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"In Truth We Trust: Discourse, Phenomenology, and the Social Relations of Knowledge in an Environmental Dispute"

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In this age of debate it is not news that what constitutes "truth" is often at issue in environmental debates. But what is often missed is an insight that the speakers of Middle English understood a millennium ago: that truth comes from trust, which, is the central theoretical position of this paper. Our point is that truth depends essentially on social relations - relations that involve power and knowledge, to be sure, but also identity. Thus, challenges to what constitutes the "truth" are equally challenges to identities and the social networks of trust in which that truth is embedded. We therefore attempt to move beyond Foucaultian discursive theory by reintroducing the subject as both the product and producer of discourse. For Foucault, the subject is reduced to the discursive relations of power/knowledge. In his effort to free us from the Cartesian cogito and the modernist absolutisms that eventually followed, Foucault lapses into a kind of postmodern functionalism. We argue that we should not speak of power/knowledge, as Foucault suggested, but of power/knowledge/identity, recovering the actors and concrete social relations that produce discourse, and are not only produced by it. We then argue that these social relations become constituted (and reconstituted) in particular moments of phenomenological challenge - discursive moments that confront the existing social relations of knowledge and their dialogue of trust and truth. We illustrate the implications of a threat to the social relations of environmental knowledge through an analysis of one such moment of phenomenological challenge: a dispute over whether or not the power plant in the community where we used to live, Ames, Iowa, is producing dioxin.

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