Martin D. Henry (*ITQ*, vol. 63/1, 1998, 3–21)

God in Postmodernity[1]

The aim of this article is to suggest that the notoriously vague terms ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity’ can in fact plausibly be construed as referring to one aspect of the secularisation of Christian theological ideas, including of course the idea of God, that has been in progress since the Enlightenment, if not before. This interpretation, which some may judge tendentious, is advanced briefly towards the end of the article, but an attempt is first made to situate postmodernism historically in the contemporary world.

Introduction: modernity and modernism

In trying to understand the term ‘postmodernism’, it may be useful to take it in conjunction with ‘postmodernity’, a closely related but distinct concept. The two terms ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity’ must in turn be seen in relation to the correlative or parallel expressions, ‘modernism’ and ‘modernity’. For it is against modernism and modernity that postmodernism and postmodernity appear to define themselves. And indeed that fact alone – if it is a fact – should alert us to the possibility that when cultural theorists describe modernism and modernity, it may not be, so to speak, an innocent description that is given, but a description covertly weighted against modernism and modernity and in favour of postmodernism and postmodernity.

Be that as it may, one should perhaps begin by attempting to describe what is meant by modernity and modernism. Putting it rather crudely, modernity may be seen as designating various social, political, scientific, economic and legal realities, i.e. concrete historical facts, whereas the term ‘modernism’ has an intellectual and cultural reference. The two are evidently closely interconnected.

[1] This article originated in a lecture given in the Faculty of Law, UCC, on 13 March 1996. It was subsequently published in a slightly revised form as Chapter 10 of M. Henry, *On not understanding God* (The Columba Press: Dublin, 1997). It is here reproduced, with a few minor changes and corrections, by kind permission of the publisher.

Modernity – in the sense of the ‘modern age’ – refers to the post-mediaeval world,[2] to the period when in the West life began to be characterised by a gradually intensifying process of secularisation. Secularisation involved the organisation of the life of this world according to rational, ordered principles, and a relegation of religious matters increasingly to the sphere of individual choice and responsibility.

The factors contributing to the emergence of the recognisably modern world certainly include the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The essence of that revolution was the dual conviction that ‘there are no privileged or a priori *substantive* truths’ and that ‘the laws to which this world is subject are symmetrical.’[3] In the course of time this conviction produced what Max Weber was to call the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ For where everything had to happen according to laws that could not admit of exceptions, there could no longer be any possibility of special events, divine interventions or miracles. Any ‘knowledge’ acquired by circumventing the scientific method was not real knowledge at all. In the wake of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution came the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the industrial revolution, and the spectacular growth of historical consciousness in the nineteenth century, followed by the emergence of a post-industrial, highly technological civilisation in the twentieth century.

This entire development is sometimes referred to as the ‘project of modernity’, i.e. the attempt to expand human power and mastery over the world in a rationally controlled fashion. In its own way, it was a quasi-religious, or at least a teleologically inspired, i.e. goal-directed, total vision of reality, for it sought through constant progress to bring about the perfection, or the maximisation, of human dominance over the environment. The project of modernity was thus, in theological parlance, a Pelagian project, aimed at self-sufficiency, and at least implicitly repudiating the traditional Christian doctrine of ‘original sin’, according to which there is a humanly irremovable weakness in the human condition. This whole modern development clearly defined itself in opposition to the older experience of the West in the Middle Ages and Antiquity. The immediate predecessor of the modern age, namely the mediaeval period, was perceived as other-worldly, religion-dominated, feudal and communitarian; the modern age was this-worldly, rationalist, increasingly democratic, individualist, and profoundly marked by the growth of capitalism.

[2] When the mediaeval world ended is, of course, a much-disputed question, and depends on which country – or segment of a country – one is talking about. Voltaire is alleged to have said on one occasion that the ‘Middle Ages’ were a few hundred yards down the road from where he himself was staying. Luis Buñuel claimed that in his native village in Aragón, the Middle Ages ended in 1914 . . .

[3] E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London, 1992), pp. 80–81.

Now, while modernity can be seen as covering quite a long period of time, from about the fifteenth century onwards, that period's awareness of itself is a much later development. By that is meant simply that any wide use of 'modernity' as a theoretical concept is not, as far as this writer can ascertain, to be found before the nineteenth century.[4] The French poet Rimbaud's use of the term ('Il faut être absolument moderne'[5]) is an example of its recently acquired cultural significance. That is to say, it was only relatively late in the day that 'modern' Westerners began to suspect that their own cultural reality was something very different from that of their ancient and mediaeval forbears, and appeared to involve a radical break with what their predecessors had believed to be eternally and universally true about the human condition.

Once this realisation began to sink in, it was reflected in the intellectual, literary and artistic life of the West: i.e. in the cultural movement known now as 'modernism', which could be dated very roughly, following M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane,[6] from 1890 to 1930. This 'movement' was a reaction against realist modes of representation in the arts and in literature, and up to the start of this century was communicated by tendencies like Symbolism, Impressionism and Decadence. From the early part of the twentieth century up to the First World War 'modernism' was expressed by Fauvism, Cubism, Post-Impressionism, Futurism, Imagism and Vorticism. Finally, during and following the First World War Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism came to the fore. Modernism would thus include: atonalism in music, anti-representationalism in art (i.e. abstract art), free verse in poetry, fragmentation and 'stream of consciousness' in the novel, functionalism in architecture (Bauhaus) and the general move away from linear or representational forms and towards the use of new spatial configurations in the arts (e.g. in the technique known as 'collage').

Modernism should however be seen in more than purely formal or artistic terms. That is to say, it was about more than a search for new forms in the arts and in literature, for it was, more profoundly, an often frenetic reaction to the political, social, military and ideological upheavals of the times. It represented, among other things, a sustained attempt at giving a radically new interpretation of space and time as the coordinates, if that is the right word, by which to plot

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[4] The actual terms 'modernus' and 'modernitas' (in opposition to 'antiquus' and 'antiquitas') can be found in Latin as far back as the fifth and twelfth centuries respectively (cf. Niklaus Peter, *Im Schatten der Modernität – Franz Overbecks Weg zur „Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie"*, Stuttgart and Weimar, 1992, p. 6); according to others (e.g. Jencks), the term goes back even further, to the third century. 'Modern' was used to refer to recent, as opposed to older, phenomena. But the connotation of the present's radical difference from the past, and a sense even of its superiority with regard to the past, only began to attach to the term 'modern' from the Enlightenment onwards.

[5] At the end of *Une Saison en Enfer*.

[6] Authors of the volume *Modernism* in the *Pelican Guides to European Literature*.

the movement of human life.[7] This fact is probably not unconnected with contemporary developments in the sciences, especially in physics, which overturned the Newtonian picture of reality, and more disturbingly overturned long-held assumptions about the relative solidity and stability of the material world.[8]

Modernity indeed, in its late phase, witnessed such a violent overthrow of traditional patterns of interpreting and trying to manage the human condition, that for some theorists (cf. the phrase used by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'all that is solid melts into air'[9]) it already contained implicitly within itself the flux and uncertainty associated with the postmodern mood.[10]

To summarise this first part of the discussion: one could say that when the modern age achieved self-consciousness as the 'modern age', 'modernity' was born, and that in turn provoked the cultural response known as 'modernism'. Then, when a self-conscious modernity became self-critical and self-doubting, postmodernity and its corresponding cultural and intellectual expression, postmodernism, appeared. It should, however, be pointed out that there are disputes about whether postmodernism can be properly described as the culture of postmodernity.

Postmodernity: Hegel, Benjamin and Wittgenstein

I now propose to take up three quotations, which cast significant light, in my judgement, on what has been said so far, and which can also serve to set the scene for what has still to be said about postmodernity and postmodernism proper. The first is from the 'Preface' to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right or Natural Law and Political Science in Outline* (first published 1821). This work was Hegel's attempt to set out his philosophy of law and his understanding of the modern state within the framework of his overall

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[7] For the above information on modernism in the arts and literature I am indebted to the entry 'modernism' in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. A. Bullock and O. Stallybrass (London, 1977), pp. 395f.

[8] Cf. William McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago, 1963), p. 753: 'By 1917, leading painters had rejected the perspective frame within which European artistic vision had operated since the fifteenth century. Physicists had modified the Newtonian laws of motion within which European scientific thought had moved since the seventeenth century.'

[9] An allusion to Prospero's words from *The Tempest*, Act 4. Sc.1, l.150, quoted by David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham, 1995), p. 8.

[10] Cf. the article 'modernity' in *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, ed. D. Jary and J. Jary (Glasgow, 1995), p. 421.

philosophy of history. Towards the end of the 'Preface' there is a famous passage that reads:

A further word on the subject of *issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be: philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state. This lesson of the concept is necessarily also apparent from history, namely that it is only when actuality has reached maturity that the ideal appears opposite the real and reconstructs this real world, which it has grasped in its substance, in the shape of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.[11]

The final sentence of this passage has been interpreted as meaning that 'a culture's philosophical understanding [i.e. its self-understanding] reaches its peak only when the culture enters its decline.'[12] Or, to put the matter in a slightly different way, once a historical era has been understood, it has ceased to be truly alive, and a new era has begun.[13] This, it seems to me, is what the term 'postmodern' is trying to articulate with respect to the period in which we are now living. For what is perceived as dead or dying is modernity itself, and until a new understanding emerges of where or what we are now, cultural commentators have to make do with describing the present time as the age of postmodernity.

Some indeed would eschew even a term like 'age' or 'period' as being too redolent of an assumption of linear, progressive development within history. For such assumptions are, from a postmodernist perspective, incompatible with the

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[11] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A.W. Wood, tr. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), p. 23. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel had used similar terminology: 'Philosophy begins with the decline of a real world; when it appears . . . , painting its grey in grey, the freshness of that world's youth and vitality has already disappeared . . . ' (quoted in: K. Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche. Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Hamburg, 1978, p. 53). One recalls Mephistopheles' words in Goethe's *Faust* Pt. 1 ('Study'): 'All theory, dear friend, is grey, but the golden tree of actual life springs ever green' (as translated in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed., 1986, p. 230). Sensitivity to the difference between 'life' and 'thought' is a commonplace in writers influenced by Romanticism — which, of course, is not to say that this difference does not contain a grain of abiding truth.

[12] *Op. cit.,* p. 392 (comment of A.W. Wood's).

[13] One may note in passing that this understanding of the past seems to have found favour with at least some twentieth-century historians. According to the late F.S.L. Lyons: 'To understand the past fully is to cease to live in it, and to cease to live in it is to take the earliest steps to shape what is to come from the material of the present' (quoted in: R. Kee, *Ireland: A History*, London, 1980, p. 7).

perceived demise of all ‘metanarratives’, about which more will be said later. However, if Hegel is correct, presumably the real understanding of our own age – the age of the postmodern, if we agree to call it that – will only emerge when our age itself will have ceased to live. Until then it cannot, in Hegelian terms, be understood. That, in turn, would seem to imply that so long as you are not sure about what contemporary experience means, you are at least still alive, which is some consolation perhaps.

The second quotation comes from Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who was both a philosopher and, in his own way,[14] a major literary critic. Benjamin’s rather apocalyptic vision of history, in which he had a keen eye for, as he put it, ‘“the image of history . . . in its rejects’”, i.e. the casualties or ‘victims of progress’ (Merquior), is evident in the following passage from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* §IX, a work completed in 1940, though not published until 1950:

> A Klee[15] painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[16]

Benjamin’s prophetic and pessimistic view of history can reasonably be interpreted as a symptom of the collapse of faith in modernity’s ideal of progress through the sustained application of Enlightenment rationalist principles to the organisation of human life. The optimism of the Enlightenment had already received a body-blow from the carnage of the First World War. The rise of fascism in the turmoil of the interwar period, followed by the destruction of European Jewry, the invention and utilisation of nuclear bombs, and all the other

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[14] This reservation is perhaps necessary, if one accepts Marcel Reich-Ranicki’s (*Die Anwälte der Literatur*, Munich, 1996, pp. 227–236) persuasively argued assessment of Benjamin’s interest in literature as being less that of a pure critic than that of a thinker seeking what one might term a ‘literary correlative’ to his own personal crisis: ‘For Benjamin’s attitude to literature was dominated by his extreme self-absorption’ (p. 235).

[15] Swiss-born modernist painter (1879–1940). See article on Benjamin by J.G. Merquior in J. Wintle (ed.), *Dictionary of Modern Culture* (London, 1984), p. 30, for references in previous paragraph.

[16] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (London, 1982), pp. 259f.

catastrophes of the Second World War, together with a growing historical awareness of past, quite elaborate Western crimes (such as, for example, the post-mediaeval slave-trade): all of this helped to spread an attitude of scepticism towards the great project of modernity. More recently the breaching of the Berlin Wall in 1989, marking the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe, appeared to underline irrefutably yet another failure – after precisely two centuries – of the grand experiment, launched in 1789, to create a rationally based political system, initially for Europe, but aimed at encompassing the whole world in due time.

The belief in rationality as a universal feature of human nature, and in the ability of rational thought to control social, political, and economic life has thus suffered serious set-backs in this century. Even the belief in a relatively stable human self, often referred to as the 'autonomous self' of the Enlightenment, has met with increasing scepticism. 'Our ready-made individuality, our identity,' wrote D.H. Lawrence, 'is no more than an accidental cohesion in the flux of time.'[17] Since the end of the Second World War, apprehension and uncertainty about where poverty, ecological imbalance, and political instability on the one hand, and humanity's highly developed technological power, on the other hand, — anxiety about where this is all leading, only serves to underscore still further the illusory quality of the Enlightenment's dream of controlled progress. The 'key psychological mood of postmodern culture' has been characterised as one of 'panic' (Arthur Kroker, in Baudrillard's wake[18]). Such radical disenchantment ushers in the end of modernity — and the beginning of what? We shall look presently at what followed the collapse of confidence in the project of modernity.

But before that, the third quotation must be mentioned. This is a brief passage (written in 1930) from Wittgenstein's posthumously published book, *Culture and Value*, where he remarks:

> I once said, perhaps rightly: The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover over the ashes.[19]

Wittgenstein conveys memorably in these few words his sense of living in a period of fragmentation, dissolution, and decline. He shared the cultural pessimism of Oswald Spengler (*The Decline of the West*) that the world in which he had grown up was doomed, and so he, too, like Benjamin, can be seen as a kind of prophet of postmodernity – a term he would no doubt have recoiled

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[17] See C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 463, citing Quiñones, *Mapping Literary Modernism*, p. 93.

[18] D. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[19] L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman, tr. P. Winch (Oxford, 1980), p. 3e.

from, but perhaps valid to the extent that Wittgenstein among others marks the end of an era, which we may call the era of modernity, and communicates, in such remarks as those just quoted, the sense of a civilisation in crisis. All that the West had built up over long centuries – on the three pillars of Judaeo-Christian religion, Greek philosophy and Roman organisational, political and legal know-how – that enormous cultural edifice seemed to be disintegrating.[20]

Postmodern: a working definition

As for the term 'postmodern' itself, its first use goes back, according to Charles Jencks,[21] a writer on postmodern architecture and art, to the 1870s, when it was used by the British artist John Watkins Chapman. The popularity of the prefix 'post-' dates also from the end of the nineteenth century. 'Post-impressionism' can be found in the 1880s, and 'post-industrial' in the period during and immediately following the First World War. By the 1960s the prefix had become attached to studies of literature, social thought and even religion (post-Christian). According to Jencks, the notion of posteriority ('the negative feeling of coming after a creative age or, conversely, the positive feeling of transcending a negative ideology') became much more prevalent in the 1970s, in architecture and literature.

In architecture the term stands for a rejection of architectural modernism, i.e. the tradition represented by, say, Walter Gropius (*Bauhaus*) or Le Corbusier ('A house is a living-machine'). In postmodern architecture the modernist principles of abstraction, simplicity, geometric purity and functionality are discarded in favour of a 'renewed interest in buildings as signs and signifiers and in their referential potential and resources.'[22] 'Deconstructive

[20] It should be added, however, that Wittgenstein did not equate what he felt was a cultural decline with a decline in the value of human existence as such. In the same year (1930) in which the previous short passage was written he also wrote that, although modern civilization in its 'industry, architecture and music' and 'in its fascism and socialism' was 'alien and uncongenial' to him, this was 'not a value judgement'. For what he took to be 'the disappearance of the arts' did not 'justify judging disparagingly the human beings who make up this civilization.' He added 'that the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value, but simply of certain means of expressing this value' (*Culture and Value*, p. 6e).

[21] In a letter to the *TLS* reprinted in R. Appignanesi and C. Garratt, *Postmodernism for Beginners* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 3.

[22] Art. 'postmodern' in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1995, p. 635. Cf. Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford 1991), p. 199, n.21: 'The general relation between assumptions inherent in architecture of all historical epochs and broad philosophical issues is not limited to the modernism/postmodernism controversy. The

postmodernism' became an influential movement when the French post-structuralists (Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard) were accepted in the United States in the late 1970s. Jencks plausibly suggests that the attraction of the term 'postmodern' lies in the way it captures the thought that we have outgrown modernity and modernism, but without knowing really where we are heading.

The term 'postmodern' attempts, thus, to hold together a number of different ideas and attitudes. Intellectually, postmodernist thought represents a reaction to many aspects of modern philosophy and to the assumptions underlying that philosophy. It is a movement that, rather than outlining or adhering to a particular set of beliefs on specific philosophical issues, radically calls into question the fundamental presuppositions of modern philosophy itself. (One should perhaps note that in attempting to see more precisely what 'postmodernism' 'means' within contemporary thought, one is adopting, strictly speaking, a non-postmodern perspective, for one of the salient features of philosophical postmodernism is that there is no such thing as a fixed meaning to anything, be it world, word, text, or individual human subject.) Yet as a reactive movement, postmodernism is – somewhat ironically – also deeply traditional, in that it re-enacts one of the most deep-seated tendencies in Western thought. One has only to think of the Reformation or the French Revolution, to say nothing of other upheavals, to see how ingrained the inclination actually is in Western history to call received wisdom into question, and to strike out in new directions.

There will certainly be disagreement on what precisely are the fundamental assumptions of modern (i.e. post-mediaeval) philosophy, which postmodernism calls into question, but the main targets of postmodern thought would appear to include two central issues that can be dealt with quite briefly. These are, firstly, the notion of an autonomous, clearly defined self, and, secondly, foundationalism.

To begin with the fate of the human self in postmodernism, here there is a noticeable difference from modernism. A modernist poet, like Yeats, could take the experience of dislocation (cf. 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold') as a spur to create his own '"subjective center"', as 'an autonomous self-defining artist',[23] but 'for postmodernism there is no center at all, the subject itself is "de-centered", no longer an origin or source, but itself a result, a product of multiple social and psychological forces . . .'[24]

What is this 'decentred self' which crops up frequently in discussions of postmodernism? The expression refers to 'a conception of the self, or the

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relation between the idea of self-sufficiency and architecture goes back at least to the Tower of Babel story.' The symbol of the Tower of Babel has indeed, fittingly, come to signify – again – the confusions of the contemporary scene.

[23] Pippin, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 156f.

thinking and acting subject, in which the self is no longer regarded as providing the kind of ultimate grounding for epistemological thinking that is often assumed in traditional forms of philosophy . . .'[25] Three different sources seem to have contributed to the emergence of this view: (a) from psychoanalysis has come the idea that the 'ego' is not in charge of the individual's life, but is in various, ultimately unaccountable ways affected by the unconscious; (b) from the influence of Saussurean linguistics has come the notion that, just as in language each element or sign only makes sense in relation to, and differentiated from, the other elements or signs in the overall system, so the self ('I') does not make sense in isolation, but only in relation to, and differentiated from, such terms as 'you', 'she', they', 'we', etc.; hence the 'self' does not enjoy any real autonomy or discrete identity;[26] and finally (c) a belief that autonomy belongs, if anywhere, to culture as such, or, in the case of a writer, to the text, from which the notion of an author has been banished, has also played a significant role in this process. In structuralism meaning was at least preserved in a total system of which the self was one element, even if the self was decentred and thus no longer centre-stage. But in post-structuralist thought, which feeds into postmodernism, neither the self nor the system in which the self is embedded is seen as providing a secure foundation for any final meaning or truth about the human condition.

This brings us to the second target of the postmodernist critique of Western thought mentioned above: foundationalism. Postmodernism is associated with the alleged end of foundationalism, foundationalism being the view that for such intellectual activities as science or philosophy solid bases do exist, in empirically observable facts, for instance, or self-evident ideas or a priori truths. Foundationalism is thus an epistemological position that attempts to justify our beliefs by giving or finding foundations for them that cannot be doubted.[27]

As a prime example of a foundationalist thinker Descartes, for one, finds no favour with the postmodernists. For Descartes moved from what he himself was convinced was indubitable first-person knowledge to knowledge of the objective (external) world, a move relying on first-person knowledge (knowledge of the self) as the *foundation* of all other knowledge. But, barely a century after Descartes, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume is sceptical of such Cartesian moves and, curiously enough, already very close to a postmodern position (if position is not too definite a term). Roger Scruton remarks that 'Hume was inclined to say that the self is a kind of illusion, as are

[25] Article 'decentred self or decentred subject' in *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 147, on which the rest of the above paragraph is based.

[26] Cf. at the start of Samuel Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*: 'I, say I. Unbelieving.' (See William Barrett, *Death of the Soul*, Oxford, 1987, p. 46.)

[27] Cf. R. Scruton, *Modern Philosophy* (London, 1994), p. 47.

all the conundrums which derive from it.'[28] Hume himself confessed, perhaps ironically, that 'whenever I look inside myself, there is no self to be found.'[29] Elsewhere he describes the self as 'only a heap of perceptions'.[30] Indeed the line that goes from Hume via Bertrand Russell to the modern American philosopher Quine ends up at the same point as the conclusions of the post-structuralists, Foucault and Derrida. That is to say, 'the notion of the self' is eliminated 'as the source of consciousness, the arbiter of meaning, the unifying *thing* that thinks. Foucault's remark that "It is not man who takes the place of God, but anonymous thinking, thinking without a subject" sounds like an unconscious echo of Russell's statement in *The Analysis of Mind* that instead of saying "I think" "It would be better to say 'it thinks in me' or better still . . . 'there is a thought in me'."'[31]

Now if, as one spokesman for postmodernism, the American philosopher Richard Rorty urges, we set aside the foundationalist assumptions shared by the major philosophers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, we are left free-floating, as it were, with no basis on which to establish hierarchies of intellectual or moral or aesthetic value or truth that would be universally binding. This is one of the consequences to flow from the nihilism diagnosed so ruthlessly in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche, and enacted, according to some observers, in the twentieth.

The forsaking of universal values and canons of taste combines naturally enough, however, with a renewal of interest in local and minority concerns, which many would regard as a plus for postmodernism. This may help to explain, or alternatively it may be a reflection of, the increased social and political weight now attaching to 'minority' issues in such areas as race (ethnicity), religion, sex, culture and language.[32] (A similar concern for minority interests can be observed in the period of Romanticism, which in its day rejected the universalising claims or pretensions of the Enlightenment.[33])

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28 *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

29 Cited in R.C. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750* (Oxford, 1988), p. 1.

30 W. Barrett, *Death of the Soul*, p. 46.

31 Brenda Almond, *Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, 1988), p. 130; the reference to Foucault is to M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* and the reference to Russell is to B. Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, p. 18.

32 Cf. Pippin, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

33 Romanticism revolted against the notion that reality has an objective, unchanging structure existing independently of human beings. For the Romantics truth is not discovered, but created by us. They repudiated the idea of a priori (pre-existent), universally valid truths that only needed to be discovered, and substituted instead the ideal of creating truth as an artist might create a work of art. A corollary of this attitude is a new respect for minorities, whose authentically expressed 'truth' may run contrary to traditional, accepted, 'objective', conventional wisdom. [On this question see I. Berlin, 'Preface' to H.G. Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics* (Oxford, 1966).] The attitude of the

The 'flux and fragmentation' that postmodernism celebrates is notoriously difficult to pin down, as may be becoming clear, so perhaps one way of trying to find our way tentatively, if not through, then at least into the ever-changing world of postmodernism, might be to deal with some of the theorists whose names have become almost synonymous with the movement, rather ironically some might think, in view of what postmodernism is supposed to believe about the death of the old (Cartesian) self. In what follows it is important to bear in mind, however, that not all those mentioned would accept the label 'postmodern'.

Jean François Lyotard

We may begin with Lyotard (b. 1924) since he has been credited with having popularised the term 'postmodern' through his book *The Postmodern Condition*.[34] 'Simplifying to the extreme,' he says, 'I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives.' According to one writer '[t]he main "metanarrative" in question follows the Enlightenment line that science legitimates itself as the bearer of emancipation.'[35] However all the grand narratives or metanarratives (such as the Myth of Progress, Marxism [an important case for Lyotard, who had been a Marxist himself], Emancipation through science, and, of course, older metanarratives like the Judaeo-Christian narrative of 'God, Creation, Fall, Redemption and Eschatological Fulfilment'), all of these metanarratives have, according to Lyotard, collapsed. Borrowing an idea from Wittgenstein, Lyotard regards even modern science as now at best to be accepted as one particular language-game, i.e. bereft of any universalist pretensions.

In speaking of the end of metanarratives Lyotard and other theorists of postmodernism are giving voice to a widely perceived lack of any overall vision of reality in the contemporary world. That is to say, no one, according to Lyotard's diagnosis, can any longer see the wood for the trees, for the very simple reason that there is no 'wood' to see, just as there is no 'God', hence no 'God's eye' (over)view of things . . .

Thus for Lyotard the idea that any state of affairs, or view of reality, can be legitimated through a metanarrative has foundered in the postmodern world.

Romantics is exacerbated in postmodernism, which can thus perhaps be interpreted as an extreme form of neo-Romanticism, but with this important difference: that faith in the autonomy and coherence of the self, which the Romantics retained, has (officially, at any rate) disappeared with the postmodernists.

[34] French edition 1979, ET 1984.

[35] D. Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Fragmentation and the atomisation of social life are the result. It should be noted however that Lyotard's announcement of 'the end of politics' has led some (e.g. Jürgen Habermas) to accuse him of neo-conservatism, since he lacks 'all theoretical justification of an alternative to the social status quo in advanced capitalism.'[36] Habermas' own refusal to abandon, as Lyotard appears to do, the moral imperative of seeking a rationale for any political course of action, is, one may suggest, surely preferable to the alternative of dismissing as an Enlightenment prejudice the need to work out a theoretical legitimation for one's actions. The fact that, as Lenin was fond of pointing out, one is often faced with the need to act in the absence of a completely satisfactory theoretical justification for one's course of action, hardly makes the search for such justification – even if it cannot ever be definitively found within history – redundant, or humanly irrelevant.

Jean Baudrillard

Another influential theorist of the postmodern condition is the French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard (b. 1929) who is associated above all with the idea that, through the modern electronic mass media of communication, the consumer society is being transformed into a kind of madhouse of ever-proliferating signs which end up by blurring or effacing the distinction between image and reality. Baudrillard caused a bit of a stir by declaring that the Gulf War did not happen, which obviously was something of an exaggeration, but it drew attention to the way the material and human substance of life is in danger of being transmuted into electronically reproduced images (*simulacra*), thereby losing its specificity and its depth.[37] It is this simulated, humanly empty, world that Baudrillard seems to have in mind by his use of a term like 'hyperreality'. Hyperreality is a condition 'in which the alleged "real" is no more real than the thing which feigns [or simulates] it.'[38] The overall effect of postmodernity for Baudrillard is thus to produce a 'loss of stable meaning'.[39] Clearly Baudrillard

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[36] J.G. Merquior, *Foucault* (London, 1985), p. 148; see also *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 378.

[37] These complaints may, arguably, have been anticipated in general terms by Feuerbach when he wrote (in 1843): ' . . . [T]he present age . . . prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence . . .' ('Preface' to *The Essence of Christianity*, tr. George Eliot, New York, 1957, p. xxxix; cf. G. Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, Paris, 1992, p. 13).

[38] *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 301.

[39] Quoted *ibid.*, p. 39.

has raised Marx's sense of 'everything solid melting into air' to an almost apocalyptic level.

Michel Foucault

We come, lastly, to two other important theorists of the postmodern situation, both also French like Lyotard and Baudrillard, but whose influence outside France has perhaps been more pervasive than theirs: Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Firstly, Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Foucault was a French philosopher and historian who worked mainly in Paris, the home of 'radical rhetoric'[40] for the French intelligentsia. Foucault has been an important voice in the twentieth-century French philosophical debate on reason, language, knowledge and power. He has become well-known for his historical studies of madness, imprisonment, medicine and sexuality, which are not carried through in the tradition of studies in the 'history of ideas', but seek rather to uncover the linkages between knowledge and power within various societies and institutions. In this endeavour Foucault acknowledges his indebtedness to Nietzsche who, in his own works, had traced connections between the human will to power and belief systems (notably Christianity), suspecting the latter of being merely rationalisations of the former.

The drawback with such a radically sceptical approach to knowledge as Foucault espouses is that if all 'discourse' is assumed to be a more or less sophisticated justification of a set of power-structures, what exempts the critic's own 'discourse' from a similarly radical scepticism? The rather pessimistic conclusion that all discourse only has the 'authority' of the epoch it reflects to support it, is only true, paradoxically, if it is false.[41] Nietzsche, in fairness, was at least more worried about this problem than Foucault, who seemed content to deny any abiding value to his own critique of what were, from his perspective, false 'discursive practices', exerting power over human bodies at different times and places.

Foucault is unlike Nietzsche too in his revolt against Enlightenment rationalism, and in the absence from his work of anything resembling Nietzsche's 'dionysian' affirmation of 'life', for all his (Nietzsche's) critique of *décadence*. Foucault, as the – or at least one – *enfant terrible* of late twentieth-century French philosophy, combines what appears to be a slightly self-indulgent intellectual anarchism with an extremely bleak view of human

[40] J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p. 159.
[41] Cf. R. Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 6.

prospects. He once spoke of his ‘hyperactive pessimism’. In Foucault, postmodernity looks like the second, definitive, ‘Fall of Man’, from which there can be no redemption, unless perhaps one were to see a glimmer of hope in his assertion of a moral value in philosophy’s readiness to ‘think the unthought’, which is also, he claims, a willingness ‘to “refuse what we are”’.[42]

Jacques Derrida

The final postmodernist key-figure I shall discuss is Jacques Derrida, born in Algeria in 1930, but now resident in France. He is perhaps best known for his radical mode of thought, known as ‘deconstruction.’

Derrida has argued that philosophers have simply been on the wrong tack in looking for underlying ‘essences’ or ‘first principles’ in reality. He himself, drawing on the Swiss linguist Saussure and the German philosopher Heidegger, holds that language, as a system that functions because of the differences inherent in it, cannot be, as traditionally conceived, the unambiguous bearer of truth. Even structuralists like the social anthropologist Lévi-Strauss had still held to this latter, for Derrida untenable, position. Derrida regards the sign (signifier) – which is in any case arbitrary both as an acoustic (spoken) and a visible (written) image – as having no stable semantic relation to that which is signified. For a linguistic sign gains its signification from the fact that it is differentiated from other signs within a system (e.g., fat, cat, mat, bat, sat, etc.). Hence its meaning depends on its relation to other (absent) signs and must consequently always be deferred (postponed). Derrida plays on the two meanings of the French verb ‘différer’ (meaning ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’ or ‘ to postpone’) to make his point, coining the neologism ‘différance’ to drive it home. What is true at the relatively humble level of phonetics Derrida takes to be transferable or applicable to the altogether higher and more complex level of meaning itself.

Strictly speaking, the ‘absent’ signs on which the meaning of any specific sign depends are not actually absent, but, in Derrida’s terminology, ‘self-effacing’. Thus, as one commentator has put it:

> [I]n any spoken or written utterance, the seeming signification is the result only of a ‘self-effacing’ trace — self-effacing because one is not aware of it — which consists of all the nonpresent meanings whose differences from the present instance are the sole factor which invests the utterance with its ‘effect’ of having a meaning in itself. The consequence, according to Derrida, is that we can never have a determinate, or

[42] *Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, ed. by J.O. Urmson and J. Rée (London, 1991), p. 112.

decidable, present meaning; he asserts, however, that the differential play of language does produce illusory ‘effects’ of determinable meanings.

. . . [T]here is indeed an ‘effect’ of meaning in an utterance which is produced by its difference from other meanings, but . . . on the other hand, since this meaning can never come to rest in an actual presence, or ‘transcendental signified,’ its determinate specification is deferred from one substitutive linguistic interpretation to another, in a movement, or ‘play,’ without end. The meaning of any spoken or written utterance, as Derrida puts it in another of his coinages, is disseminated—a term which includes, among its deliberately contradictory significations, that of having an effect of meaning (a ‘semantic’ effect), of dispersing meanings among innumerable alternatives, and of negating any specific meaning. There is thus no ground, in the incessant play of différance that constitutes language, for attributing a decidable meaning, or even a finite set of determinately multiple meanings (which he calls ‘polysemism’), to any utterance that we speak or write. As Derrida puts it in *Writing and Difference*, p. 280: ‘The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.’[43]

Moreover, just as meaning is not transparently and exhaustively present in any sign, neither can the author of a text any longer be thought of as ‘authoritatively’ present in that text. The author has no command of a text, and cannot impose meaning on it. As Derrida put it in an interview given a few years ago: the author is ‘not in the situation of the creator god *before* his text.’[44] Texts, therefore, as linguistic artefacts do not belong to their authors, for a linguistic system precedes and eludes the full grasp of any author.

The technical Derridean term ‘dissemination’, mentioned in the above quotation, is relevant to this notion. For Derrida, ‘Dissemination is something which no longer belongs to the regime of meaning; it exceeds not only the multiplicity of meanings, but also meaning itself. I attempt to read the movement of this dissemination in the text, in writing; it can’t be dominated by either the semantic or the thematic field.’[45] Dissemination seems, thus, to be a sort of irresistible ‘supra-semantic’ flux, the course of whose finally unspecifiable movement the critic attempts, always unsuccessfully, to chart. For the critic, like everyone and everything else, lives in an infinite multiplicity (‘the Many’), from which all possibility of ultimate, transcendent, unitary comprehension (‘the One’) has been banished. This flux is, however, irresistible in the sense that it is the element in which alone the critic can live, just as a fish can live only in its element of water.

In such circumstances texts themselves can at best only be provisionally interpreted in relation to other texts (this seems to be what is meant by *intertextuality*) and not in relation to any ‘truth’ outside the text (‘il n’y a pas de

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[43] M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (Orlando, 1988), pp. 204f.
[44] R. Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London, 1991), p. 98.
[45] *Ibid.*

hors-texte'[46]), whether that 'truth' be the author's mind, or some other 'objective' standard existing allegedly in independence of the text.

It is also in this context that the notion of 'logocentrism' can be located. For Derrida logocentrism is 'the belief that the Word of the *transcendental signifier* (e.g. God, the World Spirit) may provide a foundation for a whole system of thought.'[47] It is 'an attempt which can only ever fail, an attempt to trace the sense of being to the logos, to discourse or reason . . . and which considers writing or technique to be secondary to logos. The forms which this has taken in the west are of course influenced by Greek philosophy.'[48] As this comment prepares us to see, the demise of logocentrism is closely connected in Derrida's mind with the startling claim that the written word takes precedence over the spoken word.

The target at which this claim is aimed is the traditional privileging in the West of the 'notion of speech as the voice or "presence" of consciousness', which in Derrida's terminology is labelled 'phonocentrism'.[49] In making his claim about the untenability of 'phonocentrism', Derrida is espousing or endorsing the idea 'that it is with writing that language takes on the appearance of what Foucault called "autonomous discourse", without an author, without intention or interpretation, and outside of space, time and context.'[50] In affirming this Derrida is taking up a so-called anti-transcendental stance with regard to truth. 'For Derrida, as for Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, there is no constitution of meaning by a transcendental subject, a point which he makes with characteristic hyperbole by insisting that "texts have no author". Consequently texts do not and cannot express universal meanings, and the point of deconstruction is to do away with "the transcendental signified". He too accepts the fact that one cannot escape from one's historical and cultural context, but he turns this even against Foucault, who could not possibly understand the madness he describes in his work (Foucault, in return, dubbed Derrida "*le petit pédagogue*").'[51]

Derrida is thus systematically critical of all metaphysical thought, and one might say almost neurotically aware of how our language is shot through with philosophical assumptions which he claims must always be called into question. His thought contains a consistent critique of the main Western tradition in philosophy going back at least to Plato, whom Nietzsche referred to as 'das grösste Malheur Europas!' (Europe's greatest calamity!)[52] This tradition is, in

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46 From *De la grammatologie*, quoted in M.H. Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 203.
47 *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 148.
48 Mortley, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
49 *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 148.
50 Solomon, *op. cit.,* p. 201.
51 *Ibid.*
52 In a letter to Franz Overbeck (posted in Nice, 9 January 1887).

Derrida's eyes, based on an erroneous desire for, and belief in, some fundamental certainty conveyed by, or rather betrayed in, such philosophical concepts as substance, essence, origin, identity, truth. In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche had already written: 'Today . . . we see ourselves as it were entangled in error, *necessitated* to error, to precisely the extent that our prejudice in favour of reason compels us to posit unity, identity, duration, substance, cause, materiality, being . . .'[53] Derrida's philosophical 'strategy' (as he prefers to call it, rather than 'method') of deconstruction is aimed at uncovering and laying bare such hidden philosophical assumptions in the texts of Western philosophy, even in thinkers like Nietzsche who was himself, of course, already pathologically suspicious of metaphysics.

Deconstruction is therefore a 'project . . . to reveal the ambivalence of all texts, which can only be understood in relation to other texts . . . and *not* in relation to any "literal meaning" or normative truth.'[54] Putting it slightly differently and more simply, deconstruction can also perhaps essentially be seen as a strategy for puncturing the illusions of philosophers whose claims for their own philosophy cannot be made good and are thus, for Derrida, pretentious. The heart of the supreme Western metaphysical claim is what Derrida calls '(following Heidegger) . . . "the myth of presence", whether this takes the form of the immanent presence of God, or of the world as a determinate entity, or of the self as an "inner" certainty.'[55] This myth Derrida wishes to subvert. He knows, however, that 'it is an illusion to suppose that one can escape altogether from the pervasive metaphysics of presence, since to put oneself "outside" metaphysics is an indirect way of affirming it,' thus 'he suggests that one has to think in terms which neither affirm nor oppose but *resist* metaphysical concepts.'[56]

Derrida is reminiscent of Nietzsche in his realisation of how difficult it is to subvert a tradition while still operating within it, and having to work quite consciously and, as it were, parasitically with its assumptions (of truth, order, etc.). As Nietzsche said in a famous remark: 'I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar . . . '[57] However in a wider or longer perspective Derrida's thought, like Nietzsche's, might perhaps be seen as being ultimately dependent upon a tradition of radical, and essentially religious, scepticism, a tradition which is aware of the difference, but simultaneously of the connection, between 'truth' and its verbalised, codified, fixed, written expression, or, in more conventional terms, between the 'spirit' and the 'letter', (as in the paradigmatic Western case of the difference, but also the connection,

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[53] *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 47.

[54] *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 148.

[55] Solomon, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

[56] J. Wintle (ed.), *Dictionary of Modern Culture*, p. 91.

[57] *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, p. 48.

between God and Holy Writ, *the* textual trace – to use a Derridean term – of the deity).

Conclusions

A salient feature of postmodernism is that it is a Western (and not, for instance, an Islamic) phenomenon, and can, perhaps, be interpreted as an extreme form of secularisation. The Enlightenment project, or the 'project of modernity', with its belief in Progress, is itself often regarded as a secularised form of the Christian notion of Providence.[58] But how can postmodernism be seen as a secularized form of Western (and hence, Judaeo–Christian) thought?

One might first of all suggest that the postmodernist notion of the decentred self is a version of a very ancient religious notion, that places God and not the self, or even the whole created order, at the centre of reality. In postmodernism, admittedly, the self does not yield to God but to infinite multiplicity. One might therefore not wish to place too much weight on the possible religious genealogy of the decentred self in postmodernism.

However, one is on firmer ground, in my view, in seeing postmodernism as dialectically related to Christianity, if one bears in mind the traditional Christian doctrine of creation. According to this doctrine the world is God's creation, and hence is not intrinsically divine. The world thus enjoys a certain relative autonomy or independence or 'reality', but it is an autonomy ultimately related to, or dependent upon, the deity.

If belief in God falls out of the picture, one is still left with a world, but it is now a world whose giver and guarantor of 'reality' no longer exists. Hence the world's intrinsic value collapses into a void and one ends in nihilism, which in postmodernism translates into such concepts as: loss of the 'transcendental signifier', or absence of 'a transcendental signified' or of any determinate meaning. Similarly, human beings have been traditionally understood by our culture to be made in the image of God, but if there is no God, that image fades away, leaving behind an unidentified, and perhaps unidentifiable, 'humanity'.

But the nihilism just mentioned is a nihilism which is still dialectically related to a now non-existent God. Is it, however, not strange that the world should in these circumstances be interpreted nihilistically, rather than as 'naturally' meaningful and valuable by and in itself? It seems, therefore, plausible to suggest that the concept of nihilism – and thus of postmodernism – itself still moves within the shadow of theism, or within the orbit of religious

[58] For instance, by David Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

discourse, that it is in fact, despite its name, an intrinsically, even if parasitically, Judaeo-Christian religious concept.

Related to this thesis is the further consideration that in Christianity the ‘word’ or ‘logos’, as the expression of God, has, as the doctrine of the Incarnation reveals, never been exhaustively identified with pure thought or pure intellect, nor has the expression of the ‘logos’ in history been identified with a text (the Bible), as in, say, Islam. It is perhaps not too surprising then that, if written texts are – contrary to the deepest instincts of our civilisation, if one may so express it, – given priority (as in Derrida) over the unwritten ‘word’, no amount of intellectual probing of any text ever yields a satisfactory, final solution as to its ‘meaning’. This, a postmodernist might of course retort, is precisely how things are and should be: meaning is never fully accessible in this world, it is always deferred. . . But as against this objection, one could argue that the search for meaning or understanding (except in a purely functional or pragmatic sense) is rather futile and literally pointless, if there is, finally, no ‘point’. And yet the undeniable attraction of trying to decipher the meaning of texts is emphasised by our seeming inability to resist it,[59] as if, again somewhat instinctively, we assumed that there was a genuine connection (not, however, amounting to an identification) between linguistically expressed meaning, and the most abiding, ultimate explanation of reality that traditionally has been called ‘God’.

[59] Cf. Kant’s idea that although thought cannot grasp the a priori conditions of our existence, neither can it resist the desire to do so. See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London, 1991), pp. 23f.