

*Introduction:*

*The Failure of Modernism*

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It is a theme of this book that the contemporary world in terms of its intellectual, political, moral, religious, and social make-up has been significantly influenced by a cluster of philosophical ideas and tendencies that originated in modern philosophy (and which may be appropriately described by the term “modernism”). It is a further theme of this work that this influence has been for the worse, not for the better. Modernism in philosophy is characterized by skepticism and anti-realism in epistemology and by relativism in ethics and politics. The initial groundwork for modernism, as the term is used here, was laid by the “father of modern philosophy,” Rene Descartes (1596-1650). I am not suggesting that Descartes himself foresaw where his philosophical ideas would lead (for he clearly did not), nor that his immediate contemporaries and philosophical sparring partners, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, did so; nevertheless, it is still true that the ideas introduced by Descartes and later developed by Locke and other philosophers undoubtedly gave birth to a new and influential philosophical way of looking at the world. This new way of looking at the world was completely alien to the philosophical orientation of ancient and medieval thought, and has resulted, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, in a complete sea-change in our intellectual and philosophical approach to reality. There may have been no clear and steady progression of these ideas from the beginning of modern philosophy to today, and of course there were many other philosophical movements in between, but it is these ideas which became the dominant ones in contemporary thought across the whole range of intellectual life: in law and science, in the humanities and the arts, in politics and religion, and even in popular culture and media.

The ideas and themes that make up the philosophical movement of modernism are easy enough to identify; the influence of these ideas today is also obvious. The first issue of major significance to emerge out of Descartes’s work is epistemological skepticism. Rejecting the approach to knowledge characteristic

of medieval philosophy, with its blend of philosophy and theology, and its reliance on what he regarded as abstract metaphysics, Descartes was concerned to put knowledge on a sound footing, especially scientific knowledge, since in his time there was a new-found commitment to the potential of scientific knowledge for understanding reality.

Descartes's approach, as we all know, was to develop his famous arguments for skepticism, where he first tried to doubt all of his beliefs by means of the argument from illusion, the dream argument, and the evil genius argument, and then having placed himself in a position of comprehensive skepticism, he sought to establish the validity and certainty of knowledge by means of the ontological argument and the existence of God. In adopting this approach, however, Descartes unwittingly started philosophy down a road that he did not foresee, and which he would have utterly rejected. Subsequent philosophers rejected his solution to the problem of knowledge, pointing out that the ontological argument did not succeed, and identifying the problem which later became known as the Cartesian circle. Nevertheless, philosophers were impressed with Descartes's skeptical arguments, and also with his objective of trying to establish a philosophically-sound foundation for scientific knowledge. The upshot of the debate initiated by Descartes was that modern philosophy was to become obsessed with epistemology, especially with the issue of skepticism, either in defending skepticism as a philosophical position, or in developing epistemological theories which showed how the problem could be overcome. Soon, however, arguments for and against skepticism came to dominate and even eclipse the search for knowledge, and slowly began to breed a certain cynicism and even nihilism about the quest for objective knowledge.

In fact, the problem of skepticism has now so thoroughly pervaded the practice of contemporary epistemology that any proposed philosophical account of the nature of human knowledge must be accompanied by the inevitable qualification that the account proposed *might* be true *if only* the obstacle created by the problem of skepticism could be overcome. In short, no philosophical account of knowledge can be accepted as true, such reasoning goes, until we have shown first that knowledge is possible. There can be no doubt that this general approach in philosophy is responsible for the tendency toward relativism and cynicism about knowledge which is characteristic of so much current work in philosophy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in many academic departments today Descartes's search for certainty is either adhered to as an empty platitude, or is regarded as a joke.

Another theme which has come from the Cartesian tradition is epistemological anti-realism in all its various forms, the view that the mind in the process of knowing modifies the objects of consciousness in significant

ways, a view which suggests that we must abandon realism, the philosophical view that the human mind can know reality as it really is in itself. Many contemporary philosophers have thoroughly accepted the view that the mind modifies the objects of consciousness which are known in experience and in reflection, and so any knowledge we have must be only of *appearances*. This view first appeared seriously in the modern era with Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and reached its fullest expression in Kant's distinction between the phenomena and the noumena. However, it is clearly this line of thinking which is the forerunner of the contemporary view, in the ascendancy in many disciplines, that all knowledge is *contextual*. Whereas Locke argued that at least the primary qualities were exempt from the modifications of the knowing mind, and so objective knowledge of the primary qualities is possible, his general distinction between primary and secondary qualities has evolved today into the view that it is language, culture and tradition, perhaps even race and gender, which modify the objects of consciousness, and, further, and crucially, that these features of experience are responsible for modifying *all* the objects of consciousness. The result of this approach, of course, is that the search for so-called objective knowledge, for transcendental, transhistorical essences and truths, is an illusion, for there are no such truths.

It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that *postmodernism*—which I define as a movement whose central theme is the critique of objective rationality and identity, and the working out of the implications of this critique for central questions in philosophy, literature and culture<sup>1</sup>—should be regarded as the *culmination* of the approach which began with Descartes, and not as a *new departure* from it. It is certainly more radical than modernism, for while modernism usually held that some version of anti-realism is true (the knowing mind modifies the objects of consciousness), its initial proponents, Locke and Kant, still believed that these objects were modified *in the same way for everyone*, and so knowledge was objective in some sense (even if we could not know the world as it really is). Yet it is not such a large step from this view to W.V. Quine's argument that "the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges"<sup>2</sup>, and a shorter step still to

<sup>1</sup> For a further exposition and critique of the movement of postmodernism, see my "Postmodernism, Derrida and Différance: A Critique", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. XXXIX, (March 1999), pp. 5-18.

<sup>2</sup> W.V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in his *From A Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980 edition), p. 42.

Jacques Derrida's and Jean-François Lyotard's view that there are no identities beyond culture and language, that the mind is imprisoned in language, and that we need to continually express our "incredulity towards metanarratives."<sup>3</sup> And so we are plunged into epistemological relativism.

Of course, relativism and anti-realism are intimately related to other themes all too evident in contemporary thought. I will summarize some of the more obvious ones here. First, there is the ascendancy of the philosophical view known as naturalism, which I define as the view that everything that exists is physical, and has, at least in principle, a scientific explanation. This view is simply accepted as the gospel truth today in large sections of the academic community, not so much because there are good arguments for it, but because it is the paradigm within which many contemporary thinkers operate. It is allied with a superficial empiricism, and buttressed by a powerful impression that the successful track record of science implies that all knowledge-gathering should follow the scientific method. This position is often accompanied, second, by an anti-religious, anti-tradition and anti-authority strain. Third, the other influential tendency to emerge out of this modernistic approach is moral relativism, the view that the choice of moral values is relative either to the individual or the culture (usually the individual), and that it is inappropriate to judge others because there can be no objective moral knowledge, and so tolerance is to be highly recommended toward those with whom we have moral disagreements, and so on. The obvious contradictions in and between many of these positions (basic material in introductory philosophy courses) are usually downplayed or simply ignored.

My contention is that although this cluster of ideas is currently culturally dominant, nevertheless modernism has failed, and is philosophically bankrupt. And further no honest thinker can seriously argue that a philosophical movement based on such tendencies could possibly be *true*, or *better*, or *philosophically more appropriate* than others. The reason modernism has failed is simply because it ends up in skepticism, relativism, and even nihilism. As Alasdair MacIntyre has articulately pointed out, the Enlightenment project in philosophy, a project founded on many of these themes, has failed.<sup>4</sup> Differing from MacIntyre somewhat, I hold that this is because the assumptions of the Enlightenment simply do not allow philosophy to proceed on a sound footing, and inevitably collapse into skepticism, relativism, and nihilism. The only way to avoid

<sup>3</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

<sup>4</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 second edition), especially chapters 5, 6 and 17.

disagreement, as MacIntyre shows, is to dissemble. It is to pretend that one can justify one's own special views on a particular topic despite the fact that the underlying assumptions one has adopted preclude this very justification. Thus, philosophers such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick, to refer to two of MacIntyre's examples from contemporary political philosophy, assume the truth of many of the principles they prefer *at the beginning of their arguments*. And if the reader also simply assumes these principles, then the reader will very likely accept the conclusions of these philosophers. However, if the reader does not implicitly accept these assumptions, then he or she will probably not find the views of Rawls or Nozick very convincing. So contemporary philosophers often find themselves in the curious position of either never debating their starting assumptions, or acting as if their arguments for these starting assumptions are "objectively true" (despite the fact that they usually subscribe to the modernist notions of epistemological relativism or anti-realism, or both).

I believe it is important to state this criticism in a more general way, for many contemporary philosophers are dissembling in a much deeper sense, a sense that gives philosophy a very bad name. They have accepted philosophical positions such as anti-realism and relativism which thereby preclude the possibility of objective knowledge, and then go on to make objective claims about knowledge and ethics at every turn. This inconsistency is at the heart of modern and contemporary philosophy. And it explains why much of contemporary philosophy has become little more than an academic exercise, and also, as MacIntyre mentions, why philosophical debates on various issues have become especially shrill in recent times (and characterized by *protest* rather than *argument*). Thus, for example, Rawls claims that a political conception of justice must be neutral, and if not neutral, then at least based on values that we all (implicitly) share. This approach results in Rawls either imposing his own view of the good on those who disagree with him, a view which is inconsistent with his aim of being neutral, or commits him to a form of cultural relativism, a position with which he is clearly uncomfortable. And although his book *Political Liberalism* is a far better attempt to deal with these genuine problems facing his position than *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls still remains in my view in the position of trying to present a relativistic and even skeptical philosophical position while sneaking in objective claims all along. Another example of the same tendency can be found in Quine, who argues that all knowledge is theory-laden, but then attempts to exempt science from this relativistic conclusion, when it clearly cannot be exempted. (This is a conclusion from which the postmodernists, such as Lyotard, do not flinch.)

It is one of the supreme ironies of modernism and an excellent illustration of its failure that scientific knowledge must also succumb to the anti-realism and

relativism characteristic of the movement. For while science, often heralded as one of the triumphs of modernism, is committed to the objectivity of knowledge, and usually to realism, the tendencies of modernism have only served to undermine these notions, as we have seen. And it is interesting to observe Quine's attempt to exempt scientific knowledge from his unpalatable relativistic presuppositions, and also to observe the postmodernist move to do the exact opposite. If all knowledge is relative, Lyotard argues, then so is scientific knowledge. Yet if this is true the whole worldview of naturalism and empiricism is completely undermined, and it is no wonder that Quine wants to finally shrink from this particular conclusion, since the defense of the naturalistic worldview is one of his objectives. However, he cannot have it both ways: either there is objective knowledge, and so scientific knowledge can be objective, or there is no objective knowledge, and so scientific knowledge is not objective. At least one can say that the postmodernists are being somewhat more consistent on this point, than are the analytic philosophers, since the postmodernists do not exempt the "metanarrative" of science from their general "incredulity." (I say "somewhat" since the work of the postmodernists is also full of objective epistemological and moral claims.) Philosophical work in ethics is also replete with relativism, and yet we see objective moral values and judgements advocated all the time. Contemporary philosophy is a breeding-ground for this form of double-think, and it is a very good indication of its state of psychological schizophrenia.

There can be no serious question in my view that modernism has failed in the philosophical sense, and so it is only a matter of time before its results, many of which have seeped down to the popular level, fail as well. Popular culture, of course, has been very influenced by modernism, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the domain of ethics where the language of relativism has almost taken over, especially among the well-educated, intellectual and elite classes. However, it does not take much analysis to see that even here it is simply the rhetoric of relativism that is appealed to, for those involved in contemporary debates in popular culture are just as inconsistent as their counterparts in professional philosophy—insisting on ethical relativism one minute, then making objective moral judgements the next. If the philosophical foundations of modernism are bankrupt, then its failure is only a matter of time, yet it may have corrupted the culture before its demise. And that is the tragedy. Many of the problems in contemporary society, the attack on knowledge and truth in education, the attack on the liberal arts, moral relativism, the increase in crime, the general coarsening of the culture, especially in TV and film, the drug problem, sexual promiscuity, rampant individualism, and the collapse of moral character, can be directly or indirectly traced *at least in part* to the epistemological

relativism, moral relativism, and general skeptical tendencies of modernism.

All of the contributors to this volume are motivated at least in part by the belief that modernism has failed, and most of the essays are engaged in an attempt to critique specific features of modernism, often from a more traditional perspective. The authors of the essays are influenced by the philosophical tradition inspired by, but not exclusively based upon, the thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, and carried on by contemporary philosophers Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson and Yves Simon. This tradition supports the views that, among other things, realism is true, that knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is objective, that there are ethical absolutes which can be known, that moral character matters, and that the traditional view of the relationship between the individual and the community (human beings are social by *nature* and not just by choice) is essentially correct. From this background, the contributors address a wide range of issues in the contemporary discussion, such as: the background and assumptions of Cartesianism, the defense of realism, the American political tradition, including the key themes of individual rights versus the common good, pluralism, liberalism and secularism, the problem of skepticism, and social construct theory.

Peter Redpath opens the discussion with a provocative essay arguing that Descartes was not a philosopher, but a rhetorician, a rhetoric which he had synthesized from the humanism and scholasticism of his time and from his Christian faith in God as a creator. Redpath supports this view by examining Descartes's own work, and that of his tradition. Robert Geis suggests that the inquiry on the question of mind and immortality has been hampered by Descartes's tradition. He proposes a way of thinking about mind that can overcome the problems facing Cartesianism, and which is at the same time a critique of the assumptions of contemporary mind/body materialism. In a very interesting discussion, Donald DeMarco provides an overview of Descartes's views on mathematics, and the link to music. He considers the distinction between emotion and reason in Descartes and argues that Descartes's rational analysis of music distorts it. DeMarco's analysis illustrates how an excessively rationalistic approach is not appropriate for every subject, a critique which one could easily extend to much of contemporary analytic philosophy.

The main points in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's materialism are the subject of W.J. Fossati's essay. Writing from the perspective of the historian, Fossati shows how La Mettrie, influenced by the Cartesian tradition, gradually adopted a wholesale materialistic and mechanistic philosophy, which set the Enlightenment on an irreversible course.

The next two essays turn to issues in ancient and medieval philosophy. Fr Joseph Koterski considers the first Christian attempt by John of Damascus at a

systematic theological defense of icons, and especially considers the influence of the Aristotelian philosophical tradition on John's approach, even if John wishes to place philosophy in the service of theology. Fr Christopher Cullen mediates the dispute about realism from within the Thomistic tradition, and defends the position that a metaphysics of being cannot be based on a transcendental, subjective starting point. He examines the work of two leading Transcendental Thomists, Karl Rahner and Joseph Donceel, and argues that their view constitutes a rejection of realism.

Fr. James Schall's essay turns directly to the work of Jacques Maritain and political philosophy, and asks: did Maritain believe that we can do certain evil deeds for a greater good? Fr Schall illustrates that he did not by means of a discussion and comparison of Maritain's view with that of Machiavelli. Several of the next essays also turn to issues in political philosophy. Edward Furton begins with the view that philosophy is a body of knowledge accumulated over time, and so the history of philosophy is important. Writing from a realistic perspective, he argues that the three great natural rights referred to in the American Declaration of Independence (life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness) are direct descendants of Thomas Aquinas's discussion of the three types of goods found in his "Treatise on Law." Furton attempts to show that Richard Hooker is the key intermediary between Aquinas and Jefferson. His essay ends by briefly contrasting this view with that of Rawls's. Terry Hall continues the discussion of modern political thought in a consideration of the notion that contemporary liberal theory is much concerned with being neutral in the debate about worldviews. His analysis focuses on a comparison of Michael Oakeshott's critique of the common good, with the arguments in favor of the common good advanced by Yve Simon. Hall concludes that Simon's view is superior to that of modern liberalism. Deborah Wallace returns to the work of Jacques Maritain, focusing especially on his theory of rights; she then surveys Alasdair MacIntyre's criticisms of the use of rights language, and then compares and contrasts both philosophers on some of the key issues. Michael Moreland believes that Maritain's social philosophy can illuminate the contemporary political debate. He focuses on the common good and human rights, comparing Maritain briefly to Rawls and MacIntyre, and concludes with some criticisms of contemporary secular liberalism.

Henk Woldring asks: what has remained the same and what has changed in the interpretations of the purpose of the state? Along the way he treats Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, and some modern philosophers before turning to the work of Jacques Maritain. Woldring argues that Maritain's view of the state is the most adequate. In an ambitious essay, James Hanink contends that Maritain

would urge us to go beyond the political right and left, and Hanink wants to suggest some strategies for how this might be achieved. A principle of synthesis, he argues, is the classical thesis of the unity of the virtues. The political right champions deep historical sensibility and keen awareness of human malice, while the political left stresses personal authenticity, and dignity of the people (populism). Can these virtues form a unity? Hanink suggests a few ways in which this unity might be approached and understood. John Evans turns to the view that the post-enlightenment world is in crisis. Maritain's ideal of heroic humanism, which Evans explains at length, offers us the only solution. His essay also explores the theme of heroism in the gospels, and considers Jesus as anti-hero.

The next two essays take on a more postmodern flavor. Matthew Pugh argues that Thomism can satisfy the postmodern demand for a non-metaphysical theology. After discussing negative and positive theology in Aquinas, Pugh next turns to an analysis of cause and effect in Aquinas, especially as these notions relate to God. Throughout his essay, Pugh compares Heidegger and Aquinas on being. According to John Knasas, a natural law ethic can be thought through in the light of a moral agent informed by *ratio entis* (the notion of being). He explains that the postmodern notion of freedom in the work of Heidegger takes to extreme what is in fact an ordinary phenomenon: the play of projection. He then offers a Thomistic critique of this position, and argues that realism does not limit freedom. Knasas concludes by examining some of the implications of his view for ethics.

The final two essays turn directly to the skepticism and anti-realism of modernism. My own essay argues that the problem of skepticism is a pseudo-problem. I attempt to illustrate by means of a detailed example that if we *do* take the problem seriously, we will *never* be able to solve it. This is an excellent reason in itself for dismissing the problem, since it is not a problem which has been raised on the basis of evidence. I also argue that the claim that skepticism is a *logical possibility* is not a good reason to take the problem seriously, and conclude with a reply to some arguments defending skepticism offered by Keith Lehrer.

Curtis Hancock explains and illustrates the main points of social construct theory in the work of a major psychologist. He focuses especially on the anti-realism and relativism of social construct theory, and then offers several penetrating critiques of this view. His essay is a very nice illustration of modernist ideas at work in a discipline outside philosophy. Hancock also brings the volume to a close with a valuable epilogue.