Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilism?

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We are told that the present philosophical and theological condition is that of the "postmodern." Just as the *post*-script of a book is inseparable from the script against which it reacts and follows, *post*-modernism is an outlook that only becomes coherent once that which it succeeds and comments on—"modernity"—is understood. I will attempt now to provide some introductory remarks about what is meant by the term "modernity," what it means to be *post*modern, and how contemporary philosophers and theologians are dealing with the postmodern condition in two different ways.

In philosophy, "Modernity" describes "the desire for an all-encompassing mastery of reality by rational and/or scientific means."[1] Essentially, this means acquiring some sort of grand philosophical system that is capable of identifying and explaining all of reality with certainty, leaving no remainder. The modern attempts to master reality often begin with a "theory of the subject," like that of René Descartes's idea of the indubitable *cogito*, which constitutes the starting point of philosophical investigation, that is, the foundation upon which all knowledge must be built.[2]

With all the modern attempts to secure complete and objective knowledge comes the idea, and the various manifestations, of the "autonomy of Reason." This is tied to what we might call the "creed of modernity": If only Human Reason could be freed from (and thus elevated above) all subjectivity, all context, all contingent circumstance, then a perfect grasp on reality can be guaranteed. This obsession with the idea that reality can be mastered by an autonomous Human Reason can still be seen within certain contemporary spheres of analytic philosophy and theoretical science, where scholars continue their traditions' search for a "Theory of Everything," which would be constituted by a series of mathematical equations to which all phenomena are reducible.

In short, modernity is inextricably linked to the idea of foundationalism: that by setting a sturdy foundation of knowledge, an all-encompassing skyscraper of complete knowledge can be built on top, until nothing else is left, until no external remainder is available to challenge the resulting monument's absolute gaze on unabridged reality.[3] So, we can sense a tendency within these introductory remarks about modernity to strive for universalized knowledge, to free oneself from the contamination of subjectivity by moving into the sterile zone of objective knowledge.

As alluded to, postmodernism is a negative and parasitic term, in that it follows and defines itself against modernity. One might correctly suspect, from these initial ideas, that this entails a perspective that is suspicious of the goals of modernity—a suspicion with an all-encompassing and perfect perspective on reality, a suspicion with the prospect of reducing everything that is 'real' to mathematical equations or logical arguments, a suspicion with the idea that Reason and Truth can ever be separated from subjective context and thus occupy a zone of total objective awareness.

This leads one to question why it is that the project of modernity has become something living in the shadows of our current, postmodern condition. Why have the once beautifully motivating goals of modernity—mastery of nature, certain truth, complete knowledge—become viewed as insidious monsters that haunt and undermine all attempts of fulfillment?

Freud's psychological notion of repression serves as a useful illustrative tool to answer this question. In its most basic form, we find that wherever the desire to obtain an all-inclusive system (that is, an absolute understanding of reality) sprouts up, always accompanying this desire is a repressed "other" that remains external to the system and yet always returns to undermine it.[4] In this same line of thought, we might continue by claiming that modernity is the attempt to fully repress its "other," and postmodernism is "the return of the "other" that modernity sought to repress."[5] Thus, we might better characterize postmodernism not as an autonomous systematic philosophy or theology that is engaged in the act of 'disproving' its modern counterpart, but rather as the ongoing process of exposing the repressed "other(s)" that the various forms of modernity have tried, and continue to try, to conceal.

For each project of modernity, for each attempt to draw an all-encompassing circle around total reality, something external always remains. For a quick and crude example, if we base our systematic philosophy upon an axiom like "Only things that are physical in nature are real," then we retrospectively find ourselves struggling to accommodate this axiom or its justification within our proposed category of reality. Furthermore, by asking a question such as "what legitimizes the principle that legitimizes everything else?" we again find that the system deconstructs itself, as we are always relying upon a legitimizing principle that is merely posited instead of proven. In other words, we find that no so-called "all-encompassing" system can contain, within the system's logic, the conditions for the system's own legitimization.

Thus, we have reached the paradox of modernity: In order to propose an all-encompassing theory of reality, we always rely upon external validation for the theory, that is, some standard for justification that is not reducible to, emergent from, or identical to the theory itself.[6] This paradox has led postmoderns to abandon the search for an objective foundation or a single truth upon which everything else can be placed. Instead of trying to start at the primordial beginning, postmodern thinkers have come to recognize that we are always already in the middle of a story, a narrative. Thus, as rhetoric comes to replace dialectic, the convention of proposing and disproving modern grand systems and theories has given way to the postmodern idea of the narrative.

The difference between "narrative" and "meta-narrative" is fundamental to the understanding of postmodernism. If we consider any work of fiction, a favorite novel or movie, we recognize that the fictional story does not exist autonomously but is always contained within a larger story, namely, within the ongoing narratives of those reading the novel or watching the movie. The various meanings, morals, and truths of the story cease to make coherent sense unless they are placed within a wider narrative, a "meta-narrative," that is able to "position" the story's narrative alongside other such narratives and thus provide a contextual perspective from

which interpretation can occur and meaning can be extracted.[7] To be sure, "narrative" and "meta-narrative" are relative terms, and so a "meta-narrative" is simply the wider narrative that contains within it other narratives and perhaps other meta-narratives.

Applying this to philosophy and theology, we see that each of our meta-narratives "positions" (and thus subsumes) all the other narratives we encounter in our lives. To understand or explain a social, political, or theological fact about the world is simply to narrate it, to place it within a story, outside of which the plot and subjects lose their meaning. To relate this story to a wider understanding of the world is to entertain a meta-narrative.

The difference between the postmodern meta-narrative and the modern system is that the modern system sees itself as a true theory capable of providing certain knowledge about objective reality, whereas the postmodern meta-narrative is understood, quite literally, as a work of fiction, in the sense that it exists without a self-legitimating foundation and, importantly, is therefore exempt from proof or refutation.[8] When one chooses one narrative over another, say between theism and atheism, the choice is not reached by 'proving' that atheism or theism is the 'correct' narrative. Instead, one chooses a narrative over another narrative because it is more persuasive, because it tells a more beautiful story. For postmoderns, the story of "reality" is just that—a *story*—and thus reality is 'fictioned' into existence by the meta-narrative.

In philosophy and theology, two main attitudes have emerged within this postmodern sphere. The first is constituted by some version of nihilism, while the second has come to be known as "radical orthodoxy." Both of these projects would approve of the fact that postmodernism has come to expose all of the repressed "others" that modernity has tried to conceal, both reject the modern notion of foundationalism, and both see the narrative as the basic mode of knowledge. Where they differ is in their respective methods of moving forward.

To be a postmodern nihilist, in general, is to hold that reality is to be understood as "radically linguistic, with the result that all meaning gets its sense within language, there being no access to any extralinguistic reality."[9] Thus, nihilists see fictional narration as inescapable. Since one must appeal to some sort of external source of validation or justification in order to prioritize one narrative over another, the nihilists see all narratives as equally unfounded and therefore fictional. The idea of a grand meta-narrative that "positions" and organizes all other narratives is understood to be just as problematic and fictional as a single narrative, and so the nihilists denounce the priority of any one meta-narrative over any other, including the narratives offered by theology. Thus, the postmodern nihilist paradoxically advances his own meta-narrative that declares the end of all meta-narratives. Postmodern nihilists have been criticized for appearing to dwell in this paradox of denying meta-narratives by asserting a meta-narrative. This is precisely the critique of postmodern nihilism that has been issued by the second response to postmodernism, which is known as radical orthodoxy.

For radical orthodoxy, postmodernism is welcomed, not because it declares the end of all meta-narratives, but because it declares the end of the modern meta-narrative of a foundational "autonomous Reason," and thus opens the door for

something else. This "something else" is a specifically theological meta-narrative that is presented to us as a completely unfounded and radical alternative to the failures of modernity, and it is the alternative that John Milbank, founder of the radical orthodoxy movement, sees as the best one for us to live by. It is crucial to note that Milbank and the other proponents of radical orthodoxy are not claiming to re-instate a perfect foundation of knowledge, nor are they claiming that radical orthodoxy harbors an "autonomous Reason" that can be wielded against nihilism. The only tool at their disposal is their ability to tell their version of the Christian Revolution (which, it must be noted, is far different from the modern understanding of Christianity), hold it up against the stories told by the nihilists, and let the persuasiveness of their theological meta-narrative speak for itself.

So, our postmodern condition is one where theory has been replaced with narrative, where objective reality has been replaced by subjective fiction, and where the act of 'disproving' has given way to the art of 'out-narrating.' I have begun to introduce two reactions to our postmodern condition, one nihilistic and the other theological, but far more needs to be said on both fronts. For myself, this is all very much a work in progress, and, as such, we will have to wait until the next chapter to find out what happens next.

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[1] Hyman, Gavin. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. 11.

[2] Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[3] Gillespie, Michael Allen. "Descartes and the Deceiver God." In *Nihilism before Nietzsche*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

[4] Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* Vol. 2. London: Hogarth Press, 1955. 10.

[5] Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology.* 12.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 1.

[8] Lyotard, Jean-François, and Geoffrey Bennington. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. 27.

[9] Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology.* 3.

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