Response to Professor Blute

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EDITORIAL OFFICES

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I. RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR BLUTE

My talk had two parts. First, the extraordinary fascination on the part of many peoples, in many times and places, with trees and images of trees. I drew particular attention to their sacred character. Second, a reflection on tree-diagrams from about the 9th century to the present, with, for specificity, the Tree of Knowledge taken as my example. It begins with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and then, no later than Raymond Lull in 1295, the Tree of Knowledge becomes a device for organizing the relationships between the different "branches" of knowledge. In this talk about tree-diagrams I used the Tree of Knowledge rather than the Tree of Life because, in this Darwin year, one is a bit jaded by the latter.

Professor Blute wonders if (1) "the explanation for all that tree-drawing might be because the artists were actually onto something–descent with modification in the realm of culture" (223).

I probably do not understand (1). Taking it literally, it cannot possibly be true. Most of the people who drew the diagrams had no interest in or awareness of "descent with modification in the realm of culture." On the other hand, those who have used tree-diagrams have been "on to" any number of different things.

Start with the earliest well preserved tree-diagrams–trees of consanguinity, trees of the descent of Christ from Jesse, genealogical trees, the tree of Porphyry. Or recall some of the many uses in logic, for example, such as Arthur Cayley's 1857 theorems about trees, Gerhardt Gentzen's 1931 use of proof trees, or the graceful tree conjecture in graph theory (and so on and on in innumerable unrelated fields). Those who drew these trees were for sure "actually onto something," or rather they were on to a great many things. They all found different ways to use tree-structures to organize information and to think about it.

Blute writes, (2) "I doubt that Hacking would favour a cultural evolutionary 'the tree-drawers were onto something' view" (224). Again there is a communication problem, for me at least. What is the "cultural

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evolutionary view?" If it is (1) quoted above, then insofar as I understand it, I reject it for the reason given. But if it is the view that tree-drawers were on to many different things, and that there is a social history of tree-diagrams from Isidore of Seville in Western Christendom, and Sergio of Rechnaya in Eastern Christendom, down to the present, then of course I agree.

Blute guesses that (3) "if Hacking writes a book on 'The Tree of Knowledge' his ultimate point will not be that knowledge is a cultural tree" (224). Correct, although I have no book in mind. The historical growth of knowledge does not look tree-like to me, although there are certainly many local trees: you can diagram the growth of some knowledge on a tree because it is driven by teaching or imitation. Ideas are catching. But there is so much cross-fertilization that a local tree becomes part of a larger network. A net is not a tree. A more plausible metaphor is the delta of a great river, with increasingly many channels that separate and join and interweave and also create stagnant patches where mosquitoes flourish.

She continues her explanation of what she thinks I think: (4) "Trees of knowledge themselves illustrate that knowledge is not a tree because trees as symbols of knowledge have arisen independently in so many different time periods and across so many different civilizations" (224). I do not think that. So far as I know, only Peoples of the Book had the idea of a Tree of Knowledge. There really is just one basic "root" here, a text in Genesis.

I look forward to reading Professor Blute's forthcoming book, which will doubtless clear up the points that I cannot understand from her letter.

II. Personal identity in a world of googling

I am amused by the way in which the web turns ephemera into central facts in an intellectual biography, and causes a lifetime of real work to disappear.

(a) Professor Blute notices that I was present at the Halifax workshop, "Questioning the Tree of Life" earlier this year. Yes, but I was in Halifax for one day, serving as an external examiner at a Dalhousie PhD, and was able to sit in on this three day event for only one morning. The organizers asked me to make a ten minute intervention. My spur-of-the-moment rapid fire remarks are correctly enough described in her quotation from a blog.

(b) Professor Blute mentions my on-line piece, "The Complacent Disciplinarian." Google has mysteriously saddled this on my back for all posterity. This morning an exact-word search for "Ian Hacking" yielded 87,000 results. My little squib is the second entry on the first page, preceded only by Wiki's piece on me. The "complacent" rambling has been coming 2nd or 3rd ever since 2005. Thanks to Google, more people have read those words of mine that any others I have written. (How come Google does that?)

I wrote those words literally overnight as a favour for Gloria Orrigi and Dan Sperber. They created an "Interdisciplines" site with about a dozen contributors. It is still on-line in both French and English. All the other authors argued for the importance of interdisciplinary studies, so I wanted to be a devil's advocate. At that time I was completing my one and only publication on trees. ("Trees of Logic, Trees of Porphyry," in *Advancements Of Learning: Essays in Honour of Paolo Rossi*, ed. J. Heilbron, 146-97. Florence: Olshki, 2007. That is a year's hard work.) So I used my correspondence with for example the world experts on 6th century Syriac as an example of collaboration among experts of different disciplines, where "interdisciplinarity" was completely absent, and where "discipline" was the key word.

There are two nice examples of how the World Wide Web is re-ordering the perception of the world. Ten minutes of impromptu remarks and an overnight squib have become "me."

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