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## Modernism and Postmodernism

Brad J. Kallenberg  
Ethan Smith

As the entry implies, *postmodernism* names any concerted reaction against "modernism." Unfortunately, the nature of "modernism" as it refers to an era in Western European thought is a contested story. Of course, champions of modernism tell the story as one of human evolution from primitive superstition to Enlightenment (Randall, 1926). But for the sake of clarifying "postmodernisms," it is useful first to attend to less rosy *postmodern* descriptions of modernity (Lyotard, 1984; Murphy, 1996, 1997; Toulmin, 1990).

### **DEFINING MODERNISM**

It is no accident that the birth of modernism coincides with the end of the so-called "religious wars," the bloodiest of which was the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) that claimed the lives of nearly 40% of Germany. To the extent that "religious dogmatism" was successfully blamed for this otherwise politically motivated war (Cavanaugh, 1995), the new era in Western Europe was marked by the distrust and gradual marginalization of all traditional authorities and loci of learning that fail to produce mathematical-like certainty: theology, morality, history, language, culture, art, law, rhetoric, politics, etc. In a desperate attempt to shore up the newly won but fragile political peace, *theoretical* reasoning (by which absolutely certain conclusions are deduced from universally

conceded principles) was taken to be the normative form of human rationality (Toulmin, 1990), a place formerly held by *practical* reasoning (by means of which a course of action is selected often in the absence of logically compelling reasons). Common examples of practical reasoning include ethics, engineering, medicine, jurisprudence, and so on. But once theoretical reasoning gained prominence, the paragon of an individual's development was no longer taken to be the ability to think *wisely* but the ability to think *mathematically* and to do so under conditions of "autonomy" according to which the enlightened individual has shrugged off the opinions of everyone else (no matter how learned) and begun to think for themselves. Each bit of knowledge that was generated by logico-mathematical means was thought to be a "brick" in the single, united and monolithic "house" of human knowledge properly constructed upon "foundations" of incorrigible truths each of which could not be doubted (Descartes, 1993). (This epistemological theory is called "foundationalism"). Since logico-mathematical reasoning is *context-independent* (e.g., interior angles of triangles necessarily add up to 180 degrees regardless of time, place or person), the elevation of theoretical over practical reasoning is accompanied by four other marks of the modern period that likewise resulted from the loss of "context" as a working concept.

First, the interior life was radically privatized. Twelve centuries before The Thirty Years' War, St. Augustine spoke of his journey to God as turning inwards-then-upwards as though human persons were closed courtyards, walled *but roofless*. Because they were roofless, human beings were open to things above them on the hierarchy such as God and the Church (Augustine, 1958; Cary, 2000). However in modernity, both God and Church had been jettisoned along with the practice of theology. Consequently, the

inevitable metaphor for human persons in the modern period became that of a darkened theater—both walled *and roofed*—in which the human self "in here" was cut off from the world of objects "out there." In the worst case scenario, the human ego is ever skeptical, never quite sure if the world-as-it-appears is identical with the world-as-it-really-is. In the best case scenario, the modern self extrapolates past all its limitations and achieves a bird's-eye objectivity from which vantage it passes judgment on the correspondence between appearance and fact, between sentences and "reality." As a result, the development of a good character was no longer considered to be prerequisite for reliable knowledge. (The medievals and ancients insisted that only "like knows like"; thus the Psalmist: "the pure you show yourself pure" but "with the crooked you show yourself perverse." Ps. 18:25, 26.) Rather, knowledge was reduced to mere information that could be possessed by untutored individuals and change hands without diminishment like coins.

Second, once the private human subject was cut off from the public world of objects, the workings of language was taken to be the exclusive domain of the individual *homunculus* (the "little man" trapped inside each human body). The paradigm of language was photo-quality representation; words serve a relatively small role as "labels" that are given to things and events by the *homunculus*. Because a *homunculus* is locked inside the theater of each human mind, it is isolated from the world of objects and other people. Since each person is restricted to merely inferential awareness of things, language is likewise cut off from reality-out-there. Picturing has been an enduring metaphor for understanding an important way in which human language works. But in the modern era, picturing becomes the *only* way words are supposed to function.

A third mark arises in the tricky business of analogy. Consider the sentences "The dog is smart" and "The physician is smart." The word "smart" is said to be used *analogically*; the dog is smart in the same way that the doctor is smart, but to a lesser extent. If one proceeded mathematically (i.e., the paradigmatic way for moderns to proceed), the dog is thought to have some *proportion* of the doctor's intelligence:  $I.Q._{dog} = kI.Q._{doctor}$  where " $k$ " is called the "scalar" or "scale."

Roadmaps are wonderful examples of analogy-by-proportion. What the cartographer produces is almost indistinguishable from a satellite photo. The cartographer generates an analogous picture by dividing real distances by some factor  $k$  (say, 1 in. = 5 mile). The map reader runs the calculus in reverse, multiplying each inch on the map-picture by the same scalar, here 5 mi./in., to learn actual distances. Every analogy-by-proportion, whether maps or sentences, requires the user to adopt an imaginary bird's-eye vantage point.

The important point is that in the modern period, analogy-by-proportion supplanted analogy-as-skilled-use that had been central to ancient and medieval Europe and continues to be important today in many non-European cultures. In such cultures, analogy-as-skilled-use can be illustrated by the practice of navigating by "itinerary" (Certeau, 2000). Because today's streets are clearly marked in the interest of making modern city maps, a roadmaps can be trivially translated into a driving itinerary ("Go 2.1 miles. Turn left on Oakwood Blvd. Proceed 1.6 miles...."). However, the reverse has not always been possible; in former times, picture-maps could not, and *should* not, be constructed from itineraries because itineraries contained crucial details that could not be conveyed by picture-maps. Learning to handle well an itinerary's details is as

important, if not more so, than reaching the destination, because learning to handle well such details constituted growth in character.

For example, an itinerary might contain the instruction "travel west until you arrive at the Three Sisters..." where "Three Sisters" is a grove of pine trees in the middle of a meadow. Locals refuse to drop reference to "Three Sisters" when giving directions because the grove of pines memorializes the three women who lost their lives to save the 47 schoolchildren, who subsequently populated the city, during the great flood of '13. In this example, one who becomes skilful at navigating the countryside simultaneously is to begin to form an empathetic relationship with the locals, namely the descendants of the 47.

Although shuttling between roadmaps and driving directions seems trivial in a world dominated by a uniform Global Positioning System, the deep instinct of modernity is that *every* itinerary can be translated into a bird's-eye-view picture-map. In sharp contrast, many cultures treat growing up as a journey for which no picture-map exists, but for which there *is* an itinerary. Youths are painstakingly taught to live well through the telling of stories, some stories being reserved until the proper time when the youth is developmentally ready to heed it. The collection of (canonical) stories is one type of moral itinerary whose timely telling to the community's children is as much a function of the elders' practical wisdom as it is the quality of the stories themselves. But if, as the modernist insists, *every* itinerary translates into a "picture-map," then even a moral itinerary was thought in to be translatable into a timeless, skill-less, context-free picture whose correct application no longer has anything to do with practical wisdom or personal character but with mathematical calculation. (In this way, even this very

dictionary entry epitomizes the bird's-eye definition of the entry, written so as to be accessible to anyone regardless of his or her stage of the journey.)

The preference for roadmaps over itineraries is symptomatic of the presumptiveness of modernism (namely, that the lone and untrained individual can adopt a God's-eye-view *at will*). Further, this disposition coincides, fourth, with the *technological mindset* that seeks mastery over wholes by controlling the parts (Arendt, 1958; Ellul, 1967). To the modern mind, a whole—a corporation, a church congregation, a city—is always and only an agglomeration or aggregation of parts. Parts are reliably controlled by exerting mechanical force from nearby. Success in control is measured in terms of "efficiency," which is to say, moving the parts by expending the smallest amount of energy necessary.

The modern preoccupation with analysis of wholes into parts (sometimes called "metaphysical reductionism") has a corollary in the overly restricted view of "causation." The chain of cause and effect leading up to and producing an event is thought to be very much like the tumbling of a row of dominoes, each cause (like each domino) is a self-contained unit that forcibly strikes its neighbor. Mechanical causation was a severe impoverishment of ancient and medieval accounts that in addition to efficient causation, found it necessary to speak also of *formal*, *final* and *material* causes, which could be found *inside*, *outside*, *among* and *above* the parts as well as simply between one part and its neighbor (Juarerro, 2002). But "inside," "outside," "among" and "above" are features that require attention to character and context, the very features abandoned by modernity but that have become central to the two versions of postmodernism to which we now turn.

## **POSTMODERN REACTIONS: THE FRENCH SCHOOL**

In Continental philosophy the school of thought perhaps most closely associated with the term “postmodernism” is French post-structuralism. These philosophers are both indebted to, but also reacted against, the "structuralism" of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Likewise, they were deeply influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and often loosely associated with, but highly critical of, French critics of Marxism. Admittedly this is complicated business. But for purposes of this article, Saussure can be considered as a transition figure at the tail end of modernity in France. In the English speaking world their influence has been felt mostly in fields dealing with literature, religious studies, and, to a lesser degree, the human sciences. Theological response to post-structuralism has ranged from virulent rejection to wholesale appropriation to critical engagement and appropriation for the sake of critiquing liberal modernity (Kallenberg, 2001; Penner, 2005). But first a word about structuralism.

Saussure and the structuralists argued that signs are able to signify only by means of their relationship of difference to other signs. For example, English speakers cannot say they know the meaning of "white" unless they understand how white is "not-black," how "hot" is "not-cold" or "far is "not-near." That *this* visible mark or vocable ("white") is recognizably not *that* visible mark or vocable ("black") is a necessary condition for spoken sounds or marks on a page to function as signs. Thus structuralism understood language to function as a vast array of differences. These differences were taken by Saussure to be far more constitutive of language than any other natural or logical connection to the world referenced. In fact, one's language was



bigger than any and all its speakers. So large was language, that Saussure insisted that language organized, directed, constrained, and even constituted all conscious activity.

Saussure classified all human thought, perception and behavior "binary differences" (right and left, good and bad, female and male, etc). Because all that could be said, thought, experienced (and so forth) within the culture under study is determined by the linguistic codification at that time and place, the structuralists ended up focusing their investigative activities on the *synchronic* aspects of a culture (i.e., the linguistic code as it functioned at a particular slice of time and place) rather than the *diachronic* aspect of a culture (i.e., as it emerged over time). Notice that this viewpoint already marks a shift away from the modern priority of the individual subject. In fact, the language of the cultural whole is itself the user of individuals (rather than vice versa) due to language's wholesale determining of conscious and cognitive activity. The epistemological program called "foundationalism" that was central to the modern or Enlightenment project was suddenly rendered impossible in the structuralist scheme of things.

*Post-structuralism* emerged when scholars loosely associated with structuralism, Michel Foucault (1926-84) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), appropriated Heidegger's analysis of human reality and experience, "*Dasein*." They argued that Saussure was only partly correct. Not only was *Dasein* bound up with the vast array of linguistic differences, human experience was not fully intelligible from within a particular slice of time and place. Rather, human perception and experience had an irreducibly "timeful" quality. Thus poststructuralists objected to Saussure's focus on the synchronic distortingly abbreviated. Furthermore, they also radicalized the emphasis on difference itself by insisting that even the notion of binary differences was insufficiently attentive

to the all-pervasive reality of difference. Derrida coined his now infamous term “*differance*” which is a combination of the French words equivalent to the English words “difference” and “deference.” By this term he gestured towards the idea that language is not only composed of a series of differences but that each word in a language is what it is in virtue of the fact that it defers its meaning to *all* other terms at all other times and places. This means that the meaning of each word cannot be simply the function of its binary opposite. In this sense, the meaning of a word is “deferred” to the others as the meaning of all the others is partly deferred to the original word. Each term in turn defers its meaning to another term that is different, and so on. Language is therefore an endless playing of difference and deferral through time. The meaning of any term or terms is never fully “present” in the sense that it is clearly, finally, and exhaustively delineated. Thus the world that one experiences and any idea or thought that one has, as utterly shot through and made possible by language and therefore “*differance*,” is one in which nothing and no one are ever *fully* “present” to one.

The poststructuralist work of Derrida came to be known as deconstructionism. The basis of deconstructionism as an interpretive strategy is the critique of “presence” by the necessary operation of “*differance*.” Given that language is a play of difference and deferral, deconstructionists insist that any reading of any text is capable of being put into question or “de-centered.” A text, as composed of language, is not the type of thing in which a single fixed interpretation may be offered. There is no recourse to reference and not recourse to the author’s intention in hopes of securing once and for all the meaning of a text. Given the endless play of *differance*, neither objects referred to nor the author’s intention nor the text itself may be rendered fully “present” to the mind of the reader. The upshot of such a reading strategy is the removal from any speaker the

ability to claim with finality what a word, much less a text, means. Thus authoritative interpretation is at best an illusion and at worse a deceptive and illegitimate exercise of coercive power.

Power analysis is also central to post-structuralism, especially in the work of Foucault. One easily hears echoes of Nietzsche in the post-structuralist vision of a world in endless flux. Discourse, especially within institutions (social bodies that exercise power), are attempts to arrest the flux, but only succeed in describing the world in a manner that fits the interests and goals of particular persons or groups of persons. In every such construal, so says Foucault, it is important to realize that the very appeal to rationality offered by pseudo-authorities often functions to cover over the fact that putatively "objective" and "rational" discourse is but a disingenuous exercise of the speaker's will-to-dominate. Foucault and other post-structuralists insist that while this is inevitable, it is not necessarily bad. However, it is often the occasion for oppression and for the hiding of oppression from clear sight. From the side of the oppressed, post-structuralists understand as liberating the insight that language and conversations are the types of things that are themselves in flux, and therefore incapable of being impervious to critique and the play of *differance*.

To the extent that they are self-consistent, most post-structuralists may be said to be nomadic critics. They deeply distrust "meta-narratives," accounts of the world that purport to offer a final explanation of everything ((Lyotard, 1984)). They take up positions and causes in order to have a place from which to critique dominant structures and ideas. Yet they may then take up another position in order to critique the position from which they earlier issued critiques. The goal is to never let any narrative become a master narrative that orders a community's form of life, because of the belief that each

such " meta-narrative" must be, and ought to be, ultimately questioned for fear that it becomes oppressive for occluding differences.

## **POSTMODERN REACTIONS: THE ANGLO-AMERICAN SCHOOL**

The Anglo-American school has been more thoroughgoing in its resistance of modernism than the French school. Perhaps for this reason it has been more easily marginalized and dismissed as extremist. Today it remains an active but minor voice in departments of philosophy and theology in Western universities and seminaries, although its relatively meager following is thought by some of its devotees to mark it as belonging to the "narrow way" (Matt 7:13). In addition, Anglo-American Postmodernism is not as easy to describe as its nemesis, modernism. Its origins can be traced to the "ordinary language philosophers" of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge and Oxford, respectively Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and, to a lesser extent, John L. Austin (1911-1960).

Ordinary language philosophy began with the twofold observation that before one can tackle the question, "How does knowledge come about?" (epistemology), it is necessary to get a handle on "How do words mean?" Plenty of modernists thought everyday language was in a pitiable state, because so many senses were connoted by any single word. (Does "cleave" *really* mean to chop or to join together?) So, they set out to repair language, even to create an ideal language, by means of a system of universal linguistic rules. Each proposed system of linguistic rules was founded upon the notion that proposition are pictures of "states of affairs," which is to say, events and things in a given constellation. (For a severe example, logical positivists held that truthfulness of each sentence had to be verifiable by one of the five senses in order for that sentence to

be regarded as a legitimate sentence.) What enables language-as-picture to work was thought to be "ostensive definitions," for example, the ability to point to *that* car, *that* tree, *that* crash. But Wittgenstein observed that a great deal of training precedes pointing: "Point to a piece of paper.—And now point to its shape—now to its color—now to its number..." (Wittgenstein, 1953, §33). Truth is, human speakers reflexively know which of many aspects an object is being pointed to because they already are experts in reading physical and conversational contexts. In short, they are already masters of an entire language.

Wittgenstein observed that as a child becomes fluent in ordinary language, the child comes into direct and robust contact with the world. In contrast to the modernist's position, Wittgenstein insisted that such linguistically framed contact cannot even be intelligibly doubted. For example, the modern skeptic while standing in a rainstorm claims ability to doubt, "How do I *know* that I am wet?" This may sound ridiculous. But for the modern thinker, the appearance of being wet must be *inferred* from sensory data, and inference never quite achieves certainty. But Wittgenstein dissolved the problematic by observing that the skeptic has *already* given the game away by using the appropriate adjective: "Wet"! Thus, the fitting way to answer skeptic's question, "How do I know I am wet?" is the simple reply, "Because you speak English" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §381).

In contrast to the views of modern thinkers, for whom language is private and piecemeal (the homunculus successively labels each sensation with a word: "I," "wet," "cold," "tired"), language is taken to be exceedingly broad by Anglo-American postmoderns. Language is the very medium of thinking and experiencing and relating. In contrast to modernist theories, instances of language are not held up against "reality"

and measured for their correspondence (or lack thereof). Rather, language is the very means by which the world is knowable and known.<sup>i</sup>

For the postmoderns, language is never merely words and sentences. For every instance of language-use displays *grammar*. The grammatical rules are not so much *prescriptive* (e.g., "Plural forms of transitive verbs must take plural objects.") as they are *descriptive* of the underlying conditions of intelligibility. But neither is "grammar" ever simply the rules for building sentences out of words. Rather, grammar is the constellation of *actions* and *shared judgments* and *objects* seen against a whole field of word-use. Thus it is a crucial part of the grammar of the word "chair" *that we sit in chairs* (Wittgenstein, 1958, 24). To become fluent in using the word "chair," we learn that chairs are the sorts of things that we sit on—but never marry or deceive! Multiple generations of Wittgensteinians continue his practice of rendering perspicuous the "grammar" of ordinary language-use in order to dissolve philosophical puzzles arising from neglect of the workings of ordinary language. In this way, Wittgenstein's postmodern "philosophy-as-therapy" has been likened to Socrates' premodern philosophical therapy.

The modern quest for a totalizing explanation of everything has been dealt a severe blow by the hard sciences. While it once was thought that all physical systems reduce to the movement of their smallest parts, only a very small percentage of physical systems qualify as "linear" for the reductionist description to hold (e.g., billiard balls colliding on a table approximate a linear system.) With the discovery that many, perhaps even the vast majority, of natural systems are "non-linear" (or "chaotic"), modernists are being forced to admit that systems ranging from the weather to church congregations are *dynamic* and so do not succumb to totalizing explanation. Wholes often achieve unique

lives of their own while exercising top-down influence on their parts (Peacocke, 1979). Because of the complex interplay of parts and wholes, to understand each bit, it becomes necessary to study the bit in the greater contexts in which this bit is embedded. If the "bit" is a human person, attention must be given not only to the molecular, but knowledge is enriched by paying close attention to the social, historical, political and linguistic dimensions of life. Even more to the point for the individual embedded in a host of dynamic systems, the way forward into an uncharted and humanly unchartable future, is his or her need for practical wisdom. Responding well in such ambiguous circumstances can make little use of mathematical-like certainty. Rather, what is longed for and needed is training in the art and skills of practical reasoning.

As linguistic fluency itself belongs to the skills of practical reason, Anglo-American Postmodernists have sought to return all forms of practical reasoning (notably, analogy-as-skilled-use) to their former place of prominence over theoretical reasoning (and its theoretic counterpart, analogy-as-proportion). Moreover, even in cases in which theoretical reasoning is appropriate, the central metaphor for understanding the action of theoretical reasoning has been changed from a "house" (*foundationalism*) to a communally owned and operated "web of belief" (Quine & Ullian, 1978).

Finally, Anglo-American postmodern have given up the modern notion that human subjects are cut off from the world of objects and persons. While moderns consider human selves as trapped inside the theater of the mind with at best inferential contact with the world "out there," on the postmodernism view, human subjects do not need empirical inferences to overcome isolation. Rather, each and every person is already embedded in the world of practices, narratives, relations, virtue formation, and historical traditions (Hauerwas & Jones, 1989; MacIntyre, 1984, 1988). Unlike the

modernist claim, one's true identity is not *discovered* by doubting these externals. These externals constitute the human self.

In these ways, postmodernism a wholesale abandonment of the entire Modern project.

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<sup>i</sup> Aquinas said something similar about ideas as "that by which" something is known in *Summa Theologica* I.85.2. This parallel between Thomas and Wittgenstein has resulted in a growing number of Wittgensteinian Thomists such as David Burrell and Fergus Kerr.