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What is This?
Epistemological modesty: Critical reflections on public relations thought

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Abstract
This article is a critical thinking inquiry into a number of epistemologically related problems with the scholarly conceptions and real-world practices of public relations. Resonating with the epistemological modesty of the Scottish Enlightenment, and approaching public relations from the perspectives of such marginal directions as phenomenology, microsociology and literary theory, the article examines 10 problems with modern public relations thought as it has been articulated from the early public relations 'pioneers' to its popular conceptualization, in recent decades, as systems-based symmetry-excellence.

Keywords
Bauman, Bernays, critical thinking, Cutlip, dramaturgy, epistemology, ethics, Goffman, Grunig, Heath, historiography, Lippman, literary theory, Merleau-Ponty, ontology, phenomenology, poetics, propaganda, public relations, symmetry theory

A methodological preamble
Outside the field of public relations (PR) scholarship – and for the skeptics within it – there persists the perception that PR is ethically problematic. But much less attention has been paid to epistemological concerns. Yet because PR is not only a professional occupation, but an intellectual preoccupation, it is worth concerning ourselves not only with the problematic nature of its ethics, but the related problems of its epistemological and ontological foundations. In the interest of clarity, it will be helpful to indicate not only my own position on the substance of the issues, as well as on the form of this article.

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For scholars of PR, three matters may require clarification. First, the use of personal experience. Second, the rationale for organizing the article as ten reflections. Third, the article’s frame of reference.

As to the first matter, while the article is but only intermittently personal, these philosophical reflections did begin in earnest with a student’s question about PR and propaganda. The article examines this question in the first reflection and returns to it in the tenth.

As to the second matter, or the article’s form, readers may notice that the movement of thought from reflection to reflection may be less than conventionally linear and sequential. I have provided internal notations and reflexive footnotes intended to address any concerns with form. In drawing not only on PR and communication scholarship, but on poetry and dramatic literature, the article reflects the PR legacy of interdisciplinarity. Rather than explore a single problem (such as perception), the author has chosen, in the famous formulation of Isaiah Berlin, the way of the fox who knows many things, rather than that of the hedgehog who knows one big thing. An effort has been made to indicate connections among those ‘many things.’

As to the third matter, or frame of reference, the sixth and seventh reflections adduce an ontological perspective drawn from literary criticism. Modernist poetics have been chosen for their relevance to the problematics of abstraction and objectivity in PR thought.

**Reflection 1: The problem of good propaganda**

Ten years ago, in an introductory course on PR, an undergraduate posed the question that has occasioned much thought and many words: Professor Brown, Is there such a thing as good propaganda? While my article isn’t an attempt to answer that question, the question did in fact launch me into a decade of critical reflections on PR. This article rehearses some of those reflections and attempts to take my project further and deeper. In the years after hearing that question, I have been publishing essays that have been characterized as ‘critical thinking’, a term that L’Etang (2008) says can be explained either as emerging from Marxist-oriented critical theory that tackles social injustice, or more broadly as an approach that uses ‘intellectual skills’ to challenge ideas and practices. (2008: 4).

The question was asked of me shortly after the 9/11 attack on New York City’s World Trade Center that killed nearly 3000 people. Not long after that disaster, the USA launched a retaliatory air strike on a region of Afghanistan. The bombing was accompanied by an information leaflet and food packet drop intended to persuade Afghani publics of the ethical merits of America’s incursion. But did the USA’s messaging, fueled by moral outrage, constitute ‘good propaganda?’

While my student’s question was nominally about ethics, it also suggested questions of an epistemological and ontological nature (e.g. What relationship has appearance to reality? Of perception to reality?) My thesis holds, in part, that PR thought is epistemologically problematic where it approaches the idea, practice, institution and history of PR in misleading or simplistic terms. I begin and end my reflections by examining my student’s question and my immediate reply. In the article that follows, the numbered reflections include an examination of the familiar adage about PR that perception is reality. Additional reflections focus on the problematics of systems, structures and the methodologies used to justify them.
To claim that *perception is reality* is problematic, but not entirely mistaken as concerns PR, a distinction considered more closely in this article’s second reflection. Another problem in PR thought is the product of systems thinking that underlies symmetry theory. The problem is that in its static, dualistic linearity, systems/symmetry fails to provide a plausible, much less compelling, account of the actual world we inhabit. The changed features of the world we have inherited is described by the sociologist Bauman (2008) as porous and in flux – a modernity no longer ‘solid’ but melted into ‘liquid’. Bauman’s cultural historiography depicts a world not of systems or even of groups or teams or families, but a world he likens to a swarm of bees in Panama whose movements from their home hive to other hives, as apiologists discovered to their surprise, was not linear or stable or predictable, but random, unstable and chaotic. Unlike symmetry’s immensely rationalistic organizational world of systems, subsytems and efficacious balances (see Reflection 4 on imbalance), the world of Panama bees consists of an unexpected progression of assembling and disassembling well beyond the problematically paradigmatic rationality of systems.

From Bernays to Cutlip, to Broom, to Grunig, the dominant thrust of PR thought has sought to tame the contingencies of public opinion with the aid of structured, linear and, above all, systematic and managerial assumptions about the nature of reality. Legitimate thinking about PR, according to these conventions, had to be scientific and quantitatively justified. Broom, whom Grunig (1992) credits with developing PR role theory, appears no less than 86 times in the index to Grunig’s *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (1992: 640). In a small but influential text surveying PR research, Pavlik wrote, ‘In the scientific method, knowledge is generated through systematic observations of the world’ (Pavlik, 1987: 31). The legitimacy of science to make epistemic claims is not in question here; what’s problematic are the claims of systems-based PR thought to rationalize the hyper-complex cultural actuality not only of bees, but of human social life. Broadly speaking, the problem stems from a lack of epistemological modesty that vastly over-estimates rationality.

In the swarms of Bauman’s liquid modernity; in the upside-down ironies of postmodernity; and in the welter of digitization, the mechanistic rationality of systems theory feels as inadequate to explain PR as Newton’s laws of motion were to address Einsteinian relativity. It is another aspect of my thesis that clinging to symmetry’s mechanically balanced perspective would preclude the helpfully grounded way that Merleau-Ponty frames perception: not as a science that places the self outside the world, but that places the self and its perception as situated within the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2004[1948]). Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a distinctively aesthetic way of knowing, in which he considers how Cezanne and his contemporaries reframed perception in the space of the painted space or poem (Merleau-Ponty, 2004[1948]: 69). Modern painting demanded the artist’s vivid and perpetual intellectual and emotional openness to the demands of a world marked by contingency. Interestingly, this is the manager’s provisional world that the management theorist Mintzberg describes (Mintzberg, 2004). The manager, like the artist, perpetually prepares to respond with the flexibility of a bee in a swarm. Cezanne’s discipline is of course painting. Later in this article (the sixth reflection on abstraction and things), there are ontological references to the world of modernist poetry.
As the PR creator of one of the first digital PR agencies, Weber (2009) argues that the legacy of conventional, linear and sequential thinking about PR no longer works in the all-at-once, viral, instantaneous and perpetual time-space of the global, digital world. Two emergent trends in PR support Weber’s argument: (1) the ascendancy of crisis communication in an era of seemingly endless crises; and (2) the speed of change brought on by digital iconoclasticism. Once a more special application of PR practice, crisis communication has become commodified in the 24/7 digital world, catapulting the PR actor into a series of never-ending, time-compressed, high-stakes, dramatic situations. (This dramatic perspective is explored in Reflection 9.) The digital revolution simultaneously grants the customer or constituent’s equation of perception and reality as a given, while enabling the PR practitioner to use that perception as a springboard to engage or redress individuals or constituencies.

A sociologist with an historiographical orientation, Bauman (2008) locates a shift in the 20th century from the production-oriented, ‘solid modernity’ of the period up until just after the First World War, to the consumption-oriented ‘liquid modernity’ observable in the decade of the 1920s. In today’s liquid modernity the ‘solid’ world has been supplanted by porousness, instability, unpredictability and, above all, contingency. In the liquid world, the formerly reliable center has come to be occupied by the ‘emergent centrality of the orphaned self’. Liquid modernity is not a world of communities (or community relations, I would add), but of swarms likened to the swarms of bees studied by scientists in Panama (Bauman, 2008: 15–17).

Reflection 2: The problem of perception

The PR truism that ‘perception is reality’ suggests the troubling and problematic conflation that has been explored in tragic and comic literature.

My rapid, if somewhat ironically intended, reply to my student’s question as to the existence of ‘good propaganda’ (Yes, ours!) resonates with the irony of the PR adage that perception is reality. Both my answer and the PR adage also suggest the problematic nature of any simple response to such a profound and complex issue. Perception is reality not only suggests the epistemic foundation of PR knowledge; it also has been taken to indicate the ethically worrisome and relativistic nature of PR. Simplistic it may be, but the adage is evergreen. Perception is reality is the theme of the 2011 annual convention of the Public Relations Students Society of America.

The equation or conflation of perception and reality is an example of epistemological tenacity, or what PR knows through adamant insistence or deference to authority. While a full-scale focus on the academically complex, ancient and tendentious debate about perception is well beyond the scope of my article on PR thought, the tenacious adage deserves some scrutiny here.

The foundational significance of perception is central to the history of modern PR. Both Bernays (1923) and Lippmann (1922), whom Bernays liberally cites as an influence on his own thinking, have a good deal to say, if sometimes indirectly, about perception. For Bernays, individual opinion is arrived at by a process of ‘shorthand by which human effort is minimized’ (Bernays, 1923: 98). Bernays’s dubious, if not cynical,
estimation of the individual’s ability to arrive at a fully reasoned and justified opinion paralleled Lippmann’s theory of stereotypes published the previous year. Lippmann famously argued that the individual in mass-mediated, press-dominated modern society arrives at opinions not by investigation and critical judgment, but via misleading, truncated images he calls stereotypes. In his discussion of the constricted and blinding dependence on stereotypical thinking, Lippmann cites Dewey (1911) who blames ‘things and events’ for their ‘showiness’ and ‘transitoriness’ and their ‘seductiveness’ (Dewey, 1911: 108). ‘Things,’ Dewey concludes, ‘are appearances’, that for Dewey (as for Plato) are not realities but deceiving shadows on the walls of the cave in which human perception is imprisoned (Dewey, 1911: 108).

Bernays and Lippman articulated PR thought just before the emergence in the 1930s of the Magic Bullet Theory (the conception of the individual as largely helpless against the opinion-establishing dominance of the press and mass media). Both Bernays and Lippmann wrote in the shadow of the influential 19th-century sociologist, Le Bon, and the lesser known, early 20th-century social psychologist, Trotter who attributed much of an individual’s attitude, opinion and behavior to the dominant power of the group. (Bernays cites Trotter’s term, the *herd.*) Following Trotter and Le Bon, Bernays holds that opinion is both instinctual and driven by the group, rather than conceived rationally and individually (Bernays, 1923: 68). While the ethical problematics of that theory troubled Bernays, their implications served very well the dark purposes of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, who is reported to have had Bernays’s books on his shelf.

The theme that appearances (or perceptions) are tragically or comically divergent from reality has been frequently explored in imaginative and dramatic literature, for example, the initial scene in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The king’s tragedy begins with the faultiness of his perceptions about which of his daughters truly loves him. Cordelia does, but she modestly keeps silent when Lear questions her, a silence he tragically mis-perceives as constituting the absence of love. As his two cynical and deceiving daughters, who loudly and falsely claim to love their hated patriarch, later remark: ‘Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself’ (Kittredge, 1936: 1. 296–299). His perceptions, like other poor forked creatures, are unreliable, as they emerge from his blinding human pride.

When I answered my student’s question about whether there exists ‘good propaganda’, my affirmation offered nothing more than naïve realism, which according to Hirst (1967) is the epistemological position that ‘perception is a direct awareness, a straightforward confrontation’ with the object of perception (1967: 78). Or, in other words, what we perceive is reality. What a naïve realist insists upon is that his or her perception, or what appears to be, is in fact what must be. Tragic literature offers a famous example of the consequences of naïve realism. More humbly, my answer, that good propaganda was ours, resembles Lear’s naïve realism except for the tone of irony in my remark that was unlike the King’s anger. The irony in Lear’s words was not the king’s, but Shakespeare’s. Nor did I intend my own irony to be a rejection of the possibility that there is such a thing as good propaganda. That question is complex and ambiguous (see Reflection 10).

Believing that perception is reality is a truism not only to PR, but a commonplace notion in other endeavors that place a high value on opinion formation such as politics
Examined more closely, the assertion that perception is reality is hardly the bottom line of PR, but rather the beginning of the practitioner’s calculated endeavor to repackage the perceptions of targeted publics.

Another article could be devoted to the question of perception, a subject explored in many disciplines, including in the phenomenology perspectives of both Merleau-Ponty (2004[1948]) and Bachelard (1964) that challenged conventionally dualistic notions of perception, commonly accepted oppositions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and proposed instead the idea of the perceiving self that is indistinguishable from its situation in the world. In moving beyond a dualistic ontology, these phenomenologists also move beyond conventional concerns about the separation of perception and reality. For phenomenology, perception is no longer a pale thing, but something approaching a work of art.

**Reflection 3: The problem of functionality**

The assumption of PR as a ‘function’ emerges from systems-symmetry’s mechanical perspective, a view that is challenged by the reflection that follows.

In addition to adducing the perspectives of founding modern thinkers, an array of the most popular PR textbooks offers evidence of familiar themes traceable to Bernays, Lee, Page and other ‘fathers’ and ‘pioneers’. Over and again, authors of PR textbooks conceptualize PR in pale abstractions as a ‘management function’ (e.g. Lattimore et al., 2007: 5), and in one case as a ‘multiphased function of communication management’ (Cable and Vibbert, 1986: 5). Seitl’s text, in its 11th edition, offers the author’s own definition as ‘a planned process to influence public opinion’ (Seitel, 2010: 5). Wilcox and Cameron’s text in its 10th edition offers keywords: ‘deliberate, planned, performance, public interest, two-way, communication management function’ (Wilcox and Cameron, 2012: 8, italics mine).

It is worth noting a problem in Cutlip, Center and Broom’s *Effective Public Relations*, which a preface describes as the ‘bible’ of PR (Cutlip et al., 2006: xv). The authors define PR as ‘the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance’ (Cutlip et al., 2006: 4). The definition’s problematic assumption of the seamless ethical equity of an organization’s communication and that public opinion can be won begs the question of an assumed mutuality. Nor does it help matters to spin such assumed mutuality as ‘normative,’ in the fashion of Grunig and others. Guth & Marsh (2012) assert that their ‘values-driven’ approach ‘links communication with an organization’s values, mission, and goals’ (Guth and Marsh, 2012: xix). But what of an organization whose values below the landing page of its website are corrupt, its mission unscrupulous, its goals at odds with the public interest?

At their core, the familiar definitions and themes PR perform a problematic of sleight of hand by simultaneously endorsing mutuality, values and the public interest; rejecting ‘influence’ and persuasion (Grunig and others); and affirming the strategic, managerial, organizationally driven nature of the practice itself.
Reflection 4: The problem of imbalance

Like epistemic problems of functionality and appearance, the central idea in symmetry theory that there exists in the operational and ethical space of PR a ‘balance’ of fairness and dialogue is the subject of the following critical reflection.

At the heart of PR thought, as well as its self-criticism, has been the acknowledgment of the tension arising from an initial imbalance between the practitioner or organization and his or her or its constituencies and the urge to correct it. Intuitively we understand the imbalance between perception and reality, PR and propaganda, management and employees, the powerful and the weak, the rulers and the ruled. Bernays recognizes an ethical imbalance that he sought to correct by championing professionalism, and a status imbalance he wished to remedy by licensure. Public relations scholars will be quite familiar with Grunig’s theory of symmetry in all its ‘evolutions’ and restatements, including symmetry-excellence. The growth of corporate social responsibility continues the quest to redress the troubling imbalance. The problem of imbalance, long central to PR thought, refers to ethical matters of the distribution of fairness, power, gender equality, and political and historical matters of ethnocentrism and historiography. But the question of imbalance is no less an epistemological and ontological problem, as well.

Another article could be written about the problem of gender balance, which L.A. Grunig (1988) and others have plumbed. The recognition of the need to find a balance runs through PR thought from Cutlip’s depiction of PR as ‘two-way,’ to Grunig’s scientific appropriation of the mechanistic metaphor of ‘asymmetry’. The rhetorician Heath deployed the descriptive phrase, ‘wrangle in the marketplace’ (Heath, 2009: 16), which portrays Heath’s rhetorically based explanation of how PR battles its way toward a balance. The critical thinkers L’Etang and Pieczka place the imbalance of power at the center of their skepticism. Sriramesh observes imbalance from a globalist perspective. Lamme and Miller identify PR history as the source of imbalance. (See Brown, 2003; Cutlip and Center, 1952; L’Etang and Pieczka, 1996; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003).

The imbalance of gender relations in the PR profession has offered another example of imbalance. The epistemological perspective of women, and their role in the PR industry has raised the question of the growing awareness of, and need for, a gender-oriented, feminist perspective research agenda for PR (L.A. Grunig, 1988).

In its original conception (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), symmetry theory was founded on the curiously imbalanced, ethnocentrically flawed, historiographical argument that PR began in 19th-century America. But as historical sociology has contended, social theory needs to be properly rooted in history (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1992: 838). In that PR theory is social theory, we should insist that its thought as well as its theory avoid the most obvious historical distortions and inaccuracies. But that has not been the case. Instead, the development of symmetry theory was incautiously founded on a pair of problematically unbalanced assumptions about PR history: (1) that PR began in mid-nineteenth century America; and (2) that it ‘evolved’ from a crude, improvised, ethically noxious practice, to a practice Grunig identified as normatively excellent and ethical (Brown, 2006; Grunig, 1992). But to identify a theory as normative is only to say that it is preferable to an alternative theory, which is not an argument from evidence, but, in this case, a problematically rhetorical strategy.
Reflection 5: The problem of certainty

As the title of the article indicates, PR thought becomes problematic to the extent that it unwiseably abandons epistemological modesty.

‘We believe we have produced the first general theory of PR – a theory that integrates the many theories and research results existing in the field.’ This is the claim Grunig makes in the first chapter of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Grunig, 1992: 2).

At the same time as symmetry theory continued the quest of PR thinkers to resolve, reform and correct troubling imbalances in PR, an unintended consequence of the passion for ethics and scientific rigor created a secondary imbalance: that of intellectual certainty. But putatively scientific assertions justified by quantitative methodology have come to be regarded by symmetry’s critics as needlessly exclusive, insufficiently skeptical and ironically, if unwittingly, ethically blind to the imbalance of power between management and employees (L’Etang, 2008: 162). The problem is both ethical and epistemological.

Symmetry theory insists on a kind of epistemological monotheism: that PR could and must finally be known to be not only a single thing, but the best, unrivaled, and only ‘excellent’ thing. However, PR is not one thing but many, as I will propose in subsequent reflections 6 and 7 (the problems of abstraction and objectivity). Nor is PR exclusively a modern thing. In its long history, farther back in history than Aristotle and *Ars Rhetorica*, PR has been many things and taken many forms. In the digital age, PR expresses itself increasingly through socially mediated technological interfaces and networks. For some scholars, this multiplicity went hand-in-hand with the negative idea of PR as a blighted institution based on little else but manipulation and the will to power.

Not all scholars have regarded this multiplicity as a problem, although the attempt to distill multiplicity into a unitary theory continues. For decades following Grunig’s attempt to establish a unitary theory, PR scholars have debated its merits (see Brown, 2010). Notwithstanding symmetry’s gradual intellectual unpacking over the past three decades from four models to a far more simple ‘willingness to change’, the epistemological foundation of symmetry is rationalistic and probabilistic (Brown, 2004).

For reasons that include their objection to intellectual immodesty of systems thinking, critics of symmetry have been critical of symmetry theory’s insistence on a grand or single theory to drive practice and research. To push back against the problematic nature of symmetry theory does not imply a denial of the legitimacy of science, but rather questions the legitimacy of symmetry theory’s claims to be scientific. The critics of unitary thinking also share an ontological perspective: a preference for multiple, qualitative and inter-subjective methodologies over any single, unitary, quantitative, putatively scientific method. They share a rejection of epistemic mechanism.

For these and other reasons, the critics of symmetry theory have sought to delegitimize symmetry theory on epistemological, ontological and ethical grounds.

In summary, then, a significant problem with symmetry’s thinking about PR is that it may ultimately be more well-intentioned wish than verifiably scientific. Its net effect has
had what may be the unintended consequence of attempting to limit PR to a single type of practice identified as ethical and excellent (see Grunig, 1992: 307). Grunig’s oft-repeated rejection of that criticism has been that symmetry is a normative, idealistic and exemplary (Grunig, 1992: 56). But that rebuttal begs the question because the combination of symmetry theory with management’s excellence theory never directly addresses these theories’ problematic assumptions about history, gender, ethnocentricity, power differentials and other asymmetries that have been identified in symmetry-excellence (see Brown, 2010: 277–92; Lamme and Miller, 2010).

Interestingly and perhaps ironically, the certainty at the center of symmetry theory turns out to be based on statistical probability, a form of evidentiary belief that constitutes modernity’s rejection of Aristotelian authority (Brown, 2004).

**Reflection 6: The problem of abstraction**

From its modern inception in the legacy of Bernays’s appropriation of the language of science, PR thought has become not a more accurate description of the industry’s actual practices, but increasingly and problematically abstract in its adoption of ‘management speak’ jargon. Unlike the observantly co-present management theorist Mintzberg (2004) who framed management as an art, Grunig frames PR in abstract nouns such as ‘subsystems,’ and in vague terms such as ‘excellence’ (Grunig, 1992: 71).

In the first quarter of the 20th century, as the modern PR industry was developing and making its knowledge claims (e.g. the truisms that PR is not one-way but two-way, and that ‘perception is reality’), and seeking to establish itself as a profession and a scholarly discipline, the arts were undergoing innovative transformations. While communication theorists were advancing symbolically based theories, a new generation of Modernist poets, including Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, were seeking to distance themselves from symbolic ways of knowing and justifying. Their poetics served as a kind of literary critical thinking, and for that reason we may discover in these poems some resonance with PR, however unlikely this may sound.

The literary critic J. Hillis Miller included the poet Wallace Stevens among a collection of literary artists Miller called the ‘poets of reality’ (Miller, 1966). What identifies these literary artists was their fierce concentration on what could be called the *thingness of the world*. Miller’s thesis is that there exists a progression in poetry during the late 19th and early 20th century, not unlike the metamorphosis so widely remarked in the progression from 19th-century figurative painting to the focus on the painterly and sculptural thingness of Kandinsky, Picasso, Duchamps, and others. Collectively, these modernists transformed the visual arts from representationalism of things, to the thing-itself (a urinal, globs of paint). During these turn-of-the-century decades, poetry, too, underwent a radical shift from symbolism (something representing something else beyond it) to the insistence that reality is not a duality of thing and idea, but is constituted by the thing-itself. Or, as the poet Wallace Stevens wrote: ‘We seek/Nothing beyond reality. Within it./Everything …’ (Miller, 1966: 11).

Stevens’s poetics critiqued the legacy of celestial/earthly bifurcations. In so doing, he flattened poetic space, moving poetics away from a its dualistic symbolism...
toward a courageous, ontological recognition of the thing-itself, as in ‘O Florida, Venereal Soil’:

A few things for themselves,  
Convolvulus and coral,  
Buzzards and live-moss,  
Tiestas from the keys,  
A few things for themselves,  
Florida, venereal soil,  
Disclose to the lover.  
The dreadful sundry of this world … (Stevens, 1979: 78)

Where Stevens’s poetics flatten into a multiplicity of things the dualistic, symbolic legacy of poetry, William Carlos Williams completes the project with his famous motto of ‘No Ideas But In Things’:

so much depends  
on  
a red wheel barrow  
glazed with rain water  
beside the white chickens. (Williams, 1968: 30)

What ‘depends’ on the wheelbarrow is reality itself. For Williams, an object does not symbolize anything beyond itself, nor anything greater than what it is. Rather, the wheelbarrow takes precedence over the idea of reality. Things do not point to a realm beyond themselves. Things themselves are constitutive of reality. It is an ontological and epistemological perspective that resonates with Merleau-Ponty, as seen in this article’s second reflection, and is elaborated in the seventh reflection.

What has all this to do with the epistemological critiques of PR thought? A great deal. For what has emerged as a common theme among the critics of the mechanistic, systems-based, unitary model of symmetry theory is an abiding skepticism of symmetry’s abstractions, scientism, and quantifications. As to the claim of PR theorists that PR must be approached as ‘science’, L’Etang counters with whose science, and, from an ethical perspective, to what end? (see L’Etang, 2008).

From Bernays to Cutlip to Grunig, 20th-century PR thought has been centripetal: a movement toward the nuclear, normative, unifying center of PR space. As Daymon and Holloway (2010) demonstrate in their review of multiple methods of qualitative research, with the rise of globalism, diversity and new technologies, there has been a centrifugal turn in PR thought, brought about by the embrace of multiplicity, diversity, inclusiveness, culture and expansiveness. All of this suggests a movement away from a center and toward the margins where resides an epistemological modesty that has room not only for objectively based, quantitative methods of knowing, but for inter-subjective, post-symmetric methods such as phenomenology, ethnography and action research (Daymon and Holloway, 2010: 367).
Reflection 7: The problem of objectivity

Has the imagination a justifiable place in epistemological concerns? This is the launching point for a reflection on systems-based PR thinking’s tenacious adherence to truth claims based on objectivity, a perspective that as early as a century ago was compellingly critiqued by the inter-subjectivity of phenomenology, physics and the arts – a perspective now underlying post-symmetry research in PR.

Few thinkers would doubt that imagination plays a part in the strategies and tactics of PR. But for systems theorists, truth claims are justified not by the imagination, but by an epistemology based on the concept of objectivity. The rationalist–empiricist basis of systems theory is articulated by Grunig in identifying PR as a ‘subsystem’ embedded in the greater whole system of an organization (Grunig, 1992: 72). Despite the demonstrably creative imagination of his famous PR campaigns that orchestrated high-society role models to dress in green like the package color of a tobacco client, Bernays explains PR in mechanistic terms such as ‘the engineering of consent’ and in the speculative language of sociology including ‘the group and the herd’ (Bernays, 1923, 1955: 110). As epistemic justification for PR, imagination is backgrounded along with metaphysics and poetry, as compared with the prestigious objectivity of science and the pragmatism of technology (Bernays, 1923, 1955).

Yet as the intellectual life of the 20th century developed, poetry, the arts, the imagination and its mysteries were very much in the foreground for other modernist thinkers and artists, from Heisenberg and Einstein, to Merleau-Ponty, to Cezanne. As Merleau-Ponty sought to demonstrate, ‘the world of perception is, to a great extent, unknown territory’ and that we must learn to see the world anew – as the painter Cezanne saw it (Merleau-Ponty, 2004[1948]). Similarly, Bachelard (1964), a philosopher of science turned phenomenologist, approaches the poetic imagery of scientists and poets alike on the basis of the epistemology of inter-subjectivity. In large measure, 20th-century thought moved beyond the dualistic ontology that had divided the knower from the known, the subject from the object. If systems-theory-based symmetrist PR has not moved similarly beyond its tenacious claim to ‘objective’ truth, other more recent research in PR has made that move. These examples can be found in McKie’s post-objective ‘action inquiry and research’ (McKie, 2008: 6), and in Holmstrom’s (1997) inter-subjective explorations of corporate social responsibility.

Nor is inter-subjectivity an invention of the 20th century. Half a century before Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the poet Walt Whitman, in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’, articulated a vision of inter-subjectivity that collapsed the objective distance between the self and the world of others. Whitman’s poetics brings into being a transformed self, no longer imprisoned in Romanticism’s remote and atomistic individualism. For the 20th-century poet, William Carlos Williams, ‘only the imagination is real’ (Williams, 1962: 179) While such perspectives may appear odd in the context of PR, they are hardly novel for the 20th (not to mention the 21st) century.

Whitman gloried in the visionary imagination that collapsed the space between the self and the world – an inter-subjective way of knowing that is at once deeply personal and profoundly social. But despite the imaginative legacy of Bernays, Lee and other pioneers, PR thought clothed the institution and its practices in ascientistic, dualistic language that worked to enshrine the objective over the subjective.
Reflection 8: The problem of imagery

The launching point for a reflection on image is the persistent criticism of PR as an ‘image business’. On closer inspection, the criticism, which indicates of problem with PR thought, is itself problematic.

Fifty years ago, PR and advertising were commonly described, often invidiously, as manufacturers of images. The implication was that image manufacturing was an inherently powerful and deceptive enterprise. But a closer consideration of PR makes one question its framing as image-making. Associating PR with an image is problematically reductive. What it misses is the ability of PR to address matters of ambiguity and complexity.

It may be useful to construct a continuum and place intellectually serious thinkers and thinking about PR along it from its harshest and most dismissive critics such as Boorstin and Chomsky, to its most thoughtful defenders such as Heath and Grunig (Boorstin, 1992; Grunig, 1992; Heath, 2009; Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Dismissive, damning but thoughtful criticism of PR has tended to conceptualize PR in the static, ontologically realist terms of Boorstin – i.e. as an image. For Boorstin (1992) it is this imagistic perception of PR that forms the basis of his indictment of PR as unethical – a series of ‘pseudo events, or, in other words, un-real (Boorstin, 1992: 9).

Framing PR as an image is another way of indicting PR’s ethics by claiming that images are neither real nor objective, nor ethical. Given that premise, it follows that PR is a kind of falsification. Unstated but implicit and problematic is Boorstin’s ontological realism, a stance that, from Plato to Boorstin and Chomsky, regards rhetoric, persuasion and PR as antithetical to truth, reality and objectivity.

But what of the foundational claim that to know PR is to know an image? What is the epistemic nature of such claim?

Ironically, if understandably, it may have been image-based attacks on PR that helped occasion its reframing as positivistic and symmetrical.

The logic of the most caustic criticism of PR resembles the enthymeme, not the syllogism. In Book I, Chapter 2 of Rhetoric, Aristotle characterizes the enthymeme as a ‘rhetorical syllogism’, or one of the means of persuasion. Enthymematic reasoning, of which a maxim is a part, may conveniently omit an implied premise that may be dubious or invalid (Aristotle, 2001: 1330).

The harshest critics of PR, from Plato to Chomsky (see Herman and Chomsky, 2002), have tended to dispense with the rhetorical distinctions that Aristotle identified as legitimate means of persuasion. The critics simply equate PR with lying, manipulation, and distortion. But it does not follow that their polemics are not themselves problematic. The blanket critique of PR is founded of three faulty assumptions: (1) that images lack reality; (2) that the images of PR are irresistibly persuasive, which amounts to the long disputed idea known as ‘magic bullet’ theory that posited humans as mere passive receptors; and (3) the ancient belief that rhetoric itself is inherently misleading.

Reflection 9: The problem of communication

The launching point for a reflection on the epistemological limits of communication in the lived drama of PR emerges from a concern with the limits of a communication perspective as a way
of apprehending and justifying what actually happens in the dramatic action of PR players, campaigns and stages. This reflection offers an alternative way of knowing PR outside the frame and legacy of ‘communication’.

There is a very different way of understanding PR – not as static imagery, but as drama: an imaginative, improvisatory series of scenes. In demonstrating how life is theatrical, Goffman’s epistemic frames cite the self as an actor’s ‘impression management’, ‘dramaturgical discipline’, and ‘staging problems’, a terminology that closely parallels the theatrical performance of PR practice’s impression management and the strategic theatricality of press conferences, webinars and the dramaturgical discipline that media spokespeople must learn (Goffman, 1959: 208, 217, 237).

Such a dramaturgic perspective is hardly exotic for anyone wishing to understand a profession whose entire history is marked by the theatrical agonies of the *dramatis personae* of the dramas such as that of the oil-spilling Exxon Valdez: the drunken captain below deck; the clueless CEO who sought to exculpate himself and shift blame to the captain; the infuriated residents of Alaska; the TV footage of limp and oily birds. A rare hero appears such as Jim Burke, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, who early in the Tylenol poisoning crisis altered the paradigm of crisis PR by bucking his own marketing managers and holding a press conference to announce that his company would pull all the bottles off the shelves until they could be made safe for consumers. These are the lived, conflictual dramas of PR, far removed from the pale concept of communication. Nor is that drama entirely modern. Two millennia ago, St Paul, a well-schooled rhetorician, conducted what has been called the most influential PR campaign in history, which is credited with coalescing and infusing a disparate collection of churches into the religion of an empire, a journey on the internet of the Roman roads that led to Paul’s martyrdom in Rome (Brown, 2003).

To understand PR as drama is to reclaim its ancient association with poetry – that Homeric wellspring Aristotle drew upon for *Ars Rhetorica*. To make this claim is to confirm the ancient and continuing argument between Platonists and Aristotelians about the nature of truth, virtue, art and civility.

To understand PR as drama resonates with culturally driven anthropological and sociological ways of knowing. In formulating his ideas of dramaturgy and framing, the sociologist Erving Goffman rejected communication as being too limited a concept to permit a sufficiently rich apprehension of social interaction. On the microsociological level, ‘face-to-face conduct itself is never merely and not always a form of communication’ (Goffman, 1969. p. ix). It wasn’t only symbolic interaction that Goffman sought to interpret; it was the way in which behavior could be known through perceptual frames (Goffman, 1986).

From a sociological or anthropological perspective, what is problematic about PR thought is the unintended consequence of the limitations of communication-bound thinking.

**Reflection 10: The problem of ambiguity**

The tenth and final reflection brings the article full circle by returning to reconsider a student’s question about ‘good propaganda’, which was the launching point of the article’s first reflection.
As he sat in the courtroom at Nuremberg in the summer of 1948, accused of mass murder and slavery, Dr Otto Ambros, a chemist and senior manager of the I.G. Farben/Auschwitz concentration camps, made a sketch:

Ambros bowed as he took the oath, exhibiting his sketch in all directions. He waved his counsel aside for the moment. He explained: ‘This tree of many branches I choose to call the Ethylene Tree to symbolize the Good and Evil in Nature.’ (DuBois, 1952: 169)

The mass murderer, who called himself ‘a plain chemist,’ had sketched his own defense, as it were, as an illustration of moral and chemical ambiguity. His sketch was of a tree with green branches (‘soap for dirty soldiers, plant and cleaning agents for vehicles’), and red branches (‘rotten with potential destruction’) (DuBois, 1952: 167–8). He intended his to be exculpatory: he drew lines to cut off the red branches, those the lethal poison gases used to exterminate prisoners in the concentration camps (Borkin, 1978).

Ambros was convicted of enslavement and mass murder, and sentenced to eight years; he served less than three. The anecdote about that sketch is not a fantastic attempt to associate PR with unfathomable criminal depravity. But it is a reminder that it would be wise to avoid the kind of well-intentioned but problematic legacy of PR thought traceable to Bernays: the attempt to surgically sever propaganda from PR. To do so is to dismiss the lived complexities of moral ambiguity.

All of which returns me to the question that began this investigation of epistemological problems in PR thought. That question, from a student, was whether there was any such thing as good propaganda, to which I replied yes – ours.

The history of PR confounds simplistic distinctions between PR and propaganda. From the charismatic and messianic pro-Christian organizational campaigns of St Paul in the first century after Jesus to what I have called ‘the propagation of awe’ by the popes in the Catholic Reformation, the DNA of PR has interpenetrated with that of propaganda (Brown, 2004).

Ten years after that classroom Q & A, I can point to a combination of disparate perspectives that might illuminate the curious contradictoriness of my reply. There is the epistemological modesty of the British or Scottish Enlightenment (see Buchan, 2003). There is also the tradition from Socrates and Diogenes to Nietzsche and the postmoderns that Desmond (2008) calls philosophical Cynicism. Additionally, there is the anti-Cartesian perspective Fuller (2002) identified as social epistemology. The social and neurobiological basis of knowledge is explored more recently by Brooks (2011).

The standard PR textbook response to the complex and ambiguous relationship between public relations has been to deny its existence by defining PR as Aristotle did rhetoric – as inherently ethical. But such an answer is hardly more satisfying than my semi-ironic reply to my student’s inquiry. Which suggests that the answer to that question is that scholars of both PR and propaganda summon room for irony, complexity, and ambiguity.

Ultimately, the problem with PR thought has its source in the tendency of some of its seminal and powerful thinkers to deny, dismiss or rationalize its ambiguity, imbalances and cultural complexities. From Aristotle to St Paul to the popes of the Catholic Reformation, to Bernays, Cutlip, Grunig, Heath and beyond, PR has never been less art than science, but rather an institution famous for its ‘propagation of awe’ (Brown, 2004).
In the presence of awe, it would be wise to remain in a state of epistemological modesty, which leaves room for mystery and the irrational.

**Reflexive notes**

1. *Progression of ten reflections*: As the article’s title indicates, my approach is to reflect on (address, discuss, analyze) a number of epistemological problems with PR thought. While the numbering is sequential, the reflections proceed, in some respects, in the form of a literary or personal article.

2. *World of modern poetry/Mintzberg*: If this strikes a reader as bizarre or irrelevant to PR, it will be worth recalling the surprise of Mintzberg, the eminent management theorist, who, when he observed the day-to-day behaviors of business managers, concluded that the actual behaviors of successful managers were ‘soft,’ and more art than science. Management is an art, a view that resonates with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (Mintzberg, 2004).

3. *Dramatic*: See Reflection 9 for a discussion of a dramaturgic perspective on PR.

4. *The problem of perception*: Probing the problematic nature of perception is reality is not the same thing as saying that the adage is meaningless. In his book about the digital transformation of PR, the PR agency entrepreneur Larry Weber (2009) makes the point that perhaps especially in the digital era, the perception of an organization is fundamental to an organization’s viability.

5. *The problem of abstraction*: For some scholars of PR, the relevance of literary references to the epistemologically problematic nature of PR thought will need some clarification. Questions of ontology and ethics are significantly associated with matters of epistemology. PR thinkers have long wrestled, if at times indirectly, with the nature of objectivity and subjectivity. The article’s sixth reflection addresses these questions by adding 20th-century poetics.

6. *Thingness of the world (my phrase)*: The literary theorist and historian J. Hillis Miller (1966) observed a great shift in mid-nineteenth century literature from the bifurcated, alienated, disappearance-of-God, subject-object ontology of literary Romanticism, to a modernist ontological sensibility that collapsed subject and object and located reality in the things of this world. Awareness of this shift is absent in PR thought based on systems theory.

7. *The problem of communication*: While it is not unusual to see references to crises or crisis PR as ‘high drama’, there is a paucity of PR scholarship that approaches the field in the way that the sociologist Erving Goffman, the anthropologist Victor Turner and the performance theorist Richard Schechner approach their subjects, i.e. dramaturgically.

8. *Perceptual frames*: Similar perspectives are found in Turner’s ‘anthropology of performance’ (1988), and Schechner’s ‘performance theory’ (1988). These thinkers approach reality not from an epistemically atomistic perspective, but from a social one. For them, what we know and how we know it is best understood as theater, ritual and game – ways of knowing that adduce a certain robustness worthy of the complexity of social interaction.

9. *The problem of ambiguity*: The answer to a student’s question is intended to bring together some key problematics addressed across the article: the problem of imbalance, the problem of perception, and the risks of epistemological immodesty (Brooks, 2011).

**References**


Author biography

Robert E. Brown, a Professor of Communication at Salem State University, in Massachusetts, USA, is a member of the editorial board of the Public Relations Review to which he has contributed essays on the history, aesthetic, religious and epistemological dimensions of public relations thought. His essays, including a book chapter on symmetry theory in R.L. Heath’s Sage Handbook of Public Relations (Sage, 2010), have featured critical inquiries into symmetry theory; the crisis origins of corporate social responsibility; and the notion of Saint Paul as a paradigmatic practitioner of public relations. The author’s essays on the dramaturgy of political communicators have appeared in the American Behavioral Scientist. A book chapter on international crisis communication is forthcoming in 2011. Since 1990, Professor Brown has been an instructor at the Harvard University Division of Continuing Education, and in recent years has taught at universities in Spain and Colombia. His education includes a bachelor’s in economics from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance, and a doctorate in English literature from the University of Rochester. His professional background includes speech writing and marketing positions for three US multinational corporations.