Postmodern or modern-plus?

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Despite the pronouncement of the death of man and the end of humanism, deconstruction retains the immanence that its denial of transcendence entails.

Some say that we are no longer modern. It is said that we have shed the primary beliefs that have governed Western societies for three centuries and even longer. We are told that these beliefs continue to convict us by their consequences; but that they no longer convince us by their arguments. We are no longer persuaded that they persuade us. This running critique of modern principles and practices has been called "post-modern." In writing about the much-discussed "post-modernity," one risks the danger of not being modern enough, since yesterday's "post-modernity" may turn rather too quickly into today's *déjà vu*. Indeed, it is no accident that much of the discussion, especially as it centers about "post-structuralism" and "deconstruction," occurs in language in which the frequent use of the word "*passé*" is a discriminating badge of honor. By its very nature the critique seems bent upon exhausting all of its possible moves post-haste.

On North American college campuses the major figures (Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Lacan and Deleuze) excite students of the humanities, the social sciences, philosophy, and theology. No doubt the novelty and the shock of their writings are attractive. They put the preceding generation out to pasture and reassure the young that there is somewhat left to do. Not long ago a philosophical conference held concurrent sessions, one on René Descartes and another on Richard Rorty.

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Not only was attendance at the former sparse and at the latter standing-room only, but the difference in age was striking. There were few gray hairs among the Rorty attendees. It is tempting to take the discussion as just another passing fad, a mere "dead-end"; but its rather frantic pace ought not to obscure the importance of what is going on. For these same students will form the next generation of college teachers, so that the content and methods of future courses in literature, sociology, politics, philosophy, and theology may well reflect what is going on right now. Those courses may undergo a considerable change, even perhaps a "sea-change."

A second look at this alleged post-modernity finds it drenched in past history; it is not too much to say, "obsessed" with it, especially with the more recent past. What happens, however, is that the pre-modern past tends to be absorbed into the more recent past. So that deconstruction and other critical so-called post-modern forms are busy offering a wholesale revision of our understanding of and our attitude towards the past going back to the origins of Western civilization itself.

The number of publications devoted to the discussion of post-modernity is very large and, with the ease of publication and communication, threatens to increase exponentially. One aspect of the discussion is taken up with the question of the *existence* of post-modernity: Is there in fact such a condition as post-modernity? After all, thinkers, such as Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, defend the extension of the central values of modernity once they have radically transformed them. In particular, they defend the values of scientific rigor, cognitive methods, universal truth-claims and conceptual rationality. And they articulate a certain combination of rationality and liberty.

A second aspect of the discussion takes up the question of the *nature* of post-modernity, given its existence: If in fact there is something that deserves the name, what is it, when did it begin and where is one to look for it? But before determining the meaning of "post-modernity," one must have a certain notion of what he or she means by "modernity." A little reading in the literature is enough to discover a considerable variance in terminology among the discussants. First of all, in determining the meaning of post-modernity, when is modernity supposed to have ended? Is it an era or epoch at all; is it not rather a condition or attitude? And in what is modernity supposed to

have consisted? These questions are of decisive importance since the meaning given to the term "post-modernity" is parasitic upon the meaning given to the term "modernity."

The terms change their meaning according to the field in which they are applied. Thus, for example, among some *art critics* and *historians* the modernists are those who in painting and sculpture rejected representationalism in favor of abstract formalism (Picasso, Braque, and Moore); who in music rejected melody and harmony in favor of atonalism and serialism (Schönberg, Alban Berg, and Boulet); and who in literature rejected linear narrative and normal syntax in favor of the fracturing of sentences and the deliberate decomposition of narrative (Proust, Pound, and Joyce). In a word, the modernists may be said to have engaged in "decreation."

But, if one turns to science, social thought, and philosophy, the afore-mentioned movements are heralded as precursors or even as analogous expressions of what is now recognized as "post-modernity." They are taken to have either anticipated or embodied the critique of modernity that constitutes an essential feature of post-modernity. No doubt, the time-scale in the sciences is longer, and the rate of change slower. What is modern in *natural science*, then, stretches from Galileo and Newton to Einstein, and what is post-modern is Bohr, Bohm, and others. What is modern in *social thought* and society is industrialization and democratization, and what is post-modern is characterized by a world-wide economic system, post-industrial technology, telecommunciations, and computerization. What is modern in *politics* includes Enlightenment ideals of liberty and progress, the heyday of the nation-state and colonialism, so that what is politically post-modern is de-colonization, concern for the environment, and growing scepticism about the competence of the state.

But even if one has decided upon the existence, extent, and content of the terms "modern" and "post-modern," more fundamental questions remain. How is post-modernity to be interpreted, and on what grounds is it to be assessed? Are we to use modern standards of rationality? But it is just these that have come under criticism. Are we to return to ancient ones going back to Plato and Aristotle? But Heidegger is alleged to have shown their limitations, distortions, and relativism. Not even Homer has escaped the criticism of some neo-Marxists. We can no longer simply assume that such standards are trans-historical and trans-cultural, since that claim is a major point at

issue. Recognition of the historical character of norms is an essential feature of post-modernity. Indeed, even the attempt to brand such very divergent authors as Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard with a single label such as "deconstructionist" is itself contestable, since the very logic to be used in the discussion is itself a debated point. Thus, Derrida eschews the logic of what he calls "logocentrism" in both ancient and modern metaphysics, and Lyotard attacks the pretension of what he calls the "grand narratives." Moreover, Lyotard asks whether it is not possible to base the legitimacy of arguments and social practices upon *paralogy*—the recognition of unbridgeable differences—rather than upon a logic of non-contradiction that seeks consensus. Both authors warn against the readiness of modernity to totalize and to unify, in a word, to identify very diverse phenomena and to coerce them into a false unity. The very term "post-modernity," then, is suspect on its own grounds.

It simply won't do to try to capture the present critique of modernity with terms such as "nihilism" and "scepticism." The principal philsophers profess no such aims, whatever their effects. It is important, I think, to grasp that their critique is not even a straight-forward reassertion of traditional radical scepticism, though it has learned much from that source. And the reason is that traditional scepticism still takes propositional truth seriously in order to discount it, whereas post-modern philosophers take up a different view of language.

Much of the philosophical discussion draws upon three principal sources: upon a French assimilation of Heidegger, upon a certain reading of Nietzsche, and upon the understanding of language provided by Ferdinand de Saussure. To oversimplify: from Heidegger it takes the themes of the destruction of metaphysics and the critique of technology; from Nietzsche it takes the intimate relation between knowledge and power and the intended destruction of subjectivity; and from de Saussure it takes the notion of language as a system of differential signs.

This is not the occasion or place for a detailed examination of the several authors. Moreover, there is a growing number of good expositions of their various views.[1] While

[1]Jean-François Lyotard has addressed the question of post-modernity directly in a commissioned work (1979), *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. by G.

Derrida and Lyotard have quite different agendas, some aspects of their work bear upon four points of possible engagement between deconstruction and more traditonal metaphysics. These same points also bear upon Christian faith and its theological articulation. The points of possible engagement are: the primacy of diversity over unity, the pursuit of novelty rather than permanence, the denial of origins, and the inversion of theory and praxis (in the expanded modern sense of that word).

First, consider the primacy of diversity over unity. According to Jean-François Lyotard, the sense of unity in modern times has been provided by one or both of two *grand narratives*, whose stories have been told in the language of the Enlightenment. The first of these great narratives is the story of the *mind*—the story of the pursuit of *knowledge* and the triumph of the idea through the progress of science. The second grand narrative is the story of the *will*—the story of the progress of human liberty and the emancipation of man from nature and

Bennington and B. Massumi; forward by F. Jameson (Minnesota University Press, 1984), including "What is Post-modernism?" as a appendix.

Among the flood of publications by Jacques Derrida, the most pertinent to the interests of this essay are: *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. by G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univsity Press, 1976); *Writing and Difference* (1967), trans. by A. Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972), trans. by A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Among secondary works, Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) is a fine exposition. I have relied on Norris for some of the difficult points of interpretation. The most profound study of Derrida is, in my opinion, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosphy of Reflection* by Rodolphe Gasché (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). It repays study.

Although I do not draw upon Michel Foucault explicitly in this essay, I have found Gary Gutting's *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) helpful in providing background and context. See also the multi-authored assessments: *The Final Foucault*, ed. J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988); and *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges*, ed. J. Arac (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

See the important critical lectures by Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), trans. by F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1987).

And for the wider context: *Philosophy: End or Transformation?*. ed. by K. Baynes, J. Bohman, T. McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

from repression of all kinds. The first story sought to teach modern man how to distinguish between the true and the false; while the second sought to teach him how to create the just from the unjust. Like traditional narratives, these modern stories were meant to integrate individual experience and to legitimate social prescriptions while strengthening the social bond.

But, Lyotard tells us, the two great modern narratives remained divorced from one another. The theoretical scientific account recognized only closed systems of fact, while the political account spoke only the language of value. Hegel's speculative philosophy was the last great attempt to unify the two grand narratives through the meta-narrative of absolute Spirit. For a variety of reasons the attempt failed. And with the failure of this last vigorous assertion of theory over praxis, meaning came to be calculated pragmatically, i.e., through technology and its performance. The normativity of laws was replaced by the performativity of procedures. Science has aspired since to efficiency of performance and has ended up as part of the system of productive forces. The university has become an institution that provides skills rather than ideals, and is a center of ordinary power. Science plays its own language game, but it can provide no over-arching justification for other aspects of life. Indeed, its very proofs themselves stand in need of proof. Meta-narratives that are supposed to give unified meaning disintegrate instead into an incommensurable plurality of special language games. We have arrived at the post-modern condition: the mark of post-modernity is the loss of credibility in all meta-narratives.

Insistence upon diversity is found in Derrida in an even more radical form, for he locates it in the very bowels of language itself, once language is freed from the prison of logocentrism. *Logocentrism* manifests itself wherever identity is the first principle of thought: $A = A$, "a rose is a rose is a rose . . ." Modern science seeks consensus through *homologies*, and self-reference leads back to identity. But Derrida finds the roots of the logic of identity to lie in the soil of traditional metaphysics, both ancient and modern. Deconstruction takes metaphysics and its logocentrisim as its target. According to Derrida, the metaphysics which has governed Western reason is rooted in and justified by an understanding of identity that is taken from the experience of the simultaneous self-presence of the speaker to his own speaking—that is, to the immediately experienced assurance that what he means to say and what he says are

indeed identical. Derrida aims to free thought from its bondage to self-identity and self-presence. To do that he has set out to shake the foundations of self-understanding, because that self-understanding arises out of the coincidence of identity and presence experienced in the act of speaking.

To accomplish this, he has launched a triple strategy by which he takes up some of the great texts of the Western tradition in order to *decenter, destabilize,* and *defer* their meaning. This threefold strategy derives from his understanding of language, which—following de Saussure[2]—takes language to be a system of symbolic differences. Now, Derridean *différence* is not to be taken in the ordinary sense in which A is said to differ from B, women from men, universals from particulars, and one language from another. Such difference rests upon a supposed pair of identities which are initially distinct from one another; and so the relation that underlies such a difference is a connection between prior identities. Such relations are secondary and derivative, being dependent upon the terms. These relations are external connections, brought about either by things or imposed by the mind.

Derrida's *différence,* however, is original; that is, nothing in language lies prior to it, for language is nothing but symbols that differ from one another. Nor does anything *outside* language lie prior to it, either. Indeed, linguistic difference is so important that Derrida has dubbed it with a neologism, replacing the second *e* with an *a*: *différance*. With this written or printed *a*, he has been able to propose a new set of relations, and a new understanding of meaning. So that Derrida builds upon the famous dicta of de Saussure: "In language there are only differences," and: "Language is a form and not a substance," i.e., it is not at all like any *thing*. To see why and how Derrida carries out his attack upon logocentrism, we need to look briefly at the three modes of attack.

I.—First, let us consider the operation by which Derrida *decenters* the reading of a text. Whereas, according to Derrida, the logic of identity has governed the main lines of argument in the canonical reading of a text, Derrida is convinced that the text says something more,—and not only something more, but something quite *different*. He does not deny that one can read the text as standard interpreters do; but he sets out to show that because the argument of such texts is imprisoned in the metaphysical language of self-identity and self-presence, the text actually *says* something quite different from what it *means* to say; indeed, it even says something *against itself*. It is this pregnant discrepancy that leads him to describe his own thought as a kind of writing in the *margins* of the text. Not, however, as a medieval commentator who generally means to support the text by clarifying it, but rather as a military engineer who intends to undermine its buttressed meaning.

[2]See *Course in General Linguistics: A Critical Commentary on the Cours de linguistique générale*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959) (posthumous). Cf. Roy Harris, *Reading Saussure* (La Salle: Open Court, 1987).

Now, we need to remind ourselves that—for Derrida—these margins are marginal only in virtue of the established criteria based upon the logic of identity. For Derrida does not aspire to replace the standard traditonal center with another center; a cycle with an epicycle. For him "decentering" the text does not mean "to transfer the key meaning from one center to another." To "decenter" is to do away with the notion that the text has any center at all. To do this, Derrida accepts the "margins" of the text as defined by the traditional interpretation of the central argument of the text, and he then searches out resistant details, which discomfit the text and provide an uncanonical reading of it.

II.—We come, then, to the second arrow in Derrida's strategic bow: the decentering of the textual reading is meant to *destabilize* the intended meaning of the text. Derrida writes of "imbalancing" conventional thought-patterns, and Lyotard of "destabilizing" them. The strategy is not to bring some alien force against the text, but rather to exploit the text's own resources against itself. It is meant to probe its blind spots, to do "violence" to the text, but from within the text itself, to expose the moments of inner stress. That is why Derrida can claim that he does not go beyond the text, but rather that he simply puts it to the test. The strategy is to catch whatever there is in the text that cannot quite be brought to rational concepts, and then to worry the text until the central meaning gives way to a plurality of different possible meanings. Both Derrida and Lyotard make rather much of the factor of "undecidability." They see *undecidability*—not only as comparable to the "uncertainty principle" in physics—but as endemic in language itself. The native heterogeneity of language has been obscured by the priority of oral speech and the security of

immediate self-identical presence, a priority and security that has stamped Western thought with the logic of self-identity.

The Derridean *différence/différance* is more radical than the difference that establishes the binary oppositions of dialectical thinking. For in the end, binary distinctions are really correlatives; and the apparent otherness of their opposition is undergirded by their mutual self-reference. Moreover, far from being overcome by dialectics, these binary oppositions remain undecidable. That is why Derrida refuses to consider his own uncanonical readings as "alternatives" to the established readings. Now, what is at issue is not simply the opposition between Kantian antinomies, or Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, nor even of Structuralist categories; what is under Derridean attack is the very oppositions of metaphysics itself: of presence and absence, same and other, identical and different, original and derivative, cause and caused, sign and referent.

It is especially the notions of *origin* and *referent* that come under attack, because they are the source of the unity that is claimed by traditional metaphysics. A book is supposedly unified by the intention of the author; and meaning in general is unified by a "transcendental signified." But, according to Derrida, there is no self-identical principle that will exercize control over the intended meaning of the text. Nor presumably is there a God who will providentially supervise the meaning of existence. Derrida's *différence/différance* embraces a non-self-identical "logic" which highlights the arbitrary and contingent relations of signs to one another within a linguistic system. Lyotard for his part situates the true character of language outside the closed system of knowledge and in the contingent immediacy of speech. Richard Rorty has something similar in mind when he urges us to keep the conversation going.

It is certain that these thinkers would not agree that the doctrine of *analogy* will provide enough room for diversity of meaning. Indeed, Lyotard tells us that even *paradox* is too bound up with the logic of self-identity, and that what is already operative in the postmodern practice of discourse is a kind of *paralogy*, a plurality of incommensurable language games. If there is no transcendental signified—neither things, nor the intention of the author, nor God—neither is there any "transcendental signifier." The death of subjectivity is proclaimed.

Heidegger had already maintained that what is constitutive of the modern epoch is a humanism that rests

upon the human subject as upon an unshakeable and certain foundation. Derrida traces this bias towards self-reference back to Plato himself. Certainly, the modern concept of subjectivity is constituted by self-reflection. In Descartes, it is isolated and set over against an objective order of meaning; but in Kant and post-Kantians, subjectivity becomes consciousness of a world constituted by a transcendental self. Even Hegel traces the meaning of the cosmic to the self-determination of absolute Spirit. Deconstruction renounces the centrality of the self. In the view of deconstruction, meaning is not constructed through self-reference; nor is it built up through reference to an other opposed to the self in binary opposition as dialectics and structuralism have it. Meaning has no resting place, no stopping point within or outside the text, no transcendental signified or signifier which can stop the endless chain of supplementary meanings.

Derrida uses the word *supplementary* to indicate an addition by-the-way that discloses an internal insufficiency in the text itself. In this way the central meaning of the argument is displaced, so that deconstruction is a sort of *displacement* of meaning. It is nothing so grand as Hegel's *Aufhebung* or sublation, nor even as Heidegger's *Verwindung* or overcoming. It does not challenge the text on the text's own logocentric grounds. It does not attempt to contradict the argument of the text; it merely saps its strength. The deconstructionist fights somewhat in the Parthian manner; if not exactly by fleeing from the main argument, still by striking side-glancing blows. The strategy, especially Derrida's, is to put an accepted interpretation off balance, and once tilted, to put it out of play. At this point it is difficult to suppress the ungenerous image of those dogs who run in packs and nip at the heels and flanks of nobler beasts.

III.—Side-glances are not confined to blows, however, but are rooted in the very texture of language itself. De Saussure's approach to language purports to break the direct link of word-idea-thing. De Saussure took language to be a system of signs whose meanings are constituted through their differences from one another. Derrida has parlayed this bent into a general theory of meaning as *différance*. He has formed the term *différance* as a play upon *différence* and *déférence*, which in French have the same written verbal form "*différer*." Since, according to Derrida, unity and identity are not primary, each word in a language takes its meaning by reference to its others; and in this sense it "defers" to them. The meaning of a term is,

so to say, postponed, carried over to its fellows. And so, deconstruction claims to unmask the view that our signs identify with some originating referent; nor do they contain atomic self-identical, self-enclosed, self-referential units of sense. Meaning is not, as the older realism had it, established by an identity of representation and referent, by an equivalence of signifier and signified, by an identification of meaning and meant. Such a traditional theory of meaning—whether in its realist or idealist forms—presupposes an extra-linguistic referent, a transcendent object *to which* the word is supposed to refer, and *from which* it is supposed to receive the unity and identity of its meaning. By cutting such an umbilical cord—according to Derrida, it is the naive assumption of the direct connection between a thing and a proposition or sentence—Derrida proposes to return language to itself. Language is inherently intra-textual and inter-textual, and it has no tie with the transcendent or transcendental. The meaning of a word comes to it by its interaction with other words in contingent and historically conditioned ways—by its interplay with other terms and syntactical structures.

In such a view, then, there are no absolute meanings, and meaning is indefinitely deferred, passed on from one word to another, from difference to difference. With the proclaimed death of subjectivity and of the author, as well as the rejection of the referent, language is freed from its metaphysical prison. It is released into the interplay of its own meanings. Supplementary meaning is meaning without authority, because it can claim no authenticity, since it can recover no author or appeal to any unifying authorial intention. Deconstruction is the exploration of limit-situations in language. It works on the periphery of reason, at its margins, like the nomads who unsettle settled society. It performs the function that Hegel thought war would: it shakes down certainties and established practices.

IV.—There is a sense in which post-modernity is a *praxis* as much as it is a set of ideas. The primacy of theoretical ideas is renounced. This inversion of practice and theory gives to post-modernity, even in its philosophical expression, the "feel" of a movement not directed by concepts so much as by *conatus*. Indeed, Derrida may be said to replace the logic of identity with the rhetoric of difference. There is here, it seems to me, an ambivalent attitude towards power. On the one hand—to use a term of Lyotard's, taken from Nietzsche—thought itself is "agonistic." And, on the other, there is an underlying fear that unity may lead to tyranny. To be sure,

given recent history, the fear is not without some cause. There is fear of the enormous concentration of technical power and social control that is available today as a result of the ambiguous technical "success" of modernity itself. There is fear of social and political repression made possible by economic cartels and political totalitarianism. There is the ease with which a political order may pass over into a police state. Underlying this is the dangerous concept of *totality*, always present (according to these thinkers) in Western metaphysics but brought to a powerful paradigmatic status by Kant and the German idealists. Indeed, rationality itself falls under its sway and becomes a mere instrument for non-rational, and even irrational, purposes. Reason in the service of system and totality becomes a mere functionary of technical power. In such a climate, any claim to the theoretical pursuit of truth will raise the question: What is *really* behind this claim? It is this fear that leads Lyotard to raise the battle-cry: "Let us wage war on totality . . . Let us activate the differences . . ."

To the extent that these thinkers criticize such concepts as instrumental reason and the closed nature of much recent philosophy, a traditional metaphysician may welcome their support. Indeed, after fifty years of positivist dismissal of metaphysics as nonsensical—a dismissal which was an unreasonable assertion posing as a rational critique—deconstruction has made metaphysics somewhat important, if not quite respectable. For it is still treated as a kind of disease of the mind. Yet, it is possible once again to talk of metaphysics without apology. If the metaphysician is still mistaken, at least he is no longer foolish.

Nevertheless, we ought to be cautious in looking to deconstruction to free philosophy and theology from a sometimes excessive rationalism. Deconstruction may prove helpful in a limited and tactical way; but it is important to realize that what is at issue here is not simply an excess of conceptual reason. What is at stake is *the very redefinition of reason itself*.[3] Derrida sometimes seems to have in mind a critique that retains at least the shadow of critical rationality; but despite some striking similarities with the sceptics, deconstructionists are not an-

[3]See *Rationalité aujourdhui/Rationality Today*, ed. by T. Geraets (Ottawa) for an extended discussion of the issue.

cient sceptics revived. The ancients defined themselves over against particular claims of reason and yet within the demands of rationality, whereas deconstruction works to excise the very notion of principles, causality, and participation from the vocabulary and argument of philosophy. To the extent that it succeeds it tears at the very substance of philosophical reason as we have known it.

Some theologians look to deconstruction for a modern *via negativa*, and some remarks may be taken that way. But what kind of a negative way is it that resolutely denies what it calls the "myth of origins," and that denies to thought any referent at all, let alone a transcendent one? It seems to me, rather, that deconstruction may be helpful in another way. It raises profound issues of truth and justice in a serious way. In deflecting the traditional meanings, deconstruction engages fundamental issues in the tradition—issues that mainline currents of philosophy in the recent past have considered unworthy of careful thought. As Christian thinkers—philosophers, theologians, scholars, and authors—we have something to say on these issues. The time is ripe. I will only suggest some points of response.

As to the primacy of diversity over unity, we can welcome the strictures on the kind of closed systemic unity that is the enemy of difference. But despite Derrida's rejection of binary opposition because it is too enmeshed in logocentrism, the result of marginal thinking is to leave us with an equivocity of differences. As Christians, however, we are led to consider the Godhead as the diversity of infinite persons in the most perfect unity of being, thought, and love. This theological capital—the supreme harmony of unity and diversity, of identity and difference—is of philosphical interest insofar as we find intimations of that unity and diversity in human fellowship.

As to the pursuit of novelty rather than permanence, we can recognize post-modernity as an extension of that very pursuit of the new that went under the heading of progress, despite the deconstructionist attack on that very notion. Jürgen Habermas has remarked that before something can be modern, it must first be post-modern. That is, it must first establish its newness.[4] Deconstruction has made swift attacks

[4]*The New German Critique*, Winter 1981.

upon a certain fixated modernity, but it has done it with the very weapon of modernity itself. It has found something new with which to leave one form or version of modernity behind. As Christians we ought to salute good news wherever we hear it, but not without situating it within the long tradition of Christian experience. The question of time has absorbed philosophical attention in our century. There is no doubt that a shift in the understanding of experienced time has occurred between the deconstructionists and their modern predecessors. The unity of inner-time consciousness, so closely tied to subjectivity, has given way to a fragmentation of the time-experience. It seems to me that a society cannot survive without some notion of eternity. And so, there is need once again for philosophers and theologians to re-examine time in order to situate it within a credible concept of eternity.

As to the denial of origins: here again, the modernity of post-modernity discloses itself. For the denial of origins, as well as of referent, places deconstruction within the immanent circle of a humanism that not only ignores transcendence, but that systematically denies it. Once again, deconstruction has clarified the immanentist strain in Enlightenment modernity. The challenge is serious, and it calls philosophers to raise the understanding of causality to a level that illuminates the possibilities of human existence, and to understand participation as a cosmic relation and not merely a social metaphor.

Finally, the inversion of theory and praxis is a corollary of any thorough-going immanent humanism. For *theoria* arises out of a religious response: it waits upon truth to disclose itself. Religion—and especially Christian revelation—discloses an initiative that lies beyond human hands, beyond human powers of construction. Moreover, that initiative speaks of an order that lies prior to human existence. It is an order, and not simply an indeterminate givenness or pure chaos. It already has meaning built into it, and value too. That kind of openness and receptivity demands an understanding and appreciation of an order of existence that is at once incarnate and genuinely spiritual. The mainlines of modern thought need to shift—as Augustine did, and by whatever ways—from the immanence of embodied experience to the recognition of incarnate spirituality. Through that shift it can take up again—in both a pre- and post-Enlightenment fashion—the great narratives of the advance into truth and the enhancement of human liberty.

I have only touched upon a few issues among what

is a massive and highly differentiated group of thinkers. I consider their work especially important for the reasons given. Can we say that they are *post*-modern? Yes, if we restrict what we mean by modern: closed systemic thinking, centered in the human subject, reducing the non-subjective to mere object, instrumental rationality, the subordination of the human to technical power, the subjection of first-order experience to second-order criteria, the primacy of epistemology over ontology. It is my sense, however, that in the end post-modernity is a new form of modernity, so that its criticisms are not as radical as they first seem to be. Or rather, they are radical in terms of certain deeper presuppositions that post-modernity shares with modernity. These presuppositions do not gather about the rejected concept of subjectivity, but they do gather about the human as a contingent yet final horizon. Despite the pronouncement of the death of man and the end of humanism, deconstruction retains the immanence that its denial of transcendence entails. It is to those presuppositions that a theology derived from, and a philosophy conscious of, Christian revelation can bring a light ever ancient, ever new. □

The philosophical presuppositions of postmodernity

Klaus Hedwig

For the postmodern authors, metaphysical statements on the meaning of life are "empty."

One would hardly consider philosophy as avant garde in any given era. It is not without reason that Hegel says that it is only when a historical epoch is coming to a close, when twilight breaks in, that for reason—like an owl—the time for sight, for insight has come. The philosophical discussion concerning the end of the modern and the beginning of the postmodern era considers first of all the tendencies which have been present for decades and which have registered their presence in differentiating individual, societal, and political life-styles, and today, now that postmodernity has become fashionable, have descended to the level of consumer industry.

I.

But if we abstract from that—insofar as it is possible—we can discern a wide-reaching cultural pluralism in this acceptance, which shoots through every facet of life. It should not be difficult to document this development in literature, painting, music, architecture, and sociology.[1] Even a theolog-

[1]Cf. the survey in W. Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Weinheim, 1987), 87ff.

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