

Epilogue

Preserving our Memory

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The essays in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy* acquaint us with the main outlines of postmodern philosophy and diagnose its strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the book has special value in that it asks about the genesis of postmodernism, which naturally encourages many contributors to examine contrasts between postmodern philosophers and earlier thinkers, even ancient and medieval ones. As a result, this volume adds to our stock of knowledge about the history of philosophy. This epilogue will complement the efforts of these earlier essays by reflecting specifically on the relationship between postmodern thought and modern philosophy (especially seventeenth and eighteenth-century thinkers), a discussion that will also emphasize the need to keep our memory about the history of philosophy supple and intact.

Preserving our memory is not as easy as it may seem, for among the many currents that flow through the history of philosophy is the stream of *Lethe*. Philosophers quench their thirst at these waters at their own peril. Yet so chronic is their visit to this spring that forgetfulness and its consequences seem to be central features of the history of philosophy. The whys and wherefores of philosophical amnesia so fascinated Étienne Gilson that he was inspired to write one of the twentieth-century's great books on the history of philosophy: *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, wherein he argues that sometimes philosophers, having forgotten their own ancestry, will credit to themselves philosophical views that really define an earlier time. What is only imitation, a given age may mistake for novelty. Were Gilson alive, he would appeal to this observation to correct a misplaced nostalgia that often seizes certain writers commenting on postmodernism. While none of the contributors to *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy* suffers from this blinding nostalgia, authors elsewhere often succumb to the sentiment. This epilogue supports the historically sensitive philosophical work of the present volume by challenging these authors. I refer to writers who long to reclaim modern philosophy, "the

age of reason," which they regard as the halcyon era in the history of philosophy, a time when knowledge and value were the goals of philosophy and when the human mind was considered adequate to attain them. This attitude for these writers is prescriptive: "if we could but retrieve the principles and methods of modernism," they say, "we could escape from our postmodern malaise; if we could recover the confidence of a Descartes, a Hume, or a Kant, then all would be right for philosophy again."

The reason that such comments would pique Gilson's historically sensitive antennae is that he knew that the principles and methods of the most influential modern philosophers—Descartes, Hume, and Kant—are really the same in kind as the views of "mainstream" contemporary philosophers. James Marsh in his fine article aptly characterizes postmodernism as an assault on rationality. But studies on postmodernism should also acknowledge that modernism itself, perhaps unwittingly, had already begun that assault. Accordingly, modernism does not really offer an alternative to postmodernism. In terms of philosophical content, these two periods are of the same cloth.¹ The age of reason, in spite of its intentions, was the unhappy progenitor of subjectivism: an intellectual calamity which led ineluctably to skepticism and nihilism, so descriptive of the postmodern malaise. Since the modern philosophers operate within the same limits and according to the same assumptions as the postmodernists, to escape the postmodern cul-de-sac will require finding an exit different from any pathway charted by modernist thinkers. The early prophets of postmodernism—writers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger—were right in judging that modern philosophy was itself *proto*-postmodern; that modernism would eventually crash into the rock of twentieth-century irrationalism. If there is a difference between the two periods, it is largely rhetorical: the postmodernists are more self-conscious and honest about the limitations of their own principles. Contemporary skeptics no longer harbor the illusion that the philosophical assumptions on which modern philosophers based their work can sustain an awareness of reality and objective value. The postmodernists, no longer cowed by philosophical proprieties, have been so impolite as to question whether in fact modern philosophers were not wearing a mask.² They

¹ This position has been intriguingly argued by Theodore Young in his provocative essay, "Secular Gnosticism and Classical Realism," *The Modern Age*, Winter, 1995, 124-134.

² Descartes himself admits to wearing a mask in his "Cogitationes privatae" (see entry for January, 1619): "Just as actors, who are advised against appearing on the stage with a blush on their face, put on a mask, I too enter, with a mask on, the theater of the world in which I have so far lived as a spectator" (*Oeuvres de Descartes*, 10:213). This cryptic remark has been interpreted by Stanley Jaki in *Angels, Apes, and Men* to mean that Descartes masqueraded at being a human, flesh-and-bone, philosopher, when, in fact, his philosophy presumed that his mind was

have exposed the charade, charging the modernists with having professed to be, perhaps unwittingly, what they were not: philosophers committed to the efficacy of reason and the attainment of truth. To Gilson, who looked to ancient and medieval philosophers as his mentors and who had few allegiances either to the fashions of modernism or to the trends of postmodernism, this assessment would seem uncontroversial. To his Thomistic kinsmen who still retain their memories, I suppose this summation is likewise obvious. But I fear that there are yet some thinkers who stubbornly cling to the belief that modern philosophy is different in kind from postmodernism and that a return to modernism is a remedy to postmodernism. Perhaps in this epilogue I can disabuse them of their stubbornness by refreshing their memories; perhaps the antidote of *anamnesis*, even if administered in a small dose (which is all I can offer here), will help them to see that our hope is in vain if its object is to restore modernist solutions to our postmodernist problems.

In two of his most engaging works, *Three Reformers* and *The Dream of Descartes*, Jacques Maritain explained in unequivocal terms that the seeds of skepticism and nihilism which would bring modernism to its close were planted in the philosophy of René Descartes. We cannot return to Descartes' way of philosophizing, Maritain insists, without again committing the "great French sin" of subjectivism. This sin is more akin to an angelic fall than to mere human error, for, according to Descartes, man's knowledge is like that of the pure spirits: innate, intuitive, and independent of things. This last characteristic does not prevent Descartes from advocating that the mind knows real existents. For Descartes, once a clear and distinct idea is grasped, it discloses an essence that presumably puts the mind in contact with real things. But, of course, this *a priori*ism is naive. It is an excuse for angelism. In reality, Descartes' severance of the intellect from things condemns the human mind to have only its own contents as its objects. While Descartes envisions an epistemology assured of contact with reality, his own assumptions destine his philosophy in fact for solipsism. The intellect's ideas are not that by which things are known; instead they are the objects, the termini, of knowledge itself. Since ideas do not originate

really angelic. This illusion, however, bankrupted reason. Since the human mind is constrained to know things by means of the senses, a limitation the angels do not suffer, then Descartes' theatrics condemn him to dire epistemic errors (see my comments on Descartes below). Peter Redpath, in a stirring forthcoming work, *Cartesian Nightmare: Wisdom's Odyssey from Philosophy to Psychotheology*, explains that Descartes' impersonation of the angels requires him to invent a new art of rhetoric which he mistakes as philosophy, a criticism having parallels in Maritain's *The Dream of Descartes*, where he accuses the Father of Modern Philosophy of being only an "ideospher," rather than a philosopher.

in knowledge of things, they are innate. But Descartes is unable to show that this innateness conforms to reality. This ironically shows just how unlike an angel Descartes' philosopher really is. An angel's mind is directly illumined by reality; whereas the mind of Descartes' philosopher is a lamp illuminating nothing but itself. When Descartes abandoned the mind's conformity with reality as the starting-point of philosophy, he initiated a new measure of intelligence: to think *more geometrico demonstrata*; to exercise thought's reflection on itself as the aim of philosophical inquiry, perfectly exemplified in mathematics. Descartes' legacy would make the principal worry of philosophy consistency of thinking and not contact with reality. Rather than elevating man to an angel, Cartesianism in fact debases man by bankrupting his intellect. Such an impoverished angel strikes one as an imposter. Descartes is not only impersonating an angel but a philosopher too, Maritain charges, for a philosopher that can only reflect on the contents of his own mind is a philosopher in name only. Descartes' "philosophy" might be better named an "ideosophy," thinking about thinking, taking ideas, rather than things, as the objects of knowledge.

After Descartes, philosophical culture responds predictably. The angelic pretense is soon found out. Before long, man is stripped of the title of pure spirit; in fact, he is denied spirit at all. In time the assumption prevails that man is only a body. The angel's mathematicism of spirit becomes mechanism and manipulation of quantities. Clear and distinct ideas are just atomistic elements in a stream of consciousness. Clarity and distinctness become arbitrary; consistency of thinking becomes a chimera, a cultural bias. Hence, the tragic product of Descartes' pursuit of truth ends in skepticism; his optimism about a science and morals that befits an angel ends in a technology and a nihilism that threaten to make the fallen "angel" now less than human. The dream of Descartes becomes a nightmare.

This proto-postmodern disruption of intellect is only compounded by Descartes' descendants, most notably David Hume and Immanuel Kant. In spite of Hume's vaunted empiricism, he has his own taste for apriorism. His prized assumption—that whatever is separable in thought is distinguishable in fact—generates his doubts about causality, since, if the concept of "cause" is distinct from the notion of "effect," then cause can be denied of effect without contradiction. Accordingly, he commits metaphysics, ever so dependent on causality, to the flames. Without the order of causation, Hume's philosophy devolves into phenomenalism, abandoning even Descartes' *cogito*. The self is dissolved along with the intellect's grasp of anything beyond mere sensation. Man is by no means an angel. He has become an animal. Not even science can survive Humean skepticism: laws of nature and predictability are swept aside

once causality is dismissed as mere habit, a characteristic of the mind, which itself is just a rather loosely organized collection of perceptions.

Moreover, morality as traditionally understood is also swept away by Hume's assumption because, if existence or fact can be logically separated from the notion of value, there is no requirement that acquaintance with facts informs us about good or bad, right or wrong. Never mind that the assumption—"whatever is separable in thought is separable in reality"—is arbitrary. Nowhere does Hume attempt to prove it. It nonetheless serves the Enlightenment well, appearing to sweep away at once metaphysics and objective ethics. These results have proved highly influential. In fact, Hume's assumption, especially its fact/value implication, Nietzsche takes as axiomatic at the dawn of postmodernism.

Kant's reputation as one who salvages Hume from the ruins of skepticism and restores some certainty to experience has received much press in histories of philosophy. However, Kant's achievement is undermined by the nagging subjectivism which seizes his effort to overcome skepticism. Even Kant has to admit that belief in the external world is still the scandal of philosophy. His philosophy, which makes "reality" itself just a category of the mind (along with "actuality" and "existence"!) cannot bridge the gulf between subject and *noumenon*. His latent Cartesianism can give us at best only a phenomenal world, a condition for the intellect which someone once described as the "solipsistic cyclorama." Even Kant's admission that knowledge begins in sense-perception is so qualified as to nullify any step toward realism. For Kant sensation is (using the language of classic realism) only the occasion, not the cause, of knowledge. External things in themselves are not known or involved in the processes of cognition. The forms of sensibility structure sensuousness but offer no contact with extramental sense objects in themselves. The transcendental aesthetic can only provide the possibility of sensations structured by the *a priori* forms of space and time, something akin to Mill's *phaneron*, but it cannot furnish extramental reality. Nor can Kant's later efforts to give us contact with reality through morality or teleology succeed, for the very arguments he constructs to bridge the gulf between the phenomenal and the *noumenal* rely precisely on those categories that he explained earlier are constrained to structure subjective experience only. Once awakened Kantian-style from our dogmatic slumbers, we can only continue to ride the solipsistic carousel.³

³ For a lucid account of how Kant's suppositions drive us to solipsism and to postmodernist consequences, see Raymond Dennehy, "The Philosophical Catbird Seat: A Defense of Maritain's *Philosophia Perennis*," in *The Future of Thomism*, editors Deal W. Hudson and Dennis Wm. Moran (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 65-76.

My comments are brief (as befits an epilogue) but sufficient. I offer only the reminder that the heart and soul of modern philosophy—which is Cartesian rationalism, Humean phenomenalism, and Kantian transcendentalism—will not give us back reality or the mind's sufficiency to understand it, the twofold loss which describes the lament of postmodernism. Hence, so long as postmodernists look to modern philosophers for solutions, they will be engaged in a pointless task. Modern philosophy gives us no solvent to dissolve the bonds of postmodernism.

Is there, then, no escape? Fortunately, egress is available because philosophy does not begin with Descartes. There is another more salutary tradition to which the philosopher can turn, a tradition which can offer a solution because it rests on a philosophy of the human person radically different from that of the modernists. According to this more agreeable account, the human mind is not a detached intellect sorting among its own contents for knowledge. Instead, man is a rational animal situated in a world informed by ordinary experience, reflection on which is this philosophy's starting-point. This is a philosophy that does not lock itself into a vicious circle looking for a presuppositionless beginning. The capacity for knowledge is not something to be proved in advance. To offer that proof is already to suppose it. Instead, the alternative is to liberate and exercise the philosopher's genuine critical powers by letting experience of actual, extramental things provide the source of philosophical reflection. It is not presuppositionless, but it is critical because it recognizes at the outset that the Cartesian alternative is a march down a blind alley. Accordingly, this is a tradition that does not begin with angelism, the hubris that leads to the disastrous consequences with which postmodernism now grapples. It is better to recover a tradition in which man is neither an angel nor an animal. Instead, he is a rational knower, but one of flesh-and-blood, situated in history and culture and humbly dependent on sensory awareness of actual things as the content-giving causes of knowledge.

This is the tradition of philosophical realism that harks back to Plato and Aristotle. Gilson labeled it the "Western Creed," and he believed that the health of Western Civilization depends on keeping it. If this vision has defined the West, then it is no surprise that as the West has lost its grip on this ideal it has imperiled its own existence.⁴ That Creed flourished among the ancient Greeks and afterward was supported by certain medieval philosophers who recognized

⁴ My concluding remarks draw significantly from Peter Redpath's recent provocative essay, "The New World Disorder: A Crisis of Philosophical Identity," *Contemporary Philosophy*, December, 1994, 19-24. This work presages certain conclusions that Redpath will discuss at length in *Cartesian Nightmare*.

that reason and faith rightly support one another and that the rational health of the human mind is necessary for the integrity of the faith itself. But the Western Creed began to erode when Descartes initiated the proto-postmodern malaise. There is of course no going back now to embrace the Western Creed in just the way the Greeks or the Medievals did. We must accept, perhaps with a touch of irony, an important historical truth: however much modern philosophy has failed us, we ourselves are a product of modern times. But this does not mean that no retrieval of the Western Creed is possible. Recovery of an alternative pre-modern tradition is possible even if it must be adapted, perhaps paradoxically, to our own time, which is imprinted significantly with the legacy of modernism. We are ourselves modern peoples and we must live in and for the age into which we are born. Still, we can restore to health the Western Creed and let it define our culture in a way *analogous* to what it meant for the Greeks and the High Scholastics.

Near the end of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* Gilson asks whether "a social order begotten by a common faith in the value of certain principles [can] keep on living when all faith in these principles is lost?" This is an important question to ask as postmodernism threatens the survival of the Western Creed. The essays in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy* help us better appreciate the momentousness of Gilson's question and give us the opportunity to reflect on ways to rejuvenate our Western Creed and thereby initiate the era of *post-postmodern* philosophy.