

# Classic SF paper

## Introduction to Complexity, Deconstruction and Relativism

**Paul Cilliers**

**A dialogue with Kirsten Dierolf, Carey Glass, Mark McKergow and Anton Stellamans**

**Mark:** I proposed this paper as our classic paper. The first thing I want to say is that the title is horribly offputting: “Complexity, Deconstruction and Relativism” means almost nothing at all. It is almost as if he is trying to tick boxes of people who should read it, rather than explaining what it’s about. I came across this paper when I was in conversation with Paul Cilliers in about 2007 and saw many relevant aspects for SF. It is sad that he has died — it would have been better to have this conversation while he was still around. He could’ve heard it and joined in with it. I’m sure he’d be very pleased with us reading this paper, learning from it and commenting on it.

**Kirsten:** Do you have an idea of what would’ve been a better title?

**Mark:** Hmm. It’s something about why modest positions should be taken seriously.

**Anton:** I was thinking about an argument for the importance of modesty.

**Kirsten:** And for the ethical value of modesty. SF is a modest position, when you describe modesty the way Cilliers does. SF doesn’t state what cannot be stated, for example reasons why somebody does something, but states what can be stated. In SF you take the system of practitioner and client and that’s what you can make statements about rather than taking “the whole complex life of the client” and looking at it as from outside.

**Mark:** Yes. It is about the conversation between the practitioner and the client and what goes on in it – particular to that specific practitioner and client. You can't use SF to take general positions. By the way, what I just did there is what Cilliers calls the “performative contradiction”. You make an absolute statement of something that can't be absolute. And then all of a sudden philosophers start pointing their fingers at you saying: “Ahh – you just did it!! You did the thing that you said couldn't or shouldn't be done !” And that's part of the argument in Cilliers' paper.

**Carey:** Cilliers talks about how many postmodern positions are so open and vague that they do not contribute to our knowledge of the world and how a certain kind of new positivism aims to correct that. That is one of the fundamental points of his paper that I could connect easily to SFCT. It is important that we talk about what SF is even if that means defining it by what it is and what it isn't to a certain degree and to do that modestly. When I started using SF the thought that “if it works it's SF — and therefore SF is everything” bothered me. The article really provided the argument why this is not a good way to look at SF.

**Kirsten:** If you say that you cannot define SF 100%, and 100% clearly, that doesn't mean that you cannot define it at all. That is something that I'm taking from Cilliers article. If we cannot state it definitely because it develops, because meaning is defined by its use, it doesn't mean that there is no way to say anything about it.

**Carey:** He says that quite explicitly, “The fact that a system has many degrees of freedom is in itself no guarantee for complex behaviour. It is only when this freedom is constrained that structure can arise. Such structure is not a priori or externally given, but is developed in response to contingent conditions in the history of the system and has a certain resilience.” (p. 264 of the original). SF does have constraints.

**Kirsten:** This also provides an argument for the way that SFCT has gone about “defining” what good solution focused

practice is as an open system of “Clues” that can be added to and is never 100% definite and is always a work in progress.

**Carey:** Yes. To me that was absolutely the power of the article. It told me that this Clues approach has been and remains exceedingly important.

**Anton:** What I really like about the article is the way in which Cilliers talks about the importance of limiting frameworks. He says that limiting frameworks makes it possible to have knowledge. So how is this relevant to me as an SF practitioner? When we are in the situation of talking with the client, we can limit the framework of what we are saying about the complex situation the client is in. We can add some limitations and direct the conversation toward something which is useful. This allows the client to think about the complex situation which he or she is experiencing in a way which is useful for the client: imagining relevant and positive futures about his or her system, focusing on what works already, on resources and what will help him or her to move forward. This is something that we do. We limit the conversation about the situation which he or she is experiencing in order to gain useful knowledge.

**Mark:** One thing that particularly stands out for me in this paper is the discussion of ethics towards the end. He comes to the conclusion that we cannot have perfect knowledge of complex systems. Therefore we cannot calculate the performance of complex social systems. So, we have to make choices including about how we reduce the complexity. We always make choices about the way that we reduce it: no description can be complete. Therefore every move that we make contains an element of choice. We can't just calculate what will happen and do it. That means that ethics runs through everything we do as SF practitioners. Every move we make, every piece of conversation has an ethical dimension for us, an element of choice. I know SF people get uncomfortable about ethics sometimes because it's a big \$5000 word. But it's good to notice that ethics is not something that you put in the code of

ethics and park (although code of ethics is a good thing). It is something you enact continuously. And SF holds that all of these big words – like for example “self” — are enacted.

**Carey:** Yes, I am reminded of the discussion about ‘self’ on the SFT-L listserv in April 2013. You cannot not bring yourself to the conversation for exactly the reasons you are stating. And when we are interacting, we are bringing ourselves in because we are making choices in the world.

**Kirsten:** A “self” is not a thing. It is not that I look into inside and notice: “Oh there is a self!” If I describe “my self”, I make a prediction or a promise to act in a certain way in the future that is consistent with how I’ve acted in the past.

**Mark:** We might give people a clue about the architecture of the paper. He starts off describing the Sokal and Bricmont affair, the ‘Sokal hoax’. Sokal submitted a paper that looked like a postmodern description of quantum gravity to a prestigious peer-reviewed journal. The paper was accepted although it was non-sensical. Sokal used this to claim that postmodernists weren’t really serious and were talking rubbish to each other. The postmodernists all shrugged their shoulders and said: “Poor Sokal, he doesn’t understand at all”. When I’m talking about SF I use this as an example of bewitchment by \$5000 words. However, the point that Cilliers makes about this is that Sokal has made half a point in saying that these postmodernists don’t review their papers very well. Sokal has also fallen into the Richard Dawkins trap of assuming that classical positivist science is the way and everything should therefore bow to that. This is of course not where Cilliers is at, and also not where we would be either. In a contingent world modest positions are valuable and almost anything could start as a modest position, but it then has to be developed. So he starts off with looking at the importance of modesty. He then gives an excellent summary of complex systems and 12 points.

**Kirsten:** And when you look at these 12 points and compare them with SF, you can see why it fits extremely well. I’d like

to challenge every reader of this paper to find something within SF that fits with each of Cilliers' 12 points. That could be a nice intellectual exercise.

**Mark:** Yes. Cilliers then goes on to talk about why any description of a complex system will be necessarily incomplete and the implications of that. You can't know everything about a situation and even if you did, you still wouldn't be able to tell what happens next in a complex world. There is no stepping out of it. Our knowledge of complex systems is always provisional, we have to be modest about the claims we make. For me, this connects strongly to the not knowing position of SF, which is not knowing but therefore needing to explore, rather than not knowing and therefore assuming that's the end of it.

**Kirsten:** What's important for me is the framework of not knowing. We have a framework of not knowing about the client, but we have a framework of knowing about what tends to work in a helping conversation.

**Mark:** Next Cilliers goes through the arguments against modest positions: the first is the relativist argument and the concern that it leads to an "anything goes" world. The next is the performative contradiction that I have already mentioned. The final argument accuses modest positions of being vague. In each case he argues strongly and coherently that modest positions need not fall into these traps. His arguments are well-founded, acknowledging the other positions while holding up his own position.

**Carey:** The argument about relativism reminds me of the old SF saying: "You don't have to know what good is to know what better is". He also says that the structure of a complex system enables it to act in complex ways. He says that if there are too many degrees of freedom the system may behave randomly but not more functionally. That reminds me about the way we lead SF conversations. We have a very good balance between structure and emergence. You have future perfect questions first that give you structure. Then you take

one step at a time to see what emerges. It seems like the methodology of SF provides the balance between structure and emergence that he talks about. The degrees of freedom aren't so great that you fall into nothingness.

**Kirsten:** The conversation is also always emergent. As SF practitioners we are aware that the conversation is emergent and that cannot be preplanned. The conversation itself is a complex system including the practitioner's and client's interactions. This is the only system that we have access to. We cannot predict how what happens in this small system then influences what happens in the client's life. We can just trust that they come back and tell us how it's been helpful.

**Carey:** And it has the flexibility to be as constraining or loose as it needs to be. This is something I hadn't thought about in this way before I read this paper and I find it quite amazing.

**Kirsten:** I love the sentence: "We cannot 'calculate' the performance of, for example, complex social systems in their complexity; we have to reduce that complexity", (p. 264 in the original) and when I look at other approaches, it makes me want to grab their poetry album and write this sentence in big red letters. Some approaches think they can calculate the performance of complex social systems, for example an organisation. If you have a large change management programme, and you think you can calculate the performance of your organisation by conducting change management measures, I don't think you can really predict what's going to happen.

**Mark:** So SF gets into working one step at a time, working with the emergence rather than trying to fight it or pretend it's not happening . . .

**Anton:** . . . and being aware that whatever we do, say or how we interact with that system, we are part of that system and we create something new. Sometimes when I see other approaches work, when they conduct analyses of certain situations, when they try to pinpoint the root causes, I can even

find it unethical. It doesn't seem to respect the people that they are talking about. It looks like an act of violence.

**Kirsten:** And they're definitely not being modest. When Cilliers talks about the "macho" positions this is what I'm reminded of.

**Anton:** Yes, it can be very arrogant. I am so happy with this article because it links to things that I'm very interested in: one is complexity and the other is deconstruction. There is an early article of Derrida from 1964 called "violence and metaphysics" ("violence et metaphysique") where he argues against Levinas. He says when we give descriptions of one another, when we say something about one another, we do each other harm. We cannot escape it. We always do violence to somebody else when we talk about them. We know that we are doing violence and therefore we need to be very critical about how we talk about each other. This article ignited a long conversation between Levinas and Derrida. Levinas has a very strong point. He says that when we speak, we construct reality and should be very modest in the construction that we make. Why do we feel the responsibility to be modest? Why do we need to be ethical? It is because it is demanded from the other person. Respect for the other person is primordial. We're obligated to be very respectful in what we say and how we say it.

**Carey:** Yes, for me this links to Cilliers' statement: "The failure to acknowledge the complexity of a certain situation is not merely a technical error, it is also an ethical one. A modest position should not be a weak position, but a responsible one." (p. 256 of the original). A modest position recognises and acknowledges the expertise of others. It means that we try to listen well. Does that link to what you're saying or is that different?

**Anton:** The reason why we feel that we have to be responsible about what we say about complex situations is not because we realise that in a complex world everything that we can say is limited or that the knowledge that we can have is limited.

Levinas would argue that we feel the obligation to be responsible because there is an appeal of the other. The other commands us to be respectful in what we say about him or her.

**Mark:** There is also another connection with Derrida. When I met Cilliers, we had a long discussion about SF. He drew a connection between the idea of the future perfect in the SF world and what Derrida would name “a call from beyond the horizon”. Cilliers told me that Derrida was famous for saying that justice is impossible, or “there can be no justice”. And he was criticised for this. But what he means is that there cannot be perfect or 100% justice. Justice is an idea, a “call from beyond the horizon”. We should move towards it in the knowledge that we will never get to it. But that doesn’t stop us from responding to the call. Cilliers made this connection between the future perfect in SF work and the call from beyond the horizon. It is not about getting there — it is about the movement. And if you’re talking about justice or ethics, it is a movement worth making.

**Anton:** In constructionism and phenomenology we say that meaning comes from the context. We can only grasp the meaning when we look at the context. Wittgenstein also fits into that thinking. When we focus on a word or a sentence or one particular thing that has meaning, we can only do that by excluding many other things. Derrida states that by doing this we are already committing an act of violence. When I give a description of Mark, I will commit some violence. But in order to be able to say anything about Mark this violence is inescapable. Derrida first thought that this happens because our language is limited. But the violence is not due to the limitations of language. There is a difference between my descriptions of a tree and my descriptions of a person. In the limited description of a tree, there is no violence. But if I give a limited description of Mark, there is an ethical dimension. That ethical dimension derives from Mark being another person. In this case, Mark would be the point beyond the horizon, the “*epikeine tes ousias*” of Plato, which makes me

responsible for what I say about him, so I will try to be careful and modest.

**Mark:** What this paper does brilliantly is show how the complex social systems perspective puts you in a position of modesty straight away. Cilliers concluding remarks are named “against arrogance”: “When dealing with complexity, modest positions are inescapable.” (p. 263 of the original) He says: “The fact that our knowledge is limited is not a disaster, it is a condition for knowledge. Limits enable knowledge.” (p. 263) I think that here he has in mind the fundamentalists, the positivist scientists, the Dawkinsites who think that modest positions are feeble and weak and useless. They want absolutes. But I’m thinking that occasionally in the SF world you can come across people who are arrogant from the other perspective. They’re so sure that nothing can be known or understood that they refuse to enter into any kind of discussion about it at all. I understand the temptation to do that, but I don’t think it’s a credible position between professionals.

**Carey:** Cilliers calls this a family fight. He mentions that this is a useless position to take: “The argument between foundationalists and relativists is a dead end – a family fight.” (p. 260). “The true relativist, i.e. somebody that argues that there are no grounds for any form of knowledge is, in a way, nothing but a disappointed foundationalist. If he cannot find objective and universal points of reference to guarantee knowledge, then he may as well give up.” (ibid.)

**Anton:** That is a very funny quote!

**Kirsten:** It is! In order to stay consistent, to stay clear of cognitive dissonance by all means, people confuse contexts: talking about SF and using SF in helping conversation.

**Mark:** So there is an arrogance in the scientist who says that everything can be described by science. But there is also an arrogance in some parts of the SF world who assume that nothing can be said about SF because it all depends. Walking the line between the areas of these positions is challenging. It

upsets people from all sides. But I think that Cilliers here is urging us to keep doing it.

**Anton:** It is our responsibility.

**Kirsten:** Yes! Right at the end, Cilliers states: “Modesty should not be a capitulation, it should serve as a challenge – but always first as a challenge to ourselves”. (p. 265).

## References

- Cilliers, P. (2005). Complexity, Deconstruction and Relativism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(5), 255–267.
- Derrida, J. (1978). Violence and metaphysics. *Levinas, Phenomenology and His Critics*, pp. 88–173.