

## Philosophical Dimensions of Postmodernism

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**ABSTRACT:** *postmodernism seems to have deprived the grand narratives of the past of their power to prescribe to people (their adherents) what they should be ascribing or attaching value to, it caused the resultant value-gap to be filled in by the values that individuals obtained by “shopping around” in the current value supermarket, and also by resorting to a post-post-foundationalist orientation in terms of which their value-systems play an inconspicuous role in the background of their thinking. We also illuminate what we consider to be important implications (of this shift from the application of grand narrative value systems to the post-post-foundationalist application of the rather more individualistic value systems of modern-day people) for religious institutions, particularly for the church as a societal institution, and for education as an interpersonal relationship.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Postmodernism, Postmodern relativism, Post-foundationalism, Grand narratives, Value-gap.*

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### I INTRODUCTION

Post-Modernism is a broad movement in late 20th Century philosophy and the arts, marked in general terms by openness to meaning and authority from unexpected places, and a willingness to borrow unashamedly from previous movements or traditions. It is often defined negatively as a reaction or opposition to the equally ill-defined Modernism, although some claim that it represents a whole new paradigm in intellectual thought.

The term "Post-Modernism" (literally "after Modernism") originated in architecture to denote a reactionary movement against the perceived blandness and hostility of the Modernist movement, and also against the pretensions of high Modernism, with its pursuit of an ideal perfection, harmony of form and function, and dismissal of frivolous ornamentation. It came to be in art, music and literature (and, by analogy, in philosophy) for any pluralistic or reactionary style that is often more ornamental than Modernism and which is not afraid to borrow from previous artistic styles, often in a playful or ironic fashion. It tends to lack a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle, although it often embodies extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity and inter-connectedness or inter-referentiality and is typical marked by a revival of traditional elements and techniques.

Some see Post-Modernism as just another phase in the continued unfolding of Modernism; some see it as a complete replacement for, and backlash against, Modernism. The burgeoning anti-establishment movements of the 1960s can be considered as the constituting event of Post-Modernism in a more general sense. With the current wide availability of the Internet, mobile phones, interactive television, etc, and the instantaneous, direct, shallow and often superficial participation in culture they allow, some commentators have even posited that we are now entering the Post-Post-Modern period.

In philosophy specially, Post-Modernism was heavily influenced by continental Philosophy movements like Phenomenology, Structuralism and Existentialism, and it is generally skeptical of many of the values and bases of Analytic Philosophy. It is generally viewed as openness to meaning and authority from unexpected places, so that the ultimate source of authority is the actual "play" of the discourse itself. It can be considered a "pick-and-mix" approach, whereby basic problems are approachable from a wide range of theoretical perspectives.

Post-Modernism is a broad and non-specific movement (if it can be described as a movement at all), and movements like Deconstructionism and Post-Structuralism (among others) can both be considered Post-Modernist. Post-Modernists often defend themselves from criticisms of philosophical incompetence and

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excessive informality by claiming that they take a "wider" view of what philosophy is, that their use of academic jargon is necessary to communicate their ideas, and that their critics simply do not understand their work.

Among the best-known Post-Modernist philosophers are Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-

Because at its functional level all language is a system of differences, says Derrida, all language, even when spoken, is writing, and this truth is suppressed when meaning is taken as an origin, present and complete unto itself. Texts that take meaning or being as their theme are therefore particularly susceptible to deconstruction, as are all other texts insofar as they are conjoined with these. For Derrida, written marks or signifiers do not arrange themselves within natural limits, but form chains of signification that radiate in all directions. As Derrida famously remarks, “there is no outside-text” (Derrida 1974 [1967], 158), that is, the text includes the difference between any “inside” or “outside.” As he explains in a letter to Gerald Graff, attached as an appendix to *Limited Inc* (see Derrida 1988, 148), this means that “every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace.” A text, then, is not a book, and does not, strictly speaking, have an author. On the contrary, the name of the author is a signifier linked with others, and there is no master signifier (such as the phallus in Lacan) present or even absent in a text. This goes for the term “*différance*” as well, which can only serve as a supplement for the productive spacing between signs. Therefore, Derrida insists that “*différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept” (Derrida 1982 [1972], 3). Instead, it can only be marked as a wandering play of differences that is both a spacing of signifiers in relation to one another and a deferral of meaning or presence when they are read.

How, then, can *différance* be characterized? Derrida refuses to answer questions as to “who” or “what” differs, because to do so would suggest there is a proper name for difference instead of endless supplements, of which “*différance*” is but one. Structurally, this supplemental displacement functions just as, for Heidegger, all names for being reduce being to the presence of beings, thus ignoring the “ontological difference” between them. However, Derrida takes the ontological difference as one difference among others, as a product of what the idiom “*différance*” supplements. As he remarks: “*différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) ‘older’ than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being” (Derrida 1982 [1972], 22). Deconstruction, then, traces the repetitions of the supplement. It is not so much a theory about texts as a practice of reading and transforming texts, where tracing the movements of *différance* produces other texts interwoven with the first. While there is certain arbitrariness in the play of differences that result, it is not the arbitrariness of a reader getting the text to mean whatever he or she wants. It is a question of function rather than meaning, if meaning is understood as a terminal presence, and the signifying connections traced in deconstruction are first offered by the text itself. A deconstructive reading, then, does not assert or impose meaning, but marks out places where the function of the text works against its apparent meaning, or against the history of its interpretation.

#### IV HYPERREALITY

Hyperreality is closely related to the concept of the simulacrum: a copy or image without reference to an original. In postmodernism, hyperreality is the result of the technological mediation of experience, where what passes for reality is a network of images and signs without an external referent, such that what is represented is representation itself. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), Jean Baudrillard uses Lacan’s concepts of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real to develop this concept while attacking orthodoxies of the political Left, beginning with the assumed reality of power, production, desire, society, and political legitimacy. Baudrillard argues that all of these realities have become simulations, that is, *signs* without any referent, because the real and the imaginary have been absorbed into the symbolic.

Baudrillard presents hyperreality as the terminal stage of simulation, where a sign or image has no relation to any reality whatsoever, but is “its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1981, 6). The real, he says, has become an operational effect of symbolic processes, just as images are technologically generated and coded before we actually perceive them. This means technological mediation has usurped the productive role of the Kantian subject, the locus of an original synthesis of concepts and intuitions, as well as the Marxian worker, the producer of capital through labor, and the Freudian unconscious, the mechanism of repression and desire. “From now on,” says Baudrillard, “signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real” (Baudrillard 1976, 7), so production now means signs producing other signs. The system of symbolic exchange is therefore no longer real but “hyperreal.” Where the real is “*that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction*,” the hyperreal, says Baudrillard, is “*that which is always already reproduced*” (Baudrillard 1976, 73). The hyperreal is a system of simulation simulating itself.

The lesson Baudrillard draws from the events of May 1968 is that the student movement was provoked by the realization that “*we were no longer productive*” (Baudrillard 1976, 29), and that direct opposition within the system of communication and exchange only reproduces the mechanisms of the system itself. Strategically, he says, capital can only be defeated by introducing something in-exchangeable into the symbolic order, that is, something having the irreversible function of natural death, which the symbolic order excludes and renders invisible. The system, he points out, simulates natural death with fascinating images of violent death and

catastrophe, where death is the result of artificial processes and “accidents.” But, as Baudrillard remarks: “Only the death-function cannot be programmed and localized” (Baudrillard 1976, 126), and by this he means death as the simple and irreversible finality of life. Therefore he calls for the development of “fatal strategies” to make the system suffer reversal and collapse.

Because these strategies must be carried out within the symbolic order, they are matters of rhetoric and art, or a hybrid of both. They also function as gifts or sacrifices, for which the system has no counter-move or equivalence. Baudrillard finds a prime example of this strategy with graffiti artists who experiment with symbolic markings and codes in order to suggest communication while blocking it, and who sign their inscriptions with pseudonyms instead of recognizable names. “They are seeking not to escape the combinatory in order to regain an identity,” says Baudrillard, “but to turn indeterminacy against the system, to turn *indeterminacy* into *extermination*” (Baudrillard 1976, 78). Some of his own remarks, such as “I have nothing to do with postmodernism,” have, no doubt, the same strategic intent. To the extent that “postmodernism” has become a sign exchangeable for other signs, he would indeed want nothing to do with it. Nevertheless, his concepts of simulation and hyperreality, and his call for strategic experimentation with signs and codes, bring him into close proximity with figures such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida.

### **Postmodern Philosophy – Subjective Truth**

One of the themes in postmodern philosophy is a denial of universal, objective truth. This is clearly declared in Jean- Francois Lyotard’s famous statement “incredulity towards metanarrative.” A metanarrative refers to a unifying story that seeks to explain how the world is in other words a metanarrative is a worldview. Lyotard suggests that we should be skeptical of such broad explanations. For example, the statement “God so loved the world” is nonsensical to Postmodernists for two reasons: (1) they deny the existence of God, and (2) statements reflecting the whole world (metanarratives) are impossible.

For Postmodernists, since there is no universal Truth (capital “T”), there are only “truths” (small “t”) that are particular to a society or group of people and limited to individual perception. Written or verbal statements can reflect only a particular localized culture or individual point of view. A well worn catchphrase we hear in this regard is, “That may be true for you, but not for me.”

Yet, by making the universal statement that there are no metanarratives, Postmodernists have put themselves in the position of creating a metanarrative. Their story that explains the world is that there are no explanations of the world, only local stories told by various cultures. For this reason, we refer to Postmodernism as the anti-worldview worldview.

### **Postmodern Philosophy – Language and Deconstruction**

Regarding literature, Postmodernists are highly concerned with the language of written texts. The term defining the major literary methodology of Postmodernists is deconstruction. Associated with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction involves reading a text to ferret out its hidden or multiple meanings (polysemy). In this way, a reader’s interpretation of the text becomes more important than the text itself. Also significant is the subjectivity of the reader in determining what the author intended. For example, a reader may feel that a particular text really means an author is racist, even though the written text makes it clear that the author deplors racism.

In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote a short essay entitled “The Death of the Author.” In this essay he argued that the *origin* of the text is not the important thing, rather it is the *destination* the reader. By allowing the reader to invent new meanings, the text is freed from the tyranny of the author’s single intended meaning. For example, there is no reason to assume “that a Shakespearean play means exactly the same thing today as it did when first performed.” Each author (or artist) is the product of his or her own cultural setting and uses language to fit his or her condition. Thus, postmodern literary criticism claims that words never describe the objective world but only refer to other words. Therefore, no matter how a writer constructs a sentence, it can never tell us about the real world, but only about the world as understood by the reader. This concept is summed up in the phrase, “That’s just your interpretation.”

### **Postmodern Philosophy–Anti-Realism and the Construction of Reality**

The concept of deconstruction in postmodern philosophy is taken far beyond the area of literature. Just as you, the reader, are creating the meaning of this text, you also construct the world according to your culture and experiences. In other words, there is no “real world” out there only six billion constructions of the world, a belief known as anti-realism.

Traditionally, Truth (with a capital “T”) was understood as the relationship between the real, objective world and statements that correspond to the real world. This view is called the correspondence theory of truth. However, Postmodernists claim this kind of Truth is impossible to achieve. There is no universal “Truth,” only personal, subjective truths that exist only in a particular situation or cultural surrounding. Thus, according to the Postmodernist paradigm of anti-realism, there is no real world to which truth can correspond. Rather, our words correspond only to other words and, in the end, create our understanding of reality. If words signify only other words, then words can never be used in the pursuit of Truth.

A classic example of the concept that words do not refer to reality is found in Foucault’s essay entitled, “This Is Not a Pipe.” In this essay, he analyzes a 1966 painting by Magritte that shows a picture of a pipe on a blackboard with the written phrase “This is not a pipe.” Above the blackboard is an abstraction of a pipe hanging in the air. Foucault insists that none of these is a pipe, but merely a text that simulates a pipe. The primary idea behind this “word play” is the Postmodern insistence that all human beings are conditioned by their culture and language their situation in life and that no one is able to break through his or her situation to engage a universe with objectively true statements of fact. ‘Water wets’ is true for only a small community of individuals locked in their own language and culture. In addition, it is true only as long as this community agrees upon this particular usage. In fact, the community determines what truth through the words it chooses to use is.

Richard Rorty has said that truth for him is whatever his community of scholars allows him to get away with. If Rorty says the moon is made of green cheese and his community does not disagree with him, then for him the moon is made of green cheese. Again, reality is not what objectively exists; reality is produced by our agreement of what it is. We do not discover true facts about the real world we create it. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard took this concept to its logical conclusion. In 1991 he claimed that the Gulf War was not real, but merely simulated for CNN television. The truth that real people were killed did not seem to enter the equation. In actuality, not all Postmodernists take the concept of language and reality to Baudrillard’s extreme. Yet, as Glenn Ward notes, this piece has been used to discredit not only Baudrillard, but Postmodernism’s abandonment of truth.

## V HABERMAS'S CRITIQUE

The most prominent and comprehensive critic of philosophical postmodernism is Jürgen Habermas. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas 1987 [1985]), he confronts postmodernism at the level of society and “communicative action.” He does not defend the concept of the subject, conceived as consciousness or an autonomous self, against postmodernists’ attacks, but defends argumentative reason in inter-subjective communication against their experimental, avant-garde strategies. For example, he claims that Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault commit a performative contradiction in their critiques of modernism by employing concepts and methods that only modern reason can provide. He criticizes Nietzsche’s Dionysianism as a compensatory gesture toward the loss of unity in Western culture that, in pre-modern times, was provided by religion. Nietzsche’s sense of a new Dionysus in modern art, moreover, is based upon an aesthetic modernism in which art acquires its experimental power by separating itself from the values of science and morality, a separation accomplished by the modern Enlightenment, resulting in the loss of organic unity Nietzsche seeks to restore via art itself (see Habermas 1987 [1985], 81-105). Habermas sees Heidegger and Derrida as heirs to this “Dionysian messianism.” Heidegger, for example, anticipates a new experience of being, which has withdrawn. However, says Habermas, the withdrawal of being is the result of an inverted philosophy of the subject, where Heidegger’s destruction of the subject leads to hope for a unity to come, a unity of nothing other than the subject that is now missing (Habermas 1987 [1985], 160). Derrida, he says, develops the notion of *différance* or “archi-writing” in similar fashion: here, we see the god Dionysus revealing himself once again in his absence, as meaning infinitely deferred (Habermas 1987 [1985], 180-81).

Habermas also criticizes Derrida for leveling the distinction between philosophy and literature in a textualism that brings logic and argumentative reason into the domain of rhetoric. In this way, he says, Derrida hopes to avoid the logical problem of self-reference in his critique of reason. However as Habermas remarks: “Whoever transposes the radical critique of reason into the domain of rhetoric in order to blunt the paradox of self-referentiality, also dulls the sword of the critique of reason itself” (Habermas 1987 [1985], 210). In similar fashion, he criticizes Foucault for not subjecting his own genealogical method to genealogical unmasking, which would reveal Foucault’s re-installation of a modern subject able to critically gaze at its own history. Thus, he says, “Foucault cannot adequately deal with the persistent problems that come up in connection with an interpretive approach to the object domain, a self-referential denial of universal validity claims, and a normative justification of critique” (Habermas 1987 [1985], 286).

Habermas's critique of postmodernism on the basis of performative contradiction and the paradox of self-reference sets the tone and the terms for much of the critical debate now under way. While postmodernists have rejected these criticisms or responded to them with rhetorical counter-strategies. Lyotard, for example, rejects the notion that inter-subjective communication implies a set of rules already agreed upon, and that universal consensus is the ultimate goal of discourse (see Lyotard 1984 [1979], 65-66). That postmodernists openly respond to Habermas is due to the fact that he takes postmodernism seriously and does not, like other critics, reject it as mere nonsense. Indeed, that he is able to read postmodernist texts closely and discursively testifies to their intelligibility. He also agrees with the postmodernists that the focus of debate should be upon modernity as it is realized in social practices and institutions, rather than upon theories of cognition or formal linguistics as autonomous domains. In this respect, Habermas's concern with inter-subjective communication helps clarify the basis upon which the modernist-postmodernist debates continue to play out.

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