Critical Idealism and Postmodernism

One of the intriguing ironies of the history of philosophy is that Enlightenment Modernism already anticipated and provided a strategy for responding to the skepticism of Postmodernism.

Postmodernism is usually linked to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*[1] (1979, English 1985), in which he dismisses the meta-narratives of Western culture as bankrupt because of their destructiveness. It is also associated with a movement in architecture that is characterized by the demolition of gigantic buildings (e.g., hotels in Las Vegas) and sport facilities as a symbol of the impermanence of even the most massive of human constructions. In the theory of knowledge, Postmodernism is intimately connected with Deconstructionism that seeks to cultivate the virtues of vulgar skepticism for a project of justice.

Meta-narratives are attempts to place us into explanatory answers to the questions: where have we come from?, why are we here?, where are we going? Such narratives are communal by nature, and they place the individual into a historical context to which one is indebted and for which one is called to sacrifice. Such meta-narratives can be religious, political, and/or economic, and they have proven to be incredibly destructive. The meta-narratives of racism, nationalism, religious confessionalism, sexism, and gender orientation have been devastating and constitute an indictment of our species. However, such meta-narratives reach down to sub-narratives that define us by gang affiliation and or sport teams, and the violence associated with such "explanations of who we are" continue to shock us from drug cartel violence, to mafia murders, to soccer hooligans. The destructiveness of the Russian Gulag and the German death camps, but more recently the genocide of Ruanda, the Balkans, and clan violence, can all be traced to meta-narratives that were/are used to justify the violent dominance of one group over others. Lyotard's critique of such meta-narratives is not new in the French tradition. François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), arguably the most famous Enlightenment thinker, guesstimated that a million people a century have been killed out of religious intolerance. Europe was devastated by the (not exclusively but primarily) religiously motivated Thirty Years War from 1618-1648 that pitted Catholic against Protestant and saw the slaughter of up to 50% of the population in parts of southern Germany and Austria. However, one also remembered the atrocities and slaughter of peasants and nobility in the bloody Peasants War a century earlier that swept across eastern France, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, which sought to overcome the injustices of the feudal system on the basis of biblical warrants and backings.

[1] Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

The epistemological skepticism that drives Deconstructionism is also nothing new with Jacques Derrida. David Hume, arguably the most famous figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, distinguished between "vulgar" and "refined" skepticism in his *Dialogs Concerning Natural Religion*.[2] Whereas Derrida talks about understanding as an endless series of linguistic traces erasing traces far from having any anchor in a metaphysical essentialism or empiricism, Hume was the first to emphasize that causal explanations (the foundation of knowledge) are constructions on the basis of our experience of effects, not on the basis of our direct empirical access to causes. Hume's *Dialogs* were primarily an investigation of teleology in nature, and he pointed out how teleology is a use of analogy, which by definition cannot establish certainty. That nature has an order that appears to be analogous to the order that is the consequence of human creativity (ends/means) is grounded only in a speculative leap since, not only do we not have access to the minds of other persons, we surely do not have access to the minds of the gods or the mind of God who would be the intentional authors of nature's order. Furthermore, analogies are approximately accurate so long as there is a similarity between the analogates (apples and pears). The greater the difference between the analogates, the less valid the analogy. There can be no greater difference between analogates than finite humanity and infinite divinity. Hume invoked a number of additional arguments (e.g., that imperfect effects can never justify the conclusion that they have a perfect cause; given the radical differences among the effects of inorganic and organic phenomena, there is no reason to conclude that the "first cause" of creation is singular) not only to undermine the confidence of our knowledge of a divine author (or authors) but also to shatter our confidence that we can understand anything. Nonetheless, Hume ridicules such vulgar skepticism by invoking a pragmatic argument: "Whether your skepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, [Philo], we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up; we shall then see whether you go out at the door or the window, and whether you really doubt if your body has gravity or can be injured by its fall, according to popular opinion derived from our fallacious senses and more fallacious experience." (Part I: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) In other words, our habitual experience of phenomena allows us to draw conclusions about the regularity and predictability of events that is sufficient to guide our actions even if we don't possess absolute knowledge of the phenomena. Such a refined skepticism rests on the assumption that we can trust the phenomena to have regularity, and we must only diligently observe the phenomena and remember the ways in which they interact in order to establish confidence in the "way things are." This is reminiscent of Aristotelian science that seeks to develop explanations based on the combinations of phenomena (earth, air, fire, and water) rather than base explanations on imperceptible physical laws. One reins in one's skepticism by voting on regularity in the interactions among phenomena. Derrida's non-metaphorical metaphor of traces erasing traces is merely a clever re-articulation of Hume's skepticism. In fact, one can wonder whether Derrida is not more a vulgar than a refined skeptic in Hume's sense.

Famously in his *Prolegommena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik* AA III: 260, Kant acknowledges Hume as having awoken Kant from his dogmatic slumbers. However, Kant's awakening took him in the very opposite direction from Hume as the strategy for establishing our knowledge of phenomena. Rather than base knowledge on the wager that phenomena behave predictably (i.e., rather than base knowledge solely on the content of our external experience), Kant followed Johann Nicolas Tetens and Johann George Sulzer, who had stressed

[2] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackettet Pub., Co. 1982).

that human cognition involved more than the sense impressions of empirical phenomena. The focus of Critical Idealism, to invoke our metaphor again, turned the spy glass in the opposite direction from the phenomena although there can be no turning of the spy glass without phenomena to demand it. Consciousness *adds to* the phenomena elements that cannot be in the phenomena in order to make sense of them. However, Tetens, Sulzer, and Kant, unlike the Transcendental Idealism of Platonism, did not appeal to a metaphysical system of universals to serve as the source of what consciousness *adds to* the phenomena. Critical Idealism remains within the limits of reason rather than engage in speculations about "things in themselves" and/or universals as the guarantors of our understanding. What must consciousness necessarily do in order to make sense of phenomena.

Here the spy glass has been reversed: although there is no understanding without empirical phenomena, it is no longer the phenomena themselves that ground knowledge. What grounds knowledge are a set of *necessities* that we must be capable of *adding to* the phenomena in order to understand. Although this may sound like Kant and his companions are opening the floodgates to unbridled speculation, the example of the Copernican Revolution is sufficient to remind us of the power of such necessities in consciousness: in order to properly understand our solar system, we must invoke a mathematical model that *requires us to deny our senses*. In other words, not every addition to empirical intuition is legitimate, it behoove us to be extremely prudent (to engage in critical reflection) when it comes to identifying those elements that are *necessary* for us to *add to the phenomena* in order to properly understand. Here, the conclusion about the adequacy of understanding is not based on wishful thinking (and habitual perceptions) but on careful analysis of elements like quantity, quality, relation, and modality that we add to the phenomena. For example, we never experience "one" in phenomena, we at best experience "one *thing*." We don't experience "reality" in phenomena, we experience "*things* as real." We don't experience substances, causes, or interactions, but "*things* as substantial," "*things/effects* as having a cause," and "*things* as related to *other things*." Such concepts have to be (*must necessarily be*) added to the phenomena in order to us to understand. Understanding is not simply experiencing phenomena as habitually conforming to a sequence. Rather, understanding involves critical reflection about what has to be necessarily the case that this phenomena can appear with the order and predictability that it does. Crudely, we don't experience the physical laws of nature in the senses. We experience events occurring in nature *according to laws*. It is consciousness that can add the law to the phenomena not only to grasp them adequately but, in turn, to transform the phenomena in ways that their mere conformity to the natural law could never accomplish. In other words, humanity not only can understand the transcendental conditions that make knowledge of phenomena possible. Consciousness can also creatively transform the phenomena in ways that nature on its own could never do.

Here is the crucial point where we step beyond *theoretical* reason into the "higher" capacity of *pure* reason with its conditions for *practical* reason. In other words, here we must shift our understanding of reason. Theoretical reason is "discursive." The presuppositions of discursive reason are that we are capable of defining and logically distinguishing between and among phenomena. As decisively significant such discursive reasoning is for our experience and understanding of the world, it, as with determining judgment generally, is only the most basic aspect of rational experience, and it is to a degree shared with all other conscious beings.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* B 699, Kant introduces what he calls the *reflective ideas* of reason that are not determinative of the understanding of phenomena (i.e., they are not *constitutive*), but ideas that are incapable of proof or disproof that are *necessary assumptions* for us to experience as we do. The three ideas of pure reason are: God, Cosmology/Freedom, and the Soul. These we know not be discursive reason but by what Plato called "contemplation" (*theoria*), not discursive thought. The universe must have some "origin," and that necessity is enough to justify the title "God" for it without succumbing to literal, anthropomorphic metaphors. The universe must be so constituted out of causes that, as heterogeneous as they are, are capable of fitting without reductionism. The self must consist of an "enduring identity" although we can only experience its effects/appearances, never the identity itself. There are and can be no empirical proofs for these reflective ideas of pure reason. What justifies our conclusions, then, that they are *necessary*? We cannot resolve our doubt by invoking empirical evidence.These ideas are necessary not because they are habitually confirmed by our perception of phenomena, as Hume would have to conclude. Rather, we know these ideas are necessary because they are demanded by the very manner in which we experience phenomena. If we were to deny these reflective ideas, then our experience would be un-understandable.

Our very skepticism, then, turns into confirming necessity. This is Kant's profound *Postmodern* strategy already to be found in the *Modern* Enlightenment. Yet, this transcendental strategy for identifying necessities in experience is no segue to unbridled speculations. Not everything that we could conjure up in our fantasy can be turned into a necessity. The necessity must not undermine our ability to understand and to act in the world. This is a decisive criterion: whenever a presumed necessity would threaten the exercise of our supersensible capacities to understand and act responsibly in the phenomenal world, it is clearly a dubious necessity.

A quick example: we might be tempted to assume it necessary to invoke the idea of a miracle to explain a set of phenomena. Since a miracle is a form of causal explanation, we are incapable of proving or disproving that there are such extraordinary causes not susceptible to the laws of nature. Why would one not want to invoke such a causal explanation for an otherwise inexplicable event? Not because we know that it couldn't happen but because, if it does happen, it completely undermines our ability to understand the phenomenal world. It would invoke a capriciousness as a causal explanation that would, in turn, even discourage us to look for a predictable, natural causes of the phenomena in question. As a unique event, it is surely difficult to speak of a law governing the event because laws require multiple events. However, by ruling out a law with the invocation of the explanation that the event was a miracle, we rule out any possible future understanding. Humanities capacities are never complete in and of themselves. They require cultivation, and our capacities for understanding and responsible action can never be concluded – given the limits to reason.

Both vulgar and refined skepticism are turned into a strategy for the identification of necessities that make it possible for us to experience and act as we do in the world. That is a far more weighty epistemological strategy than to hope for the perception of habitual repetition of phenomena. It is only by *seeing things that aren't there* in the phenomena that we *must necessarily add to the phenomena* that it is possible for us to understand, and those things that

constitute the necessary conditions and capacities of experience and action, in turn, can serve as criteria for the very adequacy of our assumed necessities.

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