



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

---

Volume 20 | Number 1

Article 16

---

2008

### The Myth of the Modern; the Anti-myth of the Postmodern

James E. Faulconer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Faulconer, James E. (2008) "The Myth of the Modern; the Anti-myth of the Postmodern," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 20 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol20/iss1/16>

This Miscellaneous is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** The Myth of the Modern: The Anti-myth of the Postmodern

**Author(s)** James E. Faulconer

**Reference** *FARMS Review* 20/1 (2008): 219-36.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** Faulconer, though not a postmodernist himself, argues that postmodernism is misunderstood and should be evaluated more thoroughly. Accordingly, he compares postmodernism with modernism in an effort to provide a more complete view of the two schools of thought.

# THE MYTH OF THE MODERN; THE ANTI-MYTH OF THE POSTMODERN

James E. Faulconer

Today the word *postmodernism* is used mostly as a label for those with whom right-thinking people disagree. Those who consistently label themselves postmodernist are usually affecting a pose that may also require a black turtleneck and perhaps even a beret, a pose that is seldom differentiable from what has for more than fifty years had another name, relativism. I do not usually call myself a postmodernist, and I am not a relativist in the conventional sense (though I am also not an absolutist in the conventional sense). So why am I defending postmodernism? Because I believe that misunderstanding and, therefore, ignoring postmodernism has allowed much modernism to continue on, unaffected, though it ought to have taken stock when it came under a postmodern attack. Let me briefly revisit the

---

This essay was first delivered at the annual meetings of the Mormon History Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2007.

As I use the word in this discussion, myth is an expression of a particular way of organizing and understanding the world. *Myth* is not a pejorative term, and it does not imply that the expression in question is false. In this sense, all reflection is mythic: it expresses a particular way of organizing and understanding things. Thus the rise of modernism in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries marks a radical shift in the prevailing myth for European society. René Descartes's *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting the Reason* is symptomatic of that shift, recognizing that the myth of traditional Christianity no longer gives order to life and postulating an alternative order, an order that we take up as the myth of modernity.

issue that I think has gotten lost, an issue that has largely been ignored, even as postmodernism has quietly slipped into at least some historical thinking and writing. I want to ask what postmodernism means for thinking about history.

However, as a nonhistorian among historians, I will play it safe. I will say little about history or doing history. Instead, I will explain two issues in modernism that are, I believe, directly related to its implications for history, show some alternatives for our usual assumptions, describe how postmodernism works with regard to modernism, and leave thinking about concrete implications to those who actually *do* history. I hope to show that postmodern thinking is neither the wild danger that many take it to be when they look at some of its advocates nor the reactionary intellectual movement that some suspect when they see it done by conservative religious apologists like many among us. To make my argument, I will paint a portrait of modernity with broad brushstrokes. My painting will focus primarily on modernity's understanding of the subject, in other words of the ego, and on its understanding of temporality. Then I will paint an equally broad portrait of some contemporary alternative assumptions to show the origin of some of postmodernism's questions of modernity. I will argue that, historically, modernism takes the individual ego to be the basic unit of understanding and that it implicitly takes the ego to be an entity that exists prior to society, culture, and history so that those things impinge upon the "I" as exterior forces. In addition, modernism takes the knowledge of our temporal existence, history, to be like every other kind of knowledge in that it is ultimately based on atemporal, causal, universal laws. Then I will describe a recent contrasting view, though still a view within modernism. That contrasting view understands the individual as coming into being with and through society, culture, and history, and it seeks to understand temporality in temporal rather than atemporal terms. Finally, my claim about postmodernism will be that it uses the assumptions of the latter, with a variety of techniques, to question the standard view of modernism, but it does not take a position itself on the particular question at hand.

## Modernity

Strictly speaking, there is no definition of modernity. Rather than a definite set of characteristics, modernity is a constellation of positions and beliefs, “a rational demand for unity, certainty, universality, and ultimacy” together with

the belief that words, ideas, and things are distinct entities; the belief that the world [or nature, which is the Good] represents a fixed object of analysis separate from forms of human discourse and cognitive representation; the belief that culture is subsequent to nature [and imposed on it, and so is something that ought to be stripped away epistemically] and [the belief] that society is subsequent to the individual [and therefore also an artifice imposed on him or her].<sup>1</sup>

Further, as we see in the title of René Descartes’s book *Discourse on Method*, for moderns reason is exercised in method, of which geometry is the first example. The result is our contemporary insistence on methodology (and the concomitant exactitude of mathematics). Moderns believe that the use of method results in scientific progress. The story still told by modernism is that by the continuous use of reason, we have improved on the intellectual beginning given us by Greek and Latin intellectuals, a beginning that was interrupted by the Christian Middle Ages but restored with the Renaissance, and a beginning that we continue to improve on with human perfection as its ideal and perhaps even reachable goal. For modern thinkers, method is possible—it works—because reason rather than tradition is the sense common to all human beings. Reason is the *sensus communis*.

Finally, method is deemed necessary by modern thinkers, particularly those of the Enlightenment, because they hold what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a “prejudice against prejudice itself.”<sup>2</sup> Prejudices, in the literal sense of prejudgments, are imposed from the outside on an

---

1. Steven Daniel, “Paramodern Strategies of Philosophical Historiography,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1/1 (1993): 42–43.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 273.

already-existing individual who observes an already-existing Nature. So prejudices are necessarily distortions of what is original, of what is real, of what stands before and apart from human mind and culture. Prejudices prevent already fully formed, reasoning egos from making their own judgments about the already-determinate and supposedly external world. According to modernism, this means that good thinking avoids all prejudice. The ordinary person's reason is corrupt because it is exercised in a historical and cultural environment that has imposed false judgments on him or her in the form of tradition, custom, and opinion. Religion is particularly corrupting of reason, for it makes revelation (which not every person has) and tradition (a nonuniversal, pre-given understanding from which a merely particular understanding comes to be) more fundamental than the natural light of reason, which modernism takes to be definitive of every fully human person. Enlightened persons use reason (which is prior to all prejudgment because it is natural to all human beings) to rid themselves of these prejudices.<sup>3</sup> Thus in modernism the already-universal, internal light of reason replaces the light of reason as understood in premodern Judaism and Christianity. For the latter, the light of reason was universal only eschatologically and could be received and exercised only communally.

Likely there are other points of modernism worth mentioning. Nevertheless, these points are enough, I think, for us to see the constellation of ideas that I am talking about. And I repeat: one could subscribe to some of the points of this constellation of modernism without subscribing to them all and remain within the modern constellation.

Consider one of these points more closely, the redefinition of the individual ego, in technical terms, the subject. Prior to about the mid-seventeenth century, the subject was "that which supports the properties I see."<sup>4</sup> In other words, it was the thing that has the properties we

---

3. Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant Selections*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 462–67.

4. For more on this see, James E. Faulconer and Richard N. Williams, "Reconsidering Psychology," in *Reconsidering Psychology: Perspectives from Continental Philosophy*, ed. James E. Faulconer and Richard N. Williams (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990), 9–60.

observe when we encounter something. It was that which is “underneath” the properties I perceive. In contrast, the object was “the thing as it appears to me, the properties I perceive.” Strictly speaking, neither of these terms referred to what we mean today by “subject.” Both are different ways of talking about what we now refer to as the object. Neither means “the perceiving or thinking ego.” However, after Descartes, as everyone knows (at least implicitly), by “object” we mean that which has the properties we observe (the thing-in-itself) with its properties. And the “subject” is that which does the observing. Philosophically, the subject (formerly something that could not be known directly) has become self-certainty, self-consciousness (known directly, by introspection).<sup>5</sup> We seldom think about this change, this reversal, in the meaning of our terms. Indeed, most people do not know that it occurred. In spite of that, this shift of meaning was a revolution in Western thought and history, and its effects have been enormous as well as numerous.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the new understanding of the subject is that the rational subject (and recall that all subjects were assumed to be rational by nature) became the standard for truth. That is why, for modern thinkers, authority (a standard of truth outside the individual) is to be avoided if at all possible. As strange as it may at first glance seem, this placement of truth in the subject, modern subjectivism—though not “subjectivism” as we use that term today: subjectivity—is what makes science as we know it possible. Objectivism is a result of modern subjectivism! In spite of the way we usually speak of truth within modernism, as Christina Gschwandtner says, “truth and knowledge become dependent no longer on the reality which is being examined, but rather on the subject which inspects them and the method it employs.”<sup>6</sup> Modern subjectivism, the original form of subjectivism, holds that the individual is the standard of truth but that reason

---

5. In Descartes’s work, such as the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the subject becomes, fundamentally, the pure experience of self and only secondarily (with the proof of God) the experience of anything outside the self. That understanding of self haunts all modernism, even that which does not rely on Descartes.

6. Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 187.

is not only natural to all human beings but the same in them all. Thus if one individual comes to a rational conclusion, any other individual will, by the proper use of the reason they share (in other words, by method), be able to see the truth of that conclusion: objectivism.

The positive result of this redefinition of the subject is a new kind of systematic knowledge and the technologies spawned by that knowledge. It is science as we know it. Without the science and technology that the modern understanding of the individual and reason makes possible, no scholarly work, not even the most militant and faddish postmodern, could happen in anything like its present form. More importantly, without modern science and its technology, life would be much more as Hobbes describes it, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>7</sup> In spite of that, however, this new standard for truth not only made science possible, it opened the way for what comes to mind when we hear the word *subjectivism*, namely, a particularly impoverished understanding of the Sophistic formula “Man is the measure of all things.” All that was required for the new meaning of the term was for people to begin to question whether reason is common to all human beings or the same in those who have it. Without that modern supposition, all real knowledge is relative to the individual ego. If we remove the supposition that reason is the same in all, then rational subjects can disagree and, since rational subjects are the standard of truth, it follows that there are as many truths as there are disagreeing rational subjects (relativism in its ordinary sense). Both scientific objectivism and modern relativism are a consequence of modernism’s redefinition of the subject.

But modernism did not reject everything it inherited from Christian philosophy. In particular, it did not reject the ancient idea that what is most real is atemporal, outside of time. Since Plato and Aristotle, thinkers have taken the temporal world to be a manifestation of an atemporal, unified whole, and they have taken genuine knowledge to be knowledge of that atemporal whole. To quote Plato, for them the cosmos is “the moving image of eternity,”<sup>8</sup> and what we

---

7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xiii.

8. Plato, *Timaeus* 37d6.



want to know is eternity rather than its moving image. Indeed, modern science (which does not necessarily include contemporary science) not only accepted that belief, it strengthened it: science uncovers the atemporal laws that structure our temporal existence; it uncovers what is truly real and which stands, as it were, “behind” the world of experience. Modern science differed with Christian philosophy by no longer granting revelation a role in uncovering the real, but it accepted the idea that true knowledge, which is after all what the word *science* means, is knowledge of the eternal rather than the temporal. To use Spinoza’s phrase, for modernism to do science is to know the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, as universally and eternally true without reference to merely temporal reality. Modernism rejects authority and tradition as prejudice, and it replaces them with the methodical quantification and systemization of atemporal properties and laws.

As I have mentioned, we ought all to be grateful for the blessings that modernism has given us. I have no desire to live in a world with neither representative republican democracy nor disk drives, both impossible without modernism. Nevertheless, it has not been an unalloyed blessing, for at the heart of modernism is a hidden but real negation of the world. Consider the Cartesian ego, who cannot know anything but himself directly.<sup>9</sup> Consider the Kantian subject, who cannot know himself or the world at all, who can know only appearances of those things—phenomena—but never things themselves. Nihilism lurks here: if we cannot know the world itself, then why assume that there is any such world?

Beginning in the nineteenth century, first with the Romantics and then with those such as Kierkegaard, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, thinkers began to question modernism’s claims and to recognize that those claims and the nihilism implicate in them are part and parcel of a good deal of the alienation of modern Western society, a society founded on the idea that we do not have direct access to reality, only

---

9. I use the masculine pronoun on purpose since, though modernism insists that the subject is not gendered, it takes little analysis to see that it is, in fact, masculine. Modernism, like most of the rest of Western thought, unquestioningly takes the masculine to be representative of all humanity.

to concepts and ideas, only to universals or generalities and never to specifics. In modernism, I am a person only to the degree that I am someone in general: I have brown hair and brown eyes; I am short and decidedly not thin. To know me is to know a list of qualities, qualities that are shared by many others. It is probably impossible to make a list of qualities that describes me and me alone.<sup>10</sup> No list of qualities seems capable of capturing what is unique about me. And yet, that is what can be known of me. As the twentieth century showed us only too well, perfect method and perfect reason brought together in modern technology—alienated human beings reduced to general qualities—is the perfect recipe for world war and mass death. Two world wars, the Holocaust in Europe, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the tense stand-off between the Western world and Iran, . . . we could continue with a long list of the other fruits of modernism and its implicit nihilism.

The philosophical response to this has been to question whether the subject is a “natural,” precultural being onto which we impose culture, history, and meaning. Instead of being what modernism at first takes the self to be, perhaps it is, for example, a being’s *response* to those around it and to its enmeshment in culture and history. We can understand the self as an ongoing interpretation of itself living in the world, with things, and among others. The self can as easily—or more easily—be understood as something that comes to be *in* history and culture than it can be understood as something that ideally stands outside them as an observer and judge. The twentieth-century French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, for example, argues forcefully that the self must be understood to have a temporal dimension *qua* self.<sup>11</sup> It comes to be and changes over time. Ricoeur argues that the permanence the subject has—and it must have some kind of permanence

---

10. It may appear possible to make a complete list by pointing to the right conjunction of plausible properties: James Faulconer is the person married to Janice Faulconer, living in west Provo, with four children and eleven grandchildren, . . . However, such a list requires the use of proper names, at least “Janice Faulconer” and “Provo.” That complicates the matter considerably, as any number of contemporary philosophers have argued. See, particularly, Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

11. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

over time if it has identity—is not the permanence of an entity, but that of character or what we might also call “style,” a *way* of being in the world rather than a set of properties that one has.<sup>12</sup> Thus, though modernism has taken self-understanding to be immediate, for thinkers like Ricoeur all *self*-understanding is necessarily interpretation. It is mediated rather than immediate. Contrary to Descartes and contrary to the assumptions of modernism, I know neither myself nor the world as an immediate, uninterpreted object of understanding, for neither the subject nor the world is an entity that persists permanent and unchanged through time. Who we are, and who we are in relation to the past, is always a matter for interpretation. There is no final story, though of course it does not follow that there are no true stories. That is because the surprising result of the postmodern claim that I do not know myself immediately is that I *do* nevertheless know myself. In contrast, the early modern assumption that I have direct access to myself leads to the seemingly self-contradictory result that I cannot know myself at all. Why? Because the direct access to myself presumed by early modernism turns out really to be only direct access to my properties.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, if the self is not, as modernism first assumed, the rational and singular entity with direct access to self and world, then that self is not the standard for truth that modernism has presumed. The foundation for modernism’s prejudice against authority crumbles, and we must once again ask about authority (including, of course, the authority of modernism!): which ones shall we trust and why?<sup>14</sup> Some

---

12. The difference between a way of being and a list is that the former is an activity, an engagement in the world, while the latter is not.

13. Since first writing this, I have discovered that Jean-Luc Marion makes an argument for my claim in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13–15.

14. It is important to recall that Plato describes the epistemological attitude that characterizes our relation to the world as *pivsti*, trust rather than certainty (*Republic* 511e). That understanding of human understanding was part of the Western tradition up until approximately the Renaissance, when certainty, formerly reserved for mathematical objects, became the *desiderata* for all knowledge. (See also Aristotle’s remark that it is unwise to require more exactness of any area of inquiry than is appropriate, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b24–25.)

authorities that we have come to accept may lose their hold over us, new ones may arise, and others that we have rejected, including tradition and revelation, may once again emerge as possible.

However, if the prejudice against prejudice has fallen, then we must ask also about the even older prejudice against temporality. Why assume that *all* legitimate and worthwhile knowledge is ultimately knowledge of what is atemporal? In the early and mid-twentieth century, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that since Parmenides Western metaphysics has been based on the notion that the ultimate reality is a thing of some kind, an entity: some atemporal entity that exists apart from the world metaphysically accounts for the world that we experience. For many, that entity has been God; for secular modernism, it was Reason or Law or the Dialectic. There were disagreements about the nature of ultimate reality, but there was almost universal agreement that it is ultimately atemporal and an entity (if only a rational or conceptual entity).<sup>15</sup> Though it may be possible to give a more contemporary interpretation to the familiar phrase from Eliza R. Snow's hymn "O, My Father"—"Truth is reason, truth eternal"—it expresses the traditional and modern understanding of truth as an atemporal thing. On that modern view, the closer we can come to giving an atemporal account of things, including events now and in the past, the closer we come to speaking the truth.

Some respond by arguing that history is the expression of a hidden, causal logic. However, as the works of thinkers such as Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Comte, Spencer, and Spengler show us, construing the passage of time that way results eventually in a deterministic history. The complexity and interestingness of history becomes only a constant repetition of "more of the same." In spite of the apparent differences of various events, no moment of history genuinely and importantly differs from any another. Indeed, on this view, ultimately history is not itself something real. It is only the manifestation of some

---

15. Most often its characteristics are those of the traditional God: in addition to atemporality, nonspatiality, and characteristics such as absolute unity and absolute transcendence of the world. For example, notice that Descartes adopts much of the medieval language describing God to describe the ego in *Meditations*.

overarching principle. *That* is the real. Worse, the thinking of people like these has often given grounds for the justification of tyranny by those who claim to have seen through the veil of history to its undergirding structure. If we can see through the veil of history and time—supposedly mere appearances—and discern the structure, the real, that makes them what they are, then we can see the future. We can see the direction of history, and we can justifiably take power over those who would impede that direction. By virtue of our insight into the reality behind mere history, we have the right to spill “a little blood” for the greater good.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, few today understand history in this way, at least not explicitly. Any who do not see the folly of history understood that way need to read more history. Nevertheless, arguably, thinkers like Feuerbach, Marx, and Spengler were taking the modern understanding of history to its logical conclusion. Whether the ultimate metaphysical reality is God or Reason or Economics, if it is static—in other words, if it is eternal in a classical sense—then it has neither future nor past. To know it is to know everything. To the degree that one has knowledge, one escapes the bonds of time and enters into the eternal. And, like the traditional god on which modern knowledge is modeled, one who knows the eternal is surely qualified to rule among those who have not yet seen the eternal except in its misleading appearance as an account of the past.

The alternative is to deny that the atemporal is fundamental, to look for knowledge in the temporal, as Heidegger has argued we can and must. Surely history is about the passage of time rather than about its permanence. Surely if any science—any knowledge—denies the eternity of what-is, it must be the science of history, but that denial requires a shift in our metaphysics.

We find the beginning of that shift, one comparable to the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian mechanics, in Heidegger’s work, which

---

16. As Joseph Bottum notes, many thinkers have come to this conclusion. See “Death and Politics,” *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life*, [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id\\_article=5917](http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=5917) (accessed 24 September 2008), though I must note that Bottum’s criticisms of Jacques Derrida and others show that he does not understand postmodernism.

is central to understanding the difference postmodernism makes to history. It is important, however, to point out that the shift from time as atemporal to time as temporal is not yet postmodernism. It is a shift *within* modernism, a new modern step. Nevertheless, the shift is crucial: to deny that history is essentially atemporal is to argue that its basic structure is the event, a happening of temporality, rather than the thing-in-itself, which is, at least ideally, atemporal. That shift makes postmodernism possible.

To better understand this shift, consider the problem of repeating past events, and do so by considering Søren Kierkegaard's little book *Repetition*. Ostensibly a fictionalized account of Kierkegaard's failed love life (written under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius), *Repetition* is really about Kierkegaard's desire to be a Christian. In specific terms, the problem is that in order to consummate his love for his abandoned beloved, the young man must repeat the moment of his first love. By analogy, in order to be a Christian, Constantin must repeat what the first apostles did when Jesus called to them, "Come, follow me." But he *cannot* repeat that first moment, neither the erotic nor the Christian moment of first love. He cannot do so because the second moment includes the first, but the first does not include the second. He has already loved; the apostles have already responded; and that "already" is part of this moment but not part of the first. The apostles did not follow Christ with the kind of knowledge that the nineteenth-century would-be believer Constantin has, so he cannot do what they did. He seems doomed never to be truly a Christian.

In general terms, the problem looks like this: If each moment is unique, rather than the product of an atemporal law, then it is impossible for us ever to repeat any previous moment. Even if two moments could be identical in every other respect, the fact that the second occurred after the first would make it different from the first. And, of course, no two moments are identical in every other respect. But the seeming impossibility of repeating a past event results from a misunderstanding. It is the misunderstanding of taking the previous event to be reducible to its properties: Supposedly event A at time  $T_a$  has properties 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on. In order to repeat event A at time  $T_b$ , I

have to experience an event with those same properties *and no more*. (If event B has additional properties, then it is like event A in some respects, but it is not the same.) So if I think of the two events in terms of their properties, then I can never repeat a previous event. Indeed, I cannot even *think* about a previous event as the event that it was because I will always be thinking about it afterward, at a time when it has new properties, such as the fact that it caused other, later events, including my thought of it. Like the paradoxes of Zeno, Kierkegaard's book seems to demonstrate the impossibility of something that we *know* is possible, namely, the repetition of a previous moment or at least our meaningful reference to it.<sup>17</sup>

As outrageous as it may seem, in principle I cannot create a new account of any event without falling prey to the problem I have just described: if what I say about the past is always inadequate *because* it tries to repeat that past, then it seems impossible to say anything adequate. That is the consequence that modernism yields. We cannot solve the problem by finding some new feature of events that we can add to our list. However, we *do* see and experience things and events. We remember them. We refer to them. We live with them. The problem is not that we do not do these things. The problem is that the more we try to explain our repetitions, the more they slip through our explanatory fingers. We cannot avoid trying to explain events, but every modern explanation of an event unavoidably turns it into an entity, an *object* of inquiry, rather than a temporal event. That reintroduces the problem that talk about events was meant to avoid. Thus our accounts necessarily put us at least one remove from that to which they ostensibly refer, and once we are removed we have a difficult time giving another account that allows us to get back. However, getting back is usually not as difficult as thinking makes it seem. All we need to do is to stop talking and point—which is where postmodernism comes in.<sup>18</sup>

---

17. I take Kierkegaard to be offering a *reduction ad absurdum*, a *reductio* designed to help us see something that we will not see otherwise. In contemporary parlance, he offers us a deconstruction.

18. As John D. Caputo explains, though philosophical accounts of linguistic reference always run aground, we do successfully refer to things: "Proper names refer *in*

## Postmodernism

To understand postmodernism, first notice that, unlike most philosophical movements, postmodernism cannot be defined descriptively. Modernism is a set or constellation of doctrines or beliefs; postmodernism is a set of strategies for questioning modernism.<sup>19</sup> To be postmodern is to take up a position of questioning within rather than simply against modernism, and it is to take up that questioning with a constellation of strategies rather than in a content or with a method. The practices of postmodernism can, however, be described in one word, *destabilization*. The aim of postmodern thinking is the destabilization of modern thinking rather than the creation of new conclusions. This means that there is no such thing as postmodernism per se. Under the overworked label *postmodernism* we find a group of divergent thinkers who, relying on the alternatives of thought we see in thinkers like Heidegger and those he has influenced, share related ways of questioning modernism, especially the questioning of modernism's unifying tendencies and its assumption of universality, though they often differ over how to do so and what that questioning means.

Because our accounts take up events as objects, they cannot avoid tending toward ideas of permanence and eternity, unity, certainty, progress, and univocal meaning, whether they rely on the atemporal assumptions of early modernism or the temporal assumptions of late modernism. Even if we adopt an understanding of the world that

---

*actu exercitu*, in the exercised act, in actual use, in the concrete happening or the factual event. . . . It is a wonder, a little difficult to account for, but it happens. . . . [It is] something that philosophy is forced to swallow while being unable to digest." *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 76–77.

19. The use of the prefix *post-* to describe something that happens within rather than after modernism probably strikes many as odd. Granted. However, Jean-François Lyotard, who seems to have been the first to use the term in philosophy, makes that point in *Postmodernism Explained*, trans. Don Barry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Note also that by defining itself by its relation to modernism and by having no (or little) positive content itself, postmodernism cannot hope to "get beyond" modernism in any real sense. I believe that most noteworthy postmodern thinkers recognize this. Indeed, given the technological blessings of modernism and such things as democracy and human liberation that are consequent on it, few even wish to get beyond modernism.



comes from the assumptions of thinkers like Heidegger and Ricoeur, we will think of our ideas and conclusions in terms of permanence, certainty, univocity, and so on. In other words, at any meta-level our words no longer point at either things or events. They are about our words and theories rather than about the world to which our words refer. That is the benefit of reason: it allows us to reflect on our words and theories critically. However, that benefit is not pure, for when we move to a meta-level, we cease to be *able* to point directly to ourselves and the world. We can only talk about them at a distance. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, “We can only think the world because we have *already* experienced it,”<sup>20</sup> so our reflection on our thinking of the world is twice removed from our experience. By itself reason cannot avoid alienation from the world. Indeed, at least in modernism, alienation is thought’s ineluctable though unacknowledged goal.<sup>21</sup>

Postmodernism is about interrupting our chains of accounts so that pointing can succeed. What may seem like wacky or idiosyncratic interruptions by the postmodernist are intended to interrupt the modernist assumptions and methods we use to understand the world so that we can return to the world that makes our assumptions and methods possible. Postmodern strategies of reading and responding are intended to interrupt our explanations and to help us, as it were, to point. They are supposed to make us stop talking about things and talking about our talk in order to look directly at those things.<sup>22</sup> These interruptions cannot stand on their own. They are not intended to. They are not methods, neither for obtaining truth nor for showing that there is no truth. Instead they have a relation to modernism similar to the relation of negative theology to theology.

---

20. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences” and “Eye and Mind,” in *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. J. O’Neill (London: Heinemann Educational, 1974), 201, emphasis added.

21. That is its goal because it is also its origin, namely, the subject before and apart from any relation to anything but itself, as in Descartes but, I would argue, as also in Hobbes.

22. In this, they are the inheritors of Edmund Husserl’s maxim “To the things themselves,” *the* maxim of phenomenology—one more reason that postmodernism cannot be understood as coming after modernism.

There are two moments in negative theology. One is to discover and to say as accurately as possible the right names and descriptions of the Divine (comparable to modernism). Though it seems to be a paradox, the second moment is to show that these names are inadequate (roughly comparable to postmodernism). For example, one must say, “God is just”; it is blasphemy to say otherwise. Nevertheless, once that is established as true, it is also true that the sentence is inadequate. Those who know God know that “God is just” is not enough. In fact, from the point of view of a claim to have said the complete and final truth, the claim “God is just” is not only inadequate, it is untrue. We know what justice is only by using our own justice as a reference point. However, God’s justice surpasses ours, so much so that *justice* is an inadequate name to use for it. So we must also say, “God is not just”—but we must take care how we read what looks like a simple denial of God’s justice.

The negative theologian recognizes the absolute necessity of speaking about God. Theology is necessary. He or she worries, however, that our theology may give us the impression that, having established God’s justice, we are now done with thinking it. Rather than continuing to wrestle with God’s justice and our relation to it, we may become “comfortable” in our knowledge. When we do so, we are no longer engaged with the actual problem of justice. Instead, it has been replaced by our thought *about* justice. We have come to believe, implicitly, that our knowledge has encompassed the infinite. So the negative theologian reminds us of God’s infinity by showing us the failure of our affirmative theology. The point is not that there is no God or that God is, in a straightforward sense, not just. The point is that we must continue to speak of God, to praise him, to think of him, to wonder at his justice by questioning our own. Thus negative theology makes it possible for positive, praising theology to continue. Because it does, the second moment of theology, negative theology, is not a moment of pure denial. Rather, in spite of first appearances, it is as much a moment of praise as is affirmative theology. For the negative theologian, true theology comes neither in affirmative theology by itself nor in negative theology alone, but in the “third way” that

overcomes their opposition, namely, the continued praise and insight that is opened by the opposition between the two ways.<sup>23</sup>

As I understand postmodernism, its interruptions of modernism—in the forms of deconstruction, Nietzschean genealogy, reinterpretation,<sup>24</sup> rhetorical play, and so on—are meant to open a third way of understanding. They are meant to allow us to continue to refer to and deal with the world even while retaining a continually chastened modernism. Postmodernism is an interruption of the alienated destiny that modern beliefs entail. It tries to make possible a third way toward that which modernism intends but cannot keep in sight by itself. When not merely an affectation, postmodernism stands as anti-myth to modernism's myth, with the hope that the world—other persons, our relations to them (as in justice), and things—will appear, glistening in the space between them.

### A Postscript on Postmodernism and Relativism

I hope that readers can now see that one of the ironies of much trendy postmodernism is its taking of subjectivist positions (using the contemporary sense of *subjectivist*), such as that the meaning of a text or event is whatever a person takes it to be. That is ironic because one of the central tenets of modernism is the importance of the subject, and a major feature of postmodernism is that it questions the importance of the subject. One cannot argue both that meaning is merely subjective *and* that the subject is not central to the creation of meaning.

The outrageous forms of postmodernism turn out to be more modern, though self-contradictory, than those who hold it think. Post-moderns who accept strong relativism appear to accept this argument:

Knowledge is as modernism says or there is no knowledge.  
 Modernism is wrong about knowledge.  
 So, there is no knowledge.

---

23. See Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham, 2002), 128–42, for an excellent account of negative theology.

24. I use *reinterpretation* for *hermeneutics* here to avoid confusing the hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo (reinterpretation) with the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer.

However, the first premise of this argument is *an explicitly modern premise*. Thus those who accept the argument agree with modernism that the only alternative to the modern account of knowledge is the ultimate illegitimacy of all knowledge claims, but one need not believe that to question modernism. One can believe that modernism is wrong about knowledge but that knowledge is, nevertheless, possible. Those who accept the strong relativist argument are radical only in their posture, not in their position; radical relativism is an unsophisticated, privative variation on modernism.<sup>25</sup>

Some postmodern thinkers, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,<sup>26</sup> *may* argue for a strong form of relativism, but this is a minority position and not implicit in every postmodern position.

---

25. Jürgen Habermas makes a similar point in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

26. In, for example, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).