Blind spots: Christianity and postmodern philosophy

by Merold Westphal in the June 14, 2003 issue

Postmodernism means different things in different contexts. In philosophy the term refers to certain currents in French philosophy since the 1960s, including especially thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. They have often been portrayed by critics as an academic axis of evil—corrupters of youth who propound a relativistic and cynical nihilism according to which "anything goes."

The Old Guard in ancient Athens had a hard time distinguishing Socrates from the sophists. Both Socrates and the sophists challenged the complacent beliefs of the established order. Perhaps our situation is similar.

Are postmodern philosophers the latest sophists, willing to blow rhetorical smoke in people's eyes in the service of any private interest able to buy their services? (If this is their critics' real concern, they might want to target Madison Avenue and the public relations industry, whose influence vastly exceeds that of French philosophy.) Or are they more nearly a modern set of Socratic thinkers, offering a critique of both sophistical cynicism and establishment absolutism?

Perhaps the answer depends on how deeply one is wed to those features of modernity opposition to which gives postmodernism its name. One of the most important assumptions of philosophical modernity, sometimes called "the Enlightenment project," is the autonomy of the human knower: I am a law unto myself in the sense that I am equipped to apprehend universally valid truth once I have freed myself from the authority of any dominant texts or traditions.

In other words, once I no longer view the world from a subjective perspective (having seen that it is not necessary to be guided by a particular text or tradition), I can be completely objective. For modernity, autonomy and objectivity are two sides of the same coin.

Perspectival knowledge is knowledge learned from a particular perspective—and each perspective has its blind spots. I can see the front of the fridge only by putting

myself where I cannot see the back. The modern project is to free oneself from all contingent and particular perspectives (especially in matters of metaphysics and morals). By doing that, I free myself from the accompanying blind spots and attain true knowledge.

Where no perspectival distortion or blind spots are at work, I can 1) employ clear and distinct ideas whose meaning is unambiguous and 2) see the big picture with all the parts in their proper relation to the whole. Absent ambiguity and incomplete vision, I can grasp reality just as it is.

Postmodernism presents a critique of these claims to knowledge. Such a critique is not unique to postmodernism. In different ways Charles Peirce and John Dewey, Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Thomas Kuhn have attacked philosophy's claims to have achieved autonomy, transparency and certainty.

So it might be asked, what is all the fuss about? Why have postmodern philosophers aroused such attention and evoked such hostility? It is not easy to say for sure, but part of the reason is that they have not been bashful about their atheism, and they have explicitly said that their critiques shake the foundations of Western civilization.

Though the postmodern philosophers are mainly atheists, or as Derrida puts it, "rightly pass" for atheists, their arguments actually show not that God does not exist, but that we are not God, either individually or collectively. Objective knowledge of reality—seeing reality through, as it were, "God's eyes"—is not possible.

One manifestation of this understanding among postmodern philosophers is their focus on the "death of the author." According to one familiar modern theory of interpreting a text, the intention of the author is or decisively determines the meaning of a text. To know what a text means is to know what the author meant. Derrida, Foucault and others reject this interpretation of interpretation.

Under the traditional (modern) approach, the author is related to his text the way God is related to the world. The created reality, whether text or universe, contains all and only what the creator consciously intended. Authorial sovereignty is absolute. If there is any indeterminacy, whether through ambiguity in the text or freedom in the universe, it is only because the creator deliberately intended it to be there. The author has an absolute knowledge of the text, and the reader attains similar

knowledge by learning to see the text through the author's eyes.

But, say the postmodernists, the human author has no such sovereign power over a text. Prior to the author's intentions are the psychological, historical, cultural and linguistic forces that shape those intentions or which sneak into the text behind his or her back, in either case shaping the text in ways which the author is not aware of and does not intend.

Whatever the author's intentions, says the postmodernists, readers will discover unintended dimensions of meaning in a text over whose production the author did not have godlike control. These meanings come to light when the text is placed in a different context from that of the author and its original audience. Therefore, postmodern thinkers believe that the meaning of texts, and especially classic and scriptural texts, is never exhausted by interpretation. We are never finished reading Homer or Hosea, Plato or Paul. (This is not to say that the meaning of the text is entirely unrelated to the intention of the author, or that all interpretations are equally valid.)

This view would be less disconcerting than it is if we could assume that the text, while exceeding the intent of the author, were in itself an entirely coherent whole. But postmodernism claims it is not. Every text speaks with multiple voices, some of which, but not all, are the author's. There will be ambiguities, ambivalences, even antionmies or outright contradictions. The various vectors of a text will not have a single point, either at a finite or infinite distance, at which they all meet. This means that once we refrain from projecting total coherence onto a text, close readings (especially of "serious" texts) will identify precisely those fissures and fractures that betray the situation of the text and its human author. Reading by way of this "deconstructive" approach is the opposite of projecting our preferences onto a text—a frequent and careless charge made against deconstruction. Deconstructive readings require all the rigor of close reading. Deconstruction, then, is not a method imposed on the text but a strategy for opening oneself to the many and even contradictory meanings of a text.

The death-of-the-author theme has a broader significance. It stands as a kind of parable or allegory for a larger issue in postmodernism—how the knower stands in relation to the world. The author signifies the human knower and the text stands for the world. The old idea of the book of nature takes on a new significance here, since on this model, even if the world is created by God and this "text" has a divine author, the human interpreter will always occupy a finite location and cannot gain

absolute knowledge by viewing creation from God's luxury box.

Moreover, the world of our social practices, both theoretical and practical, becomes a text to be read deconstructively. We can sort out the different and divergent factors that have gone into its construction by authors who have not fully known what they were doing. And once again, our interpretations (plural) will be from contingent and particular perspectives.

In this light, the sciences, including the natural sciences, can no longer have the absolute authority that modernity claimed for them. Scientific knowledge used to be Exhibit A for modernity's claims about knowledge. But if all finite knowing is perspectival knowing, then even studies in physics are more like interpreting a text than appeared to be the case.

The natural sciences may turn out to be doubly perspectival. First, scientific work involves paradigms, rooted in fundamental presuppositions about the natural world. These paradigms and presuppositions can change—that is what constitutes a scientific revolution—and this history of change reveals that they themselves represent contingent and particular points of view.

Second, the very project of interpreting the world in quantifiable, experimental modes turns out to be but one possible perspective on the world. The postmodern philosophers are not much interested in the philosophy of the natural sciences, but an analysis of this sort, which has been made by others, is a clear implication and extension of their views.

In other words, the death of the author is a special case of the more general death of the subject—not every possible subject, but that autonomous subject for whom the world is transparent and whose knowledge is final and certain.

The collection of essays titled *Who Comes After the Subject*?—by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy—nicely poses the pressing postmodern question: What kind of knowing subject might survive the critique of modernity's proud pretensions? Every postmodern answer to this question emphasizes the finitude of the human knower. We are not God.

But then, coming from a different quarter, doesn't the Christian theologian, whether the preacher in the pulpit or the professor in the seminary, want to say the same thing? Atheistic postmodernism says that we are not God because there is no God. Christian thought says we are not God because only God is God. In spite of a deep

disagreement about God, there is a deep agreement between Christians and postmodern thinkers that we are not God and should not claim divine status for our knowledge.

It is possible for Christians to read these aspects of postmodern philosophy as unintended commentary on the doctrine of creation and the gulf it posits between God as Creator and ourselves as creatures. For the Christian, creation signifies both the possibility of human knowledge and its limits. Postmodernism is one of the philosophies that reminds us of the latter.

Perhaps no catchphrase about philosophical postmodernism is more familiar than Lyotard's oft-cited definition of the postmodern condition as one of "incredulity toward metanarratives." In turning to this theme, I make a double shift. First, the subject whose self-sufficiency is to be challenged is now the we rather than the I. Second, the theological correlate will be human sinfulness rather than human finitude. In other words, postmodernism's unintended commentary is on the doctrine of the fall.

What Lyotard calls metanarratives used to be called philosophies of history. They are grand stories about the movement of history toward its culmination. It is often assumed that Lyotard's critique is a direct repudiation of biblical Christianity. The story that stretches from Eden to the New Jerusalem is undeniably a grand narrative. But Lyotard's target is not salvation history but rather the stories told by such Enlightenment thinkers as Descartes, Locke, Adam Smith and, above all, Hegel and Marx.

Lyotard is no friend of biblical faith, but upon close examination his critique of metanarrative just might be. For quite apart from being ancient instead of modern, the biblical narrative differs in three essential ways from modernity's metanarratives.

First, "meta" suggests a change of level. A metalanguage is a second-order discourse, a language about another language. Modernity's metanarratives, on Lyotard's account, are about modernity's scientific and political discourses. But the biblical meganarrative is a first-order discourse. Its recital in homily and liturgy (both in the biblical text and in subsequent worship) is kerygma and not apologetics.

Second, when we ask about the relation between modernity's metanarratives and the discourses to which they relate, Lyotard's answer can be given in a word:

legitimation.

Modernity’s discourses and the practices in which they are embedded have risen from the ashes of premodern society, but are not self-justifying. They stand in need of stories that will justify them, and modernity hires philosophers to tell such stories, grand narratives that present the discourse or practice in question as the culmination of the historical process.

By contrast, the biblical meganarrative is more nearly a delegitimation discourse. It does not tell us, as a society, as a culture or even as a church, that our practices constitute the kingdom of God, the goal and culmination of history. It calls us to make our first citizenship in the City of God and only a second and subordinate citizenship in the human city. And instead of telling us that we are living in the New Jerusalem, it tells us that our practices and the discourses that accompany them stand under a judgment whose norm is that kingdom and that city.

The obvious and important fact that the biblical story is about forgiveness as well as judgment, grace as well as law, does not change it into a legitimation narrative. As individuals we may be justified and reconciled while our shared practices, both secular and religious, stand under judgment.

This is not to deny that the biblical story can be and has been used to legitimize “us” and our practices. It is only to acknowledge that when this happens, Christianity deserves both the modern, Marxian dismissal as ideological self-deception and the postmodern incredulity to which Lyotard refers.

A futher difference between the metanarratives criticized by postmodernism and the biblical narrative is that modernity’s metanarratives are told by philosophers, whereas the biblical meganarrative is told by prophets and apostles. Kierkegaard’s splendid essay “The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle” is relevant here. The one appeals to reason as the insights of the best and the brightest among us. The other appeals to revelation as the voice of authority which comes to us from beyond ourselves. There is no guarantee that this voice will tell us what we want to hear.

Reason, of course, is not uncritical, and both modernity and postmodernity have the habit of defining reason as critique. But reason has the habit of directing its critique at “them” rather than at “us,” or of minimizing the speck in “our” eyes by fulminating about the log in “their” eyes. Biblical revelation gives no such moral

holidays to the covenant people of God.

Now we can see how Lyotard's account can be read as an unintended commentary on the doctrine, or better, the reality of the fall. His analysis exposes the way modernity's metanarratives are "our" attempts at self-justification by means of criteria that arise out of the very practices to be legitimized. If "God" appears at all in process, it is an idol, created in our own image and reduced to the function of justifying "us," agreeing with us that our practices indeed constitute the kingdom. The biblical categories of sin and grace are replaced by such notions as ignorance, immaturity and superstition on the one hand, reason and "mankind come of age" on the other. Modernity's philosophers are very much like those the Bible calls false prophets. In the pursuit of human freedom they silence the voice of any God free enough to call us seriously into question.

Needless to say, this is not the direction in which Lyotard takes his critique. My point is simply that there is nothing in it to prohibit Christians from incorporating it into our teaching about the nature of human sin.

Finally, I want to return to the objection that postmodernism asserts relativism and undermines goodness and truth, ethics and evangelism, since it reduces all beliefs about how we should live and what we should believe to the limited opinions of those who happen to occupy a particular perspective. In postmodernism, it is alleged, we can have no answer to those who reply, "That's just your opinion," or "Different strokes for different folks."

The fact is that our beliefs are relative, and visibly so, to a variety of parameters: race, class, gender, age, education, culture, geographical and historical location, and so forth. One need only think of the history of Christian thought. Even if one quite arbitrarily restricts one's view to the Western church and excludes both the Eastern church and the global church of today, it is easy enough to recognize the enormous diversity of interpretations of Christian belief and practice and to see how these exist relative to the historical and cultural contexts in which they arose and flourished. As finite beings we simply are relative, and as fallen we only increase this relativity through the distortions that work their way into our beliefs and into the practices in which our beliefs are embedded. Our beliefs and practices are all too relative to sinful desires and habits.

We always have the option, by no means new, of saying that everyone else's beliefs and practices are relative to contingent and particular perspectives while we alone

have broken through to pure insight. The anathemas and the violence that legitimize themselves in this way are less the mark of Christian love than of human arrogance, and they no doubt deserve both the incredulity and the hostility they evoke.

But suppose we are not tempted to make this quintessentially modern move. Must we then throw in the towel to “anything goes”?

Let’s note that none of the biblical forms of instruction about how we should live seeks to ground itself in the pure insight of the autonomous subject, whether in its I-mode or its We-mode. The voice that speaks in the Pentateuch and the prophets, the wisdom literature, the Gospels and the epistles is a voice not our own, not the voice of human genius. “This is the Word of the Lord,” we say, “Thanks be to God.” Nor does this voice try to validate itself by showing itself to be in conformity with the “reason” of the time, the worldly wisdom of the surrounding Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman cultures.

It is helpful here to introduce the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Though not one of the usual suspects of postmodernism, his critique of the Enlightenment project is every bit as powerful as Derrida’s. Levinas’s central claim can be stated by paraphrasing Kant: I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for responsibility.

The kind of knowing with which philosophy has been for the most part preoccupied places the autonomous subject, whether individual or collective, at the center. Everything else is relative to this center. According to Levinas, this kind of knowing reduces the other to the same, makes the other a means to the goals of the same, namely the subject. Everything that would be other loses its differentness, for it is classified according to the subject’s concepts and interpreted within the subject’s horizons of expectation.

In this kind of knowing, the knower is the master. Knowing is like eating; by digesting what is other the knower assimilates it to itself. The subject is like a hungry stomach—without ears. Everything is grist for its mill, and nothing calls it into question.

As long as such knowing is taken to be the highest human task, says Levinas, ethics is essentially reduced to social conformity. The ethical relation arises when those who have ears to hear hear the voice of the other—the widow, the orphan and the stranger (Levinas draws here on his biblical roots without appealing to biblical

authority)—a voice that is summoning them, calling them into question, even accusing them. Far from being at the center and in charge, I now find myself in the dock.

Levinas insists that the only place where we encounter God is in the face of the neighbor. Christian thought cannot accept that view, but the relevant point is clear: it is only when modernity's kind of knowing is demoted to secondary status that responsibility before God and neighbor becomes possible.

But, it will be asked, what about evangelism? If there isn't something absolute about the gospel, how can we say that Jesus is "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) or that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19)? Won't Christianity be reduced in postmodernism to a tribal religion of those who happen to belong to a particular culture?

St. Paul obviously did not think so. And whereas the Enlightenment project seeks to reduce all faith to sight, he insists that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). We see, to be sure, but "in a mirror, dimly" or "in a riddle" (1 Cor. 13:12). We have a treasure, indeed the absolute treasure, one worth worth living and dying for, but we have it "in clay jars" (2 Cor. 4:7) so that it will be clear that we are not the authors of this truth nor the source of its power. That is why the gospel is "foolishness" to the "wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:18-25). For Paul the bold and universal proclamation of the gospel does not require absolute knowledge as its legitimizing backup. That task can be left to the Holy Spirit.

There are two errors to be avoided here. The "conservative" error assumes that proclamation presupposes possession of the kind of knowledge that postmodern (and other) critiques undermine. This approach insists, against the evidence, that it has such knowledge. The "liberal" error assumes that postmodern (and other) critiques have made their case against absolute knowledge and concludes that since the church and its theologies are relative, the gospel is merely a cultural artifact—Christianity is but one of the world's many culturally relative religions.

Paul, it seems to me, was a postmodernist who rejected these alternatives as a false dilemma.

Douglas Groothuis's response
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