

An abstract graphic design on the left side of the page. It features a solid orange background with several overlapping geometric shapes in black and white. There is a large white circle on the left, a black circle at the top right, and various black and white shapes that create a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is modern and minimalist.

# Inconvenient Truth Criteria

## Discovering Value in Descriptive Contextualism

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# Disclosure

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**Don Marks, Kean University:**

I have not received and will not receive any commercial support related to this presentation or the work presented in this presentation.

# Critique as an Act of Love

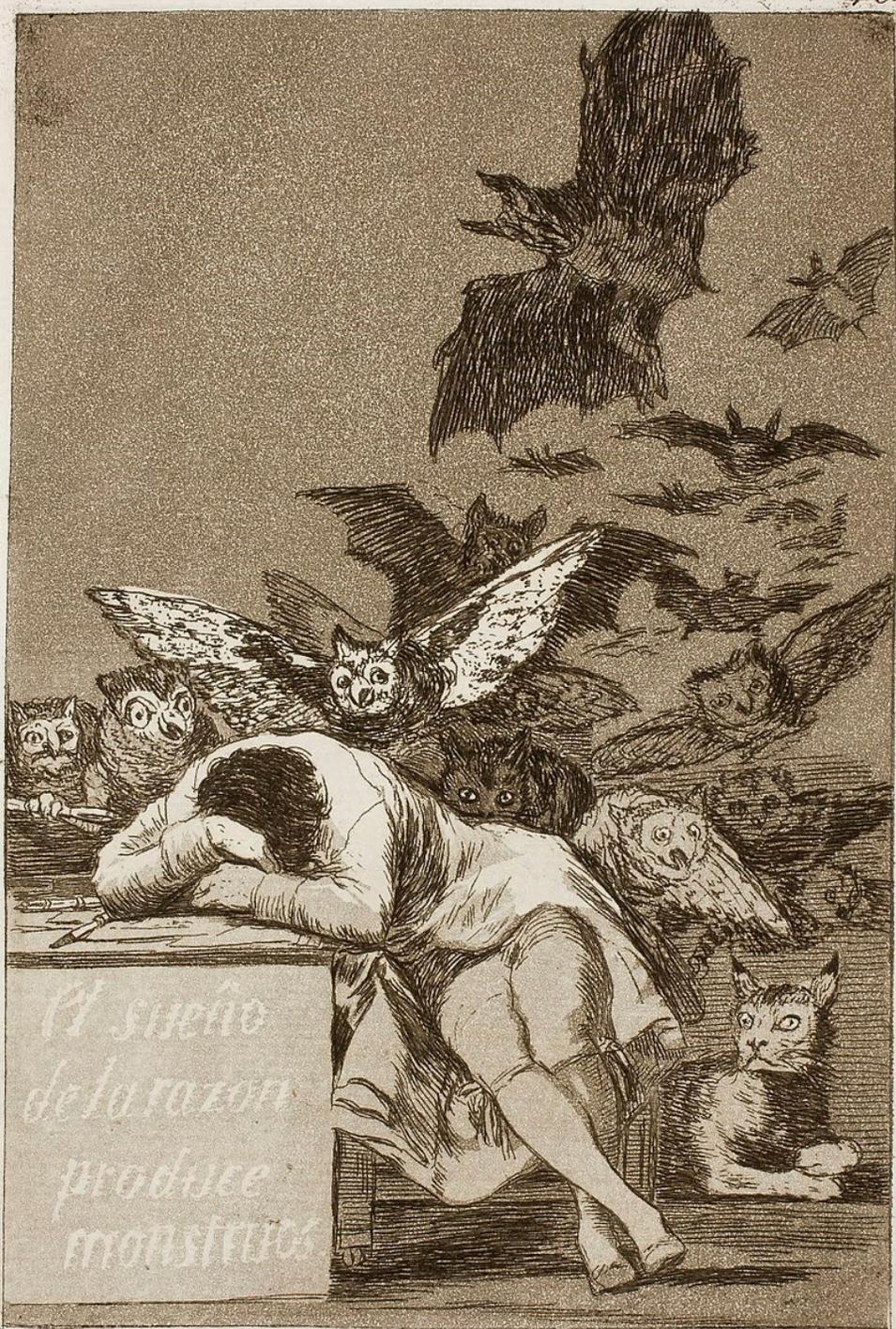
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“The critic is not the one who debunks but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between anti-fetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, *if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.*”

--Bruno Latour

“Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*  
Francisco Goya, 1799



# What Is Descriptive Contextualism?

- ❑ A term applied to investigative approaches that examine the act-in-context (Hayes, 1993).
- ❑ No event (i.e., behavior or other phenomenon) occurs in isolation; description explores the context from the observer's perspective.
- ❑ History is often the reference example, though cultural anthropology (e.g., ethnography), literary criticism, and interpretive approaches of many kinds may be included.
- ❑ Researchers whose work could be usefully categorized as “descriptive contextualism” often do not describe their efforts using this term.

# Descriptive vs. Functional Approaches

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Functional	Descriptive
Empirical	Theoretical/Discursive
Convergent	Divergent
Operational	Phenomenological
Etic	Emic
Thin Description	Thick Description
Pragmatic (Problem-Solving)	Accumulative (Compelling)
Theater (Show)	Narrative (Tell)
Fast (productive)	Slow (reflective)
Experimental	Exploratory
Prediction	Understanding

# The DC Truth Criterion

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A pragmatics of a different kind:

- ❑ “Successful working” is determined not by whether specific problem has been solved but by whether an account is:
  - ❑ Compelling (rich, vital, useful)
  - ❑ Convincing
    - ❑ Coherent (foregrounds contradictions)
    - ❑ Comprehensive (subtle, nuanced)

Could we envision a pragmatics with an aesthetic or spiritual dimension?

- ❑ Useful elegance; poetic utility; “making strange” (defamiliarization)
- ❑ The experience of awe; the sacred or sublime

# Inconvenience and the Anti-Vitalist Pact

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“Brücke and I pledged a solemn oath to put in power this truth:

*No other forces than the common physical-chemical ones are active within the organism. In those cases which cannot at the time be explained by these forces, one has either to find the specific way or form of their action by means of the physical-mathematical method, or to assume new forces equal in dignity to the chemical-physical forces inherent in matter, reducible to the force of attraction and repulsion.”*

– Emil du Bois-Reymond (1842)

Signed by: Ernst Brücke, Hermann von Helmholtz, and Carl Ludwig

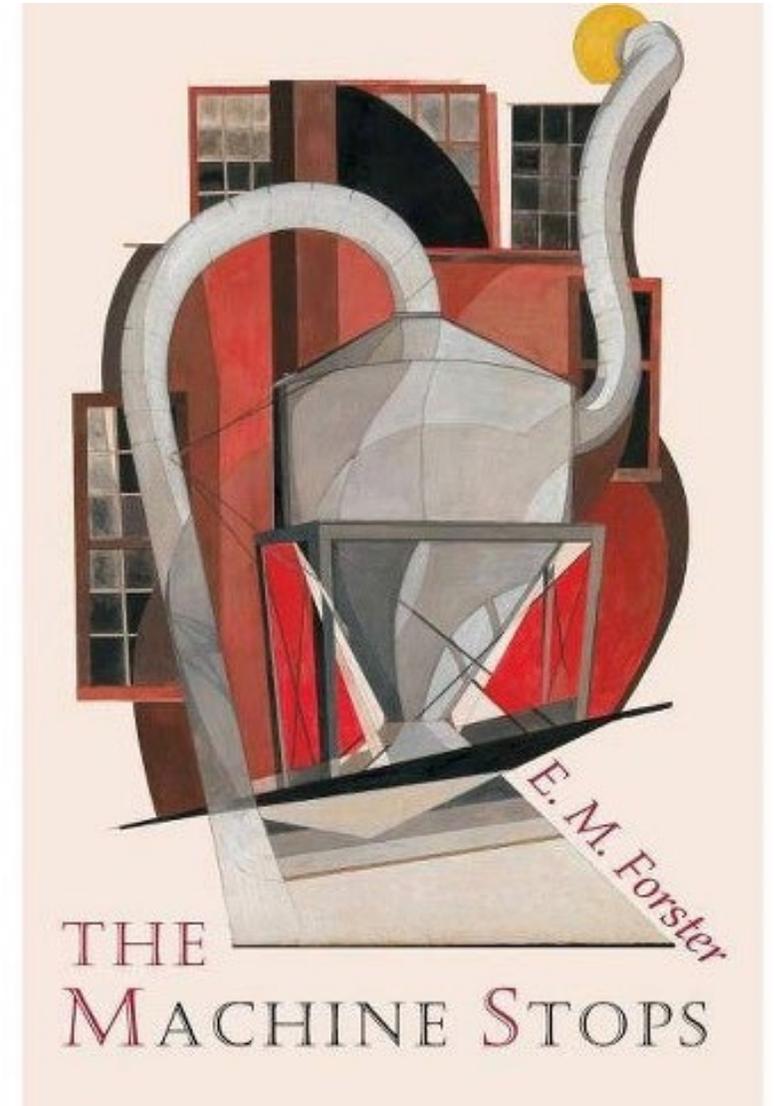


# “The Imponderable Bloom”

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“He broke off, and she fancied that he looked sad. She could not be sure, for the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people – *an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes...* The imponderable bloom, declared by a discredited philosophy to be the actual essence of intercourse, was rightly ignored by the Machine, *just as the imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit.* Something ‘good enough’ had long since been accepted....”

E. M. Forster, “The Machine Stops” (1909)



# Openness to the Transcendent

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- ❑ Functional contextualism – useful framework for the *study* of religion (e.g., social functions, effects, and significations).
- ❑ Descriptive contextualism – accounts for phenomena of sacred awe, beauty, and mystery (aporia) without reduction or operationalization.
- ❑ Charles Taylor (2007) on “the predicament of exclusive humanism”:
  - ❑ Buffered modern subject – disenchanting, mechanistic, anthropocentric universe
  - ❑ Prison-house of exclusive humanism – insensitive to “what lies beyond the ordered human world and its instrumental-rational projects”
  - ❑ **“The sense can easily arise that we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen.”**



# Negative Capability

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In an 1817 letter to his brothers George and Thomas, the Romantic poet John Keats writes:

“Several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”



*Slavers Throwing  
Overboard the Dead and  
Dying – Typhoon Coming  
On, 1840*

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- ❑ Turner: “The Sun is God.”
- ❑ Turner read Thomas Clarkson’s (1839) *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*
- ❑ The story of the *Zong*
- ❑ Turner’s history of investment in Jamaican plantation
- ❑ David Dabydeen’s *Turner*



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