Appropriating Postmodernism*

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Once upon a time—not yesterday, but not so very long ago, I am told—there was a minister in the Reformed tradition whose sermons all had three points. In itself that is not unusual, but in this case they were the same three points, regardless of the text. Each text was expounded in terms of (1) what it said against the Arminians, (2) what it said against the papists, and (3) what it said against the modernists. It would no doubt be going too far to call this zealous preacher a postmodernist. But he certainly was persistent in expressing his suspicions of modernity. Moreover he suggests that one might have theological reasons for such suspicions and that a Christian thinker might be sympathetic with postmodernism, which shares those suspicions.

But, the objection immediately arises, postmodernism is a radically secular movement. If by postmodernism you mean (as in fact I do) such philosophers as Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty, along with those aspects of Nietzsche and Heidegger they have appropriated, it is clear that the "and" in "Christianity and postmodern philosophy" can only signify an either/or without compromise. What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, or, to be a bit more current, what has Paris to do with Grand Rapids (a.k.a. the New Jerusalem)? Is not the task of the Christian thinker in the face of such godless projects of thought to inoculate the faithful against these diseases, first by warning them of the dangers posed by Nietzsche and his minions and then by refuting their philosophies, wholesale if possible, but retail if necessary?

Before suggesting a different response, I note in passing the all-too-real possibility that such refutations will consist of arguments designed to

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persuade those within the circle of faith and will often come down to little more than "They are different from us." When apologetics lets this happen it does not constitute a serious engagement with one's opponents and can even be construed, not without reason, as a refusal even to talk with them.

"Appropriating postmodernism" is the name I give to the alternative strategy I wish to propose, one that seeks a middle way between the total rejection of the refusenik and the equally uncritical jumping on the bandwagon of this month's politically correct fad. One can think of appropriation as a doubly violent act. When, for example, Derrida appropriates Heidegger, he first distinguishes the wheat from the chaff and discards Heidegger's romantic/mystical tendencies as relics of the metaphysics of presence that both seek to overcome. Then he recontextualizes the features of Heidegger's attempt at the overcoming of metaphysics to which he is sympathetic, relocating them in his conceptual framework rather than in Heidegger's. In their new home they are recognizable, but not always immediately or easily, for their meaning is no longer quite the same, and the vocabulary in which they are expressed is often quite different.

Without forgetting the dual negativity of rejection and recontextualization, it is possible to think of such an appropriation as an invitation to conversation. The appropriator, after listening carefully to the appropriatee, responds by saying, "I find these aspects of your presentation quite compelling and illuminating. But for me they work better when recontextualized as follows. Of course, that changes the project somewhat and involves the abandonment of this or that aspect of your original proposal. But don't you agree that those ideas of yours I find compelling work better in the context I propose, or at least, since they can be fruitfully put to work there, that they are not inherently wedded to the larger goals of your project?"

Whether one thinks of appropriation as violence or invitation to conversation, I suggest that although it does not involve discovering any counter-examples, it is a form of philosophical counter-argument. In another context this was the strategy I adopted in response to the religion critiques of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In a book called *Suspicion and Faith* (1993) I argued that their accounts of the ways in which irreligious interests shape religious ideas, especially the uses to which they are put by the believing individual and community, are genuine insights and that the task of the Christian thinker is not to refute them but to acknowledge their force. But I also argued that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are plagiarists, that this kind of critique has its origin in biblical religion itself, that its proper motivation is a religious fear of idolatry, and that its proper

home is the communities of biblical faith. Although I did not try to refute the atheism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud directly, I did note that my recontextualization involved the abandonment of that aspect of their project, and I claimed to have shown that there is nothing inherently atheistic about their critique. That religious people are often, even always, idolatrous, worshiping a god created in their own image and in conformity with their own interests, does not mean that there is no God.

Since Marx and Freud are quintessentially modern thinkers, while Nietzsche is a posthumous postmodernist, it will obviously not do to identify postmodernism with their hermeneutics of suspicion. So how shall we identify what might be appropriated in the present context? Postmodernism is as difficult to define as, say, romanticism—or more so. Just as romanticism is defined with reference to classicism, so postmodernism is defined with reference to modernity. But there are so many modernisms. We speak of modernism in music, literature, painting, and architecture. I shall not be concerned with these aesthetic modernisms nor with the various postmodernisms that stand over against them. We have already been reminded of theological modernism. That, too, is not my point of reference. But it brings us closer to what we want; for "modernism" was the early twentieth-century American name for the liberal Protestant theology that developed during the nineteenth century in Germany, and that theology was an attempt to accommodate the message of Christianity to "the modern mind," to "modern man come of age."

It is this latter modernity (which was not particularly gender conscious) of which the philosophical postmodernism that concerns me is the aftermath. It is a philosophical attitude, expressed in a wide variety of philosophical theories, that might be described as a certain faith in reason, a reason that took scientific objectivity and method as its touchstones. The philosophers I have named, along with quite a few others, are united by a loss of that faith in that reason. It should be obvious, but needs to be noted, that their loss of faith represents a threat to moral and religious values just and only to the degree that those values have been wedded to modern or Enlightenment conceptions of reason.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this latter point with reference to three theologians I encountered a few "weeks" ago during my undergraduate studies. All wanted to base their theology on the authority of biblical revelation, and all thought the right account of that authority was the theory of biblical inerrancy. So it is clear that all were far too conservative to have any sympathy for theological liberalism. Yet two of them, ironically, had wedded their conservative theologies to precisely that modernity with which that liberalism had sought accommodation. In terms of

theological content no one would have called their theologies modernistic. But the meta-claims they made about their theologies, to which they gave theological status, were born of the Enlightenment, children of Athens rather than Jerusalem.

One of them said, "With the help of biblical revelation we can achieve a knowledge of God wholly on a par with God's own self-knowledge. Our knowledge does not extend as far as God's, of course, but what we know is not in any way inferior to God's knowledge of the same truths." This means that theological knowledge, with the help of revelation, achieves the ideal of objectivity and perfect correspondence that science was thought to achieve in relation to nature. This knowledge, which is entirely free from prejudice or perspective, is wholly unconditioned by interests and desires, and is relative to no human culture. It should be noted that our theologian is not saying this about the Bible, but about his own theology, at least in principle, at least when he gets it right.

As a hint toward the possibility of a theologically motivated postmodern protest against this meta-theology, I remind you that it is not just Nietzsche but also Kierkegaard's Climacus who wages a sustained polemic against claims that human knowledge can operate *sub specie aeterni*, can peek over God's shoulder and see things from the divine perspective.

Our second theologian lectured on the perspicuity of Scripture. He said, "It is not necessary for us to interpret the Bible. The Bible interprets itself. When we use the proper grammatical-historical method, the meanings that result are, if not untouched by human hands, at least uncontaminated by human cultures in their finitude and fallenness." Truth in advertising might have required that the lecture be titled "Cartesian hermeneutics." Once again, by a curious osmosis, the absoluteness first claimed for biblical revelation has been claimed for a particular theology, at least insofar as it has been methodologically rigorous.

In its general form this *non sequitur* is anything but rare. One does not even have to listen very closely to those who present themselves as defenders of Absolute Truth or Absolute Values to hear the all-too-frequent follow-up: "And since we are the defenders of Absolutes, it should come as no surprise that we are the ones in possession of them. Our theories are the Truth and our practices are the Good." One of the tasks of a theologically motivated appropriation of postmodernism is to challenge this move in all its forms, blatant and subtle. For just as I do not become purple by speaking about violets, so I do not become absolute by speaking about God. The divine character of revelation does not cancel out the human character of my attempt to say what it means.

If our first two theologians would be surprised to discover how thoroughly Cartesian they are, our third would be surprised to find himself

linked to postmodernism. But he used to say, "The Bible is the divinely revealed misinformation about God." This means that his theology, based on biblical revelation, will never get it right, no matter how methodically rigorous. His beliefs will never simply correspond to the object they intend; they will never be the *adequatio* of his intellect to the divine reality. He is a theologically motivated anti-realist, and just to that degree we can say, a bit anachronistically, that he has appropriated postmodernism.

This does not mean for a moment that he is an anything-goes theologian, to cite an all-too-standard straw-man critique of postmodernism. He is as concerned with theological methodology as our second theologian and as explicitly dependent on biblical revelation as the first. But he thinks the goal of theological rigor is to think about God as humans should think about God, rather than to think about God as God thinks about God. To think God's thoughts after God is not to see anything through God's eyes or to peek over God's shoulders. It is to be the best possible human approximation to a divine thought that always transcends our grasp of it.

In trying to think through the notion of the Bible as "the divinely revealed misinformation about God" I have often come back to this homely analogy. My three-year-old son is sucking on a quarter. I tell him not to put coins in his mouth. He asks why not. Since he lacks an understanding of viruses and bacteria, and does not even have those words in his vocabulary, I tell him, "Because they have little, invisible bugs on them that can make you sick if they get inside you. Remember how awful you felt last time you were sick?"

This is the parentally revealed misinformation about sucking on coins. It is false, but it is how the boy ought to think about the matter. But just for that reason, we probably should not simply call it false. Rather we should notice that a good epistemologist would give an anti-realist account of the boy's knowledge and suggest that his belief is phenomenally correct, by comparison with the belief that sucking on coins will cause the cat to die, but noumenally false, relative to adult knowledge as the criterion of the thing in itself.

To describe postmodernism as a loss of faith in the Enlightenment project and the concept of reason it presupposes is to give a wholesale account. For a deeper understanding we would have to go retail. We would have to look at specific themes of postmodern philosophy, such as Nietzsche's perspectivism, Heidegger's overcoming metaphysics as onto-theology and technology, Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, Foucault's genealogy as the critique of discursive practices, and Rorty's claim that all our vocabularies are contingent and non-final. This

requires painstaking reading of texts that are often painful to read. I am not disposed to inflict that pain on you here, and in any case the needed space to do so has not been granted. So I need to find a way of splitting the difference between wholesale and retail analysis.

The best way to do that, I believe, will be to take as a typically postmodern thesis the following claim: The truth is that there is no Truth. Although this formulation is too general and abstract to do justice to the thought of any of the five thinkers I have been naming, each of them has a detailed development of its basic idea in his own distinctive vocabulary and conceptual scheme. The advantage of making it our focus is that it will be possible to speak about all five at once; the disadvantage is that the distinctiveness of each will be lost.

The key to understanding the claim, "the truth is that there is no Truth," is found in the second appearance of the key term, the one where "Truth" appears with a capital T. Modernity's faith in reason is faith in the human capacity to achieve such Truth. Ironically, this faith goes back at least to Plato. (The irony in the notion that modernity begins with Plato is mitigated, at least somewhat, if we remember that he is sometimes described as the high point of the Greek Enlightenment.) In any case Plato's faith is that reason can be pure, that with the right discipline, which we can call either method or ascesis, reason can rise above its "encavement" to gaze directly upon eternal being. When Plato speaks in the *Phaedo* (65e ff.) of "the unaided intellect," he means a thought fully purified of dependence on the senses. Then he speaks (and this is quite clearly Plato and not Socrates speaking) about "the man who pursues the truth by applying his pure and unadulterated thought to the pure and unadulterated object." To do this "we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself." Thus the purification of the intellect leads to a heavenly orgy in which the totally naked soul and its totally naked object enjoy unmediated union. This is the moment of Truth.

By the time we get to modernity, both in its rationalist, Cartesian form and in its empiricist, Lockean form, the enemy is not so much the senses as tradition, opinions received from others in the cave (even if they claim to have just returned from Plato's party) rather than from one's own direct face-to-face with the real. We would not normally think of Descartes and Locke, in contrast to Plato, as ascetic priests. But by calling their faith in objectivity through method a form of the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche helps us to see their kinship with Plato and the appropriateness of lumping them all together as Enlightenment thinkers.

One does not break faith with their objectivism by becoming a fallibilist, for all three of them are already fallibilists. We do not always get it

right. Much, if not most, of the time our beliefs are not True, are not the products of Method and thus of Pure Reason. But they can be, and when they are they are Truth as Absolute Knowledge. For they are relative to nothing but the facts of the matter. The mind has become the mirror of nature, or supernature; however partially in extent, the ideals of adequation and correspondence have been completely achieved. And this we know to be Truth.

What is known in this way is perfectly known. Not even God could know it any better. There is thus good reason for Kierkegaard's religious postmodernism and Nietzsche's atheistic postmodernism to agree in identifying their target as the claim to know *sub specie aeterni*.

Postmodernists give a variety of reasons—yes, they give reasons, like a good philosopher should—for denying that we ever simply get it right, that we ever have Truth in this sense. They find us to be too deeply embedded in the cave to be able to extricate ourselves through any methodology or ascetic discipline. Among the features of cave life that hold us most tightly in their grip are time and culture or history as concrete time.

It was time (in something like Husserl's sense of internal-time consciousness) that made Kant distinguish the phenomenal from the noumenal and deny our access to Truth, at least in the realm of theory. To know things in themselves, things as they really are, would be to know them as God would know them. But since all the categories of human understanding are schematized in terms of time, and since God sees everything under the aspect of eternity, there is a great gulf fixed between human and divine understanding, with the result that we can know things as they appear to us, but not as they are in themselves. We can call our beliefs true when we apprehend the world as we should; but they are not True, since that would require us to apprehend the world as we can not. Going back to our three-year-old's belief that coins have invisible bugs on them, we can say that his belief is true, but not True.

Postmodernists, especially Heidegger and Derrida, are Kantians in their emphasis on the inescapably temporal character of human experience. We are always *in medias res*, and can never stand at the Alpha or Omega point where Truth can be had. Every present has as part of its meaning both its whence and its whither, both of which have an indeterminability about them that renders our meanings in flux (Derrida would say undecidable) to such a degree that, while we may very well be able to get along quite well with daily tasks, any theoretical claims to Truth will already be vitiated at the level of meaning.

In their Kantianism, postmodernists are Humeans as well. To be more precise, they think the Humean lesson has not been learned well enough. Hume did not think we should stop making causal judgments.

Nor did he deny that for all practical purposes they work quite well. What he denied was the appropriateness of a certain theoretical interpretation of those judgments. Similarly, in denying our access to Truth, postmodernists are not saying we should abandon the distinction between truth and falsity that, for all practical purposes, is both indispensable and fruitful; they are only denying the meta-claim that our truths are Truth. They are Kantians.

What ties us to the cave even more tightly than the abstract time of internal time consciousness is the concrete time of historical, cultural existence. With the possible exception of Nietzsche, our five postmodernists have all taken the linguistic turn, and their theories of culture will be theories of language. They make the following claims:

—All our experience is linguistically mediated. Whatever pre-linguistic encounters with reality we may have, they are not the building blocks out of which knowledge is built.
—Every language is a language. It is a particular conceptual scheme or vocabulary and lacks the universality that Truth requires.
—Every language is contingent in the sense that it contributes to our interpretation of the world elements that derive from historical accident, rather than from super-historical, direct encounter with the real.
—In short, every language is a perspective, and it is the plurality of vocabularies that make up human language that shows us most clearly the inescapability of Nietzsche's perspectivism, according to which there are no facts but only interpretations. For all our insights are relative to some frame of reference that is itself anything but absolute. In this relativity, our truths are never Truth.

The move from time to history or culture was from abstract to concrete. But we need to take another step in that direction, for the linguistic theory of culture just sketched is still too abstract. For the postmodernists as for Wittgenstein, languages are always language-games in the strong sense of the term. This means not just that there are verbal rules and moves, but that forms of life are involved. In other words our verbal practices, and thus our insights, are themselves always embedded in the social practices of our culture(s).

This final move to concretion has devastating consequences. For the abstract theory of time and the abstract dimension of the linguistic theory of culture belong to the hermeneutics of finitude. Because we cannot transcend the limited perspective of our location in time and in cultural history, knowledge can never be Truth. But cultural practices are not just

finite and contingent; they are also fallen and corrupt, a point the postmodernists are not slow to point out—even if they do not speak the language of sin and the Fall. This takes us from the hermeneutics of finitude to the hermeneutics of suspicion and introduces us to another whole class of reasons why Truth exceeds our grasp. As Nietzsche puts it, pure Truth is not exactly the highest priority of our will to power. This dimension of the postmodern critique of knowledge is (unwittingly) an extended homily on the Pauline account of those "who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). Taken together the hermeneutics of finitude and of suspicion tell us: we cannot attain to the Truth, and if we could, we would edit (that is, revise) it to suit our current agenda.

These are the kinds of considerations that lead postmodernists to say: the truth is that there is no Truth. But some would dismiss the whole discussion out of hand on the grounds that there is a fatal problem of self-reference, a performative contradiction in saying that there is no Truth. Consider the liar's paradox. Suppose I say, "What I am telling you now is a lie." The problem is one of self-reference because the statement refers to itself. The paradox is that if it is true that the statement is a lie, then what I told you (that the statement is a lie) is not true, in which case the statement is not a lie. So the truth of the statement entails its falsity. This problem can be described as a performative contradiction, for the act of uttering the statement indirectly asserts its truth, while the statement itself asserts its falsehood. The contradiction is between what I do and what I say.

Now when I say there is no Truth, do I not performatively commit myself to the Truth of this claim, while inconsistently denying at the same time that there is any Truth at all? In a word, no. The philosophies with which postmodernism takes issue say, the Truth is that there is Truth, and they assume that to disagree is to say, the Truth is that there is no Truth. No doubt there is a performative or self-referential problem with the latter assertion. But we were careful to notice that the postmodern claim is different, namely, the truth is that there is no Truth.

We can expand that to something like this. I understand that various philosophers (and cultural traditions stemming from them) have claimed Truth for our most properly validated beliefs. But from where I stand, it looks as if this is not possible. Here are some of the things I observe that lead me to that conclusion. Taken together, I suppose, they make up a theory about human knowledge. But I do not claim Truth for my philosophical theories any more than I do for my scientific or theological theories. Of course, this does not mean that I abandon the distinction between truth and falsity and say, "Anything goes. Every viewpoint is just as good as every other"—no matter how badly my critics wish I would say

that. I think that my theory is true in the sense that it is the theory we ought to hold and that the Platonic theory of truth is false because it does not do justice to what I see and to what I think you can see if you look carefully and honestly. Since the truth I claim for my theory is different from the Truth I deny to it and to every other theory, I fail to see the performative contradiction. Just as Humeans can debate what causal judgments we should make, while denying that the "right" ones express insight into necessary connection, so postmodernists can debate what theories we should adopt, while denying that any of them simply and finally gets it right.

If the self-reference objection had the force its proponents wish for, there would be nothing left of postmodernism to appropriate, at least not as a theory of Truth. But it does not have that force, and in that respect the path to appropriation remains open. I remain interested in appropriation because I find much in the postmodern hermeneutics of finitude and of suspicion to be compelling philosophically. Moreover as a Christian thinker I find postmodernism's hermeneutics of finitude helpful in thinking about human createdness and its hermeneutics of suspicion helpful in thinking about human fallenness.

As promised, my appropriation will involve a double negation, a rejection and a recontextualizing. Both of these stem from the way the postmodern insights get expressed. It seems to me that the postmodern arguments are about the limits of human understanding and that they support the claim that we do not have access to Truth. But that is different from the claim that there is no Truth, which would only be true if there were no other subject or subjects capable of Truth. But one looks in vain for an argument, even a bad argument for the claim that the conditions for human understanding are the conditions for any understanding whatever.

Secular postmodernism is guilty, I believe, of a *non sequitur* that is equal but opposite to the one we noticed earlier. That one slid from "there is something Absolute" to "our speech about the Absolute must be absolute." Postmodernism tends to slide in the opposite direction, from "we have no absolute insight" to "there is no absolute insight." Hence the formulation, "the truth is that *there is no Truth*." But this is equivalent to the claim that since our understanding is not divine there is no divine understanding, a view that might be taken to exaggerate our importance in the overall scheme of things.

Kant, in the First Critique, is as stubborn as any postmodernist in denying our access to Truth. But he thinks it would be simple dogmatism to deny the reality of God and that only God's knowledge, unlike human knowledge, deserves to be called Truth. Similarly, in a context where

Truth and System have been tightly linked by Hegelian theory, Kierkegaard's Climacus says that reality is a system for God, but not for us as existing creatures. Kant and Kierkegaard provide the theistic context into which I would like to appropriate postmodernism's claim. In this case, not surprisingly, recontextualizing means reformulating. The version I want to propose is this:

> The truth is that there is Truth, but in our finitude and fallenness we do not have access to it. We have to make do with the truths available to us; but that does not mean either that we should deny the reality of Truth or that we should abandon the distinction between truth and falsity. Moreover, the most we should claim for this claim itself is that it is true, that it is the best way for us humans to think about the matter.

The rejection that accompanies this recontextualizing is fairly obvious. It is the secular, atheistic project of some postmodernists that falls by the wayside. My claim is that the arguments I am interested in appropriating neither presuppose nor entail a godless world and that the links between those arguments, and the secular project with which they are usually associated by friend and foe alike, are merely biographical and not conceptual. To repeat, this is because those arguments show, not that there is no God but simply that we are not God. Moreover, they do so in ways that make it more difficult to agree that we are not God and then go about our business, theoretical and practical, as if we were.

In saying that we do not have access to the Truth, I am claiming that we do not possess it, that we do not preside over it, that our knowledge fails to embody the ideals of adequation and correspondence in terms of which Truth has traditionally been defined. But this does not entail that the Truth has no access to us, or that we should abandon the attempt to determine how best to think about what there is. The boy who does not suck on coins because his parents have told him about the bugs that will make him sick does not have the Truth about the matter (defined, in the analogy, by superior parental knowledge). But he does think about the matter as a boy with his intellectual limitations ought to think about it. Moreover it is important to recognize from a theological point of view that his knowledge of the truth of the matter, while neither Knowledge nor Truth, is sufficient to keep him healthy (so far as coins are concerned) and to bring him into a grateful and obedient relation to his parents. It is not clear that we should ask our knowledge of God to do more than this.

I want to conclude with a remembrance of another pastor, this one my own, years ago. His preaching did not shy away in the least from kerygmatic boldness; and he never suggested that we replace the Ten

Commandments with the Ten Suggestions. He wrestled hard with the biblical text in order that his sermons might be as faithful to it as possible. But with great regularity he ended his sermons with these words: "I think it must be something like that." I like to think of him, anachronistically to be sure, as having appropriated postmodernism.

Works Cited

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