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Finding Godot: Postmodernism and Truth

Robert T. Gregory Jr.
Old Dominion University

FINDING GODOT: POSTMODERNISM AND TRUTH

by

ROGER T. GREGORY, JR.
B.A. August 1993, Virginia Wesleyan College

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Approved by:

_____
Lawrence Hatab (Director)

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David James

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Dana Heller

ABSTRACT

FINDING GODOT: POSTMODERNISM AND TRUTH

Roger T. Gregory, Jr.
Old Dominion University, 1996
Director: Dr. Lawrence Hatab

Postmodernism has enjoyed a wide range of influence as a critical enterprise, often being accused as nothing more than a method of critique. In addition, it is often objected that postmodernism advocates a radical relativism which is ultimately self-contradictory and lacks an overall sense of agency that can apply to concrete action. These issues are particularly significant when considering theories of truth. Given postmodernism criticizes traditional notions of truth and objectivity, it is appropiate to ask if postmodernism possesses a positive position on truth as an alternative. I argue in this work that while postmodernism has a significant critical enterprise, it also possesses a viable alternative to traditional conceptions of truth which does not suffer from a performative contradiction. This postmodernism sense of truth avoids many problems resultant from foundationalist positions on truth and shows postmodernism as not only a critical methodology but also a positive epistemology.

For my Grandfather

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism as it applies to philosophy is generally acknowledged as a

sustained and vigorous attack upon the cherished foundational ideals of truth and

objectivity. It challenges fundamental assumptions which begin in the modernist tradition

and extend to the present day. Postmodernism generally faces two accusations: 1) that it

advocates a radical relativism and 2) that it lacks any epistemic system of agency that can

apply to concrete action. Many would support such charges but they should not be

accepted without careful examination. First of all, the accusation of radical relativism is

not at all clear, yet too often it is seen as reason enough to dismiss postmodernism as self-

contradictory. Should the charge of self-contradiction prove to be accurate, then there is

an epistemic position which can be associated with postmodernism, namely relativism,

and our task then would be one of explication and evaluation. Secondly, I think

postmodernism does in fact possess a "theory" of truth and an "epistemology," both of

which may prove to be not as radical or as new as is so often assumed, and which can be

applicable to concrete action.

Before we go much further, a working definition of postmodernism is necessary to

orient the discussion. The term "post-modern" has become ubiquitous and therefore

difficult to define. As Hillary Lawson notes, "Caught in a whirl of intellectual fashion the

term 'post-modern' is in danger of becoming a vacuous epithet conveying no more than

approbation or criticism depending on the prejudices of the writer."[1] While Lawson's

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[1]Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi, ed. Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), xi.

concern is appropriate, there is another reason for the difficulty in defining

postmodernism. Far from an isolated term, its mode of critique and range of concerns

stretch wide. As Calvin Schrag writes, "Another feature contributing to the diversity of

portraits of postmodern, postmodernism, and postmodernity is the global,

multidisciplinary expanse of the terrain. . . Postmodernism has spread its mantle over an

extended spate of disciplines, and the task of finding a common thread in the wider

postmodern curriculum is a formidable one indeed."[2] The task of finding such a thread

stretching throughout the literature of postmodernism is beyond my scope here. My

emphasis is upon postmodernism as it relates to the philosophic tradition, specifically the

criticism of objectivity and truth which is characteristic of postmodern philosophy.

One method of understanding the issues of postmodernism is to place it up against

"modernism." Given that "post" modernism can be understood in relation and opposition

to certain characteristics of the modern period, a sketch of some of the basic features of

modernism will serve as a backdrop for my discussion. Modernism, in the sense I use it

here, can be understood as the philosophic tradition beginning with Descartes and running

up to Kant. There are several general characteristics of this period. First, modernism

advocated a stringent criticism of established preconceptions of science, philosophy and

other intellectual elements of human interest. Descartes provides an excellent synopsis of

the scope of this criticism when he writes, "I reject as absolutely false everything in which

I could imagine the least doubt, so as to see whether, after this process, anything in my set

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[2]Calvin Schrag, The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 14.

of beliefs remains that is entirely indubitable."[3] Hand in hand with this call for criticism is the preeminence of reason. The world is seen as rationally ordered and the human mind as capable of grasping this order. Human reason is the force which will unlock the mysteries of existence and ensure certainty and truth. Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum* not only proves to be the first principle and foundation for certainty, but also the fulcrum which divides subject from object, mind from body, and truth from falsity. This notion of "subjectism," whereby reality is seen in terms of a fundamental dichotomy between the self-grounding subject and its Other, allows the objectification of the world and serves as the driving force behind the modernist movement.

Especially significant is the optimism which accompanies modernism. The objective nature of reality can be understood by humanity through rational means. "Subjectism" refers to the ability of individual subjects to disengage themselves from concrete situations and grasp the abstract principles which govern all situations and reality as a whole. It is through such reflection that universal truths can be apprehended. Nothing can withstand this force of human rationality, eloquently shown in Descartes' example of an all-powerful deceiver who still cannot prevent the rational human subject from grasping certain necessary truths.

Postmodernism positions itself against this optimistic background, taking the critical call of modernism full circle, calling into question the very foundations of the modernist project. Postmodernism can be described as "anti-foundationalist, suspicious of

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[3]Rene Descartes, <u>Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy</u> trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis:HackettPublishing, 1980), 17.

theory and distrustful of any universal claims of reason,"[4] in essence challenging the privileged status of rationality, the validity of the subject/object distinction and advocating a shift from universal objectification toward the primacy of situation and context. This being said, it appears odd that one would attempt to place postmodernism on any foundation whatsoever; however, while anti-foundational, I shall argue that postmodernism does present a position through which a positive epistemology can be understood.

It is nonetheless difficult to assign a particular theory of truth to postmodernism. As a movement based in radical criticism, postmodernism resists static assignments of meaning. Nonetheless, by looking carefully at the criticisms levied against objectivity and truth and the work within literary criticism regarding literary meaning, an implicit epistemological "theory" can be brought to the surface. This theory is one in which the traditional senses of truth, theory and epistemology are poor guides.

In Chapter One I will discuss the modernist foundations from which traditional theories of truth arose. This necessitates a return to the history of philosophy, particularly an examination of Descartes. With this background in hand, three traditional theories of truth will be examined: correspondence, coherence and pragmatic. The orientation of this chapter is to clarify the basic features and limitation of these theories, not to fully examine their intricacies. Therefore, there are thinkers who I do not specifically examine in the interest of a more general approach.

Chapter Two explores alternative theories of truth as represented in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom are often heralded as forerunners of

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[4]Schrag, Resources, 14.

postmodernism. Nietzsche best represents the critical spirit of postmodernism with his criticism of the subject/object division and his explicit denial of traditional notions of truth. Heidegger shares with Nietzsche a robust criticism of subjectism and a radically different theory of truth. These alternative theories of truth will serve as a precedent for understanding contemporary postmodern treatments of truth.

Chapter Three presents what I consider to be a credible account of postmodern truth. Two thinkers in particular play a significant role in this presentation: Jean-Francois Lyotard and Stanley Fish. Lyotard provides a comprehensive account of the sort of criticism postmodernism generally advocates, and Fish provides the framework within which discourse about truth can remain viable, even in postmodernity. Their work provides the details from which I shall abstract a postmodern theory of truth.

Finally, in Chapter Four I shall evaluate this theory of truth and the thought from which it stems. It is here that I shall attend to the accusations of radical relativism and lack of agency, along with common criticisms of postmodern epistemology.

In closing, a note about the overall orientation throughout this work. Much of my task is descriptive, in clarifying certain currents within postmodern thought. I also have a critical task, namely to show why I do not think postmodernism is epistemologically empty and to flesh out the base from which postmodern epistemology operates. I maintain that a discussion of postmodern epistemology does not limit it radical critical enterprise, but rather lends credibility to its criticisms.

CHAPTER TWO

TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF TRUTH

Earlier we touched on some of the general characteristics of modernism,

characteristics which are helpful in understanding both postmodernism and traditional

theories of truth. In particular, the optimism of the period sets the stage for traditional

theories of truth. It is from modernism that we gain the traditional conception of

objectivity and truth. While the beginnings of these notions can be traced deep into the

history of philosophy, one thinker stands out in influence over modernist philosophy: René

Descartes. Often heralded as the father of modern philosophy. Descartes struggled to

place philosophy upon firm foundations. Descartes, as do foundationalists in general,

holds that certain propositions are basic or foundational. Their truth is obvious, absolutely

certain and self-evident. One such proposition for Descartes is his famous *cogito ergo*

sum. Other propositions are not basic or self-evident and thus require justification,

justification which, in the best case scenario, is inferred from the basic propositions. As

will be recalled, Descartes begins his quest for these basic propositions through a robust

methodological doubt, one in which he denies the truth of any proposition where the

slightest doubt can be generated. Ultimately, this leads Descartes to his conception of the

cogito, the seat of certainty and fulcrum which separates subject from object. The details

of his arrival at a foundation for certainty are significant as they set the tone for modernist

philosophy in general and modern science in particular. Descartes advocates

"detachment" and "withdrawal" away from the world. Only by turning inward can one

discover the truths of reason and gain certainty. This retreat into the subject for

Descartes is seen as wholly necessary since ". . . just as it is not enough, before beginning

to rebuild the house where one lives, to pull it down to make provisions for materials and

architects, or to take a try at architecture for oneself, and also to have carefully worked

out the floor plan; one must provide for something else in addition, namely where one can

be conveniently sheltered while working on the other building. . . ."[1] This "convenient"

shelter for Descartes, and the whole of modernism, is the disengaged subject coupled with

the resources of rationality.

More significant are the implications of this establishment of the subject as the seat

of certainty. The *cogito* as subject becomes ". . . the center around which all other entities

revolve as 'objects' of experiences."[2] The division of subject and object becomes all

encompassing, a division which "divides without remainder."[3] This division serves to

provide a foundation, or grounding, from which the world can be examined. As Charles

Guignon notes, "The 'I' becomes the self-grounding ground of all grounds. As a result,

the term 'ob-jectum'. . . now comes to be taken in its modern sense as the objectively real.

. . entities come to be grounded in the 're-presenting' . . . of the subject."[4] Put another

way, the sort of distinction which Descartes initiates with the establishment of the *cogito*

and which is further developed in modern science, sets the stage for the current

connotation of "objective"; that which is inter-subjective or true for *all* subjects. Thus,

we can eliminate those factors which are contingent, doubtful or variable, thereby

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[1]Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations, 12.

[2]Charles Guignon, Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 17.

[3]Ibid., 19.

[4]Ibid., 165.

establishing a universal, binding "truth." This notion of objective as "true for all subjects" plays a crucial role in our traditional notion of truth and how traditional theories of truth function.

Traditional theories of truth concern themselves with the determination of the truth of propositions. There are three general forms of traditional theories of truth: correspondence, coherence and pragmatic. Truth is important in all of our daily affairs. We engage in the evaluation of the truth of propositions everyday as an essential part of functioning in the world. As Kirkham notes, "If none of our beliefs is any more justified than its negation, then all of life becomes a perpetual guessing game."[5] We do have a functioning theory of truth which we apply in everyday situations; we determine the truth of propositions based on the reliability of their accounts. Propositions are believed to be true if they "correspond" or agree with reality. The proposition, "The cat is on the mat" is true if the cat *is* on the mat. Put simply, the correspondence theory holds that true propositions correspond to states of affairs or facts in the world. The performative element is clear since the truth of any proposition can be verified through the examination of the facts to which it relates. Should we doubt the verity of a statement, we can simply *look and see* if the proposition is accurate. True statements are those which accurately portray facts. While this is true as a general slogan for correspondence theories, there are debates among correspondence theories concerning the details of the functioning of correspondence. It is sufficient here to note that there remain disputes as to whether truth-bearers (i.e. propositions) are structurally isomorphic with the facts to which they

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[5]Richard L. Kirkham, Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 42.

relate. This dispute neatly divides correspondence theorists into two camps; correspondence as correlation, where truth-bearers are not seen as mirroring the facts to which they relate, and correspondence as congruence, where truth-bearers are seen as isomorphic with facts in the world. Regardless of these and other debates among correspondence theorists, the overall orientation of any correspondence theory is that of a polarized perspective, with propositions or truth-bearers on one side and facts or states-of-affairs on the other.

Rather than exploring the objections one could immediately raise against correspondence theories, I shall focus on the limitations, as I see them, of such theories. However, an adumbration of the more common objections is helpful. Typically, there are three types of objections raised against correspondence theories. One objection focuses on the truth-bearer, arguing that whatever has been identified as the truth-bearer cannot function *as* a truth-bearer.[6] This would include those arguments which claim that propositions are incapable of functioning in a capacity which would allow correspondence. Another objection often raised is of the same vein; whatever has been identified as a "fact" or "state-of-affairs" cannot function as a correspondent. Finally, objections often arise concerning the relation between truth-bearer and correspondent, arguing that such a relation cannot exist, function as claimed, or is too ambiguous.

These objections, while treated quite generally here, are helpful in seeing some of the inherent limitations of correspondence theories. What is pivotal is that correspondence theories are about justification; they are performative and thus deal with propositions and with determining which propositions are true. This being the case, we

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[6]Ibid., 134.

must look to see if correspondence theories function in this capacity. Correspondence theories, as they function in everyday affairs, are verficational; they base many of their claims upon the possibility of empirical authentication. Our proverbial "cat on the mat" can be verified as to its veracity by simply going outside and looking. This is partly a strength of the theory, since disputes can generally be easily solved. However, herein lies a severe limitation. Propositions about which verification is impossible, either in practice or theory, cannot be dealt with within a correspondence theory. It can be argued that eventually such propositions *can* be verified once the technology becomes available, (e.g. in the advancement of powerful telescopes and propositions concerning planets in distant galaxies) however, the dependence of correspondence theories upon verification remains a severe limitation. Propositions outside the possibility of verification exist as neutral propositions with their truth (or falsity) being unestablishable. Other propositions present similar problems. To what do mathematical statements refer? How can one establish the truth of an algebraic expression through correspondence? For that matter, to what does the statement "a proposition is true if it corresponds with reality" refer?

Correspondence theories function quite well in everyday situations, but the larger the set of propositions we consider, the more we see problems with correspondence. In sum, correspondence theories run up against the limitation of empirical verification and cannot evaluate those propositions which cannot be authenticated through empirical means.

Another of the traditional theories is that of coherence, a theory which is much more successful in dealing with formalized, abstract systems such as mathematics. Coherence theories hold that the truth of propositions is dependent not upon the relation

of a proposition to a state-of-affairs but upon its the relation to other propositions. A proposition is true if it is consistent, or fits, with a set of propositions which are already accepted. Mathematics is an excellent example of a coherent system; each "truth" of mathematics is determined through its relation to other propositions of mathematics. While coherence theories are much more successful in attending to those sorts of propositions found in mathematics and the abstract sciences, there are a number of issues which point toward implicit limitations in any coherent system.

As before, my concern is not to develop specific objections to coherence theories but to use common objections to show the epistemological limitations of coherence theories. First, coherence theories base the truth of individual propositions upon their consistency with other accepted propositions. However, coherence is not a guarantee of truth. Consistency within a set of propositions is not sufficient to establish the truth of particular propositions. For example, coherence with a set of *false* propositions certainly cannot provide justification in holding a proposition to be true. For example, what are we to make of a schizophrenic whose delusional system is internally consistent and coherent? One avenue designed to avoid such concerns is to establish that there are "first propositions," much like the basic, indubitable propositions of Descartes. These first propositions are accepted to be true and function as a foundation for other propositions within a coherent system. However, this brings with it another problem, mainly that these "first principles" fall outside the coherence criteria of truth. The establishment of their truth must be external to the coherent system. If these first propositions prove to be false, then each coherent belief is suspect and the coherence theory proves to be quite unstable.

Another interesting point is that it seems at least possible that there could be two,

or for that matter, an infinite number of complete coherent systems, each internally consistent but incompatible with each other. So while one proposition could be seen as true under one system, it could just as well prove false under another. For example, a mythological account of the universe, while internally coherent, is at odds with a scientific explanation. Yet, so long as each account is internally coherent, the tension between such groups seems unresolvable. All of these objections point toward a implicit suspicion of coherent systems in general. While one could argue for multiple coherent systems, one redress is to hold that coherence-as-truth is an ideal, with these objections being appropriate only for non-ideal coherent systems. Even so, coherence fails to provide a guarantee of truth. Some propositions will ultimately prove to be unassessable within any coherent system. One dramatic example of this can be found within highly formalized systems such as mathematics.

Mathematics can be described as an axiomatic system, one which bases its deductions from certain propositions which are held to be self-evident. These propositions form the foundation of mathematics from which one can develop "systematically the endless totality of true propositions. . . ."[7] This sort of formal, coherent system has often been conceived as an ideal coherent system; individual propositions are evaluated based on their consistency with other propositions within the system. Under such a system, it is assumed that *all* propositions can be evaluated. However, in 1931, mathematics, and coherence theories in general, came under severe

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[7]Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman, Gödel's Proof (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 6.

scrutiny with the publication of an amazing proof by Kurt Gödel.[8] Gödel's proof ". . .

presented mathematics with the astounding and melancholy conclusion that the axiomatic

method has certain inherent limitations, which rules out the possibility that even ordinary

arithmetic of integers can ever be fully axiomatic. What is more, he proves that it is

impossible to establish the internal logical consistency of. . . deductive systems."[9] Gödel's

proof shows that within axiomatic systems, there are always propositions which cannot be

evaluated; their truth (or falsity) is undecidable.[10] Gödel's work points toward a wider

ramification for coherence theories of truth. Even within highly formalized systems,

coherence alone is not sufficient to determine the truth of all propositions within the

system. Mathematics, as Gödel's proof shows, cannot be completely formalized in one

system and account for all propositions which could be made within the system.

Regardless of how complete or formalized the system, there are inherent limitations as to

the completeness of the system and therefore any coherence theory of truth.

One last traditional theory of truth I wish to consider is that of Pragmatism. This

is not without difficulty since contemporary revisions of pragmatism, most notably

Richard Rorty's, have enjoyed considerable influence. Even if we are to restrict our

discussion to the classical pragmatists, such as James and Peirce, there remain problems in

presenting a consistent theory of truth. My solution is to consider the pragmatic theory of

truth as one with two veins; one instrumental, the other, consensus-based. Both can be

seen as representative of a pragmatic theory of truth.

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[8]Kurt Gödel, On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems trans B. Meltzer (New York: Dover Publications), 1992.

[9]Nagel and Newman, Gödel's Proof, 6.

[10]J. Van Heijenoort, "Gödel's Theorem," in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol. 3, 348.

James' instrumental theory of truth can be summed up easily: a true proposition is one which is useful to believe is true. As James writes, "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events . . . ."[11] This "happening" of truth to a proposition is its workability or utility. Thus, the truth of propositions should be based upon the consequences of believing them to be true. James takes this further, " . . . if it can make no practical difference which of two statements be true, then they are really one statement in two verbal forms; if it can make no practical difference whether a given statement be true or false, then the statement as no real meaning."[12] For James, the practical effects which result from holding particular propositions to be true are the essential determinants for truth. What remains a pressing question is how practicality can equal truth. Consider: "Suppose you have an appointment at 8:00 one morning and your watch reads 7:50. You believe your watch is working correctly, and acting on this belief, you leave for your appointment and arrive precisely on time. But suppose, unbeknownst to you, your watch has stopped at 7:50 the previous evening. It is just by coincidence that you look at it exactly twelve hours later."[13] What is interesting to note with the story above is that, with an instrumental theory of truth, believing that your watch was functioning correctly is *a true belief*, its usefulness is apparent in your making the appointment on time.

Peirce takes a different approach to the issue of truth. Peirce maintains that truth is a matter of consensus, or agreement among subjects. As Kirkham writes, "A true

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[11] William James, The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to 'Pragmatism' (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), preface VI.

[12] Ibid., 52.

[13] Kirkham, Theories of Truth, 94.

proposition is one which everyone would eventually agree if they each had enough of the experiences relevant to the proposition."[14] However, one should not take Peirce as advocating arbitrary agreement for the basis of truth. Rather, Peirce holds that, given enough information and experience, anyone (and everyone) would arrive at a specific conclusion. It is clear Peirce holds the methods of science in high regard. But this regard is due to the ability of scientific methods to garner agreement, not that scientific methods are inherently better or suited to establishing truth. Kirkham notes, " . . . what makes experience and scientific method good ways to get at truth is not that they effectively reveal reality . . . but rather that they are effective at producing agreement. If some other method . . . were as effective at producing consensus, then it would be every bit as good a method for attaining truth as is the scientific method."[15] Peirce makes it clear that agreement among subjects is the criterion for truth. The difficulty lies in what we take this agreement to constitute. Peirce is not only offering an optimistic outlook on our intellectual abilities, but also that the conclusions reached through agreement are, by definition, *true*. For Peirce, "Reality is independent of any *one* mind and of any proper subset of minds, but it is not independent of all minds. Reality is whatever is *said* to exist or be the case in the proposition to which everyone (with sufficient relevant experiences) would agree . . . ."[16] This consensus theory of Peirce's holds agreement as the constituent of truth; agreement itself determines the truth of propositions. Objections to this sort of view of truth come easily. It is unclear why a group of people would tend toward

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[14]Ibid., 83.

[15]Ibid., 84.

[16]Ibid., 82.

agreement in the first place, unless there is an "objective" standard of some sort. If we deny any external basis for our agreement, then there seems nothing to prevent non-agreement. More importantly, there appear to be temporal limitations to the theory as a performative theory. Kirkham notes the theory as eventual consensus, based upon sufficient and relevant experiences. What is not at all clear is the practicality of these edicts. What determines which experiences are sufficient and/or relevant? A familiar objection, one brought against coherence theories, is that there seems nothing to prevent two separate groups from evaluating a proposition and arriving at different conclusions. If truth is determined through agreement, then there is nothing preventing the groups from disagreeing as to the truth of the proposition in question. This idea of eventual agreement seems to be an idealized standard, one which is not at all clear in the sense of attainability.

CHAPTER THREE

ALTERNATIVE THEORIES OF TRUTH

No discussion of postmodernism and truth can be complete without an

examination of the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger. As we shall see, Nietzsche's

position on truth is one of finite pluralism, one which conceives of truth as dynamic and

fluid. His position is decidedly anti-foundational, but I think it is a mistake to dismiss

Nietzsche's position as solely one of critique; I will show that in addition to a criticism of

foundational theories of truth, Nietzsche also offers a considered constructive position.

I shall present Nietzsche's position on truth by emphasizing three components of

his position. First, the denial of the possibility of a "view from nowhere," the possibility

of a detached, disengaged position of assessment or evaluation. Secondly, that what

remains once we recognize our inherent epistemic finitude are not "facts" but

interpretations made from a particular perspective. Finally, that Nietzsche's position is

ultimately best described as a robust perspectivism, one which embraces multiplicity of

perspective rather than an absolute or purely objective truth.

I propose to begin with Nietzsche's comments on the "thing-in-itself." Following

Kant, the thing-in-itself represents the true reality behind appearance; for Nietzsche, it is

iconic for traditional positions on truth; transcendent, absolute, and sacred. This notion

stands as an ultimate legitimator behind the plethora of experience. As Nietzsche puts it,

"We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no

further. . . These perhaps are the horizon of our knowledge, but not truths."[1] Nietzsche

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[1]Fredrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), Section 482.

resists a passive view of our relationship with the world, especially with moral and epistemic claims. "It is *we* who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed "in-itself," we act once more as we have always acted- *mythologically*."[2] These illusions suddenly become real, or as Nietzsche writes, "illusions which we have forgotten are illusions. . . ."[3] We have not discovered or represented a hidden essence behind appearance but rather created a placeholder where such an essence is craved. As Nietzsche notes, "There is no drive toward knowledge and truth, but merely a drive toward belief in truth."[4]

Nietzsche's position forces an evaluation of objectivity as an attainable goal for humanity. As he writes, "That things possess a constitution in themselves quite apart from interpretation is quite an idle hypothesis; it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential."[5] Nietzsche denies the accessibility of a platonic realm as a guarantee of our conceptions. Rather than focusing primarily upon providing an alternative to the canon of the thing-in-itself, Nietzsche's concern is with clearing it away to see what lies beneath. Claiming interpretation as essential is a claim of finitude and Nietzsche's cry of "There are no isolated judgments"[6] is a recognition of the process by which we designate

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[2]BasicWritings of Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kauffmann, Beyond Good and Evil (New York: Random House, 1966), chapter I, section 21.

[3]Fredrich Nietzsche, Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's, trans and ed. Daniel Breazeale (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), 84.

[4]Ibid., 95.

[5]Nietzsche, Will to Power, section 560.

[6]Ibid., section 550.

"facts" and "truth." "What is rejected is the *privileged* epistemic status accorded these objects [facts, truth, reality, etc.]. . . And in each case, the ground for rejecting the privileged status of the 'given' epistemic object is the pervasiveness of perspective and interpretation. . . perspective and interpretation are already at work prior to the judgment that something is a 'fact' or a 'truth'."[7] As Schrift rightly points out, Nietzsche's dissolution of the 'objective' position reveals not only that we cannot escape interpretation but that out sacred icons have been epistemically fueled not by a higher authority but our perspectives. This being the case, Nietzsche rejects truth as a fixed, absolute notion. Indeed, he takes this even further:

> . . . the value of the world lies in our interpretations. . . the world with which we are concerned is false. . . is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a merger sum of observations; it is "in flux," as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: For there is no truth.[8]

> The biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge.[9]

> The "true" world--an idea which is no longer good for anything. . . an idea which has become useless and superfluous- *consequently*, a refuted idea: let us abolish it.[10]

Several points can be seen in the above passages. Again there is the focus upon the necessity of recognizing the preeminence of interpretation within epistemic endeavors. In addition, Nietzsche denies the *possibility* of objective truth; not only are we trapped within

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[7]Alan Schrift, Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction (New York: Routledge, 1990), 150.

[8]Will to Power, section 616.

[9]Ibid., section 555.

[10]The Portable Nietzsche, trans and ed. Walter Kaufmann, Twilight of the Idols (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 485.

our interpretative framework but it is interpretation which constitutes our very notion of truth. As Schrift notes, "not only are there no fixed and stable truths to extract from the process of becoming, but the observer, by virtue of being situated within this process, must adopt a limited historically circumscribed perspective in the process itself."[11] This is much stronger than just insisting upon the inseparability of fact and interpretation. There is also the sense that we cannot avoid false interpretations or perspectives, that "truth" is a pure fiction. This strong claim, however, must be seen as speaking against a traditional notion of truth.

> When Nietzsche speaks of Truth in the singular, he is referring to the Platonic-Kantian tradition's view of truth as a single, univocal, eternal, immutable relation of correspondence. Thus, in saying that "perspectives are necessarily false," Nietzsche indicates that if we retain the epistemological criteria of truth as adequate correspondence (*adequato*) we must conclude that everything we apprehend perspectivally (i.e. *all* our "knowledge") is *false according to these epistemological criteria.*[12]

Nietzsche therefore rejects the notion of a singular "truth," opting instead for multiple, competitive truths. This position is perspectivism.

What we have seen thus far orients Nietzsche toward perspectivism as the only viable alternative. First, there is the recognition of the finitude of human experience. We are ultimately unable to disengage ourselves from context and situation sufficiently to gain an objective position. Secondly, by our very nature, we are interpretive beings. This interpretive process has a constant presence and lies *before* any judgment or epistemic account. Perspectivism for Nietzsche is the only authentic position for epistemology not only because it rises from a critique of foundationalism, but, more importantly, because it

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[11]Schrift, Question of Interpretation, 149.

[12]Ibid., 153.

accepts the necessary finitude of human existence. Nietzsche writes, ". . . let us be on guard against the dangerous and conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject'; let us guard against the snares of such. . . concepts as 'pure reason,' 'absolute spirituality,' 'knowledge in-itself. . . There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'."[13] Nietzsche asserts that perspectivism is the only authentic position to take towards truth. Notions of a "pure" perspective, one privileged above all others, is a "dangerous" fiction, ". . . imposed as schematism upon all the apparent facts."[14] What is stressed throughout Nietzsche's writings is the conception of epistemology as a human affair, which any treatment of epistemology must take into careful account. "Nietzsche puts forward the doctrine of perspectivism as an 'empirical' conclusion regarding human finitude: because human beings are situated bodily at a particular point in space, time, and history, their capacity for knowledge is inevitably limited. . . human beings are not capable of 'objective,' 'disinterested' observations of reality. . . ."[15] This inability to engage in disinterested observation is not a failing on our parts for Nietzsche; far from being a theory of resignation, it is more a theory of affirmation of the conditions of the world as they are found and experienced.

Nietzsche's position of perspectivism is one which accepts the finitude of situation and the inescapability of interpretation. This position sees truth as multiple and dynamic. When we speak of truth, we speak of perspective and interpretation. As Nietzsche notes:

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[13]Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, Genealogy of Morals (New York: Random House, 1966), chapter III, 12.

[14]Nietzsche, Will to Power, section 549.

[15]Schrift, Question of Interpretation, 146.

"In so far as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is

interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings."[16] There are

countless positions one may take, countless interpretations. No one is privileged among

others. All are in competition. This is an important distinction. With the elimination of

any privileged position, Nietzsche is not discrediting perspectival positions, rather,

Nietzsche encourages disparate perspectives. This has two functions as I see it. First, this

completes his critique of foundationalism. Since there can be no "higher" epistemic

position over any other, all perspectives are seen as possible. Secondly, and perhaps more

importantly, this shows an internal consistency. Not only are there multiple perspectives,

but even the doctrine of perspectivism is itself a perspective. As Nietzsche notes:

"'Everything is subjective,' you say; but even this is interpretation,"[17] and again,

"Supposing that this also is only interpretation--and you will be eager to make this

objection?--Well, all the better."[18] This aspect is particularly significant. Nietzsche

recognizes the problem of self-reference as one applicable only to those positions which

privilege one particular perspective over another. In affirming the perspectival nature of

his own position, Nietzsche neatly avoids internal inconsistency. Taken hand in hand with

his denial of any metaphysical ground upon which to base truth, this provides a response

to charges of self-reference which are often levied against perspectivism. Self-reference

represents the most challenging criticism of perspectivism. There are two issues which lie

at the heart of these charges of self-reference within Nietzsche's perspectivism. First, if

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[16]Nietzsche, Will to Power, section 481.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, section 22.

we are to deny any foundation from which to determine the truth of our beliefs, then it

seems reasonable that a determination between two contradictory beliefs leaves no method

of resolution. Worse still, it seems that if we accept Nietzsche's account of truth as

perspective, then we have no reason to accept his position at all, unless the doctrine of

perspectivism is somehow privileged among others. Regarding the first issue, Nietzsche

does seem to indicate a non-foundational position with regards to truth, one which denies

any privileging of one perspective over another. What of perspectives or beliefs which are

in competition with one another, or those beliefs which are incommensurate with one

another? As Maudmarie Clark relates,

> Perspectivism leads us to recognize that there are multiple perspectives on a thing.
> But since it rejects the thing-in-itself, it leaves behind no basis for comparing
> perspectives, for considering one cognitively superior to another. Given the thing-
> in-itself, we think of one perspective as cognitively superior to another if we
> believe that the interpretation it warrants corresponds more closely to the thing as
> it is in itself. If we reject the thing-in-itself, we have no remaining basis for
> comparing two conflicting perspectives, no common or neutral standard in terms
> of which to conceive as cognitively superior to the other.[19]

The typical criticism is that without some basis for comparison to determine the

superiority of one perspective over another, then we are faced with having no basis for

accepting the claims of science over "common sense" or mythological accounts.

However, this may not be a view of perspectivism which Nietzsche himself would

advocate. For example, he writes, "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective

'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes,

different eyes, the more complete will our 'objectivity' be."[20] What acts as the hinge is the

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[19]Maudmarie Clark, Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 138-139.

[20]Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, III, 12.

renunciation of the thing-in-itself. If we discount absolute or "whole" truth, Nietzsche's position can become clear. Instead of viewing one perspective as superior based upon a decidable level of completeness, this view of perspectivism refuses to see perspectives such as science and mythology as engaged in a competition for ultimate truth. As Clark puts it, "Science and common sense seem to be good candidates for incommensurable perspectives. Perspectivism offers us the possibility of treating them as non-competitors, as offering different answers to different questions, in accord with different standards of acceptability, rather than competing visions of the whole truth."[21] Moreover, a perspective which takes in multiple perspectives as contributory can be seen as more "complete" than those which do not. This does not allow for one perspective to be "superior," in an absolute sense, over another, but emphasizes the importance of multiplicity. It should be noted that Clark's position is somewhat misleading because often perspectives *are* in direct competition, and this is a competition which Nietzsche favors.

This certainly puts us in a position to consider the problem of self-reference. As we have seen, Nietzsche recognizes the problem of self-reference as one applicable only within systems which privilege one perspective over another. Yet, in asserting his position as simply one perspective among others, Nietzsche seems to be unable to avoid a dismissal of his own position. However, one must acknowledge different meanings of the term "privileged." For example, one can take "privileged" to mean superiority. Another meaning, such as "one who is privileged," indicates one who has more than others. Clark argues that nothing internal to perspectivism prevents one from holding certain beliefs to

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[21]Clark, Nietzsche on Truth, 143.

be cognitively better than others (or more reasonable).[22] I see nothing wrong with this

position for if we accept the possibility of someone holding a particular belief to be more

reasonable than another (a possibility not difficult to grant) then nothing prevents

Nietzsche from holding his belief, Perspectivism, as better than others. What is absent

from Nietzsche's position is the insistence on a definitive resolution for the superiority of

any perspective. Instead, he argues it is "better" to see and challenge his position as a

perspective among other possible perspectives. The alternative is to fall back upon a

foundational account of truth, something Nietzsche finds untenable. As Clark notes,

> Because perspectivism is compatible with some (or one) perspective being
> cognitively superior to others, we have no reason to deny what otherwise seems
> obvious; that Nietzsche considers his own perspective(s) cognitively superior to
> competing ones. And if it should turn out that there are a number of
> incommensurable human perspectives, they would not be in competition, and
> would therefore not threaten the truth or beliefs from other perspectives.[23]

Important to note above is that "cognitive superiority" is an assessment which takes place

within a perspective; cognitive superiority is not based upon adherence of a

correspondence to a "true" state of affairs, but upon that framework of reasonableness

within that particular perspective.

As such, Nietzsche's response to the charges of self-reference and the possibility of

holding one perspective over another is consistent with his anti-foundational critique.

Nothing prevents one from holding their perspective as superior over others so long as

this claim of superiority is not seen to be absolute or "objective." Indeed, Nietzsche holds

that it is "better" to take his position as "merely" one perspective among others than to

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[22]Ibid., 142.

[23]Ibid., 144.

continue a foundationalist approach. This has a structural aspect for Nietzsche as well; perspectivism necessitates opening discourse in the sense of "affirming" other discourses or positions. Perspectivism does not seek to "close out" other epistemological positions. Indeed, those positions are necessary for perspectivism; this is why Nietzsche finds it "better" to take a perspectivist position over a foundational one. "Nietzsche will take a stand for his global perspectivism. . . without, however, seeking to invalidate or erase contrasting views. Even perspectivism needs its opponent. . . Nietzsche maintains that any viewpoint is constituted by its Other; so the erasure of its Other would be the erasure of itself. That is why it is 'better' that perspectivism be a perspective in the midst of other perspectives. . . ."[24] Nietzsche's conception of truth is therefore quite different from traditional notions of truth and provides a viable alternative to traditional theories of truth. As an alternative, Nietzsche's position emphasizes that multiple perspectives are more effective in addressing phenomena. For example, in undergoing a risky surgical procedure, one would wish the physician to fully embrace the physiological and technical perspective. However, discussing the possible effects and dangers of such a surgery requires a completely different approach.[25] Obviously, these are issues which medical personnel engage in everyday, issues which are not incommensurate or isolated from one another. Physicians may ask a patient if she is in pain; to ask "are your c-fibers are firing?" would be strange and inappropriate to the context. Nietzsche therefore advocates this sort of pluralism, where different perspectives can co-exist without danger of closing off

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[24]Lawrence J. Hatab, A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics (La Salle: Open Court, 1995), 154.

[25]Ibid., 158.

discourse. Nietzsche's conflict-based perspectivism is not susceptible to the same

criticisms of traditional theories, for it makes no privileged claim about any one position.

As we shall see, Nietzsche's position on truth and the method by which he criticizes

traditional conceptions of truth has had a tremendous influence upon postmodernism. It

will not be difficult to sense a Nietzschian orientation when we examine postmodernism

more closely in Chapter four. Standing on its own, Nietzsche's position is one which

raises significant questions for both epistemology and truth.

Another important figure for postmodernism is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger

provides a probing examination of truth not unlike Nietzsche's in that both strive to lay

bear what had been left hidden in Modernism. While Heidegger assuredly does not mirror

Nietzsche in the vehemence of his critique, both share the same spirit of critique, to lay

bear that which has been cast aside. Heidegger's concern is with the *meaning* of truth and

how truth *is* truth. Heidegger's common project throughout his work is ontological, to

address the question of Being. This orientation, so carefully laid out in <u>Being and Time</u> is

what governs his analysis of truth. As such, any examination of truth for Heidegger

presupposes an understanding of the his orientation in <u>Being and Time</u>. My task here is to

provide an adumbration of this orientation in so far as it relates to Heidegger's analysis of

truth.

In his substantive introduction to <u>Being and Time</u>, Heidegger makes it clear his

intentions in the work are ontological. He specifically wishes to attend to the "question of

Being," that is, to lay clear what is *means* to be. He begins by asking what the question of

Being itself tells us. As he sees it, our very questioning of Being contains within it a

"background" understanding of Being. As Heidegger notes, "Inquiry, as a kind of

seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way . . . we do not *know* what 'Being' means. But even if we ask 'What *is* Being?', we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptually, what the 'is' signifies."[26] Heidegger points then toward viewing the question of Being not as an impenetrable abstraction but rather a concrete inquiry. He writes, "What we seek when we inquire into Being is not something extremely unfamiliar, even if at first we cannot grasp it...."[27] Still, the problem of beginning such an inquiry remains. Where are we to begin in examining Being? What should be our starting point for such an investigation? Heidegger himself notes the heart of the matter when he tells us, "In *which* entities is the meaning of Being to be discerned? . . . Is the starting point optional, or does some particular entity have priority when we come to the question of Being?"[28] The necessity of grounding the question of Being is one which Heidegger acknowledges as essential to the success of such a project.

Startlingly, we ourselves are the key to unlocking the mystery of Being. Since *we* are the beings who are asking the question of Being, we can look toward human *being* as an avenue leading toward Being proper. The very question of Being,

> requires us to prepare the way for choosing the right entity for our example, and to work out the genuine way of access to it . . . to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity -the inquirer- transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question [of Being] is an entity's mode of *Being* . . . If we are to formulate our question explicitly and transparently, we must first give a

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[26]Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Nacqarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), 25.

[27]Ibid., 25.

[28]Ibid., 26.

proper explication of an entity (Dasein), with regards to its Being.[29]

As such, the inquiry into Being is intimately tied with the questioner. Heidegger puts it best when he tells us, "We ourselves are the entities to be analyzed."[30] We *are* in such a way that since the question of being comes to us, this marks us apart from other beings in the world. As we shall see, human *being* (Dasein) is unique in a number of ways. The first of these differences between Dasein and other beings is that we *exist*. Heidegger uses the term "exist" differently from the philosophic tradition, for to exist is to be "self-interpreting."[31] This self-interpretation sets us apart from other beings in that it is the source of our "background" understanding of Being. As Dreyfus tells us, "Human beings . . . are special kinds of beings in that their way of being embodies an understanding of what it means to be."[32] As we shall see, Heidegger takes up the issues involved with human existence not for their own sake but as a path through which Being itself can be grasped.

Another difference between Dasein and other beings is that Dasein is what Heidegger calls, "being-in-the-world." At first glance this may not seem to indicate much. For when we look around the world we find many beings "in" the world. The chair upon which I sit to type these words is "in" the world as is the paper upon which these words appear. But Heidegger means something quite different by the term "in" than it is used in these ordinary associations. He grants the above examples as one aspect of being "in" the

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[29]Ibid., 26-27.

[30]Ibid., 68.

[31]Hurburt Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 15.

[32]Ibid., 14-15.

world; the tea I drink is indeed *in* the cup, just as a quarter can be *in* my pocket. However, if we think of "in" as only indicating location, we miss Heidegger's point altogether. While we do speak of tea as being "in" a cup and chairs as being "in" rooms we also speak of such things as being *in* love and *in* trouble. Being in love does not refer to a location but rather to a state of being. This is the sort of "in" which Heidegger wishes to bring forth with "being-in-the-world." He argues that the sense of "in" in the case of being-in-the-world is much more akin to *reside*. The world is more to Dasein than its container; it is its home and residence. The relation between Dasein and the world differs *ontologically* from the relation between the cup and tea. While the relation of tea to cup is spatial, the relationship between Dasein and the world is quite different, it involves how the world is meaningful for Dasein. In order to clarify this relationship implied in "being-in-the-world" we must explore *how* Dasein is in the world. For we are not passive beings in the world; there is a connection between our activity and our being. We are not just *in* the world, we are *involved* with the world.

If we look over how it is we are in the world, several things come to mind. Whether I am writing a paper, washing clothes or sitting on the beach, I am in each case engaged in a project. We all endeavor to accomplish such projects and whatever our activity may be, it always involves a project. Yet it is not precisely these projects which define us. As Dreyfus states, "I am . . . not defined by my current projects or goals but by the possibility of being a father, a teacher, etc."[33] Dasein is defined by its *possibilities* as opposed to fixed characteristics or features. Heidegger writes, "Dasein is constantly 'more' than it factually is . . . as Being-possible . . . Dasein is never anything less; that is to

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[33]Dreyfus, <u>Being-in-the-World</u>, 188.

say, it *is* existentially that which in its potentiality-for-being, it is *not yet.*"[34] Thus, human

being is such that it is to be defined not in terms of the facts of its existence but rather by

the possibilities of being it possesses. As Dreyfus puts it, " . . . Dasein can never be

characterized essentially by a set of factual features, like its current goals and

accomplishments."[35] I *can* continue my education and eventually teach philosophy. I *can*

quit school and wait tables for a living. All of these things are possibilities which are part

of my being and toward which I project myself. This is precisely what projects are, the

projection of our possibilities into the world. That human beings have projects which they

are involved in and care about is indicative of potentiality-for-being; it is because we have

possibilities that we engage in projects in the world. Heidegger argues Dasein *is* its

possibilities and understands itself through these possibilities. As such, Dasein's being is

not, " . . . a static endowment, but something to be fulfilled or achieved . . . Dasein is

always stretched forward toward its own still-to-be-realized being; it is always beyond or

out in front of itself. Its being is never complete actuality, but always includes possibility;

for Dasein "to be" means "can be . . . . "[36] Thus the very nature of Dasein is such that it *is*

its possibilities. An essential part of our existence is the projects which we undertake and

the possibilities which we embrace. Dasein understands itself through possibilities and

without possibilities, Dasein cannot be. However, it is *how* Dasein is originally related to

the world that is significant for my discussion.

How Dasein relates to the world is a matter of authenticity or inauthenticity. It is

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[34]Heidegger, Being and Time, 185-186.

[35]Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World, 188.

[36]James Demske, Being, Man and Death (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 20.

difficult to dismiss the existential baggage which is carried with these terms. For to call

something "authentic" seems to make a normative claim. However, this is not

Heidegger's intention. Rather, it is a structural element of Dasein, one which does not

carry with it normative claims, though Heidegger himself seems to prefer one mode to the

other.

We begin with considering inauthenticity since this is how Dasein originally finds

itself. Heidegger tells us, "While we exist in the everyday, we understand ourselves in an

everyday way or, as we can formulate terminologically, *not authentically* in the strict

sense of the word . . . as we are not our own, as we have lost our self in things and human

beings while we exist in the everyday."[37] Here we see Heidegger intending inauthenticity

not as a necessarily negative aspect of Dasein's being but rather a mode in which Dasein

can relate to the world. By inauthenticity, Heidegger refers not to a lack but rather an

absence of ownership. So we may call inauthentic a project which is not Dasein's *own* but

rather one which perhaps is part of the general culture or everyday social context. This is

not to cast a negative light upon such projects in and of themselves as for projects are

neither authentic nor inauthentic. It is the *orientation* of Dasein towards projects which

makes them authentic or not. For Dasein can *make* projects its own and therefore become

authentic with regard to them. For example, I may well have been raised Catholic and

adhered to all its tenets, however, until I embrace the Catholic faith *on my own* and take it

as part of my project it is *inauthentic*. Once I have incorporated it into my own projects,

then it becomes my own and thus *authentic*. However, it remains to be seen why Dasein

is originally inauthentic. For this we need to examine how Dasein comes to find itself in

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[37]Cited in Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World, 28.

the world to begin with.

Dasein is originally inauthentic because it is *fallen*. Again, we must resist any normative or theological associations with this term. By fallen, Heidegger means to indicate that Dasein has as its primary orientation or, more accurately, as its *original* orientation, being-in-the-world and being-with-others. We are born into a world of Others, one where we are continually and incessantly socialized into our shared traditions. As Heidegger writes, "The self . . . is primarily and usually inauthentic . . . Being-in-the-world is always fallen."[38] As inauthentic, Dasein is entranced with the world. Heidegger tells us, "'Inauthenticity' does not mean anything like being-no-longer-in-the-world, but amounts rather to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world- the kind which is completely fascinated by the 'world' and by the Dasein-with of Others . . . ."[39] Thus, we are born into a society and are caught up with the world and our projects as defined by our social setting. Dasein orients its being originally as being-with; centering itself firmly within a world of Others. Fallenness means, " . . . an absorption in being-with-one-another . . . ."[40] This notion of being-in-the-world challenges the detached, disinterested stance of Modernism and is resistant to problems associated with the subject/object split. Since we are already "in-the-world" prior to our philosophical reflections, the privileging of the subject, with its resultant philosophical problems, necessitates a *denial* of the already present conditions of being-in-the-world. From a Heideggerian perspective, there is no "Cartesian anxiety" whereby we begin to doubt other minds and the world. We are

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[38]Heidegger, Being and Time, 225.

[39]Ibid., 220.

[40]Ibid.

already caught up in a world of others *before* we engage in philosophical reflection.

A summary at this point is in order. As we have seen, Heidegger's ontology indicates that human being (Dasein) provides the path toward illuminating Being proper. The way Dasein *is* makes it such that Being can be explicated. This way of being is the crucial issue for Heidegger in his analysis of Truth. Heidegger seeks a deeper understanding of Truth, one which orients itself toward the meaning of truth as opposed to just its application. To this end, Heidegger considers it impossible to separate Dasein from Truth.

This is a critical point in understanding Heidegger's orientation toward truth. His concern is with what he calls the "essence"[41] of truth; what it is that happens when something is taken as true. Thus, " . . . Heidegger's approach to truth is . . . not so much a theory as an analysis. That is, he examines what *happens* in an event in which truth occurs."[42] Heidegger's analysis begins in the everyday, with our common, traditional usage of "truth." Here the essence of truth is said to be contained in assertion, or judgment, and its agreement with its object. There is nothing unusual here and Heidegger does not contest this use of "true." Instead, he tells us such a view of truth is "very general and empty."[43] The reasons for this emptiness lie in the background of our holding agreement to be the core of truth. If we examine how it is we make such claims about truth, we find that suddenly we are not speaking at an ontological level *about truth*; rather,

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[41]Heidegger's use of essence is more akin to the German wasen, which for Heidegger is attached with a verbal sense of "coming-to-be" rather the traditional approach of "essence" indicating a "whatness."

[42]Michael Gelven, A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 128.

[43]Heidegger, Being and Time, 258.

we are speaking of a criteria by which we evaluate propositions. As Heidegger notes, "A statement is true if what it means and says is in accordance with the matter about which the statement is made."[44] What Heidegger wants recognized is that in such cases, "it is not the matter that is in accord, but rather the *proposition*."[45]

Heidegger urges that truth-as-agreement, while useful and accurate in a variety of situations, is far from an ontological description of truth. Propositional "truth" is "always, and always exclusively, this correctness [between statement and object]."[46] Heidegger wants to go beyond this notion of truth, for it does not capture the "essence" of truth; propositional truth is derivative of something more original. As he notes, "Truth does not originally reside in the proposition."[47]

We are faced then with determining where such an essence is to be found. Heidegger, when he speaks of seeking the "essence" of truth, is after the *meaning* of truth, rather than a strict criterion by which to evaluate propositions. He begins his analysis with a straightforward example:

> Let us suppose that someone with his back toward the wall makes the true assertion that 'the picture on the wall is askew'. This assertion demonstrates itself when the man who makes it, turns round and perceives the picture hanging askew on the wall. What gets demonstrated in this demonstration? What is the meaning of "confirming" . . . such an assertion? . . . What is to be demonstrated is not an agreement of knowing with its object . . . neither is it an agreement between

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[44]Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell, On the Essence of Truth (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 117.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell, On the Origin of the Work of Art (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 177.

[47]Heidegger, Essence, 122.

'contents of consciousness' among themselves. What is to be demonstrated is solely the Being-uncovered . . . of the entity itself . . . .[48]

In the above passage, several things immediately are evident. For one, Heidegger is not speaking of what *sort* of demonstration would satisfy the truth-condition of the statement. For another, he is not interested in developing either a purely external (correspondence) basis for the meaning of truth nor a internal (coherence) model. Both are dismissed as not dealing with what is meaningfully demonstrated in his example. What is most striking is his answer; "Being-uncoveredness." The meaning of truth then has to do with "uncovering," that which is prior to mere relation. The insistence on relation, on the polarity between subject and object, covers up the unitary phenomenon of truth as disclosure.

Heidegger traces this view of truth back to the Greek tradition, recognizing truth to be an activity of a particular being rather than a relation. He writes,

To let be--that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are--means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand . . . Western thinking in its beginning conceived this open as *ta aletheia*, the unconcealed. If we translate alethia as "unconcealment" rather than "truth," this translation is not merely more literal; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of the correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings.[49]

Truth is *aletheia*, or "unconcealment." In the earlier passage of the askew picture, the truth of the proposition (as being correct) is derivative; there is a prior activity or orientation which takes place before any such evaluation of a proposition (true or false) can be made. As Heidegger puts it, "In proposing our 'definition' of 'truth,' we have not

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[48]Heidegger, Being and Time, 260-261.

[49]Heidegger, Essence, 125.

shaken off the tradition, but have *appropriated* it primordially . . . . "[50] and again, "The essence of truth which is familiar to us--correctness in representation--stands and falls with truth as unconcealment of beings."[51] Heidegger therefore insists that his description of truth as disclosure (unconcealment) is the primordial, or original, meaning of truth. All other levels of truth, propositional, logical, etc., are derivative of truth as disclosure.

To begin to see why Heidegger would make such a claim, we must first attend to a basic question which is answered implicitly in his example of the picture. *Who* makes the statement concerning the picture? For that matter, when we speak of statements at all with regard to their truth or falsity, who makes these statements? Obviously, some*one*. For Heidegger, this obvious simplicity, that some*one* must inquire into a state of affairs, contains within it not only a hidden complexity, but also a deeper insight into truth itself. This hidden complexity and guiding insight are one in the same; it is *Dasein* who makes such statements, inquires into truth and, most importantly, unconceals.

It is here Heidegger makes his more startling claims about truth. Since it is Dasein who unconceals, truth and Dasein are intimately tied together. Heidegger writes, "Entities are uncovered only *when* Dasein is; and only as long as Dasein *is*, are they disclosed. Newton's laws, the principle of contradiction, any truth whatever- these are true only as long as Dasein *is*. Before there was Dasein, there was no truth; nor will there be any after Dasein is no more. For in such a case truth as disclosedness, uncovering, and uncoveredness *cannot* be."[52] This is clearly a significant passage, one which requires

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[50]Heidegger, Being and Time, 262.

[51]Heidegger, Origin, 177.

[52]Heidegger, Being and Time, 269.

careful attention. Are we to take Heidegger as arguing that truth is dependent upon human beings? Are gravity and other physical "truths" merely so because of our being? Is truth arbitrary, victim to human intervention?

Heidegger addresses these issues further in the same passage when he writes, "Before Newton's laws were discovered, they were not 'true'; it does not follow that they were false, or even that they would become false if ontically no disclosure were any longer possible."[53] Thus, Heidegger is not developing a position which holds that Newton's laws or other scientific certainties were *false* before they were disclosed via human being. He notes, "To say that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false, cannot signify that before him there were no such entities as have been uncovered and pointed out by those laws. Through Newton the laws became true and with them, entities became accessible in themselves to Dasein. Once entities have been uncovered, they show themselves precisely as entities which beforehand already were. Such uncovering is the kind of being which belongs to 'truth'."[54] Heidegger's view of truth is therefore not as controversial as one might first assume. In insisting upon the connection of Dasein with truth, he is not disputing the existence of entities outside or beyond Dasein, but simply that "truth" makes sense only *with* Dasein. As Barry Allen puts it, "Nothing in the world would be true or false if there were no speakers or speech. Truth would not then exist."[55] In one sense, this is hardly surprising. Obviously, we are the ones who talk about truth and propositions. Heidegger's position, is that we orient our talk about truth *first* in its

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[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Barry Allen, <u>Truth in Philosophy</u> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 178.

primary context, namely its meaningfulness for us.

We can now provide a reasonable summary of Heidegger's position. Truth as represented in propositions, logic and correspondence are all derivative of a more original, primordial truth; truth as disclosure. Heidegger best expresses this when he writes, " . . . assertion is grounded in Dasein's uncovering, or rather its *disclosedness*. The most primordial 'truth' is . . . the ontological condition for the possibility that assertions can be either true or false- that they may uncover or cover things up."[56] It is this primordial sense of truth which grounds and allows our other conceptions of truth to function. As such, Heidegger analyzes truth as being connected with and tied up in human being. "Truth, understood in the most primordial sense, belongs to the basic constitution of Dasein."[57] Heidegger thus orients our understanding of truth as tied with the sort of being we are.

As we have seen. Heidegger takes truth to be the activity of disclosure. The "happening" of truth is the mode of being which unconceals what is hidden. The happening of truth is disclosure. This orientation is not a displacement of more traditional theories of truth but more a realization of truth as an activity before "truth" can be situated within discoveries, laws, or propositions. In taking truth as disclosure, Heidegger forces us to accept human being as involved with truth at a fundamental level.

There is a sense, of course, that this is a somewhat odd position to take. It leaves a number of questions seemingly unanswered. Why is it human being is so tied to truth? Is it simply that we are the originators of propositions? "Truth" makes sense only within a human context, only when coupled with human being as its impetus. However, it is why

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[56]Ibid., 269.

[57]Ibid.

Dasein is so tied to truth that gives Heidegger an overall consistent orientation. As will be recalled, Dasein is fundamentally being-in-the-world. Just as this proved essential for understanding human being, so too does it hold interest for truth. It is because we are being-in-the-world that we are disclosive. As Kaelin puts it, "A human being's way of being in a world is to disclose that world to itself."[58] As I noted earlier, being-in-the-world avoids many problems which plague an orientation based in the subject/object split. From a Heideggerian perspective, this subject/object distinction *creates* problems such as whether other minds exist, by not recognizing the shared background in which philosophical reflection operates. Truth as disclosure recognizes these prior elements and thereby avoids such problems. Heidegger is striving to connect truth with a mode of human being, an essential, existentially primordial aspect of our being. This is the key which fits the lock between Being and Truth.

We might well ask how it is that we miss this primordial sense of truth, how it is we are not *in* the truth, so to speak. Recalling Heidegger's identification of truth as unconcealment, untruth is seen as hiddenness. And Dasein participates in this as well. For Heidegger, that there is "untruth" is due to another ontological condition of our existence; we are fallen into this world. To give this more of an analytic meaning, we might say that our epistemic enterprises take place within a specific context, against a shared background of social practices and orientations. This for Heidegger is the origin of the loss of truth. Since we are fallen, " . . . [Dasein] can lose itself in the objects of its world and allow the

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[58]E.F. Kaelin, Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reading for Readers (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1989), 142.

objects its discloses to surface as the newer standard of truth."[59] What is forgotten is the

activity of disclosure; what our clearing reveals is heralded as "the truth" and the activity

itself is cast aside. One concrete example of this is found in Heidegger's exploration of

what he calls "being-toward-death".

Simply stated, being-toward-death is the obvious fact that human beings are finite;

we all die. However, since we are fallen, thrust into a world of Others, this fact becomes

distorted, or hidden. *People* die, but the possibility of our *own* ultimate death is forgotten,

absorbed in the public domain and description of death. Thus, the *truth* of *our* finitude

becomes hidden or concealed behind a descriptive, public account of death. It is only

when we confront our own inevitable death that we regain the truth of our being; that we

are finite and thrown into this world.

As I noted earlier, in Being and Time, Heidegger argues that we ourselves are the

key to unlocking the mystery of Being. This key is Dasein as disclosure; since we are

disclosive beings, not only can Being be explored, but truth as well. This view of truth as

disclosive is much more for Heidegger than simply a grounding for performative theories

and operations, it is an impetus to reconsider our world. As Guignon writes, "Interpreting

the question of Being as rooted ultimately in this sort of truth would transform our

understanding of what is at issue in that question. What we should expect is no longer a

final, conclusive answer to the question of being, but rather a new mode of openness in the

asking- a new *way of life* instead of a new metaphysical model or theory."[60] Heidegger is

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[59]Ibid., 143.

[60]Charles Guignon, Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 251.

offering much more than just a new perspective on truth; truth is seen to be an activity which is sewn into the fabric of a specific kind of being. If one tries to separate the fabric one is likely to lose the whole. Truth as an activity for Heidegger is one whose ultimate goal is to bring Being into the open.

Finally, some general comments on Heidegger's position on truth. His position is much more fluid than most we have looked at thus far. With a view of truth as disclosure, whatever mode of discourse we may engage in, whether it be the posture of science, literature or art, all disclose. This view of truth is one which opens possibilities as opposed to providing reductive criteria. Its orientation is to identify what takes place in the background to allow truth to occur. Thus, Heidegger's position is less susceptible to challenges of relativism or foundationalism; Heidegger's view of truth is one of activity-an act of meaningful disclosure of the world. This view of truth not only opens more possibilities for meaningful forms of discourse between disciplines, it refuses to be caught up in any perspective which constrains other possible senses of disclosure. Heidegger's position places the focus of truth back toward its original, meaningful sense, replacing the posture that truth as a transcendental, eternal or absolute. More significant for my discussion is that Heidegger avoids problems associated with the split of subject/object; his is a unitary position which places truth as disclosure *before* any division between "statement" and "fact." Thus, Heidegger would not become involved in controversy as to the validity of correspondence theories; rather, he would argue there is a more meaningful way to approach truth. To force an understanding of truth as simply correspondence or coherence is to miss a deeper dimension of truth, a dimension which Heidegger finds more important, more meaningful, more significant. This view of truth as disclosure therefore

does not attempt to provide a performative orientation toward truth (such as providing a

criteria) but seeks to approach the meaning of truth in the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

POSTMODERNISM VISITED

As I briefly touched on in the introduction, postmodernism has become increasing

difficult to define. Even philosophical postmodernism, that concerned with epistemology

and truth, contains many facets and orientations, making a choice as to which figure to

consider difficult. Nonetheless, few thinkers epitomize postmodernism as much as Jean-

Francois Lyotard. In this section I will discuss three aspects of Lyotard's work: the denial

of metanarratives, his analysis of consensus, and epistemological terrorism. All can be

seen to undermine traditional conceptions of truth and underwrite a position on truth

which is perhaps one of the best examples of the postmodern stance. I shall discuss this

orientation at the end of this section with particular attention to its formal features.

In his introduction to The Postmodern Condition,[1] Lyotard notes that his concern

with what he calls the "crisis of narratives."[2] He specifically defines his position on the

matter, and postmodernism in general, as "incredulity toward metanarratives."[3] Indeed, he

goes as far as to call metanarratives in general obsolete as an "apparatus of legitimation."[4]

His concern is the inevitable political elements which metanarratives bring into culture and

systems of discourse.

To begin, Lyotard holds that the status of knowledge has changed in the

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[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[2] Ibid., xxiv.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

postindustrial age. The main culprit behind this change is technology, technology which

rapidly imposes constraints and impacts what is considered to *be* knowledge. As he

writes, "These technological transformations can be expected to have a considerable

impact on knowledge."[5] The primary impact which technology will have upon knowledge

is twofold. First, there will be an increasing orientation toward the translation of

knowledge into information. By information, Lyotard seems to favor a computational

model, that which can easily be transferred through computers and computer networks.

Second, once such a transformation fully takes hold, knowledge as information will

become a commodity, one "indispensable to productive power."[6] Both transformations of

knowledge, into information and commodity, hold for Lyotard grave implications. Once

information becomes a mere commodity, one tied to political or social power, Lyotard

notes, "It is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information,

just as they battled in the past for control over territory. . . A new field is opened for

industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies

on the other."[7] However, more germane for his orientation in The Postmodern Condition

is the transformation of knowledge into informational "bits". As he writes, "We can

predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this

way [into quantifiable bits of information] will be abandoned. . . ."[8] Thus, with the shift of

knowledge to quantifiable information, those aspects or modes of knowing which are not

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[5]Ibid., 4.

[6]Ibid., 5.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., 4.

reducible to such quantification are liable to be removed from the body of knowledge altogether. As he warns, "Along with the hegemony of the computer comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as 'knowledge' statements."[9]

Lyotard therefore begins his analysis of the postmodern with the concern that knowledge is becoming exclusionary against those types of knowledge which are not quantifiable. To simplify matters, he provides a generic division between these types of knowledge: scientific knowledge (that which is translatable into information) and nonscientific knowledge, which Lyotard tends to call "narrative." Scientific knowledge has always maintained a position of animosity in relation to narrative knowledge; a position of "conflict."[10] Lyotard does not wish to deny the progress made by the scientific orientation, instead he challenges the notion that scientific knowledge is self-sufficient or complete. He writes, ". . . scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge. . . narratives."[11] The differences between scientific and narrative knowledge are fairly straightforward for Lyotard. One difference we have already touched on; scientific knowledge is readily translatable into quantified information whereas narrative knowledge is not. Another is that scientific knowledge tends to be much more specific and formal than narrative knowledge. Scientific knowledge operates more conditionally than narration. As Lyotard notes, "Science is. . . composed of

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., xxiii.

[11]Ibid., 7.

denotative statements. . . [and] imposes two supplementary conditions upon their acceptability: the objects to which they refer must be accessible for repeated access, in other words, they must be accessible in explicit conditions of observation, and it must be possible to decide whether or not a given statement pertains to the language judged relevant by the experts."[12] Here Lyotard describes the basic parameters through which modern science functions. Scientific observation should be falsifiable, repeatable, and should utilize the appropriate lexical notation.

It is for these reasons that scientific knowledge holds narration in such poor regard. Since "customary knowledge" often fails to use consistent language and may not be strictly repeatable, narration is deemed to be little more than "fables." However, Lyotard notes that scientific statements themselves, as statements, are exactly that, statements. Thus, "Scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse."[13] From this stance Lyotard asserts that we must attempt to trace the differences between scientific and narrative knowledge, for both at their base are simply statements made by speakers. To ease this analysis, Lyotard uses a term introduced decades earlier in the later Wittgenstein. Our forms of discourse, whether scientific or narrative take place within "language games". By language games Lyotard means, ". . . that each of the various categories of utterance [such as scientific or narrative] can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put--in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each piece, in other words,

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[12]Ibid., 18.

[13]Ibid., 3.

the proper way to move them."[14] As such, Lyotard advocates a Wittgensteinian approach, albeit slightly modified, to language. All discourse takes place within a language game; just as scientific statements must "pertain to the language judged relevant," so too do all statements take place within a language game. As Lyotard notes,

> It is useful to make three observations about language games. The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players. . . The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a "move" or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game.[15]

Lyotard presents a picture where discourse operates according to rules established by contract and use. New expressions must be integrated *into* each language game in which they occur. Without such integration they have no use and therefore no meaning within the game. It is this irreducible necessity of language games that allows Lyotard to raise questions as to the deprecation of narration in comparison to scientific knowledge. Its cause is quite formal. As he puts it, "Scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded. A statement's truth-value is the criterion determining its acceptability. . .one is "learned" if one can produce verifiable or falsifiable statements about referents. . . ."[16] Scientific knowledge is therefore exclusionary, privileging denotative statements over other utterances. This strikes Lyotard as a bleak landscape for knowledge to thrive. He contrasts the above with narrative discourse. He notes, "In the ordinary use of discourse--for example, in a discussion

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[14]Ibid., 10.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., 25.

between two friends- the interlocutors use any available ammunition, changing games from one utterance to the next. . .The war is not without rules, but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance."[17] Narrations therefore are much more pliable than scientific/denotative orientations which attempt to legitimate internal statements through constraint of the possible range over which a given discourse may travel.

It is this flexibility of narration which Lyotard holds to be essential for epistemology. Narration is a richer medium for the transfer of knowledge. In this respect, it is clear that Lyotard considers narration superior to denotation. He writes, ". . . the narrative form. . . lends itself to a great variety of language games. Denotative statements concerning, for example, the state of the sky and the flora and fauna easily slip in; so do deontic statements prescribing what should be done with respect to those same referents . . . The areas of competence whose criteria the narrative supplies or applies are thus tightly woven together. . . ."[18] Thus, Lyotard indicates that narrative forms of knowledge are better suited for discourse between individuals than scientific orientations since narration allows for a greater range of expression. I think it fair, as we shall see later, that Lyotard's preference is one born more from pragmatic concerns than an epistemic privileging *per se*. However, it is clear that Lyotard considers narration superior to scientific discourse, because of its greater flexibility and range; later we shall see than Lyotard considers scientific discourse to possess features which render it unstable. It is also clear that Lyotard's designation of narrative/denotative is one readily translated into

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[17]Ibid., 17.

[18]Ibid., 20.

inclusive/exclusive.

This puts us in a good position to consider Lyotard's treatment of "metanarratives." Alternately called "grand narratives," metanarratives are the common thread underlying modernistic orientations. These grand narratives are universal prescriptions which serve to universalize legitimation. Grand narratives strive to "totalize"[19] knowledge under a single, over-arching standard. The tenets of Modernism are metanarratives, for Lyotard, since they satisfy three specific conditions: ". . .the appeal to metanarratives to legitimate foundationalist claims; the inevitable outgrowth of legitimation, delegitimation, and exclusion; and a desire for homogenous epistemological and moral prescriptions."[20] Modern science, the orientation of the Enlightenment with regards to philosophy and literature, Marxism, and philosophies of history, all "appeal to metadiscourse such as the narrative of progress and emancipation, the dialectics of history or spirit, or the inscription of meaning and truth."[21] Thus, Lyotard positions himself against all modern discourse, whatever its form, so long as it ascribes to a totalizing, universal grand scheme by which particular instances of meaning are legitimized.

Lyotard's earlier concern about polarizing denotative and narrative knowledge becomes much clearer with this in mind. Not only does such a division differentiate those discourses reliant upon grand, totalizing metanarratives (denotative discourse) and those more internally dependent (narrative discourse), it also brings to the surface their similarities. As Lyotard notes,

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[19]Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogatio, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 165.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

. . . drawing a parallel between scientific and nonscientific (narrative) knowledge helps us understand, or at least sense, that the former's existence is no more--and no less--necessary than the latter's. Both are composed of sets of statements: the statements are "moves" made by the players within a framework of generally applicable rules; these rules are specific to each particular kind of knowledge, and the "moves" judged to be "good" in one cannot be of the same type as those judged "good" in another, unless it happens that way by chance.[22]

This is a particularly significant passage. Lyotard's denial of metanarratives in favor of pluralistic modes of discourse, or language games, levels the playing field for all discourse. Scientific discourse is seen as no different than narration. More particularly, language games possess autonomous frameworks for establishing meaning and validity; these standards by which statements are evaluated in one language game are incommensurate with other standards used in other language games. Thus, "Instead of a truth/falsity distinction Lyotard adopts a small/grand criterion."[23] In essence, "small" narratives are "good" because they allow flexibility for meaning and fluidity between language games. "Grand" narratives, such as Marxist theory, are "bad" in that they seek to exclude some forms of discourse. Indeed, it is this exclusionary mode of grand narratives which Lyotard finds untenable.

I think the more provocative argument is that metanarratives insist upon exclusion. As we shall see later, Lyotard rightly argues that exclusion is inherently harmful to creativity and progress. With this view, if we value social relations and creativity, we should prefer fluid discourses over exclusionary ones. The less provocative argument is more formal. Taking scientific knowledge/discourse as his example, Lyotard argues that

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[22]Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 26.

[23]Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 146.

while scientific discourse holds narration as inadequate to express knowledge, and seeks to differentiate itself from narrative forms of discourse, it nonetheless finds itself inexorably tied to them. As Lyotard notes, ". . . what do scientists do when they appear on television or are interviewed in the newspaper after making a 'discovery'? They recount an epic of knowledge. . . They play by the rules of the narrative game. . . ."[24] Although science may favor a narrative-free form of discourse, its participants are caught up in various narratives in the course of their work. The *work* of science takes place under the rules of the "narrative games". While science may strive to exclude these narrative games from the canon of knowledge, it is nonetheless grounded in these narrations. As Lyotard puts it, "It is not inconceivable that the recourse to narrative is inevitable, at least to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own."[25] Thus, the relationship between narrative and scientific knowledge is a complex one; one in which it is difficult to call each anything other than differing language games.

This brings us to another aspect of Lyotard's thought: his analysis of consensus. Consensus for Lyotard represents a violence against narration. It resists the fluidity of language games and threatens creativity and invention. As he writes, ". . . consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool. . . it refines our sensitivity to difference and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."[26] For Lyotard, with

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[24]Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 27.

[25]Ibid., 28.

[26]Ibid., xxv.

consensus lurks the evil of the metanarrative; it imposes a universalizing, totalizing complacency in which individuality and dissent are suppressed. This consensus as conformity is detrimental to the production of knowledge. Lyotard argues that it is precisely dissension with established language games which produces knowledge. As he writes, "Countless scientists have seen their 'move' ignored or repressed, sometimes for decades, because it too abruptly destabilized the accepted positions, not only in the university and scientific hierarchy, but also in the problematic. The stronger the 'move' the more likely it is to be denied the minimum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game upon which consensus had been based."[27] Knowledge is produced when the current paradigm is challenged or a new paradigm created. This is what Lyotard seeks to capture in his adage, "To speak is to fight."[28] Knowledge for Lyotard is a struggle against conformity; it is to those voices who vigorously oppose that we should listen, for it is there that progress is ripe.

It is not hard to grant Lyotard a wide latitude here. Science in particular has progressed through challenging existing presuppositions in a methodical and vigorous manner. What Lyotard wishes brought to the foreground is that all such advances in knowledge take place not through conformity with the existing paradigm, but often through violence to these paradigms. Thus, metanarratives present a double jeopardy; not only do metanarratives tend toward exclusion, but in doing so, this exclusion is oriented *toward* establishing consensus. This hidden agenda of metanarratives is what Lyotard calls terrorism.

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[27] Ibid., 63.

[28] Ibid., 10.

Every bit as violent as dissension, terrorism is the drive to silence contrary voices. As Lyotard writes, "By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game."[29] With this view, exclusionary narratives establish their authority through elimination or intimidation. In disallowing disparate voices the right to be heard, the universalizing metanarrative can dominate the paradigm thereby establishing its legitimacy. It is significant to note a Nietzschean theme here; what establishes epistemological legitimacy is force or power, not a "true" position. Exclusionary narratives then seek to close discourse, to limit its possibilities in order to ensure supreme authority.

Lyotard's position is remarkably similar to Nietzsche's in many respects. In both we have a denial of an absolute position from which to determine truth. For Nietzsche this is a fact of our existence as finite beings; for Lyotard, we must be players *within* language games that are incommensurate with one another and that disallow an absolute position. But there is another sense in Lyotard, one which is more akin to Heidegger than Nietzsche. Lyotard's animosity toward metanarratives seems largely based on the propensity of such grand narratives to close discourse. Grand narratives do not seek to open possible discourse, rather they attempt to eliminate other forms of discourse from legitimacy. Just as Heidegger would affirm multiple disclosures, Lyotard prefers multiplicity to the absolutist singularity of grand narratives.

Given the negative implications of metanarratives, Lyotard would seem to argue against a traditional sense of truth as a strict relation between statement and fact. On a larger scale, any totalizing, universal truth would be seen as suspect; it is *better* to hold

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[29]Ibid., 63.

truth to be context-specific given the alternatives. Holding truth as universal threatens to close discourse and thereby exclude creative expression. For Lyotard, the issue of whether or not there is a context-free or absolute truth can be suspended. What is seen as important are the consequences of grand narratives in general.

There is a more provocative position one can ascribe to Lyotard. This position would deny metanarratives any legitimate claim whatsoever. All that exists are local narratives or language games; it is only within a specific language game that talk about truth makes sense. Those standards which attribute truth in one narrative may or may not hold true in another; language games are incommensurate. Structurally, there is no difference between grand and local narratives, both are language games or discourses which function with internal rules. Truth is local by definition. Not only is it better to affirm a contextual perspective on truth, truth *can only be* local. Lyotard's position is therefore a contextual epistemology, one which denies, in one sense or the other, the legitimacy of a universal sense of truth. In its place he advocates a local sense of truth; separate language games in which truth has meaning and application.

There is one final thinker I wish to consider. While not commonly associated with postmodernism in the same way as Lyotard, Stanley Fish represents a thorough and considered postmodern position with regard to literary criticism. His work on the subject is significant for my discussion as well. Postmodernism is often accused of a lack of agency,[30] that is, lacking any applicable theory of its own. Postmodernisn taken this way is a purely critical exercise, offering no solutions to the problems it discovers. Fish is a

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[30] I use "agency" here to refer to action, that is, having a basis for action as opposed to "agency" meaning a subject as in an "agent."

footbridge to what an active postmodern theory of truth would look like.

Fish speaks directly against objective notions of truth and meaning as they apply to literary texts. His initial suspicion is toward formalism, the view that formal features of texts are the key to determining literary meaning. For formalists, the meaning of a text is to be found *in* the text itself. Fish claims this is am overly simplistic view of literary meaning, primarily because it discounts the reader as superfoulous or unnecessary. For Fish, the reader is an "actively mediating presence"[31] which is necessarily involved in the meaning of a text. Fish specifically rejects meaning as an objective feature of texts, arguing instead that it is " . . . no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader."[32] Fish argues that the text, by itself, is impotent; it requires a reader in order for any meaning to manifest. Indeed, to speak of a text absent readers is not to speak of a text at all. This necessity of a reader turns Fish away from formal features of texts as criteria for meaning toward the experience of reading. Fish finds this an obvious conclusion, but one which may be initially troubling. The problem is a preconception of traditional notions of objectivity and meaning. As he writes, "The objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing . . . Literature is a kinetic art, but the physical form it assumes prevents us from seeing its essential nature."[33] Fish therefore argues against objective features of texts as being useful in determining meaning. We cannot simply take features such as words, style, etc., analyze them, and hope to find the

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[31]Stanley Fish, Is there a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretative Communities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 23.

[32]Ibid., 25.

[33]Ibid., 43.

meaning of a text. There is a more *active* and, for Fish, obvious, process to reading. It is

this process of reading that determines meaning. As Fish notes, " . . . there is no direct

relationship between the meaning of a sentence . . . and what its words mean . . . It is the

experience of an utterance--*all* of it . . . that is its meaning."[34] While knowing what words

mean and the rules for their usage is important, these features do not constitute the

meaning of a text.

So far this should be familiar ground. Fish argues against any standard of

objectivity as useful in determining meaning, pushing a more subjective approach. Instead

of formal features of texts, we should seek the features of experience when reading a text

if we are to seek a text's meaning. This position raises an immediate complaint. First, if

it is the experience of reading which determines meaning, does this mean that *any* reading

is as good as any other? Fish acknowledges this fear when he writes, "The chief objection

. . . is that affective criticism leads one away from the 'thing itself' in all its solidity to the

inchoate impressions of a variable and various reader."[35] This is certainly a valid issue.

For if we dispense with any objective standard of meaning for a text, then it seems

consistent that we must give up any sense of consistent meaning for a text. The tyranny

of the text is replaced with the anarchy of the reader. Faced with as many interpretations

as there are readers, it seems unlikely Fish's position is sustainable. However, Fish's

analysis of the role of the reader runs much deeper. The experience of the reader involves

language, an involvement which carries with it a context of situation.

. . . the reason that I can speak and presume to be understood by someone . . . is

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[34]Ibid., 32.

[35]Ibid., 42.

that [I] speak . . . *from within* a set of interests and concerns, and it is in relation to those interests and concerns that I assume he will hear my words. If what follows is communication or understanding, it will not be because he and I share a language, in the sense of knowing the meaning of individual words and rules for combining them, but because of a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us, and implicates us in a world of already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values and so on; and it is to the features of that world that any words we utter will be heard . . . . [36]

Our use of language then, does not take place in isolation. Our utterances are grounded within a context which orients and qualifies the statements we make. Communication takes place against a background of shared practices. Understanding is not simply efficient use of language, technical skill of usage and application, but rather being within a language-context as a speaker. Language is not merely a tool used for communicating ideas, ideas themselves are formed *in* and *through* language.

It is this intertwinement of language and background which Fish hopes will answer fears of interpretive anarchy. Since interpretation must take place within a context, it is structured in its orientation by that context. Readers are not free to impart any meaning they wish. As Fish writes, " . . . norms are not embedded in the language . . . but inhere in an institutional structure within which one hears utterances as already organized with reference to certain assumed purposes and goals . . . interpretative activities are not free . . . What constrains them are the understood practices and assumptions of the institution."[37] Put another way, interpretations are not free to range over any imaginable landscape, but are governed by a context of community. As Fish puts it, "The mistake is to think of interpretation as an activity in need of constraint, when in fact interpretation is

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[36]Ibid., 303.

[37]Ibid., 306.

a *structure* of constraints."[38] Thus, interpretative strategies are formed from and through

interpretative communities; the technique or orientation of specific interpretations are born

from these communities or institutions. Fish would rather we think of interpretative

strategies as limitations for possible orientations. Interpretations have purposes and goals

which orient their activity. Interpretations are not arbitrary but quite focused. This is why

Fish finds it unwarranted to charge his position as relativistic.

> An infinite plurality of meaning would be a fear only if sentences existed in a state
> in which they were not already embedded in . . . .Sentences emerge only in
> situation, and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will
> always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that
> same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning . . . .[39]

> . . . meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in the
> language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a
> structure of norms. That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but
> social; and therefore it is not a single structure with a privileged relationship to the
> process of communication as it occurs in any situation but a structure that changes
> when one situation, with its assigned background of practices . . . has given way to
> another.[40]

Fish therefore denies objective standards, urging the primacy of interpretation structured

through communal context. There are no independent or context-free interpretations.

However, Fish is not advocating relativism; interpretative activity is communal and

conventional. As Fish tells us, " . . . in fact [interpretation] . . . is determined by the

literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of

interpretative strategies."[41] Much like Kuhn's paradigms, institutions structure and

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[38]Ibid., 356.

[39]Ibid., 307.

[40]Ibid., 318.

[41]Ibid., 357.

authorize interpretative strategies. Valid interpretations are legitimated within and

through institutions. While "paradigms" and institutions may shift or change, revealing or

authorizing new strategies, reasonable interpretations can always be determined.

It is in this fashion that Fish hopes to avoid internal inconsistency. Interpretations

may compete and "bad" interpretations may manifest, nonetheless legitimation occurs

through convention. Thus, Fish argues for meaning as socially determined. Truth for Fish

is convention. Truth is therefore fluid, easily accommodating changes in strategy over

time. Meaning can change as institutions change. This also allows multiple interpretations

to co-exist without issues of legitimacy of one over another arising. Reader's interpretive

strageties are formed by institutions. For Fish, *readers* themselves are formed by these

institutions. This position completes Fish's position as one which denies objective

standards while at the same time resisting charges of relativism. As Fish puts it,

> . . . the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one because
> neither exists in the pure form that would give the opposition its point . . . we do
> *not* have free-standing readers in a relationship of perceptual adequacy or
> inadequacy to an equally free-standing text. Rather, we have readers whose
> consciousnesses are constituted by a set of conventional notions which when put
> into operation constitute in turn a conventional, and conventionally seen, object.[42]

In other words, contexts not only determine appropriate strageties of interpretation, but

also the goals and purposes of those who utilize such strageties. Texts *themselves* are

such by virtue of interpretative communities.

Fish's position is that meaning and truth are based upon convention. Communities

of interpretation fashion readers and the texts they read; our conception of meaning and

truth is fashioned paradigmatically. Truth is dynamic and fluid, but nonetheless follows

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[42]Ibid., 332.

communal guidelines of consistency. This not only colors what "facts" are for Fish, but also what we do when speaking about meaning and truth. As he writes,

> In short, we try to persuade others to our beliefs because if they believe what we believe, they will, as a consequence of those beliefs, see what we see; and the facts to which we point in order to support our interpretations will be as obvious to them as they are to us. Indeed, this is the whole of critical activity, an attempt on the part of one party to alter the beliefs of another so that the evidence cited by the first will be seen *as* evidence by the second . . . the facts that one cites are available only because an interpretation (at least in its general and broad outline) has already been assumed.[43]

Fish resists a static view of meaning or "facts." We cannot simply point to facts "out in the world" without first persuading a particular interpretive strategy. Facts themselves are constituted by these strageties. Persuasion comes *before* demonstration. Without a set of background assumptions, facts which are so obvious to us are not seen as facts at all. Our goal then should be to persuade acceptance of these background assumptions so that the "facts" can be seen.

An obvious challenge to this position, one which we have seen earlier raised against Nietzsche, is the problem of self-reference. Why should we accept Fish's claim "all is communal interpretation"? If we follow his advice, shouldn't we hold his position to be merely one interpretation among others? It is interesting that Fish's response is remarkably similar to Nietzsche's. Consider:

> I have been saying that all arguments are made within assumptions and presuppositions that are themselves subject to challenge and change. Well, isn't that also an argument, and one therefore that is no more securely based than the arguments it seeks to dislodge? The answer, of course, is yes; but the answer is also "so what"? According to the position presented here, no one can claim privilege for the point of view he holds and therefore everyone is obligated to

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[43]Ibid., 365.

practice the art of persuasion.[44]

Rather than seeking to beg off a criticism of the status of his argument in relation to others, Fish freely acknowledges that his position *should* be challenged. Much like Nietzsche, Fish feels it better to challenge his position than to assign it a privileged status. To avoid formalism in all its forms, one should advocate a robust, community-based subjectivity.

As a final note, I would like to highlight those features of Fish's thought which I find postmodern. First, like many of those thinkers we have examined, there is the denial of objectivity as a useful standard. Fish argues against formal features of texts as carriers of meaning. "Formal" features are only "objective" when authorized by a particular interpretative community. Thus dis-interested, objective truth or meaning is illusory. Second, Fish argues that while readers are responsible for meaning, the range of interpretation must take place *within* a context. There is a strong shift away from universal, objective standards toward contextual-based criterion for meaning. Meaning, truth, strategies of interpretation, criticisms, etc., all take place within and through a context which legitimates and authorizes validity. Finally, there is an affirmation of the tenets of his position as being no more privileged than any other. More than anything, it is this insistence upon the connection of community to truth and meaning and his advocacy of persuasion over demonstration which make Fish a postmodern thinker.

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[44]Ibid., 368.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARD A POSTMODERN SENSE OF TRUTH

In this chapter I will present a credible account of a postmodern theory of truth, one which is neither radically relativistic nor lacking agency. Put simply, postmodernism advocates a contextual epistemology which resists universalized absolutes in favor of pluralistic, dynamic discourse. This view of truth holds truth to be fluid and variable, favoring persuasion over demonstration, dissension over consensus. I shall argue that this theory does not suffer from the performative contradiction so often levied against postmodernism, that it is not as radical is as often thought, and does indeed provide agency. My first task is to examine four basic features of this theory of truth. These features are best discussed in relation to Lyotard and Fish, especially as a response to criticisms which are often brought against their work. I also will show that this theory is not subject to charges of self-reference and that a contextual epistemology is not a radical approach. Finally, I will show that this view of truth improves upon and succeeds more traditional approaches to truth in addressing traditional philosophical problems.

To begin, there are several criticisms which can be brought against Lyotard which should be addressed. As will be recalled, Lyotard divides discourse into two basic types: denotative approaches which favor totalizing, grand narratives, and connotative discourse which resists static assignments and stresses local narratives which are fluid and plural. Given Lyotard's condemnation of metanarratives, it is reasonable to ask if Lyotard's position itself might be seen as totalizing; that Lyotard is proposing the metanarrative of "local" narratives. As James Harris argues, "Everything is relative to a multiplicity of

language games except what Lyotard has to say about those language games."[1] Harris contends that if we are to take Lyotard's analysis seriously, then his analysis is no more than another narrative, one which can be preempted by another and therefore we have no reason to accept his position over others. This type of argument, while reasonable, seems to miss the spirit of Lyotard's analysis. Lyotard's denial of metanarratives is a denial that any *one* language game can function as a final, universalizing standard. As Bill Readings writes, " . . . Lyotard's claim is not so much that 'everything is narrative' as that a story is not *the* story, that there can be no narrative to put an end to narratives."[2] Lyotard then would not argue that his position should be privileged among language games; indeed, he would embrace placing his analysis as *one* of many narratives. As we saw earlier, one feature of grand narratives is that they tend toward terrorism, excluding other discourses from participation. Lyotard's concern with the possibility of terrorism within discourse makes it clear he believes it is better to hold his position as no different from other language games than to risk exclusionary practices which accompany privileging of one discourse over another, even when that discourse is one which affirms multiplicity.

Another issue in Lyotard's work is relativism. Since Lyotard prefers dissension over consensus and denies any universal appeal for legitimacy which is external to particular language games, isn't this a position of relativism? Lyotard's position resists this label, denying *all* totalizing narratives, even those which support the basic tenets of his position. Just as he denies his position any special status over others, so too relativism is

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[1] James Harris, Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method (La Salle: Open Court, 1992), 117.

[2] Bill Readings, Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics (London: Routledge, 1991), 69.

held with suspicion as a possible "totalizing" narrative. As Readings writes, "Relativism must legitimate its own claim to be more that just 'one way of looking at things' by imposing its subjective consciousness as a metanarrative . . . Thus it still answers (poorly) to a non-narrative criterion of efficient communication. Relativism is not so much a break with metalanguage as the preservation of metalanguage . . . ."[3] The relativist, while denying privileging, still holds her own position to be "true," regardless of the context. Lyotard position could be seen as worrying that relativism places us in the same position as modernism, namely, an allegiance to a transcendental grand narrative which terrorizes local narratives. Just as modernism has deprecated certain forms of narrative, so too can relativism close discourse. For these reasons Lyotard's position resists relativism, considering it another attempt at a grand narrative.

Another issue concerns Lyotard's characterization of scientific discourse as denotative. In particular, Lyotard indicates that scientific discourse tends toward exclusionary practices, shutting out other forms of expression. Underlying this is the implication that science is a descriptive discourse, one which points to universal, repeatable phenomena. This can be taken to see science as striving for context-free, value-free discourse, seeking universal laws and features which transcend all contexts. However, this view of science, while appropriate for modern science, is not accurate of contemporary approaches to science. As Schrag writes, "Part of the problem in Lyotard's approach . . . has to do with his restriction of statements in the scientific language game to the denotative or constantive type . . . ."[4] Indeed, this proves to be a substantial problem

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[3]Ibid., 67.

[4]Schrag, 102.

when one looks over recent scientific discourse which recognizes the necessity of context in considering scientific problems. With the shift from Newton to Einstein, perspective or context plays an increasingly significant role. For example, with Einstein comes the recognition that it is inappropriate to ask the speed of an object without first asking "from whose perspective?" This shift away from purely denotative, descriptive discourse to a more connotative approach is even more apparent with recent advances in quantum mechanics.

Quantum mechanics shows that comments and theories concerning the sub-atomic realm *must* be grounded in a specific context; to change the context is to change the results of the experiment. For example, the two-slit experiment of Thomas Young[5] produces different results depending on the context of the observer. This phenomena, called wave/particle duality, shows that, depending on the context of the experiment, sub-atomic objects (such as electrons or photons) manifest either as waves or as particles. This "complementary" feature of nature, that subatomic objects have dual, exclusive natures (such as wave or particle) dependent on context, forces quantum physicists to acknowledge the importance of context; indeed, to speak of an experiment without clearly defining its context is to invite disaster. It simply makes no sense to speak of light as "wave-like" or "particle-like" without defining the context in which this is observed.

While physics is a specific discipline within science, I think it representative of recent science in the following way: the context in which experiments take place has an effect upon the outcome of the experiment. I think it unfair to cast recent science as a purely denotative discourse when this recognition of the importance of context is

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[5]Victor Guillemin, The Story of Quantum Mechanics (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1968), 46.

ubiquitous. Nor do scientists insist their discourse is independent of the scientific

community. While science may make universal claims about nature, the processes by

which such claims are made are local and communal. Even these universal claims are

subject to change through changes within the scientific community.[6] It is perhaps more

accurate to say Lyotard's concern is the overemphasis of scientific methodology, not

necessarily the activity of science itself.

Given an argument that science *is* connotative, we should look deeper into

Lyotard's concern regarding scientific discourse. Lyotard fears that with technologically

advancing societies there is a tendency to cast aside non-quantifiable discourses in favor of

those which are readily translatable into quantities of information. In this respect, science

has an advantage over other narratives; science is characterized by its ability to quantify its

findings. While science may embrace a more connotative approach than Lyotard gives

immediate credit for, it can be argued that the results of scientific discourse are

quantifiable and grand, which carries the possibility of local, less quantifiable discourses

being crowded out from what is considered to be knowledge. This too may be an

unfounded fear. While Lyotard worries about the "hegemony" of the computer, one look

at the proliferation of the world-wide-web on the Internet of *local, individual* web pages

indicates that far from crowding out or constraining the type of information distributed,

computer networks have allowed an unparalleled advance in the distribution of "local"

information. With the popularity of the Internet, localized communities (such as six-grade

classrooms) now have a voice where none was possible before. Indeed, one need only

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[6]See Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2d ed. (Chicago: The University of
Chicago Press, 1970).

look at the advocacy newsgroups on the Internet to see that the widespread use of computers has *opened* and *encouraged* discourse rather than constrained or closed it. In all fairness, Lyotard does grant the *possibility* of computers opening discourse, writing, " . . . [computers] could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions."[7] Again, Lyotard seems to be offering more a warning than a description; nonetheless, the possibilities of terrorism with the advance of the computer is something Lyotard takes very seriously.

However, Lyotard's preference for local narratives has one remaining facet. Lyotard insists that narration is a richer medium for communication. The ability to engage in a variety of language games allows greater flexibility in discourse and lends itself to conflict between language games. For Lyotard, conflict is a necessary component of invention and creativity. While urging scientific discourse to be more connotative and warning against the ubiquity of computer-centered discourse may be unnecessary, Lyotard's's point is significant in that discourses which are exclusionary can be dangerous to invention. I think this point is well taken; discourse which excludes other forms of discourse often seeks a totalizing approach which denies the significance of context. An approach which resists these types of closed discourse is more effective for creativity and invention.

This is one feature of postmodern truth; given that truth is multiple, discourse should embrace a heterogenous approach and strive to open and continue conversation as opposed to providing a totalizing system which excludes other possible perspectives. This

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[7]Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 67.

is closely tied to the second feature of postmodern truth; its allegiance to conflict within and between language games. The third feature which Lyotard brings to the surface is the local nature of knowledge, that it is grounded in an interpretative context or community.

As we have seen, Fish argues that interpretative communities provide the strategies with which readers engage texts. Through the preeminence of these communities as the background to our interpretations, Fish hopes to avoid objections of reader-anarchy. "Good" interpretations are those which are appropriate for the interpretative community. Readers therefore approach texts through specific strategies which are given to them via an interpretative community. This social perspective of meaning, while significant in its attempts to avoid charges of relativism, nonetheless raises several significant issues. These interpretative communities not only constitute the orientation by which readers approach texts; Fish also argues these communities produce the texts themselves which readers engage. One concern is whether the influence and power of these "communities" could be coercive.[8] Since interpretative communities shape readers' responses, hasn't Fish sacrificed the reader's interpretative freedom? If readers' responses are completely dictated by the communities which provide their strategies, then it seems readers would have no choice in the sort of strategies which they employ and would be unlikely to produce new strategies. This would be a strange view of readers; not only do they have little choice with regard to *how* they engage a text, but they readily *accept* whatever strategy is given them.[9] This does not seem reflective of readers in actual practice.

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[8]Richard Beach, A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), 107.

[9]Ibid.

Readers are able to interpret the texts they read from a variety of perspectives. A reader may approach a text from a feminist, deconstructive, Marxist or post-structuralist approach, to name a few examples. Indeed, as Beach notes, "In responding to a text in a classroom, a student may be not only a member of a classroom community, but also import perspectives as a member of a family, social club, a neighborhood, etc."[10] While communities provide strategies and the structure for their application, nothing prevents readers from utilizing a multitude of strategies. To argue that Fish's interpretative community is a tyrannical system of enforcement neglects the fact that readers actually have allegiances to *many* communities and they can readily, and often do, change interpretative strategies. Nonetheless, Fish's focus upon a subjective basis for meaning structured by convention and community is significant for a postmodern sense of truth. In particular, Fish advocates persuasion over demonstration. Demonstration is seen to be ineffectual without a shared background of concerns and assumptions. Thus, Fish would urge communities to persuade new members into their ranks, not through demonstration of "facts" but through urging the acceptance of background assumptions and attitudes.

This feature of Fish's work represents the fourth and final feature I wish to discuss of postmodern truth. "Truth" being local does not make it arbitrary; local communities provide structure and legitimacy for discourse. One is not free to make *any* claim, such as "All Blake's poetry is about carrots," without qualification. In addition, without certain background assumptions in place, many interpretations make no sense. Therefore, persuasion is superior to demonstration as it carries with it the shared background of a community, context, and convention.

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[10]Ibid.

We can now point to the basic features of a postmodern approach to truth. Truth is multiple, finite, and contingent. A contextual, localized approach to truth recognizes the importance of background assumptions and regards truth as communal with respect to these assumptions. There is also an allegiance to conflict and resistance to any discourse which tries to totalize or universalize discourse. It denies the traditional notion of truth as absolute and bivalent. Truth is not absolute, nor purely subjective, nor restricted to a single community. In Chapter One, I examined some of the limitations of traditional theories of truth. If a postmodern view of truth is to be a viable alternative, then it is important to see if postmodernism is subject to these same limitations.

Correspondence theories faced accusations of being too limited in scope; many propositions are seemingly unaccountable by a correspondence based orientation to truth. At the core of this limitation is the traditional notion of objectivity; those propositions which cannot be verified as corresponding to some fact in an "objective" sense cannot be accounted for. Since postmodernism denies this notion of objectivity, it does not suffer from these types of problems. Those propositions which cannot be evaluated from one perspective point toward the use of another perspective. This is prevalent in our everyday practices as well. The methods by which we evaluate "the cat is on the mat" differ from how we approach "one should not lie". Postmodernism recognizes the fluidity by which we shift from one perspective to another and by considering truth to be multiple, avoids the problems of contention between criteria by affirming the contention.

Coherence theories cite coherence between beliefs as the basis for truth. Objections to this position include concern with the possibility of an infinite number of coherent sets which are incommensurate with one another. An approach to truth which

encourages multiplicity and contention is less likely to suffer from such an objection given that conflict between beliefs is seen to be beneficial. With the denial of totalizing narratives, postmodernism refuses to acknowledge a single coherent system as a final standard for truth, thus allowing a greater flexibility in dealing with disparate propositions. Postmodernism *affirms* multiplicity, conflict between language games and incommensurability. A final objection which I raised against coherence involved Gödel's incompleteness theorem which shows an inherent limitation for proof within formal axiomatic systems. Two things here. First, postmodernism would seem to favor limitations to proof; how better to foster discussion? Secondly, Gödel's theorem argues that no *single* formal axiomatic system can account for all propositions within it. However, nothing prevents *another* formalized system for accounting for such propositions (while having its *own* undecidable formulas). This is in agreement with a postmodern position; truth, being radically finite and multiple, *must* be decided at a level of a language game. No single basis for truth is sufficient to address all possible propositions. It is significant to note that postmodernism and coherence theories have much in common. In affirming a multiple, local sense of truth, coherence can play a significant role for truth *within* perspectives. For example, scientific and mythological accounts of the universe are incommensurate with one another but are nonetheless *internally* coherent. A coherent sense of truth can work well from a postmodern perspective so long as no *single* coherent system is taken to be an absolute standard for truth across all language games.

Finally, I wish to compare objections to pragmatism and this postmodern view of truth. As will be recalled, I considered the pragmatic theory of truth as one with two

veins; instrumental and consensus-based. Instrumental pragmatism argues for truth as usefulness. The primary objection I considered is how practicality is to be equated to truth, since often it may be practical to believe a false proposition. The consensus-based view of pragmatism has received recent attention in the work of Richard Rorty and has often been associated with a postmodern sense of truth. There are several similarities between Rorty's consensus theory of truth and postmodern truth. First, both deny an objective, absolute standard for truth, arguing instead for a local understanding of truth. Second, neither accept truth as singular or static. Rorty's use of "consensus" is perhaps best understood as convention within a community; Rorty resists as well those discourses which seek to end conversation, preferring "edifying" discourse which encourages continued discussion.

However, for instrumental pragmatism, while postmodernism would certainly accept usefulness as an appropriate measure of truth in some language games, it would resist seeing this as a universal criterion for truth. So long as a consensus-based (i.e., convention within a community) continues to view truth as dynamic, postmodernism sees truth in much the same light. However, a more classical consensus-based theory, such as those which argue for a tendency toward global agreement across all communities, would not rest well with a postmodernism perspective. Postmodernism, as we have seen, resists consensus and agreement, urging instead conflict within and between language games. Truth as agreement would be seen as an invitation to exclusion, sacrificing creativity for a grand notion of legitimacy. Agreement then becomes a metanarrative, universalizing across communities as an intra-communal standard for truth. Postmodernism, then, would seem to embrace a pragmatic view of truth which holds truth to be dynamic and

community-based but would resist those orientations which introduce a totalizing

definition which threatens to preempt creative dissension. Postmodernism also shares with

the pragmatic tradition the sense of truth as performative as opposed to strictly abstract

and static.

A context based sense of truth then is a viable alternative to traditional approaches.

Much of this viability is due to conceiving truth as plural as opposed to absolute; this gives

a postmodern view of truth flexibility within and between language games. Those

objections which carry weight against traditional theories of truth are often seen as reasons

for a postmodern sense of truth. Nonetheless, with the assumption of truth as plural and

dynamic comes another set of objections, objections with which I began my discussion in

the Introduction; self-referential paradoxes and lack of agency.

The first objection is one which is familiar at this point; a context-based conception

of truth seems to advocate a radical relativism. With the acceptance of a context-based

epistemology we are left with no reason to accept its tenets over those of another, more

traditional approach. However, as we have seen with Nietzsche, Lyotard, and Fish, a

context-based, perspectival sense of truth holds that it is *better* to hold it as one position

among many. For Nietzsche, an approach which embraces multiplicity not only affirms

the finite conditions of existence, it also enables conflict between perspectives. This

conflict between perspectives is what constitutes perspectives themselves; to close

discourse is to close ones own position. Lyotard sees relativism as another attempt to

totalize discourse, an attempt which ultimately leads to the exclusion of one form of

discourse over another. For Lyotard, it is better to see his view as no more privileged

than others, since this encourages free discourse. To ascribe his position a privileged

status would open up the possibility of his own position as terrorist. Fish takes a similar

approach in that he directly affirms his position as no more "demonstrative" than others.

Fish claims that charges of relativism make no difference to his position since he denies the

efficacy of demonstration. "Facts" and "truths" can only be manifest given a particular

background, a background which can only be established by persuasion, not

demonstration. Fish holds than since his position is itself a persuasion, it then does not

suffer from a performative contradiction. Charges of self-referential contradiction are only

appropriate to those arguments which purport to demonstrate.

The second issue which is frequently brought up against postmodernism is that of

agency. With the affirmation of multiple, competing positions and a lack of a definable

course of resolution between these positions, often it is argued that this doesn't *do*

anything. A postmodern sense of truth then negates itself in a practical sense. However,

if we look back over the thinkers I have considered, it is clear that their positions do *not*

deny agency; if anything, a postmodernist position encourages agency.

With Nietzsche, nothing prevents him from holding perspectivism to be a *better*

position than others. Indeed, much of his work is a persuasion toward that end. While

postmodernism may prevent one from *demonstrating,* in a traditional sense, the

appropriateness of its position, nothing prevents it from *persuading* others that this is the

case. With Nietzsche, the case is clear; he holds his position to be more appropriate to the

conditions of existence than foundational positions and actively seeks to win others over

to his perspective. Heidegger's position of "truth as disclosure" advocates a stronger

sense of agency in my mind than traditional approaches. For Heidegger urges that we

look beyond the simplistic notions of correspondence and coherence toward the

meaningfulness of truth for us *as* beings. Heidegger's position on truth *opens* up new ways of looking at the world, while at the same time maintaining a place for traditional orientations toward truth. Lyotard takes a similar approach, warning against the terrorist practices of grand narratives, in essence, warning that such narratives *prevent* agency; creative freedom is abandoned where there is no dissension. Fish is perhaps the most obvious of the thinkers in having a position which actively pursues active engagement; his position makes it imperative that critics persuade others into their interpretative communities. Therefore, I find objections that postmodernism lacks a sense of concrete action unclear. For postmodernism seems to directly indicate agency. The loss of an absolute foundation is replaced with an imperative to engage others in discourse; if anything, postmodernism advocates a position of action and thereby contains a system of agency.

Looking back, postmodernism does seem to represent consistent thought regarding truth. In holding truth to be fluid and multiple, postmodernism resists static assignments of meaning, favoring communities in conflict and advocating persuasion between communities as opposed to demonstration. I think it appropriate that given postmodernism's orientation toward truth, it does not suffer from performative contradictions in that it maintains a consistent position, even with regards to its *own* position, and denies the basis from which such objections are made. I have also suggested that postmodernism may not in fact be as radical or as new as is often supposed; one can find traces of its thought in Nietzsche and Heidegger as well as evidence in contemporary science.

One last aspect of this issue of truth which I have not discussed is its relation to

certain traditional philosophical problems. It is here that a postmodern approach to truth

can be seen as an improvement over more traditional conceptions. A postmodern sense of

truth assumes a background of involvement which avoids many traditional philosophical

problems. As we have seen with Heidegger, that we are immersed in the world prior to

our reflections avoids problems such as solipsism, the disbelief in other minds, and radical

skepticism, an all-encompassing doubt. With a postmodern sense of truth, truth-claims are

made only *after* background assumptions have come into play in shaping our interpretative

strategies. With Heidegger, this avoids problems which can commonly be associated with

modernist conceptions of truth, such as solipsism and radical skepticism. Since we are in-

the-world *prior* to our philosophical claims, there is a background involvement with the

world which is presupposed. With this view, the skeptic who publishes a "proof" of the

uncertainty of other minds, certainly *seems* sure other minds exist; after all, the work is

published. What is significant is that such problems as solipsism and skepticism can only

arise only within a modernist conception of truth where there is a polarization between

subject and object, and the sense of an objective, static reality "outside" our

consciousness. Only with such a position can we entertain doubt about a world and its

connections to our ideas. From a postmodernist perspective however, such problems deny

obvious facets of our existence; for Nietzsche, that we are bound to the Other in

constituting our own position, for Heidegger, that we are being-in-the-world prior to any

truth-claims, for Lyotard, that claims must be made from within a language-game which is

pragmatically based, and for Fish, whose interpretative communities fashion the questions

before we pose them. Since postmodernism embraces the finitude of existence and

advocates a contextual sense of truth, traditional philosophical problems lose their force

and are seen not to be problems at all. This can be seen as a decided advantage for a postmodern perspective on truth; it avoids the problems associated with the subject/object split that have occupied philosophy for centuries.

In conclusion, postmodernism should not be seen as a position solely of criticism, one which can be easily dismissed as a self-contradictory theory lacking any viable alternative to the problems it poses. Postmodernism advocates a contextual approach to truth as an alternative to foundational positions which hold truth to be absolute. Postmodernism holds truth to be multiple and dynamic, based more in discourse than demonstration. This approach to truth avoids traditional problems which trouble modernist approaches to truth by denying the possibility of an overarching, "objective" position; truth must take place from within a perspective. Truth is local, communal, and finite. Postmodernism's attention to background assumptions denies the validity of a polarization of subject/object and embraces a contextualized approach to epistemic issues. Truth being local does not abolish standards by which we conduct ourselves in discourse. How it is local communities go about determining the truth of propositions can be share something with modernist positions. For example, nothing prevents a local sense of truth continuing to determine truth in terms of degrees of appropriateness, reliability, workability, or agreement.[11] Postmodernism resists an "imperial" sense of truth which crowds out other possible meaningful approaches. Postmodernism then does not deprecate scientific orientations, recognizing the reliability of scientific claims and the practicality of scientific perspectives in certain situations. Nonetheless, postmodernism

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[11]See Lawrence J. Hatab, "Rejoining *Aletheia* and Truth: or Truth is a Five-Letter Word," International Philosophical Quarterly 30. (December 1990): 431-47.

offers comparisons between different modes of truth, such as those of science and literature. Any mode of truth shows a connection with community, narration, rhetoric, and context. What is essential is that postmodernism denies the applicability of one orientation for *all* contexts. Just as a literary orientation would be seen to be inappropriate for building a bridge, so too is the scientific mode seen to be lacking for literary criticism. This is significant in that postmodernism does not deny the efficacy of science but any exclusionary domination of any one perspective over all others. We are bound by perspective and context; there can be no "God's eye view" which could afford a disinterested, objective position. Foundational approaches to truth have enjoyed unparalleled success in the modern world; conceptions of truth as objectivity have their place in science and technology. However, postmodernism warns not only of the inherent finite conditions in which we make truth-claims, but also the possibility of exclusionary practices which often go hand in hand with foundational approaches. Postmodernism demands that the normative elements of epistemology be acknowledged as significant. In this sense, postmodernism is not seen as an usurper of modern science and philosophy but a reasoned resistance to blindly accepting standards whose consequences have not been fully explored. Postmodernism then does not offer a position of contradiction, but a viable, robust alternative to traditional conceptions of truth. While not without its problems, postmodernism represents a continuation of philosophical rigor so characteristic of modernism.

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VITA

I was born Roger T. Gregory, Jr. on August of 1968 in Richmond, Virginia. My current

residence is   I completed my

baccalaureate degree in Philosophy in 1993 at Virginia Wesleyan College. As an

undergraduate I presented "Nietzsche's conception of Morality" at the 1993 Southeastern

Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, hosted by Old Dominion University and entered

the Masters of Arts program in Humanities that same year. During my residency in this

program I have had the opportunity to serve as a teaching assistant for an introductory

Philosophy course and presented "Robots and Assistants: Wittgenstein and

Understanding" for the Virginia Wesleyan Philosophy club. I will complete my Masters

Degree in Humanities in 1996 and intend on continuing my education at the doctoral level.