

Chapter Three

The Twentieth-Century Collapse of Reason

Heidegger's synthesis of the Continental tradition

Martin Heidegger took Hegelian philosophy and gave it a personal, phenomenological twist.

Heidegger is notorious for the obscurity of his prose and for his actions and inactions on behalf of the National Socialists during the 1930s, and he is unquestionably the leading twentieth-century philosopher for the postmodernists. Derrida and Foucault identify themselves as followers of Heidegger.¹ Rorty cites Heidegger as one of the three major influences on his thinking, the other two being Dewey and Wittgenstein.²

Heidegger absorbed and modified the tradition of German philosophy. Like Kant, Heidegger believed reason to be a super-

¹ Foucault 1989, 326.

² Rorty 1979, 368.

ficial phenomenon, and he adopted the Kantian view of words and concepts as obstacles to our coming to know reality, or Being. However, like Hegel, Heidegger believed that we can get closer to Being than Kant allowed, though not by adopting Hegel's abstracted third-person pretense of Reason. Setting aside both reason and Reason, Heidegger agreed with Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer that by exploring his feelings—especially his dark and anguished feelings of dread and guilt—he could approach Being. And like all good German philosophers, Heidegger agreed that when we get to the core of Being we will find conflict and contradiction at the heart of things.

So what is new? Heidegger's distinctiveness was his use of phenomenology to get us there.

Phenomenology becomes philosophically important once we accept the Kantian conclusion that we cannot start as realists and scientists do by assuming that we are aware of an external, independent reality that is made up of objects that we are trying to understand. But, from the phenomenological standpoint, we must also realize that Kant took only a timid half-step. While Kant was willing to give up the noumenal object, he held onto the belief in an underlying, noumenal self with a specific nature available to us for our investigation. But a noumenal self underlying the flow of phenomena is just as problematic a notion as the notion of noumenal objects underlying the flow. Recognizing this, Heidegger therefore wanted to start, following Nietzsche's occasional but undeveloped suggestions, without making the assumption of the existence of either an object or a subject.

So we start phenomenologically—that is, by simply and clearly describing the phenomena of experience and change.

On Heidegger's account, what one finds when starting so is a sense of projection into a field of experience and change. Do not think *objects*, Heidegger counseled, think *fields*. Do not think *subject*,

think *experience*. We start small and local, with Da-sein's being projected into reality.

"Da-sein" is Heidegger's substitute concept for "self," "subject," or "human being," all of which he thought carried undesirable baggage from earlier philosophy. Heidegger explained his choice of "Da-sein" by defining it as follows: "*Da-sein* means *being projected into Nothing*."³ Ignoring the "Nothing" for now, it is the *being projected* that is Da-sein—not that, if anything, which is projected or does the projecting. The emphasis is on activity, thus avoiding assumptions that there are two things, a subject and an object, that enter into a relationship. There is simply action, the action of being out there, being thrust into.

The *being projected* reveals and clothes successively over time various semi-stable fields or "beings"—what we would call "objects" if we had not already shed our naïve realism.

Yet the long process of describing the phenomena of beings, Heidegger found, led him inexorably to a question—the question that has haunted all of philosophy: What is the Being of the various beings? The beings differ and change, come and go, yet for all their changeability and difference they still manifest a oneness, a commonality: They all *are*. What is that Being underlying or behind or common to all beings? What makes the beings Be? Or, raising the stakes to the Heideggerian Question of all questions: Why is there even Being at all? Why is there not rather Nothing?⁴

This is no ordinary question. With a question like this, Heidegger pointed out, reason quickly finds itself in trouble—the same kind of trouble that Kant had pointed out with his antinomies: reason *always* reaches contradictions whenever it attempts to explore deep metaphysical issues. A question such as "Why is there Being and not rather Nothing?" is therefore repugnant to reason. For Heidegger, this meant that if we are to explore the question,

³ Heidegger 1929/1975, 251.

⁴ Heidegger 1953, 1.

then reason—the “most stiff-necked adversary of thought”⁵ — was an obstacle that had to be discarded.

Setting aside reason and logic

The Question is repugnant to reason, as Heidegger wrote in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, because we reach logical absurdity whichever way we go in attempting to answer it.⁶ If we say, on the one hand, that there is no answer to the question of why there is Being—if Being just is for no reason—then that makes Being absurd: something that cannot be explained is an absurdity to reason. But if, on the other hand, we say that Being is for a reason, then what could that reason be? We would have to say that that reason, whatever it is, is outside of Being. But outside of Being is nothing—which means that we would have to try to explain Being from nothingness, which is also absurd. So either way we go in trying to answer the Question, we are deeply into absurdity.

Logic wants at this point to forbid the Question. Logic wants to say that the absurdity shows that the question is ill-formed and so should be set aside: Logic wants instead to make the existence of reality its axiom, and to proceed from there with discovering the identities of the various existents.⁷

On the other hand, switching back to a Heideggerian perspective, the questions spawned by the Question strike very deep feelings in Da-sein. What about the Nothingness that Being would have come from? Could Being not have been? Could Being return once again to the Nothing? Such questions are compellingly awesome, and yet at the same time they fill Da-sein with a sense of dis-ease and anxiety. So here Da-sein has a conflict: Logic and reason say that the question is contradictory and so should be set

⁵ Heidegger 1949, 112.

⁶ Heidegger 1953, 23, 25.

⁷ E.g., Rand 1957, 1015-ff.

aside, but Da-sein's feelings urge Da-sein to explore the question in a non-verbal, emotional way. So which does Da-sein choose: contradiction and feeling—or logic and reason?

Fortunately, as we have learned from Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, this contradiction and conflict is yet another sign that logic and reason are impotent. As we all know by now, we should *expect* to find conflict and contradiction at the heart of things—contradiction is the sign that we are on to something important.⁸ So mere logic, Heidegger concluded—an “invention of schoolteachers, not of philosophers”⁹—cannot and should not get in the way of probing the ultimate mystery that is Being. We must reject entirely the assumption “that in this enquiry ‘logic’ is the highest court of appeal, that reason is the means and thinking the way to an original comprehension of Nothing and its possible revelation.” Again:

If this [contradiction] breaks the sovereignty of reason in the field of enquiry into Nothing and Being, then the fate of the rule of ‘logic’ is also decided. The very idea of ‘logic’ disintegrates in the vortex of a more original questioning.¹⁰

And again, in case we have missed the point: “Authentic speaking about nothing always remains extraordinary. It cannot be vulgarized. It dissolves if it is placed in the cheap acid of merely logical intelligence.”¹¹ Deep feeling about Nothing trumps logic any day.

Emotions as revelatory

Having subjected reason and logic to *Destruktion* and then set them aside as merely one superficial way of thinking—one that the Greeks had established fatefully for all subsequent Western

⁸ See, for example, Heidegger 1929/1975, 245-246.

⁹ Heidegger 1953, 121.

¹⁰ Heidegger 1929/1975, 245, 253.

¹¹ Heidegger 1953, 26.

thought¹²—we need another route to Being and Nothing. We can try to explore language without the presuppositions of reason and logic, but even the elements of language, words, have evolved over time and become so twisted and crusted over with layers of meaning that they almost entirely hide Being from us. Their original force and contact with reality has been lost. We can therefore try to strip away from our language the encrusted layers to reveal the ur-words that had original and genuine connective force to Being, but that will require special efforts.

For Heidegger, the special effort that is required is emotional, an exploratory letting oneself go into the revelatory emotions of boredom, fear, guilt, and dread.

Boredom is a good mood to start with. When we are bored—really, really, really bored—we are no longer engaged with the ordinary, trivial, day-to-day things that occupy most of our time. When we are bored, “drifting hither and thither in the abysses of existence like a mute fog,”¹³ all beings become a matter of indifference, undifferentiated from one another. Everything merges or dissolves into an un-distinguished unity.

Progress has thus been made: “This boredom reveals what-is in totality.”¹⁴ Real boredom takes one away from one’s normal focus on particular beings and one’s cares for them and diffuses one’s awareness into a sense of Being-as-a-whole’s being revealed to one.

But this revelation also brings with it anxiety and dread. For part of the process of the dissolution of particular beings into a state of undifferentiation is the dissolution of one’s own sense of being a unique, individual being. One has the feeling of beings being dissolved into an undifferentiated Being—but at the same time one has the feeling of one’s self-identity as also slipping into a state of

¹² Heidegger 1929/1975, 261.

¹³ Heidegger 1929/1975, 247.

¹⁴ Heidegger 1929/1975, 247.

being nothing-in-particular—that is, of becoming nothing. This is distressing.

In dread we are ‘in suspense’ (*wir schweben*). Or, to put it more precisely, dread holds us in suspense because it makes what-is-in-totality slip away from us. Hence we too, as existents in the midst of what-is, slip away from ourselves along with it. For this reason it is not ‘you’ or ‘I’ that has the uncanny feeling, but ‘one.’¹⁵

This sense of dread that comes with a sense of the dissolution of all beings along with oneself was for Heidegger a metaphysically potent state, for in effect one gets a foretaste of one’s own death, a sense of one’s being annihilated, a sense of going into nothingness—and thus a sense of getting to the metaphysical center of Being.

One must absolutely not, therefore, give into one’s overpowering sense of distress and run away from dread and back to the safety of one’s petty, day-to-day life. One must embrace one’s dread and surrender to it, for “the dread felt by the courageous”¹⁶ is the emotional state that prepares one for the ultimate revelation. That ultimate revelation is of the truth of Judeo-Christian and Hegelian metaphysics.

In dread we come to feel that Being and Nothing are identical. This is what all philosophy based on the Greek model had missed, and what all philosophies not based on the Greek model had been struggling toward.

“Nothing,” wrote Heidegger, “not merely provides the conceptual opposite of what-is but is also an original part of essence.”¹⁷ Heidegger credited Hegel with having reclaimed this lost insight for the Western tradition: “‘Pure Being and pure Nothing are thus one and the same.’ This proposition of Hegel’s (‘The Science of

¹⁵ Heidegger 1929/1975, 249.

¹⁶ Heidegger 1929/1975, 253.

¹⁷ Heidegger 1929/1975, 251.

Logic,' I, WW III, p. 74) is correct." Hegel of course got it from trying to resuscitate the Judeo-Christian account of creation, in which God created the world out of nothing. As Heidegger put it in re-affirming that Judeo-Christian claim, "every being, so far as it is a being, is made out of nothing."¹⁸

So after abandoning reason and logic, after experiencing real boredom and terrifying dread, we unveil the final mystery of mysteries: Nothing. In the end, all is nothing and nothing is all. With Heidegger, we reach metaphysical nihilism.

Heidegger and postmodernism

Heidegger's philosophy is the integration of the two main lines of German philosophy, the speculative metaphysical and the irrationalist epistemological. After Kant, the Continental tradition quickly and gleefully abandoned reason, putting wild speculation, clashing wills, and troubled emotion at the forefront. In Heidegger's synthesis of the Continental tradition, we can see clearly many of the ingredients of postmodernism. Heidegger offered to his followers the following conclusions, all of which are accepted by the mainstream of postmodernism with slight modifications:

1. Conflict and contradiction are the deepest truths of reality;
2. Reason is subjective and impotent to reach truths about reality;
3. Reason's elements—words and concepts—are obstacles that must be un-crusted, subjected to *Destruktion*, or otherwise unmasked;
4. Logical contradiction is neither a sign of failure nor of anything particularly significant at all;
5. Feelings, especially morbid feelings of anxiety and dread, are a deeper guide than reason;

¹⁸ Heidegger 1929/1975, 254-255.

6. The entire Western tradition of philosophy—whether Platonic, Aristotelian, Lockean, or Cartesian—based as it is on the law of non-contradiction and the subject/object distinction, is the enemy to be overcome.

This is not yet to introduce Heidegger's strong social and political collectivism, which is also part of his inheritance from the main lines of German philosophy. Nor is it to make explicit, as Heidegger did, his strong anti-science and anti-technology views.¹⁹ Nor is it yet to discuss his anti-humanism,²⁰ with his regular calls for us to be obedient to Being, to feel guilty before Being, to pay homage to Being, and even to "sacrifice man for the truth of Being"²¹—which, if we are still allowed to be logical, means sacrificing ourselves to Nothing. (Those elements in Heidegger's philosophy will arise in Chapter Four, in the context of discussing the political background to postmodernism.)

What the postmodernists will do in the next generation is abandon the remnants of metaphysics in Heidegger's philosophy, along with his occasional streaks of mysticism. Heidegger was still doing metaphysics, and he spoke of there being a truth out there about the world that we must seek or let find us. The postmodernists, by contrast, are anti-realists, holding that it is meaningless to speak of truths out there or of a language that could capture them. As anti-realists, accordingly, they will reject the formulation of (1) above as a metaphysical assertion, and instead reformulate its assertion of the reign of conflict and contradiction as descriptive merely of the flow of empirical phenomena; and while they will accept (3) above, they will accept it while abandoning Heidegger's faint hope that ultimate *ur*-concepts connecting us to reality may be revealed at the end of the unmasking.

¹⁹ Heidegger 1949.

²⁰ Heidegger 1947.

²¹ Heidegger 1929/1975, 263.

The postmodernists will effect a compromise between Heidegger and Nietzsche. Common to Heidegger and Nietzsche epistemologically is a contemptuous rejection of reason. Metaphysically, though, the postmodernists will drop the remnants of Heidegger's metaphysical quest for Being, and put Nietzschean power struggles at the core of our being. And especially in the cases of Foucault and Derrida, most major postmodernists will abandon Nietzsche's sense of the exalted potential of man and embrace Heidegger's anti-humanism.

Positivism and Analytic philosophy: from Europe to America

So far my account of the epistemological origins of postmodernism has concentrated on German developments in philosophy. Those developments are most of the story of the background to postmodernism. In Europe, if one was a philosophically-trained intellectual in the middle part of the twentieth century, one's training was primarily in Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Those thinkers set the philosophical framework of discussion for European intellectuals, and that framework goes a long way toward accounting for the rise of postmodernism.

Yet my account of postmodernism as developed so far is incomplete. Postmodernism's strongholds are in the *American* academy, not the European. Rorty is of course American, and while Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard are French, they have many more adherents in America than they do in France or even Europe. So there is a gap that must be bridged. How did the Counter-Enlightenment tradition come to prominence in the English-speaking world, especially in North America?

The gap is wider intellectually than it is geographically. For the longest time, the American academy had little use for Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. The Anglo-American tradition saw itself as a champion of the Enlightenment project. It allied itself

with science, with rigor, with reason, and with objectivity—and it rejected contemptuously Hegel’s speculative wanderings and Kierkegaard’s wallowings. It had been deeply impressed with science, and it saw science as the alternative to now-discredited religious and speculative philosophy. It wanted to make philosophy scientific and to justify the roots of science. This positivist spirit—pro-science and pro-logic—dominated the Anglo-American intellectual world for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The collapse of the positivistic spirit in Anglo-American philosophy is therefore part of the story of the rise of post-modernism.

As strong as Enlightenment traditions were and are in America and Britain, those cultures never were Enlightenment islands unto themselves. European and especially German philosophical influences began to be a presence shortly after the revolution in France. The English Romantics, most famously, were among the first to turn to Germany for philosophical and literary inspiration. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, for example, spent time in Germany for that purpose.²² Wordsworth’s famous lines signal the new anti-reason trend:

*Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;
—We murder to dissect.*

John Keats’s lines continue it:

*Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?*

And Thomas de Quincey is perhaps the clearest prose representative of what many of the English Romantics absorbed from German philosophy:

Here I pause for one moment to exhort the reader never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in

²² Abrams 1986, 328-29.

opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted; and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else—which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes.²³

Germany's rising star was also signaled by the popularity of Germaine de Staël's *Germany* (1813), a book that had a major impact on French, English, and American intellectual life.

In the United States, Madame de Staël's book inspired many budding intellectuals to take up the study of German language and literature. It was read by the young Ralph Waldo Emerson, later to become America's leading man of letters. In conjunction with her book's popularity, the 1810s and 1820s also began a trend of young intellectuals going to Germany to study. This group included many of those later prominent in American intellectual life. Edward Everett was one of Emerson's professors at Harvard. Ralph's brother William studied the new Schleiermacher- and Hegel-inspired approaches to theology and biblical criticism at Heidelberg. George Ticknor later became professor of *belles-lettres* at Harvard. And George Bancroft, "the father of American history," attended several German universities, including hearing Hegel's lectures in Berlin.

"Until 1830," historian Thomas Nipperdey points out, "it was the general rule that talented and curious young minds gravitated to Paris; but from then on they came, in ever-increasing numbers (American students, for example) to Germany, to Berlin."²⁴ They brought back with them Kantian and Hegelian philosophy. By the middle of the nineteenth century, German ideas were established in America. One indication of this is that the most important phil-

²³ Thomas de Quincey, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," 1823.

²⁴ Nipperdey 1996, 438. See also Burrow 2000, Chapter 1, for the impact of German ideas on Russian, French, and English students in the early 19th century.

osophical journal in America from 1867 to 1893, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, was founded in 1867 by a group of Hegelians in the St. Louis Philosophical Society.²⁵

This list of German philosophical influences is not yet especially weighty, for America in the nineteenth century was not yet an intellectual or cultural powerhouse, and the intellectual and cultural life that did flourish was still largely guided by Enlightenment philosophy. To the extent that intellectual life flourished in America, German philosophy existed as a minority tradition alongside the dominantly pro-reason and pro-science traditions coming out of the Enlightenment.

From Positivism to Analysis

Yet early in the twentieth century, the influence of German philosophy began to increase significantly. Setting aside until Chapters Four and Five better-known German imports such as Marxism, and setting aside the massive exodus of intellectuals from Germany to England and America in the 1930s because of the rise of National Socialism, the impact of German philosophy upon Anglo-American intellectual life was being felt even by the beginning of the century.

Our focus in this chapter is upon epistemology, and epistemological concerns dominated Anglo-American philosophy for the first half of the twentieth century.

The various leading schools of twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy, broadly positivist in their orientation and collectively known as analytic philosophy, are deeply indebted to German philosophy. As philosopher Michael Dummett has written, "The sources of analytical philosophy were the writings of philosophers who wrote, principally or exclusively, in the German

²⁵ Goetzmann 1973, 8.

language.”²⁶ Analytic philosophy is not however a variant on Hegelian speculative or Husserlian phenomenological philosophy (although Bertrand Russell was a Hegelian and a partial Kantian early in his career, and Gilbert Ryle was an early exponent of Husserl’s approach.)

Analytic philosophy developed out of nineteenth-century positivism. Positivism was developed in the nineteenth century by scientists with a strong philosophical bent and by philosophers strongly impressed with science. The philosophical framework that they operated within drew heavily upon Hume’s nominalist and skeptical empiricism and upon Kant’s epistemology. Positivism accepted as firm philosophical principles the Humean dichotomy of facts and values, the Humean and Kantian analytic/synthetic dichotomy, and as a premise the Kantian conclusion that while seeking metaphysical truths about the universe may be fruitless and meaningless, science could at least make progress with organizing and explaining the flow of phenomena.

In the second half of the century, Positivism was given further impetus and a new direction by innovations in logic and the foundations of mathematics—developed primarily by the German mathematicians Gottlob Frege, Richard Dedekind, David Hilbert, and Georg Cantor. To the extent that these mathematicians were philosophical, they offered Platonic and Kantian interpretations of mathematics. The new impetus was felt strongly in the English-speaking world early in the twentieth century when, just prior to World War I, Bertrand Russell brought the German developments to the English-speaking world, publishing with A. N. Whitehead *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913). Russell’s work on logic and the philosophy of logic was in turn one of the streams that fed into the creation of the Logical Positivist school.

Logical Positivism’s origins are also culturally German, in the regular meetings of the Vienna Circle, begun after the Great War by

²⁶ Dummett 1993, ix.

a talented group of philosophically-informed scientists and science-impressed philosophers. Logical Positivism developed into a philosophical force and was then re-imported into the English-speaking world, most famously by A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).

While initially motivated to uphold reason, logic, and science, Positivism's and Analysis's internal developments led to their core commitments becoming hollowed out and their consequent collapse.

Recasting philosophy's function

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell best foreshadowed what was to come. In the final chapter of an often-read introductory book, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Russell summarized the history of philosophy as a repeating series of failures to answer its questions. Can we prove that there is an external world? No. Can we prove that there is cause and effect? No. Can we validate the objectivity of our inductive generalizations? No. Can we find an objective basis for morality? Definitely not. Russell concluded that philosophy cannot answer its questions and so came to believe that any value philosophy might have cannot lie in being able to offer truth or wisdom.²⁷

Ludwig Wittgenstein and the early Logical Positivists agreed with Russell, taking his conclusions one step further by offering an explanation for philosophy's failure: Philosophy cannot answer its questions because its questions are simply meaningless. It is not the case, they argued, that philosophy asks questions that, unfortunately, are just too difficult for us to answer—philosophy's questions themselves are not even intelligible; they are pseudo-formulations. Foreshadowing postmodernism's anti-realism, for example, Moritz Schlick wrote of the meaninglessness of prop-

²⁷ Russell 1912, 153-ff.

ositions about an external world: “Does the external world exist?” is an unintelligible question, for “both its denial and affirmation are meaningless.”²⁸ And if we cannot speak meaningfully of an external world, then ascribing cause and effect to the world is also meaningless—causality is a “superstition,” wrote Wittgenstein.²⁹

The mistake earlier philosophers had made was in thinking that philosophy was about its own unique subject matter. But that is wrong, the Logical Positivists asserted: Philosophy has no *content* such as metaphysics, ethics, theology, or aesthetics. Those are all meaningless inquiries and should be dismissed.³⁰

The meaninglessness of philosophy’s traditional questions means that we must recast philosophy’s function. Philosophy is not a *content* discipline but a *method* discipline. The function of philosophy is *analysis*, elucidation, clarification.³¹ Philosophy is not a *subject*: its only role is to be an analytical *assistant* to science.

Hence “analytic” philosophy. The new purpose of philosophy is only to analyze the perceptual, linguistic, and logical tools that science uses. Scientists *perceive*, organize their observations linguistically in *concepts* and *propositions*, and then they structure

²⁸ Schlick 1932-33, 107.

²⁹ Wittgenstein 1922, 5.1361. See also Rudolf Carnap: “In the domain of metaphysics, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless” ([1932] in Ayer 1959, 60-61).

³⁰ Even talking about the meaninglessness of philosophy’s traditional questions is meaningless. Foreshadowing Derrida’s “crossing-out” device of using a word but then crossing it out to indicate that its use is ironical, Wittgenstein closed the *Tractatus* with the following remark about the book he had just written: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)” (6.54)

³¹ See Wittgenstein 1922, 4.112; cf. 6.11 and 6.111. Following Kant: “Philosophers, whose task it is to examine concepts ...” (1781, A510/B538).

those linguistic units using *logic*. Philosophy's job, accordingly, is to figure out what perception, language, and logic are all about.

The question then is: What conclusions has twentieth-century analytic philosophy reached about perception, language, and logic?

Perception, Concepts, and Logic

By the middle of the century, the dominant conclusion about perception was that it is theory-laden. The biggest names in the philosophy of science—Otto Neurath, Karl Popper, Norwood Hanson, Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, and W. V. O. Quine—despite wide variations in their versions of analytic philosophy—all argued that our theories largely dictate what we will see.³² Putting their point in Kant's original language, our perceptual intuitions do not conform to objects but rather our intuition conforms to what our faculty of knowledge supplies from itself. This conclusion about perception is devastating for science: If our percepts are theory-laden, then perception is hardly a neutral and independent check upon our theorizing. If our conceptual structures shape our observations as much as vice versa, then we are stuck inside a subjective system with no direct access to reality.

Similarly by the middle of the century, the mainstream conclusion about concepts and the propositions of logic and mathematics was that they are conventional. Most of the Logical Positivists started by agreeing with Hume and Kant that logical and mathematical propositions are analytic or *a priori*, and necessary. On this account, *Twice two makes four*, for example, has to be true, and we can determine its truth without appeal to experience, simply by analyzing the meanings of its constituent concepts. Such a proposition contrasts with one such as *Beverly's car is white*. That *Beverly's car is white* is synthetic—neither “car” nor “white” is

³² See Neurath 1931, Hanson 1958, Feyerabend 1975 (164-168), Kuhn 1962, Quine 1969, and Popper 1972 (68 n. 31, 72, and 145).

contained in the other concept's meaning; so the connection between the two has to be established by experience; and the established connection between them is merely contingent—the car could have been painted any color.

This standard Humean/Kantian dichotomy of analytic and synthetic propositions immediately yields a very problematic implication: Logical and mathematical propositions are disconnected from experiential reality. Propositions about the world of experience such as *Beverly's car is white* are never necessarily true, and propositions of logic and mathematics such as *Twice two makes four*, being necessarily true, must not be about the world of experience. Logical and mathematical propositions, wrote Schlick, “do not deal with any facts, but only with the symbols by means of which the facts are expressed.”³³ Logic and mathematics, accordingly, tell us absolutely nothing about the experiential world of facts. As Wittgenstein put it succinctly in the *Tractatus*: “All propositions of logic say the same thing. That is, nothing.”³⁴ Logic and mathematics, then, are on their way to becoming mere games of symbolic manipulation.³⁵

Such conclusions about logic and mathematics are devastating for science: If logic and mathematics are divorced from experiential reality, then the rules of logic and mathematics hardly say anything about that reality. The implication is that logical or mathematical proofs cuts no ice in adjudicating competing claims of fact.³⁶ Analytic propositions “are entirely devoid of factual content. And it is for this reason that no experience can confute them.”³⁷ Offering logical proofs about real matters of fact is thus pointless. And,

³³ Schlick in Chisholm 1982, 156; also Ayer 1936, 79.

³⁴ Wittgenstein 1922, 5.43.

³⁵ Or as the editor of the *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, J. Michael Dunn, once put it to me in conversation: “I must say, it kind of tickles me to use the words ‘logic’ and ‘practical’ in the same sentence.”

³⁶ Ayer 1936, 84.

³⁷ Ayer 1936, 79.

conversely, it is pointless to expect any amount of factual evidence to add up to a necessary or universal conclusion.

Accepting that the propositions of logic and mathematics are not based in experiential reality and so do not tell us anything about that reality leads one to the question of where logic and mathematics come from. If they have no objective source, then their source must be subjective.

Two broad options emerged at this point within analytic philosophy. The neo-Kantian option, emphasized by the nativists and the coherence theorists, held that the basic propositions of logic and mathematics are innate in us or necessarily emerge psychologically once we start to use words. And some such neo-Kantians scandalized the purer Kantians by holding out the hope that such innate or emergent propositions reflect or represent in some way an external reality. But, critics always asked, given the theory-ladenness of perception, how would we establish such that such a connection exists? Any belief in a connection between reality and subjectively-generated logic could only be reached by a leap of faith.

It was the neo-Humean option, therefore, emphasized by pragmatists such as Quine, Nelson Goodman, and Ernest Nagel, that prevailed. On this account, logical and mathematical propositions are merely a function of how we have *decided* to use words and which combinations of words we have *decided* to privilege. Concepts are merely nominal, based on subjective human choices about how to carve up the flow of phenomenal experience.

Conceptual relativism follows directly from such nominalism: We could have decided differently what concepts to adopt; we could have and still could carve the world up differently. We could, for example, decide not to pick out one section of the color spectrum and call it "blue" and call the neighboring section "green," but rather pick an overlap area between them and,

borrowing words from Goodman for a slightly different purpose, call it either “grue” or “bleen.” That is a matter of convention.

If all concepts are nominal, then one consequence is that there is no basis for a distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions.³⁸ All propositions then become *a posteriori* and merely contingent. Logical relativism is the next consequence. Logical principles are constructs of concepts. What counts as a principle of logic, then, is not dictated by reality but is rather up to us: “the principles of logic and mathematics are true universally simply because we never allow them to be anything else.”³⁹ Logical principles become a matter of which formulations we are “willing” to accept, depending on whether or not we like the consequences of accepting any given principle.⁴⁰ Logical justification, Rorty wrote of Quine’s doctrine, “is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice.”⁴¹ But what if someone does not like the consequences of adopting a given logical principle? What if conversational or social practices change? If the rules of logic and language are conventional, what is to stop someone, for whatever reason, from adopting different conventions? Absolutely nothing. The rules of logic and grammar then can be as variable as other conventions, such as performing greeting rituals by shaking hands, hugging, or rubbing noses. No form of greeting or system of logic, then, is more objectively right than any other.

By the 1950s, these conclusions were commonplace. Language and logic were seen as conventional, internal systems—and not as objective, reality-based tools of consciousness.

³⁸ Quine 1953/1961.

³⁹ Ayer, 1936, 77. See also Schlick: “the rules of language are, in principle, arbitrary” (1936, 165).

⁴⁰ Goodman, in Copi & Gould (1963, 64). See also Nagel 1956 (82-83 and 97-98).

⁴¹ Rorty 1979, 170. See also Dewey 1920, 134-135 and 1938, 11-12.

From the collapse of Logical Positivism to Kuhn and Rorty

The next step was Thomas Kuhn's. The publication in 1962 of his landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, announced the developments of the preceding four decades of analytic philosophy and highlighted the dead end it had reached. If science's tools are perception, logic, and language, then science, one of the Enlightenment's prized children, is merely an evolving, socially subjective enterprise with no more claim to objectivity than any other belief system. The idea that science speaks of reality or truth is an illusion. There is no Truth; there are only truths, and truths change.⁴²

Consequently, by the 1960s, the pro-objectivity, pro-science spirit had collapsed in the Anglo-American tradition.

Richard Rorty, the best known of the American post-modernists, generalizes the point to antirealism. As Kant had said two centuries ago, we can say absolutely nothing about the noumena, about what is really real. Rorty's anti-realism is the exact same point:

To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or 'true' as a term which repays 'analysis.' 'The nature of

⁴² In a strong formulation in Chapter 12, Kuhn asserted the subjectivity of scientists' paradigms: "the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds" (1962, 150). And in Chapter 13 he drew the conclusion that science has nothing to do with anything called "truth": "We may, to be more precise, have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth" (1962, 170).

truth' is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect 'the nature of man' and 'the nature of God'⁴³

Summary: A vacuum for postmodernism to fill

Speaking of the post-Kuhn era in Anglo-American philosophy, historian of philosophy John Passmore has stated flatly and accurately: "The Kantian revival is so widespread as scarcely to lend itself to illustration."⁴⁴

The various analytic schools began with Kant's conclusion that metaphysical questions were unanswerable, contradictory, or meaningless nonsense to be set aside. Philosophers were then urged to retreat to conceiving of their discipline as a purely critical or analytical enterprise. As part of that enterprise, some early analytic philosophers sought universal and necessary structural features in grammar and logic. But with no external metaphysical basis for language and logic, they retreated further to the subjective and the psychological. Once there, they found that the subjective and the psychological were highly conventional and variable, and so they felt forced to conclude that language and logic not only have nothing to do with reality but are themselves conventional and variable.

Then arose the question of the status of science. Analytic philosophers had, for whatever reasons, decided that they liked science and so had picked its concepts and methods to analyze. But now they had to ask, as Paul Feyerabend urged them to ask, Why is science special? Why not analyze theology's concepts and methods? Or poetry's? Or witchcraft's?⁴⁵ Having abandoned discussion of

⁴³ Rorty 1989, 8.

⁴⁴ Passmore 1985 (133-4, note 20). See also Christopher Janaway: "One feature uniting many kinds of recent philosophy is an increasing recognition that we are working within the legacy of Kant" (1999, 3).

⁴⁵ Feyerabend 1975, 298-299.

“truth” as useless metaphysical speculation, analytic philosophers could not say that science’s concepts were truer or that science’s method was special because it got us closer to truth. The analytic philosophers of the 1950s and 1960s were only able to say that science happened to push their personal value buttons.

So we now ask the question of value: If the basis for the study of science is one’s personal value buttons’ being pushed, what is the status of personal values? On questions of value, by the middle of the century, the Anglo-American tradition had concurred with the Continental. Again, the conclusions reached by the analytic tradition were highly subjectivist and relativist. Accepting the divorce of facts from values that dated back to Hume, most philosophers concluded that expressions of value are neither objective nor subject to reason. Summarizing the state of the profession in the middle part of the century, Brian Medlin wrote that “it is now pretty generally accepted by professional philosophers that ultimate ethical principles must be arbitrary.”⁴⁶ Their arbitrariness could be rooted in sheer acts of will, or in social conventions, or, as argued by the leading Logical Positivists, subjective emotional expression.⁴⁷

Having reached these conclusions about knowledge, science, and values, the Anglo-American intellectual world was ready to take seriously Nietzsche and Heidegger.

First thesis: Postmodernism is the end result of Kantian epistemology

After this whirlwind tour of 220 years of philosophy, I can now summarize and offer my first hypothesis about the origins of postmodernism:

⁴⁶ Medlin 1957, 111.

⁴⁷ E.g., Stevenson 1937.

Postmodernism is the first ruthlessly consistent statement of the consequences of rejecting reason, those consequences being necessary given the history of epistemology since Kant.

The key ingredients of postmodernism were laid out by the philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. The developments in Continental philosophy up to Heidegger provided the positive direction and impetus that postmodernism takes; and the negative developments in Anglo-American philosophy up to the collapse of Logical Positivism left the defenders of reason and science feeling dispirited, directionless, and unable to mount any significant response to the skeptical and relativistic arguments the postmodernists used.⁴⁸

Yet much of twentieth-century philosophy had been piecemeal and unsystematic, especially in the Anglo-American tradition. Postmodernism is the first synthesis of the implications of the major trends. In postmodernism we find metaphysical antirealism, epistemological subjectivity, the placing of feeling at the root of all value issues, the consequent relativism of both knowledge and values, and the consequent devaluing or disvaluing of the scientific enterprise.

Metaphysics and epistemology are at the heart of this account of postmodernism. Despite the postmodernists' billing of themselves as anti-metaphysics and anti-epistemology, their writings focus upon those themes almost exclusively. Heidegger attacks logic and reason to make room for emotion, Foucault reduces knowledge to an expression of social power, Derrida deconstructs language and turns it into a vehicle of aesthetic play, and Rorty chronicles the failures of the realist and objectivist tradition in almost-exclusively metaphysical and epistemological terms.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche predicted the result: "As soon as Kant would begin to exert a popular influence, we should find it reflected in the form of a gnawing and crumbling skepticism and relativism" (in Kaufmann 1975, 123).

From the postmodern anti-realist metaphysics and anti-reason epistemology, the postmodern social consequences follow almost directly. Once we set aside reality and reason, what are we left with to go on? We can, as the conservatives would prefer, simply turn to our group's traditions and follow them. Or we can, as the postmodernists will prefer, turn to our feelings and follow them. If we then ask what our core feelings are, we connect with the answers from the past century's dominant theories of human nature. From Kierkegaard and Heidegger, we learn that our emotional core is a deep sense of dread and guilt. From Marx, we feel a deep sense of alienation, victimization, and rage. From Nietzsche, we discover a deep need for power. From Freud, we uncover the urgings of dark and aggressive sexuality. Rage, power, guilt, lust, and dread constitute the center of the postmodern emotional universe.

Postmodernists split over whether those core feelings are determined biologically or socially, with the social version running as the strong favorite. In either case, however, individuals are not in control of their feelings: their identities are a product of their group memberships, whether economic, sexual, or racial. Since the shaping economic, sexual, or racial experiences or developments vary from group to group, differing groups have no common experiential framework. With no objective standard by which to mediate their different perspectives and feelings, and with no appeal to reason possible, group balkanization and conflict must necessarily result.

Nasty political correctness as a tactic then makes perfect sense. Having rejected reason, we will not expect ourselves or others to behave reasonably. Having put our passions to the fore, we will act and react more crudely and range-of-the-moment. Having lost our sense of ourselves as individuals, we will seek our identities in our groups. Having little in common with different groups, we will see them as competitive enemies. Having abandoned recourse to rational and neutral standards, violent competition will seem

practical. And having abandoned peaceful conflict resolution, prudence will dictate that only the most ruthless will survive.

Postmodernist reactions to the prospects of a brutal post-modern social world then fall into three main categories, depending on whether Foucault's, Derrida's, or Rorty's variant is given primacy. Foucault, following Nietzsche more closely in having reduced knowledge to an expression of social power, urges us to play the brutal power politics game—though contrary to Nietzsche he urges that we play it on behalf of the traditionally disempowered.⁴⁹ Derrida, having followed Heidegger more closely and purified him, deconstructs language and retreats into it as a vehicle of aesthetic play, insulating himself from the fray. Rorty, having abandoned objectivity, hopes that we will seek “inter-subjective agreement” among the “members of our own tribe,”⁵⁰ and, feeling loyal to his American left-liberal roots, requests that we be nice to each other while doing so.⁵¹ The postmodern options, in short, are to plunge into the fray, or withdraw and insulate oneself from it, or try to ameliorate its excesses.

Postmodernism is thus the end result of the Counter-Enlightenment inaugurated by Kantian epistemology.

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⁴⁹ Foucault: “I am simply a Nietzschean, and I try as far as possible, on a certain number of issues, to see with the help of Nietzsche's texts” (1989, 471).

⁵⁰ Rorty 1991, 22-3, 29.

⁵¹ Rorty 1989, 197.