

POSTMODERNISM

modern dichotomy was made explicit by Wilhelm Dilthey in the nineteenth century, but was grounded in the metaphysical dualisms of early modern thought (extended vs. thinking substance, nature vs. mind). On this model, the natural scientist objectively observes and measures the material world, offering an *explanation* of the facts in terms of universal laws. The human (or social) scientist examines the behavior of human beings over time, presenting an *understanding* of the value of a particular event in the pattern of a broader context. With these as the available options, some theologians tried to model the study of the Christian religion after the natural sciences; this typically took a foundationalist form in which basic data is posited (e.g., in Scripture or religious experience) and propositions are objectively inferred. Nonfoundationalists, on the other hand, are often satisfied with categorizing theology as a “human” science, involving the depth description of particular linguistic communities.

For the postfoundationalist, all human knowing and so all of the sciences are characterized by both hermeneutical understanding and the drive toward experientially adequate and intersubjective explanation. In *Explanation from Physics to Theology* Philip Clayton proposes a mediating position that recognizes the shaping influence of contexts of meaning, but simultaneously allows for general standards or criteria for explanation in the sciences. He defines *understanding* broadly as an intuitive grasping of patterns of meaning, and *explanation* as a rational reconstruction of these interrelated structures in a primarily theoretical context. Although the values, interests and goals that guide their operation will differ, explanation and understanding are interdependent and operative in both theology and science. By exploring the dynamics of rationality that lay across these fields, postfoundationalism aims to contribute to a safe interdisciplinary space for the dialogue between science and theology.

See also COHERENTISM; FALLIBILISM; FOUNDATIONALISM; NONFOUNDATIONALISM; POSTMODERNISM

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Postmodernism is an abstract, theoretical term and should be distinguished from *postmodernity*, which describes a sociological or cultural climate. The term *postmodernism* was coined in the late 1940s by British historian Arnold Toynbee, but used in the mid-1970s by the American art critic and theorist Charles Jencks to describe contemporary antimodernist movements like Pop art, Concept Art, and Postminimalism. Jean-François Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), was one of the first thinkers to write extensively about postmodernism as a wider cultural phenomenon. He viewed it as coming both before and after modernism, the reverse side of it. As such, postmodern moments have subsequently been discerned in thinkers as various as the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, the nineteenth-century Danish

philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Characteristics of the postmodern

For Lyotard, the postmodern is characterized by an incredulity towards metanarratives. By *metanarratives* he means the appeal to explanatory principles that presume to tell the story of the ways things are. Metanarratives are accounts of the origin, foundations, and formations of the various forms of human knowledge: for example, motion (Isaac Newton), the mind (René Descartes and Immanuel Kant), history (George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel), the economy (Karl Marx), psychology (Sigmund Freud), and society (Emile Durkheim). Metanarratives assume the world and human activity within it can be known as a whole because it is rational and organized according to certain universal and verifiable laws or principles. Postmodernism announces a radical scepticism towards such universalism and the objectivity or view from no where that is presupposed in investigations into and accounts of these foundational laws or principles. Postmodernity, then, would describe a cultural situation in which such scepticism was culturally dominant. In such a time, the postmodern would not just be a theoretical critique of modernity's rational understanding of the world and the universalism of that reasoning. The postmodern would be an attempt to rethink and experience the world according to that antifoundationalism and the turn towards local knowledges or views from a specific standpoints: gendered knowledges, ethnic knowledges, religious knowledges, for example.

The postmodern world is composed of little other than grand narratives, accounts of knowledge that are aware they are partial in nature, refracted through a certain cultural perspective and constructed. Their constructedness is important, specifically when attempting to assess the impact of postmodernism on religion, science, and the debates between them. The constructedness of knowledge challenges the foundational realism of the empirical sciences in which language is simply viewed as transparently communicating the world as it is, mediating between mind and matter. When knowledge of "what is" is understood as constructed, then reality is soft, pliable, and ultimately open to endless interpretation and reinterpretation. Language no longer simply mediates or acts like a clear window on the world. Language creates,

fashions what people see and what they understand by what they see. The universal concepts governing thinking in both the human and natural sciences in modernity—truth, nature, reality, history—are viewed as unstable. The instrumental thinking that accumulated "neutral" data, measured it, calculated the options, and arrived at general statements through an inductive reasoning is seen, at best, as just one form of rationality. Explanation becomes a mode of interpretation. Time (as a sequence of present moments), space (as that which either contains or is the extension of things), matter (as composed of atomized particles) all are refigured by the nonrealism and antifoundationalism of the postmodern. Attention to the constructed nature of representing the world leads to an emphasis upon the metaphoric, the symbolic, the allegorical, the theatrical, and the rhetorical. Rather than a world of inert entities, passive before objective enquiry, in the postmodern all things signify, entities are expressive. The real is an aesthetic effect so that belief in the literal is exactly that, *a belief*. The literal, the transparency of modernity's understanding of the meaning *behind* language, becomes an ideology.

Postmodern science and religion

While Silicon Valley scientists were establishing both themselves and cyberspace, the postmodern condition was producing its own understanding of virtual reality. And while astrophysicists were exploring the collapse of stars and the creation of black holes, the postmodern condition was producing its own understanding of the implosion of secular modernity and the sacredness of the void. The parallelisms between what the empirical sciences term "discoveries" and the cultural sciences in postmodernity would call "inventions" are not felicitous but inevitable. If knowledge is produced rather than found within a particular cultural milieu, then such parallelism will necessarily occur. Mary Hesse had already demonstrated this in her book *Revolution and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (1980). Paul Feyerabend had taken cultural pluralism right into the heart of the empirical sciences with his *Against Method* (1975).

At the same time, the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault was developing his genealogies and "archaeologies" of clinics, economics, madness, punishment, and sexuality, and extending the thesis that the way the world is

understood and organized is governed by discursive acts of power and practical disciplines in which the body becomes the prisoner of the soul (or the way mind conceives the world to be). A sociology of knowledge led to a sociology of scientific knowledge. New histories were written that countered modernity's "progress" model of scientific discovery. New epistemologies and methodologies were sought, like the feminist standpoint work of Sandra Harding and Helen Longino, which examined *abduction*—or the choices made in scientific research prior to and governing inductive reasoning.

At the same time, a new marriage was emerging between the mythological and the technological. In modernity, as the sociologist Max Weber's "disenchantment thesis" taught, the job of science was to demystify the world, and the various technological revolutions were the practical outworking of this rigorous demythologizing. The success of science was measured by progress in terms of human control over the world. Everything could be explained; science would provide the answers, and technology would harness the answers in order to liberate human beings from the drudgery of labor for the pursuit of civilized living. The supernatural was for the superstitious and the ignorant; religion was for those needing private consolation. Stripped of its liturgies, stories, and priestcraft, religion expressed human ideals of the good life. The priest at the altar was replaced by the scientist in the laboratory as religion, among the enlightened, was viewed as mythological clothing for human aspirations, fears, and projections. As such, modernity's dreams were often secularized religious ones: a new Jerusalem of technological efficiency as intellectually hygienic as it was biologically controlled. The "disenchantment" of the world, cultivated by technological progress, was a fundamental tool in the secularization of the sacred. All values were to be found in this world, not beyond it, and human beings were capable of realizing the very highest of these values themselves, through rationalization and forward planning.

The emergence of the postmodern condition, in critiquing the grand narratives of explanation and pointing up the ideologies of control, appealed to what lay outside of the secular world-view. From the mid-1970s there has been revival of romantic thinking. The gothic imagination flourishes again in popular culture, not only in terms of

vampires, warlocks, angels, dungeons, dragons, and fascination with the psychotic, but in terms also of a renewed interest in all things medieval. The mythopoetic was revived, and the character of that revival can be estimated by comparing the Narnia Chronicles of C. S. Lewis to Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy or J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. For Lewis, Narnia was a separate realm reached only through the wardrobe in a professor's rambling Oxfordshire home. But in *Dark Materials*, the supernatural world is not distinct from the natural world, there is neither one nor the other.

Popular science (promoted in part by various governments wanting to interest the young in the technological and nurture a new generation of scientists and technicians) and science fiction assist now in the re-enchantment of the world. With the spread of home computers, the developments in telecommunications, digital graphics, and cinematic special effects, science promotes the bending of modernity's understanding of the real. Virtual reality is now not standing alongside some naturalistic prototype, virtual realities (plural) confuse any boundary between the natural and the supernatural. Science now promotes the transcendence of the human.

Two important thinkers have helped us to understand this postmodern science: Bruno Latour and Michel Serres. Latour's best known book, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), points out how modernity aspired to a transparency that separated one thing clearly from another. Modernity was committed to distillation. What it feared and policed was *hybridities*. As such, modernity produced and fostered a series of dualisms: the objective and the subjective; the body and the mind; the public and the private; the organic and the mechanical; the natural and the cultural. But the production and fostering of such dualisms required mediating agencies. The postmodern world is witnessing the return of the hybrid, as the mediating agencies can no longer cope with the infiltration of one category into another. The vampire, the cyborg, and the angel all figure this transcendence of the human, the instrumental, the calculated, and the rational in contemporary culture. The priest and the scientist are, as they often were in the mediaeval world, the same person.

Michel Serres book *Angels: A Modern Myth* (1993) expounds this new world-view in which postmodern science and religion fuse. Sketching a

profound interrelatedness of all things, Serres denies material things are inert. All things communicate—the waves of the sea, weather systems, rock formations, human beings. The world is caught up in endless relays and interchanges of messages. As angels have traditionally been conceived as the purest of messengers, so the world can be viewed as participating in an angelic intercommunication that transcends this particular person or that particular object. Global telecommunications become an expression and development of this participation in a complex, discursive interconnectedness which, ultimately, for Serres, sings a doxology to the Most High. Serres practices the hybridity Latour informs us is the state of things, relating it specifically to a theological (in fact specifically Christian and sacramental) worldview.

Conclusion

The postmodern condition announces the collapse of secularism, but it also announces a new dialogue between religion and science. In premodernity, scientific enquiry submitted itself to religious judgement. In modernity, religion was deemed outdated, if not pathological, by the rise of the new sciences. In postmodernity, neither the oppositions nor the hierarchies pertain. And so the character of the debates between religion and science will change also. The earlier debates concerned themselves with attempting to show that there was no incompatibility between scientific discoveries and the religious perspective. They were conducted frequently by scientists with religious commitments, in an attempt to integrate two divergent views of the world. They constituted a form of liberal apologetics in which science offered the vision of what was, and religionists showed how that did not conflict with a theological worldview. The metaphysics of empiricism and positivism remained firmly in place, dictating the terms of the struggle and the attempts at *détente*. Postmodernism, having challenged those empiricisms and positivisms, having announced a contemporary incredulity in such foundationalism, will usher in a round of new debates between religion and science that will demonstrate a shift in cultural power, a reciprocal learning, a new respect. Serres's work shows the way, but religionists have recently appealed also to the work of the Oxford mathematician Roger Penrose who, in a different way, endorses an indeterminacy between the brain and

the world such that both the material and the immaterial are caught up in complex informational processes. The various alliances between new age religions and concerns with ecology are also significant indicators of cultural change. The basis for the new discussions is an emphasis upon interconnectedness and attention to participating within open-ended informational systems in which the psychic and the material are not distinct but inseparable, mutually informing dimensions.

See also NONFOUNDATIONALISM; POST-FOUNDATIONALISM; POSTMODERN SCIENCE

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