

Deconstructing Post-Modernism

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Over the last 20 years or so the philosophic orientation known as "postmodernism" (or "po-mo," to the cognoscenti) has become the dominant mindset in many humanities departments in American universities, especially in English departments. To the extent that professors in, say, science and engineering departments have heard of postmodernism, it seems mystifying. They see colleagues in humanities departments delivering papers filled with incomprehensible prose, making outrageous claims (such as that there is no correct interpretation of any text), and offering bizarre courses (such as the history of comic books). Stephen Hicks, a professor of philosophy at Rockford College, has produced a clearly written, concise book explaining just what postmodern philosophy is and how it arose, and he has done so in an admirable way.

Hicks begins by sketching out in broad terms what modernism is. Modernism is the worldview produced by the Enlightenment over the last four centuries. Roughly characterized, modernism involves naturalism in metaphysics, with the confidence that modern science is capable of, and is actually succeeding in, giving us an understanding of the physical universe. Modernism involves what he calls objectivism in epistemology, meaning the view that experience and reason are capable of gaining real knowledge, although modernist philosophers have hotly contested the specifics of this (with Rationalism, Empiricism, and Pragmatism being the most historically active epistemological schools). Modernism involves individualism in ethics, and a commitment to human rights, religious toleration, and democracy in political theory. Modernism also involves the acceptance of free-market economics and the technological revolution that it has spawned. In sum, modernism is the mindset that is common to the West, the laborious product of many great minds — Bacon, Locke, Descartes, Smith, Hobbes, Spinoza, Galileo, Newton, and Hume, among others. Most of us view this as a considerable leap forward from the Medieval period of supernaturalism, mysticism, excessive reliance on faith, and feudal political and economic systems.

In the last 30 years or so, however, a group of thinkers have set themselves in opposition to the whole Enlightenment project. These soi-disant postmodernists

reject the Enlightenment root and branch. Chief among the postmodern thinkers are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard and (amazingly, an American) Richard Rorty. These thinkers, together with a host of smaller fry (such as Stanley Fish, Jacques Lacan, Andreas Huyssen, Frank Lentricchia and others), have developed a large following in the humanities — especially literature, less so in philosophy — and in the social sciences. They have developed virtually no following in science, math, computer science, and engineering for reasons that will become clear below. The postmodern mindset views the whole Enlightenment project as a failure. The po-mo view is metaphysically anti-realist and anti-naturalist, holding that the physical universe is not ultimately describable in final terms. It is socially subjectivist in epistemology, holding that the "world" is what we socially construct, and each "group" (racial, gender, linguistic, ethnic, national or what have you) constructs the world according to its group identity. Postmodernists are egalitarian and collectivist in matters ethical and political. (If there are any postmodern libertarians or conservatives, I have yet to hear of them.)

Postmodernism has had a powerful impact on a number of areas of academic study. In literary theory, it has rejected the notion that literary texts have objective meanings open to better or worse interpretation, in favor of the notion that the text is simply a vehicle for the critic to exercise wordplay upon, or to deconstruct and thus expose the racial, class, or gender biases of the author. In law, postmodernists known as Critical Legal Theorists reject the notion of universally valid legal principles and objective legal reasoning, essentially viewing legal reasoning as subjective plumping for one's race, class, gender, or political preferences. In education theory, postmodernism junks the notion that education should develop a child's cognitive abilities and impart factual knowledge to enable her to function as a productive member of our free-market democracy. Instead, the postmodernist believes education should mold a student's racial, class, and gender identity. Postmodernists try to focus on the achievements of women, non-whites, and the poor, exposing the history of American democracy as a history of oppression, and denying the existence of any objective scientific method. For this reason, natural scientists and engineers find postmodernism silly — try convincing engineers who have successfully sent a robotic probe to the surface of Mars that objectively true scientific laws don't exist. Also, most modern philosophers, who since Descartes have concentrated on epistemology, have tended to view natural science as the most successful knowledge-generating human enterprise, and thus are not inclined to dismiss it lightly.

In short, postmodernism is relativism run riot, skepticism on stilts. In terms of the culture wars, it informs the arguments of those who think that American

society is inferior to others and on the decline, that there are no "Great Books" of a higher order of merit than others, that science and technology are socially constructed and are not making genuine progress, and that modern free-market economics has lowered living standards. As Hicks notes, there is a contradictory tone to all this — all cultures are equal, but ours stinks; all truth is relative, except the unquestionable po-mo truth; no race, class or gender is superior, but middle class white males are clearly inferior; and no books are superior, except, of course, those by third-world authors. Where does this farrago of resentment come from?

Hicks rightly views postmodernist philosophy as the most recent manifestation of the reaction against the Enlightenment, what we might call the Counter-Enlightenment. The Counter-Enlightenment in Hicks' view goes back at least to the work of Kant and Rousseau in the 18th century. The epistemological and metaphysical side of the Counter-Enlightenment Hicks traces back to Kant. Kant, Hicks claims, should not be considered an Enlightenment advocate of reason, for he held that we can know only the phenomenal realm, i.e., the realm of what we directly experience via the senses, while the noumenal realm — the "world-in-itself" — is beyond our knowledge. The mind has built-in organizing features (causality, temporality, and so on) which it imposes upon the raw input of the senses to construct the world of experience. Kant begot Hegel, who sought to fuse the phenomenal and the noumenal realms — viewing reality as being ultimately all mental or spiritual (metaphysical idealism). Hegel's ideas certainly informed Marx's philosophy, contributing to the rise of collectivism. But Kant also begot the strain of irrationalist philosophers, most importantly Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. This strand of thought attempts to get around the Kantian problem of reason's inability to apprehend the noumenal world directly by thinking that intuition or other non-rational approaches (leaps of faith or super-human acts of will) will bridge the gap.

Hicks focuses upon two strands of 20th century metaphysics and epistemology as direct precursors of postmodernism. He discusses Heidegger in some detail, appropriately, given that Derrida and Foucault describe themselves as followers of Heidegger. Heidegger grounded his philosophy in phenomenology, the close examination of the given field of immediate experience. He came to the view that logic and reason are impotent in answering ultimate metaphysical questions, leaving dark emotions such as boredom, guilt, and dread as the only tools, and reaching a metaphysical nihilism in which pure Being and pure Nothing are one and the same. Heidegger thus provides the postmodernists with some of their core beliefs: that reason and logic are subjective and metaphysically sterile; that words and concepts are obstacles to be destroyed or unmasked; that feelings

are a more reliable tool than logic and scientific method; and that the Western philosophic tradition (based upon the law of non-contradiction and the subject-object distinction) is something that needs to be overcome. As Hicks notes:

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. (p. 67)

The question arises, then, how can a philosophic trend so rooted (or mired) in the Continental tradition of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger come to be so attractive to the American academy — indeed, apparently now more the stronghold of postmodernism than Europe, its birthplace — given the Anglo-American tradition of Enlightenment empiricism? Hicks rightly puts the focus on the collapse of the logical empiricist project. Hicks briefly surveys the rise of logical empiricism from its early sources in the advances in modern logic by Frege and Russell, and the work of the Vienna Circle, to its demise at the hands of Hanson, Feyerabend, Quine, and Kuhn. The logical positivists had attempted to rigorously analyze scientific method and the structure of knowledge using the tools provided by modern symbolic logic, but their program was demolished in the 1950s and 1960s. This left a vacuum which attracted skepticism. That vacuum, together with the work of Kuhn and Quine — which gave perspectivalism a rebirth in an analytic context — provided the soil for anti-Enlightenment epistemology to flourish.

Turning from metaphysics and epistemology to politics, Hicks notes that postmodernists aren't just skeptics who vary in their political beliefs. No, postmodernists are all committed leftists. The fact that postmodernists are uniformly drawn to collectivism is even more puzzling, given that socialists have traditionally, à la Marx, argued that socialism is scientific, while postmodernists view science with contempt, and worship subjectivity and irrationality. Hicks explains this in detail over several chapters by exploring an external factor, namely, the collapse of socialism in theory and practice. Postmodernism is a fusion between Leftist politics and skepticism. But the dream of socialism died in the latter half of the 20th century. Socialism was tried in a variety of forms, from Leninism to National Socialism to Maoism and so on, with the clear result that, far from being superior to capitalism, it is completely inferior. Socialism promised to free workers from capitalist bondage, but it chained them to the means of production they purportedly owned. It promised to outproduce capitalism, but the

prosperity achieved by capitalist economies totally eclipsed the poverty wrought by socialism. Socialism promised to usher in an era of peace and humane values, but it delivered decades of police states and gulags. Free-market democracy, i.e., classical liberalism, won decisively in the developed world, and is rapidly transforming the rest of the planet as well.

The failure of socialism, both empirically and theoretically (once Mises demolished socialist theory with his publication of "Socialism" in 1920), brought about a crisis of faith among socialists, and postmodernism is their response. Hicks puts it well: "Postmodernism is born of the marriage of Left politics and skeptical epistemology. As socialist political thought was reaching a crisis in the 1950s, academic epistemology had, in Europe, come to take seriously Nietzsche and Heidegger and, in the Anglo-American world, it had seen the decline of Logical Positivism into Quine and Kuhn. The dominance of subjectivist and relativist epistemologies in academic philosophy thus provided the academic Left with a new tactic. Confronted by harsh evidence and ruthless logic, the far Left had a reply: That is only logic and evidence; logic and evidence are subjective; you cannot really prove anything; feelings are deeper than logic; and our feelings say socialism. . . . Postmodernism is a response to the crisis in faith of the academic far Left. Its epistemology justifies the leap of faith necessary to continue believing in socialism, and the same epistemology justifies using language not as a vehicle for seeking truth but as a rhetorical weapon in the continuing battle against capitalism." (90)

I have a few slight quibbles with Hicks' book. First, he has a tendency to blur the distinction between a skeptic, accurately so called, and a failed anti-skeptic. The difference is important in historical exegesis. Descartes tried mightily to devise a theory of knowledge that would do justice to the rapidly rising scientific revolution of his time — a revolution to which he himself was a tremendous contributor. But his program — pure Rationalism, at least as it's coquettishly flaunted in the "Meditations" — clearly failed. Locke, following Bacon and Hobbes, tried to devise an Empiricist epistemology that would do justice to the scientific revolution — an epistemology that ultimately failed to refute skepticism, as Hume so deftly demonstrated. Locke and Descartes failed to refute the skeptic — but not for lack of sincere effort. It is with this understanding that we need to look at Kant. Kant was no anti-objectivist crypto-skeptic. He truly was challenged by Hume's devastating skepticism (which roused him from his dogmatic slumbers, as he put it). His epistemology was a brilliant attempt to answer Humean skepticism. That later philosophers, most notoriously Nietzsche,

used it to devise a perspectivalist skepticism shouldn't lead one to think that Kant would have been at all sympathetic to it.

Second, Hicks might have looked a bit more at the pragmatic tradition. This epistemology reached its apogee in the work of C. S. Peirce, who called himself a pragmatist to distinguish his thought from people such as James and Dewey.

Pragmatism is a very novel and reasonable stab at combating skepticism, with a more realistic approach to scientific enterprise. Unlike Rationalism, Empiricism, and even Kantian Perspectivalism, Peirce (a prolific polymath who actually did scientific research) gave up the idea of founding knowledge on certainty. Instead, he noted that knowledge, while real, is inherently fallible. Pragmatism of Peirce's sort is absolutely unsympathetic to the po-mo pragmatism of Rorty.

Third, Hicks leaves things hanging, epistemologically speaking. Yeah, okay, the cheap, trendy collectivist skepticism of postmodernism is silly, in the face of the continuing global advance of scientific knowledge, new technology, free-market economics, and political democracy. But does anyone yet have an adequate account of the nature of knowledge and scientific method that Hicks can recommend?

But I ought not wax churlish. Hicks has written a lucid and readable book explaining an influential, albeit puzzling, intellectual phenomenon. He has a balanced internalist and externalist approach, discussing the narrow evolution of ideas within philosophy and the wider influence of political and economic trends on the evolution of those ideas. His book deserves a wide audience.

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