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UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David

Essay 2.

Late - Capped

Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment Coversheet & Feedback Form

[Please insert this coversheet as the first page of the assignment you are submitting]

For completion by the student:

Student Name: Abhishek Sharma

Module code: CSPH7041

Student University
Number:
1807879

Educational
support needs:
NO

Module title: Self and Society

Module tutor: Rebecca Humphries

Assignment title: "There is still a significant amount of confusion about what modernity is and whether postmodernity is merely an extension of the self-critique begun in the Enlightenment." Critically examine and assess the validity of this statement using your understanding of its terms.

Assignment due date: 31/08/2019

I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism.

Name: Abhishek Sharma

Assignment Mark

1st Marker's Provisional mark

67 (Late)

2nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark

External Examiner mark (if relevant)

Final Mark

To be capped at 50.

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board

Overall, this is a well written piece of work which focuses on the task set producing a reasonable discussion of the issue. In places, though, it appears that you are

For completion by Marker 1:

Comments: trying to discover whether the precepts of modernism & 'post-modernism' cohere, rather than exploring whether postmod. is simply an extension of modernism (the latter is what you aim to do, & while there is some need for the former, you do not need to focus on this too much). Section 6 is really interesting & the ideas here could be developed a bit further - this would allow for a better supported conclusion. But, in general, the way you've approached the task together with your

Marker 1 signature:

wide understanding of the philosophical issues at stake

Date:

For completion by Marker 2 / Moderator:

Comments:

good grasp of the topic in relation to the history of ideas.

ETH 9/9/19.

Marker 2 / Moderator signature:

Date:

External Examiner's comments (if relevant):

External Examiner signature:

Date:

Summative Assessment:

“There is still a significant amount of confusion about what modernity is and whether postmodernity is merely an extension of the self-critique begun in the Enlightenment.” Critically examine and assess the validity of this statement using your understanding of its terms.

Abhishek Sharma (1807879)

1. Introduction

In this essay, I shall consider the era of *modernity*, *its'* philosophical tenets, and a definition of modernity alongside *post-modernity*. I shall first begin by developing the historical context of how modernity came about. Subsequently I shall examine the question above, "whether postmodernity is merely an extension of the self-critique begun in the Enlightenment", and whether the shift from *the enlightenment* into post-modernity did in fact represent a paradigm shift significant enough to warrant a distinction of the two categories.

However, even an exposition on the categorisation of modernity and post-modernity must begin in the ancient world. In the western tradition, Philosophy has undergone repeated paradigm changes over thousands of years. Traditionally, western philosophy attributes its roots to ancient Greece, where the first people to call themselves *philosophers* employed rational argument for the explanation of the world and left traces of their existence in often obscure and poorly preserved fragments (1). Whilst the modern image of philosophers is that of persons keen to accumulate and disseminate their knowledge, simply for the sake of its truth, this was not always the case for the ancients. Ancient Pythagoreans for instance, were famously secretive about their knowledge. Sophists (and I use this term in its unbiased form, rather than Plato's somewhat scornful use of the term) expected a fee for their educational services, and often taught rhetoric. A paradigm shift then occurred in Athens, when Socrates proposed philosophy as an elevated way of life. He chose to engage ordinary people in argument to demonstrate their incomplete understanding of particular concepts taken for granted. He clearly made an impression on his student Plato (2), who in turn didn't just make an impression on his most famous student, Aristotle, but rather on almost all western thought for two millennia (3). This is not to say that there weren't multiple schools of philosophy during this time period. All these schools, however, were ultimately influenced by these two Goliaths of ancient critical thought.

As the medieval period drew to a close in the middle of the 15th Century, new ideas from the expanding Islamic kingdoms began to propagate west, Europe re-discovered knowledge of the classical Greek language, its legacy, and in turn entered the Renaissance. Classical

philosophy was once again accessible to a Western Europe versed only in Latin. A school of philosophy that had not been seen in over a thousand years, re-appeared. Beginning with Michel de Montaigne, scepticism was re-born. Influenced by him, another Frenchman, a more radically sceptic philosopher produced one of the most important works of modern philosophy, bringing with it a tidal paradigm shift in critical western thought. The human subject took a more central role in society (this statement is not without its fallacy; the African slave trade too was established around this time, and this provides us with a contradiction, which I shall consider later). The era of modernity was thus born. ✓

2. Empiricism and Scepticism

In classical philosophy there has existed a constant dichotomy between the rationalists and the empiricists. For over two and a half millennia, the rationalists have attempted to explain the world around them through *a-priori* abstract reason (1). ^{By contrast,...} The empiricists have often claimed irrefutability of the senses with the information provided to the subject through such senses, delivering immutable truths and featuring prominently in their epistemological arguments. Perhaps the most famous of these two from classical antiquity are Plato (2), the rationalist, and Aristotle (4), the empiricist. Whilst thinkers of the past have equally adopted these schools, in more recent times the rationalists have been resigned to an unpopular status-quo. With the arrival of the European Renaissance, a 16th century philosopher and subsequent English statesman, Francis Bacon, cemented the dominance of empiricism in natural philosophy, and is famously attributed to having established *the scientific method*. In his famous work, *Novum Organum* ("The New Organon", a name inspired by the collective six logical works of Aristotle, called the Organon), he states "*Even the effects already discovered are due to chance and experiment rather than due to sciences; for our present sciences are nothing more than peculiar arrangements of matters already discovered, and not methods for discovery or plans for new operations*" (5). Hence Bacon attached importance to empirical experimentation and inductive reasoning (derivation of general principles from specific observations), rather than rationalism and deductive reasoning. With this work, the transition into modernity and the cultural dominance of empiricism began.

Not
always.

Ironically the other important figure in this transition into modernity, Rene Descartes, was in fact a rationalist. But it was his scepticism that led him to his most well-known statement: "*cogito ergo sum*" (6). This statement in fact represents a momentous shift in the role of the human subject or *the self*, in society. Prior to this Cartesian statement, it was the influence of Plato that reigned supreme in matters of knowledge. Platonic knowledge (the theory of Forms), was only accessible in the divine realm; a mere human could never hope to achieve true knowledge of these Forms (2). Plato had in turn influenced Stoics (7), Church Fathers and subsequently all of Christian Europe. In his radically sceptical stance, Descartes had unwittingly subverted two thousand years of Platonic hegemony, by stating that *the self* was in fact the arbiter of truth and knowledge. He further undermined ancient Platonic assumptions about the soul by attributing to the material body functions that had always traditionally been within the domain of the immaterial (and sometimes divine) soul.

3. The Age of Enlightenment and the Self

Having provided impetus for the self to play a more central role in knowledge, Europe entered the 18th century, colloquially known as *The Age of Enlightenment*. During this age, philosophers built on the two principles that I dwelled on in the prior section. Empiricism was now the dominant force in natural philosophy. Furthermore, *the self*, played an increasingly central role in society. David Hume's even more radical scepticism and ^{supposed} denial of causality (8) inspired Immanuel Kant to synthesise the rationalist and empiricist schools of thought in his work, *A Critique of Pure Reason* (9). Importantly, in his work, the human subject became both the subject and the object of knowledge. He thus legitimised the *humanist* philosophy that came to define this era. Such philosophy placed the human subject at the centre of its particular system. In fact, Kant's other well-known work, Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals (10), presents exactly such a system of ethics and morality. Subsequent developments in the philosophy of politics, justice, economics and education also placed the human subject and predominantly empirical reason, rather than beliefs such as religion at the core of their systems, with many philosophers advocating a separation of religion and state.

4. A definition of Modernity and Post-modernity

Re-word - claim, not a question
I shall now return to one of the original questions posed for this essay: "There is still a significant amount of confusion about what modernity is....". I shall address this *claim* question by first examining a definition of modernity. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy states "On the longest view, modernism in philosophy starts out with Descartes's quest for a knowledge self-evident to reason and secured from all the demons of sceptical doubt. It is also invoked—with a firmer sense of historical perspective—to signify those currents of thought that emerged from Kant's critical 'revolution' in the spheres of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetic judgement" (11). My above two sections provide a satisfactory account of this definition of modernity.

Good signposting
The definition of post-modernity, however, is somewhat more contentious (in fact the Oxford Handbook of Philosophy *was* does not provide a definition). Whilst the term *was* first introduced by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book, *The Postmodern Condition* (12), the foundations for post-modernism arose earlier. There were threads of post-modernity already at display by the 19th century, in the works of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche in particular produced a work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which provides ground for argument for some of the critics of post-modernity; I shall re-visit this in a later section. Some argue that post-modernity developed from the tradition of *continental* philosophy (13); again, I shall re-visit this in a later argument. Most commentators however would regard the 20th century as the period when post-modernity emerged of its own right. A definition for post-modernity is provided by Encyclopaedia Britannica as "a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power" (14). It must be noted however, that there is significant disagreement amongst philosophers as to whether postmodernism represents a true paradigm shift from modernist philosophy. I shall now consider arguments for and against these views.

Will you explain why? just briefly here, for you to go on to discuss.

5. Argument for philosophical post-modernity as a being separate to modernity

Here I shall consider some arguments for post-modernity as an entity separate from modernism. The first of these arguments is the denial of *human nature*. As noted above, modernism began when philosophical studies regarded the human subject as being of central value of that particular system (Humanism). Some post-modernists deny the existence of human nature, declaring it socially constructed, a stance that is at least, in part, supported by Karl Marx (15).

Lyotard produces such an argument in questioning why human nature has to be acquired through learning, rather than being innate to the new-born child. He also raises objections to the definition of being human which does not allow for inter-subject difference. This provides him compelling grounds to reject humanism and the importance of the human subject in knowledge. Based on this promotion of anti-humanism, there is a strong case to be made that Lyotard's stance produces a post-modernist philosophy that is very much at odds with the modernist (humanist) tradition of the enlightenment, and thus, this represents a novel epoch in philosophical inquiry, significant enough to warrant discrete categorisation. A counter argument to this may be posited by the modernist, that an anti-humanist stance is directly at odds with his stance on non-rational forces such as feelings and desires in limiting a subject's ability to reason. A perhaps weak retort would be that a similar contradiction was present in the enlightenment, that produced humanism also produced the industrial revolution, and inaction toward the slave trade.

My second argument in support of post-modernism is one that I alluded to above: Lyotard's rejection of conventional rationality, by drawing the interlocutor to the limits of reason and rationality. As noted in section 1, the traditionally accepted view is that western philosophy arose with the adoption of rational discourse in producing understanding of the world. This is evident when Thales of Miletus attempts to produce a monism based on water as the causal principle (1). Plato's dialogues and the *Socratic method* too were critical to the development

In relation to the above, do you mean 'why human nature cannot be acquired...'

Say why.

okay but do they need to release? Are you not rather trying to draw out who's postmodern? or have they shifted from modernism?

of western philosophy. Cartesian subjective rationality is the starting point for modernity and this is Lyotard's principle target in his arguments. Two of his critical arguments to this regard are *reason* and *representation*; traditionally reason acts in a structure that excludes irrationality (sensual and emotional) and representations never fully produce the entirety of underlying reality in the subject. Thus certain and complete knowledge according to Lyotard, is not possible, in contradiction to Descartes. There is some similarity in this argument and that of Nietzsche's *Apollonian and Dionysian* concept (16), which implies rationalist hegemony in the literary arts due to Socratic rationalism ("when the *mythos* became the *logos*", a trend that both of the named philosophers are perhaps trying to reverse). A counter argument proposed by Jurgen Habermas (a contemporary philosopher and outspoken critic on post-modernity), who alleges that both Nietzsche and Lyotard are in fact employing the same rational dialectic in presenting their arguments that they seek to criticise, thus undermining their own arguments; in this sense, their critique on modernity and thus the categorisation of post-modernity as a separate entity is unwarranted owing to methodological fallacy.

6. Argument for philosophical post-modernity as a being a continuation of modernity

Having considered the above arguments for post-modernity being a separate epoch in philosophy, I shall now consider arguments that propose that post-modernity is in fact simply a continuation of modernity that began in the age of enlightenment. The first of these is based on the five Agrippan modes from classical pyrrhonism (the original philosophical school of scepticism, attributed to Pyrrho of Elis). Whilst these modes are attributed to the ancient Greek sceptic Agrippa by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Philosophers*, it is re-produced in prose by the ancient physician and sceptic, Sextus Empiricus in his work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes*) (17). These five modes produced dialectic arguments against any conclusion which ultimately led to the suspension of judgement on any question, and thus *ataraxia* (ἀταξία, ancient Greek for *freedom from disturbance* or *tranquility*).

These five modes, in order, are *dispute* (disagreeing on a particular question, hence suspending judgement); *infinite regress* (premises assuming priors, which themselves are

subject to dispute, ad infinitum and thus suspending judgement); **relativity** (observations being relative to the subject, not reflecting their true nature, and therefore suspending judgement); **hypothesis** (a premise that is assumed or “believed” but not demonstrated, hence leading to suspension of judgement); and **reciprocal** (an argument where the conclusion is assumed to form part of the argument for itself). Based on my above definition of post-modernity philosophy, the broadly sceptic argument proposed by post-modernists resembles pyrrhonism (such as subjectivism/relativism being similar to the Agrippan *relativity* mode or denying that any knowledge is possible being similar to *suspending judgement*). Given the enlightenment in-fact began as a sceptical inquiry into the nature of knowledge, one might argue post-modernity is simply the natural evolution of post-Kantian scepticism. A counter argument might propose that based on such an argument, the enlightenment was simply a natural evolution of scepticism during the renaissance; in fact Sextus Empiricus adopted both tenets of modernity presented in section 2 – scepticism and empiricism. This might be answered by modernists by presenting their conception of the self, derived from Cartesian sceptical enquiry, which was absent from ancient scepticism.

A similar criticism may be presented to my above argument if we were to consider the evolution of two modern philosophical schools: *continental* philosophy and *analytic* philosophy. As implied, continental philosophy has roots in European continental tradition. The division between analytic and continental philosophy may be said to have begun after Kant’s division of the world into noumenal (material) and phenomenal (mental) world (9) (arguably this division was present prior to Kant, when he describes the British Empiricists: Locke, Hume and Berkley and the European Rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz).

Georg W. F. Hegel argued against this separation and became the pioneer of a philosophical tradition that presented unifying grand theories for all activities within the human sphere (13). It is this tradition that evolved into structuralism and subsequently into post-structuralism and deconstructionism from which post-modernism takes its stance. If humanism, a defining feature of modernity, arose from post-Kantian philosophy, the same post-Kantian tradition that formed continental philosophy, then post-modernity is simply a

revised modern continuation of this enlightenment tradition. A post-modernist could argue that this does not account for the individualisation that is prevalent in post-modernity in comparison to continental philosophy, which takes a more totalising stance. However, a counter argument could be posed whereby such individualisation is simply an extension of the individualisation of the human subject that began during the enlightenment.

explain
And continental philosophy
often starts with the subjective
individual.

5. Conclusion

In the above essay, I have summarised the rise of modernity from ancient history. I have described modernity and explained why post-modernity is a contentious and difficult definition to produce. Finally I have provided reason for and against such a description and I am compelled to conclude that post-modernism does not produce enough methodological innovation over that developed in modernity, to warrant its own categorisation as a separate entity.

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