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The Concept of Postmodernism in the Philosophy of Constructive Postmodernism

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Abstracts

A scientific grasp of the concept of “post-modern” is a logical prerequisite for understanding the latest development of western philosophy, but so far there is no unified definition of “post-modern”. Therefore, clarify the reason for the tension of the “post-modern” concept and its essential connotation is not only related to the development of philosophy itself, but also has very important practical significance for China that is completing modernization. Reconstructive post-modernism philosophy as the latest development form of post-modernism philosophy, the independent opinions on the concept of “postmodern” contained therein help us to better grasp the essence of the concept of “postmodern”.

Key words: Post-modern; Post-modern philosophy; Reconstructive post-modern philosophy

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RAISING THE PROBLEM

Undoubtedly, in order to study and grasp the latest development trend of Western philosophy today, one must study the brilliant trend of postmodernism philosophy. To grasp the theoretical connotation and essence of postmodernist philosophy, a very important prerequisite is to understand and grasp the concept of “postmodernism”

in advance, otherwise we will not be able to have an accurate grasp of postmodernist philosophy. However, since the French “Le Monde” announced to its morning paper readers in 1987 that “there is a ghost—the ghost of postmodernism haunts Europe”, until the “ghost” formally appeared in the philosophical hall. Even so far as the term “becomes a household name”, the academic community has yet to have a unified definition of “postmodern” that can be universally recognized by all parties, although today’s theoretical works on postmodernism continue to spring up like mushrooms. Therefore, how to clarify the ins and outs of the concept of “postmodern” theoretically and understand the reason why the concept of postmodern is full of tension has become a very important philosophical topic, and this has very important and urgent practical significance for China, which is completing modernization and striving to move towards post-modernity. For this reason, this article tries to make a preliminary analysis of the reasons for the frequent ambiguities of the concept of “postmodern”, on this basis, review people’s general understanding of postmodern concepts, and finally focuses on analyzing the concept of “postmodernism” in the perspective of constructive postmodernism philosophy. Because constructive postmodernism philosophy is the latest development of postmodernism philosophy, which contains the latest insights into the concept of “postmodernism”. This is undoubtedly of great significance for us to better grasp the essence of the “postmodern” concept.

THE COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE CONCEPT OF “POSTMODERN”

As mentioned earlier, until today, we do not have a “postmodern” concept that can be universally recognized by all parties. So what makes the concept of “postmodernism” so difficult to define?

After carefully examining the development process of the “postmodernism” trend so far, I think the reasons can be attributed to the following points:

First of all, this is because postmodernism has an indissoluble bond with complexity and diversity. In this respect, it is manifested as an anti-traditional and anti-modern cultural trend that started from the literary field and then spread to philosophy and even all social fields. The broadness of the field makes it appear as a bewildering chaos both in content and form. This chaos makes it difficult for people to recognize its essence at once, and thus it is impossible to give a unified definition. Looking at the actual situation of postmodernism, we can find that there is actually no unified postmodern theory, and the various positions do not even have basic consistency. On the contrary, the difference between the various theories commonly referred to as “postmodern” and the postmodern position, which are often in conflict with each other, is surprising enough. Similarly, the chaotic use of the concept of “postmodernism” (although they are all called or self-proclaimed postmodern) is also dizzying.... This situation is fully characterized by people’s divergent opinions on postmodernism, and even diametrically opposed comments and opinions. Because any simple theory can never cause such a large amount or even tit-for-tat evaluation. This actually hints to us such a conclusion: any simple labelling of the concept of “postmodern” is destined to be undesirable.

Secondly, it is because people have become accustomed to understanding, evaluating or criticizing various postmodernism from the standpoint of modernism, and trying to give a unified definition of postmodernism. For postmodern thinkers, “postmodern” is not mainly a concept of time, it is often related to the way of thinking. Therefore, if “postmodern” is simply interpreted as “post-modern” or chronologically behind “modern” as in the Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary, then it must be difficult to understand. In fact, the most important way to understand postmodernism is to change our perspective, especially from the perspective of postmodernism. Only in this way can it be possible to achieve what Gadamer calls the “fusion of perspectives” and truly distinguish the true face of postmodernism.

Finally, it is because the postmodernist trend of thought is still developing. Not as currently believed by some scholars in the academic circles of our country, postmodernism has become the end of the crossbow or lacks future and vitality. This means that the connotation and extension of the concept of “postmodern” are still under development, with uncertainty and dynamics. This feature of the “postmodern” concept undoubtedly increases the difficulty for people to grasp its connotation.

CURRENT ACADEMIC CIRCLES’ GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF “POSTMODERN”

According to the conceptual archaeology of “postmodern”⁽²⁾ by Chinese and foreign scholars, the earliest user of the term “postmodern” was the British painter John Watkins Chapman. He uses the term “postmodern” painting to refer to paintings that are said to be more modern and avant-garde than French impressionist paintings. However, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that postmodernism began to move from the narrow literary and artistic fields to all fields of society. Philosophical postmodernism was also produced at this time. The key person who laid an important foundation for the official entry of postmodernism on the philosophy forum was the French philosopher Lyotard. In 1979, Lyotard officially published the book “Postmodern State”. The book not only played a very important role in the spread and diffusion of postmodernism in the European continent, but also identified postmodernism with intellectual criticism and anti-foundationalism. Immediately thereafter, in the early 1980s, philosophical masters such as Foucault, Habermas, and Lyotard launched the big discussion about “What is Enlightenment?” and “Modernity” and “Post-modernity” which has led the philosophy of postmodernism to the depths, thus forming a philosophical postmodern concept full of tension that is closely connected with the criticism of modernity.

Looking at the use of the concept of post-modernity, we can find that the “post” used in post-modern manipulated by postmodern discourse has a pun, in fact, it embodies two different attitudes towards “modernity”. First, it refers to non-modern, and it must completely break with modern theories, cultural practices, ideologies and artistic styles. Therefore, post can be definitely understood as actively breaking with the previous things, liberating from the old restrictions and oppressive conditions, and entering new areas. At the same time, it can be interpreted negatively as the loss of traditional value, certainty and stability. Second, it refers to the most-modern, that is, relying on modernity, which is the continuation and reinforcement of modernity (Habermas). According to Douglas Kellner and Steven Best: “Post-modernism is nothing but a new face and new development of modernism.”⁽³⁾ or “postmodern” development within modernity.

THE CONCEPT OF POSTMODERNISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM

Although the above-mentioned analysis of the concept of “postmodern” can be made, in the eyes of constructive postmodernist philosophers, there are many vague and

even contradictory statements about the actual use of the term postmodern. Even in the field of philosophy, the term postmodern represents two very different positions. In order to clearly state his position, David Griffin made a more detailed analysis and comparison of two very different postmodernism in the field of philosophy, and based on this, believes that their postmodernism philosophy is the real postmodernism philosophy. Griffin believes that: at present (in the field of philosophy) there are at least two very different philosophies both called “postmodernism”. One type of emphasis is deconstructive, which he calls “deconstructive postmodernism or elimination postmodernism”⁽⁴⁾. Although the other type has also done a lot of negative work, its characteristics are reconstructive. (Therefore, he calls himself reconstructive postmodernism.) He further believes that although these two philosophies have the need to deny concepts, and these concepts are essential to the modern world view, and sometimes the pre-modern world view. But the real difference between them lies in whether it is necessary and possible to construct a new worldview that maybe it can become a new worldview for generations to come. The former’s answer is no, the latter’s answer is yes.

So, which of these two postmodern philosophies can be more reasonably called “postmodern”? Griffin believes that there is no neutral standard to help us make judgments on this issue. Both parties have their own reasons for the priority of use. On the one hand, in the philosophical world, the term “postmodern” is most closely related to negativity so far, and this usage is closely related to the use of this term in literature and art. But if it is the actual priority of use rather than the advantage of use, then maybe reconstructive postmodern philosophy has priority, because the term “postmodern” was used as early as 1964 in the commentary on Whitehead’s philosophy. However, Griffin believes that the question of priority is irrelevant. The main question is mainly about what is modernism or what is modern philosophy? Or what is the unsatisfactory content of true postmodern philosophy that strives to transcend modernity? In short, what is modernity? But on this issue, the views of the two sides are completely different, and they both regard the other side as modern. From the perspective of negative postmodernism, rationality is the essence of modernism. From this point of view, reconstructive postmodernism philosophy is the most typical modernism, because this philosophy hopes to provide a standard of rationality that can satisfy coherence, and it is a sufficient metaphysical cosmology for all experiences and facts. On the contrary, constructive postmodernism follows Whitehead’s view and regards modern philosophy (including modern science) as a movement that is basically anti-rational. According to this view, the restoration of the rationality standard can be regarded as postmodern, And those who make us more anti-rational than modernity (referring

to negative postmodernists) can be regarded as highly modern, because they simply pushed the main tendency of modernism to the extreme.⁽⁵⁾

In short, from the perspective of reconstructive postmodernism, the difference between these two philosophies can be determined according to the way they deny modern philosophy and the various assumptions on which it is based. Deconstructive postmodern philosophy defeated the modern world outlook in an anti-world outlook method. It cancels or eliminates the indispensable elements that constitute the world view, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, the real world, and the truth that is consistent with the objective. This philosophy is sometimes driven by ethical considerations that reject the totalitarian system, and often leads to relativism, pessimism and even nihilism, so it is not true postmodernism.

In contrast, reconstructive postmodernism (or modified postmodernism is more appropriate) also tries to defeat the modern worldview. But not by eliminating the possibility of the existence of various modern worldviews, but by modifying modern worldview assumptions and traditional concepts to construct a postmodern worldview. They only aim at concepts that need to be corrected, such as “empty reality” (By Whitehead), “sensory perception” and “perception” equivalent concepts, and so on. In their view, it is these concepts that make it impossible to construct a coherent and sufficient metaphysics. Therefore, they focused their attention on those concepts that made modernity “anti-rational”, which is the logical conclusion they found in the negative postmodernist philosophy.

Based on the above comparison, Griffin believes that “reconstructive or modified postmodernism is a new system of scientific, moral, aesthetic and religious intuition”⁽⁶⁾. It is not against science itself, but against the scientism that only allows modern natural science data to participate in the construction of our worldview. On the one hand, it emphasizes that the modern world has made unprecedented progress, and these progress cannot be discarded because of opposition to its negative characteristics. On the other hand, it hopes to save the positive meaning of some pre-modern concepts such as “divine reality”, “cosmic meaning” and “enchanted nature”. In their view, constructive postmodern philosophy is not only sufficient for our experience, but also truly postmodern. Because it has returned to organic theory and accepted “non-sensory perception”, it does not simply deny various modern premises, rather, there is negation in affirmation, so it is “the creative combination of modern truth and values and pre-modern truth and values”.⁽⁷⁾

It can be seen that Griffin’s so-called true postmodern philosophy is a comprehensive and affirmative philosophy that transcends modern philosophy on a higher basis. On the one hand, it is keenly aware of the limitations of modernity, and at the same time it accurately sees

the mistakes made by negative postmodernism. On the other hand, it is quite optimistic, trying to reconstruct the relationship between people and the world and between people, and is committed to seeking a better new world—the postmodern world. Looking at the constructive postmodern philosophy advocated by Griffin from this angle, there is undoubtedly its indelible rationality. This rationality, in the words of Ronald A. Crosby of Colorado State University, is that it “suggests a new direction for philosophy in general...This new choice makes it possible for philosophy to resume its critical and guiding function within a more general cultural context, and this restoration is absolutely necessary in this dangerous era.”⁽⁸⁾

In addition, from Griffin’s above discussion, we can also conclude that the term postmodern does have very complex connotations, and it involves some periodical terms describing key changes in history, society, culture and thought. But it is mainly not a time concept. The confusion in postmodern discourse stems from its different usages in different academic fields such as various disciplines. In fact, the definitions and understandings provided by most postmodern theorists and postmodern commentators for the term “postmodern” often conflict with each other, and they usually do not fully explain the term. Not only that, some theorists and critics use this term descriptively to refer to new phenomena; while others use it normatively to refer to a new theory, culture, politics and practice. It can be seen that the term postmodern

is more related to people’s attitudes towards modernity and ways to transcend modernity. Therefore, if the term postmodernism can be used in different ways to find common ground, “It refers to a wide range of emotions rather than any common dogma—that is, an emotion that believes that humans can and must go beyond modern times.”⁽⁹⁾ I think this is also one of the main reasons why postmodernism has spread rapidly around the world in recent years.

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