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ABSTRACT

Although several recent articles have addressed postmodernism in ethical terms, it is not difficult to see the perils facing anyone who wants to talk about ethics, since it is hard to justify certain practices over others. An individual cannot appeal to human needs or capacities, since these are said to be variously constructed by various discourse communities; a person cannot speak of ethical knowledge, because such talk is infected with objectivist rationality, said to be deadly in its own right. To the extent that an individual does any of these things while simultaneously promoting a postmodern epistemology, he or she is engaging in self-refutation and incoherence. Postmodernism is a notoriously imprecise term which emphasizes the situatedness of all knowledge claims and rejects the notion that theories match or fit reality in more or less accurate ways. For many postmodernists, truth does not exist, or if it does, limited human beings could never know it all. Postmodernism seems to demystify, while at the same time reject the idea that there is anything there to be demystified. The postmodern dichotomy between socially constructed knowledge and truth is a false dichotomy, taking the form of rhetoric or situatedness versus truth. So the postmodern ethical project seems doomed because it relies uncritically on false postmodern precepts and assumptions. Considering what is at stake, humanities scholars and teachers should think through the pitfalls of postmodernism and elaborate an epistemology and an ethics that is coherent and compatible with emancipatory aims. (Contains 16 references.) (CR)

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### Toward a Coherent Antifoundational Practice

The notion, then, that there exists an objective reality "out there," independent of our perceptions of it, far from being an ideological rationalization for the existing order, is a prerequisite for changing the existing order, which has to be understood as it is before it can be altered. --Gerald Graff (27)

Speaking as a hierarchical, essentialistic, teleological, metahistorical, universalist humanist, I imagine I have some explaining to do. --Terry Eagleton (93)

Our session title this evening, "The Fate of Ethics in Postmodern Theory," strikes me as rather dark and foreboding. Indeed, one definition of "fate" in my dictionary reads "death, destruction, or ruin." Our conference organizers certainly might have created a more optimistic ambiance by swapping out "fate" for a synonym; consider, for example, "Destiny of Ethics in Postmodern Theory." Think about it: Luke Skywalker has a destiny; fate is generally reserved for Custer or Napoleon or Caesar.

But I think our session title (with its gloomy undertones) is actually quite apt, and I think perhaps that it is a subtle indication of a growing and widespread concern that postmodernism--a system of thought that developed at least in part from entirely ethical, anti-absolutist, anti-authoritarian impulses--has been utterly unable to articulate or capably defend a coherent and compelling and compassionate ethics. It's not that people haven't tried; during the last decade, numerous well-meaning scholars and teachers have attempted to theorize and elaborate a postmodern ethics. This is not easy, of course, because as soon as one starts "doing" meta-ethics--just as when one starts doing epistemology--one is no longer really doing postmodernism. The trick, as one recent contributor to College English puts it, is this: "To

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talk about ethics in a way that informs current practice in our discipline requires a complete reconfiguration of ethics in response to postmodern precepts" (Friend 549).

What I will be arguing this evening--and perhaps my subtitle should be "The Death, Destruction, and Ruin of Ethics in Postmodern Theory"--is that the postmodern ethical project is doomed precisely because it relies uncritically on false postmodern precepts and assumptions. If postmodernism were right in its ironically sweeping and self-certain claims about humans and knowledge, then indeed we would want to reconfigure our ethics in light of it. However, I want to suggest here--and I am relying, often tacitly, on a number of writers in the natural and social sciences--that much postmodern thinking is incoherent, self-refuting, and false, and thus an ethics of postmodernism is likely to suffer accordingly.

My discussion of "The Fate of Ethics" involves me primarily in negative critique. The first part of my talk will be an examination and analysis of postmodern epistemology, with a look at passages from several recent articles in our field that address ethical issues in postmodern terms. But my paper is entitled, "Toward a Coherent Antifoundational Practice," and so I want to conclude by sketching out, however briefly, an ethical alternative based on moral realism. Given the time constraints, given the fact that moral realism is a relatively new research program in need of elaboration, and given the intensity of people's commitments to postmodern assumptions, I have rather modest expectations here. I would hope that what we all agree on is the need, during this time of rampant inequality and suffering and institutional violence, for a reconceptualization of ethical theory and practice.

Postmodernism is a notoriously imprecise term. For the sake of this talk, I will refer

to postmodernism as a system of thought that includes, but is not limited to, the following: a celebration of and emphasis on the local, the particular, the communal, the subjective, the ambiguous, the indeterminant, and the constructed; and conversely, a rejection of the transcendent, the universal, the essential, the foundational, the objective, the discovered, and the true. In general, postmodernism emphasizes the situatedness of all knowledge claims, and it rejects the notion that our theories match or fit reality in more or less accurate ways. For many postmodernists, truth does not exist, or if it does, limited human beings could never know it; all we know is our knowledge, and there is no metaphysical grounding for this knowledge. With truth banished, rhetoric takes center stage, as if the two, like Superman and Kryptonite, cannot exist together. Truth--usually accessorized with scare quotes or with an apologetic "small-t"--is that which happens when rhetoric is successful. Humans create reality, and rival accounts of reality are incommensurable since there is no way of getting outside our conceptual systems to evaluate competing claims. Theories determine--rather than mediate--the evidence they need for ratification, and for many postmodernists, this is as true of biology or astronomy as it is of ethics. Our values, according to many postmodernists, are simply screens for our material interests.

All of this is by now quite familiar and generally accepted, so much so, in fact, that it is frequently assumed to be true and rarely argued for. The following claim, made by Lee Patterson and cited by Reed Way Dasenbrock in his excellent essay on "Truth and Methods," has become passe in contemporary English studies. Patterson writes: "the relation between language and the world is not that of correspondence--a statement is true when it conforms to the way the world is--but of convention: a statement is true when it conforms to certain norms

that govern what a particular way of writing takes to be true" ("Truth" 551). Patterson is writing about literary theory and historicism, but the view he expresses has been widely adopted by scholars in rhetoric and composition. For instance, Patricia Bizzell writes, "persuasive language creates truth by inducing belief; 'truth' results when rhetoric is successful" (261). Another scholar writes in Rhetoric Review that "objectivity is a futile attempt to purify or legitimize subjectivity" (Rasmussen). And an author in College English proclaims that "the remedy to false notions of an objectified world is relativism" (Paine 559).

It isn't entirely clear what "false notions" could possibly mean here, given the demise of truth. It is also a bit of a mystery, and Dasenbrock makes this point nicely, whether the previously-cited claims are universally and transparadigmatically true, or whether they are only true for a certain discourse community, in which case dissenting communities need not heed these claims. We are faced with some curious and troubling paradoxes: the claims that there is no truth and that there are no self-evident facts have become truths that we take to be self-evident. The theory that no human theories can accurately match reality is taken by many to be a perfect match with reality. The claim that competing claims are incommensurable is regarded hands-down as superior to any competing claim. As Terry Eagleton writes, postmodernism "is animated by the critical spirit, and rarely brings it to bear upon its own propositions" (Illusions 26).

It is not difficult to see the perils facing anyone who wants to talk about ethics. One has a difficult time justifying certain practices over others; one cannot speak for other groups of people; one cannot appeal to human needs and capacities, because human needs and capacities are said to be variously constructed by various discourse communities; one cannot

speak of ethical knowledge, because such talk is infected with objectivist rationality, which is said to be deadly in its own right. To the extent that one does any of these things while simultaneously promoting a postmodern epistemology, one is engaging in self-refutation and incoherence.

In the face of these difficulties, I think postmodernist ethics has taken a regrettable, but entirely explicable, course. Since our values are, at bottom, unjustifiable and mysterious--since we do what we do simply because that's what we do--then why not just 'fess up? Why not just admit that we believe our beliefs? While we can't offer our students anything true or better, and we can't liberate them in any sense because there is no outside, we can avow our commitments and carry on. Maybe I can't justify my unit on the Holocaust over my colleague's unit on Holocaust denial, but this is no cause for paralysis or political quietism.

Paralysis and quietism are, for many postmodernists, the worst possible alternative. This is because many, if not most, are at least in part politically-minded and left-oriented. I think here of Patricia Bizzell, who has written eloquently about the need for academics to work for social justice. But the way around quietism has too often been a sort of decisionism, somewhat akin to Stanley Fish's idea of "doing what comes naturally." There is nothing else we can do, this reasoning goes, but to go forth in the world, self-conscious about our arbitrary positions but nonetheless committed. Bizzell writes, "I'm willing to risk looking as if my values come from a mysterious source, while being able to provide explanation only to the effect that they are historically located and communally sanctioned" (283).

Numerous recent articles in our field have argued for this type of decisionism. In a College English article, Charles Paine echoes Bizzell:

We still believe in our values . . . whether we believe them to be transcendently anchored or anchored merely by our personal convictions. Therefore, it is of course reasonable . . . to try to inculcate into our students the conviction that the dominant order is repressive . . . . The recognition that all the values we teach are radically contingent will only, as far as I can see, call for our making our agenda clear to them . . . .

Because we make clear that these are personal beliefs--but held with strong conviction nevertheless--and because we realize we are not teaching the truth . . . the degree to which we are able to influence students depends a great deal upon charisma and power. (564)

Paine goes on to argue that teachers "must accept their role as manipulator" 563).

Judson Curry, in a 1993 Rhetoric Review essay, draws an extended analogy between religious conversion and antifoundational conversion. After denying any prescriptivist intent, he writes, "Sisters and brothers, this is the process of conversion in which we are engaged: Our students come to us as foundationalists and we must, in the name of empowerment, transform them into antifoundationalists" (164). But Curry later qualifies his analogy to meet postmodern emission standards; while antifoundationalism is a more "useful," "fruitful," "realistic," empowering, and anti-hegemonic way of thinking, it is not of course any better or more true than foundationalism. He writes, we should not "imagine that we are simply showing our students the way things really are. Rather we are constructing a reality for our students. Antifoundationalists can make no claims to truth. Having converted the listener, the antifoundationalist witness cannot point the new convert toward any one course of sanctification" (165).

As a final example, I refer to a 1994 essay by Terry Rassmussen, also in Rhetoric Review. Rassmussen argues that logos is dead because there is no foundational or self-evident knowledge, and she argues that pathos is irresponsible because it preys on the emotional vulnerabilities of an audience. Thus "we have to place a renewed trust in, or merely come to grips with, the powerful influence of ethos" (157). "Once we toss out

objective premises," she writes, "I believe we ultimately end up siding with a messenger as much if not more than the message, in which case we voluntarily consent to accept the messenger's ethos as the authority that ultimately justifies our position" (159). Rasmussen thus preserves commitment and persuasion through an emphasis on ethos.

Each of the above-mentioned writers has managed, though not always coherently, to elude paralysis and to create room for commitments, values, beliefs, and persuasion in the classroom. But we must ask, What are they offering their students? Their talk of emancipation and liberation and ethical persuasion is tainted with talk of conversion and manipulation and power. They envision themselves in a process of swapping out their students' unjustifiable beliefs with other kinds of unjustifiable beliefs, which are somehow more "useful" without being more true, more "realistic" without being more real.

These writers want to "toss out" objectivity, and yet Paine argues that critically minded students will gain objective knowledge of their own repressive consciousnesses and the violence of the status quo; Curry seems quite able to identify objectively his students naive foundationalism; and Rasmussen implies that although we have no way of assessing the truth or falsity of, say, Aristotle's claim that women are natural slaves or Murray and Herrnstein's racist claims in The Bell Curve, we can nevertheless objectively recognize and identify with a speaker's ethos. As Dasenbrock argues, "Any principled argument against objectivity presupposes it." The point is an important one: Negation--i.e. there is no objectivity, there is no truth, humans cannot know reality, etc.--requires the very objectivity and access that it denies.

There is a very real sense in which postmodern relativism or conventionalism is the



flip side of the absolutism that it so vehemently rejects. Talk of conversion and manipulation and charisma makes antifoundationalism seem mysterious and dogmatic, not liberating. In its attempt to elude paralysis, postmodernism often sanctions a decisionism that grounds authority in the idea that this is just what we do, which is hardly an attractive alternative to the oppressive culture of positivism that it denounces. Postmodernism seeks to demystify, while at the same time it rejects the idea that there is anything there to be demystified. As Gerald Graff writes, "demystifying consists in an assault not only on certain conceptions of reality but on the idea that there is any such thing as a knowable reality independent of ideology and myth. Following this line of argument, the demystifiers can hardly help universalizing mystification in the very process of trying to drive it away" (27). I would add, furthermore, that if all there is is mystification, a totalizing claim if there ever was one (and self-undermining, as well), then postmodernism has difficulty justifying its program of replacing old, outworn mystifications with its own stylish brand. I conclude this section with a quote from Landon Beyer and Daniel Liston:

As educators we are always and necessarily moral actors, at whatever level we teach, in whatever subject matter we claim competence. We are confronted daily with myriad choices that call for the development of reasons to support one course of action over another, the result of which may have profound and long-lasting consequences. A postmodern orientation seems ill-equipped to handle these deliberative features of daily educational life. (390)

Given the state of epistemological debate in English Studies, a realist about science or ethics faces a daunting credibility problem. A scientific realist argues that the objects of our inquiry exist and act independently of our theory-mediated, historically situated descriptions of such objects. A realist contends that over time and with much hard work, humans come to

know about the world--we never of course have direct access to reality, but nevertheless we can build and elaborate disciplines of knowledge that can produce more or less accurate and reliable information. Our theories guide and often constrain us, but they do not merely generate self-sustaining evidence. As Stephen Jay Gould writes, "Good theories invite a challenge, but do not bias the outcome" (149). Even when our theories are wrong--and they are wrong all the time--they can still produce true and useful information. As Richard Boyd writes,

Until Darwin, essentially all biologists attributed the organization and the adaptive features of the physiology, anatomy, and behavior of plants and animals to God's direct planning. That attribution did not prevent biologists from accumulating the truly astonishing body of knowledge about anatomy, physiology, and animal behavior upon which Darwin's discovery of evolution by natural selection depended; nor did it prevent their recognizing the profound biological insights of Darwin's theory. (208)

Our theories provide evidence (and often anomalous evidence), our evidence helps sharpen our theories, which then provide new and better evidence, and so on. None of our scientific beliefs or methods are self-justifying or foundational or a priori. They are achieved through human endeavor, and they are measured by their explanatory power, their coherence with other reliable beliefs, and their ability to mediate new evidence. Thus objective accurate knowledge is obtained through antifoundational, fallibilist practice.

Like postmodern anti-realist arguments, realist arguments are extremely complex, and I cannot hope to do them justice here. Perhaps the best I can do is to recommend a few excellent sources in the natural and social sciences, most notably Richard Boyd, Roy Bhaskar, Alan Gilbert, Frank Farrell, Phillip Kitcher, and David Brink. The point I would most like to emphasize here is that the postmodern dichotomy between socially constructed knowledge and truth is a false dichotomy. This false dichotomy also takes the form of rhetoric vs. truth, or

situatedness vs. truth. The idea is that where rhetoric (or politics or interest) is, truth cannot be. Postmodernism has given us valuable insights that no inquiry is value-free and that all knowledge is human made, but this is not to say that all knowledge is just made up. We have no access to theory-independent reality, but it does constrain our belief formation in crucial ways. As Frank Farrell writes,

even if our subjective apparatus plays a role in how the world appears, it is the world itself that is appearing to us, not some substitute realm of appearances. How reality is and how we take it to be cannot vary independently in the Kantian fashion, not because we determine what reality is, but because it determines how an interpreter will fix the semantic content of our statements. Our abilities are limited, and perhaps there are very many features of the universe that are worth having beliefs about and about which we are not able to have any beliefs at all. But the beliefs we do have are largely about features that are really there, and we can hope to extend gradually our conceptual reach so that our picture of how things are becomes more adequate. (127)

A realist grants readily that all knowledge is constructed, but she is anxious to add that some constructed knowledge is false (for example, the idea that race is a biological category, or that some races are innately superior) while some constructed knowledge is true or at least partially true. The realist insists, that is, on the distinction between ontology and epistemology, while the postmodernist often conflates the two (what Bhaskar calls the epistemic fallacy).

While most postmodernists would reject outright the version of scientific realism I just outlined, the moral realist wants to extend it to the realm of ethics. That is, a moral realist argues that just as humans make discoveries and gradually learn about the natural world, so they make discoveries and learn about themselves. More specifically, we learn about our needs and capacities, we learn about objective conditions that produce happiness, healthiness, and well-being. In this sense, a realist about ethics rejects the fact/value dichotomy and

asserts that there are moral facts that exist independently of our contingent understanding, but which we might come to discover: one such fact may be that the condition of slavery is not conducive to human flourishing. As Eagleton writes in Ideology, "Moral judgements are as much candidates for rational argumentation as are the more obviously descriptive parts of our speech . . . . That Jews are inferior beings is quite as false as that Paris is the capital of Afghanistan" (17). This is not to say that we have a clear-cut answer on every, or even many, moral questions, and it certainly is not to say that the moral realist is the clear-sighted guardian of the truth, but it is to deny that morality is wholly relative or that cultures create the human natures they need.

Postmodernists often regard human nature talk as dangerous, although it is difficult to know what "dangerous" means if our species is really as malleable as they would have us believe. The truth is, of course, that talk of human nature can indeed be very dangerous, and it has been used to justify all kinds of reprehensible behaviors. But retreating from the human nature question altogether--declaring it off limits--seems to be a curious way of fighting hegemony or promoting emancipation. Essentialism is one of the deadly sins under postmodernism, but to quote Eagleton once more,

we cannot jettison essentialism because we need to know among other things which needs are essential to humanity and which are not. Needs which are essential to our survival and well-being, such as being fed, keeping warm, enjoying the company of others and a degree of physical integrity, can then become politically criterial: any social order which denies such needs can be challenged on the grounds that it is denying our humanity, which is usually a stronger argument against it than the case that it is flouting our contingent cultural conventions. (104)

Richard Boyd, in his essay "How to be a Moral Realist" includes among a list of important human needs "the need for love and friendship, the need to engage in cooperative

efforts, the need to exercise control over one's own life, the need for intellectual and artistic appreciation and expression, the need for physical recreation, etc." According to Boyd, we have discovered these needs, and much of our knowledge is "genuinely experimental knowledge." For example, "we would not have been able to explore the dimensions of our needs for artistic expression and appreciation had not social and technological developments made possible cultures in which, for some classes at least, there was the leisure to produce and consume art" (205). He goes on to state that the "question of just which important human needs there are is a potentially difficult and complex empirical question" (203).

About this, that is, the difficulty and complexity of learning about ourselves, our needs and capacities, there can certainly be no doubt. And yet I think such a project is as crucial as it is daunting. Considering what is at stake, I hope that scholars and teachers in the humanities will have the nerve to think through the pitfalls of postmodernism and to elaborate an epistemology and an ethics that is coherent and compatible with emancipatory aims.

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