
Via Postmoderna: Toward Modal Theology

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Words are strange things. The "linguistic turn" that led us into today's proliferation of what Richard Rorty calls "posties"—poststructuralism, postliberalism, postmodernism...Derrida's "postcards"—has proved confusing if not discouraging of serious scholarship. The term "postmodern" has had a brief and heady career, beginning in literature and architecture. In the latter it denotes a break with the dominant International Style and a response to pluralism with its relativism and eclecticism (Jencks 1987; Oden 1990, 71 ff.). It has spread to the social sciences, and to philosophy and theology. In the last it seemed almost a label invented by the American Academy of Religion, where an elite group read papers to one another annually in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. But the very range of disciplines exploring its meaning suggests a certain convergence, a growing critique of what we have assumed—particularly liberal humanists—to be the enlightened understanding of understanding.

Neonatal care is required, to monitor symptoms and provide prognosis. Although definition works better with hindsight at the end of a journey, we must make a beginning. Social scientists typify "modernity" by categories such as rationalization (Max Weber), autonomy, individualism, nationalism. Its breakdown or demise is described as alienation, anomie, "life lived in fragments" (Baudelaire), "the broken centre" (Nathan Scott, following Yeats); in short, the Death of God. Philosophers

favor the explanatory concept of an "Enlightenment project" (Jeffrey Stout, Alasdair MacIntyre) now doomed, so that we need to go beyond the kind of consciousness associated with the Cartesian ego, or Husserl's "solitary mental life."

Now "post-modern" is an oxymoron—how can you progress "beyond" the "new"? Postmodernism itself recognizes that "modern" denotes the "measure" (*modus*) of the present (*modo*) (Lyotard 1984; Olson 1990). Lyotard makes the shrewd observation: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard 1983, 338f.). The formal idea of going beyond modernity may be construed as a return to a former age, yielding types of "conservatism" (young-, old-, and neo-) (Habermas 1987). Or it may be more pointed, rejecting the philosophical *subject* found in Cartesian solipsism (Kerr 1986).

This sits well with Heidegger's programmatic *Destruktion* of the history of ontology, aiming at retrieval of the proper question of what "Being" signifies (*Being and Time*, sec. 6.19). Metaphysics dissolves reality, it entails the formation of "ontotheology" which posits divinity as the logical End of the hierarchy of beings. If ontology has lost Being, so to speak, ontotheology has lost "God." Ontology needs to be rescued—everybody says so, not only Heidegger but also Barth, Tillich, Ayer, and Derrida—from this category mistake. Regressive analysis is required, sometimes called "deconstruction." Here is another bothersome term. Better to speak of two kinds of postmodernism: "deconstructive-eliminative" and "constructive-revisionary" (Griffin 1989, 1ff.) For the light-hearted, there is also Jeffrey Stout's article-review of Davidson, Putnam, and Rorty (a kind of "Princeton Lampoon"?) entitled "Lexicon of Post-modern Philosophy" (Stout 1987).

To sum up: "modern" signifies the historical period (in the West) from the 17th to 20th centuries, born largely of the scientific revolution and Enlightenment, and characterized by the exaltation of individual reason. "Post-modern" signifies the transition period of the 20th century, born largely of post-war disillusionment, recognition of the limits of scientific method, and consciousness of global reality.

Minerva's Owls

Masters of suspicion have long warned that the Enlightenment project contains the seeds of its own destruction. Their question is: what is the reason for trusting reason? That is, what evidence do believers in evidentialism have for demanding grounds for knowing something to be true? These masters—so called by Paul Ricoeur, who named Marx, Freud, and

Nietzsche—include Hegel, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Barth, and Heidegger. The most notorious is Nietzsche, the most tendentious Kant himself. Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" supplied the very motto of Enlightenment: *Sapere aude!* But was he not also facing Enlightenment's "impotence...its helplessness in the face of the questions it raised" as Kolakowski holds (Kolakowski 1969, 41)? Did he not recoil before that final *aporia* noted in the first *Critique*: the "unconditioned necessity" which yawns like "an abyss on the verge of which human reason trembles in dismay" (*Tr. Dial.* 2.3.5; McLelland 1989, 97ff.)?

It seems that Hegel is now enjoying the attention previously paid to Kant. The older Hegel of Kierkegaardian attack is yielding to the younger (*Phänomenologie der Geist* 1807), the idealist to the existentialist—"there are several Hegels" (Merleau-Ponty 1964). The question is whether Hegel's contribution to our aporetic dilemma leads to reunion or further estrangement. Is his "Spirit alienated from itself" (*Der sich entfremdete Geist*) the temporary cost of creation ("production" for Marx) or the sign of permanent fault? Alan Olson argues that Habermas and those French philosophers influenced by Kojève's interpretation of Hegel are right to begin with Hegel's critique of Kant's *Verstehenphilosophie*. That is, he is *post*-Kantian. Our still *neo*-Kantian age (especially its theologians) needs to hear this attack on transcendental reflection, with its argument for the existence of faith. Hegel's proposal involves a dynamism, "the *processual* element in a concept of faith as consciousness" (Olson 1990, 49). His dialectical logic posits the *identity* of identity and difference, and so reinstates analogy (or "metaphor" to use today's more fashionable term) at the heart of theological epistemology.

This positive interpretation is disputed by Mark C. Taylor, who follows Heidegger's reading of Hegel as having fulfilled (sublated!) the Cartesian turn to the subject (Taylor 1987, 3ff., 35ff.). (As if Hegel trumps Descartes: *Cogitat, ergo [Spiritus] est?*). Thereafter, Heidegger's destructive analysis rolls over both players, replacing identity with *das Zwischen*, the between, the difference that unveils (*Es gibt*) identity only in its differentiation. If Hegel sublates Descartes, elevating subjectivity to Absolute Subjectivity, then these postmodern critics need to subvert this subjectivity through declaring the *difference* between identity and difference. Hence Derrida's neologism "*différance*" to trace the constant cleavage, "to save the tear" in order to celebrate the absence of presence (Derrida 1978).

So the new saints of postmodernism—Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard (and Taylor to break the francophone monopoly)—begin from the ironic insight into philosophy and theology caught in a rationality that spells its own doom. (Hegel warned us that the owl of Minerva takes

flight only at dayfall: her wisdom begins at reason's end.) Their noisy attacks produce a cacophony of "logics of disintegration" (Dews 1987). There is no longer universal reason, history as metanarrative (Lyotard's "*grands récits*"), individual identity. There is instead the peculiar nexus of language, texts (a woven "texture"), signifiers, a pastiche made by *bricoleurs*. Taylor talks (sorry: *writes*) of "mazing grace, and erring scripture" (Taylor 1984, 99). Is this how a new age gets itself born, with whimpers rather than a bang? What is so radically *new* here?

Once More: "Via Moderna"

In the later 14th century another Modernity was born. The *via moderna* challenged the dominant culture where harmony reigned in matters civil and ecclesiastical. It offered a new paradigm of faith/reason, rejecting the "realist" tradition (thus rendering it *via antiqua*) in favor of a linguistic turn ("nominalist") that questioned whether words terminate on things universal at all—thus *via moderna, terministae, nominales*. Aquinas had been clear that "[t]he act of the believer ends not in a statement but in reality" (*non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem*; *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae 1, a.2, ad 2). But for William of Ockham both Thomism, and even more its apparent rival Scotism, needed paring to the bone; his sceptical-critical philosophy resembles modern logical positivism. The self (as *synteresis rationis*) was no longer regarded as posited by God and invested with eternal truths; ontological connection was replaced by voluntary acceptance. Voluntarism, and insofar anti-intellectualism, was shared with the *schola Augustiniana moderna*—Gregory of Rimini and John Major for example, influential in Renaissance and Reform. The stress lay particularly on the *ratio meriti* of both Christ and ourselves. If our age has a "will to power," theirs had a will to salvation.

Perhaps history is an unceasing dialectic or *querelle* of ancient and modern, in which each term is relative to the other, and every Present Age, as Kierkegaard saw, has its own style which is also its doom. I have chosen the term *via postmoderna* to signify this connection with late medieval *via moderna*. Both share a critique based on language; for us, the failure of rationalist ideology to effect human selfhood and to secure moral reasoning. Here we stand, once again barren through the infertility of the rationalism/fideism polarization, the titanic clash of the disjunctive syllogism—All or Nothing (McLelland 1989, 244ff.). Kant was able to make an end run around his antinomies, even if finally tackled by radical evil, just short of the goal. In our case some other play seems necessary, even some change in the ground rules themselves. Not a paradigm shift, but a more profound change, like adding a dimension to the game of chess. My tentative name for this project is *modal*.

"Modal" intends to denote a shift in the way (*via*) reality is reflected in and by human minds. It agrees with the labels "modernity" and "post-modernity" as working definitions of a historical dialectic. But it seeks to go beyond both modern and postmodern rationalities. It is a recommendation from what might be called "philosophy of theology" as to how theology (Christian and other) should proceed in view of the postmodern critique. If postmodernism is analytic and de(con)structive, modal will be synthetic and constructive. After therapy, wholeness.

Modal Theology

We have noted the ambiguity in the use of *modus* in both modernity and postmodernity. We might add also those modalities of genre or type familiar through Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and theory of myths. I also have in mind what is in play when "modal" is used in logic and in science. Modal logic is the logic of *if*—"If p then q." It explores the possibilities in conditional statements. Ancient forms developed by Philo of Megara and by Aristotle were suspect in earlier Christendom, but later studied by the scholastics, and then neglected until the 1930s. Since C.I. Lewis and others, modern logicians have developed systems of implication to account for *alethic* modalities of possibility and necessity, *deontic* modalities of obligatoriness, and *epistemic* modalities of being known as true, false, etc.

A good example of modal thinking is the modern distinction between typical and modal science. Classical physics cherished the Aristotelian classification of types, since typicality was the foundation of method. With relativity and quantum theory, however, a radical shift was required, inasmuch as "universality" advanced from limited fields to properly cosmic dimensions. Typical science involves special laws for certain classes of subjects; modal science involves general laws for more abstract subjects, for example the move from Special to General Theory of Relativity, and thence to Unified Field Theory. Universal explanation requires a kinematic mode (itself indirect) of "describing" states of affairs (Stafleu 1980, 220ff.). The difference between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries implies the change required in modes of apprehending, even of reasoning itself. This is more than Kuhn's famous "paradigm shift" since it connotes a change in the very way of understanding phenomena. The inductive method belongs to the "youth" of science, as Einstein remarked, whereas mature science relies more and more on hypothetico-deductive models. The trap of evidentialism set by Hume ("always proportion your belief to the evidence") is not the whole story, even for Hume himself.

Theology, I suggest, needs to develop its own modal thinking. Classical theism made modest use of modal categories in its explication of divine and human potency/impotency, with some echoes in the contemporary "Paradox of Omnipotence" debate (McLelland 1989, 54ff., 281 ff.). Ockham wrestled with the precious problem of God's foreknowledge of future contingencies—which God knows "evidently and with certainty" (Ockham 1957, 127ff.). Before him, William of Sherwood (1200-66?) explored signs according to the fourfold terminology *significatio*, *suppositio*, *copulatio*, *appellatio*. Such terminal talk entails "supposing that," particularly that copulative terms produce novel naming (Mark Taylor does this well) (Taylor 1984). My intention in "modal theology" is somewhat akin to this earlier terminism. I wish to push our frame of reference for the implications of human God-talk to the properly "universal." Unless the verification/falsification of our statements about Transcendence is truly *universal* rather than merely *global* we are not yet in a mode corresponding to the universe as we know it scientifically. And if theological implication is contradicted by scientific implication, it suffers by the norm of possibility; that is, it is incompatible with certain possible states of affairs. Aristotle first noted that the principles which hold good for "everything that is" belong to the science of being qua being (*Metaphysics* 1003ff.). The gloss by Leibnitz was well taken, that universals must be invariant for all possible worlds. Such connection between logic and ontology, remarked by Ernest Nagel for one, is the burden of my story.

"Possible Worlds"

The idea of possible worlds is familiar to philosophers and logicians exploring problems in semantics and metaphysics. Alvin Plantinga is one philosopher of religion who has dabbled in such modalities, using the category "transworld" in behalf of his free will defence of theodicy (Plantinga 1974). Karl Barth is another who explored the properly universal modality of those *rationes* which participate in Truth and therefore are both distinct and true—as Anselm grasped in postulating a *ratio Dei* beyond noetic and ontic contrasts (Barth 1960). A further analogue comes from metamathematics, namely Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem: the price of completeness in axiomatics is inconsistency. This in turn resembles Heisenberg's principle of Indeterminacy, accounting for the inability to know both velocity and position of subatomic data (although this applies strictly to physical measurability, not to ontological data). Do theological systems likewise have an open texture, like an infinite series of expanding sets, or an incompleteness in knowing their data (Carnes 1976)?

Modal theology will cast its doctrine in terms accountable to universal implications. It will acknowledge Bertrand Russell's point that the

problem of universals has paid too much attention to substantives and adjectives and too little to verbs and prepositions, thus concentrating on the logic of *qualities* to the neglect of the logic of *relations* (Russell 1967, 52ff.). Maurice Boutin's analysis sees this as the result of failing to note Kant's own division in his Table of Categories: "reality" is a quality (linked to quantity), but "existence" is a modality (linked to relation) (Boutin 1994).

Aristotle turned to modal logic to solve the crucial dilemma: can we find reasons to oppose the apparent determinism of all things? His solution turned on the category of motion, *kinesis* (*Physics* 3.1.200b12ff.; *Metaphysics* 1013a7–11, 1019a15ff.). Here was a way through strict causality to allow free choice (similar to Democritus' solution by the famous "swerve" of atoms, providing Karl Marx with both thesis topic and philosophical agenda). The Aristotelian solution to the problem of future contingents draws helpful distinctions: *dynamis-kinesis-energeia*. They yield different kinds of potentiality or possibility, opening logic to the richness of a reality not encompassed by formal logic alone (Hintikka 1977). Possibility encompasses necessity: this is what seized Kierkegaard in his search for logical categories able to handle his concept of "the leap" which proves decisive for what he calls "my category," the unique individual self (*den Enkelte*) (Kierkegaard 1962). From Trendelenburg's logical works he gained the modal categories he needed (Come 1991). The motion between differing life-styles of the *Stagen* is thus accessible, and also the "thought-experiment" of the *Fragments* and its *Postscript*. Kierkegaard's answer to Lessing's question ("Can eternal happiness be based on historical accident?") is thus formalized in dynamic categories appropriate to the Subject. Faith is not so much the conclusion of a reasoned argument as the resolution of a lived dilemma (Kierkegaard 1936).

Test Cases

The obvious Christian concepts at issue concern Trinity and Incarnation. I have argued elsewhere that we need a "theory of relativity" for religious pluralism, one that will refocus the global problematic in reference to the universal (McLelland 1991). This means hypothetical instantiation—extraterrestrial—of forms of incarnation. An analogy from physics would be: christology developed in an "inertial field" of world history and needs to be not globalized but universalized. An analogy from art would be: christology developed in impressionistic style and needs to become not expressionistic but cubist, even surreal. Would this not be a good way to view *homoousios*, *circumincessio*, etc.? This were not to revive ancient forms of modalism, the monarchianism of Sabellius for instance. Patristic

modalism debated intratrinitarian relationships and the concept of *prosopon*; its idea of “modes of being” moved within a particular paradigm. But other forms of Logos christology insisted on a mode of divine being that maintains universality *at the same time as* the mode of human being: *kenosis* does not affect the eternal being of Logos, *and therefore* the possibility of other forms of divine presence, whether quasi-incarnational or extra-incarnational. Examples of such modal thinking include Origen’s teaching on accommodation and subordination, the twin concepts of *en-* and *an-hypostasia* of II Constantinople (553-4 C.E.), and the sixteenth century Lutheran-Reformed debate dubbed *extraCalvinisticum*, the Calvinistic “extra” signifying the necessary universality which limits the globally incarnate Word.

The form “If p then q” at its simplest demands that theology—Christian most particularly—attend to the universal implications of its doctrinal system. We know enough about our universe now to have done with vestiges of the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian cosmology. I do not suggest a new astrotheology as the postmodern form of cosmological argument (like seventeenth century insectotheology), nor do I wish to replace ontotheology by epistemotheology. Rather, I mean such development of doctrine as will satisfy the possibilities of our new exploration of space, our new appreciation of the immensity of the universe, our new knowledge of possibilities beyond the solar system. “If E.T. then...” is the form of theo-logic demanded. I suggest that such re-conceptualizing will force a more adequate christology upon Christians, with corresponding re-evaluation of divine accommodation in all earthly religions. If we acknowledge the validity of Kant’s criterion of “universalizability” in the logic of obligation, must we not search for similar criteria in the logic of revelation and reconciliation?

Classical theism assumed that what was good enough for Christians was so for all other humans on earth. Modern theism assumes that while the case of “non-Christians” is more problematic, the implications of trinitarian/christological doctrine remain universal. Postmodern theism, however, must answer new questions no longer merely academic: since (probably) there are conscious life forms on other planets revolving around the million suns in other galaxies, what does revelation (necessarily) and salvation (possibly) mean for them? After all, the “anthropic principle” notes that the earliest conditions of the universe made the evolution of life inevitable. Yet the principle applies not to our planet alone, either uniquely or singularly, but to all planetary systems in the universe.

Such questions have been raised in principle ever since the Church Fathers (or the Pauline literature’s cosmic Christ); now they have a bite, an exigency as test of universalizability. The dogmas of modernity about

human experience and reason need to be deconstructed in order to allow more modern questions to be formulated, answers to be sought. The human "flesh" of the Christian Incarnation, for instance, is not a universal category, but may serve as a global metaphor for all life forms in the universe. The modality of human knowing also receives a different problematic: is our (mathematical) ability to unlock the secret of physical reality the whole story of Reason? We must attempt the larger and harder vision in order to come down to earth with appropriate statements. What works in such a cosmic context provides *a fortiori* argument for its validity on earth—from the greater possibility to the lesser actuality. Such cosmic relevance imposes more limited, modest claims for our doctrines on the one hand, while on the other it provides a truly universal dimension in which they participate.

What works in such hypothetical universality should be fruitful in our interfaith dilemma of absolutism/relativism. Is the distinction between *incommensurability* and *incompatibility* relevant to interreligious dialogue? For example, Christianity's presupposition is original sin, and Buddhism's "original suffering," as it were; such diverse beginnings surely mean that attempts to discuss apparently similar doctrines of "salvation" are bound to pass each other like ships in the night. Raimundo Panikkar considers that dialogue aiming at a unitive theory of religion, or "universal theology," is a mistake of western metaphysics (Panikkar 1987). Thus our problem becomes not incompatibility but differing modes of measuring the human condition. The modal shift under discussion acknowledges the brackets around our finite ways of knowing and being, but offers a transposition to broader categories of classification.

Post-lude

Finally, we need to look beyond the jargon of both modern and postmodern advocates, beyond the vicious circle of adding epicycles to qualify otherwise incompatible dogma. Antony Flew's old charge of "death by a thousand qualifications" still applies unless we are willing to explore new dimensions of possibility (Flew 1955). While the modal project of probable conditions in possible worlds may seem too "sci-fi" or fantastic, its intention is to open a window to ideas whose time is coming, forced by the pace of space exploration and by the challenge of relativism. Relativity is not relativism, but unless we measure the difference we have only absolutism to fall back on.

Postmodernism, moreover, is afflicted with dandyism; as such it should heed the warnings of Kierkegaard on the superficiality of "immediacy," and of Camus on the "dandies' rebellion." Nevertheless, it is trying to articulate the breakup of an age that proved overly proud of its

mastery of word, thought, and world. Ultramodernity is falling, and with it the foundationalism/evidentialism that drove both theism and antitheism low these many years. When foundationalism is rejected, one must make do with some sort of "intersubjective communication" (Habermas 1987) or a form of "solidarity" that can survive the reign of "contingency" and the critique of "irony" (Rorty 1989). But this assumes only one form of postmodernism, the "deconstructive-eliminative" noted above. It is the "constructive-revisionary" that informs modal thinking and impels exploration of alternative forms of universal validity. I wish to move into the post-Newtonian, non-Euclidean, geodesic era of possibilities now within imaginative grasp. I wish to appropriate this new thinking for philosophy and theology, for a renewal of youth. It does not take a Hebrew prophet to tell us that old men dream dreams; that is all we have left, to turn our heritage into your project, and to welcome new generations to the only game in the universe.

Cubist poet Pierre Reverdy wrote (in *Le Livre de Mon Bord*): "Nothing is worth saying in poetry save the unsayable, which is why one counts greatly upon what goes on between the lines." And in philosophy, theology, and so on perhaps it is counting on those spaces "between" to which mystics, visionaries, and even professors have pointed with varying degrees of confidence or desperation. That would be a modality of communication worthy of Koheleth himself.

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