

The Postmodernist Movement and Philosophical Aspects

Dr.N.Mary Suvarna Latha

Lecturer in English
B.S.S.B.Degree College
Tadikonda 522236

Abstract

Postmodernism appears to have stripped the major narratives of history of their authority to dictate what individuals should value or believe in. This has led to a value vacuum that people fill by exploring various options in today's value marketplace, as well as by adopting a post-post-foundation list perspective, where their value systems subtly influence their thoughts without being overtly acknowledged. We also highlight what we believe are significant consequences of the transition from using overarching narrative value systems to the more individualistic value systems of contemporary society, particularly regarding religious institutions, especially the church as a social entity, and education as a form of interpersonal connection.

Key words: *Postmodernism, Postmodern relativism, Post-foundationalism, Grand narratives, Value-gap.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In philosophy and the arts, post-modernism is a broad movement that emerged in the late 20th century. It is characterized, in general, by an openness to authority and meaning from unexpected sources as well as a readiness to shamelessly steal from earlier traditions or movements. Although some contend that it represents an entirely new paradigm in intellectual thought, it is frequently negatively defined as a response or opposition to the equally ill-defined Modernism. A reactionary movement against the Modernist movement's perceived blandness and hostility, as well as against the pretenses of high Modernism, with its pursuit of an ideal perfection, harmony of form and function, and rejection of frivolous ornamentation, gave rise to the term "Post-Modernism" (literally "after Modernism") in architecture. It originated for any pluralistic or reactionary style that is frequently more decorative than Modernism and that is not hesitant to borrow from earlier artistic movements, frequently in a lighthearted or humorous way, in the fields of art, music, and literature (and, by extension, philosophy). Although it frequently embodies high complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity, and interconnectedness or inter-referentiality, it typically lacks a clear core hierarchy or organizing principle and is characterized by a resurgence of classic elements and approaches.

While some view Post-Modernism as a complete replacement for Modernism and a reaction against it, others regard it as only another stage in the ongoing development of Modernism. In a broader sense, the emergence of anti-establishment groups in the 1960s might be seen as the catalyst for post-modernism. Some observers have even suggested that we are now entering the Post-Post-Modern era due to the widespread availability of the Internet, mobile phones, interactive television, etc., and the instantaneous, direct, shallow, and frequently superficial participation in culture they enable.

Particularly in the field of philosophy, Post-Modernism was greatly impacted by continental philosophical traditions such as Existentialism, Structuralism, and Phenomenology. It is often dubious of many of the principles and values of Analytic Philosophy. Since the "play" of the discourse itself is the ultimate source of authority, it is typically seen as being receptive to meaning and authority from unexpected sources. It can be regarded as a "pick-and-mix" strategy, in which fundamental issues can be approached from a variety of theoretical angles.

Post-Modernism is a broad and non-specific movement (if it can be described as a movement at all), and movements like Deconstructionism and Post-Structuralism (among others) can both be considered PostModernist. Post-Modernists often defend themselves from criticisms of philosophical incompetence and excessive informality by claiming that they take a "wider" view of what philosophy is, that their use of academic jargon is necessary to communicate their ideas, and that their critics simply do not understand their work.

Because at its functional level all language is a system of differences, says Derrida, all language, even when spoken, is writing, and this truth is suppressed when meaning is taken as an origin, present and complete unto itself. Texts that take meaning or being as their theme are therefore particularly susceptible to deconstruction, as are all other texts insofar as they are conjoined with these. For Derrida, written marks or signifiers do not arrange themselves within natural limits, but form chains of signification that radiate in all

directions. As Derrida famously remarks, “there is no outside-text” (Derrida 1974 [1967], 158), that is, the text includes the difference between any “inside” or “outside.” As he explains in a letter to Gerald Graff, attached as an appendix to *Limited Inc* (see Derrida 1988, 148), this means that “every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace.” A text, then, is not a book, and does not, strictly speaking, have an author. On the contrary, the name of the author is a signifier linked with others, and there is no master signifier (such as the phallus in Lacan) present or even absent in a text. This goes for the term “différance” as well, which can only serve as a supplement for the productive spacing between signs. Therefore, Derrida insists that “différance is literally neither a word nor a concept” (Derrida 1982 [1972], 3). Instead, it can only be marked as a wandering play of differences that is both a spacing of signifiers in relation to one another and a deferral of meaning or presence when they are read.

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

HYPERREALITY

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

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

The lesson Baudrillard draws from the events of May 1968 is that the student movement was provoked by the realization that “we were no longer productive” (Baudrillard 1976, 29), and that direct opposition within the system of communication and exchange only reproduces the mechanisms of the system itself. Strategically, he says, capital can only be defeated by introducing something in-exchangeable into the symbolic order, that is, something having the irreversible function of natural death, which the symbolic order excludes and renders invisible. The system, he points out, simulates natural death with fascinating images of violent death and catastrophe, where death is the result of artificial processes and “accidents.” But, as Baudrillard remarks: “Only the death-function cannot be programmed and localized” (Baudrillard 1976, 126), and by this he means death as the simple and irreversible finality of life. Therefore he calls for the development of “fatal strategies” to make the system suffer reversal and collapse.

Because these strategies must be carried out within the symbolic order, they are matters of rhetoric and art, or a hybrid of both. They also function as gifts or sacrifices, for which the system has no counter-move or equivalence. Baudrillard finds a prime example of this strategy with graffiti artists who experiment with symbolic markings and codes in order to suggest communication while blocking it, and who sign their

inscriptions with pseudonyms instead of recognizable names. "They are seeking not to escape the combinatory in order to regain an identity," says Baudrillard, "but to turn indeterminacy against the system, to turn indeterminacy into extermination" (Baudrillard 1976, 78). Some of his own remarks, such as "I have nothing to do with postmodernism," have, no doubt, the same strategic intent. To the extent that "postmodernism" has become a sign exchangeable for other signs, he would indeed want nothing to do with it. Nevertheless, his concepts of simulation and hyperreality, and his call for strategic experimentation with signs and codes, bring him into close proximity with figures such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida.

POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY – SUBJECTIVE TRUTH

The rejection of universal, objective truth is one of the topics covered in postmodern philosophy. Jean-François Lyotard's well-known remark, "incredulity towards metanarrative," makes this quite evident. In other terms, a metanarrative is a worldview, which is a cohesive story that aims to explain how the world is. According to Lyotard, we ought to be wary of such generalizations. The claim that "God so loved the world" is absurd to postmodernists, for instance, for two reasons: (1) they reject the existence of God, and (2) it is impossible to make assertions that reflect the entire world (metanarratives). Postmodernists believe that there are only "truths" (small "t") that are specific to a civilization or set of people and restricted to individual experience because there is no such thing as a universal Truth (capital "T"). Statements, whether written or spoken, may only express a certain local culture or personal viewpoint. In this context, "That may be true for you, but not for me" is a common catchphrase. However, postmodernists have placed themselves in a position to create a metanarrative by asserting universally that there are no metanarratives. They claim that there are no universal explanations—only regional tales from diverse cultures—that explain the world. We refer to postmodernism as the anti-worldview because of this.

POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY – LANGUAGE AND DECONSTRUCTION

Regarding literature, Postmodernists are highly concerned with the language of written texts. The term defining the major literary methodology of Postmodernists is deconstruction. Associated with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction involves reading a text to ferret out its hidden or multiple meanings (polysemy). In this way, a reader's interpretation of the text becomes more important than the text itself. Also significant is the subjectivity of the reader in determining what the author intended. For example, a reader may feel that a particular text really means an author is racist, even though the written text makes it clear that the author deplures racism. In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote a short essay entitled "The Death of the Author." In this essay he argued that the origin of the text is not the important thing, rather it is the destination the reader. By allowing the reader to invent new meanings, the text is freed from the tyranny of the author's single intended meaning. For example, there is no reason to assume "that a Shakespearean play means exactly the same thing today as it did when first performed." Each author (or artist) is the product of his or her own cultural setting and uses language to fit his or her condition. Thus, postmodern literary criticism claims that words never describe the objective world but only refer to other words. Therefore, no matter how a writer constructs a sentence, it can never tell us about the real world, but only about the world as understood by the reader. This concept is summed up in the phrase, "That's just your interpretation."

POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY – ANTI-REALISM

In postmodern philosophy, the notion of deconstruction is extended much beyond the realm of literature. You, the reader, are constructing the world based on your experiences and culture, just as you are constructing the meaning of this book. In other words, anti-realism holds that there are only six billion constructs of the universe, not a "real world." Truth, with a capital "T," has historically been defined as the connection between assertions that reflect the real world and the objective, real world. The correspondence theory of truth is the name given to this viewpoint. But according to postmodernists, it is impossible to attain this form of truth. There is no such thing as a universal "Truth," only subjective, individual truths that are unique to a certain context or culture. Therefore, truth cannot relate to any real world, according to the postmodernist paradigm of anti-realism. Instead, our words only make sense in relation to other words, which ultimately shapes how we perceive the world. Words can never be employed in the search for Truth if they just represent other words.

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

individuals locked in their own language and culture. In addition, it is true only as long as this community agrees upon this particular usage. In fact, the community determines what truth through the words it chooses to use is.

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

HABERMAS'S CRITIQUE

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

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

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

II. CONCLUSION

The concept of deconstruction in postmodern philosophy is taken far beyond the area of literature. Just as you, the reader, are creating the meaning of this text, you also construct the world according to your culture and experiences. In other words, there is no "real world" out there only six billion constructions of the world, a belief known as anti-realism. Traditionally, Truth (with a capital "T") was understood as the relationship

between the real, objective world and statements that correspond to the real world. We do not discover true facts about the real world we create it. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard took this concept to its logical conclusion. In 1991 he claimed that the Gulf War was not real, but merely simulated for CNN television. The truth that real people were killed did not seem to enter the equation. In actuality, not all Postmodernists take the concept of language and reality to Baudrillard's extreme. Yet, as Glenn Ward notes, this piece has been used to discredit not only Baudrillard, but Postmodernism's abandonment of truth.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 96.
- [2]. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 107, 113.
- [3]. Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 210f.
- [4]. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.
- [5]. Glen Ward, *Postmodernism* (Chicago, IL: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 162.
- [6]. What the very first words refer to is never explained because there were no other words to which to refer.
- [7]. For a more complete definition of "anti-realism," see Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33.
- [8]. See Foucault's *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 49.