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The Postmodern Doctrine

Forrest Lunn

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Philosophy**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

April, 1992

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Abstract

The Postmodern Doctrine

Forrest Lunn

The Postmodern Doctrine, the theory that neither our beliefs nor our moral and aesthetic values have any timeless, culture-independent foundation, is the ascendant philosophical ideology of our time. This theory, like all philosophical ideologies, is employed to 'rationalize' our institutions and social practices — to make it possible for us to see our culture as comprehensible and justifiable.

The connection made between antifoundationalism and 'postmodernity' is not uncontroversial. It is defended first on the grounds that it is a fruitful hypothesis and secondly by arguing that a wide range of theories and attitudes that *are* generally regarded as postmodern turn out on analysis to be versions of philosophical antifoundationalism.

Although it has a good deal of plausibility as a rationalization of the world we inhabit, the Postmodern Doctrine remains deeply problematic because it threatens fundamental social practices. Practices such as the interpretation of legal and literary texts, the moral evaluation of human action, and the aesthetic evaluation of art and nature, reasoned social dissent, and the scientific investigation of nature cannot long survive the abandonment of the commitment to culture-independent foundations. All these activities rest on the assumption that the judgments we make in pursuing them can be 'measured' for adequacy against culture-independent standards of truth, goodness and beauty. Once the belief in such standards has been lost, the

names of the old practices may remain, but the practices themselves will have ceased to exist. If we wish to retain the practices, we must reaffirm our commitment to genuine foundations.

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PREFACE

A particular experience sparked my interest in the topic of this essay. A lifelong interest in drawing suddenly blossomed into a fascination. I began trying to teach myself to draw competently and, as part of the process, began looking carefully and inquisitively at Renaissance and Baroque master drawings. As time passed, my experience of these drawings changed. They ceased to be dead things laden with arcane mythology and obscure symbolism and became wonderfully alive. I felt then — as I feel now — that I was learning to see them for what they are: A truly 'masterful' expression of respect for the human body. I felt, in short, that I had learnt to see the *quality* of the drawings — to see just how brilliant and beautiful they are.

The experience was exhilarating: A whole new world of understanding and pleasure had been unlocked. But soon I realized that I had come too late to these masterpieces to be allowed to enjoy them with a clear conscience. Not long after I had begun looking seriously at Renaissance and Baroque art, I had also started to look at contemporary figurative art, in particular at the work of such established postmodern painters as Francesco Clemente, David Salle, and Eric Fischl. I was struck — as I believe anyone coming to these painters by a similar route would have been — by what I took to be the conspicuous inferiority of their draftsmanship. Its quality ranged from the competent but amateurish drawing of Fischl to the grotesquely *incompetent* efforts of Clemente. Nowhere was there a single work or even an isolated passage that seemed to have any claim to a place on the same wall as the meanest sketch of a minor Renaissance artist. In itself, this vision of a ter-

rible loss of skill need have been nothing more than depressing. I soon realized, however, that, according to the conventional philosophical wisdom of the day, my conviction of the inferiority of contemporary draftsmanship was not so much depressing as *incoherent*. A hundred years ago it must have been possible to argue that nineteenth-century drawing was inferior to the drawing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to do so with confidence that, right or wrong, one was at least making sense. I soon realized, however, the difficulties of attempting to take a comparable stance in our own era. At the same time as I had begun looking at contemporary figurative art, I had begun to read contemporary criticism and in this way came into contact with the attitudes and values of the world from which the art emerged. I quickly saw that I was surrounded by an idea that challenged the legitimacy of the pleasure I had found in the master drawings. That pleasure had been crucially connected with a sense of the drawings' quality and now I found that the advocates of contemporary figurative visual art — critics, teachers, curators, the artists themselves — insisting that I had no right to regard contemporary draftsmanship as inferior to classical draftsmanship.

This was not my first encounter with philosophical relativism, but it was the first time I had felt it as genuinely threatening. I felt that it threatened not only my intellectual security, but also my right to take untainted pleasure in looking at the drawings I had come to love. I began trying to think about the problem systematically. I also began to read, hoping that I would find a writer whose thoughts I could use to conclusively reject the threatening relativism — or, failing that, one who would show me an argument that would shake my conviction of the absolute superiority of

master draftsmanship. I found neither person — not surprisingly as it now seems. But I did find powerful and illuminating pieces of philosophical and critical writing that intensified my interest in the whole large issue and stimulated further reading and further thinking. What follows is the result of that work.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the following pages I want to introduce — briefly, and more or less casually — some of the major themes of this essay. This synopsis will be useful not only as a preview of what is to follow, but also as a means of broaching some important methodological matters.

Foundationalism

As I have explained, all this began as an attempt to ease acute philosophical discomfort. The attempt has not, of course, been entirely successful, but it has led to a 'position' of sorts — a roughly defined and tentative stance which has at least the merit of fitting a lot of diverse elements into some kind of perspective. The simplest way to describe that position is as 'foundationalism'. It is tempting to go farther and, defensively, refer to it as 'reactionary' foundationalism; certainly it is not a point of view that will have an immediate appeal to many. Even those who might initially find the idea of 'foundations' appealing are likely to be put off when, in the final chapter, I say something about the *kind* of foundationalism I have in mind. The theory I develop there is an atheistic and epistemologically humble one which, far from offering the reassurance provided by traditional foundationalist ideologies, would seem even more likely than antifoundationalism to plunge its adherents into intellectual insecurity and anxiety.

I am made all the more acutely aware of neo-foundationalism's lack of general appeal by the fact that I share to a certain extent the postmodern repugnance toward the idea of absolute and immutable standards of truth, morality and aesthetic value. In committing myself, even tentatively, to such 'transcendentalia', I fear that I am perhaps compromising long-held values and, at the same time, cutting myself off from my intellectual surroundings. In short, I feel the nervousness and the embarrassment which is bound to be felt anyone who wishes to maintain the possibility of such things as these: statements that are true although they are generally rejected; practices that are immoral although they are generally accepted; aesthetic judgments that are valid despite being trans-cultural. Convictions like these are bound to be seen as arrogant and smug as well as retrograde, and that impression will remain even if one goes on, as I do, to point out that a commitment to foundations is not a commitment to the belief that anyone *knows* the truth or that anyone actually *has* an unerring sense of good or beauty. But embarrassment and nervousness cannot be good reasons for refusing to follow where experience and thought lead.

The Commitment to Transcendentalia

The central critical tenets of this essay are: First that antifoundationalism, the 'Postmodern Doctrine' as we shall come to call it, is the prevailing 'philosophical ideology' of our time — that it is, that is to say, a general, more or less unconscious 'theory' that underlies our thought and action; secondly that, whatever its virtues may be, that doctrine suffers from serious flaws, philosophical ones in particular; and thirdly, that the only way to really escape the doctrine is through a commitment to

'transcendentalia', timeless, culture-independent standards of truth, morality and aesthetic quality.

As I have already conceded, such talk of immutable absolutes is scarcely fashionable. Indeed, that is an understatement: The entire course of post-Renaissance Western philosophy is a flight from a belief in absolutes — first, from the idea of standards that transcend human experience and, during the last two hundred years, from the idea that even human experience can provide a stable touchstone. Anyone who presumes, now, to argue in favour of immutability, is going against the grain of history.

The central substantive claim of the essay is that, despite all this, there is a plausible foundationalist alternative to postmodern antifoundationalism. By 'plausible alternative' here I mean: a theory which could be just as effective, both philosophically and ideologically as is the Postmodern Doctrine. To show that such a theory can be made plausible, however, is not to show that it can be made popular. It must be admitted immediately that not even a cautious and qualified form of neo-foundationalism is likely to be widely attractive. A good deal of the sympathy a briefly stated version of such a theory might receive would be motivated by traditional theological considerations and, because our culture is so thoroughly secular, support coming from that direction would mean little. Indeed, the approval of those — the Christian foundationalists and others — who are so obviously not typical products of our culture could reasonably be taken to show the practical hopelessness of a neo-foundationalist philosophical ideology. In any case, as I argue when we come in the final chapter to sketch out some of the detail of a contemporary foundationalism, only an *atheistic* version of the theory would have any real plausibility as a contemporary philosophical

ideology, and so any support coming from the traditionally religious would prove ephemeral. To put it bluntly, very few of the members of our own culture who have any views whatsoever on these matters would be willing to take seriously the idea of a philosophical ideology that is committed to transcendentalia of the kind I have in mind — not at least until they had been subjected to a long and carefully wrought argument in its favour.

In light of the current unpopularity of foundationalism, it is important to do something, quickly, to cast a slightly more positive light on the our whole enterprise. I will make two points, the first concerning what might be called without much exaggeration the outrageousness of my position. The fact that my substantive claim goes so strongly against prevailing opinion, should, I think not be seen as discouraging, but as something that adds plausibility to my claim that antifoundationalism *is* the prevailing philosophical ideology. If, as I argue, adherence to current ideology implies the rejection of foundationalism, then foundationalism's outrageousness is surely evidence in favour of the ideological status of *anti*-foundationalism: Just because the antifoundational outlook has become so fundamental, we have come to regard it not as a theory but as common-sense and to see any questioning of it as something akin to madness.

My second point is that while I do not by any means claim to have any arguments which *show* that there are transcendental standards, I do not feel that the absence of such arguments represents a weakness in my essay. Indeed, it follows from the nature of the transcendentalia that their existence *cannot* be demonstrated: How, after all, could the validity of a line of reasoning purporting to do so be established? Only by a self-refuting appeal to other standards. The existence of transcendentalia can only be

posited, not proven. To be sure, considerations can be put forward in *favour* of positing them, and arguments can be made to show that positive consequences ensue if we do so. But there will always be counter-considerations which can be brought against the positing of transcendentalia and other arguments which show that positing them will have negative consequences. Nevertheless, just as no argument can demonstrate the existence of transcendentalia, no argument can demonstrate that they do not exist. If there are such things as philosophical ideologies, then their adoption, whether by an individual or a community, will always be more akin to making a leap of faith than to acceding to cogent argument. One important consequence of this is that the mere knowledge that there is a coherent alternative must be a fact of considerable interest even to someone who is completely committed to the prevailing philosophical ideology. For such a person the prospect of seriously examining an alternative viewpoint offers, at the very least, the attractions of an interesting thought experiment — an exercise which cannot be harmful and which may lead to deeper understanding.

The Idea of Philosophical Ideology

My whole project of questioning contemporary relativistic attitudes, and outlining an alternative, foundationalistic theory, rests on the claim that there are such things as philosophical ideologies. A philosophical ideology is a very general theory adhered to by a community (or sub-community) to which that community appeals in order to explain and justify its beliefs, institutions and practices. In the next chapter a good deal of effort is put into defining and developing this idea and into establishing its validity, but

here, while we are still proceeding informally, it is worth noting the irony such a concept's playing a central role in a critique of relativism. To assert a connection between philosophy and ideology, and go on to emphasize the social role of ideology, is apparently to accept one of the primary principles of the theory I wish to oppose. As we shall see, in rejecting the possibility of inter-cultural and inter-epochal judgments of truth and value, the antifoundationalists argue that our means of *expressing* such assessments, our 'discourse' as they would call it, is necessarily, the product of our own time and place. In other words, antifoundationalists are historicists and in giving the idea of philosophical ideology so much theoretical importance I too seem to be adopting historicism. Nevertheless, despite the fact that there is an important historicist element in my position, it is not genuine historicism because I am not claiming that philosophical ideologies can be regarded as *entirely* the products of the cultures that produce them. I will argue that a genuinely *philosophical* ideology is by definition an attempt at a transcendent rationalization — one which justifies a culture not just to itself, but *sub specie aeternitatis*. Of course, to merely describe a philosophical ideology in this way is not to show that the idea is a valid one, but this is not the place to take up that issue. The crucial thing here is to make it clear that if there are such things as philosophical ideologies, they cannot be completely understood as the products of cultural contingencies.

Because, inasmuch as they are philosophical, philosophical ideologies cannot be regarded as cultural products, the notion can be used without contradiction in a critique of antifoundationalism. To make this point is not to say that in employing the concept of a philosophical ideology we are conceding nothing whatsoever to the proponents of antifoundationalism.

Quite the contrary, in acknowledging the intimacy, and the necessity, of the connection between ideology and philosophy, and at the same time admitting that inasmuch as a philosophical ideology is an *ideology* it is a cultural product, we are granting that there is a great deal to be said in favour of all but the most ontologically extreme forms of contemporary historicism. Indeed, it seems perfectly possible that future historians of ideas will look back on the second half of the twentieth century as a time when we finally realized we can hope to understand ourselves and our world only if we acknowledge that — to a very considerable extent — we are the products of contingent and transient cultural conditions.

Anticipating another recurrent theme of this essay, I should add that on this last point and on several others one result of my efforts to undermine contemporary antifoundationalism has been to force me to acknowledge just how 'small' and obscure our foundations are — and just how little of the content of the cultures that we erect on them can be thought of as being foundationally determined or justified. I do not think that this admission weakens my critique of antifoundationalism: What is important about our foundations is simply that they exist — not how clearly we can 'see' them or even how much they can potentially 'tell' us about how what sort of judgments we should make and what sort of institutions we should build. It is important, however, that it be made clear from the start, that even if our critique of antifoundationalism succeeds, any plausible version of foundationalism that we might hope to establish in its place would have to take into account the now undeniable historicity of many aspects of our minds and our world that not so long ago were confidently taken to be securely founded in culture-independent absolutes.

Antifoundationalism and Postmodernity

As is indicated by this essay's title, and at several points in the preceding pages, I have not been content to label the ascendant philosophical ideology of our time simply as 'foundationalism'. I have gone on to dub it the 'Postmodern Doctrine'. It might be thought that in introducing this label I am unnecessarily becoming involved in a separate, perhaps irrelevant debate. After all, the term 'postmodern' is notoriously controversial and polysemous, and if I am right in using the word 'antifoundationalism' to describe the target of my critique, it would surely be prudent not to complicate matters by introducing another, suspect piece of terminology. There is no doubt some point to this objection, but, nevertheless, there is at least one good reason for taking the risk: By giving crucial importance to the term 'postmodern' we automatically place ourselves at the centre of the most vital and wide-ranging of current philosophical debates. And that is precisely where anyone who proposes to discuss philosophical ideology must wish to be.

Evidence of the importance of the notion of postmodernity is all around us. Many of the most productive visual artists and novelists of our time explicitly characterize their outlook as 'postmodern'. Many of the most powerful and widely read critics of visual art and of fiction regularly use the term to describe the contemporary work that seems to them most worthy of comment. Many prominent authors of social criticism and cultural criticism centre their whole position on the term. At least some philosophers, Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard are examples, give the concept a central place in their thought; and others, for example

Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty, while themselves tending to avoid the word have had an important influence on explicitly postmodern thought.

There are those, however, who deprecate the term largely because it is used in so many contexts and because its meaning is so elusive. They would insist that it is a mistake to take the word 'postmodern' as seriously as I propose to take it, contending that because there is no clear and unified conception of postmodernity, it makes no sense to speak of a postmodern philosophy — or to describe a philosophical doctrine such as antifoundationalism as 'postmodern'. They would argue that postmodernism amounts to nothing more than a loosely knit family of philosophical, critical, and political ideas, or perhaps, that it is merely an artistic style or a vaguely defined set of socio-cultural trends. Certainly the term is vague, sometimes to the point of being used in contradictory ways, but given the fact that it has emerged out of debate about philosophical ideology, this is scarcely surprising. It would be naïve to expect otherwise. Trying to arrive at a precise and definitive statement of a diverse and unstable culture is rather like attempting to be precise and definite about the sub-conscious mental life of a complex and unstable person. In neither case, however, can the impossibility of the task be used as a reason for abandoning it. The philosophical impulse cannot be ignored — and in any case, even if we are doomed to fail, by making the effort we will learn a great deal.

Given the difficulties, we must in discussing philosophical ideology be willing to use whatever conceptual tools seem most promising, without worrying overmuch about how finely wrought these tools are. The ultimate test of the legitimacy of the connection I make between philosophical

antifoundationalism and the concept of postmodernity must be the degree of illumination that is achieved by taking that approach. More concretely, however, there is in the next chapter a detailed discussion of an article by Andreas Huyssen, a writer who makes a point of talking in a general way about the nature of postmodernity. I argue there that even though Huyssen himself makes no connection between postmodernity and foundationalism, an analysis of what he says supports my claim that there is such a connection.

The Arguments Used against the Postmodern Doctrine

The arguments I bring against the Postmodern Doctrine do not, as I have already admitted, show that the doctrine is philosophically untenable, or that it must be rejected for any other reason. Indeed, as I have also already admitted, there is no way of demonstrating the truth or falsity of any philosophical ideology. From the point of view of advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine, whose historicism commits them to the view that we are entirely the products of our own culture it is not possible even to *criticize* a philosophical ideology. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the modest but stringent foundationalism that I will be advocating, even if we cannot refute such theories, we *can* criticize them. Misgivings and dissatisfactions can be regarded as legitimate and one can make the effort to express them as powerfully as possible in the hope of sharpening and strengthening the misgivings and dissatisfactions of others and, perhaps, persuading some of those who have previously accepted the prevailing philosophical ideology to question their allegiance to it. In this connection, I will often speak of 'undermining'. This seems an appropriate metaphor.

Three sorts of argument will be employed in the attempt to undermine the Postmodern Doctrine. Since they are not explicitly identified as such in the text, it seems worthwhile to describe each briefly now.

Recalling Commitments

One way of attempting to undermine the Postmodern Doctrine is by drawing attention to the fact that it is incompatible with fundamental social practices and the institutions which embody them. In Chapter Four this kind of argument is made with respect to the practices of interpretation, evaluation, dissent and science. In each case the claim is roughly this: If we adopt the Postmodern Doctrine as our philosophical ideology, we cannot, without falling into self-contradiction, continue to engage in the practice in question. This argument is similar in form to the Kantian transcendental argument, but there is an important difference: When Kant argued, for example, that space must be a 'form of outer sense' because that is a necessary condition of the truth of the propositions of Euclidean geometry, he was operating on the assumption that Euclidean geometry *was* true. A comparable argument in the present context would be to say that because we actually do make evaluations, then there must be transcendentalia. However, the arguments made in Chapter Four with respect to the fundamental practices mentioned above do not rest on the claim that we actually do engage in the practices discussed. They leave open the possibility that we only imagine ourselves to be taking part in those practices — that, for example, when we take ourselves to be evaluating a work of art against a culture-independent standard, what we are in fact

doing is merely expressing the opinion of the culture we happen to belong to.

The Dire Consequences of Postmodernization

Beyond this, the line of thought pursued in Chapter Four further separates itself from the Kantian transcendental argument by going on to suggest that not only *might* the practices not really exist, but, even if we assume they do, we are still forced to concede that as the Postmodern Doctrine becomes better and better established, these practices are undergoing an essential change in character: They are becoming 'de-foundationalized'.

This concession is double-edged, however. On the one hand it seems to support the advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine because even its greatest opponents are forced to admit, as they watch the progressive postmodernization of their practices and institutions, that there must be more to the Postmodern Doctrine than abstract theorizing. On the other hand, the fact that we are witnessing such dramatic changes — changes which bring our culture more and more in line with the Postmodern Doctrine — is a fact that can provide a second line of resistance to the opponents of the doctrine. They can argue that on moral or aesthetic grounds these changes are wrong and go on to claim that although the prevalence of such change shows that the Postmodern Doctrine must possess a certain sort of soundness, the fact that such changes can be — and are — objected to by means of an appeal to transcendental standards shows that the radical historicism on which is the core of the Postmodern Doctrine must be rejected.

Exposé

The third line of thought used in the critique of the Postmodern Doctrine is what might crudely be called a 'do-you-realize-what-you're-saying' argument. One way of understanding this element of the critique is to see it as a rhetorical appeal to the obvious absurdity of, say, a view which denies that science is an attempt to arrive at an accurate description of nature. Such a move will of course have no effect on anyone who had already thought about antifoundationalism's implications for science and accepted the postmodern view of science as an activity which does *not* rest on a conception of a timeless, culture-independent nature. It might, however, have a very powerful effect on someone who had adopted the Postmodern Doctrine without having reflected on the fact that it is incompatible with traditional views about the status of science. And an argument of this kind might have a similar impact on someone who has accepted the Postmodern Doctrine without realizing that it clashed with strongly held views about the absolute superiority of one culture's moral values over the moral values of some other culture.

This element of the critique of the Postmodern Doctrine is present, implicitly, in Chapter Four. The discussions there of the Postmodern Doctrine's incompatibility with fundamental social practices draw attention to the profundity of the gap between the traditional and the postmodern outlooks. In Chapter Five, this aspect of the attempt to undermine the doctrine moves to centre stage. There, a concerted effort is made — largely by means of an examination of an influential article by Jacques Derrida — to defend a thematic claim of this essay: That, despite its frequently anti-metaphysical posture, postmodern antifoundationalism

does imply a metaphysical view, a view that shares with philosophical idealism the rejection of a mind- and culture-independent external world but which goes beyond philosophical idealism in that it also rejects the fundamental reality of mental entities of any sort. If this line of thought is sound it suggests a powerful form of the 'do-you-realize . . .' argument. Even the most philosophically frank and courageous of postmodern thinkers will balk at explicitly acknowledging an anti-physicalist, anti-mental metaphysic. If it can be shown that, for all that, they are committed to a radically reductive metaphysical theory that rejects as delusory belief in ontologically fundamental nature or ontologically fundamental thought, then it seems that the appeal of the Postmodern Doctrine will have been weakened.

A Concession: The Power of Postmodernity

The remarks made above concerning the way in which our culture seems to be evolving so as to fit the Postmodern Doctrine point toward a minor but significant theme of this essay — its 'dark' side, I suppose. The idea plays a contrapunctual role throughout, but it only occupies our full attention in the Afterword where it is conceded that, whatever inadequacies the doctrine may have from a philosophical point of view, it does do an admirable job of performing its ideological task. A connection is made there between this concession and another already made at an earlier stage of the essay: Despite the fact that a philosophical ideology is a double-sided theory which *both* rationalizes our cultural values and institutions *and* satisfies our yearning for culture-independent understanding, it must be admitted, since ideology is important to everyone and metaphysics only to a few, that the

question of which philosophical ideology will actually prevail at a particular time and place will always be decided on grounds of ideological suitability, never on grounds of metaphysical cogency. Combining the two concessions we get the following conclusion: The Postmodern Doctrine is likely to become more and more widely accepted and to have a greater and greater effect on our culture. And its reign, for all we know, may be long.

It is possible to look at this last point as the conclusion of the essay — as the point to which I have been led by my original frustration with a particular aspect of the Postmodern Doctrine. And, if we do look at things in that way, then it must be admitted that the attempt to dissolve the frustration by undermining the doctrine has been futile: It has led only to the conclusion that the Postmodern Doctrine is unassailable. I end, however, by suggesting that there is a more positive way of viewing the matter: Even though we have emerged from our study of postmodern antifoundationalism without any hope of depriving the Postmodern Doctrine of its ideological attractiveness, we have found an intellectually respectable way of escaping as *individuals*. By making the distinction, so central to the whole essay, between a philosophical ideology's philosophical core and its ideological function, those who are repelled by the Postmodern Doctrine may reasonably continue to view the world from a foundationalist perspective so long as they realize that in so doing they are taking on, perhaps permanently, the role of metaphysical dissenters and cultural outcasts.

CHAPTER TWO: THE POSTMODERN DOCTRINE

The Postmodern Doctrine and Antifoundationalism

This is the Postmodern Doctrine: Our beliefs, our moral and aesthetic values have no culture-independent foundation.

The word 'culture' is being used here to refer to a whole way of life. Used in this way, the term is roughly synonymous with 'society' but has the important advantage of emphasizing the intellectual and the experiential.

'Foundation' here refers to some standard which determines the validity of our beliefs and of our moral and aesthetic judgments. Roughly speaking, we can say that factual beliefs are valid or not depending on whether they accord to the standard of truth. The validity of moral judgments depends on their accord with the standard of goodness, and the validity of aesthetic judgments depends on their accord with the standard of beauty.

'Validity' is being used loosely — so as to be more or less synonymous with 'acceptable'. The terms 'truth', 'goodness' and 'beauty' are being used strictly, but in an empty, abstract way. That is to say they are to be taken as simply referring to the standards applicable in three different areas of social behaviour — accumulating information, behaving morally, and responding to experience. In order to understand the terms as they are being used here, it is only necessary to be able to recognize these activities in an intuitive way. In other words, there is no reason why two people with very

different conceptions of truth, of goodness or beauty could not agree on everything that has been said so far.

Not only is what has been said compatible with dramatically opposing views on the precise meaning of the key terms, it is also, strictly speaking, compatible with either acceptance or rejection of the Postmodern Doctrine. The advocates of the doctrine are not denying the existence of foundations of any kind whatsoever; they deny the existence of *culture-independent* foundations. They are not saying that there are no standards of truth, of beauty, or of goodness, but simply insisting that all such standards are culture-specific. For the sake of simplicity, however, we will speak throughout this essay of the doctrine as being 'anti-foundationalistic' and of the denial of the doctrine as being an assertion of 'foundationalism.' But it should always be kept in mind that 'anti-foundationalistic' means 'against the idea of *culture-independent* foundations' and that 'foundationalism' is the theory which asserts the existence of standards of that sort

This view has a radical corollary with far-reaching implications. If there are no culture-independent standards, then no *inter-cultural* validations of beliefs or value judgments are possible; in other words, it is not possible, ever to set two statements or two value judgments from two different cultures side by side and say that one is right and the other wrong, according to some *independent* standard that can be applied to both.

I have said that the Postmodern Doctrine is antifoundationalism and I am confident that taking this to be the case serves clarity and provides illumination. But antifoundationalism cannot be said to be the whole of postmodern thought. There are, in the first place, what I will refer to as the 'asso-

ciated doctrines' — discursivism, historicism, relativism, anti-subjectivism and anti-rationalism. Despite their importance, and despite the fact that, in many contexts, they can be considered as separate theories, they all turn out upon examination to be versions of the basic anti-foundationalist claim. In Chapter Three these associated doctrines will be discussed in some detail.

Even when the associated doctrines have been taken into consideration the content of postmodernity will not have been exhausted. There is, for one thing, a large body of critical writing about literature, visual art, architecture, popular culture, sociology, feminism and politics which is widely thought of as 'postmodern'. Beyond this, there is a large amount of non-verbal material, particularly artistic and architectural work, which is similarly labelled. Despite the fact that these things are not self-conscious expressions of the Postmodern Doctrine or any of the associated theories, their postmodernity can be understood as an expression of antifoundationalist ideas. To take just one example: The eclectic, decorative touches that are characteristic of postmodern architecture can be seen simply as a style or fashion; but they can also be seen as a visual statement of anti-foundationalism — an allusion to the fact that from the postmodern point of view all architectural styles, and the discourse of which they are a part, are on an equal footing, none better or worse, more progressive or more reactionary than another. There may of course turn out to be styles or theories or preoccupations which are called postmodern but which cannot plausibly be interpreted as even indirect and unconscious expressions of antifoundationalism. Indeed, there may be things which are called postmodern but which contradict the doctrine.¹ Faced with such a case, we will have to say that a

¹ See the note on political correctness on page 251.

mistake has been made, that the idea or the practice is not genuinely post-modern. This may seem like definition by fiat, but it is, I think, a defensible approach in light of the confusing variety of conceptions of postmodernity already in existence. At least our conception has the virtue of focussing on a fundamental point, and therefore, offering the possibility of explaining a great many smaller things in terms of one central one.

Philosophical Ideology Defined

In Chapter One, we introduced, somewhat informally, the idea of a philosophical ideology, commented on the central importance this idea has for the whole essay, and went on to say something about the difficulties of demonstrating the empirical claim that the Postmodern Doctrine is *our* philosophical ideology. Here, we return to a consideration of this key concept, first to offer a more rigorous definition and, second, by expanding on the definition, to provide some sort of argumentative support for the contention that the concept is a legitimate and useful one.

The idea of philosophical ideology must be understood in terms of the more basic idea of ideology *simpliciter*: As I am using the term, an ideology is a theory which offers a rationalization of the beliefs and values of a culture. Obviously, the word 'rationalization' is crucial here and must itself be explicated. I am using it simply to refer to the process by which we make our culture understandable. The inhabitants of a successfully rationalized society will feel that their cultural environment makes sense, that it expresses and supports generally accepted social values and goals. (Dictionaries seem to be unanimous, incidentally, in giving priority to this, 'positive' meaning of 'rationalize' despite the fact that it is far less common in current usage

than the 'negative' sense which refers to a deceptive — and often self-deceptive — process of masking real but questionable motives with laudable but spurious ones.)

The use of the term 'theory' in the above definition also requires comment. It should not be taken to suggest that an 'ideology' of the relevant sort must bear any resemblance to the highly abstract and self-conscious structures that we may take to be paradigms of theory. Quite the contrary, the ideologies of most cultures have had a merely implicit existence in myths and rituals — and in animistic proto-religions.²

Any culture that has any degree of stability and coherence will have an ideology. *Philosophical* ideologies on the other hand, will appear only when the mental life of a culture reaches a certain level. They differ from non-philosophical ideologies in that they contain an explicit attempt to provide

² Terry Eagleton distinguishes numerous senses of the term 'ideology' in his historical study of the concept, *Ideology* [Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 28-30.] Several of these center on the idea that ideologies are concerned with the "promotion and legitimation of sectoral interests." As I am using the term, however, an ideology is not the theoretical apparatus of a particular social class. It is rather a theory that is accepted (or is tending toward being accepted) by the society as a whole — and whose 'purpose' is not to secure domination or promote revolution but to encourage social stability and cohesion. This usage is more akin to another conception mentioned by Eagleton according to which 'ideology' is a "politically and epistemologically neutral" term that "denote[s] the whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society." But this definition does not quite fit my view of the matter either because I do not think of ideologies either in their philosophical or non-philosophical aspect as being *neutral*: The whole point of the Postmodern Doctrine, for example, is to propound a particular, and radical, epistemology. As I conceive them, although ideologies are stabilizing in their function and directed toward the welfare of the whole society, they are not neutral but *biased*. Another way of putting this is to say that ideologies are *theories* — and like all theories they attempt to persuade us to accept an outlook which is not determined by the facts. My usage of the term is also related to yet another of Eagleton's definitions according to which an ideology is a system of "false or deceptive beliefs . . . arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole." But I could not accept *this* definition, because I want to leave open the possibility that an ideology, at least in its philosophical aspects, is *true*. Indeed the acknowledgement of this possibility is absolutely crucial from my point of view because I am arguing that philosophical ideologies are distinguished from non-philosophical ones in that they attempt to be not only effective, but correct.

absolute justification. Inasmuch as they do this, they must obviously go beyond mere myth making: Not even the most elaborate ritual or subtle myth can plausibly present itself as an *argument* to the effect that the culture it rationalizes accords with timeless principles. Philosophical ideologies can succeed in this sort of justification only because they employ abstract ideas — ideas which claim to be untainted with cultural contingencies of any kind. Philosophical and non-philosophical elements can co-exist in an ideology and Christianity provides a good example of how this can happen, but in post-Renaissance European culture there has been a progressive de-mythicization of ideology, and, for a century at least, the rationalizing ideologies of European culture, have been thoroughly secular. For a long time now we have had no choice but to depend on philosophy for social rationalization.³

As long as ideology remains non-philosophical, it is relatively simple to come up with a more or less accurate statement of what the ideology is. And this is also possible with respect to the philosophical element in the ideology

³ To say that ideologizing rationalizations of secular cultures are a form of philosophical thought is not by any means to suggest that *all* philosophy is ideology. In the first place it may be possible to think philosophically and *non*-ideologically about technical issues such as determinism or induction although there is clearly no guarantee that philosophizing about these matters will not be ideologically motivated — or ideologically relevant. More importantly, it is certainly possible for philosophy to be counter-ideological or subversive, although that is not, perhaps, the case as often as the subversively inclined would like to think. (And it may well be that philosophy that *appears* to be subversive is in fact more accurately viewed as reactionary or precocious — the product of philosophical minds that are behind of or ahead of their time.)

It also should be pointed out here that even if all philosophy were to turn out to be ideological support for a particular, contingent culture, it would not follow that all philosophy is nothing more than that. Indeed, if the notion of a philosophical ideology is valid, that possibility is eliminated: To say that an ideology is philosophical is to say that its adequacy is, in part at least, to be measured in terms of how well it satisfies timeless, culture-independent standards of truth [To anticipate a point that will be made both in our discussion of the 'logical oddness' of the Postmodern Doctrine (see page 153 ff.) and in our discussion of Jacques Derrida's "Differance," postmodern antifoundationalism can be understood as a philosophical ideology which self-contradictorily makes the culture-independent claim that no culture-independent ideologies are possible.]

of a culture whose rationalization remains basically mythic or religious. In a literate culture it may only be necessary to examine the holy texts, and even in a non-literate culture it will be possible to observe rituals and interview the hierarchs. By contrast, identifying the ideology of a completely secular culture is not a simple matter. There will be no meaningful rituals, or sacred texts and, perhaps, no institutions or persons accredited with ideological authority; it will always be pertinent to ask whether the culture in question really *has* an ideology of any kind — and all the more pertinent to ask whether it really has a *philosophical* ideology. And, when we are faced with a culture so tremendously diverse and heterogeneous as our own, these questions become all the more pressing.⁴

In light of the importance I am giving to the idea of philosophical ideology, some sort of reply to this kind of scepticism is obviously required. My primary response must simply be this essay as a whole: I am convinced that the notion of philosophical ideology is a theoretically fruitful one. I believe that if we assume that we do have a philosophical ideology and that that ideology is — or is coming to be — the Postmodern Doctrine, much that is otherwise perplexing becomes comprehensible. If the analysis and argumentation that is based on this assumption carries any conviction, if it provides any illumination, then, and only then, will this assumption be vindicated.

Although the most powerful defense of our working hypothesis must be the 'instrumental' one just described, there are other, more independent ways

⁴ Part of the reason for this heterogeneity is, of course, the fact that our culture threatens to become *the* culture of the world. Even if this trend accelerates, it will presumably take centuries to complete, and, until it *is* complete, an uncontroversial characterization of the inherent ideology will be made difficult by the presence of unassimilated remnants of previous cultures.

of defending the contention that our culture must have an ideology. In the first place, once having granted what seems undeniable — that fully religious cultures have philosophical ideologies in the form of a theological doctrine — it would be odd to go on to deny that contemporary, secular cultures lack any form of philosophical ideology. Indeed, unless we wish to deny what is presumably sociological orthodoxy — that the religion of a religious culture has a definite social *function* — it seems that we must admit there is a strong *prima facie* argument to the effect that there must be non-religious ideologies which play a similar role in secular cultures. Of course, considerations of this kind can only be appealed to to show that we must have *some sort* of ideology, not that we must have a *philosophical* one.

With respect to a religious ideology like Christianity, it is easy enough to establish the presence of a crucial *philosophical* element: Not only is it a crucial element of Christian dogma to maintain that, according to culture-independent standards, Christianity is preferable to other religions, it is an important part of some Christian traditions to back up this contention with arguments that depend not merely on mythic narration but on the manipulation of abstract concepts. In short, with respect to a religious culture there are straightforward ways of *showing* not only that an ideology is present, but also that it has a philosophical element. With respect to a secular culture, however, even if we can reasonably assume that ideology of some sort must be present, there remains a serious problem of showing, first, that it has a genuinely philosophical element and secondly, just what the philosophical content *is*. An argument to the effect that our ideology is philosophical can, I think, be powerfully made simply by pointing to the fact that it is certainly not mythic. There are still many, of course, who take

religious myths seriously, but there are presumably none among them who see those myths as providing an effective rationalization of the realities of our culture. To this rather negative consideration another, more positive, point can be added. It cannot be denied that there is a widespread tendency to view our own culture in terms of abstract labels such as 'democratic', 'pluralistic', and 'capitalistic' and, moreover, to argue in a highly general, and therefore philosophical way, that these qualities not only *are* possessed by our culture, but that they *should* be possessed by all cultures

As to the particular, and more contentious, claim that the specific content of our philosophical ideology is, or is becoming the antifoundationalism of the Postmodern Doctrine, the primary way of making *that* case must be by examining the institutions and the practices that are central to our culture, by looking at the behaviour of the individuals who 'inhabit' these institutions — and from these observations attempting to infer the fundamental beliefs and values that constitute the current philosophical ideology. I believe that the result of such an investigation would be to show that the Postmodern Doctrine does underlie our lives — that, if we cannot yet say it *is* our philosophical ideology, we can say it is definitely tending to become that. No systematic inquiry of this kind will be undertaken here, but, later in this chapter, in the section entitled "Postmodernism and Philosophy," there is a rebuttal of one attempt to show that the Postmodern Doctrine is *not* our philosophical ideology. Moreover, Chapter Four is entirely devoted to a discussion of particular practices and institutions which, I will argue, already show signs of becoming postmodernized. All this will provide at least some support for the contention that *our* philosophical ideology is the Postmodern Doctrine. At various points there will also be discussions of the work of

philosophers whose current popularity — a popularity which extends far beyond the borders of professional, academic philosophy — seems to be based, in large part at least, on the fact that they are proponents of antifoundationalism. I believe, that the eminence of such thinkers, provides another reason for believing that postmodern antifoundationalism is the ascendant philosophical ideology of our time.

Philosophy versus Sociology

The idea of having to dabble in sociology in order to do philosophy is disconcerting — especially to anyone who has been deeply affected by the notion that sociology is a science and therefore a subject that can be practised only by accredited professionals. But if one feels, as I do, that there *are* such things as philosophical ideologies, it follows that it is impossible to discuss fundamental philosophical issues without doing a sort of sociology at the same time. The only way to remain uncontaminated by the empirical would be to abandon philosophy altogether.

Although it is not an approach that will be pursued here, it is possible to produce persuasive arguments in support of the contention that philosophical theories must be understood as products of their social context. It can be pointed out, for example, that in a religious society there is invariably an intimate connection between philosophical and theological doctrine, whereas in a secular culture that sees social progress as connected with scientific advance, philosophers will typically devote much attention to perceptual epistemology. In short, philosophical doctrines tend to suit their time. It is also worth pointing out that, although philosophers are constantly attempting to refute one another, philosophical doctrines tend to be

replaced, not, as scientific theories do, because they have been discredited, but simply because they no longer captivate either professional philosophers or the community as a whole. One plausible explanation for such a sudden disappearance of attractiveness is surely that the philosophy no longer 'suits' the society in the way it did in the past.

Philosophy versus Ideology

The fact that we can, and must, understand philosophical ideologies, and the more specific philosophical theories they 'contain', as cultural products does not that mean that when we have understood them in this way, we have exhausted their significance. It is often implied that to explain a philosophical theory — or a theory of any other sort — in terms of the environment from which it emerges is to explain it away. But there is no reason why a philosophical theory cannot be regarded as overdetermined — no reason, that is to say, why it cannot be regarded as *both* a social phenomenon and as an attempt to state the truth. Nor is there any reason why a philosophical theory cannot be regarded as successfully performing its social role, but failing in its effort to state the truth.⁵

One way of encapsulating all this is to say that it is possible to distinguish between the social validity and the philosophical validity of a philosophical ideology. This is an important point: As has been explained in the preface, this essay is written out of a desire to undermine the Postmodern Doctrine,

⁵ The following analogies seem relevant: A religious painting may admirably fulfill its role of inducing emotions of piety, but, at the same time be guilty of inaccurately representing the Biblical episode which is its subject matter; a socio-political theory which claims that the dominant social group is racially superior to a minority group might do an excellent job of motivating the bulk of the populace while at the same time misstating the facts.

and this enterprise makes sense only if such a distinction can be made. My contention will be that the doctrine is successful as ideology but fails as philosophy. Although little has so far been said about the Postmodern Doctrine, it must be obvious that in attributing to it a philosophical element that cannot be reduced to ideology, I am guilty of begging the question against it. As we have seen, the doctrine alleges that there are no theories, nor indeed expressions of thought of *any* sort which transcend the culture that produces them.⁶ Therefore, anyone who attempts to undermine the doctrine by assuming that culture can be transcended is begging the question — not really arguing at all, but simply saying, “No.” To this charge of circularity I must plead guilty, but I can point to impressive mitigating circumstances, ones which I believe justify my proceeding in the way that I do. As will soon become clear, the Postmodern Doctrine is *designed* to be irrefutable and, as a result, *any* fundamental critique of it will be guilty of begging the question against it. There are only two ways one can express opposition to a theory of this sort: rejecting it out of hand *because* it is irrefutable and therefore lacking in significance; or by brazenly begging the question and going on to attempt to say something of value. I have chosen the latter course even though it is more complex and less conclusive because I think the doctrine *is* significant despite its shortcomings and that there is much to be learnt by taking it seriously and considering it at length.

⁶ As we shall see, this is not because the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine make the error of ignoring the possibility of theories being overdetermined. It is because they subscribe to a metaphysical theory according to which there is, in effect, *nothing but*, theories.

Postmodernism and Philosophy

We have already considered the question, "Is our philosophical ideology really centered on the idea of antifoundationalism?" There is another sceptically motivated question we must be willing to face: "Is it accurate to characterize our antifoundational philosophical ideology as 'postmodern'?" This challenge is perhaps even more serious than the previous one, if for no other reason than because there are proponents of postmodernism who argue to the contrary. One of these writers is Andreas Huyssen. In an article entitled "Mapping the Postmodern" he argues that postmodernity must be understood as a diffuse but dramatic and *entirely novel*, transformation of artistic preoccupations and social attitudes, as he puts it, a "shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences and presuppositions from that of a preceding period."⁷

Huyssen explicitly rejects the idea that there is a connection between postmodernism and the antifoundationalism of the French 'poststructuralists'. In chapters Two and Four I will be arguing that the work of these thinkers should be understood as providing a metaphysical matrix for antifoundationalism. So, if Huyssen is right about the irrelevance of antifoundationalist thought to postmodernism, then I am clearly wrong in my description of our philosophical ideology. I do not feel, however, that for all his erudition, he makes a particularly powerful case. He argues that the poststruc-

⁷ Andreas Huyssen "Mapping the Postmodern." *New German Criticism* 35 (1984) 8. (Other postmodernists who take a position similar to Huyssen's on the definition of postmodernity are Charles Jencks and Frederic Jameson. Jean-François Lyotard and Julia Kristeva are writers who, although explicitly styling themselves as postmodernists, disagree with Huyssen concerning the connection between postmodernism and anti-foundationalist philosophy.)

turalists are not theoreticians of postmodernity, but rather of mere *modernity*. He does not explicitly describe the modernism of the poststructuralists as 'antifoundationalism' but his description of their thought makes it clear that this is how he sees their work. He speaks of them as proposing

a modernism of playful transgression, of an unlimited weaving of textuality, a modernism all confident in its rejection of representation and reality, in its denial of the subject, of history, and of the subject of history; a modernism quite dogmatic in its rejection of presence and in its unending praise of lacks and absences, deferrals and traces which produce, presumably, not anxiety but in Roland Barthes' terms, *jouissance*, bliss⁸

Having dismissed poststructuralism and antifoundationalism as irrelevant, Huyssen goes on to give a positive account of postmodernism. The substance of this account is contained in two lists, one of "the four major characteristics of the early phase of postmodernism" and the second of "four recent phenomena which . . . will remain constitutive of postmodern culture for some time to come."⁹ The items in the first list are: First, "a powerful sense of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict." Second, "an iconoclastic attack on institution art." Third a "technological optimism" typified by "McLuhan's cybernetic and technocratic media eschatology and Hassan's praise for 'runaway technology,' 'the boundless dispersal by media,' 'the computer as substitute consciousness.'" And fourth, "a vigorous . . . attempt to validate popular culture as a challenge to the canon of high art . . . [promising] a 'post-white,' 'post-male,' 'post-humanist,' 'post-puritan' world." The first item on Huyssen's list of contemporary developments 'constitutive' of postmodernity is the decline of the "culture of inner and outer imperialism," a culture which is being

⁸ Ibid., 39-40.

⁹ Ibid. The first list is on pages 20-24 and the second on pages 50-52.

'challenged' in a way that will, perhaps, "usher in a more habitable, less violent and more democratic world." Connected with this is "a growing awareness that other cultures, non-European, non-Western cultures, must be met by means other than conquest or domination . . . [a development which encourages] intellectual work different from that of the modernist intellectual who typically spoke with the confidence of standing at the cutting edge of time and of being able to speak for others."¹⁰ The second item on this list is the "women's movement" which has changed "the ways in which we . . . raise questions of gender and sexuality, reading and writing, subjectivity and enunciation." The final 'development' Huyssen mentions is the increased concern for ecology and the environment, a trend which not only engenders new political movements, subcultures and lifestyles but also "affects art and literature in a variety of ways."

I have thought it worth mentioning the details of Huyssen's positive account of postmodernism for two reasons. In the first place, it is an excellent statement of typically postmodern preoccupations, values, attitudes, and aspirations. Secondly and more importantly, I feel the content of these lists strengthens my claim that Huyssen is wrong in insisting that contemporary antifoundationalist philosophizing is irrelevant to postmodernism. My point is this: In one way or another everything on the two lists can be seen as expressions of antifoundationalism. One symptom of this is the frequency with which Huyssen speaks of 'challenging' and 'attacking' — and

¹⁰ In the following lines Huyssen goes on to say, "Foucault's notion of the local and specific intellectual as opposed to the 'universal' intellectual of modernity may provide a way out of the dilemma of being locked into our own culture and traditions while simultaneously recognizing their limitations" this remark is worth noting first, because it is an admission on Huyssen's part that there is at least some connection between postmodernism and the work of Foucault, a poststructuralist — and secondly because it is a rare admission by a postmodernist that by adopting postmodern attitudes we *might* come to feel "locked into our own culture." (Ibid., 52)

the fact that the objects of these challenges and attacks are such things as institutions and canons. Another symptom is his description of *modernist* attitudes as championing 'imperialism,' 'domination' and 'conquest.' More specifically, we might divide the points in Huyssen's description of postmodernity into two categories: on the one hand, those that concern the postmodern assault on outmoded modernity — the rejection of institutional art and the canon, and of the idea of our cultural superiority, and on the other hand, those that concern the changes that will come about as the result of the adoption of postmodern views — the freedom made possible by information technology, and the acceptance of feminist and ecological ideals. Even when categorized in this way, Huyssen's points seem to be rather loosely connected — until one sees the possibility of construing them all as antifoundationalism. One may pertinently ask, for example: "What is the 'rupture' a rupture *with*?" "What is on the other side of the discontinuity?" In each case the only plausible answer is: "The idea that factual, moral, and aesthetic certainty are made possible by the existence of transcendental foundations." Equally, one might ask, "What is *wrong* with the idea of cultural imperialism, with the idea of intellectual conquest and domination?" And here again, it seems that the only imaginable answer would be along the following lines: "These things are wrong because we are not *justified* in thinking that our culture is superior to others; that sort of judgment could only be justified by an appeal to culture-independent criteria — and there are no such things."

Perhaps, from our point of view, the most revealing remark in the whole article is the critical reference to the modernist intellectuals who see themselves as "standing on the cutting edge of time and . . . able to speak for oth-

ers." Again, one can ask "Why? Why did the modernists think they could speak for others?" And, yet again, the answer must be: "Because they felt they had some way of showing the *universal validity* of their beliefs and values." Here we see what might be called the 'anarchism' of postmodern thought. But postmodern anarchism is not directed against the physical authority of people or institutions; it is directed instead against the authority that other philosophical ideologies have invested in transcendental standards: The works of art referred to as 'institutional art' are so-called because they have been selected by the cultural 'institution' of art evaluation as *the best*. How are we to interpret the rejection of this practice except as the denial of the existence of the transcendent aesthetic standards that such an 'institution' requires? Even the postmodern exultation over the possibilities of 'runaway technology' can be seen in this way, although here of course it is not so much that these devices show there are no transcendent standards but that their existence makes it more difficult to maintain the myth that there are.

Huyssen's remarks about the women's movement and the ecological movement also have very much the appearance of expressions of antifoundationalism. Notice that he does not speak of the substantive gains of either of these movements; nor does he say anything of the principles on which the feminist and ecological positions are based. Instead he speaks of how the women's movement enables us to *raise questions* that would previously have been unthinkable and of how the environmental movement encourages a *critique* of modernity.¹¹ In other words, as described by Huyssen,

¹¹ Huyssen's failure to mention the accomplishments of feminism or the ecological movement or the principles on which the positions taken by these groups are based is significant. To speak of these things would be to raise doubts as to whether or not he is correct in claiming the movements as creatures of postmodernism. I believe that a case

feminism and the ecology movement are part of a general process of sceptically questioning the foundations of our belief system.

In short, looking closely at Huyssen's two lists we see that all the elements of his conception of postmodernity can be understood as manifestations of antifoundationalism. Yet, not only does Huyssen never explicitly mention antifoundationalism, but, by his denial of the pertinence of poststructuralism, he implicitly denies that antifoundational convictions are central to postmodern thought. How can we explain Huyssen's failure to acknowledge the connection between antifoundationalism and postmodernism despite the fact that his own catalog of postmodern tenets and trends reveals the link? There are two, complementary, answers to this question. The first one can be stated briefly: Huyssen does not have a particularly philosophical or even a particularly generalizing mind and therefore does not feel the need of a general principle of postmodernity — or even a *set* of principles — from which flow all the *particular* ideas and phenomena he describes as postmodern. (The fact that he does not have strong philosophical needs is underlined by his failure to offer *any* explanation of his categorization of the items in his catalog as 'postmodern.'¹²)

can be made to the effect that the association between postmodern anti-foundationalism and feminism, conservationism, and some other 'rights movements' is, in large part at least, a historical accident. The alliance between postmodernists and rights advocates is convenient for both sides, but, despite that, it will ultimately prove to be logically untenable unless the feminists and others can show that they are not, as they certainly seem to be, claiming *absolute, culture-independent* validity for their positions. (See the footnote about political correctness on page 251.)

¹² In fairness, it must be said that in Huyssen's article and in much postmodern art criticism and political commentary there *are* allusions to an alternative 'postmodern principle'. It is often claimed that modernism is form of aestheticism, that it is guilty of advocating the abandonment of vulgar reality for a never-never land of refined sensuality, and that postmodernism by contrast is a robust return to the real world and to ordinary people. It is natural that the advocates of postmodernism will see it as a happier, healthier theory than modernism, but the idea that this difference is the essential one is not plausible. In the first place it is vague and therefore unilluminating. In the second place it makes postmodernism seem banal and therefore incapable of providing a plausible rationalization of our practices and institutions.

Postmodernism versus Modernism

The second part of the explanation of Huyssen's strange denial of the relevance of antifoundationalism is more complex. As we have seen he is not interested in philosophy, but he *does* have strong interests. Like many postmodernist writers he is primarily concerned with contemporary art, popular culture and special-interest politics. And like many such writers he is charmed by the idea that, politically and artistically, we are at the brink, or just beyond the brink, of a completely new era. He insists that there has been a 'rupture' and resents any suggestion that connections can be made between the postmodern movement and anything that has gone before. In particular, he adamantly refuses to acknowledge the possibility that *post* modernism is a development of modernism. He argues moreover that the poststructuralists are merely late modernists whose 'revolt' is in fact nothing more than a rejection of an earlier stage of their own movement.¹³ His position on these matters is made clear by the following passage:

I do not question that the theoretical discourse of the 1970s has had a profound impact on the work of a considerable number of artists both in Europe and in the US. What I do question, however, is the way in which this impact is automatically evaluated in the US as postmodern and thus sucked into the orbit of the kind of critical discourse that emphasizes radical rupture and discontinuity. Actually, both in France and in the US, poststructuralism is much closer to modernism than is usually assumed by the advocates of postmodernism.¹⁴

Only by ignoring the antifoundationalism that is inherent in it can Huyssen maintain that postmodernism is something absolutely new. Moreover, once

¹³ Charles Jencks makes similar points about the confusion between late modern and postmodern architecture in *What Is Postmodernism?* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986).

¹⁴ Huyssen, "Mapping," 37

the connection between postmodernity and antifoundationalism has been established, it becomes difficult to maintain another of Huyssen's views — the idea that modernism is a form of aestheticism. And beyond that, it becomes impossible to argue, as Huyssen does, that through their interest in such figures as Proust, Bataille, Magritte and Artaud the poststructuralists reveal that they are not postmoderns at all but merely late moderns.¹⁵ Recognition of the antifoundationalist nature of postmodernity makes it clear that the poststructuralist choice of subject matter fits in very well with their postmodern, antifoundationalist principles. I do not mean to imply that the figures Huyssen mentions in this context are not really 'moderns.' They are, however, artists, or novelists, or creatively inclined intellectuals whose work exhibits much of the richness and openness to interpretation usually associated with literature. It should not be surprising if there are important themes in their work which presage attitudes and metaphysical positions that have come, fifty or one hundred years after their deaths, to be congruent with a nascent philosophical ideology. Indeed, as Jürgen Habermas points out once we see that antifoundationalism is at the heart of postmodernism we will be able to find 'postmodernists' throughout history right back to Hellenic times. It is not the *idea* of postmodernism that is new. What is new is the world we inhabit; and for that new world an old idea suddenly looks temptingly serviceable.

As I have suggested, it is not particularly important how we categorize the early-twentieth-century artists and writers who fascinate contemporary antifoundationalist philosophers. The crucial thing is to see that these figures

¹⁵ Ibid., 39. The others mentioned are Flaubert, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Mallarmé, Joyce, Freud and Brecht.

do have strongly antifoundational tendencies — and that their appeal to the poststructuralists can be seen as a consequence of this. Having seen that, we can go on to agree with Huyssen that other aspects of the thought, the values, and the attitudes of the modern period — its elitism and aestheticism for example — do contrast with the contemporary ones that are rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine, while at the same time insisting that this is not the philosophical crux of the matter. If we concentrate on the *philosophical* production of the modern period — if we think, for example of the logical positivists rather than the Dadaists — we see that there *is* a philosophical rupture between the two eras although it is not the one that Huyssen insists on. It is a rupture not between elitist aestheticism and democratic practicality but between foundationalism and discursivism.

Speaking more carefully, we should perhaps say that there are two branches of modern philosophy *both* of which are foundational. One branch is scientistic-empiricist modernism. Scientistic modernists could themselves be divided into two groups — the logical positivists and the phenomenologists. Both were motivated by the conviction that, if experience is regarded as *foundational*, philosophy could somehow be done in a methodical manner and be made to yield results as solid and indisputable as those obtained by the physical sciences. One characteristic feature of both varieties of foundational modernism is the importance placed on the subject as the location of the founding experiences. This emphasis further strengthens the contrast between modernism and postmodernism because, as we shall see in Chapter Three, one of the salient aspects of postmodern thought is its fierce anti-subjectivism. The second branch of philosophical, foundationalistic, modernism is *linguistic* philosophy the central idea of which is that

philosophical progress can be made by analyzing ordinary language. Ordinary language philosophers share with the poststructuralists the conviction that language is in some way all-important but this is where the similarity stops. As we shall see when we discuss Derrida, for the poststructuralist, the most important fact about language is that it adamantly *refuses* to act as a foundation.

There were, of course *philosophical* precursors of postmodernism, just as there were artistic ones. Wittgenstein is obviously the leading figure in this category but J.L. Austin is important as well. At the heart of the work of each was the determination to show that neither language nor experience could legitimately be regarded as a foundational. It would be interesting to know whether Huyssen feels that they too are of no relevance to postmodern theory.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ASSOCIATED DOCTRINES

Associated Doctrines

The core of the Postmodern Doctrine is the simple denial of the existence of foundations. Around this center is a cluster of what might be called 'associated doctrines' — theories about language, culture, history, the nature of the human mind, of truth, of knowledge and of political power. Each of these is quite capable of being propounded and debated on its own, but each must ultimately be understood as a version of antifoundationalism.

Discursivism

The most important of the associated doctrines is what I will call 'discursivism' — the reductivist claim that everything is discourse. In ordinary English, 'discourse' simply refers to language in its written and spoken forms. In postmodern theory, however, the scope of the term is widened so as to include all the rules and principles that are implicit in language and, beyond that, the institutions, social practices and attitudes that are an expression of the thought of their time. The simplest way to put it is this: Our discourse is our culture.¹⁶

¹⁶ Do we in fact *have* a discourse? It might be argued that our society is so fragmented, or so stratified that it cannot reasonably be regarded as operating in accordance with a single, universally accepted set of beliefs and presuppositions. After all, many members of contemporary Western societies, those who take astrology seriously for example, seem to be operating within a discourse which is more mediaeval than postmodern. And even more strikingly, it may well seem odd that anyone who genuinely adheres to one of the major monotheistic religions can be said, at the same time, to be operating within an anti-foundationalistic discursive system. These are good questions, but ones with which I will not deal with in this essay. I will assume that these discursive heterogeneities are more apparent than real and that in the really crucial respects a contemporary as-

The connection between discursivism and antifoundationalism is fairly straightforward. According to the classical and modern philosophical ideologies, *the* foundational relationship is between language and the world: All thought is founded on certain fundamental statements which themselves are permanently accurate descriptions of an extra-linguistic external world. These crucial language/world relations are completely repudiated by antifoundationalism. It does not follow from that that advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine are committed to claiming that there is nothing beyond discourse; the possibility remains open of taking the position that there is discourse *and* a discourse-independent 'external' world but no reliable relationship between the two. For practical purposes however that possibility is indistinguishable from the denial of the existence of an 'external' world.¹⁷ The only way we could refer to that world is by using discourse, and if, as discursivism claims, such reference is impossible, then theorizing in general and philosophizing in particular must proceed *as if* the 'external' world did not exist.¹⁸

The arch discursivist is Michel Foucault whose entire career was devoted to producing painstaking analyses of the successive discourses of Western civilization — and who, after his earliest writings, regularly emphasized that his interest did not extend beyond discourse to anything 'external' — or, to

trologer has more in common with, say, a postmodern literary critic than with the inhabitants of a society, past or present, where astrology is not merely an outlook that one may choose to adopt or to ignore but a ubiquitous screen through which everyone automatically views the world,

¹⁷ The connection between discursivism and the denial of an 'external' world is discussed further in Chapter Five.

¹⁸ One interesting way of disagreeing with discursivism would be to say that the discursivists are right about all discourse except mathematics — the whole value of which is precisely that we can hope, by using it, to arrive one day at a permanently accurate description of the 'external' world. (It is important to see that this objection could not be expressed by saying that mathematics is not part of discourse, that is ruled out by the fact that 'discourse' has been defined as including all thought.)

use his terminology, to the 'referent'. In a striking passage in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault expresses his attitudes to 'referents' with unusual candor. He does not give an explicit definition of the term but it is clear that for him a 'referent' is simply anything which is independent of discourse. Referents are to be understood in opposition to what Foucault calls 'objects of discourse' — words, concepts, meanings, ideas. In the immediately preceding passage, Foucault has shown how discursive 'objects' emerge from the 'discursive formation' or systems of thought of which they are a part. He offers the discipline of psychopathology as an example of a discursive formation and mentions hallucinations, sexual aberrations, and criminality as examples of the discursive objects this formation contains. He makes it clear that, in his opinion, if psycho-pathology did not exist as a field of study and a set of social practices, there would be no such things as hallucinations, sexual aberrations and criminality. Then he anticipates an obvious objection: What about the *discourse-independent* things — the experiences, the physiological conditions the behaviour patterns — that we conceptualize with the aid of these discursive objects? In other words, what about the *referents*? He answers this question in the following way:

There can be no question of interpreting discourse with a view to writing a history of the referent. In the example chosen, we are not trying to find out who was mad at a particular period, or in what his madness consisted, or whether his disturbances were identical with those known to us today. We are not asking ourselves whether witches were unrecognized and persecuted madmen and madwomen, or whether, at a different period, a mystical or aesthetic experience was not unduly medicalized. We are not trying to reconstitute what madness itself might be, in the form in which it first presented itself to some primitive, fundamental, deaf, scarcely articulated experience, and in the form in which it was later organized (translated, deformed, travestied, perhaps even repressed) by discourses and the oblique often twisted play of their operations. Such a history of the referent is no doubt possible and I have no wish at the outset to exclude any effort to uncover and free these 'prediscursive' experiences from the tyranny of the

text. But what we are concerned with here is not to neutralize discourse, to make it the sign of something else, and to pierce through its density in order to reach what remains silently anterior to it, but on the contrary to maintain it in its consistency, to make it emerge in its own complexity. What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with 'things' . . . To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of 'things' anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these objects without reference to the *ground*, the *foundation of things*, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance. To write a history of discursive objects that does not plunge them into the common depth of a primal soil, but deploys the nexus of regularities that govern their dispersion.¹⁹

Despite the ironic reference to the possibility of writing a 'history of the referent', Foucault leaves no doubt here that his universe is thoroughly discursive.

The phrase 'tyranny of the text' deserves comment. Even if his choice of words is facetious, in speaking of 'tyranny', Foucault acknowledges that to someone used to believing that language can reach out successfully to an 'external' reality, the world of the discursivists might look like a horrifyingly inescapable prison. One way of describing the disagreement between the postmodern discursivist and a more traditional, realistic position would be to say that from the traditionalist point of view, the postmodernists seem intent on immuring themselves in a discursive prison, whereas, from the postmodern point of view, the traditionalists are like mad people whose

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Tavistock, 1972), 47-48. (Can we be sure that Foucault is being ironic here? Is it not possible that he sincerely believes that writing a 'referential' history is a perfectly respectable, potentially fruitful activity? Certainly, it is not possible to prove that he does not. He has no intention of explicitly denying the existence of the referential — and it is only on rare occasions that he even mentions fundamental issues of the sort discussed in this paragraph. Still, there are at least two reasons for regarding his endorsement of referential history as *insincere*: the contemptuously sarcastic tone of this and similar passages; the impossibility of believing that anyone would want to write a history of the *concept* of madness (for example) without concerning themselves with the question of the concept's *adequacy* — unless convinced that that question was meaningless.)

delusions drive them to frantic efforts to escape — efforts that are bound to be unsuccessful since there is, in fact, no place to go.

Historicism

Anyone who has a tendency to react to discursivism with a panicked feeling of confinement is likely to have an even stronger negative reaction to another of the 'associated doctrines' — historicism. Historicism is the idea that because everything has a history, it can therefore be *reduced* to that history. According to the philosophical ideology of modernism, and of earlier periods, we have the ability to understand, and even to evaluate, the beliefs, the moral attitudes and the social practices of previous epochs. Our confidence that this is possible perhaps reached an all-time high in the nineteenth century, and the attitudes that prevailed then dominated our culture well into the second half of the present century. They still hold sway in the minds of the uneducated and the sincerely religious — and indeed in the institutional structures of any corners of society where the establishment has not been converted to postmodernism. Historicism challenges our belief that such transcultural judgments are possible.²⁰ It is perhaps best understood as an aspect of discursivism. One way of expressing *that* idea is to say that our discourse, whatever timeless, representational powers we may misguidedly imagine it to have, is never anything more than a manifestation of contingent, temporary forces — in short that discourse is historical. And since we are trapped inside our discourse, we are unable even to

²⁰ When one speaks of our evaluations of the cultures of other epochs, it is natural to have in mind assessments which state or imply the *superiority* of our culture, but the strictures of historicism apply equally to judgments which rank our own culture as *inferior* to another, real or imagined. In other words, historicism, if taken seriously, brings an end to both cultural chauvinism and cultural criticism.

understand let alone to evaluate other cultures with other discourses. We are 'blind' to everything beyond our own discursive horizon because our way of seeing is historically conditioned.

It is important to appreciate how radical the historicism of postmodernity is — to distinguish it from the weak, banal sort of historicism which common sense and modesty must always advise. Postmodernists are not simply saying that we must remember that contingent historical factors play a role in determining beliefs and attitudes. That is something which thoughtful modernists would not want to deny; however, a modernist would presumably want to go on to argue that by carefully discounting the role that our own discursive environment plays in forming our outlook — by forcing ourselves to be abstract and scientific — we can still come to *know* other epochs. Postmodernists disagree. In their opinion, once we have discounted historical conditioning there will be nothing whatsoever left of our discourse.

One indication of the profundity of the postmodern commitment to the role of history is the fact that knowledge itself comes to be seen as a historical phenomenon. Foucault again:

knowledge [has] historical, social, or economic conditions, [it is] formed within the relations that are woven between men, and [it is] not independent of the particular form they might take here or there; in short, [there is] a *history* of human knowledge which [can] both be given to empirical knowledge and prescribe its forms²¹

Relativism

Historicism can, perhaps, best be seen as a corollary of relativism — the general theory that *all* beliefs and values are relative to their cultural con-

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1973), 319.

text — but it would be misleading to take this approach here because of the prominence of historicism in postmodern thought. I will reserve the term ‘relativism’ for the idea that distinct *contemporary* cultures cannot understand, or objectively evaluate one another. Because this idea is logically identical with historicism, I will not discuss it separately at this point. Relativism as opposed to historicism will, however, play an important role in our *critique* of the Postmodern Doctrine.

This is perhaps the place to point out that the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine, denying as they do the logical possibility of there *being* any transcendent standards, insist that they are not relativists. It would make sense to speak of ‘relativism,’ they claim, only if transcendence were a coherent possibility.²² But even they would presumably have to admit, if pressed, that it is understandable that their critics want to *call* them relativists. (Postmodernists tend to reject the ‘historicist’ label on similar grounds: it does not make sense to characterize a position as ‘historicist’ unless there is some coherent, non-historicist position, which in their opinion there is not.²³)

The Philosophy of the Subject

One of the major themes of postmodernism is its critique of the idea that ‘the subject’ — human consciousness — is metaphysically fundamental. This idea is generally traced back to Kant, a figure whom the postmoderns seem universally to view as having had a baleful influence on the history of

²² The American postmodern theorist, Richard Rorty is particularly vehement on this matter.

²³ This attempt on the part of the postmoderns to deny their opponents the right to even *state* their opposition is one aspect of the ‘logical oddness’ of the Postmodern Doctrine — an issue which is discussed later in this chapter.

post-Enlightenment thought. The Kantian conviction that phenomenal reality somehow emanates from individual human minds is an anathema to postmodernists. Their rejection of the idea follows, more or less automatically, from their acceptance of the radical antifoundationalism which is the central tenet of the Postmodern Doctrine: Consciousness cannot be foundational because there *are* no foundations of *any* kind.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the postmodern hostility to the subject amounts to nothing more than a particular instance of the general rejection of foundations. To leave it at that would be to ignore the striking intensity of the postmodern animus against subjectivity, and to downplay the fact that postmodern thinkers typically regard the idea of a grounding subject as the epitome of all that is deplorable in modernism.

Foucault provides a particularly good example of this tendency. In the climactic section of *The Order of Things*, the chapter entitled "Man and His Doubles," he describes the emergence of modernity at the end of the eighteenth century. He argues that the decay of the purely descriptive classical outlook made it possible for the first time to develop a conception of *man* as metaphysically central. (Descartes might be thought to be the origin of this tendency, but Foucault contends that Descartes was interested not specifically in *human* consciousness but in *thought* as a general phenomenon.²⁴) An important part of the modern idea of man according to Foucault is the belief that human experience can be regarded as a foundation:

the analysis of actual experience has established itself in modern reflection, as a radical contestation of positivism and eschatology. . . it has tried to restore the forgotten dimension of the transcendental²⁵

²⁴ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 324.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 321.

The reference to 'positivism and eschatology' is an allusion to the mixture of neutral empiricism and theologically derived metaphysics which Foucault sees as characteristic of the 'Classical' epoch. He is sympathetic up to a point with the desire to give greater importance to the study of human beings — to move away from thinking of ourselves as just another part of nature to thinking of ourselves as unique and central. He feels, however, that the Kantian idea of achieving this by granting a foundational status to experience was a grave blunder and one for which we are still paying.

In Foucault's opinion the right way to break away from the cold Classicism of the Enlightenment is not through the exaltation of experience. He feels, that by taking that route we only strengthen our subjection to a false conception of ourselves and to the notion of a culture-independent world. The right way to make a clean break with Classicism and, at the same time, to correct the error of the philosophy of the subject, is to question the very existence of what Foucault calls 'man' — in other words to debunk or 'deconstruct' the notion of an entity whose culture-independent experience of a culture-independent external reality provides the foundation of all thought and belief.

The true contestation of positivism and eschatology does not lie . . . in a return to actual experience (which rather, in fact, provides them with confirmation by giving them roots); but if such a contestation could be made, it would be from the starting point of a question which may well seem aberrant, so opposed is it to what has rendered the whole of our thought historically possible. This question would be Does man really exist?

Having made his point in a typically paradoxical way, Foucault exploits the very implausibility of his suggestion in order to expand on his idea. He continues:

To imagine, for an instant, what the world and thought and truth might be if man did not exist, is considered to be merely indulging in paradox. This is because we are so blinded by the recent manifestation of man that we can no longer remember a time — and it is not so long ago — when the world, its order, and human beings existed, but man did not. It is easy to see why Nietzsche's thought should have had, and still has for us, such a disturbing power when it introduced in the form of an imminent event, the Promise-Threat, the notion that man would soon be no more — but would be replaced by a superman . . . and that our modern thought about man, our concern for him, our humanism, were all sleeping serenely over the threatening rumble of his non-existence.²⁶

The Rejection of Experience

Politics: Anti-humanism & Foucauldian Power

The reference to humanism is significant. It casts light on a recurrent, although often undeveloped, theme of much postmodern writing — the rejection of humanism. The anti-humanistic remarks of many postmodern writers often seem disturbingly callous — and, perhaps, strikingly incongruous — in light of the fact that worries about the welfare of women, ethnic minorities and the handicapped are often thought to be typically postmodern preoccupations.²⁷ Foucault's remark, coming as it does in the context of his critique of the philosophy of the subject and his predictions about the imminent demise of 'man', makes it tempting to conclude that, for him at least, postmodern anti-humanism is a highly theoretical and a somewhat esoteric matter — and that there is, for example, no contradiction between his condemnation of humanism and his advocacy of prison reform, or between the anti-humanism so frequently espoused by postmodern

²⁶ Ibid., 322.

²⁷ See the discussion of Andreas Huyssen's article, "Mapping the Postmodern" in Chapter Two and the note on political correctness on page 251

writers on art and politics and the support that these same individuals so typically show for the minority groups and the oppressed of the Third World.

It would be a mistake, however, to move from such considerations to the conclusion that postmodern anti-humanism is a benign technicality. It is certainly true that postmodern writers tend to be supportive of the 'rights movement' — true, in other words, that the typically postmodern position on an important range of political issues is indistinguishable from a position that in pre-postmodern times would have uncontroversially been called 'humanistic'. Against this however it is also worth remarking that there *is* a significant subtheme of sadism and masochism in postmodern art.²⁸ And it also worth commenting on the fact that Foucault himself is an enthusiastic admirer of de Sade, Bataille and Artaud. These facts alone may be the source of misgivings for anyone eager to be able to believe that it is possible to join forces with the postmodernists without giving up anything more than the *labels* one previously put on one's ethical principles.²⁹

There is, however, a more substantial and therefore more troubling consideration that is relevant here — one that brings us back to the connection between the anti-subjectivity of the Postmodern Doctrine and its rejection of humanism. The concern for the rights of all human beings which came to be called humanism had its source in a more general, more metaphysical idea that first came to prominence, not during the modern era, but during the 'Classical' epoch which preceded it. According to this idea — the idea of

²⁸ For example in the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois, the painting of Francesco Clemente, the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and in the novels of Kathy Acker

²⁹ A pre-postmodern European would have been as likely — *more* likely perhaps — to refer to views of this kind as 'liberal' but that is a word which is just as distasteful to postmodern ears as is 'humanistic'.

empiricism — human experience is the source of all knowledge. From this it follows both historically and logically that the experience of individual human beings is worthy of the ultimate degree of ethical respect — an attitude that was not possible as long as a theological-Platonistic mentality prevailed. Now, as we have seen, it is precisely this empiricist axiom that the postmoderns want to repeal by rejecting the philosophy of the subject. The question arises therefore: Once we take away the metaphysical underpinning of empiricism, what will secure the ethical status of individual rights? The only answer that a consistent post-modernist could give to this question is, "The discourse."³⁰ But this is not an answer which is likely to set to rest the doubts of a modern liberal engaged in a struggle of conscience with the new philosophical ideology. After all, as we shall see when we come to discuss Jacques Derrida, the essence of discourse is to change, and the essence of human experience as conceived by the empiricist axiom is to remain constant.³¹

There is one prominent feature of postmodern thought — and one that is well exemplified in Foucault's work — that provides a particularly persuasive basis for misgivings about the sincerity of the postmodernists' concern for individual rights. This is what might be referred to as 'Foucauldian power theory'. Several of his later essays center on an idiosyncratic extension of the concept of power.³² There Foucault speaks of power, not as something which is simply *possessed* by individuals or institutions but as

³⁰ And this is indeed the answer that would be given by Richard Rorty who, despite his postmodernism, is a determined and self-described liberal.

³¹ As will be pointed out in when we come to discuss the possibility of dissent, there is already a good deal of evidence that individual rights would not survive a lengthy reign of the Postmodern Doctrine as the generally accepted philosophical ideology.

³² For example, in "Two Lectures" and "Truth and Power" both in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, trans. Colin Gordon et al., ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

an independent force, a sort of vital social fluid which flows, blood-like, through the body politic. As it flows, it passes through individuals and institutions, and those who happen to be lodged in local capillaries 'have' less power than those in the main arteries.³³ But no institutions, no individuals *make* their power; they are granted it by their position in the system. It would be difficult, perhaps, to argue that such a conception of power is a necessary consequence of the rejection of the subject, but certainly the two ideas go well together. As we have seen, Foucault's rejection of the subject amounts to a denial of individual autonomy. And that idea prepares the way for the conception of the individual as gripped in the flow of uncontrollable, unpossessable power. The idea of individuals as essentially powerless would scarcely have been plausible when we still thought of experience as foundational.

One corollary of this conception of power — and it is a corollary of which Foucault makes much — is that any attempt to challenge power is bound to be futile. To entertain ideas of setting up a social order in which power has been overthrown and freedom prevails, is to misunderstand what sort of thing power is. Foucault's theory of power leads him to a radically iconoclastic view of the so-called liberalizations which have characterized the course of European civilization over the past two hundred years. For him, these 'rights,' far from being emancipatory are a pervasive and brutally effective means of oppression:

Modern society . . . from the nineteenth century up to our own day, has been characterized on the one hand, by a legislation, a discourse, an organization based on public right, whose principle of articulation is the social body and the delegative status of each citizen; and, on the other

³³ The metaphor I have used here is suggested by Foucault himself (See, "Two Lectures," 96)

hand, by a closely linked grid of disciplinary coercions whose purpose is in fact to assure the cohesion of this same social body. Though a theory of right is a necessary companion to this grid, it cannot in any event provide the terms of its endorsement . . . These two limits are so heterogeneous that they cannot possibly be reduced to each other. The powers of modern society are exercised through, on the basis of, and by virtue of, this very heterogeneity between a public right of sovereignty and a polymorphous disciplinary mechanism.³⁴

There is surely nothing in this passage to reassure anyone who is sceptical about the postmodernist's claims that, despite their anti-humanism, they are more concerned with the protection of individual rights than are 'modern' humanists and liberals.³⁵ If, as Foucault apparently believes, we are utterly deluded in our belief that the human condition in Europe and some of its cultural colonies has been genuinely improved by the reforms in working conditions, health care and the legal and educational system, then it seems to follow that, once undeluded through the reading of Foucault, the sensible course of action would be to passively accept whatever manifestations of Power we happen to find ourselves partaking of. Foucault himself, it must be said, makes no such recommendations; indeed, he occasionally tries to discourage a quietistic interpretation of his theory by references to the possibility of developing a "non-disciplinary form of power."³⁶ But these suggestions seem to be made as much out of uneasiness as conviction, and in any case, Foucault certainly does not show how they are connected with his basic theoretical position. Moreover, because of their vagueness and the

³⁴ Foucault, "Two Lectures," 108.

³⁵ In the course of a discussion of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish, the Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, makes a blunt comment on a connected aspect of Foucault's thought — his conviction that institutions such as modern prisons and hospitals which are supposedly inspired by liberal, emancipatory ideals are in fact instruments of manipulation and repression "It is Foucault's thesis that our own societies are maintained not by army, police, and a centralized, visible state apparatus, but precisely by those techniques of dressage, discipline and diffused power at work in 'carceral' institutions." [Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault* (London. Tavistock, 1980), 136.]

³⁶ See for example, "Two Lectures," 108.

slightly ominous terms in which they are expressed, they are more likely to strengthen than to allay a traditional liberal's qualms about the reliability of postmodern tolerance.

The upshot of all this is that it would be a serious error to do what seemed permissible at an earlier point in our discussion and pass off postmodern hostility toward humanism as merely a technical, or terminological matter without sinister implications for 'liberals' and 'humanists'. It seems, in other words, that it would be a mistake for such people to reassure themselves by arguing that, since postmodernists are so strongly committed to the protection of the rights of women and minority groups, the principles of humanism are threatened by nothing more serious than re-labelling. Despite the conspicuous liberality of postmodern support of the rights movement, it is impossible to study the writings of Foucault — or indeed of the other great theoreticians of the movement — without feeling that the application of Postmodern Doctrine *could* lead to great *illiberality*, to an eventual rejection not only of the name but the substance of humanism: The refusal to grant *any* sort of foundational, constitutive role to human consciousness is bound to encourage a nihilistic scorn for traditional ideas about the significance of experience. The idea that we are the products of our discursive world, rather than its creators is bound to encourage a fatalistic scepticism about the possibility of improving the human condition.³⁷ The idea that the citizens of European democracies are as much in the grip of power as are the citizens of totalitarian states will undoubtedly be used by

³⁷ For similar worries about the possible consequences of adopting the Postmodern Doctrine see: Thomas McCarthy, "Private Irony and Public Decency," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990): 366.

some as a reason for accepting the erosion of the 'rights' and freedoms so highly valued from the modern point of view.³⁸

Conceptualism in Visual Art

It was remarked above that the postmodern hostility to the metaphysically significant 'subject' can be seen as flowing directly out of the antifoundationalism of the Postmodern Doctrine. There is an alternative way of looking at it. The rejection of 'the philosophy of the subject' can also be seen as an inevitable consequence of postmodern discursivism: If subjectivity is to provide a foundation for conceptual thought, then there must be such a thing as *pre-conceptual*, *pre-verbal*, culture-independent consciousness — and that, of course, is precisely what is denied by discursivism. According to postmodern discursivism — and to the adumbrations of that doctrine found in the writings of Saussure and Nietzsche — the verbal, cultivated, human mind is a product not of raw, biological consciousness but of the discursive context. Indeed, from the postmodern point of view, the very idea of a bare, originating consciousness is absurd: Kant, in suggesting that the conceptualized world is a product of the human mind, has allegedly reversed the real relationship.

³⁸ One way of describing this danger would be to say that, despite Foucault's official opposition to anything transcendental, his sort of 'power,' in its resistance to change, and its ability to reassert itself unweakened even when the surface structure of society undergoes drastic change, begins to look very much like the just the sort of immutable, culture-independent entity he has so set himself against. This is presumably what Jurgen Habermas has in mind when he argues that Foucault, having denied himself the luxury of employing a Heideggerian notion of being as a substitute for truth, succumbs to the temptation to give 'power' that role. The result, Habermas suggests, is that 'power' becomes suspiciously multi-faceted: "[Foucault] thinks of the transcendental practices of power as something particular that strives against all universals and further as the lowly corporeal-sensual that undermines everything intelligible, and finally as the contingent that could also have been otherwise because it is not governed by any regulative order." [Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), 257]

The conceptualism that is characteristic of the postmodern attitude — and of its complementary anti-subjectivism — is strikingly manifested by the typical postmodern attitude toward visual art. According to the orthodox postmodern position, the proper activity of the visual artist is the creation of works whose primary content is not visual at all but verbal. For example, “Under a Rock,” a typical product of a prominent postmodern artist, Jenny Holzer, centers on bits of banal poetry which are displayed on a red pixel board positioned as a sort of altar, at one end of a dimly lit ‘installation space’. The bits of text are also carved into the monumental stone benches that face the screen. Even the work of contemporary visual artists who seem more concerned with providing genuinely visual stimulus tends to involve a crucial verbal element. The vast canvases of Anselm Kiefer for example, traditional as they are in many ways, typically incorporate hand-written names and slogans.

Given the importance postmoderns place on the denial of subjectivity, this tendency toward the verbalization of visual art is scarcely surprising: Traditional visual art, depends for its primary impact on pre-verbal experience — or at least on experience which resists exhaustive verbal description, and postmodern orthodoxy denies the existence of such experience. What *is* perhaps surprising is the fact that there are still artists whose work is recognizable as painting and sculpture and who nevertheless view what they do as an expression of the prevailing philosophical ideology. The only really consistent course for the postmodern visual artist seems to be to abandon painting or sculpture for some form of writing or for a sort of art

that, while remaining superficially visual, demands to be understood not as experience but as comment.³⁹

The Rejection of Reason

Because the postmodern outlook denigrates experience and exalts conceptuality, the uninitiated might imagine that postmodernists would be champions of rigorous rational thought. Nothing could be further from the truth. The conceptual realm of postmodernity does not provide the orderly, stable environment that is required for deduction and inference. The discursive universe described by postmodern philosophers is a constantly and unpredictably fluctuating network of concepts whose interrelations are so complex and ephemeral that the possibility of cogent argument is eliminated.⁴⁰

Foucault: Knowledge as Oppressor

We have already discussed Foucault's repudiation of the claims of institutionalized liberalism and humanitarianism. This is, however, only one aspect of a larger theme. Liberal ideas and the institutions that supposedly

³⁹ The work of a conceptual artist such as Irene Whittome who exhibits sumptuously framed diary pages takes the first of these options. The second one is taken by the nihilistic Sherrie Levine who has made a career out of exhibiting the work of famous photographers as her own.

⁴⁰ The 'discursive metaphysics' of the most powerful philosopher in the postmodern ranks, Jacques Derrida, is examined in some detail in Chapter Five. It is worth adding here, still on the subject of the metaphysics of postmodernity, that when advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine attempt to characterize their outlook in the most general possible terms they often sound like *nominalists*. For example, Paul Bove, in his foreword to Deleuze's study of Foucault presents Foucault as an enemy of 'totalization' and a champion of the 'local.' [Paul Bove, Foreword to *Foucault*, by Gilles Deleuze, trans. and ed. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xvi-xvii.] And Richard Rorty criticizes Robert Binkley's work on conceptual change because Binkley "[takes] too seriously the question. . . 'How is our system of epistemic appraisal to be applied in contexts of changing meanings?'" Rorty goes on to say "In my view, there is no such system — no overarching structure of rationality." [Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 271.] Moreover, in the passage from his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* quoted on page 67, Rorty actually refers to his imaginary postmodern hero — the 'ironist' — as a 'nominalist'.

protect them center on the idea that *knowledge* and the understanding it provides can replace brute force and raw power. One manifestation of this is the notion, still so powerful in our culture, that the proper role of the penal system is not, moralistically, to punish criminals by making them suffer, but to scientifically study them and their crime and, on the basis of the knowledge acquired in this way to, make them into free and happy citizens. According to Foucault, however, the desire to accumulate knowledge about human behaviour, the 'will to knowledge' as he calls it, is not benignly motivated.

In appearance, or rather according to the mask it bears, historical consciousness is neutral, devoid of passions, and committed solely to truth. But if it examines itself and if, more generally, it interrogates the various forms of scientific consciousness in its history, it finds that all these forms and transformations are aspects of the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety, and malice. It discovers the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions with which humanity protects itself, a position that encourages the dangers of research and delights in disturbing discoveries. The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge reveals that all knowledge rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth) and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious (something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind).⁴¹

One way of crudely summing this up would be to say that Foucault accepts the adage, "Knowledge is power" but interprets it cynically so it does not mean that knowledge, seen as something good, gives us the power to do good, but that the malign force of power cannot get along without the connivance of knowledge. That he has such a relationship in mind is made clear by the following passage:

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F Bouchard (Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1977), 162-3.

Perhaps we should abandon the belief that . . . power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge . . . that power and knowledge directly imply one another⁴²

There is, incidentally, an important connection between Foucault's deconstructive assault on knowledge and his rejection of foundational subjectivity. As we have seen, we can only find a solid basis for our values and beliefs if we can assume that not only do we have knowable selves, but, moreover, that these selves are immutable. One corollary of this is that our knowledge of our selves — of what we, as conscious beings *are* — must be entirely discourse-independent. Our basic self-knowledge must be built into us in the way our animal instincts are. Not surprisingly, Foucault has little patience with this idea:

We believe that feelings are immutable, but every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested has a history. We believe in the dull constancy of instinctual life and imagine that it continues to exert its force indiscriminately in the present as it did in the past. But a knowledge of history easily disintegrates this unity . . . We believe, in any event, that the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history, but this too is false. The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws . . . Nothing in man— not even his body — is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Knowledge, even under the banner of history, does not depend on "rediscovery" and it emphatically excludes the "rediscovery of ourselves."⁴³

The idea that knowledge, far from being something pure and inviolable that stands apart from the marketplace and the boardroom is in fact nothing more than a device for gaining and perpetuating power has by now perco-

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979), 27.

⁴³ Foucault, "Nietzsche," 153-4.

lated down to the middle regions of discursive activity and beyond. One manifestation of this is the contemptuous attitude of postmodern art critics toward the practice of serious art-historical scholarship. The art critic of *The Guardian* prefaces his review of an exhibition of Guercino's drawings with the following remark:

Connoisseurship is much loathed by the Politically Correct of the art world, who regard the precise study of old master paintings and drawings as elitist, therefore reprehensible, close to the art trade, therefore corrupt, and in any case ludicrously demoded⁴⁴

Lyotard: Science Deconstructed

Foucault casts blanket aspersions on all knowledge. He apparently sees no reason to distinguish between the claims and methods of science and those, say, of folklore. Another philosopher of postmodernity, Jean-François Lyotard, takes a different approach; his critique of knowledge concentrates on the practice of science, which he attempts to redescribe in such a way as to make it seem compatible with the Postmodern Doctrine. He denies that scientific theories, even the best established ones, have any claim to absolute certainty. He defends this claim by arguing that science is not, and cannot become, an axiomatic system. This is out of the question according to Lyotard because Gödel has shown in his incompleteness theorem that there is no such thing as axiomatic completeness: Any system will contain a statement which can neither be refuted or demonstrated within the system.⁴⁵ Lyotard's point is that once we give up on the conception of science as

⁴⁴ Tim Hilton, "Studies For the Lazy Eye," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 16 June 1991

⁴⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 42-43. (It might be thought suspicious that Lyotard is forced to defend his support of the Postmodern Doctrine with an appeal to a mathematical theorem. But as we have already seen, there is little hope of finding a solid argument either in support of or against such a fundamental — and irrefutable — claim as the Postmodern Doctrine, so it should not be surprising that

a complete axiomatic system, we have to give up on the idea that it has special epistemological status. And with that we have to give up on the conception of scientific truths as *demonstrable*; we have to admit, in other words, that they issue, not from something immutable and culture-independent, but from what Lyotard calls a pragmatic language game.⁴⁶ The game is pragmatic, because, in order to play it, scientists must first accept "the rules defining the allowable means of argumentation."⁴⁷ All sciences "owe their status to the existence of a language whose rules of functioning cannot themselves be demonstrated but are the object of a consensus among experts."⁴⁸ The crucial point here, and the point that marks Lyotard's position as distinctively postmodern, is that, once it has been admitted that what counts as scientific truth depends on the agreement of scientists as to how the 'game' is going to be played, it must also be admitted that the criteria of scientific truth will change whenever the scientific community decides they should change. In other words, relativism follows from pragmatism. When such theoretical shifts occur, ideas that had formerly been rejected can come to represent scientific orthodoxy. Lyotard shows the thoroughness of his antifoundationalism here by speaking of a change in the conception of reason; clearly, if reason itself is not immutable, then nothing is.

Obviously, a major shift in the notion of reason accompanies this new arrangement. The principle of a universal metalanguage [i.e. the discredited idea that the criteria of scientific truth are guaranteed by a complete axiomatic system] is replaced by the principle of a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems capable of arguing the truth of denotative statements [in other words by a postmodern

a proponent of postmodernism, or any other philosophical ideology, who feels the need for some sort of support should be led to look for it in strange places.)

⁴⁶ Lyotard is an admirer of late Wittgensteinian language theory.

⁴⁷ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

'principle' of foundationlessness! . . . What used to pass as paradox, and even paralogism, in the knowledge of classical and modern science, can in certain of these systems, acquire a new force of conviction and win the acceptance of the community of experts.⁴⁹

In taking the position he takes here, Lyotard is operating under the influence of the historian of science, Thomas Kuhn.⁵⁰ The most important aspect of Lyotard's position from our point of view, however, is not his contention that scientific paradigms are constantly evolving, but his refusal to admit that there is anything constant in our thought, even reason itself.⁵¹ It is that extreme position which defines Lyotard's postmodernity and which puts him clearly in the company of prominent postmodern theorists such as Foucault and Derrida. (Because of the strong pragmatic element in his approach, however, Lyotard is perhaps even more closely allied to the major American theoretician of postmodernity, Richard Rorty, than to his own countrymen. One will search in vain for references to 'the community of experts' in the work of Foucault and Derrida; indeed, despite their distaste for conventional metaphysics, they are both metaphysically inclined, and happier with their 'genealogies' and 'différences' than with something as straightforward and dull as the consensus of the community of experts.)

Lyotard's pragmatism becomes even clearer when he takes up the role of technology in science. He argues that technology is important to science as a means of acquiring confirmation of scientific claims and as a way of altering reality — 'conditioning the context' as he puts it.

Technology is . . . a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency. a technical

⁴⁹ Ibid., 43-4. (The expository comments in braces are my own.)

⁵⁰ See page 120 ff.

⁵¹ In this respect, at least, Lyotard is far more extreme than Kuhn who stops short of renouncing the idea of an unchanging reasoning process that transcends scientific change.

"move" is "good" when it does better and/or expends less energy than another⁵²

As science progressed it became more and more dependent on technology as a source of information and confirmation, and, as a consequence, it became clearer and clearer that only the rich would enjoy the benefits of discovery. Eventually "science becomes a force of production . . . a moment in the circulation of capital."⁵³ Lyotard qualifies this particularly radical comment by admitting that there is still some scientific activity which is not at the service of the economy, but he implies that it is probably only a matter of time before that will cease to be the case, before the 'imperative of performance' will be ubiquitous. In the course of his discussion of technology, Lyotard stresses the connection between scientific knowledge and power — and in so doing indicates that in at least one respect his attitudes are more akin to Foucault's than to Rorty's.⁵⁴ He also makes a noteworthy, and once again Foucauldian, connection between postmodernism and the demise of humanism:

[faced with the importance, and the expense of technology] the State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.⁵⁵

Although the connection Lyotard makes between power and knowledge is reminiscent of Foucault's, there is an important difference. For Foucault, as we have seen the relation is a constant: the power/knowledge connection may manifest itself in different ways at different times, but, in one form or

⁵² Ibid., 44.

⁵³ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁴ See McCarthy, "Private Irony," 362 ff., for comments on the similarities and differences of the positions of Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty

⁵⁵ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 46.

another, its grip is constant. For Lyotard, the relationship is an aspect of the postmodern condition — a recent state of affairs. In the past, for the Greeks and during the Renaissance, the relationship between power and knowledge was not nearly as close as it is now; it was only with the Enlightenment that it began to gain ground. The apogee of postmodernization still lies in the future when, as a result of advances in the dominant technology and cybernetics, the “generalized computerization of society” will be complete and power and knowledge will be indistinguishable.⁵⁶

Lyotard’s vision of the future is likely to have a chilling effect on anyone whose thinking has not advanced beyond modernism. Taken in isolation, his claim that science has been co-opted by commerce and his radical remarks about the coming ‘computerization’ of the world could create the impression that he is a humanistic Marxist trying desperately to stave off the triumph of capitalism. But it would be a mistake to draw that conclusion. Indeed, there seems to be nothing in *The Postmodern Condition* to contradict the claim made by Frederic Jameson in the book’s introduction to the effect that Lyotard believes that social classes of the sort described by Marx have been replaced by other groups such as technocrats and bureaucrats.⁵⁷ And I can see no reason to disagree with Jameson’s further claim that, once the idea of social classes has been abandoned, it makes no sense to speak of Marxism.

Even when we have eliminated the possibility of classifying Lyotard as a Marxist, there is a danger of being misled by lingering modernist sensibilities into thinking that he must be a humanist or liberal of some sort. Can he

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid., xiv

really countenance the complete “computerization of society” with equanimity? Can he really be willing to welcome the triumph of the “imperative of performance”? That he does indeed have misgivings is made clear in the final paragraph of his essay:

We are finally in a position to understand how the computerization of society affects this problematic. It could become the “dream” instrument for controlling and regulating the market system, extended to include knowledge itself and governed exclusively by the performativity principle. In that case it would inevitably involve the use of terror. But it could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions. The line to follow for computerization to take the second of these two paths is, in principle, quite simple: give the public free access to the memory and data banks.⁵⁸

The concern that Lyotard expresses for the preservation of individual rights — both here and elsewhere in his essay — is presumably sincere. But it raises difficult questions: How can he seriously suggest the possibility of such a simple solution to the problem and yet admit, as he does, the great power of capitalism? How can he believe that there is even a slight possibility that those who possess power will not insist on acquiring more and more by ruthlessly applying the performativity principle? How can he believe that they will jeopardize their dominance by simply handing over their precious information to the public? In short, if Lyotard is being sincere here, he is guilty of patent fantasizing. He seems to be making an attempt to play both the hard-headed realist who knows where power resides and sees why it must be possessed by those who possess it, *and* the starry-eyed revolutionary who believes that, at any moment, power may be permanently handed over to those who deserve it. Of course Lyotard is not alone among postmod-

⁵⁸ Ibid., 67.

ern theorists in his desire to have it both ways. One is reminded, for example of Foucault's "non-disciplinary form of power."⁵⁹

Rorty: Truth as Philosophical Invention

Richard Rorty is undoubtedly the strongest philosophical spokesman for postmodernism in North America. In style and, to some extent, in content, his thought differs markedly from that of the French postmodernists, but he is in complete agreement with them on the crucial point: antifoundationalism. And, as with his continental counterparts, one of the important ways in which Rorty's antifoundationalism is manifested is in his hostility to the notions of knowledge and truth or — to put it in a way that Rorty would be more likely to accept — in his hostility to the classical philosophical analysis of those ideas. Unlike Foucault, Rorty does not speak abusively of knowledge itself. He does not even argue, as does Lyotard, that our conceptions of knowledge and truth are outdated and must be replaced with ones more in keeping with contemporary socio-economic reality. He claims to have no complaints whatsoever about the common-sense idea of truth. His only argument is with philosophers, epistemologists in particular, who insist that true statements are true because they refer to a mind-independent reality. The idea of truth as a relationship between language and a discourse-independent world makes no sense to Rorty. He claims that truth is correctly analyzed as 'warrantable assertibility' — in other words that a statement is true if it is an expression of "our present views about nature." Another way of putting this is to say, "Truth is relative to our conceptual

⁵⁹ See page 52.

scheme." For Rorty, these contentions, properly understood, are tautologies, unexceptionable codifications of common sense:

to say that we have to assign referents to terms and truth-values to sentences in the light of our best notions of what there is in the world is a platitude. To say that truth and reference are "relative to a conceptual scheme" sounds as if it were saying something more than this but it is not as long as "our conceptual scheme" is taken simply as a reference to what we believe now⁶⁰

Being platitudes, these contentions would need no defence if it were not for misguided *philosophical* opposition. This opposition comes from philosophers who feel the need for a kind of certainty, a kind of *founding*, which, in Rorty's opinion at any rate, common sense can do without. The philosophical need to construe truth, not in terms of informed current opinion, but in terms of a relation between language and immutable, culture-independent referents is, in Rorty's view, just one aspect of the more general lust for what he refers to as 'transcendentia.' The other transcendentia are beauty (conceived as a general criterion of aesthetic quality) and goodness. Just as the claim that truth is transcendental could be made by insisting that a statement might be true even though it is not in agreement with the best current thinking on the subject, the idea that goodness is transcendental could be expressed, Rorty suggests, by the Socratic statement that something might be bad for me, for Athens, and abhorrent to the Gods but yet good — in other words that something might be good even though not beneficial to anyone or anything.⁶¹ Rorty admits that we *do* have a

⁶⁰ Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 276.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 281 (Rorty says little about the transcendental view of beauty but since he refers to 'non-functional beauty' as parallel to the notion of 'non-instrumental goodness' that Socrates proposes, he presumably has in mind a comparable conception of beauty according to which nothing can be beautiful without also being functional. But could Rorty claim with any plausibility that *that* is the common-sensical view of beauty, or that it would be if it were not for philosophical interference? It is difficult not to suspect that he

transcendental notion of truth but, he insists defensively, it "may not be much older than the time of Socrates and Aristotle." He then says:

Whatever the provenance, the fact that we possess such a notion is in itself no guarantee that there will be an interesting philosophical theory about it. Most of what passes for discussion of "truth" in philosophy books is, in fact, about justification, just as most of what passes for discussion of "goodness" is about pleasure and pain. The price of sharply distinguishing the *transcendentalia* from their common-sense counterparts may be to leave one without material for theory construction, and without problems to resolve.⁶²

In this passage (as on every page he writes) Rorty shows his great skill as a rhetorician by quietly importing the assumption that the proponents of the notion of transcendental truth would be disturbed by the fact that there is nothing to say about truth from a philosophical point of view beyond characterizing it as a discourse-independent quality possessed by statements that correctly describe an extra-linguistic world. For an analytically inclined pragmatist like Rorty, the prospect of giving up the engrossing activity of analyzing the rich concept of justification may be distressing, but philosophers who see no essential connection between justification and truth will not be particularly troubled by the threat of reduced employment. They will think that a small price to pay for being allowed to speak of the possibility of a statement's being true despite the fact that everyone is convinced that it is false.⁶³

The analytic flavour of Rorty's method in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* makes it somewhat difficult to think of him as a postmodernist.

says nothing else about beauty at this point because he realizes that by doing so he would weaken his general theory of 'transcendentalia'.)

⁶² Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 282.

⁶³ Later in this chapter we discuss several reasons why a philosopher might *want* to be able to speak in this way.

This impression remains even in his last chapter where he finally leaves behind his critique of what he calls "epistemologically centered philosophy" and attempts to say something positive about what philosophers might do once they have given up the quest for transcendentia. In his more recent writing however, Rorty's style and subject matter have come to be much more what one would expect from a defender of the Postmodern Doctrine. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he devotes his opening chapters to dismissing the foundational potential, first of language, and secondly of what he calls 'selfhood'. goes on to deal with Proust, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida in the central part of the book, and turns to literary criticism in the final sections. The following passages from the chapter entitled "Private Irony and Liberal Hope" show the extent to which Rorty has come to see himself as a prophet of postmodernism — and, incidentally, provide a compact review of many typically postmodern preoccupations:

The ironist . . . is a nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. So she thinks that the occurrence of a term like "just" or "scientific" or "rational" in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationalism will take one much beyond the language games of one's time.⁶⁴

And a few pages later:

The ironists' preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is re-description rather than inference.⁶⁵

In calling the champion of postmodernity an ironist, Rorty is adhering to approved postmodern terminology. The irony the postmodernist sees — and

⁶⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 75.

⁶⁵ Rorty, *Contingency*, 78.

glories in — lies in the fact that there are no foundations and that we are all helpless products of the discourse we happen to inhabit. In making his ironist a female, Rorty demonstrates his support for radical feminists who see in postmodern theory not just support for equality between the sexes, but for the notion that females, once liberated from the trammels of male domination — and 'male' foundationalism — are somehow more insightful, more 'correct' than men.⁶⁶ Throughout the chapter the heroic ironist is referred to with feminine pronouns; masculine pronouns are reserved for her imaginary antagonist, 'the metaphysician'.

Even if Rorty did not acknowledge his affinity with the continental postmoderns, there would, as we have already seen, be more than adequate grounds for regarding him and them as representatives of the same school of thought. Nevertheless there are important differences.⁶⁷ Rorty is first and foremost a pragmatist — and it seems reasonable to conjecture that he was originally attracted to the work of Foucault and Derrida because he saw the possibility of using elements of their thought in support of his own pragmatic outlook. His study of their writing and of the tradition which lies behind it has presumably led to changes in his own position, and his developing role as a guru of North American political correctness has perhaps also had its effect. Despite all this, even at his most radical, Rorty remains a pragmatist. One striking manifestation of his pragmatism is his adamant opposition to metaphysics and metaphysicians, an opposition which he

⁶⁶ Whether feminists and other participants in the 'rights-movement' are thinking clearly when they ally themselves with anti-foundational postmodernism is a moot point. (See the discussion of Andreas Huyssen's article, "Mapping the Postmodern" in Chapter Two and the note on political correctness on page 251.)

⁶⁷ For views similar to mine on what these differences are see McCarthy, "Private Irony," 362 ff.

pushes to the point of advocating a total 'de-theoreticization' of thought.⁶⁸ Foucault and Derrida, by contrast, are enthusiastic metaphysicians. Foucault, to be sure, shies away from explicit discussion of general metaphysical questions, but his work is full of concepts which are classically metaphysical if for no other reason than that the presence of the characteristics they ascribe could not be verified; moreover, he relies on obscure and ornate metaphors that give his work a distant, abstract quality totally unlike anything to be found in Rorty. As for Derrida, he apparently revels in metaphysical speculation. Because of his detestation of the various forms of 'presence' which the metaphysicians of the past have proposed, he would not describe himself as a metaphysician, but, from the point of view of the Anglo-American analytical philosophy that is Rorty's original milieu, nothing could be more metaphysical than Derrida's pet concept, *différance*.⁶⁹

The second important contrast between Rorty and his trans-Atlantic mentors is political. The degree of difference should not be over-emphasized; indeed, in terms of substance, it might be difficult to show that there *is* any. But there is certainly a strikingly different tone. In the writing of all the French postmodern thinkers there is a vague an aura of nihilism and anarchism. The nihilism is presumably an expression of the sense of human helplessness that arises from the discovery that we are doomed to perpetual enslavement to contingent discourse. The anarchism — Foucault's 'non-disciplinary power', for example, or Lyotard's vision of public ownership of the data banks — seems to be a sort of fantasizing, evidence of the gap be-

⁶⁸ See, for example, Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity" in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 161-176.

⁶⁹ When Rorty writes about Derrida he leaves this metaphysicality out. (And this makes reading Derrida after reading Rorty's account of him is a strange experience.)

tween the grimly non-human world of postmodern theory and the still-longed-for lost world where human desires could make a difference. But even if it is correctly interpreted in some such way — seen as a means, perhaps, of dealing with aggressive, angry feelings that no longer can be given a *theoretical* role — it must be admitted that anti-establishment animus is a powerful force in the writing of the the French postmodernists. In Rorty, by contrast, there is no such animus. But this is not to say that he is not political; if anything, he is more so. He seems convinced that *his* postmodernism is not only compatible with but conducive to a sort of gentle American liberalism that concerns itself, not with fantasies of anarchistic utopias, but with the prevention of cruelty to human beings. He does not explain his apparent confidence that the foundationless 'conversation' which he sees as the proper activity of the thinkers of the future will not lead one day to the conclusion that cruelty is acceptable.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Rorty does make a pass at this question on pages 85-88 of *Contingency* where, after admitting that he has no way to show that abandoning a commitment to transcendentalia will not lead to an abandonment of liberal values, he goes on to argue that very strong evidence to the effect that it will not is provided by the fact that liberal societies have not, as many predicted they would be, been weakened by the loss of religious faith. He insists that they have been strengthened. I believe that Rorty is wrong about this, later in this chapter I try to show that a general acceptance of the Postmodern Doctrine would almost certainly lead to the dissolution of fundamental social practices on which the sustenance of liberal values depends, and I will go on to argue that there is a good deal of evidence available that this dissolution has already begun. It is worth noting here, however, that even if Rorty is right in his contention that the death of God has so far had the effect of strengthening liberal values, it does not follow that he is right in claiming that liberals have nothing to fear from the Postmodern Doctrine. It might simply be that the theologically supported values were so strongly entrenched that they have naturally lived on, in the guise of humanism, for a century or so before finally succumbing. It might also be that although theology supported the liberal values it was not a necessary condition of their being maintained — whereas the foundationalism, which is only now dying, is.

The Logical Oddness of the Postmodern Doctrine

Self-referentiality

The Postmodern Doctrine is presumably unique among philosophical ideologies in that it applies to itself. If, as the Postmodern Doctrine claims, all beliefs are products of their social context, then the doctrine itself must be the product of *its* context. But this apparently means that the doctrine cannot possibly be applied to other cultures with other philosophical ideologies. It means, in other words, that, if the proponents of the doctrine are to avoid self-contradiction, they must restrict themselves to claiming that *our* beliefs are products of our culture. They cannot apply the doctrine to other cultures with different, perhaps transcendentially oriented, philosophical ideologies. But this is an impossibly high price to pay for logical consistency; it seems to deprive the doctrine of all its interest and power. And it seems that few if any postmodernists who would accept this disappointing localization of their position.⁷¹ It is probable, moreover, that, human psychology being what it is, a theory which explicitly restricted its applicability to its own context would have little chance of becoming a widely accepted philosophical ideology.

It is tempting to think that the self-referentiality of the Postmodern Doctrine is self-destructive. This suspicion might be expressed by asking the following question: By what criterion are we to evaluate the Postmodern Doctrine's claim that there is no discourse-independent standard by which to evaluate theories such as itself? It seems that any answer a proponent of

⁷¹ At some points Foucault, *does* seem to acknowledge that the scope of the doctrine may have to be narrowed in this way, but against that it must be said that the general tone of his writing implies that the doctrine's scope is universal.

the Postmodern Doctrine could provide would only lend support to the suspicion that the doctrine is self-contradictory: An appeal to an independent standard would lead to self-contradiction because the whole point of the Postmodern Doctrine is to deny the existence of any such standards, whereas any attempt to 'answer' the question by insisting that the truth of the Postmodern Doctrine does not require such independent confirmation would amount to using the doctrine to support itself and would thus be circular.

Irrefutability

If the logical oddness of the Postmodern Doctrine means that its proponents are in constant danger of contradicting themselves, it also provides them with compensating protection. If the Postmodern Doctrine is true — if the culture-dependence of all belief is the fundamental discursive principle of our time — then genuine opposition to the doctrine becomes not only futile but impossible. Anyone who is really a *part* of our culture will, by that very fact, accept the doctrine. In short the doctrine is irrefutable. Any objections to it — including criticism of its irrefutability — only reveal that the objector is still locked into an antiquated, merely modern, discourse and is thus ineligible to participate in the discussion.

An excellent example of how postmodernists defend themselves with the irrefutability of their doctrine is provided by Paul Bové's response to Charles Taylor's complaint that Foucault's commitment to the 'regime-relativity of

truth' is 'difficult — or impossible to integrate with the logic of one's analytical discourse.'⁷²

We might say that [Taylor] has measured Foucault by a certain unannounced and unexamined set of argumentative standards of signification which he thinks are central to "reasoning" itself — whereas we might easily say that they belong rather to the constitutive practice of the discipline of which he is a leading exponent . . . as he works on Foucault's complex writing, he unspokenly assumes that "sense" itself must be the end of discursive writing and that it must result from an integrated logic of analytic discourse. Taylor has been trained [sic] (and come to accept) the premium placed by his discipline upon a certain kind of thought [he] can only proceed along certain expected lines of argumentation.⁷³

A speedy rejection of the theory on logical grounds is inadvisable, however, if for no other reason than because it would cut us off too quickly and too completely from the undoubted merits of the doctrine. Special allowances clearly must be made in this respect for a theory like the Postmodern Doctrine which is not only self-referential — a theory about theories such as itself — but is also a theory about the status of such concepts as reason, refutability and self-contradiction. One way of looking at the Postmodern Doctrine is as a challenge to these notions: Proponents of the doctrine do not, for example, accept the idea of reason as a sort of discourse-independent court of appeal where theories can be evaluated in terms of an absolute measure of truth and, for that reason someone who rejects the Postmodern Doctrine on logical grounds is not really doing anything more than saying, "You're wrong." To attempt to support such a contention by an appeal to reason is futile because according to the theory at which the objection is directed, there is no such thing as absolute reason.

⁷² Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in David Hoy, ed. *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 92.

⁷³ Bove, Foreword to Deleuze's *Foucault*, xii-xiii.

Obviously there is something important in this line of criticism, but it would be much too easy to reject the Postmodern Doctrine by appeal to 'logical' considerations of this sort. The central objective of this essay will be the formulation and defence of resistance to the Postmodern Doctrine, but a subsidiary theme of great importance will be the contention that effective and fruitful resistance to the doctrine is only possible when it is based on an acknowledgement of its power, its plausibility and, above all, its *usefulness*. In other words, we must take the doctrine seriously, and in order to do so we must be tolerant of its logical oddness.

Provocation and Restraint

Postmodernist statements like the one just quoted make one thing clear: There is no possibility of arguing successfully against postmodernists except on their own terms -- not at least if success depends on convincing them that they should modify their position. And, as we have seen, if one *does* attempt to take on the postmodernists on their own terms, fundamental opposition of the sort Taylor attempts becomes impossible. For this reason, anyone with serious misgivings about the Postmodern Doctrine may find it difficult to resist the temptation of answering arrogance with arrogance by assuming foundationalism in the way that the postmoderns seem to assume antifoundationalism, and simply insisting that postmodernism is *wrong*. I cannot imagine this being done any better than it is done by Professor Wijnobel a character in A.S. Byatt's novel *Still Life*. Wijnobel is provoked by a woman called Juhana Belper who

had not been listening too carefully to the talk about the new university, [and] had picked up vaguely some remark of Wijnobel's about the necessity for an educated man to know about the General and Special theories of Relativity, and had said, in words Alexander was sure she used in

her lectures, that it was very true that great changes had taken place in the arts and sciences, that everything was now *relative*, we had lost our sense of certainty and absolute values, we perceived the world as fluid, random and chaotic, and that our art forms *must* reflect the fragmented and subjective nature of our perception of the world. Wijn Nobel drew himself up, and said, to the grouped wine bottles in front of him, 'That is the kind of very silly argument with which I have no patience. That is the kind of simplistic nonsense I was hoping to avoid. "Everything is relative." It can only be relative to *something*. We are relative, it is true. Our measurements depend on our biology, on the skill of our toolmakers: on the geographical source and chemical composition of their materials. But even you must be able to see that there would be no theory of relativity without the absolute, immutable idea of the velocity of light — which in this theory becomes an invariable. We cannot have the idea of random happenings or chaotic conditions without simultaneously — indeed previously having had a concept of order, an order of numbers, of form, of law.'⁷⁴

The problem with this sort of response is that, apart from its self-therapeutic value, it gets us nowhere. This will not bother someone like Professor Wijn Nobel who thinks the Postmodern Doctrine has no validity whatsoever and is happy to dismiss it as nonsense. But I believe that the doctrine *does* have a kind of validity and that there is much to be learned from treating it as seriously and as sympathetically as possible. We will only be able to think fruitfully about the doctrine, however, if we refuse to be provoked by the smug manner in which its advocates protect themselves with their theory's irrefutability. We must simply accept the fact that anything we say will be dismissed by the postmodernists as question begging.

⁷⁴ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life* (London: Penguin, 1986), 177-8.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DOCTRINE AND OUR WORLD

Conflict: The Postmodern Doctrine and Social Practices

The Postmodern Doctrine is in the process of becoming the philosophical ideology of our time. Already it has been widely accepted within the academic and artistic worlds and has provided inspiration and stimulus to scholars, painters, novelists, and others. Already there are signs that it is trickling down to the level of what might be called fashionable common sense. As we shall see in Chapter Six, the doctrine does have its opponents. But even when these critics are powerful reasoners, arguing with eloquence and erudition, they seem unable to offer a alternative philosophical ideology that has any plausibility. If it really *is* to become a fully-fledged philosophical ideology however, the doctrine must be able to do more than provide stimulus and amusement to the intelligentsia. It must be able to rationalize our world. In other words, it must be able to provide us with a coherent and intellectually satisfying 'justification' of the fundamental practices and institutions of our culture. In this section we will consider whether or not the Postmodern Doctrine can indeed perform this service.

Interpretation

It may seem strange to suggest, as I will be doing in this section, that there is tension between the Postmodern Doctrine and the practice of interpretation. There is, after all, a historical connection between hermen-

eutics — the philosophical study of interpretation — and the rise of the doctrine. It is, moreover, a postmodern commonplace that interpretation is pervasive: Since discourse is everything, texts — conceived broadly as the ‘documentation’ of the discourse — take on great importance. However, because, according to the doctrine, there is nothing that is genuinely extra-textual, no possibility of evaluating the relation between the text and its ‘referent’, we are limited to considering the possible connections between texts — that is to say, to interpreting them. Apart from these considerations it is not surprising that the idea that all thought is interpretive should have an appeal to the postmodern mind: Even according to traditional, foundationalist philosophical ideologies, interpretations tend to be ineluctably debatable in a way that straightforward factual statements and even scientific theorizing are not. Of course, to say that interpretations are endlessly debatable does not imply that there is no such thing as *the* correct interpretation. Endless controversy may simply be a consequence of the enormous complexity of interpretive issues; or it may be a consequence of the fact that we are arguing about things which, real as they are, can never have the certainty and the clarity of the perceptually accessible physical world.⁷⁵ In short, although it does not strictly imply the antifoundationalist metaphysic on which the Postmodern Doctrine rests, the idea that interpretation is pervasive, certainly fits well with the postmodern idea that there is no discourse-independent truth. If the practice of interpretation does imply that there is no possibility of finding *the* correct interpretation, then it seems that it should be possible to rationalize the practice in terms of the Postmodern Doctrine. Indeed, if the practice of interpretation *is* endless in

⁷⁵ This, as we shall see in Chapter Six, is a central point in the writing of Ronald Dworkin

this way, the postmodernist can argue that we *must* adopt the doctrine in order to be able to rationalize this fundamental practice.

Despite all this I believe there *is* tension between the Postmodern Doctrine and the practice of interpretation. Two points must be made. Both of them are rather obvious, from a traditional point of view, but, in the context of a critique of the Postmodern Doctrine, both need to be made. First, it is important to remember that, despite the famous uncertainties of biblical exegesis or of literary criticism, despite the unresolvable debates that take place among judges as to how particular pieces of legislation should be interpreted, there are plenty of instances of unanimity as to what *the* correct interpretation is. Theologians may have debated for thousands of years over widely divergent interpretations of the story of Eve's seduction by the serpent, but there is presumably unanimous agreement on the correct interpretation of Christ's parable of the talents. It may be possible to make convincing cases for two diametrically opposed readings of the final lines of Milton's twentieth sonnet, "Lawrence of virtuous father, virtuous son."⁷⁶ But there is presumably no debate about, say, the fact that the 'forgetful Lake' of line 74 of Book II of *Paradise Lost* is the river Lethe. Legal scholars have not been able to come to any agreement after a century of discussion as to whether the statute of wills in force in New York state in 1882 should be interpreted so as to allow a murderer to inherit money from his victim.⁷⁷ Interpretation was required in this case because the statute says nothing

⁷⁶ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1980), 149-50. [After having given the two interpretations and shown how it is possible to argue persuasively that either reading is *the* correct one, Fish generalizes as follows: "analysis generated by assuming that meaning is embedded in the artifact will always point in as many directions as there are interpreters."]

⁷⁷ See the discussion of 'Elmer's Case' in Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 15.

about murderous legatees. It is presumably quite as silent, however, on the issue of whether a legatee should be allowed to inherit despite having cruelly insulted the dying legator. And yet, if a group of judges were asked to decide whether someone should be deprived of a legacy because of such behaviour, their interpretation of the statute would clearly be confident and unanimous.

Such cases, being uncontroversial, do not draw themselves to our attention and for some reason they often continue to be ignored even in the face of postmodernist claims about the interpretive nature of all thought. This is surprising because, once we remind ourselves that we are constantly surrounded by uncontroversial interpretations, we are unlikely to be impressed by any attempt to move from the premise of the pervasiveness of interpretation to the conclusion of antifoundationalism. As we have seen, even if we grant the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine the pervasiveness of interpretation, the postmodern view of interpretation has not been established until it has also been shown that *all* interpretations lack the solid foundations that beliefs must have if they are to be candidates for the status of discourse-independent truth.

The point just made in the last paragraph, the first of the two points to be made about the postmodern view of interpretation, is important, but it has two weaknesses from the point of view of a critique of the Postmodern Doctrine. In the first place it is an *analytic* point. In other words it is an attempt to be hard-headed and logical, to think about large, discursive issues in precisely the way that proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine claim we *cannot* think about them; according to their view, being products of our discourse, being *part* of it, if we attempt to comment on it from the outside, we

are bound to be frustrated. In the second place, it must be admitted that, even from a hard-headed, analytic point of view, the claim that everything is interpretation does tend to push us in the direction of antifoundationalism. The certainty even of the most uncontroversial interpretation is not, perhaps, the certainty which straightforward empirical claims are pre-critically taken to have, and if, as the postmodernists claim, *nothing* is more certain than the most certain interpretation, then it is only natural to feel that cracks have appeared in the solid foundations of belief.

The second point I want to make about interpretation has an advantage over the first in that it can be made without assuming that it is possible to criticize a discourse from outside. The point is this: The postmodernists' claim that all thought is disputable interpretation would, *if it were generally acted upon*, have consequences which would not be acceptable to the postmodernists themselves. As is noted by Richard Rorty himself, redescription is a favourite tactic of the champions of postmodernity.⁷⁸ It is the postmodernists' main weapon of defense against the most natural objection to their doctrine: The claim that we can maintain certain fundamental social practices — which all of us including postmodern theorists participate in — only if we commit ourselves to the foundationalist metaphysic that the Postmodern Doctrine rejects. The postmodernists respond to this objection by arguing, implicitly for the most part, that through *redescription* these practices can come to be viewed as compatible with the doctrine. The tactic is a powerful one, but it has a serious flaw. The postmodern redescriptions of the fundamental practices often turn out to depend for any plausibility they may have on significant changes in the practices themselves. They

⁷⁸ See page 68.

tend to be not so much redescrptions as *prescriptions*, recommendations for changes in behaviour. If significant changes are required to make the 'redescrptions' descriptively accurate, then it seems that the postmodernists are guilty, at least, of being disingenuous — of trying to beguile us into believing that they are only asking us to see our world differently when in fact they are asking us to *make* it different.

In order to appreciate the extent of the change that would come about if the 'redescription' of interpretation proposed by the advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine were generally accepted, it is necessary to consider for a moment the importance of interpretation in our lives. Even if the practice were an essential element *only* in the areas we have used as examples, jurisprudence and literary criticism, the acceptance of the proposed postmodern 'redescription' would have dramatic and distressing results. It is an enormously important characteristic of both jurisprudential and of literary debate that the participants in these areas of discourse operate on the assumption that there are unique correct answers to the questions that interest them. To be sure, if they are reflective and honest, literary critics and judges will admit that the history of their disciplines does not offer much ground for optimism about the possibility of unanimous agreement on the answers to all major questions. This realization is bound to have a chastening effect — particularly on any who are at all tempted by dogmatism. But it need not drive them to acceptance of the postmodern redescription of interpretation. There are other ways in which they can deal with this difficulty. The simplest would be to appeal to some form of foundationalism or metaphysical or realism and insist that it does not follow from the fact that no generally acceptable answer to a question has ever been found that there

is no such answer, and to go on to point out that even a consensus to the effect that no such answer will ever be found might only show that the question is an impossibly difficult one.⁷⁹

Judges and critics unwilling to commit themselves to foundationalism in order to escape the charge that they have radically misunderstood the nature of their profession do have other alternatives. They can argue that no consensus can be expected in their area, not, as the postmoderns would have it, because the idea that arguments can be backed up by an appeal to extra-discursive standards is a delusion nor, as the foundationalists might say, because limitations on our knowledge prevent us from discovering the right answers, but because debate in these areas, in part at least, concerns moral and aesthetic *principles* and such principles are *necessarily* debatable. Alternatively, they could insist that the accuracy of a correct interpretation lies in its compatibility with other discursive, culture-*dependent* facts — and go on to claim that the compatibility of these discursive facts with one another is itself a non-discursive fact. (In the legal area such facts would be facts about previous legal decisions, facts about the intentions and expectations of the legislators, and facts about the contemporary moral

⁷⁹ One way of defining foundationalism would be to say that it is the doctrine that claims that there are questions which, even though they are unanswerable by us, do have unique correct answers. One such question might be: "What was the temperature at the north pole of Mars at midnight, GMT January 1, 1990?" If an antifoundationalist were to insist that the difference between that question and, say, the question "Should Elmer have been allowed to inherit?" is that in the former case but not the latter we can at least *imagine* what an answer would be, we can simply reply that an answer can be equally well imagined in the interpretive case. It would be an answer which, unbeknown to us, was in accord with the truth of the matter. (According to the foundationalist position consensus among experts would here, as anywhere else, be a *sign* that a correct answer had been found, but would not a *criterion* of this being so.)

principles of the community. In the area of literary criticism they would, for example, be facts about 'narrative consistency'.)⁸⁰

If, however, neither foundationalism nor any other alternative to the Postmodern Doctrine turns out to be an acceptable rationalization of our interpretive practices, and, as a result, we are forced to consent to the re-description proposed by the advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine, then the following question arises: What effect would this have on our debates about the correct interpretation of law and literature? It seems most unlikely that the practices could survive the re-description: Interpretive practices depend for their vitality on the assumption that reasons can be given in favour of the various interpretations proposed, reasons that might have the effect of persuading a participant in an interpretive debate to adopt one interpretation or reject another — but commitment to the Postmodern Doctrine eliminates the possibility of making such an assumption. I am not suggesting that if a postmodernist re-description came to be generally accepted the practice of defending interpretations with persuasive reasoning would disappear immediately. Making that suggestion would be a serious mistake for anyone attempting to undermine the plausibility of the Postmodern Doctrine; the postmodernists could easily counter it merely by pointing to people who *do* accept the Postmodern Doctrine and who yet take positions on interpretive issues and defend these positions with reasons. I am suggesting, however that, *in the long run*, a decline in the rigour, the seriousness, and, therefore, in the value of our interpretations is bound to be a con-

⁸⁰ These possible ways of developing a conception of interpretive practice which does not involve a commitment to foundationalism but which also allows interpretive claims to be regarded as having a truth value are, roughly speaking, those suggested by Ronald Dworkin in *Law's Empire* and other works. Whether or not they are real possibilities, or whether they dissolve on inspection into either foundationalism or some form of pragmatism is, I believe, a moot point. The matter is discussed in Chapter Six.

sequence of the general acceptance of the doctrine. At the very least the *quality* of the 'debate' will decline disastrously: The only participants will be people who are unscrupulous enough or deluded enough to be able to devote themselves to an activity that is interdicted by the philosophical ideology to which they adhere.

Evaluation

Like the practices of legal and critical interpretation, the traditional practices of moral and aesthetic evaluation are not compatible with the Postmodern Doctrine. However, as with interpretive practices, evaluative practices, seem to be in the process of transforming themselves so as to conform to the doctrine. Here too, to remark on the *apparent* phenomenon of an institution submissively reshaping itself in the face of ideological pressure is not to suggest that ideology is the primary cause of social change. Quite the contrary, if our notion of philosophical ideology is sound, the major causal force flows from institution to ideology and not vice versa: Before rationalization can begin there must be something to be rationalized. At most the ideology, once it has been formulated, will speed the essentially non-ideological processes of institutional and attitudinal evolution.

Moral Evaluation

The most straightforward, and perhaps the most accurate (if not the most persuasive) way to get at the incompatibility of moral evaluation and the Postmodern Doctrine would simply be to say that moral evaluation is foundational by definition. In other words, we could simply insist that when we say that something is good or bad, our defense of this judgment must have

an end point — a foundation. Whether this justificatory terminus is close by, say in the intuition of the moral agent, or whether it is the distant conclusion of a complex chain of utilitarian reasoning is of no consequence. The only thing that matters is that there is a point — suffering, for example, or the will of God — beyond which one cannot go. From the traditional, foundationalist point of view these are commonplaces: It goes without saying that all justifications must come to an end. But from a postmodern point of view, far from being a commonplace, the idea that there is an end to justification is completely wrongheaded. As we have seen, the discursivist corollary of the Postmodern Doctrine states that *no* justification can have an end because everything is a text and all texts are endless.

I believe that a strong case can be made to the effect that, in the conspicuous and influential subcultures of the larger society where the process of postmodernization is most advanced, the institution of moral evaluation is already moribund. If these subcultures manage, through their control of the media, and of educational and political institutions, to postmodernize the entire society, then we will find ourselves living in an amoral world. Such a world will no doubt contain behaviour, attitudes, and even terminology reminiscent of the practices and terminology of foundationalist moral practice, but there will be profound differences between the two discursive realms, differences large enough to force us to conclude that, whatever the similarities, the identity of the original institution has been lost.

As we we will see in our discussion of pluralism in the next section, one of the symptoms of postmodernization is the disappearance of the possibility of making judgments about a large range of particular cases in terms of a single, high-level principle. Without a belief in culture-independent found-

ations and, yet *with* a great deal of cultural diversity, we are left with insular subcultures whose only common ground is acceptance of (or at least a willingness to exploit) the Postmodern Doctrine's interdiction of intercultural communication. Except on the foundationalist fringes of society, the central moral notions of punishment, sacrifice, honour, forgiveness, and redemption are no longer taken seriously as the basis of principled and transcendent judgments. The concepts that have replaced them, notions such as rehabilitation and re-education may *seem* at first glance to be analogous, but a moment's consideration shows that they lack the crucial foundationality and are instead discursively directed: When we rehabilitate, for example, we rehabilitate *to* whatever set of attitudes and values happens to be current at the time.

Along with the foundationality goes the strength of *feeling* that invariably accompanies traditional moral judgment. Anger, hatred and vengefulness have no place in a world where the manipulation of behaviour has been given over to psychologists, social workers, and 'educators' whose minds (in apparent confirmation of the Postmodern Doctrine's rejection of the 'philosophy of the subject') really *do* seem to be entirely the products of the discourse in which they operate. It seems that 'old-fashioned' moral feeling has not disappeared altogether, however, even from the responses of the most postmodern of moralists. It has merely become confined to what was in the past only one among many areas in which moral evaluation was possible — sexually motivated violence. Polluters, muggers and drunken drivers represent social problems; rapists and pederasts are evil.⁸¹

⁸¹ The following remarks from an article on child abuse by Ian Hacking are clearly pertinent: "Relativists may remark that some of the things called child abuse are only seen as such in a culture such as ours. But no one has yet had the pluck to suggest that child abuse is 'merely relative to our culture.' And yet, and yet . . . there is so much

This striking concentration of moral passion results, I suspect, from the fact that our feelings about sexuality are so strong and so instinctual that, in that area, and there alone, our foundationalistic reflexes cannot be counteracted by our theoretical commitment to the Postmodern Doctrine.⁸² This suggestion is nothing more than a conjecture, and I do not claim to be able to make anything more solid out of it. Still, the contemporary concentration of moral conviction is undeniably real, and it is an impressive and perplexing phenomenon which begs for *some* kind of explanation. Given all this, and the fact that there are no more solid explanations to hand, any conjecture which suggests further, theoretically fruitful ideas must be taken seriously. (There is, it can be added, at least this much to say, a priori, in favour of my suggestion: It amounts to suggesting that the markedly narrow focus of contemporary moral response is a case of ideological blindness — and that is an explanation that fits in well with the Postmodern Doctrine's ability silently and gently to mould our view of our world.)

morality, so much righteousness here that one can begin to suspect that some sort of pseudomorality is creeping in. [Ian Hacking, "Child Abuse," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 260.] (Ellipses in original) Hacking's point is apparently similar to my own, but there are two differences: He is concerned not with sexually inspired violence in general but only with child abuse; and he speaks of *pseudo*-morality "creeping in" whereas I am suggesting that what creeps in is *genuine* morality. (In the paragraph which comes to an end with the quoted sentence Hacking has been speaking of the manner in which child abuse has come to be regarded as the epitome of "absolute moral evil" — a phenomenon that more than any other activates our "most primitive and deep-seated moral sensibilities." In light of this his sudden (and undeveloped) reference to pseudomorality is somewhat puzzling. Presumably he means to suggest that the intensity and viscosity of our reaction to child abuse indicates the presence of something *more* than morality — a fear of our own sexual impulses perhaps, or a sadistic element in our hostility toward the abusers.)

⁸² One is reminded here of Foucault's phrase, "the dull constancy of instinctual life" (See page 57.) One way of putting the point I am making here would be to say that our contemporary reactions to sexual violence are, in their non-postmodern anomalousness, evidence that, *pace* Foucault, we are under the influence of ineradicable, pre-discursive instincts.

The Montreal Massacre

Perhaps the best way to support these suggestions is by looking briefly at a particular case. I believe that the discursive handling of the so-called Montreal Massacre of December, 1989 provides an excellent example of the way that contemporary moralizing is narrowly focussed on violent sexuality and also of how this contraction of the range of moral response is a reflection of the Postmodern Doctrine's subversion of moral evaluation. Within hours after the shooting stopped, a particular interpretation of the event had gained general, if not universal, acceptance. The killings, we were told, were easily to be understood. They were merely another instance of the everyday phenomenon of male violence against women; their specialness lay not in *what* they were, but in their enormity — and in the fact that they were so fully documented. This interpretation was, to some extent, the creation of feminist ideologues who were quick to see in the massacre the raw material of effective rhetoric. Within a week of the event for example, Sasha McInnes of the Northern Women's Centre issued an 'open letter to men' in which she said "This is a men's issue; this terrorism and these deaths are your creations and your shame."⁸³ But it was not only women who scrambled to put a feminist — and discursivist — spin on the massacre: Some of the most extreme statements were made by men: Elliott Leyton, an anthropologist who has written a book on mass murder, said: "I think we have to understand how virulent and malevolent sexist feelings can be . . . wherever a social group rejects its subservience as women everywhere have been doing it threatens those in power."⁸⁴ And Bob Wadden

⁸³ *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 11 Dec. 1989.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

of a group called the Toronto Men's Forum, speaking less elegantly but more straightforwardly than Leyton actually made explicit the categorization of the massacre as nothing more than a spectacular example of an ordinary sort of behavior: "This massacre in Montreal was not created by a madman as the media are plugging it. This sort of thing happens every day . . . women are abused every day."⁸⁵ In short, even if the orthodox interpretation of the massacre originated within the feminist movement, it met with the eager acquiescence of the whole class of discourse makers — journalists, academics, 'helping' professionals, and government spokes-men.

Nothing could better reveal the power of a vigorous philosophical ideology to obscure and contort than the success of the orthodox interpretation of the Montreal Massacre. It has succeeded only because the discourse makers have been allowed to ignore several salient aspects of the situation. The most important of these is the fact that the murders committed by Marc Lepine cannot reasonably be regarded as examples — even as *extreme* examples — of the sort of male violence against women that is the main target of the feminist movement. If Lepine is to be seen as *type*, he must be classified as an Aberrant Mass Killer, not as a Typically Violent Man. It is not easy, of course, to say what it means to be ordinary, but however normality is to be construed, Lepine would not be likely to qualify. Certainly the biographical facts that were revealed after the shooting did not create a picture of an emotionally balanced, well-adapted young man, poised to embark on a career and start a family of his own. He had a passion for commando films and regularly 'patrolled' his neighbourhood with several other young men, all of them dressed in para-military gear. He had been rejected by the army

⁸⁵ Ibid.

and fired from his job. And, to make his profile all the less like that of the ordinary, everyday man he is alleged to represent, he himself was a victim of 'male' violence, his father having beaten him habitually before abandoning the family when Lepine was seven.

Not surprisingly in light of these facts, Lepine seems never to have had a relationship with a woman. This fact too, perhaps more than any other, casts light on the extent of the rhetorical distortion of the massacre. In order to commit the kind of male violence against women that is the primary target of the feminist movement a man has to have a real relationship, however brief or casual, with a particular woman. Even if it were to turn out that Lepine had had happy love affairs, he would still come nowhere near fitting the stereotype into which he has been squeezed if for no other reason than that he had no personal connection whatsoever with any of the women he killed.

Misfit killers like Lepine are, to be sure, invariably men and, typically if not invariably, women are a major object of their anger and hatred. A disproportionate number of their victims are women. (This is scarcely surprising given the great strength of the sexual impulse — an impulse which mass killers are, as a group, incapable of finding a socially acceptable outlet for.) Moreover, Lepine did kill *only* women and it is clear that he did so intentionally: Before he shot his first victims, he accused them of being "a bunch of feminists" and, roaming through the halls moments later, he shouted, "I want the women." In short it is literally true, to use the rhetoric, that his

victims died “because they were women.”⁸⁶ None of this, however, goes any way toward justifying the pervasive assumption that the massacre is a good example of the social problem of male abuse of wives, girlfriends, daughters, and employees — and no one whose mind is not beclouded by rhetorical requirements would think that it did.

What, then is happening here? Why has such an untypical case been put to use in this way? It is not as if there is any lack of well-documented, suitably horrendous cases that *are* typical? Why have our ideologues unnecessarily burdened themselves with an exemplar that forces them into such gross misrepresentation of the truth? One plausible way of answering this question is to return to our conjecture to the effect that, as a result of the ascendance of the Postmodern Doctrine, violent sexual immorality has become a crucible into which all our instinctual moral passion must be poured. With that idea in mind we can make the following suggestion: By putting Marc Lepine into the same category as the man who beats his wife, seduces his daughter, or harasses his secretary, we put him and his crime into the only category which allows us to react in a genuinely moral way.

By ‘genuinely moral’ here I mean ‘foundational’. As I am arguing, the traditional social practice of moral evaluation is intrinsically foundational; it is also, presumably, an institution which more than most, is based on instinctual and therefore, pre-cultural *feeling*. In pre-postmodern European societies (and presumably in most if not all other non-postmodern cultures) there was a huge superstructure of non-instinctual, culture-created moral-

⁸⁶ There were at least two men among the injured, however — presumably the recipients of stray bullets. (Not surprisingly, this fact was seldom mentioned in the ensuing discourse.)

ity erected on this instinctual basis. Contemporary scepticism about foundations has caused the superstructure to crumble, but the originating instinct cannot be altered by social or philosophical change and it remains intact. We are left being able to forcefully condemn a particular act only if we can categorize it as sexual. One important aspect of the suggestion I am making about the discursive handling of the Montreal Massacre is this: The proponents of the 'feminist reading' of the massacre have realized, intuitively at least, that the contemporary narrowing of moral response makes it easier to gain general acceptance for their view of the matter. Even those with little interest in feminism will be attracted to the feminist reading by the fact that it legitimizes their disgust, anger, and vengefulness. By accepting this objectively implausible interpretation, they can, without ideological disloyalty, say what they instinctively want to say: "This is wrong — and its wrongness is beyond any argument or any doubt." If, on the other hand, they reject the proposed reclassification of the massacre, the only ideologically acceptable way of looking at it will be as a 'text' — an endlessly describable discursive object. And Lepine himself, on this view of the matter will be, not a guilty human being but just another text to be discussed and interpreted.

As I have repeatedly emphasized, my remarks about the Montreal Massacre are a conjectural attempt to exemplify the theoretical point made at the beginning of this section: That the ascendance of the Postmodern Doctrine is bound to result in a decline in the essentially foundational practice of moral evaluation. The point could have been made while remaining on a theoretical plane, or at least by alluding, less specifically, to such often-remarked phenomena as the replacement of the conception of punishment

with the the idea of rehabilitation or on the psychologization of remorse and guilt, but to take that route would have been to deprive ourselves of the opportunity of considering the intriguing fact of the stubborn persistence of moral responses with respect to immorality that is sexually motivated. And, however the Montreal Massacre is to be interpreted, there can be no doubt that there is something strikingly anomalous about contemporary attitudes to sexually inspired crimes. That that is so can be seen simply by considering the fact that violence that is sexually inspired is not only more severely punished than comparable violence having a similar source, but, also by recalling that our attitudes toward the perpetrators of such crimes are so much less understanding and detached than our attitudes toward those guilty of non-sexual crime. The sexually guilty are cast out without anyone suggesting that the harm they have done must be attributed even in part to the cultural environment from which they emerge — or that their guilt is diluted by the fact that, through sheer bad luck, they were subject to powerful desires that most of us do not feel. Nor do we remind ourselves — even though it is so obvious a thought from the postmodern point of view — that there are cultural contexts in which their deeds would not be regarded as serious crimes.⁸⁷ I cannot imagine any explanation of this confidence other

⁸⁷ The following remarks by Camille Paglia are relevant. "These days, especially in America, boy-love is not only scandalous and criminal but somehow in bad taste. On the evening news, one sees handcuffed teachers, priests, or Boy Scout leaders hustled into police vans. Therapists call them maladjusted, emotionally immature. As a woman, I feel free to protest that men are pilloried for something that was rational and honorable in Greece at the height of civilization." Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York, Random House, 1991), 116.] From my point of view, Paglia is correct in noticing the special abhorrence with which our culture views sexual wrongdoing and correct also in commenting on the fact that a generally admired ancestor culture did not have the same view. I think she misses the point, however, with her remark about the attitudes of therapists. It is true that the priests and the teachers will receive therapy, but they will receive it behind prison walls. It is also true that few would expect the therapy to work and fewer still would feel that, if a quick and effective therapy *were* discovered that the priests and the teachers should not still be punished. I suspect that we insist on therapy in these cases largely because, even when we are operating in territory that has still not been rational

than a vestigial commitment to moral foundations — to the idea that there are some things that are *absolutely* wrong.

The types of case just referred to in passing might be more straightforward than the one we have chosen to discuss, but there is an aspect of the Montreal Massacre which has not yet been mentioned — one which makes it uniquely pertinent to the point being made. When Marc Lepine entered the classroom, the women whom he attacked were not there alone. They were in the company of a large number of men — their teacher and their fellow students. Lepine told the men to leave and, fearing that they would be shot if they refused, they left.⁸⁸ Later, Lepine went to the cafeteria and began to shoot women there. Again, men were present. (One eyewitness commented on the fact that even when he stopped to reload his gun no one made any attempt to stop him.)

Putting it bluntly, Lepine killed fourteen women and injured a number of others while numerous men stood by and made no attempt to stop him. It is not, however, so much this fact that is relevant to the present discussion but rather the fact that the orthodox interpretation of the incident ignores this aspect of the story. I believe that there are two reasons for this blindness. Most obviously, there is a potential clash with the received interpretation of the events: The men's behaviour suggests the possibility of seeing what happened as being as much the consequence of male impotence as it was the consequence of male violence; it suggests the possibility that there are times when the stereotypical masculinity decried by feminists might work

ized by the Postmodern Doctrine, we feel obliged to pay lip service to the pervasiveness of textuality.

⁸⁸ In a newspaper report the following day, one of the male students described how he and some others had waited in the hall outside the room until they heard the first shots and then run down the corridor

in women's favour; and it suggests the possibility that, in leaving them with this memory, Lepine did something quite as terrible to the men he ignored as to the women he killed.

Quite apart from the clash between this part of the story and the orthodox interpretation, however, a well-postmodernized mind will not be comfortable dwelling on the men's behaviour. Doing so would amount to challenging the Postmodern Doctrine's insistence that there are no moral values that transcend contingent discourse. There was nothing that any of the men could have done without risking his life. In the classroom at least, the first one to act would almost certainly have been killed. Heroism was the only alternative to their doing what they did.⁸⁹ To act heroically one must overcome all anxiety about death and to do that one must believe, momentarily at least, that there is something more important than one's own life. But *that* conviction implies a commitment to transcendent values — to foundationalism. It would be absurd to risk one's life for a moral principle that simply reflected the way people happen to think at the moment.

In summary then, we can say that the discursive handling of the Montreal Massacre is triply revealing from our point of view. In the first place, the fact that the orthodox interpretation has been as successful as it has — despite requiring a gross misrepresentation of the facts — testifies both to the power of our discourse and to the power of those who are most responsible for moulding it. Secondly, the particular rhetorical tactic that has been used here — assimilating a case of mass murder to the category of male-versus-female assault — suggests the persistence, in one highly charged and in-

⁸⁹ To say this is, emphatically, not to imply that in behaving as they did, the men were being cowardly. There is presumably a large amount of space between these two poles

instinctual area of our lives, of foundationalist modes of thought and perception. The tactic could not work if, in our horror, we did not need the emotional release that can only come from a genuinely moralistic — that is to say a foundationalistic — response. Third, our consideration of an important but generally ignored, aspect of the case shows us what happens when it is not possible to surreptitiously re-introduce genuine moral reaction: We *lose* something. In the case we have been considering, we lose, first and foremost, the possibility of heroism; but the whole range of traditional moral concepts is endangered by the abandonment of the idea of foundations. We may, moreover, lose much more than just concepts. If, for example, heroism should turn out to be not simply a transcendent moral idea, but a built-in human potential, then, as I suggested above, it may turn out that the *men* at the University of Montreal must also be seen as tragically victimized: They will be left not just with the haunting memory of their inaction, but with the further injury of being told that their suffering is merely neurotic.

Aesthetic Evaluation

The practice of aesthetic evaluation is perhaps not as closely tied to foundationalistic convictions as moral evaluation is. One of the themes of our discussion of the postmodernization of moral evaluation has been that genuine moral judgments are possible only if we assume the existence of transcendent moral standards. At first glance, it may seem that, by contrast, aesthetic judgments do not require foundations. Given the importance of genre and style, it could plausibly be argued that, when we evaluate art, we are measuring it not against a transcendent standard but against other works

in the same form and from the same place and time. Art, the argument might continue, is, unlike morality, *unquestionably* a cultural product, and, being a cultural product, it can obviously not be evaluated according to culture-independent standards. But, however plausible this line of thought may be, no one who is unable to escape from the conviction that the artistic production of one era *can* be superior to that of another will be able to take it to heart. It is worth adding that this sort of experience is not uncommon. Our world is plentifully populated with people who are convinced that no worthwhile music has been written since the death of Brahms or that non-figurative visual art is an unmitigated disaster or that we have never seen an outpouring of brilliant poetry to match the production of Elizabethan England.

Despite all this, according to the advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine, judgments of this sort are *impossible*, not simply unverifiable but meaningless: They rest on the mistaken assumption that we can step outside all culture — our own or any other — and find ourselves still standing on solid ground. What is someone who feels that transcultural aesthetic judgments simply *cannot* be avoided to say about this? Very little. Here we cannot point, as we can with respect to interpretive practice and the practice of reasoned dissent, to the possibility of dire practical effects arising from postmodernization. We cannot even point with any confidence to the sorts of distortions of the truth or the dangers of human damage that, as we suggested above, may result from the postmodernization of moral practice. In terms of the number of people and the amount of money involved, the practice of art flourishes as never before. It seems, moreover that few who are actively involved in the practice are particularly bothered by the taboo on transcultural

evaluation: The people who continue to make such evaluations are, for the most part outsiders; they are not makers or even consumers of discourse. The discourse-making critics, curators, and scholars who accept the Postmodern Doctrine abjure evaluation of *any* kind and are therefore scarcely likely to be bothered by the fact that they are not allowed to make *transcultural* evaluations.

Perhaps the best way to 'argue' against the postmodernization of aesthetic discourse is by taking up the fact just mentioned: that it is not simply transcultural evaluation, but evaluation *simpliciter* that has disappeared from aesthetic discourse. It is easy to see why transcultural evaluation violates the Postmodern Doctrine but not so clear at first glance why *intracultural* evaluation should also be a victim. Its disappearance must be seen as a consequence of the discursivism which is a corollary of the Postmodern Doctrine. If everything is a 'text' and all texts are endlessly interpretable, then works of art will not have a stable identity. In fact they will have no identity at all, 'existing' only in the commentary, theorization, and interpretation they evoke. This state of affairs eliminates the possibility of evaluation even before the question of whether or not there are timeless, culture-independent standards arises: According to discursivism, even if there were such standards, there would be nothing to measure against them. And so, it turns out that, from the point of view of the Postmodern Doctrine there is no more possibility of establishing the relative merits of two works that are products of the same culture than there is of establishing the relative merits of two works that are the products of disparate times and places.

The following comments, made in James Wood's review of a collection of V.S. Pritchett's essays, show the extent to which this is something that has

come to be taken for granted even by those who wish it had not happened. They also suggest the sense of frustration and loss that is felt by those who, like Wood, believe that the discursivist approach to art deprecates rather than enhances the *experience* of reading and writing and listening.

As we move through the book and through the decades, Pritchett begins to review not the great authors, but critical studies of the great authors. And yet a dialogue between university and amateur criticism still exists: "Mr Cockshut has read the whole of Trollope and I have not," writes Pritchett about one academic critic in the 1960s. How wonderfully antique this seems: the dignified amateurish renunciation; the portly politesse of that "Mr"; above all the assumption that partial knowledge does not disqualify. Indeed, the assumption that criticism is not about knowledge at all but about evaluation. Contemporary literary theory, as all who have tussled recently with it know, has largely given up on the rigours of evaluation, yet this is the only really interesting thing about criticism.⁹⁰

One striking thing about Wood's remarks is the emphasis he puts on *amateur* appreciation of art. He clearly feels, and I think quite rightly, that the postmodern approach implies that art can be truly understood only by experts. And this is after all something that follows more or less straightforwardly from the discursivist principle: If all art is essentially 'textual', then the only way to appreciate it fully must be by 'reading' it interpretively — something that can only be done by someone who *knows about* art and who, moreover, is skilled at putting that knowledge into practice. Once this approach is accepted, the non-professionals are quickly left behind. Not only do they lack the knowledge required for independent appreciation, they lack the knowledge required to take advantage of professional expertise.

Postmodern attitudes toward art must be understood not only in terms of the corollary of discursivism, but also with respect to rejection of the

⁹⁰ James Wood, "Jeweller Among the Gems," *Guardian Weekly*, 5 January, 1992.

'Philosophy of the Subject'. The 'partial knowledge' that Woods speaks of, the knowledge of the amateur, is something that can be regarded as legitimate only if we believe that what is important about art is the *experience* it provides. And because this experience must be available to the non-expert, we have to think of it as being at least partly discourse-independent; if we do not, we will have to concede that the fact that it is 'partial' and uninformed, renders it unworthy. But, the idea of discourse-independent experience is anathema to postmodernists; in fact, as we have seen, they have little patience with the whole idea of experience as a philosophically significant category.⁹¹

Something else will disappear from the traditional view of art if the Postmodern Doctrine triumphs: the idea that art is important largely because it is a source of sensual, or at least non-intellectual, non-verbal pleasure. If experience is not a factor, then pleasure does not play a role. Those who merely enjoy art are missing the point, as are those who create art with a view to bringing pleasure.⁹² The connection between pleasure and experience brings us back again to the whole issue of evaluation. As long as the essence of our interaction with art is taken to be non-conceptual plea-

⁹¹ An analogy: Thorough-going postmodernists, convinced as they are that pure, discourse-free experience is impossible, would presumably be contemptuous of the idea that anyone who has had but a single, ignorant experience of love really knows what love is.

⁹² The following remarks by Charles Newman are relevant. According to Newman, postmodern novels "possess a complexity of surface, a kind of verbal hermetic seal which holds them together, irrespective of linear pattern or narrative momentum. [Despite this] they lack both the depth and momentum which we associate with traditional narratives, but their *verbal* density gives them weight and palpability. While they may fail to give consistent pleasure, they are sophisticated precisely because they function very much like the primitive brain, eschewing every familiar sentiment and facility of absorption . . . the problem, of course is that even the most intelligent reader resists such books, which continue nevertheless to come at us as if objections were irrelevant." [Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 91.] A few pages later, using as an example the difficulty of reading some of William Burroughs' work, Newman suggests that much postmodern literature is apparently intended to provide "an aesthetic experience . . . for a species which has yet to appear on earth." [Ibid., 93.]

sure, the idea of evaluation will be built into our view of art: Pleasure seekers will always be concerned with grading the objects of their interest according to the amount of pleasure they describe — and the more intense, the more permanent, the more transportable is the pleasure provided by a work of art, the *better* it will be thought. There may often be a lack of consensus as whether one work of art gives more pleasure than another, but at least, if we assume the existence of culture-independent aesthetic standards, it will be possible to regard evaluation as legitimate. However, once we reject the idea of founding experience, as the Postmodern Doctrine tells us we must, evaluation is out of the question: Interpretations, constantly being expanded, contradicted, and superseded can never play a foundational role.

In short, the ascendance of the Postmodern Doctrine is having the same sort of effect on the practice of aesthetic evaluation as it is having on the other practices we have considered in this chapter. It is undermining aesthetic evaluation, not just theoretically, but through the parallel creation of 'postmodernized' institutions such as contemporary academic criticism. As elsewhere, foundational practice is not by any means dead; rather, it is marginalized. In the case of the practice of aesthetic evaluation the marginalization takes the form of 'amateurization'. The idea that the whole point of art is to give and to receive a certain sort of sensual pleasure — an idea which was implicit in the practice of artists, critics, and public in the not-too-distant past is now held only by that segment of the art-conscious public least in contact with contemporary critical and artistic practice. From the point of view of the advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine, the discourse makers, this is good riddance. From the point of view of the unconverted it is a great loss.

Dissent

Now we will consider a third fundamental practice — social dissent — and ask whether or not it can be rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine. First, a definition: A culture which supports the practice of social dissent is a culture which encourages criticism of itself. The practice of social dissent is even less likely than are the practices of interpretation or evaluation to be closely tied to a particular institution. It will be diffused throughout society and will manifest itself in the thought, writing and speech of individuals and groups of individuals. It may have legal or even constitutional protection, but it certainly can exist without that, either because it is in need of no protection or because it manages to survive despite being denied the protection it needs. (The practice of dissent can even flourish in a culture in which dissenters are silenced by fear of persecution. All that is required is that there be a consensus on the *possibility* of dissent.)

In saying that the sort of dissent we are concerned with here is a matter of a culture criticizing *itself*, I mean that the people making the criticism do not intend to bring an end to their culture. We are not speaking of what might be called 'revolutionary criticism' — criticism whose goal is the *destruction* of the prevailing social order. The possibility of *that* sort of criticism is presumably built into every social order, just as the possibility of escape by suicide is built into all cases of individual suffering. Even if it succeeds, social dissent does not *destroy* a social order but merely improves it — or at least brings about changes thought to be improvements; the identity of the culture is preserved. Of course there will be borderline cases, but that is not important as long as there are paradigms which are clearly on one

side of the dividing line or the other. And there are: The Khmer Rouge obviously wanted to destroy the culture they were struggling against; proponents of stricter legislation for the protection of the environment in our own culture obviously want social improvement.

One reason for the importance of this distinction is that 'revolutionary criticism,' unlike 'social dissent', *is* rationalizable in terms of the Post-modern Doctrine. Because it advocates an end, a sort of discursive suicide in fact, revolution is conceptually acceptable from the point of view of postmodern antifoundationalism. A successful revolution is a *rupture* with the past — reminiscent of the 'ruptures' that Foucault sees as separating successive paradigms. It is also reminiscent of the dramatic 'paradigm' shifts which the precursor of postmodernism, Thomas Kuhn, sees as characteristic of scientific advance. (Kuhn actually uses the word 'revolution' in his title, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and repeatedly emphasizes the similarities between scientific revolutions and political ones.)

It may seem strange at first glance that something so 'large' as political revolution is rationalizable in terms of a philosophical ideology which will not allow a rationalization of mere reform. The strangeness is soon dissolved, however, when we consider just what it is that reformers are doing — or claim to be doing. They claim to be criticizing a discursive system while at the same time operating within it. Unlike the opposition of revolutionaries, their opposition cannot be explained as emanating from an independent, rival, position. It can only be seen as an appeal to the discourse-independent standards which it is the essence of the Postmodern Doctrine to reject.

In short, the Postmodern Doctrine is committed to denying not only the possibility of reform, but of reformist *thought*. To accept the doctrine as a rationalization of our discursive context is to accept the fact that we cannot make genuine criticisms of that context. According to the postmodern view, the impossibility of genuine, *internal*, criticism results from the fact that anyone making such criticisms is, necessarily, a *part* of what they are criticizing. As a consequence, all their thoughts and attitudes are entirely understood as *products*; they are not, to be sure, seen as products of an independent human mind (for according to the doctrine there can be no such thing) but they are regarded as nothing more than manifestations of the discourse, nothing more than 'texts'. If the Postmodern Doctrine came to be fully accepted as the philosophical ideology of our culture, all the activity we presently regard as criticism would not necessarily come to an end, but, if it continued, it would have to be reinterpreted — and that reinterpretation would itself have an important effect. It would set a certain trend in motion — a trend which would certainly be disconcerting to anyone who has any remaining faith in the value of social dissent. In order to see why this is so it is worth looking at an example in some detail.

Imagine, to take up a sort of case already mentioned in passing, that a group of environmentalists criticizes the pulp and paper industry for polluting the atmosphere and demands that the government legislate stricter controls on the plants' emissions. This kind of thing could happen in a culture that rationalized itself according to the Postmodern Doctrine just as well as in a culture operating with an older, antifoundationalistic philosophical ideology. But there would be important differences between the two situations, differences which might only become apparent when we asked

the environmentalists to give a philosophical — that is to say, a general and non-empirical — *defense* of their complaint. If the environmentalists were operating from within the Postmodern Doctrine, they would be limited to defending their position in discursive terms. In other words, they would be forced to attempt to justify their position by appealing to the rights, interests, needs, feelings, or desires of some segment of the community — to things which, from their point of view at any rate, are as they are because of cultural happenstance. Environmentalists operating with a foundationalist philosophical ideology would be able to argue in this way too, but they would also have open to them the possibility of appealing to timeless, discourse-independent standards.

What sort of transcendental standards might be appealed to by the foundationalist environmentalists? The sanctity of the natural world perhaps, or the inalienable right of every living thing to flourish in healthy surroundings. But the actual *content* of the claims they might make is not particularly important from our point of view. This is because the point being made is essentially a logical one. Whatever the specific content of the appeal to foundations, the postmodernists would always be able to argue along similar lines, but *they* would have to be able to make a plausible case to the effect that, say, a commitment to the sanctity of nature was immanent in the discursive world. The foundationalists, by contrast could insist, say, that the natural world is absolutely and timelessly sacred *even though* its sanctity is not reflected in current discourse.

There are important practical consequences to this logical difference. Because of their willingness to countenance justification in terms of the transcendental, the foundationalist environmentalists are in a much better

position than are their postmodernist counterparts to offer a decisively cogent defense of their criticism of the polluters. This is not because appeals to the transcendental are intrinsically more powerful than appeals to the immanent; it is because, in any but the most attitudinally homogeneous society, it will always be possible to find discursive grounds *against* as well as in favour of any opinion that one might want to support. There will, for example, always be segments of society who feel that *their* rights or interests would be violated by increased protection of the environment. And, from the postmodernist point of view there will be no, *principled*, way of making a decision in favour of one party or the other. The only non-arbitrary way such a decision *could* be made would be by going outside the discourse and appealing to a transcendental standard.

If such an appeal is not made, any reasons that might be offered for, say, favouring the interests of the farmers living near the plant over the interests of the industrialists who own it could always be countered by another countervailing set of reasons showing why the industrialist's interests should be favoured. According to the Postmodern Doctrine, none of these appeals, however accurate, can ever be anything more than a statement about current discourse. Imagine, for example that the farmers made a *legal* case, citing legislation that prohibited industrialists from using manufacturing methods that were harmful to agriculture and imagine that the industrialists defended themselves with a utilitarian argument claiming that the legislation should not be strictly applied in this case because, if it were, there would be harm done to the economy far exceeding the harm that the mills' emissions were doing to the surrounding farmland. It may well be that there would be no more likelihood of *settling* this dispute in a

culture which rationalized its social practices with a foundational philosophical ideology than there would be in one that rationalized its practices with the Postmodern Doctrine. However, in a foundationalistically rationalized culture there would at least be the possibility of fruitfully continuing the debate on a transcendental level — that is to say, by leaving discourse description behind and appealing to principles *as principles*. Approaching the problem in this way, we would try, first, to establish agreement with our interlocutors as to whether the utilitarian principle took precedence over the legal or vice versa, and having done that, perhaps manage to reach a conclusion as to the correct course of action in the case at hand. In a culture rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine, however, this sort of debate would not take place because no one would take seriously the idea of a moral principle which could not plausibly be regarded as a reflection of discursive contingency; appeals might be made to similar principles but they would be regarded as relevant only inasmuch as one could show that they had discursive reality and even then, being on the same level as the factual material defining the original issue, they would not have any real argumentative weight. They would be, in fact, nothing more than another lump of text. Given serious disagreement, the only genuinely postmodern way of ‘resolving’ this sort of issue would be the typically pluralistic one of struggling on in an unprincipled, *ad hoc* way, trying to satisfy as many people as possible and hoping that controversy would eventually die down.

We are now in a position to expand on the remark made above about the ‘trend’ in social dissent which would be set in motion by a more or less complete triumph of the Postmodern Doctrine. Something that *looked* like dissent would remain, but it would lose its argumentative character be-

cause no one would any longer believe in the possibility of actually escaping the prison of their own culture. One way of putting this would be to say that *reasoned* dissent would come to be replaced by *rhetorical conflict*.

Thomas McCarthy's Rationalistic Romanticism

One important theme of our discussions of the practices of interpretation and evaluation was the suggestion that there is already a good deal of evidence that those practices are evolving so as to conform with the Postmodern Doctrine. With respect to the practice of reasoned dissent, I believe there is impressive evidence to the same effect. Before saying anything about that evidence, however, I want to briefly discuss a recent article about Richard Rorty. There are two reasons why this article, by Thomas McCarthy, is important from our point of view. In the first place, it provides cogently argued support for one of the main themes of this essay, the idea that a commitment to transcendental notions is built into our fundamental social practices. Secondly, the article exhibits, I believe, a worrisome, but also revealing naïveté about the *security* of these notions. McCarthy's attitude toward Rorty and his conviction that our discourse *does* depend on transcendental notions are well illustrated by the following passage:

Whatever the sources, our ordinary, non-philosophical truth-talk and reality-talk is shot through with just the sort of idealizations that Rorty wants to purge. More generally our culture is everywhere structured around transcultural notions of validity. We are heirs to centuries of distinguishing between appearance and reality, truth and opinion, prejudice and reason, custom and morality, convention and justice, and the like.⁹³

⁹³Thomas McCarthy, "Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism," *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (Winter 1990): 360-61.

McCarthy goes on to make a powerful and closely argued case against Rorty, one of the central points of which is the contention that Rorty contradicts himself by arguing on the one hand that philosophers must restrict themselves to "collecting the settled convictions of our political tradition" while abstaining entirely from any discussion of justifiability because "in his view, the question of whether justifiability to the community with which we identify entails validity is simply irrelevant."⁹⁴ McCarthy then offers the following criticism of Rorty:

But to whom is it supposed to be irrelevant? Certainly not to a community nurtured on the Bible, on Socrates and Plato, on the Enlightenment. . . . "Our" settled convictions include things like basic human rights, human dignity, distinctions between mores and morals, justice and prudence — and most of the other things Rorty wants to get rid of. On the other hand, he would not find among our settled convictions the belief that what is settled is ipso facto right. That is he will not find his detached observer's view to be the *content* of our engaged participant's view. So if he wants to deuniversalize our political culture, he will have to do this too not as a reporter or "equilibrator" but as a deflationary critic.⁹⁵

McCarthy's critique is, in its allegations of self-contradiction and disingenuousness, perfectly consonant both with my own criticism of Rorty and, more generally, with my complaints about the Postmodern Doctrine. As I have already indicated, however, his positive ideas seem less satisfactory to me. Like his mentor Jürgen Habermas, McCarthy insists on seeing the transcendentalia not as genuinely culture-independent but as 'idealizing suppositions'. We must begin, he says, by following

neo-Kantian thinkers like Hilary Putnam and Habermas who seek social practical analogues to certain of Kant's

⁹⁴ Ibid., 365. (In the passage from which these quotations are taken McCarthy is paraphrasing an article entitled "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan, Cambridge Studies in Religion and American Public Life (Cambridge, 1988), 257.)

⁹⁵ Ibid., 365-66.

ideas of reason. The basic move here is to locate the tension between the real and the ideal *within* the domain of social practice by showing how ordinary language communication is everywhere structured around idealizing, context transcending presuppositions.⁹⁶

With this idea in hand, McCarthy believes, we are able to resist the efforts of those who try to persuade us to abandon the 'philosophy of the subject' and to see human action as helpless submission to the 'rules' laid down by the discourse and to adopt a much more plausible role in which a genuinely independent, reasoning subject plays a role and to move from that base to the idea of a mind-independent nature:

The idealizing supposition of rationally accountable subjects figures in turn in the idealizing supposition of an independent reality known in common: competent subjects are expected to deal with conflicts of experience and testimony in ways that themselves presuppose and thus reconfirm, the intersubjective availability of an objectively real world.⁹⁷

The fatal flaw in this approach is that, if we see the reasoning subject and independent nature as posits required by our social practices, then it follows that their existence is dependent on the existence of the social order that spawns them. One consequence of this — a symptomatic one — is that the posits will only be effective as long as their genuine nature is concealed (or ignored.) For example, McCarthy believes that one social practice that requires us to posit transcendentalia is the making of transcultural judgments and it is true, of course, that we cannot make such judgments without appealing to a transcendent standard that can be applied to all possible cultures. Now it may be that when we judge another culture to be better, or worse, than our own that the culture-independent standard we are appealing to is a posit of our own culture. Once we *understand* that, however, we

⁹⁶ Ibid., 368.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 369.

will no longer be able to make such judgments. We will see that our attempts to make them are meaningless because the supposedly transcendental standard we are applying is not really transcendental after all.

The argument that McCarthy offers in support of his position is in at least one important way similar to the argument I have been using in support of my contention that foundationalism which is the only genuine alternative to the Postmodern Doctrine: In each case there is a crucial appeal to social practice. McCarthy claims, however, that the transcendentalia must be *posited* in order to support the social practices. According to the sort of neo-foundationalism that we have been considering, fundamental social practices are only possible on the assumption that the transcendentalia exist. That this is so means that those who are committed to these practices have a very good reason for *believing* in the transcendentalia. To say this is to say something crucially, if subtly, different from saying that the commitment gives such people a reason for *positing* the transcendentalia. One way of putting the difference is to say that from the foundationalist point of view the standards would remain even if the practices ceased to exist; from McCarthy's point of view, that would not happen. His 'idealizing suppositions' are posited into existence and would therefore evaporate if the positors themselves ceased to exist — or if they stopped positing.

Away from Dissent

McCarthy's article is helpful in two ways. First, it provides a clearly expressed statement of the only alternative to postmodern antifoundationalism that has any current popularity. More will be said about this school of thought when we come to discuss Jürgen Habermas in Chapter Six.

Second, and more importantly from the point of view of our immediate purpose, the article bears an interesting relation to our discussion of certain ways in which our own discourse seems to be shifting so as to become increasingly rationalizable in terms of the Postmodern Doctrine: It suggests another objection to McCarthy's position — an objection whose empirical character that makes it a useful complement to the purely abstract criticism made above of the idea that the transcendentalia are 'idealizing suppositions'. The objection can be simply stated: Even if the postmodernization of our practices is so far slight, the mere fact that it is under way shows that it is not *always* necessary to posit transcendentalia. And that obviously casts doubt on the point of basing a *philosophical* argument on the fact that we *ever* do so. Posited transcendentalia become extremely unconvincing foundations once it is admitted that there is a real trend in the direction of discursive conditions under which the need for such positing will disappear.

Pluralism

'Pluralism' has become the quotidian, journalistic face of the Postmodern Doctrine. The term has come to vie with 'democracy' as the label that is placed, in Western democracies, on praiseworthy political structures. (When Prime Minister Brian Mulroney learnt of the defeat of the military coup in Russia, he pronounced it "a great victory for democracy and pluralism.")⁹⁸ If we define pluralism as the view that society should tolerate and

⁹⁸ A recent article in *The Economist*, suggested that Canada is "the first post-modern nation-state," a country with a "weak centre acting as kind of holding company for a few activities," the provinces being left to "get on with their own affairs virtually unimpeded by the centre." In other words, as the 'foundation' of its federal structure is deconstructed Canada is postmodernized. ["Canada: For Want of Glue," *The Economist*, 29 June, 1991, page 18 of special 'Survey' section.]

even encourage racial, ethnic and religious variety and accept wide variations in sexual behaviour and family structure, then the connection with the Postmodern Doctrine is apparent. Complete social acceptance of both Hinduism and Christianity say, or of both homosexuality and heterosexuality will become much more likely if it is universally believed that there are no absolute standards which permit us to justify a claim to the effect that one religion or one sexual propensity is more moral or more natural than another — if, in other words, the Postmodern Doctrine, really has become our philosophical ideology. The dramatic increase in the number of people who hold such beliefs — people who, to use the fashionable term, pride themselves on being non-judgmental — provides strong evidence that our own culture is in the process of being postmodernized. Further evidence is provided by the fact that our governments have been systematically enacting legislation designed to foster and enforce these typically postmodern attitudes. Already criticism of such things as particular religious beliefs or consensual sexual behaviour has virtually disappeared from public discourse.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Given the sensitivity of the topic of sexual behaviour, a couple of qualifications are in order here. First, in saying that general acceptance of religious and sexual difference is made 'more likely' by postmodern attitudes, I am not by any means suggesting that complete acceptance of these things is ruled out by a foundationalist outlook. It would be perfectly possible for a foundationalist consistently to argue that although there *are* timeless standards which give sense to culture-independent moral judgments, that the existence of such standards does not imply that one religious doctrine or one form of sexual behaviour is transcendentally preferable to others. The question remains, however, whether, given the nature of human society and of the human mind, acceptance (or even toleration) of such differences could ever become universal in a culture rationalized by a foundationalist philosophical ideology. Secondly, it must be emphasized that the postmodernization of our attitudes toward sexuality extends only to *consensual* sexual behaviour. To allude again to a major theme of the preceding section on the practice of evaluation, contemporary attitudes toward *non-consensual* sexual behaviour are markedly *less* tolerant than traditional ones. To mention a line of thought that was not taken up in that next section, but which, I think, would be worth pursuing. It could, perhaps, be plausibly argued that a foundationalist philosophical ideology (because it can appeal to the foundational status of pain) has the advantage over the Postmodern Doctrine in that it can *explain* the importance of the distinction between consensual and non-consensual sexual behaviour.

It is significant also that even when the postmodernization of our attitudes is backed up by legislation, the legislation is, typically, more a response to popular opinion than an attempt to mould it. The postmodernization we are witnessing is not being coerced by authority. Indeed it could not be. As has already been pointed out, although the *expression* of dissent can be suppressed, the practice itself cannot be eliminated by those in power. The practice will survive as long as the idea is alive. If the present trend continues, the idea of dissent will die, but only because we have lost belief in its possibility. Postmodernism is perhaps uniquely benign as a philosophical ideology in that the idea of imposing it by force is self-contradictory.

Looking at the connection between pluralism and postmodernism from a slightly different angle, we can note that if pluralism prevails, there will be an inevitable tendency toward a sort of 'atomization of opinion'. In other words, a pluralistic society, having abandoned the idea of any overarching principle of public purpose or general good, will contain numerous 'islands' of thought, isolated areas of opinion belonging to one special interest group or another. In a purely pluralistic society, there would be no attempt at any reasoned communication between these islands. Their only interaction would be in the form of rhetorical salvos, disguised, perhaps, as an attempt at dispassionate argument but, in reality, nothing more than defensive or aggressive outbursts lacking in any attempt to find the genuinely common ground which could serve as the basis for resolving the disagreement. In some areas at least, our own culture already appears to be approaching this situation. The debate over abortion is a good example. There are still thoughtful people who make an attempt to resolve the dispute by working from general principles that transcend the particular positions of

the combatants. But that approach is less and less in evidence. By and large, anti- and pro-abortionists seem to have no more desire to have a thoughtful debate with one another than do, say, the supporters of rival baseball teams.

Freedom of Speech

Another postmodernizing trend in our own culture — one which is not by any means unrelated to the trend toward pluralism — is the decline in our devotion to the idea of freedom of speech. As has already been mentioned, it has become a generally accepted principle that it is immoral to criticize any of the 'special interest groups' — or at least to criticize the tastes, the mores, or the political and theological convictions that *define* these groups. Whether the criticism is strong or mild, whether or not it is dispassionately or insultingly presented, whether or not it is based on research or prejudice is not really relevant from the point of view of the pluralist ideologue. Imagine, for example, that a furore results on a university campus when an article in a student newspaper suggests that homosexuality is a 'genetic deviation'.¹⁰⁰ In cases like this, the objection to printing such statements is invariably that they will 'cause offence' to the minority group. In less sensitive contexts the phrase 'genetic deviation' would be readily accepted as scientific and therefore lacking in any moralistic implications. By traditional standards these could not be seen as harsh, carelessly chosen words that reveal hostility and ignorance. Moreover, the *possibility* of describing homosexuality and other kinds of sexual behaviour in some such way is essential to a long tradition of attempting to find a physiological basis for varieties of

¹⁰⁰ The imaginary case I describe here was suggested by a recent incident at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute in Toronto, but even the most casual reading of the popular press over the past few years shows that real cases of this sort abound.

sexual tropism. Research of this kind is based on the assumption that if workers do discover, say, a genetic explanation of homosexuality, then, in reporting their results they are no more insulting homosexuals than they would be insulting diabetics in offering a physiological explanation of diabetes. According to prevalent gay rhetoric, however, homosexuality is normal — something that does not *require* explanation. Therefore, *any* suggestions about its cause are bound to be offensive. And given *that* fact, pressures to refrain from engaging in and publishing the results of certain sorts of research are bound to be felt by academic hiring committees, the dispensers of grant money, and newspaper editors — and the attitudes of the whole society are bound to be affected. In short, pluralism is bound to lead to pressures on the commitment to the sanctity of free speech. Advocates of free speech can fight back, of course, but only by engaging in the old-fashioned process of reasoned dissent and attempting to show why, in the long run, freedom of speech is good for the whole community, even though from time to time it will inevitably be painful to *parts* of the community. In the eyes of converts to postmodernism, however, that sort of argument only reveals a failure to have escaped the clutches of the *dépassé*, pre-postmodern idea that there *are* principles and values which transcend any particular culture or at least ones which transcend the insular subcultures that are contained in contemporary pluralist societies.

It can be argued, I think, that there are dangers in our increasing insouciance about the importance of the free expression of opinion which might worry not only those who have misgivings about the Postmodern Doctrine but even the most confident advocates of that theory. In fact, if there is any place in our critique of the Postmodern Doctrine where we might hope to

make some of that theory's advocates reconsider the merits of foundationalism, I think it is the place we have now reached. The case of Salman Rushdie certainly makes it plain that there are terrible dangers to individuals who choose to ignore the postmodern taboo on 'offensive' speech. One indication that there are even more alarming dangers to whole societies is the way in which the fascist gubernatorial candidate in Louisiana, David Duke, was able to use postmodern reticence about transcultural criticism to attain a remarkable degree of popularity. His success must be attributed, in large part at least, to the fact that, not being committed to the Postmodern Doctrine, he is able to believe that *his* values are solidly founded. He therefore has no qualms about giving offence to cultural minorities and special interest groups and this enables him to discuss important issues, such as race relations and welfare abuse which cannot be honestly dealt with by postmodernized mainstream politicians because they are burdened with a metaphysical view which makes them feel that offending any group is not only politically unwise but theoretically incorrect as well. As a result, public discussion of matters that are of great importance to a large segment of the populace is carried on entirely by anti-democratic bigots.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ One distressing aspect of all this is that Duke, who at best could be said to represent all that is *worst* in Western culture, is able to represent himself as a defender of European civilization. Absurd as this claim is, it is bound to have some plausibility as long as no one in the political arena is willing to defend the idea of transcendent values (ideas which, as Thomas McCarthy points out, have characterized our culture from Biblical times to the twentieth century).

A similar point is found in the following remark by John Berger (made in the course of commenting on the contemporary impact of Géricault's *Monomane de Vol*): "Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narrative being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space, the gap is enormous. The desolation lies there, not in the facts. This is why a third of the French population are ready to listen to Le Pen. The story he tells — evil as it is — seems closer to what is happening in the streets." [John Berger. "Madman in the Street," *The Guardian Weekly*, 12 January, 1992.]

At first glance, it seems that whatever problems might be created by adopting the Postmodern Doctrine as our philosophical ideology, such a step would at least have the merit of encouraging free and adventurous discussion. It is a troubling irony therefore that postmodern attitudes can in fact lead so quickly to the *suppression* of debate and the *constriction* of thought. Perhaps, there is an important lesson here for anyone who is reluctant to abandon foundationalism and adopt the new philosophical ideology. The surprising ease with which the doctrine can be used to discourage open speech and uninhibited thought shows that those who have misgivings about it should not be too quick to concede — as the establishment ideologues will encourage them to — that their resistance is merely a matter of bullheadedness and unfashionability. There are matters at stake here far larger than the intellectual comfort of individuals.

The sort of issue just discussed also shows that any one who wants to oppose postmodernism, will have to be willing to behave courageously and radically if they hope to have any success. Courage will be required because, in the present context it is impossible to speak out in favour of the idea of transcendent foundations without inviting accusations of arrogance, intolerance and even racism. And radicalism is important because of the necessity of insisting on the absolute, 'metaphysical' independence of the transcendentalia. That this is required is shown by the fact that, in the political arena, postmodernists immediately respond to any talk of foundations with accusations of Eurocentrism. To this charge the foundationalist must be willing to reply that although Western civilization has distinguished itself by its devotion to transcendental values, that is not by any means to say that

Western civilization has *invented* those values. It is rather that it happened to be the first to *detect* them.

Science

The Importance of Kuhn

The practice of science is crucially important to the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine. This is because, viewed through unpostmodernized eyes at any rate, science seems to be indubitably founded in the culture-independent world. Legal, ethical and aesthetic judgments and responses are so much a *part* of culture that there is at least some initial plausibility in the suggestion that they do not involve any sort of appeal to culture-independent standards. But science is about *nature*, culture's 'other'. It seems absurd to suggest that the truth value of scientific judgments — judgments, for example, about the rate at which objects accelerate as they fall toward earth — depends not on their accuracy as representations of culture-independent nature but on merely discursive considerations such as communal consensus. Science's obstinate foundationality presents a challenge to postmodernists, but it also presents them with an opportunity. If they can make a convincing case to the effect that, after all, scientific judgments are to be understood and evaluated only in relation to their cultural context, then their general claim — that *all* judgments are to be understood and evaluated in this way — will be enormously strengthened. It is improbable that anyone willing to concede that science is pure discourse will go on to insist that ethics and aesthetics are governed by transcendentalia.

In light of these considerations it is not surprising that advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine have eagerly seized on the writing of the historian of science Thomas Kuhn and, in particular, on his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's name is invoked so often in this context that it has taken on an almost talismanic quality. His basic historical claim is that the history of science is an alternation between lengthy periods of stability, what he calls 'normal science,' and brief revolutionary spasms — 'abnormal science'. The periods of normality are presided over by 'paradigms,' the ground-breaking theories of gigantic figures such as Aristotle, Newton and Einstein. Their 'achievements,' to use Kuhn's word, share two characteristics. They are "sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity" and "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve."¹⁰² One of Kuhn's central tenets is that, conventional wisdom to the contrary, the succession of paradigms does not provide us with an ever more accurate representation of culture-independent reality. Our confidence that scientists are getting closer and closer to figuring out "what things are really like" is, in his opinion, entirely misplaced. Far from being *descriptive* of nature, scientific activity, and the paradigms that define it at a particular point actually *constitute* nature.¹⁰³ There are not two things, science on the one hand and nature on the other, but only the unanchored and shifting practice of scientific discourse. In short, Kuhn is a radical anti-foundationalist — a discursivist. And he has a sternly postmodern reply for anyone who protests: "But surely science is

¹⁰² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 10.

¹⁰³ See, for example, *ibid.*, 110.

about something which is *not* science. And surely good science *is* good because it comes closer to matching this other thing — nature — than does bad science.” He says:

A scientific theory is usually felt to be better than its predecessors not only in the sense that it is a better instrument for discovering and solving puzzles but also because it is somehow a better representation of what nature is really like. One often hears that successive theories grow ever closer to, or approximate more and more closely to, the truth. Apparently generalizations like that refer not to the puzzle-solutions and concrete predictions derived from a theory but rather to its ontology, to the match, that is, between the entities with which the theory populates nature and what is “really there.”

Perhaps there is some other way of salvaging the notion of ‘truth’ for application to whole theories, but this one will not do. There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its “real” counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle.¹⁰⁴

In short, Kuhn disarms the obvious common-sensical objection with a classically discursivist ploy: It is a meaningless complaint revealing a failure to understand.

Enough has already been said about Kuhn’s views to show why he is so popular with contemporary philosophical postmodernists. He *does* offer them support — and, as has already been pointed out, it is support that comes from a most welcome quarter. That point having been made, it is important, for the sake of exegetical accuracy if for no other reason, to add that Kuhn’s views on science often differ significantly from those of theorists, Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard, for example, who appeal to his authority. Some of these differences will be mentioned in what follows, but first we must set the stage by reviewing the place of the present discussion in the overall scheme of this essay.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 206.

The importance of the four fundamental practices discussed in this chapter — interpretation, evaluation, dissent, and science — is that it is possible to argue plausibly that each resists rationalization in terms of the Postmodern Doctrine. As we have seen, however, the first three of these practices *do* involve a philosophically problematic element which can be appealed to in support of the postmodernist's case: Despite the significance that has traditionally been given to the idea of transcendental foundations in each of these areas, in none of them is it possible to *demonstrate* the validity of a judgment by appealing to culture-independent foundations. Beyond this, with respect to each of the first three practices, there is a noticeable tendency toward postmodernization and this too provides support for the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine. The question which must be kept constantly in mind in considering Kuhn is this: Are Rorty and Lyotard and others right in their implicit but emphatic and often-repeated contention that Kuhn's version of the history of science provides novel and weighty evidence in favour of the conclusion that the appeal to extra-cultural foundations can play no role either in science *or* in any other fundamental social practice? I will argue that they are *not* right in making this claim, and that inasmuch as Kuhn *does* succeed in making a case for the 'foundationlessness' of scientific judgment, his argument is really only a version of a similar line of thought that can be used to draw parallel conclusions with respect to aesthetic and moral judgment.

One of the great attractions of Kuhn's writing to postmodern theorists is its distance from mainstream philosophy. On its surface at least, it is not even primarily concerned with the already somewhat marginal field of the philosophy of science. It presents itself as a *description* of the *history* of science

thus becoming triply esoteric from the point of view of the general philosophical debates engaged in by the likes of Rorty and Lyotard. The cachet of distance and specialness is, I believe, an important source of the rhetorical impact carried by the frequent allusions to Kuhn's work. Encountering these references without having read Kuhn carefully (or, perhaps, not at all) the unconverted are bound to feel chastened. As it turns out this humble reaction is uncalled for: As fine a piece of writing as *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is, the book contains no facts or arguments which could force someone who has been resisting the Postmodern Doctrine finally to capitulate.

Kuhn's Position

His Historical Analysis

The core of Kuhn's position is his rejection of the traditional view of the relationship between scientific theory and scientific research. According to the traditional view of the matter, research *precedes* theory: First the bare facts are collected in an objective way, without any assumptions being made about how they fit together or how they are to be explained; then, once the facts are in, they are used as the basis for the *deduction* of a fully-fledged scientific theory. According to Kuhn, the history of science shows that this traditional conception misrepresents the real relationship between fact and theory. The truth of the matter is that it is not always possible to make a very firm distinction between fact and theory — and, moreover, during revolutionary periods at least, far from pointing the way toward the theories, facts often can be discerned only *after* the theories that explain them have been formulated.

According to the deductivist philosophy of science that Kuhn opposes, research is an orderly process. In his sharply opposed view, the nature of research changes dramatically during certain periods. When science is proceeding 'normally' research is a matter of gathering the data whose importance has been revealed for the first time by the currently operant paradigm, and also of looking closely at phenomena which, although they may not have a great deal of intrinsic interest, represent crucial tests of the validity of the paradigmatic theory.¹⁰⁵ (One of Kuhn's examples of normal scientific activity is the drawn-out, eventually successful attempts of post-Newtonian astronomers to explain the observed movements of the moon in accordance with the Newtonian paradigm.¹⁰⁶) During revolutionary periods, on the other hand, the distinction between fact and theory is much less clear-cut. Sometimes — Roentgen's accidental discovery of X-rays¹⁰⁷ is an example — the scientists who lead the revolutions are inspired by an accidental encounter with unexpected facts that resist explanation in terms of the paradigm. But more often than not the original impetus toward a new paradigm does not come from data that represent an obvious challenge to current theory. (The origins of John Dalton's paradigm of chemical atomic theory, for example, did not emerge from chemistry at all, but from Dalton's work in his own field, meteorology.¹⁰⁸)

In short, major theoretical shifts are not forced upon the scientific world by freshly discovered, theory-neutral facts which *demand* the adoption of the theory that they imply. The revolutionary process is less defined — and less

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 25-27.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 132-33.

self-conscious — than that. When one paradigm replaces another, it usually does so as a result of the success that some members of the scientific community, the revolutionaries, have had in persuading others. In doing so they cannot depend on reason and logic alone; rhetoric will necessarily play a role. In making this point Kuhn often employs, either explicitly or by his choice of metaphor, an analogy with supposedly similar changes in ethical or aesthetic values:

Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice is not and cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defense.

The resulting circularity does not, of course make the arguments wrong or even ineffectual. . . . Yet, whatever its force, the status of the circular argument is only that of persuasion. It cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle. . . . As in political revolutions so in paradigm choice — there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community. To discover how scientific revolutions are effected, we shall therefore have to examine not only the impact of nature and of logic, but also the techniques of persuasive argumentation effective within the quite special groups that constitute the community of scientists.¹⁰⁹

There is nothing in the foregoing summary of Kuhn's views about the history of science that is incompatible with the sort of foundationalism I have been opposing to the Postmodern Doctrine. This is a crucially important point for our purposes: As I have already indicated, when postmodern theorists such as Rorty or Lyotard appeal to Kuhn, they imply that his description of scientific practice shows conclusively that scientific practice *must* be rationalized in postmodern terms. This is not so. Kuhn *is* a postmodernist

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 94.

— or a ‘proto-postmodernist’ at least — but, as I will argue below, his postmodernism is a consequence not of his neutral analysis of the history of science, but of his philosophical position.

In order to see how Kuhn’s version of the history of science is compatible with the sort of foundationalism we are interested in, we must first recall that it is the point of the Postmodern Doctrine to deny the existence of *any* sort of culture-independent foundations. It is the *generality* of the doctrine’s antifoundationalism that is the source of ‘associated doctrines’ such as discursivism, relativism, and historicism. And it is thus the doctrine’s generality that provokes the sort of foundationalist resistance to postmodernity which this essay strives to express and to support.

Kuhn’s theory, *as summarized in the preceding section*, does not deny the existence of culture-independent foundations. It does not even deny that there are culture-independent foundations that are relevant to scientific practice. If science does have a foundation of this kind, then that foundation is surely nature itself, conceived as a mind- and culture-independent ‘thing’ — science’s subject matter. According to the traditional view — and it is a view which is still widely held — the point of science is to *describe* nature and to do so as accurately as possible. The sort of foundationalism we are opposing to postmodernism does not by any means insist that scientific theories be *entailed* by their foundations; and it does not, therefore, conflict with Kuhn’s central historical claim. All that this variety of foundationalism requires is that the practice of science be rationalized as an attempt at the accurate description of mind- and culture-independent nature. It requires, in other words, that we be allowed to assume that there is something *non-discursive* beyond the discourse of science and that when we reject one

scientific theory in favour of another we are doing so because we believe that the favoured theory is a better representation of nature than the discarded one. There is, to repeat, nothing in our outline of Kuhn's view of the history of science which is in conflict with this kind of 'scientific foundationalism'. His analysis is concerned with the manner in which scientific theories are developed, established, tested, questioned, and, finally, dismissed; it is *not* concerned with the relationship between scientific theories and non-discursive nature. Kuhn's descriptive position — as opposed to his *philosophical* position which we will consider below — can be encapsulated as follows: Theory B has replaced Theory A not because Theory B, unlike Theory A, is entailed by theory-neutral facts, but because the proponents of Theory B have succeeded, in one way or another, in *persuading* the members of the scientific community to abandon Theory A and adopt Theory B. Admittedly, had Kuhn shown that, in adopting Theory B, the members of the scientific community are not motivated, exclusively or even primarily, by the conviction that theory B provides a more accurate representation of nature than does theory A, *then* his analysis could be seen as showing that science cannot be foundationalistically rationalized. But Kuhn does no such thing; nor does he claim, or even intimate that he has done it. At most he has shown, negatively, that there can be no entailment relation between theory-neutral observation and scientific theory; and, positively, that the discursive processes whereby scientific theories come to be adopted are as much rhetorical as logical. But that does not mean that scientific theories are not descriptive of reality any more than the fact that my correct statement about your age is the result of a mere *guess* means that, in making the statement, I am not really saying anything accurately descriptive about you.

Anti-postmodernist Elements

Despite the fact that the historical study of scientific research which is at the core of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is not antifoundationalist, as I emphasized in my preliminary explanation of his importance, Kuhn is an antifoundationalist and postmodernist philosophers are perfectly right in looking to his writing for support. This anomaly arises from the fact that there is a crucial gap between Kuhn's history and his philosophy. Although his historical analysis does not force him to antifoundationalist, discursivist conclusions, he *allows* it to drive him in that direction and ends up occupying a position which, on the central metaphysical issue at least, is identical with the postmodernism of such writers as Rorty and Lyotard.

The suggestion that Kuhn is a postmodernist despite the fact that postmodernism is not implied by his historical analysis is not as critical a statement as it may seem. Even if his historical analysis does not eliminate the possibility of a foundationalistic rationalization of scientific practice, it must be admitted that the combination of Kuhn's own philosophical background and the philosophical culture that prevailed at the time he was writing made it difficult for him to avoid radical foundationalism.

Kuhn was working out of — and working his *way* out of — the positivistic empiricism that prevailed in Anglo-American philosophy (and in particular in Anglo-American philosophy of science) during the first half of the century. Ample evidence of just how deeply rooted in this tradition he was is

provided by his philosophical views on such matters as perception, natural families, and neutral observation languages.

That he accepts without hesitation the sense-data theory of perception is revealed, for example, by remarks he makes about the possibility of two people, in identical perceptual situations having different 'sensations', a state of affairs which implies that they "do *in some sense* live in different worlds." And in the same passage he speaks of the "neural processing [that] takes place between the receipt of a stimulus and the awareness of a sensation."¹¹⁰ Statements like these show that, despite the heroic status given to Kuhn by contemporary postmodernists, the author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* subscribed to a philosophy of perception which philosophers like Rorty and Lyotard would regard as an expression of the traditional epistemology that it is their primary purpose to attack. Scepticism about the legitimacy of Kuhn's status as a source of support for the Postmodern Doctrine is even more forcefully suggested by the fact that at the time his book was published, in 1962, the orthodoxy of his philosophy of perception was already being undermined not only by the increasing influence of the *Philosophical Investigations* but by the work of J.L. Austin and Wilfrid Sellars.¹¹¹

Kuhn's commitment to natural families — sharply delineated groupings in the language- and culture-independent 'world' — is revealed by his reading of Wittgenstein's remarks about family resemblances.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 192.

¹¹¹ Kuhn's philosophical backwardness on this matter is made all the more striking when one considers that the remarks just quoted are made in the 'Postscript' to the second edition — published in 1969.

For Wittgenstein, in short, games, and chairs and leaves are natural families, each constituted by network of overlapping and crisscross resemblances . . . The existence of such a network sufficiently accounts for our success in identifying the corresponding object or activity. Only if the families we named overlapped and merged gradually into one another — only, that is, if there were no natural families — would our success in identifying and naming provide evidence for a set of common characteristics corresponding to each of the class names we employ.¹¹²

Here, Kuhn accepts Wittgenstein's idea that it is folly to search for distinct *conceptual* boundaries but, unlike contemporary postmodernists, he does not draw discursivist conclusions. He does not argue, as would Foucault or Rorty or Derrida, that the essential vagueness and pliancy of language makes nonsense of any notion of *non-conceptual* objects, or 'characteristics' to which language corresponds. Quite the contrary, he insists that were it not for the the existence of non-overlapping, non-merging 'families' in the real world, we would not be able to get away with using language as freely and easily as we do. In another remark made in a different context Kuhn reaffirms his commitment to discourse-independent natural families:

The possibility of immediate recognition of the members of natural families depends upon the existence, after neural processing of empty perceptual space between the families to be discriminated. If, for example, there were a perceived continuum of waterfowl ranging from geese to swans, we should be compelled to introduce a specific criterion for distinguishing them.¹¹³

In other words, the open-endedness of language is possible only because of the *non-* open-endedness of the non-linguistic world. It is only because there is a definite dividing line between real swans and real geese that we don't need to worry about *making* a dividing line between our *concept* of a goose and our *concept* of a swan.

¹¹² Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, 45.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 197n.

Whatever the exegetical merits of Kuhn's view of Wittgenstein, and whatever is to be said about the cogency of his view of the relationship between language and the non-linguistic world, there can be no doubt that, at some points at least, despite his ultimate antifoundationalism, Kuhn continues to think of our discourse about nature as an attempt to describe a non-discursive world, and to think of the success of this discourse as a function of its ability to *describe* that world.¹¹⁴ It is as if, because of his meditation on the history of science, and his exposure to the Wittgensteinian tendencies that were beginning to penetrate Anglo-Saxon philosophy at the time *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published, Kuhn found himself being pushed, somewhat reluctantly, toward postmodern antifoundationalism. As a result, his book is full of ambivalences and tensions.

Further evidence of Kuhn's very unpostmodern patience with foundationalist ideas is provided by his remarks about neutral observation languages. In the course of a discussion of the manner in which the paradigms scientists use exert an influence over 'what they see' as they go about their research, he acknowledges that the goal that has dominated philosophical thinking about science since the Renaissance has been the *elimination* of just this influence. In the twentieth century, this desire has been mani-

¹¹⁴ Further evidence to this effect is provided by a note to this passage in which Kuhn cites sections 64-77 of the *Philosophical Investigations* and then admits that, in 'reading' the remarks made there as a comment on the relationship between language and the world, he is going beyond what Wittgenstein actually says. He complains rather petulantly that Wittgenstein "says almost nothing about the sort of world necessary to support the naming procedure he outlines." In making this remark Kuhn reveals the strength of his own resistance to the central metaphysical point of Wittgenstein's later work. The importance of Wittgenstein as a precursor of postmodernism is *based on* his refusal to think in terms of a distinction between a linguistic, discursive realm and a culture-independent 'world'. As I have already said Kuhn himself is eventually driven to precisely this position but only reluctantly — and even in his most unequivocally postmodern statements there is nostalgia for the idea of foundations. It is perhaps this sense of painful loss that most sharply marks the difference between Kuhn and the glibly confident ideologists who are so fond of invoking his name.

fested by the attempt to expunge all theory from the primary level of scientific investigation by constructing an absolutely neutral language “designed to conform to the retinal imprints that mediate what the scientist sees” and in this way “to retrieve a realm in which experience is again stable once and for all.”¹¹⁵

Kuhn emphasizes the enormous difficulties that stand in the way of successfully completing this project:

Three centuries after Descartes our hope for such an eventuality still depends exclusively upon a theory of perception and of the mind. And modern psychological experimentation is rapidly proliferating phenomena with which that theory can scarcely deal. The duck-rabbit shows that two men with the same retinal impressions can see different things; the inverting lenses show that two men with different retinal impressions can see the same thing.¹¹⁶

Kuhn goes on to argue that the most impressive attempts to create a neutral observation language — he mentions Nelson Goodman’s *Structure of Appearance* — are limited by the fact that they “[embody] a host of expectations about nature and [fail] to function the moment these expectations are violated.”¹¹⁷

Despite all his criticisms, however, Kuhn makes it clear that he has a great deal of sympathy with the *idea* of an observation language. Here is another point at which his views are in striking contrast with those of thinkers such as Rorty for whom the notion of an observation language is laughable. In

¹¹⁵ Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, 125.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 125-26. (It should be noted that, despite Kuhn’s admiration for him, Wittgenstein, who brought the duck-rabbit to philosophy, would have emphatically denied that, if one person sees the drawing as a duck, the other as rabbit, that they are seeing different ‘things’. Indeed, the whole point of the duck-rabbit from Wittgenstein’s point of view is that two people who see it differently are seeing only *one* thing.)

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 126.

the very paragraph in which he cites the difficulties raised by research in empirical psychology and points out the shortcomings of Goodman's observation language, Kuhn says bluntly that efforts to create observation languages are "worth pursuing," and just before the passage quoted above we find the following remarks:

But is sensory experience fixed and neutral? Are theories simply man-made interpretations of given data? The epistemological viewpoint that has most often guided Western philosophy for three centuries dictates an immediate and unequivocal, Yes! *In the absence of a developed alternative, I find it impossible to relinquish that viewpoint.* Yet it no longer functions effectively, and the attempts to make it do so through the introduction of a neutral language of observations now seem to me hopeless.¹¹⁸ (Italics added.)

We are in the process of considering the legitimacy of the reputation of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as a repository of material offering strong and original support for the Postmodern Doctrine. Our results so far can be summarized as follows: First, there is nothing in Kuhn's analysis of the history of science which is not compatible with foundationalism; second, there are important respects in which his views are closer to those of the positivistic foundationalists than to those of the postmodernists; moreover, even when Kuhn makes it clear that he is an antifoundationalist, he may admit finding himself uncomfortable with the position he has come to occupy. None of this should be taken as a suggestion that Kuhn is not really a postmodernist after all. The unequivocal assertion of antifoundationalism quoted at the beginning of this section puts an end to any doubts on that score.¹¹⁹ What we have seen so far must, however, raise doubts about Kuhn's supposed contemporary importance — and it also forces us to ask the question: Just what *is* the source of Kuhn's antifoundationalism?

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 126.

¹¹⁹ See page 122-23.

Kuhnian Metaphysics

My main exegetical contention with respect to Kuhn will be that, although he is an antifoundationalist, his antifoundationalism does not emerge from his analysis of the history of science but from general philosophical considerations. I will be arguing that there is something fraudulent in the frequent suggestions to the effect that *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* contains surprising factual information about the history of science, and that Kuhn's great contribution is to dig these facts up and to show how they imply antifoundationalism. I have already pointed out that Kuhn's version of the history of scientific research, illuminating as it is, is perfectly compatible with foundationalism. That is the negative point. Now I want to go on to say something positive about the source of his antifoundationalism.

In an important sense Kuhn's rejection of traditional deductivist epistemology is based on his historical data. However, the conclusions he draws from these facts *could* just as well have been drawn from much more mundane sources. Kuhn is fascinated by what might be called the 'indeterminacy' of science and, another aspect of the same phenomenon, its non-cumulative quality. In speaking of the indeterminacy of science, I am simply referring to the fact, so often reiterated by Kuhn, that scientific theories cannot correctly be thought of as *determined* by the data on which they are based. To say that science is non-cumulative is to reject the idea, dear both to common sense and to traditional philosophy of science, that the history of scientific inquiry is the history of progress from an inaccurate to an accurate representation of nature. In Kuhn's opinion, this notion is completely wrongheaded: If scientific theories are not determined by neutral,

but ever-more precise and thorough observations, then we clearly have no guarantee that a particular theory will provide a more accurate representation of nature than its predecessors. (If science did progress in this way, Kuhn points out, its course would not be marked by reversions to discredited ideas: For example, Newton's re-adoption of the already-rejected idea of innate forces, an aspect of his work which caused him to be accused of leading science back toward the dark ages.¹²⁰)

What seems to Kuhn to be philosophically important about science, then, is its indeterminacy and its non-cumulative nature, its 'circularity' we might say. The important thing from our point of view is that one does not have to reflect specifically on the history of science to be struck by the indeterminacy and 'circularity' of theoretical activity in particular or of *thought* in general. Precisely the same conclusions could be drawn from the study of, say, ancient historiography or Latin American literary criticism. And they could equally be drawn from the consideration of everyday thinking about ourselves and about the other selves and the institutions that surround us. In sum, there is *no* field of intellectual activity where there are well-established ways of arriving at a theory-neutral description of the facts and then going on to *deduce* a theory from that base; nor is there any area of thought where all participants agree that constant progress is being made toward an absolutely accurate representation.

¹²⁰ Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, 163. (Kuhn also points out here that when Lavoisier rejected the chemical principles of his day in order to explain chemical phenomena in terms of *elements*, he was accused of retrogressing to the idea that explanation could proceed by mere naming; as another example, he mentions the reservations of Einstein and Bohm as to the adequacy of the merely probabilistic explanations of quantum mechanics.)

As Kuhn is acutely aware, the critical importance of science from the point of view of the debate between traditional epistemology and antifoundationalism lies in the fact that it has long been thought that, if the ideals of traditional epistemology are satisfied anywhere, they are satisfied by science. As was remarked at the outset of this section, contemporary postmodernists regard *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as being of great importance because they feel the book shows that not even science lives up to the ideals of traditional epistemology and that, therefore, those ideals must be rejected. Therefore, from the postmodernist's point of view, the appeal to Kuhn will be effective only if he has turned up historical facts which show that scientific practice *must* be rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine. Postmodernists *imply* that Kuhn has done this, but in fact he has not. At most he has shown that scientific practice is rather more like other intellectual practices than we have imagined it to be: Scientists too, assume the truth of theories they cannot demonstrate; and they, too sometimes accuse one another of being guilty of retrogression.

None of this shows, however, that scientific practice is incompatible with foundationalism. To see why this is so, it is necessary to recall that the case of science is taken to be crucial because science is an attempt to explain nature and nature is, by definition, that which is culture-independent. The analysis of science is bound to be critical to the anti-foundationalist case because antifoundationalism is the denial of the possibility of culture-independence. The only way that antifoundationalism can deal with the problem is by denying that science is an attempt to describe culture-independent nature. This, as we have seen, is what Kuhn ultimately does, and it is because he does it that he is correctly classified as a postmodern antifounda-

tionalist. But, to repeat my main point, he is not forced to do it by his version of the history of science. This raises the question: If Kuhn is not forced to his antifoundationalism by the historical facts, then why *does* he espouse the theory?

This is a difficult question to which only a rather complex answer can be given. The most important part of the answer is, I think, that Kuhn almost *isn't* an antifoundationalist. Or, to put the point more carefully: If it were not for the passage quoted at the beginning of this discussion in which he says bluntly that "the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle," it would be possible to produce a plausible 'reading' of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which insisted that it is a foundationalist work. It would *not*, of course, be possible to produce a plausible reading which claimed that the book is foundationalist in the sense of maintaining that our beliefs are deductively grounded, but, as we have seen, *that* sort of antifoundationalism is innocuous from the point of view of someone who is engaged, as we are, in an attempt to challenge the Postmodern Doctrine. The sort of foundationalism that *is* (almost) compatible with Kuhn's position — and the only sort that is relevant to our questioning of the Postmodern Doctrine — is the sort that simply insists there *is* a culture-independent nature which science attempts to describe and that any scientific theory is successful only to the extent that it accurately describes that nature. Whether or not we can ever be certain, by making deductions from the data or in any other way, that a particular theory *is* perfectly accurate is irrelevant from our point of view.

Our discussion of some of Kuhn's philosophical views about science, language, and mind has revealed his lingering philosophical positivism — one symptom of his ambivalence toward the idea of culture-independent foundations. Even stronger evidence of his attitude toward this issue, however, is provided by his recurrent references to the idea of nature. It cannot honestly be claimed that the idea of culture-independent nature plays an important role in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, but Kuhn does mention nature regularly and he does so in an unselfconscious, un-ironic way which would be quite impossible for a contemporary postmodern philosopher. At many points Kuhn gives the impression that he is moving toward a position according to which scientific theories are *partly* determined by the discourse of the scientific community and *partly* determined by a culture-independent nature. Consider, for example, the following passage in which Kuhn is discussing Galileo's theorem:

He had developed his theorem on this subject together with many of its consequences before he experimented with an inclined plane. That theorem was another one of the network of new regularities accessible to genius in the world *determined jointly by nature and by the paradigms upon which Galileo and his contemporaries had been raised.*¹²¹ (Italics added.)

And at other points he seems to suggest, despite everything he has said about the *discursiveness* of scientific activity, that culture-independent nature is, in the end, the most important determinant.

Because the unit of scientific achievement is the solved problem and because the group knows well which problems have already been solved, few scientists will easily be persuaded to adopt a viewpoint that again opens to question many problems that had previously been solved. *Nature itself must first undermine professional security by making prior achievements seem problematic.*¹²² (Italics added.)

¹²¹ Ibid., 125.

¹²² Ibid., 169.

Having made this reference to nature's role in provoking scientific revolution, Kuhn goes on to mention other, discursive, conditions that must be fulfilled before a revolution can occur, but, despite this, it is clear that, in some moods at any rate, he believes an accurate description of theory change must include reference to non-discursive nature. I do not wish to make too much out of such passages or of other vestiges of foundationalism in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. As I have already emphasized at several points, Kuhn is an early postmodern antifoundationalist, and contemporary postmodern philosophers, even if they are not justified in appealing to him for support, are quite right in regarding him as an ally.

Kuhn's ambivalence on this matter does, however, point the way toward an answer to our question concerning the motivation for his ultimate rejection of the idea of nature as the culture-independent 'other' of discourse. His reflections on the history of science push him in the direction of postmodern antifoundationalism because they make him feel, first, that nature disappears — permanently and completely — behind a veil of discourse. And once in that position, he imagines himself compelled to take a further step: Since nature is hopelessly hidden, he implicitly argues, it is not really there at all. There are no unequivocal statements of this line of thought in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn is not as obsessive as is Rorty about downplaying the counter-intuitive quality of his position, but he is willing to sacrifice clarity in order to make his position seem less radical than it actually is. If we are to understand the motivation for Kuhn's antifoundationalism, we must then work with implications and suggestions, but that does not mean we are merely guessing: There are many passages

where Kuhn makes it quite clear what is going on in his mind. Here is one example:

During revolutions scientists see new and different things. . . . It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and joined by unfamiliar ones as well. . . . *In so far as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world.*¹²³ (Italics added.)

There is a similarly telling remark a few pages later. Kuhn has been discussing the famous duck-rabbit drawing and a psychological experiment with anomalous playing cards which likewise indicates that identical physical stimuli can be differently perceived. He goes on to make a contrast between the significance of these experiments and the significance of the discursive nature of scientific practice:

In both these cases as in all similar psychological experiments, the effectiveness of the demonstration depends upon its being analyzable [as a matter of looking at one thing but seeing something else]. Unless there were an *external standard* with respect to which a switch of vision could be demonstrated, no conclusion about alternate perceptual possibilities could be drawn.

With scientific observation, however, the situation is exactly reversed. *The scientist can have no recourse above or beyond what he sees with his eyes and instruments.* If there were some higher authority by recourse to which his vision might be shown to have shifted, then that authority would itself become the source of his data, and the behaviour of his vision would become a source of problems.¹²⁴ (Italics added.)

In this passage, Kuhn is as explicit as he ever becomes about the logic that lies behind his rejection of the notion of a discourse-independent nature. He is clearly afraid that, if he does not reject nature, he will be caught in the grip of an aporia: He will find himself saying that science is a description of

¹²³ Ibid., 111

¹²⁴ Ibid., 114.

something which cannot be described because we have no 'recourse' to it. If, to break free of such a self-contradiction, we must abandon the traditional view of science as a description of discourse-independent reality — a view that, as we have seen, Kuhn is intuitively comfortable with — then, in the end, he is willing to pay the price. We might label this aporia 'The Aporia of the Veil of Discourse' and state it in the following way: The language in which our theories are expressed is a cultural phenomenon and any attempts to construct an 'observation language' that is free of cultural influences are bound to fail.¹²⁵ Moreover, as psychological experimentation shows, even the pre-linguistic experiences that can be described in the language are influenced by the discursive system we inhabit. However, if everything we see and everything we say is conditioned by cultural happenstance, then how can we ever know, from a culturally independent point of view, what nature is *really* like? There are not many possible replies to this question. We can say that we can learn the culture-independent truth about nature by means of some sort of non-linguistic, non-perceptual intellection; or we can concede that nature is permanently shrouded behind the veil of discourse — or, more accurately, behind one such veil or another. The first of these replies will have no appeal whatsoever to Kuhn; it would require a Platonistic epistemology and metaphysics and, more importantly, would imply a Platonistic contempt for empirical investigation, an attitude that he would find completely unacceptable. The second reply is scarcely more acceptable to someone with Kuhn's interests and background — and for similar reasons. No one who values and respects science as Kuhn does can as-

¹²⁵ See Kuhn's remarks about Nelson Goodman on page 134.

sert that nature is intractably hidden. To do so would apparently be to dismiss scientific activity as futile.

There *is* a third option however, and this is the one that Kuhn implicitly chooses. It is possible to reject the very idea of independent nature as meaningless, as somehow missing the point and in this way to avoid altogether the need to employ the distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive. This is precisely what Kuhn does in the crucial passage quoted at the beginning of this section when he says that "the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle." The ponderous circumlocution of this statement is striking given the fact that Kuhn's English is generally so elegant and so simple, but this unnecessary obscurity is precisely what anyone familiar with the rhetorical tactics of postmodern antifoundationalism would expect. Kuhn has good reason for being coy here. If he simply said that it makes no sense to talk about non-discursive reality, he would be almost *demanding* to be asked: "Does that mean, then that there *is* no such thing?" But Kuhn cannot escape this question merely by using obfuscatory language, and as far as I can see, the only honest reply he can make is, "Yes." Even if he remains silent, the remarks we have quoted apparently commit him to the view that nature is ineluctably concealed. In short, he has not avoided the aporia after all.

That Kuhn's struggle with the Aporia of the Veil of Discourse turns out to be futile should not be surprising. In one form or another, the puzzle seems to be as old as philosophy itself. Its most spectacular manifestation, at least in the tradition of which Kuhn is a part, is found in the work of George Berkeley who argued so cogently that *all* the qualities of supposedly mind-

independent objects could be shown to be mind-*dependent*. Berkeley, of course was not a *postmodern* antifoundationalist: He reduced the supposedly external world, 'nature', not to discourse but the *mental* events he called 'Ideas'. But his basic line of thought — that the 'hiddenness' of 'nature' must be interpreted as its lack of existence — is identical with the reasoning that is implicit (and occasionally almost explicit) in Kuhn's book. The discovery that the philosophical core of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a version of a familiar, and ancient argument fits in well with our earlier realization that, contrary to a widespread belief, Kuhn's position does not emanate from his historical analysis. Now we are able to see that not only is Kuhnian antifoundationalism *not* based on something fresh and original but that it *is* based on something old and *banal*. The banality of a philosophical position is not a reason for rejecting it of course, but it is, perhaps, a reason for disguising it.

Rorty: Disguise and Rhetoric

Rorty, who sees himself as Kuhn's successor, is a master of disguise. From a rhetorical point of view, the most prominent characteristic of his writing is his trick of waylaying criticism by anticipating it and at the same time haughtily rejecting it, claiming that it burdens him with views for which, in fact, he has no sympathy whatsoever.¹²⁶ It is therefore not surprising that he does not go out of his way to lay bare the line of thought that leads him to his own rejection of nature. Indeed, in keeping with the strategy just described, Rorty denies that he rejects nature. It is worth looking at a typi-

¹²⁶ That there is something disingenuous about this is perhaps indicated by the fact that the criticisms seem weighty enough to Rorty himself that he feels it is worthwhile putting time and effort into showing that they miss the point

cally slippery passage in which Rorty first rejects any imputations that he is questioning the discourse/nature dichotomy but then goes on to describe his commitment to nature in a way that will only strengthen the misgivings of anyone who suspects that he really is denying that discourse has a culture-independent other.

The dread of "falling into idealism" which afflicts those tempted by Kuhn . . . is enhanced by the thought that if the study of science's search for truth about the physical universe is viewed hermeneutically it will be viewed as the activity of spirit — the faculty which *makes* — rather than as the application of the mirroring faculties, those which *find* what nature has already made.

Rorty speaks of the danger of "falling into idealism" rather than the danger of falling into *discursivism* because he does not, in this context, make the distinction between the cultural and the mental. 'Idealism' here should be taken to refer to any metaphysical theory that denies the existence of anything that is genuinely 'external' to the mental and the cultural realms. When Rorty speaks of viewing science 'hermeneutically', he is referring to his own way of expressing the postmodern view of scientific investigation and other types of intellectual endeavour — as endless, interpretive 'conversations'. The distinction between "the faculty which makes" and the "mirroring faculty" is Rorty's version of the distinction between the culture-dependent and the culture-independent. He continues:

This latent romantic-classic opposition . . . is brought into the open by Kuhn's unhappy use . . . of romantic phrases like "being presented with a new world," instead of the classic "using a new description for the world." In the view I want to recommend, nothing deep turns on the choice between these two phrases — between the imagery of making and of finding. . . . It is less paradoxical, however, to stick to the classic notion of "better describing what was already there." This is not because of deep epistemological or metaphysical considerations, but simply because, when we tell our Whiggish stories about how our ancestors gradually crawled up the mountain on whose

possibly false summit we stand, we need to keep some things constant throughout the story.¹²⁷

Rorty's use of 'romanticism' and 'classicism', terms of art generally thought to be more appropriate to literary criticism than philosophy, is calculated and characteristic. His choice of this terminology reflects his programmatic goal of conflating the rigorous epistemology of scientific practice and the looser 'epistemology' of fields such as criticism. His complaint about Kuhn's 'romanticism' is just one instance of a frequently stated objection to the effect that Kuhn unnecessarily speaks of the adoption of a new paradigm as an entry into a 'new world'.¹²⁸ When Rorty says that Kuhn would do better to speak of a paradigm shift as a matter of coming to speak of the same old world in a new way, it seems, momentarily, that he is committing himself to the existence of a culture-independent nature. What follows, however, is a splendid example of the obfuscatory rhetoric at which he is so adept. In the next sentence he takes back with one hand what he has given with the other, saying that it doesn't *really* matter which form of words one uses here. Then, slipping comfortably into further paradox and subtlety, he qualifies his qualification by saying that for pragmatic as opposed to metaphysical reasons, it does — sort of — matter after all. Needless to say, none of this maneuvering will satisfy genuine foundationalists. For them, the *only* acceptable way to characterize a paradigm shift is as a new description of an old world. And their grounds for holding this position have nothing to do with pragmatics; they are entirely metaphysical. But although foundationalists will certainly not be satisfied with Rorty's highly qualified and ironic acceptance of the idea of a non-discursive other, his tac-

¹²⁷ Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 344.

¹²⁸ One way in which Rorty misrepresents Kuhn is in his frequent suggestions that Kuhn's talk of other worlds is just a manner of expression into which Kuhn occasionally slips. The fact Kuhn employs the trope self-consciously and systematically

tics may well make them despair of the possibility of ever mounting a cogent attack on his position. If this is what happens, Rorty's rhetorical strategy will have been successful.

The Necessity of Foundations

The preceding comments show that, despite Rorty's objections to Kuhn's 'romanticism,' the attitudes of the two philosophers are essentially identical. Kuhn is a transitional figure, very much a product of the tradition he sets out to undermine, who clearly finds it difficult to take to heart the postmodern antifoundationalism to which he finds himself driven — rather, perhaps, in the way Joseph Priestly found it so difficult to believe that combustion was to be understood as consumption of *oxygen* even though his own experiments had done so much to establish the existence of this gas. The argument of the last paragraphs also indicates that the ancient, profound but, by now also philosophically *banal* idea that the genuinely external is hidden behind a discursive or mental veil is a crucial element of postmodern philosophizing.

If this is so, then something of considerable interest follows: It turns out that thinkers like Kuhn and Rorty are not by any means as free of Cartesian, certainty-obsessed foundationalism as they claim to be. Why, is it, after all, that we should be *bothered* by the fact that the external world is hidden from us by the way we see and think? What problems does this create? The only answer can be that the veil deprives us of certainty, and in light of this, we must go on to ask, why Rorty or Kuhn would be driven to reject the very idea of independent nature rather than concede that we can never really know what nature is like? The only answer to *this* question is

that they adopt discursivism because they cannot bear the prospect of irremediable uncertainty. They prefer to give up on externality altogether than to admit we are cut off from it. In short, Kuhn and Rorty and other philosophers who take a similar approach have a strong, crypto-Cartesian streak.

We embarked on our examination of Kuhn as a way of dealing with the question of whether or not the fundamental social practice of scientific inquiry can be successfully rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine. In taking this approach we departed from the method used in considering the social practices of interpretation, evaluation and dissent. With respect to those areas, we took a 'positive' approach, attempting to show that there are central aspects of these practices that cannot maintain their identity while undergoing postmodern 'redescription'. By contrast, we have approached scientific practice 'negatively', attempting to show that a highly regarded attempt to postmodernize science does not, on a fundamental philosophical level, have the originality or cogency that is often attributed to it.

Having dealt with the negative aspect of the problem we will not, now, embark on a positive attempt to show that there are in fact aspects of scientific activity which cannot be rationalized in terms of the Postmodern Doctrine. There is no doubt, though, that such a project could be approached with greater confidence armed with the realization that it is not doomed to failure by facts or arguments contained in Kuhn's book. I will conclude this section by sketching, in barest outline, how an attempt might be made to show that science *cannot* be postmodernized.

One way of summing up our reflections on Kuhn would be to say that the only considerations he produces in favour of the idea that science *can* be ra-

tionalized by the Postmodern Doctrine are not only disappointingly familiar but, from the point of view of anyone who is willing to accept the idea of reality as hidden, perfectly compatible with the denial of the Postmodern Doctrine — perfectly compatible, that is to say, with the idea that our scientific beliefs are valid only to the extent that they ‘match’ discourse-independent reality. The realization that the Rorty-Kuhn program for the postmodernization of science is opposable if and only if we are willing to think of nature as veiled suggests a promising way of making the foundationalist case. The source of our desire to undermine the Postmodern Doctrine, it is important to keep in mind, is the fact that it rejects not just the idea of *accessible, guarantory* foundations, but the idea of any sort of foundational ‘other’ whatsoever. One consequence of this, as has already been pointed out, is that neither the indeterminacy of science nor its circularity can be appealed to as evidence of the need for postmodern redescription. It follows that both the debate about the commensurability of theories, and the debate about whether or not science is cumulative, interesting as they are in their own right, are irrelevant from our point of view.

What *is* relevant — and what would have to be focussed on in any attempt to show that science cannot be rationalized in terms of the Postmodern Doctrine — is the social psychology and the sociology of scientific practice. It would be necessary to look closely both at the sort of attitude that scientists must have in order to do good scientific work and the sort of contribution the larger society expects from the scientific community. There is irony in this perhaps, because one important characteristic of the Rorty-Kuhn position is the shifting of attention away from the intellectual aspects of science and toward communal ones. But social considerations would play a signifi-

cantly different sort of role in the line of thought I am envisioning. In the first place, Kuhn and Rorty are concerned not with the workings of society as a whole but merely with the relatively small and isolated scientific community. Moreover, they argue *from* their analysis of the structure of science considered in isolation from society *to* the conclusion that science must be understood as a communal activity. On the other hand, an important element of the line of thought I am suggesting would be that the social setting of the practice could be appealed to in order to show that there is a 'theoretical' need for foundations. The argument here would be comparable in form to those we have sketched out in the previous sections with regard to the fundamental social practices of evaluation and dissent. It would move from some general comments on the practice of scientists and the social role of scientific investigation to the conclusion that, if the mass of scientists adopted the Postmodern Doctrine as the philosophical ideology rationalizing their practice (and if the larger society acquiesced in this shift of attitude), a trend would be established which would inevitably lead to such a profound transformation that the identity of the original practice could not reasonably be said to have been preserved.

Specifically, it could be argued that just as judges *need* to believe they are dispensing justice rather than merely expressing social opinions, scientists *need* to believe that they are aiming at an accurate description of culture-independent truth rather than merely serving whatever happens to be the going paradigm, or, for that matter, attempting to persuade their fellow scientists to adopt their revolutionary ideas. If the rationalization of science proposed by philosophers such as Kuhn, Rorty, and Lyotard came to be generally accepted, science would inevitably lose its rigour — a rigour that

comes from attempting, against all odds perhaps, to get the match between theory and nature exactly right. And having lost its rigour, science would soon lose its social status — if for no other reason than because the technological innovation that science spawns would quickly falter. ‘Science’ might live on, perhaps as a sort of theology, perhaps as an aspect of commerce, but science would be dead. Given the remarkable accomplishments of science and the enormous status it has in our culture, it is hard to envision this actually happening. But there is no reason why ours could not become another scienceless culture. Indeed, it is easier to imagine our losing science as the result of a shift in philosophical ideology or for some other reason than it is to imagine our losing the practices of interpretation, evaluation, and dissent. After all, *those* practices are found in all cultures but, as Kuhn himself points out, highly developed science is unique to ours.

CHAPTER FIVE: POSTMODERN METAPHYSICS

This chapter has two purposes. The first is to continue the attempt to undermine the Postmodern Doctrine by using, here, the third of the three methods briefly described in the preface: an 'exposé' of the radical theoretical commitments demanded by the doctrine — commitments which will perhaps be unacceptable to some who have adopted the doctrine in one or another of its guises without fully considering the metaphysical implications of their acquiescence. The second, complementary, purpose of this chapter is to deepen our understanding of the Postmodern Doctrine by examining an explicit statement of the metaphysical theory which underlies it — a project that is important not only on the general principle that one ought to understand what one is criticizing, but also because, having had a closer look at the metaphysics of the doctrine, we will be in a better position, later on, to consider the basis of its ideological appeal.

The brief, first section of the chapter is a general comment on the nature of postmodern metaphysics — and in particular on its relation, or lack of relation to philosophical idealism. The second section is a detailed discussion of a particular postmodern text, Jacques Derrida's essay, "Différance." We focus on Derrida at this point for a simple reason: He is apparently the only postmodern theorist who has any appetite for a thorough and honest treatment of the philosophical aspects of philosophical ideology.

Postmodern Metaphysics, Idealism and Discursivism

The idea of postmodern metaphysics may seem at first glance to be self-contradictory. After all, the writing of many postmodernists is strongly and explicitly anti-metaphysical; Rorty's work provides an excellent example of this characteristic and even Derrida — who, as I am arguing, is *the* postmodern metaphysician *par excellence* — employs the *term* 'metaphysics' only in a derogatory manner. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which *all* philosophical ideologies *must* have a metaphysics. With respect to any such theory it is obviously possible to ask: What *kinds* of entity are we committing ourselves too if we adopt the theory? Or, in other words: What is the theory's ontology. Using the term in this way, we can speak uncontroversially of the metaphysics of even such classically anti-metaphysical theories as nominalism, materialism, and behaviourism.

My central *philosophical* contention about the nature of postmodernity is this: The 'negative' aspect of the Postmodern Doctrine is antifoundationalism. Looking 'positively' at the doctrine, we could say it rests on a 'metaphysics of monistic discursivism'. In other words, its proponents believe that there is nothing which is not discursive — nothing whose existence is not reducible to conceptual or institutional interplay. In the early stages of groping toward a characterization of postmodern metaphysics, it can be tempting to employ the label 'idealism'.¹²⁹ Momentarily, this may seem reasonable because the discursive world must be understood as the 'other' of the physical world of culture-independent nature and, traditionally, the physical has been opposed not to the discursive, but to the mental. It

¹²⁹ Rorty quite rightly rejects the criticism that his own (and Thomas Kuhn's) ideas lead to idealism. See page 146.

would be a serious error to use this term 'idealism' here, however, because of the inescapable association between any form of philosophical idealism and the *mental*: As we have seen the rejection of the mental as a basic ontological category is one of the primary tenets of postmodernism, so we would obviously be misrepresenting the doctrine if we classified it as idealistic. One reason for the momentary temptation to describe postmodern metaphysics as idealistic in this way is that that term is at least a familiar piece of philosophical parlance. For the same reason it might be tempting to consider labelling the doctrine 'anti-realistic' or perhaps 'non-realistic', but, to avoid confusion, we would then have to go on to point out that we were not making the traditional real/non-real contrast between the physical and the mental but rather contrasting the traditionally 'real' with the discursive.

In light of all this, it seems best to refrain from characterizing the metaphysics of postmodernity by sticking one label on top of another; instead, we will simply keep our original name for the 'positive' core of postmodernism, 'discursivism', adding the qualification 'monistic' in order to emphasize the contempt in which postmodernists hold *both* the traditional ontological categories, the mental and the physical.

Derrida's 'Différance': A Postmodern Metaphysical Text

One obstacle to a philosophical assessment of the Postmodern Doctrine is the fact that, although we are surrounded by *applications* of the doctrine, it is not easy to find a clear, philosophically sophisticated statement of the doctrine itself. Such a statement *is* found, however, in the work of Jacques Derrida — a writer whose work can be seen as providing a philosophical justification of postmodernism, and an outline of its genealogy. In his 1968

essay, "Différance," he offers an encapsulation of the fundamental elements of his position, outlining a metaphysical system that supports postmodernism, defending the antifoundationalism that is the central tenet of the Postmodern Doctrine and offering arguments for many of the doctrines 'corollaries'.

In discussing "Différance," I will be primarily concerned with description. There will be little in the way of explicit criticism of Derrida's position. Needless to say, this silence is not to be taken as a sign of agreement; it is rather a consequence of the fact that the main purpose of this essay is to express misgivings about the Postmodern Doctrine, misgivings which obviously extend to the views of the doctrine's most philosophically powerful proponent. Of course, if Derrida supported his claims with explicit argumentation, it would be worthwhile to include a critique of his reasoning in our examination of his views. But there is scarcely any argument in "Différance." Although he is more probing, more honest and more erudite — and thus more plausible — than many of the lesser advocates of the doctrine, he seems no more inclined than they to attempt anything like a *demonstration* of the truth of what he is saying. (If he were to offer hard-headed arguments he would, by revealing suspect tendencies to 'logocentricity', perhaps succeed only in casting doubt on his credentials as a postmodernist.) In short, what is true of advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine in general, is true of Derrida in particular: the only possibility of opposing his position is through rearguard action, diversionary tactics and surreptitious undermining. To attack directly by attempting to debate particular points in a careful analytic manner is only to invite frustration and scorn.

Antifoundationalism and *Différance*

Derrida does not describe himself as an anti-foundationalist. Indeed, in "Différance," he does not even *speak* about of 'foundations'. Nevertheless, he quickly makes it clear that his primary purpose is to undermine the idea that our beliefs and values are founded — that they can be confirmed or justified, by an appeal to discourse-independent standards. In the first pages of his essay, he announces that "what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility."¹³⁰ The crux of his position is that there *is* no 'rightful beginning'. He would admit that it is tempting to imagine the existence of a foundation, tempting to explain the working of our belief and value system in terms of something genuinely 'other'. And he would admit that it is difficult to avoid speaking and writing as if there were 'an absolute point of departure': The assumption that there *are* foundations seems to be built right into our language. But he insists that we must not succumb to these temptations.

According to Derrida, although there are no foundations, there *is* '*différance*'. *Différance* is not easy to understand; even Derrida is willing to admit that it is a strange and slippery 'thing'.¹³¹ He makes his approach

130 Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6

131 I have used scare quotes here because Derrida, in the course of explaining what he means by *différance* makes a point of insisting that it is not 'a thing'. He also denies that it 'exists', and claims that it 'is not'. Derrida's use of such paradoxical and perplexing language is to be understood, in part at least, as the result of his determination to avoid placing *différance* in any of the traditional ontological categories. His conviction that the basic stuff of his metaphysical system is ontologically unique is expressed mainly in his repeated assertions of the opposition between *différance* and what he calls 'presence'. He uses this term to refer to the empiricist-phenomenological notion that discourse-independent experience is fundamental. It is important to keep in mind, how-

through a discussion of the semantic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure.¹³² Saussure's essential point, as Derrida sees it at any rate, is the *arbitrariness* of meaning: Meaning emerges not from the relationship between words and things, but from the relationship *between words and other words*. One indication of the fact that meaning is generated in this way is the interdependence of conceptual dichotomies. Derrida mentions three examples of "the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives": culture/nature, concept/intuition, intelligible/sensible.¹³³ He makes it clear, however, that the interaction

ever, that Derrida is just as opposed to Platonism or any other form of rationalism as he is to empiricism. For him, meaning is ultimate, but, because it is in a state of constant flux, it is nevertheless unable to play the foundational role of Platonic forms or Leibnizian essences. Because of their fugacity, the meanings generated by *differance* are accidental and therefore eminently ill-suited to act as foundations. As he puts it, "We must be permitted to refer to an order which no longer belongs to sensibility. But neither can it belong to intelligibility, to the order which is not fortuitously affiliated with the objectivity of *theorem* or understanding." [Ibid., 5]

¹³² It is to be expected, of course, that the metaphysical theory that underlies the Postmodern Doctrine should be a *linguistic* theory. Indeed, the radical discursivism that characterizes the Postmodern Doctrine seems to *imply* something like Saussure's position. In light of this one should not, perhaps, be surprised by Derrida's opinion of Saussure's importance: "most of the semiological or linguistic researches that dominate the field of thought today whether due to their own results or to the regulatory model that they find themselves acknowledging everywhere, refer genealogically to Saussure (correctly or incorrectly) as their common inaugurator" [Ibid., 10]

¹³³ Ibid., 17 The theme of semantic opposition is of considerable importance in the essay. Even more important than these *pairs* of opposing words are *single* words with two opposing meanings. According to Alan Bass, the translator of "Differance," this phenomenon provides particularly strong evidence in favor to the accuracy of Derrida's notion of *differance*: these strange opposing meanings can only be understood as 'traces' of *former* meanings which are in the process of being displaced by the workings of *differance*. (note 23, 19-20) Derrida makes much out of the fact that '*differance*' itself is just such a word, containing both the meaning of 'difference,' which emphasizes contrast and otherness, and the meaning of 'defer,' which reflects the possibility of returning to an original meaning which has been 'deferred' but not destroyed. In the course of discussing this matter, he says "Here we are touching upon the point of greatest obscurity, on the very enigma of *differance*, on precisely that which divides its very concept by means of a strange cleavage" (19) [It is, incidentally the fact that *differance* not only creates differences but also defers that, according to Bass at least, marks the distinction between Derrida's key notion and Hegel's 'Aufhebung' (note 23, 19-20)]

It seems worth noting that, arcane as these matters may be, there is evidence here, as at many other points, of a striking congruence between Derridean theory and the 'postmodern' preoccupations of thoughtful and well-informed people — journalists and artists, for example — who are not professional philosophers or academics. For example in an article about the drug trade in Medellín, Alma Guillermoprieto discusses the ideas of film maker Victor Gaviria concerning the street children who make up the

between such closely related concepts is only the most obvious and most comprehensible, instance of the phenomenon he is describing; all words, all aspects of *discourse*, are constantly influencing each other, creating, and changing each other's meanings. And, he insists, *there is nothing more to meaning than that*. It is this last claim that is crucial; even a proponent of the traditional theory of meaning would be willing to concede that meanings influence each other — but would emphatically deny that the entire meaning of a word or sentence can be attributed to such influences.¹³⁴

As a result of massive, constant interaction between individual concepts a network of distinctions is created — distinctions like those that mark the conceptual line between, say, knives and forks, or, to take one of Derrida's own weightier examples, between the idea of culture and the idea of nature. He refers to these particular distinctions simply as 'differences.' It is important to distinguish between Derrida's more or less straight-forward use of the ordinary word 'difference' and his use of the technical term, '*différance*.' The individual differences are 'generated' by the large, abstract, system of *différance*.

drug industry's work force: "Through their words he has come to believe that in the *pistolocos*' fragmented world their essential relationship with reality is magical. 'You see it in the language,' he said. 'At first, they used the word *traido* to refer to the things they 'found' or stole. *Traido*, meaning 'that which is brought,' is a term we *paisas* use to refer to the Christmas gifts that the baby Jesus leaves on the table, so they would say, 'Look at this motorcycle, or this watch — what a *traido* I found.' Then the word became its opposite: *traido* referred to an enemy, and then to a corpse. That is, *traido* refers to everything that appears in front of one, which in the end is always death'" (*The New Yorker*, 91.4.22, 102)

¹³⁴ Saussure claims that the meaning of a word is to be completely understood in terms of the word's relationship with other words. It does not *follow* from this that such meanings are all that exists. There could still be non-discursive things that are completely out of the range of words and meanings. A theory to that effect might be called 'weak discursivism' as opposed to the strong discursivism that is the heart of the Postmodern Doctrine. But however important the difference between the two versions of the theory may be it seems that, psychologically, it is a short step from one to the other.

Despite his use of causal terms like 'generate,' Derrida emphasizes that the terminology of cause and effect is not really appropriate to a discussion of the workings of *différance*. The distinction between cause and effect is, after all related to *différance* in the same way as is the difference between knives and forks; in other words, because we must understand the cause/effect dichotomy *in terms of différence*, we cannot, without falling into absurdity, conceive of *différance* in causal terms. In using the causal terminology to describe that relationship, we are making a sort of category mistake. Still, despite the insistence with which he presses this point, Derrida has problems saying what he wants to say in a non-causal, non-classical, way; and, on numerous occasions, he allows himself to use the repudiated language to explicate the crucial term. At one point, for example, he defines *différance* as a "constitutive, productive and originary causality, [that is to say] the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences."¹³⁵

Discursivism

The most important aspect of Derrida's theory of meaning from our point of view is that it is an ontological theory; for him, meanings are, ultimately, what exist. The second most important fact is that this is a discursivist ontology. In other words, Derrida, in taking *différance* as his 'substance', is propounding the Postmodern Doctrine: He is denying that reality is composed either of spatio-temporal objects, or of individual experience, or, indeed of the operations of de-individuated but still unified Mind; he is insisting that reality is neither physical nor mental but that it is, rather,

¹³⁵ Derrida, "Difference," 9.

composed of a more subtle, less graspable stuff, verbal and meaningful, but at the same time unexperienceable and incomprehensible. For Derrida, as for postmodern thinkers in general, reality is inseparable from language. This is not to say that he believes that all discourse can be put into words, that it can be *stated*. Indeed, he emphasizes that *différance* itself is necessarily beyond words. But, for all that, it is *linguistic*: it is what makes words possible. Given the linguistic quality of *différance*, it is not surprising that Derrida's explication of the notion should center on a theory of meaning, or that he should borrow ideas and terminology from the work of a linguist. In the following passage, he attempts to explain the Saussurean theory of meaning that lies behind the idea of *différance* and to contrast it with the classical theory.

Now Saussure first of all is the thinker who put the *arbitrary character of the sign* and the *differential character* of the sign at the very foundation of general semiology, particularly linguistics. . . these two motifs. . . are inseparable in his view. There can be arbitrariness only because the system of signs is constituted solely by the differences in terms and not by their plenitude. The elements of signification function due not to the compact force of their nuclei but rather to the network of oppositions that distinguishes them, and then relates them to one another.¹³⁶

The most striking thing about this passage from our point of view is the clarity with which it reveals Derrida's discursivism. The key phrase is 'constituted *solely*'. Derrida clearly wishes to eliminate the possibility that anything outside discourse makes any contribution to meaning. Using his terminology we could say that, according to the classical theory, meaning is a consequence of the 'impact' of words on the non-discursive world: Language taken by itself is meaningless and is given meaning only by con-

¹³⁶ Ibid., 10.

tact with something outside itself. It is the *world* that fills out the empty words with meaning, with their 'plenitude'. From the point of view of a discursivist such as Derrida, the traditional view gets it all wrong: Words have meaning only because of their relationship with other words.

Relativism & Truth

Relativism, as has already been pointed out, is a corollary of the antifoundationalist principle. It is the theory that there is no discourse-independent standard by appeal to which we can arbitrate factual or valuational differences of opinion between individuals, groups of individuals or distinct, but contemporaneous, cultures. Derrida does not actually use the term 'relativism' in "Différance," although he does, as we shall see, have a good deal to say about the diachronic version of the same theory — historicism. Still, there can be no doubt that Derrida is a relativist. That this is so is implied by what he has to say about truth. The status of historicism and relativism as corollaries of the central tenet of postmodern antifoundationalism follows from the fact that the idea of a timeless, culture-independent truth is the primary target of the Postmodern Doctrine: If, as Derrida believes, there *is* no truth of that sort, then we cannot speak of other times *or* other contemporary cultures with the 'objectivity' with which we can speak of our own discursive world.

For Derrida, our idea of truth, just like our idea of cause and effect is *part* of our discourse — not a measure by which our discourse can be judged. Derrida sees truth as just one more idea — an idea, moreover, which it is particularly important to deconstruct because a certain view of truth is at the heart of the 'classical', foundationalist metaphysic that is Derrida's

target. He describes his own view as a "thematic of active interpretation, which substitutes incessant deciphering for the unveiling of truth" and then goes on to say that the 'system' he is proposing will not be "dominated by the value of truth, which [will become] only an included, inscribed, circumscribed function."¹³⁷ Of course, from the point of view of an adherent of 'classical' metaphysics, however vehemently Derrida may insist that there is a place for truth inside his system, it will seem that his deconstruction is also a *destruction*, a refusal to acknowledge that there is any such thing as truth.¹³⁸ But whatever doubts there may be about precisely how Derrida's views on truth are to be construed, one thing is certain: If we choose to operate with the 'circumscribed' sort of truth he advocates, we will not be able to make legitimate objective assessments of the beliefs and values of people who are not part of our discursive world. In short, we will be relativists.

Historicism

It is tempting to suggest that Derrida does not actually mention relativism because he is not interested in any culture but his own. Certainly, in "Différance" at least, he provides no evidence of any such interest. This ap-

¹³⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹³⁸ We are here up against question that will often be encountered by anyone who attempts to look critically at postmodern ideology: How are we to decide whether a proposal such as the one Derrida makes about truth is a *rejection* of a concept or simply a *reapplication* of it. From the point of view of an adherent of the Postmodern Doctrine the question does not even arise: this sort of shift is nothing remarkable; it is only a matter of *différance* doing its work. From the point of view of someone who can confidently dismiss the Postmodern Doctrine, the answer to the question is obvious: concepts are discursive labels for non-discursive entities; it really makes no sense to speak of changing them in a drastic way, because after such 'changes' the label will no longer label the things it previously labelled and will therefore be a different label which happens to have the same appearance and the same sound. From the point of view of someone who is not uncritically committed to one view or the other, however, the question remains open.

parent narrowness of view contrasts sharply with his strong sense of the history of his own culture. He makes it clear that he is aware of the tensions brought to the Postmodern Doctrine by the fact that it seems to be committed both to the discourse-dependence of all thought *and* to its own universality.¹³⁹ Roughly paraphrased, Derrida's response to this puzzle goes as follows. "Look, maybe the doctrine *is* just a sign of the times. Very likely, somewhere down the line it's going to get thrown out in just the way that we're now throwing out modernist foundationalism. But that doesn't mean that *we* should — or can — have any doubts about it." This ploy does not eliminate the difficulties raised by self-referentiality, but that is scarcely to be held against it — not at any rate if I am right in claiming that the problem is an essentially insoluble one.¹⁴⁰

Derrida's willingness to envisage the demise of his own viewpoint is revealed in comments such as the following:

I wish to underline that the efficacy of the thematic of difference may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded, lending itself if not to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed.¹⁴¹

Whether *différance* is superseded or merely enmeshed in a chain is of little consequence. It is clear that either way of putting it implies that the Postmodern Doctrine falls prey to its own assertion of historicity. It, too, is just another historical contingency — just another link in the chain. As I

¹³⁹ See the discussion of the Postmodern Doctrine's 'logical oddness' in Chapter Three.

¹⁴⁰ What it *does* do is show that the theoretical tensions within the doctrine are reflected by tensions in Derrida's own thought — a fact which, I believe, lends credence to my contention that Derrida is not only the major philosopher of postmodernism but also far less a dogmatist than most of his epigones.

¹⁴¹ Derrida, "Différance," 7. (In this sentence, with his use of the blatantly causal chain metaphor and his casual reference to truth, Derrida reveals once again his own addiction to the 'classical' language he claims to be replacing.)

have already suggested, however, Derrida is not always so willing to send *différance* to its ironic fate. Toward the end of his essay he struggles at some length with his mixed feelings on this matter. There, in a remark that echoes the one just quoted, he says first, "In a certain aspect of itself, *différance* is certainly but the historical and epochal unfolding of Being."¹⁴² But then, as if arguing against himself, he goes on to ask a question:

And yet, are not the thought of the *meaning* or *truth* of Being, the determination of *différance* as the onto-ontological difference, difference thought within the horizon of the question of Being, still intrametaphysical effects of *différance*?¹⁴³

The "thought of the meaning of Being" to which Derrida refers here is his own central, discursivist thought, the rejection of the idea that there are discourse-independent things, or 'beings,' that we can rely on to provide a foundation for our thought.. Derrida's suggestion that his own thinking must be understood 'within' a certain 'horizon' and his asking if that does not imply that even *this* 'difference' — the distinction between *différance* and beings — is an effect of *différance*, can be paraphrased roughly as follows: "If I am right about the fundamental nature of *différance*, does it not follow that *différance* somehow determines even our understanding of itself? And does it not follow from that that *différance* is, after all, somehow a timeless, transcendent substrate?"

Having raised such a troubling possibility, however, Derrida resolutely hastens to reassure himself with the following proposal:

Perhaps we must attempt to think this unheard-of thought, this silent tracing: that the history of Being, whose thought

¹⁴² Ibid., 22. (Derrida is here exploiting the Heideggerian distinction between Being and beings. He sees his contention that *différance* is *the* ontologically basic category as a way of challenging the regrettable 'domination of beings' [21])

¹⁴³ Ibid., 22.

engages the Greco-Western logos such as it is produced via the ontological difference, is but an epoch of diapherein¹⁴⁴

In other words. "Perhaps, in order to avoid any danger of falling back into the error of foundationalism, we must grit our teeth and force ourselves to accept the possibility that not just the current postmodern phase of our cultural development but the whole of our cultural history is nothing more than a historical contingency." If we are able to do this, then we will be prepared to accept the possibility that not only is our cherished philosophical ideology, the Postmodern Doctrine, nothing more than a child of its time but that the very idea of a 'time' is something that will one day cease to make sense. We will be prepared, as Derrida puts it, to go "beyond our logos, [into] a *différance* so violent that it can be interpellated neither as the epochality of Being nor as ontological difference."¹⁴⁵ One value of such a remark is that it suggests a possible explanation of the dogmatic refusal of most advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine even to consider such difficult and troubling questions as the one Derrida is wrestling with here: If thinking about this matter can drive even Derrida so quickly toward a wild-eyed millenarianism, it should not be surprising that lesser thinkers act as if the problem did not exist.

Self-referentiality, Paradox and Metaphysicality

We have already had occasion to point out how ideas associated with the Postmodern Doctrine, even ones which at first glance seem to be quite distinct from one another, often turn out on closer inspection to be so intimately connected that they threaten to become identical. As Derrida's re-

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 22.

marks make amply clear, there is just such a connection between the doctrine's historicist element and its self-referentiality: It is this self-referentiality, the fact that the doctrine is a theory about a kind of theory of which it itself is an example, which makes the doctrine's historicism so perplexing and elusive. There is a similar connection between self-referentiality and what might be called the 'mysterious metaphysicality' of Derrida's version of the doctrine.

As was suggested when they were first mentioned, it seems probable that the only satisfactory way to deal with the puzzles raised by self-referentiality is to cheerfully embrace the paradox they present. Derrida's waverings on the question of historicism, his lingering desire for a logical, consistent view of the matter, indicate that he is not completely comfortable with this way of living with the illogicality of the Postmodern Doctrine. But if, in the passage we have just looked at, he exhibits leanings toward old-fashioned, paradox-rejecting logical rigour, there are plenty of other points where he seems eager to exult in the strange elusiveness of *différance*. Indeed, a great deal of what he says about *différance* is an enthusiastic commentary on its oddness. Toward the beginning of his essay, he describes *différance* in this way: "It cannot be apprehended in speech and . . . it also bypasses the order of apprehension in general."¹⁴⁶ A little later he says:

Now if *différance* ~~is~~ (and I also cross out the "~~is~~") what makes possible the presentation of the being-present is never presented as such, is never offered to the present. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point but without dissimulating itself as something.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 6. (In referring here to 'the present', 'presentation', and to 'being present', Derrida employs the Heideggerian terminology of which he is fond. Roughly speaking, the 'present' is what is available to us in experience; the chief characteristic of *différance* is that, like Heidegger's Being, it is ineluctably hidden.)

And then, even more extravagantly: "Already we have had to delineate *that différance is not*, does not exist . . . it has neither existence nor essence."¹⁴⁸

One important implication of these remarks is that *différance* cannot possibly be understood by anyone who is so firmly under the spell of what Derrida calls the 'classical thinking' of the 'Greco-Western logos' as to be bothered by paradox or contradiction. In short, because of its deeply paradoxical character, Derrida's *différance* provides philosophical respectability for a form of argument that is one of the main weapons of the defenders of the Postmodern Doctrine. That argument goes roughly as follows: "If you don't agree, that only goes to show that you have been unable to escape the trammels of the old way of thinking and follow us into the airy, post-logical realms." As we have seen, Derrida himself sometimes has difficulty in making this leap but the fact that, in his normal confident mode, he is willing to embrace illogicality still provides the defenders of the Postmodern Doctrine with an impressive sanction for the use of one of their favorite rhetorical tools.¹⁴⁹

It is not, perhaps, surprising that the confident enthusiasm of less deeply philosophical proponents of the doctrine is not shaken by Derrida's own occasional inability to break away from the old discourse.¹⁵⁰ What is sur-

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 6. (Italics in original.)

¹⁴⁹ Derrida's frequent recurrence to the 'old' way of talking can be seen as evidence of weakness, confusion, even hypocrisy, but it can also be seen as evidence of his philosophical sincerity, of the fact that eager as he is to present himself to his readers as someone with a smoothly polished 'position', he is driven by the genuine philosophical perplexity he feels to go on thinking as he writes.

¹⁵⁰ There are many points in "Differance" where Derrida shows his ambivalence toward the tradition. For example just after making the remark quoted above about the possibility of moving someday from our present, postmodern, logos into another "violently" different one, he goes on to emphasize that, despite the fact that we are in the process of shedding the discourse that has informed the development of Western civilization, we must strive through study to remain in contact with the logos of our past. "We must stay with the difficulty of this passage [i.e. the ongoing discursive shift] and

prising is the fact that the less scholarly and theoretical champions of the Postmodern Doctrine are apparently not bothered by the fact that Derrida's whole enterprise is intensely and unapologetically *metaphysical*. To put it bluntly, nothing, not the Forms, the Monads, the Noumena, or the Absolute could be any more metaphysical than *différance*. (Derrida explicitly acknowledges this at one point at least: "For us, *différance* remains a metaphysical name and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names, metaphysical."¹⁵¹) This discrepancy between Derrida's position and the position taken by his supporters is made all the more striking by the fact that some postmodernists apparently do not realize that the Postmodern Doctrine is a metaphysical claim. Moreover, the American advocates of postmodern antifoundationalism not only fail to mention the old-style metaphysics which lies beneath their glossy postmodern discourse, they cheerfully continue to practice styles of philosophy which are generally thought of as based on a *rejection* of metaphysics — or at least of any form of metaphysics which posits metaphysical entities so imperceptible and evanescent as *différance*. Stanley Fish, who has perhaps done more than anyone to promote the anti-foundationalist cause in the North American intellectual world, seems, inasmuch as he has any identifiable metaphysical position, to be a radical pragmatist. And pragmatism, of course, in its deification of straight-forwardly observable action, is committed to the rejection of anything as mysterious and intangible as *différance*. Richard Rorty, the most powerful *philosophical* voice among North American postmodernists, also has strong pragmatist leanings, but, even more strikingly, he has

repeat it in the rigorous reading of metaphysics, wherever metaphysics normalizes Western discourse, and not only in the texts of the 'history of philosophy' as rigorously as possible." ("Différance," 22-23.)

¹⁵¹ Derrida, "Différance," 26.

many affinities with the Anglo-American tradition of analytical philosophy and, therefore, to the radical positivism of the Vienna Circle philosophers who ridiculed as gibberish the Heideggerian jargon to which Derrida is so attached.

It is tempting to interpret the dramatic discrepancy between Derrida's ontological commitments and those of North American postmodernists in the following way: Philosophically speaking, the gap between the North American pragmatists and the French poststructuralists is as enormous as it has ever been, but the two cultures have become sufficiently similar for a shared *ideology* to have become possible; and given that fact, thinkers like Fish and Rorty — more interested in the ideological than the philosophical aspects of philosophical ideology — hasten to construct a rationalizing apparatus which supports itself with an appeal to *certain* aspects of a philosophically alien tradition.¹⁵²

***Différance*, Theology, Oppression**

There is another sort of ambivalence in "Différance," but in this case, rather than revealing a way in which Derrida is not typically postmodern, the tension between the opposing attitudes emphasizes his role as a philosophical mentor of the advocates of the doctrine. One striking characteristic of the proponents of the dominant philosophical ideology is that they often seem to present themselves as *both* revolutionaries *and* as defenders of the *status quo*. This is not accidental; this sort of double-sidedness is built right into

¹⁵² In speaking here, and elsewhere, of the possibility of a distinction between philosophical ideology and genuine philosophy, I am not, of course, suggesting that there is, or could be any *test* with which to determine what is ideology and what is real philosophy. *That* will always be an interpretive issue --- i.e. one on which debate and disagreement will always be possible.

the Postmodern Doctrine. As we have seen, a certain element of conservatism — perhaps ‘passivism’ would be a better word — is inevitable as a consequence of the doctrine’s historicism.¹⁵³ However, despite their commitment to a theory which denies discourse-entrapped individuals the possibility of acting independently, postmodern thinkers are fond of suggesting that an important part of the appeal of the Postmodern Doctrine is that in accepting it, one breaks free of oppression.

One way in which the element of political radicalism in Derrida reveals itself is through his use of the term ‘theology.’ He uses the word in a highly abstract way. By setting himself in opposition to the theological, by practicing ‘negative theology’ as he puts it, he is rejecting not only religion but any discursive system which views itself as subject to measurement in terms of non-discursive standards. For Derrida, in other words, ‘theology’ refers to a commitment to foundations. There is a point to his speaking of theology instead of foundationalism, however, one which provides the justification for his extension of the ordinary meaning of the word: By speaking of ‘theology’, Derrida gives the impression that he is specifically attacking religion, whereas he is in fact attacking it only incidentally, as one non-discursive metaphysical system among others. Using this term, he imparts to his writing the *feel* of a familiar, comprehensible and widely admired form of iconoclasm. That this is what is happening is made clear by passages like the following. After describing what he is doing as ‘negative theology’ he goes on to explain what he means by making a contrast with ordinary, ‘positive’ theology which is

¹⁵³ See the discussion of dissent in Chapter Four.

always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable and ineffable mode of being¹⁵⁴

'Presence' is a key term in "Différance." Derrida uses the word to refer to what language and belief would be founded in — *if* they were founded in anything. When he says that 'essence' and 'existence' are the two categories of presence, Derrida is referring to the rationalist and the empiricist branches of 'classical' thought. According to the former, the immutable foundations of discourse are provided by the Platonic meanings that underlie language and make it possible; according to the latter, the foundation is provided by concrete experience. Although these two philosophical traditions are generally regarded as being set against religious thought which is itself the residue of an even earlier *pre-classical* discourse, there is, according to Derrida, a sense in which they can *all* be classified as theology: They are all theories of presence. Pre-classical theologians and classical philosophers are alike in their desperate need for a founding presence of one sort or another.

One way of summing up Derrida's remarks about theology would be to say that he is claiming to be the first genuine atheist — or at least claiming to be the most recent contributor to the first genuinely atheistic philosophical tradition, the scion of the first family of thinkers to have broken free not just of the need for a moral God but of the need for even a 'logical God'. At several points Derrida makes his point in a more secular way by presenting himself not as the 'absolute atheist' but as the 'absolute anarchist' — a sort of philosophical freedom fighter, proudly committed to the overthrow of the

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, "Différance," 6.

tyranny of the old discourse. Perhaps the most striking example of this line of thought occurs early in the essay when Derrida, commenting on the significance of the fact that there is no audible distinction between his coinage, *différance*, and the ordinary word, 'différence,' says:

The 'a' of *différance*, thus is not heard, it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb . . . the family residence and tomb of the proper . . . This stone — provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription is not far from announcing the death of a tyrant.¹⁵⁵

When he speaks of 'the proper' Derrida is referring, once again, to the metaphysical assumptions which underlie the old, pre-postmodern, discourse. But he is doing so, here, in a way that emphasizes the 'political' aspect of his project. The 'proper' is, in part at least, the *respectable*.¹⁵⁶ And the word also suggests, perhaps, that Derrida, in his revolutionary mode, sees himself as a sort of super-Marxist, operating on a rarefied level and arguing, not that *physical* property must be given up, but that the time has come to abandon the very concept of property.¹⁵⁷ In short, when Derrida employs the loaded figures of 'propriety,' 'tyranny,' and 'entombment' as he does here, he shows that he sees himself, in part at least, as a philosophical ideologue, as a propagandist using the power of his rhetoric to prepare the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁶ See the remarks of Derrida's translator, Allan Bass, on the meaning of 'le propre' ("Différance," 4, Note 1.)

¹⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, more orthodox Marxists, cannot be counted on to have much patience with poststructural revolutionaries. Describing the politics of the contributors to *Tel Quel* (a journal with which Derrida has been associated) Terry Eagleton makes a remark that he would presumably think applicable to Derridean politics: "a starry-eyed Western view of the Maoist 'cultural revolution' is naively transplanted to the arena of language, so that political revolution becomes implicitly equated with some ceaseless disruption and overturning. The case betrays an anarchistic suspicion of institutional-ity as such, and ignores the extent to which a certain provisional stability of identity is essential not only for psychical well-being but for revolutionary political agency" [Eagleton, *Ideology*, 197-98.]

way for the new discursive order. These tendencies become even more prominent at another point.

[*Differance*] governs nothing, reigns over nothing, nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *differance*, but *differance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom.¹⁵⁸

The language of 'government,' 'authority,' 'instigation,' and 'subversion' is, of course, reminiscent of the passage we have just been examining. Once again Derrida tries to persuade his readers to convert to the new discourse by tempting them with a vision of heady liberty. Once again there is the tone — somewhat surprising in light of the dry restraint which characterizes most of the essay — of hostility and scorn, of a willingness to take pleasure in *épatant les bourgeois*. What is new here, though, is the way the metaphor shifts, in the last sentence, from politics to psychoanalysis. Now it is no longer simply a matter of being cajoled into rejecting the authority of the church or the state; beyond that, we are told, in order to be free we must also learn to resist our desires and conquer our fears. The most interesting thing about the sentence, from our point of view at least, is that it is an implicit (and perhaps accidental) acknowledgment of the *unnaturalness* of the Postmodern Doctrine — the suggestion that it pushes against a universal human desire for a 'kingdom'. In Chapter Four we considered the possibility that the doctrine might be undermined by arguing that it is incompatible with fundamental social practices; and we have seen how the champions of the doctrine can respond to that criticism by redescribing these practices so they *become* compatible — and how the practices them-

¹⁵⁸ Derrida, "Differance," 22.

selves may seem to be altering at the same time as they are redescribed. The plausibility of this way of defending the Postmodern Doctrine against criticism rests, however, on the assumption that there are no built-in resistances to redescription. Derrida, in raising the possibility of innate desires that work against the leap into the embrace of *differance*, touches on a crucial point: A philosophical ideology that contradicts human nature is not likely to succeed in the long run — whatever virtues it may have in other respects. The defenders of the doctrine insist, of course, that there is no such thing as human nature; but if this claim is to have any persuasive power over the unconverted it must be backed up with argument, not merely made. Derrida, in mentioning the desire for the 'kingdom,' and doing so in a way that acknowledges the importance of this need, shows once again that he is more aware of the difficulties of his position than are many of those who depend on him for philosophical support.

The Self

These remarks about fear, desire, and human nature bring us naturally to the matter of Derrida's attitudes toward the 'subject'. As we saw in taking our original look at the themes and theories that cluster around the anti-foundationalist core of the Postmodern Doctrine, the traditional ethico-metaphysical notion of the self is a favorite target of the postmodernists. They object to the classical self, it will be recalled, because they see it as a theoretical construction of philosophers who, having been deprived of the possibility of basing discourse on immutable Ideas or on a directly accessible external world, resorted to an inner, experiential foundation. This approach was appealing because it seemed that our experience of our own

minds must be immune from the sort of sceptical doubt that had undermined earlier foundations. However, according to Derrida, and the tradition of which he is the current culmination, this is simply not so; he has no more patience with the idea of discourse-independent minds than with the idea of discourse-independent meanings or the idea of a discourse-independent external world. His dismissal of the classical self flows from the Saussurean principle to which he is so devoted: The idea that individual *linguistic* consciousness does not *precede* language, but *follows* it. As he puts it,

the subject . . . is inscribed in language, is a 'function' of language, becomes a SPEAKING subject only by making its speech conform . . . to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences,¹⁵⁹

If our linguistic ability is dependent on *différance*, then it follows that the *thinking* we do with the concepts that are embodied in language must be seen not as originating with us but as an effect of the discourse that surrounds us. And if Derrida is right, this discourse is constantly transforming itself in response to the free play of *différance*, a process which no more belongs to us than does, say, the process of nuclear fusion. But could it not be that there is, nevertheless, some *non-linguistic* consciousness that *does* inhere in the human mind and to which we can appeal for epistemological security? Derrida goes out of his way to raise this question; his answer may not be completely satisfactory but it is illuminating. Its gist is this: If we are tempted to believe that consciousness is possible independently of language, this is only because we are under the sway of a false metaphysical theory.¹⁶⁰ He approaches this question by first asking an imaginary proponent of

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶⁰ As we have seen this strategy is also used by Richard Rorty to disarm any objection to the effect that his rejection of transcendentalia is counter-intuitive

discourse-independent consciousness: What does 'consciousness' mean. He then offers his own, very historicist, very negative, answer: No one, he says — and it is clear that he means, "No philosopher who has credited consciousness with the ability to provide a foundation" — has ever succeeded in distinguishing between the idea of a founding consciousness and the idea of 'presence'.

Just as the category of the subject cannot be, and never has been thought without the reference to presence as *hupokeimenon* or as *ousia*, etc., so the subject as consciousness has never manifested itself except as presence. The privilege granted to consciousness therefore signifies the privilege granted to the present . . . This privilege is the ether of metaphysics¹⁶¹

For Derrida, as we have seen 'presence' is any 'thing' which is solid, enduring, and accessible enough to provide a foundation for belief. Solidity, durability and accessibility are, of course, just what *différance* does not have; in fact, the most precise, if not the most informative way to explain what Derrida means by presence would presumably be simply to say that presence is not *différance*. When Derrida says "consciousness has never manifested itself except as presence," he means, then, that, whenever consciousness is offered as a foundation, what is offered turns out to be something that has all the characteristics of 'presence'. He is presumably referring here to classical empiricism, the 'ideas' of Hume and Locke and the sense-data of twentieth century analytic philosophers *and* to the phenomenological analyses of such thinkers as Husserl. In the last sentence of the passage just quoted, he says bluntly what he thinks of the consciousness in which all these philosophers have had so much faith — that it has no more validity than the notorious ether of nineteenth century physics.

¹⁶¹ Derrida, "Différance," 15.

The crucial characteristics of consciousness as conceived by the philosophical tradition that Derrida is attacking here are, of course, its discourse-independence and its infallibility; without these qualities consciousness would not be able to do the job it is intended to do. In Derrida's opinion, however, one of the great accomplishments of the counter-tradition which leads up to his own work is its demonstration of the discourse-*dependence* and the *fallibility* of consciousness. According to Derrida, we owe our original insights into the inadequacy of consciousness as a foundation to Nietzsche and to Freud. Nietzsche showed that even the most immutable-seeming moral intuitions are the products of contingent culture and Freud showed that, far from being a foundation, consciousness is only an effect or 'determination' of the unknowable, and *nonpresent unconscious*.¹⁶² Important though Nietzsche and Freud were as champions of *différance* (which appears, Derrida says, "almost by name in their texts"¹⁶³) they did not see its real nature as clearly as they might have. The real hero of the history of *différance* is Heidegger whose distinction between beings and Being finally makes it clear that consciousness, inevitably tied as it is to 'presence' and 'beings', and therefore separate from 'Being', cannot have the ultimate, foundational status that the ideologues of the classical tradition have wanted to give it.¹⁶⁴ Derrida's feeling of indebtedness to Heidegger in this matter, as well as his conviction that Nietzsche and Freud were Heidegger's precursors, is made clear by the continuation of the passage

¹⁶² Derrida seems willing to regard the Freudian unconscious almost as a *model* of *différance*.

¹⁶³ Derrida, "Différance," 17.

¹⁶⁴ It is *Hegel*, however, whom Derrida sees as the great *pioneer* of *différance*. (He implies on page 20 that Hegel's mistake was to take a too 'metaphysical' view of *différance*, to see its workings as an orderly, logical progression in which the superseded conceptual materials of earlier stages was incorporated without loss. According to Derrida we are constantly losing obsolete bits of discourse — and there is no progress.)

quoted above. Commenting on Heidegger's distinction between presence (or beings) and Being, Derrida states that its importance is that it reveals the secondary, dependent nature of presence. It shows that

presence — and specifically consciousness. [can] no longer [be seen] as the absolutely central form of Being but [must be regarded] as a "determination" and as an "effect." A determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*. . . Before being so radically and purposely the gesture of Heidegger, this gesture [i.e. the granting of predominance to Being or *différance*] was also made by Nietzsche and Freud, both of whom, as is well known, and sometimes in a very similar fashion, put consciousness into question in its assured certainty of itself. Now is it not remarkable that they both did so on the basis of the motif of *différance*? ¹⁶⁵

Whether or not Derrida's conflation of *différance* and Being is legitimate, it is true that, in his later writings at least, Heidegger sees Being and *language* as intimately related — a view vividly expressed by the remark, quoted by Derrida at the very end of "Différance," to the effect that "Being speaks always and everywhere through language."¹⁶⁶ This conviction, in combination with the belief that Being is fundamental, implies a commitment to some form of discursivism and that, perhaps, is all that is required to show that Derrida is quite right in seeing Heidegger as a source of support.

¹⁶⁵ "Différance," 16-17.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 52. (Quoted by Derrida, "Différance," 27)

CHAPTER SIX: RESISTANCE

As I have already mentioned, despite the growing power of the Postmodern Doctrine there are still powerful thinkers who oppose it — or have serious misgivings about accepting it. We will discuss two of them, Ronald Dworkin and George Steiner; before embarking on that discussion however, it is necessary to say something about Jürgen Habermas, a philosopher who in some ways has a far stronger claim than either Steiner or Dworkin to be considered a champion of anti-postmodernity.

Jürgen Habermas

The goal of Habermas' vast project is to rescue the Enlightenment conviction that reason is a positive, socially beneficial force — an ideal he feels has been unjustly discredited by the long-running critique of post-Hegelian anti-rationalism. It is this critique, originating philosophically in the work of Nietzsche and sociologically in the writing of Max Weber, that is the source of the anti-rationalism of late twentieth postmodernists such as Foucault and Lyotard. At the same time as he opposes this Nietzschean strand of post-Hegelian thought through his attempted rehabilitation of reason, however, Habermas also engages in a critique of Marx. He believes that Marx was mistaken in his belief that there are rational processes immanent in capitalism which will eventually lead to its downfall. In Habermas' opinion, the only form of rationality immanent in capitalism is an 'instrumental' rationality, the effect of which is to protect capitalism rather than to undermine it.

At the heart of Habermas' position is his notion of 'communicative rationality'. Unlike the instrumental rationality capitalists use in figuring out *how* to reach their capitalistic goals, communicative rationality is a matter of thinking, and arguing, about what society's goals *should* be. Habermas believes that it was a commitment to the efficacy of communicative reasoning that inspired the humanitarian hopes and ideals of the Enlightenment. He also concurs with Max Weber's claim that, since the rise of capitalism in the early part of the nineteenth century, less and less attention has been paid to goal-oriented reasoning and more and more to thinking about the best means by which to achieve the economic goals we uncritically assume to be rational. Habermas feels, however, that Weber is excessively pessimistic about the possibility of reviving communicative, goal-oriented reasoning within a modern context. He believes Weber ignores the fact that remnants of communicative reasoning have survived in the form of a humanitarian, but distinctively modern, counter-tradition that manifests itself in a slowly increasing concern about human rights, individual equality, and the alleviation of suffering.

Habermas contends that the main opposition to this tradition of humane, modern rationalism comes from the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine; that he should think so is scarcely surprising in light of the intense anti-rationalism of much postmodern thought. For example, as we have seen, Foucault thinks reason is the source of all that is undesirable in our world.¹⁶⁷ (Unlike many on both sides of the debate over 'postmodernism'. Habermas is not bothered by the word itself. He uses it to label his opponents. and he applies it not simply to a late-twentieth-century

¹⁶⁷ See the section entitled, "Foucault: Knowledge as Oppressor," 55-58

phenomenon but to a philosophical trend that dates back at least to Nietzsche and which leads not only to Foucault but, by another route, to Heidegger and Derrida.)¹⁶⁸

Despite the intensity of Habermas' attack on postmodernity — and despite the unparalleled erudition with which he backs it up — his work is not particularly relevant to the critique of postmodernism undertaken in this essay. In fact, if our central exegetical claim is sound — and antifoundationalism *is* at the heart of postmodernity — then we have no choice but to conclude that Habermas is not a genuine antifoundationalist and that, therefore, his position does not really constitute a serious challenge to the Postmodern Doctrine. For Habermas, the fundamental objects of philosophical inquiry are 'cognitive interests' — invariant human proclivities toward technical, practical and 'emancipatory' inquiry. The last of these, the emancipatory interest, provides the basis for his project of re-establishing the social importance of goal-oriented reasoning. In *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, Thomas McCarthy suggests that the cognitive interests are 'transcendental' in the sense that they are invariant characteristics of human nature: "Although the cognitive interests, considered from the perspective of the different processes of inquiry, have a transcendental status, they have their basis in the natural history of the human species."¹⁶⁹ And in the same passage, McCarthy goes on to remove any possible doubt about what he means by 'transcendental' referring to the first of "the basic elements of Habermas's theory of cognitive interests [as] a rejection of the

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, Chapter Four of Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, entitled "The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point."

¹⁶⁹ Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1978), 59

'objectivist illusion' according to which the world is conceived as a universe of facts independent of the knower."¹⁷⁰ Even if we grant that the history of philosophy justifies McCarthy in using the word 'transcendental' in the way he does here, there can be no doubt that Habermas' cognitive interests are not transcendental in the sense of being mind- and culture-independent — and from the point of view of this essay that is the only relevant sense of the word.¹⁷¹ Another commentator, Russell Keat, makes much the same point by means of a contrast between Habermas and Kant

Habermas's major departure from Kant consists in denying that the object-constituting categories are imposed by a transcendental consciousness, and insisting instead that they are imposed by the human species.¹⁷²

Whatever the theoretical merits of Habermas' concept of cognitive interests, it is clear that an allegedly universal human proclivity cannot play the same sort of foundational role as the transcendentalia. In the first place, Habermas is begging the question against his opponents by giving a foundational status to an allegedly universal human devotion to emancipatory reason.¹⁷³ As we have seen, it is one of the primary contentions of post-modern thought that far from being 'invariant' in human beings, rationality is a contingent and escapable condition. So postmodernists will want to

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷¹ This is made all the clearer by a passage from Habermas' *Theory and Practice* which McCarthy quotes in the same context: "These cognitive interests are of significance neither for the psychology nor for the sociology of knowledge, nor for the critique of ideology in any narrower sense; for they are invariant. [They are not] influences on cognition that have to be eliminated for the sake of the objectivity of knowledge, rather they themselves determine the aspect under which reality can be objectified and thus made accessible to experience (in the first place. They are for all subjects capable of speech and action, the necessary conditions of the possibility of experience that can claim to be objective." Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 8-9. (Quoted by McCarthy, *Jürgen Habermas*, 58.)

¹⁷² Russell Keat, *The Politics of Social Theory* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1981), 74

¹⁷³ McCarthy speaks of the 'quasi-transcendental' status of cognitive interests [*Jürgen Habermas*, op. cit., 59.]

interrupt Habermas even before he gets his project underway, challenging his contention that we have no choice but to be reasonable. Moreover, even if we were to agree with Habermas about the universality of human rationality, we would not be able to appeal to this capacity in order to solve puzzles of the sort discussed on the first page of this essay. We would not, in other words, be able to find in Habermas any relief from the frustration we feel when we are 'told' that no trans-cultural evaluations — of the quality of draftsmanship or anything else — are possible. The uneasiness induced by that sort of experience can only be resolved by a commitment to the idea of a mind- and culture-independent 'other' against which human beliefs and judgments are to be measured. To claim, for example, that a particular drawing is good despite the fact that it is unappreciated in the current cultural context, is precisely to claim that it is good quite independently of anything 'in' or 'of' us. To interpret such explicitly and irreducibly trans-cultural judgments as implicitly based on a biological constant (for which there is no independent evidence) is, in the first place, to pretend they are something that they are not. In the second place, it is to weaken rather than to strengthen their plausibility: These judgments are, *ex hypothesi*, ones on which there is unresolvable disagreement and the presence of such disagreement eliminates the possibility that a biological constant is at work.

In light of all this, it seems reasonable to conclude that, despite his opposition to postmodernity, Habermas cannot be considered a genuine foundationalist. Indeed, one can go farther and say that his willingness to give 'foundational' status to a mere species capacity shows that he does not even feel the sort of *temptation* towards a commitment to real foundationalism

that is evident in the thinking of the writers whom we will be considering in the second and third sections of this chapter.

It might be protested in Habermas' defense that, despite his theory of cognitive interest, his foundationalist credentials are established by his commitment to the idea of a culture-independent nature. As we have seen — for example in our discussions of Kuhn and Foucault — however much they might resist acknowledging it, antifoundationalists who have the courage of their convictions are ultimately forced to deny the existence of an independent nature. So if Habermas insists on the independence of nature from culture, then perhaps he is a foundationalist after all. Russell Keat for one is convinced that Habermas *is* committed to the idea of an independent nature. In support of this claim, he quotes the following passage from *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Speaking there of the 'autonomy of nature' Habermas says:

Its independence manifests itself in our ability to learn to master natural processes only to the extent that we subject ourselves to them. This elementary experience is expressed in the language of natural 'laws' which we must 'obey'. The externality of nature manifests itself in the contingency of its ultimate constants. No matter how far our power of technical control over nature is extended, nature retains a substantial core that does not reveal itself to us.¹⁷⁴

This seems clear enough, but the effect of the quotation is somewhat weakened by Keat's admission in a footnote that "strictly, this is Habermas's account of Marx's view, but he clearly endorses it here."¹⁷⁵ Even assuming that Keat's assessment of Habermas' endorsement is correct, a pointed question is raised by the fact that he finds it necessary to support his con-

¹⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. H.J. Shapiro (Heinemann: London, 1972), 17. [Quoted by Keat, *Social Theory*, 73-4]

¹⁷⁵ Keat, *Social Theory*, 214n.

tention about Habermas' realist convictions by quoting Habermas' synopsis of another philosopher's views.¹⁷⁶ Such worries may be set aside, however, because the crucial point is not so much whether or not Habermas, here and there, declares his allegiance to independent nature but whether or not the idea of independent nature plays an important role in his thought. What has been said just above about the theoretical importance he places on the idea of cognitive interests — which, being *interests*, cannot be independent — must make it clear that, for Habermas, independent nature is, at best, highly forgettable and remote. It is true, to be sure, that Habermas' interests are vaguely based in biology, but Habermas does not approach them through biology: He *starts* with them. In short, the only reasonable conclusion seems to be that Habermas' affirmations of realism are to be taken no more seriously than Foucault's ironic acknowledgement of the possibility of a 'history of the referent'.¹⁷⁷ Habermas may avow realism, but even if he does so, he clearly goes on to operate on the assumption that, although there is an external world, we cannot, while doing philosophy, take it into consideration. Instead, he believes, we must proceed as if there were not anything beyond discourse and concern ourselves only with discursive objects. There is an enormous difference between this view and the foundationalist theory that I want to set against the Postmodern Doctrine. As I have repeatedly acknowledged, according to the sort of foundationalism I am proposing, our relationship to the 'external', non-discursive world of transcendent values and standards may well be ineluctably agnostic — we may be incapable of figuring out precisely what the

¹⁷⁶ To this thought must be added another: Given the fact that Habermas is a direct philosophical descendant of Hegel, it can scarcely be *assumed* that he is a realist

¹⁷⁷ See page 40-41.

transcendental values and standards are. But to make that concession is not to say that independent nature drops out of consideration as it does for Habermas. Indeed, according to our sort of foundationalism, we must *constantly* be taking the transcendental realm into consideration: While remaining uncertain of just which judgments of truth and value are accurate, with respect to every judgment we make, we must, be aware, that its accuracy — if it *is* accurate — lies in its accordance with transcendental standards.

I hope that enough has now been said to show that, despite the scope and brilliance of Habermas' critique of postmodernity, he is not *fundamentally* opposed to postmodernism. There is, however, an additional point that should be briefly made in the hopes of casting further light on the gap between Habermas' position and the one we have been developing. One way of explaining his failure to oppose postmodernism on the most basic level is to point out that he cannot because he is a *pragmatist*. Pragmatists believe that the social goals which are to be arrived at by the exercise of reason — or by any other process — are, necessarily, the product of an *activity*, of 'practice'. They cannot make any sense of a contention that any aspect of a particular society is immoral unless that criticism itself issues from social activity of some sort — and from this it follows that no genuine pragmatist can ever be a genuine foundationalist. Pragmatism, in short, is a form of discursivism — and despite his distaste for many of the aspects of postmodernity, Habermas cannot escape that fact.

George Steiner

Viewed from the standpoint of traditional metaphysics, or, for that matter, from the standpoint of traditional common sense, the Postmodern Doctrine is a radical theory. This, I believe has been amply shown by the discussion of the doctrine in Chapter Two and Three and the examination, in Chapter Five, of a text that comes as close as any to being a philosophical testament of postmodernity. The theory's radicality might be summed up as follows: It asks us to believe that ultimately, everything in the universe is a discursive object; it tells us that trees and stones, atoms and galaxies, and pains and passions are just as much products of the culture we happen to inhabit as are, say, systems of government and fashions in clothing. In short, the confrontation between the traditional philosophical ideology and its powerful challenger raises fundamental issues. This realization will not reassure anyone who is tempted to reject the Postmodern Doctrine on the grounds that it seems to be forcing us to abandon fundamental social practices or at least to perform implausible feats of contortion in order to reinterpret them. Clearly, the attempt to undermine the doctrine is not a project to be taken on lightly. Still, there are serious thinkers who are unintimidated.

In his recent book, *Real Presences*, George Steiner makes what might be called the Theological Response to the Postmodern Doctrine. He says, in effect, that the doctrine must be rejected because it is atheistic. Steiner insists that God is palpably present in our experience of great art and, most dramatically, in our experience of music. When Steiner speaks of God, he apparently does not have any version of the Judaeo-Christian deity in mind or, indeed, any personage who would be attractive to the orthodox adherents of any institutionalized religion. Steiner's 'God' seems to have two character-

istics: First, it must be transcendent — above and beyond not just the happenstance of history and culture, but also beyond the contingencies of human brain and body; second, although it need not be a personage of any sort (and certainly not a *male* personage), it must provide some sort of 'objective correlative' for our deepest and most moving experiences.

Steiner makes no attempt to *demonstrate* the existence of his God. He merely insists, in a text whose power lies in its eloquence, its erudition and, above all, in the intensity of its conviction, that reflection on profound aesthetic experience compels us to acknowledge the transcendent.

In a typical passage he writes:

In ways so obvious as to make any statement a tired cliché, yet of an indefinable and tremendous nature, music puts our being as men and women in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analyzable. Music is plainly uncircumscribed by the world as the latter is an object of scientific determination and practical harnessing. The meanings of the meaning of music transcend. It has long been, it continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed.¹⁷⁸

And at another point:

The limits of our language are not, *pace* Wittgenstein, those of our world (and as a man immersed in music, he knew that). The arts are most wonderfully rooted in substance, in the human body, in stone, in pigment, in the twanging of gut or the weight of wind on reeds. All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there. Which is to say, very plainly, that it is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and 'the other'.¹⁷⁹

Steiner's 'argument' is not, of course, likely to have much effect on anyone who has confidently adopted the postmodern attitude. He sees this and ac-

¹⁷⁸ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 218.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

cepts it, bluntly admitting at one point that "the claims of nothingness cannot be adequately answered."¹⁸⁰ This should scarcely surprise us because we have already been forced to admit the impossibility of making a successful logical assault on the fortress of the Postmodern Doctrine. It is to be hoped, however, that there is some way of resisting the doctrine more effectively than Steiner does. His approach can 'work' only on the converted — on people who *do* have deep experiences of high art and who are led by these experiences into an irresistible yearning for transcendence. The problem is that in the postmodern era not many people seem to have such experiences. And postmodern thinkers, even those who devote the bulk of their energy to the study of high art, do not seem to be among the few who do. We are facing here a problem encountered by all appeals to experience: They will have little if any effect on those who have not had the relevant experience; it seems improbable, for instance, that anyone has ever been convinced of the existence of God by *another's* experience. Moreover the idea of an appeal to the experience of *art* seems to be particularly unpromising in light of the fact that our experience of art is notoriously non-universal. Even within a single, relatively homogeneous culture there will be enormous variations in the breadth and depth of aesthetic experience from one individual to another — and between widely separated times and places the differences will be far more dramatic. In short, the postmodern comment on Steiner's position would be: "Of course, he believes that art reveals a reality that transcends discourse; he is a highly cultivated product of a culture that is committed to that view."

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 199.

There is a further weakness in Steiner's appeal to the experience of art as an 'argument' in support of his commitment to transcendence. Although he does not *need* anything like a Judaeo-Christian God to make his point, he does, in the end, leave the reader with the impression that that is the sort of theological entity he has in mind. Certainly the *art* that he has in mind — if for no other reason than because it is the art which happens to have moved him — is the art of a thoroughly Christian, pre-Nietzschean Europe. He says nothing whatsoever of non-European art, and the art of Europe after the death of God interests him only as long as he is able to see it is an expression of grief. He finds no sustenance whatsoever in the art that he sees as emerging from an acceptance of God's total absence. Indeed, he scarcely seems able to believe that such work can really *be* art. Because of this narrowness of scope, it is difficult to read Steiner's text without feeling that we are in the presence of a veiled plea for some sort of return to, or, perhaps, a 'revival' of a familiar, and distinctly parochial God, a being whose great power ensures the immortality of our souls, a *personage*, presumably male and certainly having markedly European interests and morals.¹⁸¹ In creating the impression that this is the sort of god he has in mind, Steiner is once again playing into the hands of the postmodernists who will find in his reactionary theology conclusive evidence that he is a man entrapped in the rapidly petrifying sediments of a dead discourse.

I sympathize, of course, with Steiner's resistance to the Postmodern Doctrine, with his unwillingness to give up 'old-fashioned' idea that there are things which transcend not only the constantly shifting discursive

¹⁸¹ Pages 227 and 228 of *Real Presences* provide a good example of a passage where Steiner's strong tendency toward Judaeo-Christian orthodoxy becomes almost explicit.

world but which are also absolutely independent of the contingencies of the human body. I also sympathize with his belief that there is a strikingly and essentially transcendent element in our reaction to art and that the Post-modern Doctrine's attempt to interpret aesthetic experience as thoroughly mundane underlines its inability to rationalize aesthetic experience. But, despite my sympathies, I feel that Steiner goes too fast — and he goes far too far. His headlong rush into orthodox religion is, to use a word he uses himself, *embarrassing*. Moreover, given the rarity of the combination of intelligence, passion and erudition displayed by Steiner, his theological compulsion must be a frustration to many who, similarly distressed by postmodernism, look to his writing for support and inspiration. Can it really be that there is nowhere to turn to but the Church?

Although it will seem to some an even more embarrassing destination than the church, there is another sanctuary from the grim grip of postmodernity: a commitment to the existence of genuinely transcendent standards. As we shall see in the final chapter, when we come to discuss this possibility in some detail, it is only cold comfort that we can hope to find in that direction. There is no solace there for our fears of death and pain, no way of guaranteeing our scientific accuracy, moral rectitude or aesthetic sensitivity. All we can hope for is a plausible way of giving metaphysical respectability to our conviction that our beliefs and our values are more than merely a reflection of the happenstance of our cultural environment.

It seems that the possibility of escaping into secular foundationalism rather than into theology must be something that Steiner has carefully considered. He does not, however, so much as hint at it in *Real Presences*. What considerations might have led him to have plunged into an archaic, culture-bound

religion without even considering the alternative of finding a foundation for his transcendentalism in some less uplifting but more rigorous metaphysical theory? Is it simply that Steiner's temperament and his interests propel him in a theological direction? Or could it be that he feels that secular foundationalism will have even less appeal than the religious sort? There is probably at least an element of truth in the latter suggestion. Foundationalism is a philosophical position. Religion, at least the sort of intuitive, experience-based faith that attracts Steiner, is not. Perhaps he feels that by going in this direction he can get out of reach of the verbally-adept postmodern ironists. Certainly there is plenty of evidence that, for all his courage, Steiner feels the need to placate his postmodern antagonists. As I have already noted, he repeatedly concedes that they command the field of battle. And it is certainly true that someone such as Foucault would be less likely to be harsh on a proclamation of faith that betokens immersion, at a fairly rudimentary level, in an outdated discourse than with an attempt to *prop up* such a discourse by reviving an old philosophical ideology.

The nervousness that Steiner feels with respect to the dominant philosophical ideology is made sharply evident by a remarkable concession he makes, almost in passing, in the final pages of his book:

What I affirm is the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable. And I would vary Yeats's axiom so as to say: no man can read fully, can answer, answeringly to the aesthetic, whose 'nerve and blood' are at peace in sceptical rationality, are now at home in immanence and verification. We must read as if.¹⁸²

¹⁸² Steiner, *Presences*, 229.

The paragraph begins with a statement of Steiner's basic position, which by this stage of the book will be more than familiar to the reader — and ends with an unexpected, and undeveloped, aside to the effect that all this God-talk is not *really* to be taken seriously. I do not see any way to interpret this startling and confusing remark except as an attempt to placate any advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine who may have read this far — no doubt with ever-mounting fury. But surely this is a too-costly concession. How can we possibly hope to protect ourselves against the death of God by pretending he exists? How indeed can conscious pretence ever be a substitute for sincere belief? How can we take Steiner's opposition to postmodernism seriously if, in the end, he tells us, in a distressingly postmodern way, that he does not *really* believe all these surprising things he has said about God's presence?

These are certainly questions which Steiner should have answered, but it would be a mistake to be too hard on him for the way he vacillates here. He is not the only powerful critic of the Postmodern Doctrine who does not always have the courage of his convictions. Perhaps such placatory gestures are a psychological if not a logical necessity — a symptom of the influence of the postmodern contention that no one escapes the clutches of their discourse.

Ronald Dworkin

Ronald Dworkin's anti-postmodern project is more philosophically subtle than Steiner's, but it is ultimately even less satisfactory. Dworkin does not explicitly confront the proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine; indeed, he goes so far, at a crucial point in his argument, as to enlist the support of

Hans-Georg Gadamer who, while not, perhaps, a postmodernist, is a central figure in the related, hermeneutic tradition from which the Postmodern Doctrine emerges. Dworkin's explicit target is the American pragmatist tradition. But this tradition, as we have seen in our discussion of Richard Rorty, has a great deal in common with postmodernism, and its persistent popularity is undoubtedly a major reason for the welcome that European poststructuralism has received in so many areas of American intellectual life. So in attacking pragmatism Dworkin is also taking on the Postmodern Doctrine.

A major issue, perhaps *the* major issue, in the philosophy of law is this: Is there a uniquely correct judgment in hard cases? 'Hard cases' are those in which the judges who consider the cases, and the legal community in general, cannot come to any consensus as to what the correct judgment is, even though they are in agreement as to the facts of the case and also as to which statutes and common-law precedents are relevant. The unresolvable disagreement in these cases is disagreement not as to what the law is but as to how it should be interpreted and, indeed, this issue is just one instance of a general and ancient philosophical puzzle about interpretation: If there are numerous ways of interpreting a text and if there is no consensus even among acknowledged experts in the field as to which interpretation is correct, then how can it reasonably be maintained that there *is* a correct interpretation?¹⁸³ There is a temptation to respond by quickly adopting a scep-

¹⁸³ This issue goes back at least to the debate between the upholders of mainstream Christians and the Gnostic dissidents who gloried in their talent for endless reinterpretation of the scriptures. "Irenaeus describes various gnostic interpretations of the creation story and then complains that 'while they claim such things as these concerning the creation, every one of them generates something new every day, according to his ability, for, among them no one is considered mature (or 'initiated') who does not develop some enormous fictions.' Consequently, gnostic Christians neither sought nor found any consensus concerning what the story meant but regarded Genesis 1-3 rather

tical position: If the experts cannot agree, then we must conclude that there is no correct answer — and this is roughly the position taken by the legal pragmatists. There is a major problem with this sort of scepticism, however: If the judges who argue fruitlessly about the correct decision in a particular case, or the literary critics who can never come to an agreement about the correct interpretation of a poem, are not engaged in an effort to find *the* correct interpretation — as they clearly cannot be if there is no such thing — then, what *are* they doing? The legal pragmatists have an answer to this question; they contend that the judges who make decisions in hard cases are not interpreting the law at all; they are *making* it. There is a serious problem with this answer, however: If these judges are really making law, then how is it that they are so widely and confidently taken to be *interpreting* it? Can it be that our whole legal system is based on deceit?

Whether or not the legal pragmatists are capable of providing a satisfactory answer to this last question, Dworkin certainly does not think that they can do so. The goal of his entire enterprise is to find a way of looking at legal practice which grants that there are irresolvable hard cases but which avoids being led by this fact into any sort of scepticism.

Dworkin provides an explicit and revealing account of his position on hard cases in the essay, "Is There Really No Answer in Hard Cases?"¹⁸⁴ In the first pages he quickly dispenses with two superficially plausible arguments in favour of the pragmatist thesis. According to the first of these arguments, there may be cases in which a judge is unable to give a 'Yes' or 'No'

like a fugal melody upon which they continually improvised new variations, all of which, Bishop Irenaeus said, were 'full of blasphemy'" Elaine Pagels *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), 64.

¹⁸⁴ Ronald Dworkin, "Is There Really No Right Answer in Hard Cases?" in *A Matter of Principle*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

answer to a question of law such as, "Is this contract valid?" because there is a sort of 'logical space' between the two responses. In other words, there may be contracts which cannot correctly be said to be either valid or invalid, just as there are people who cannot correctly be said to be either young or old. Dworkin's response to this line of reasoning is to introduce the idea of a 'dispositive concept'. Such concepts do not allow any space to exist between themselves and their negation; to say that the concept of a contract is dispositive therefore is, to say that it follows from the fact that a document is a contract that either it is valid or it is invalid. It is logically impossible for it to be neither — or both. As Dworkin points out, dispositive concepts are characteristically found in legal contexts and in quasi-legal ones such as the regulation of sports and games. There is a very good reason for employing such concepts in those areas: Their whole point is to facilitate a practice of some sort. If tennis umpires were allowed the option of judging that a ball has landed neither in nor out of the court, the practice of competitive tennis would not survive for long; if judges were allowed to declare a contract neither valid nor invalid, the practice of commerce would soon become impossible.

The second argument considered by Dworkin attempts to defend the 'no-right-answer thesis' by appealing to the role that undeniably vague concepts like 'sacrilege' often play in the law. While admitting that vague concepts cannot be avoided, Dworkin insists that their presence does not mean that there is no uniquely correct judgement. He cannot, however, respond to the second argument as straightforwardly as to the first; his reply involves an appeal to the basic concepts of his own complex theory of jurispru-

dence.¹⁸⁵ The crux of that theory is that although legal decisions are genuine judgments and therefore capable of being uniquely correct, their correctness cannot be understood as founded in the letter of statute law — or even in statute law and precedent taken together. According to Dworkin, hard decisions are based partly in the 'observable' facts of statute and precedent and partly on *interpretation*. When judges do not feel that the facts of the case and the demonstrable facts of the law clearly indicate in what direction they should decide the case, they must interpret the law, or, to put it more accurately, they must choose between a variety of *possible* interpretations. They proceed by looking for the interpretation which best fits both the ethical and political principles originally motivating the law *and* the earlier interpretations to be found in the record of precedent. This, then, is Dworkin's reply to the suggestion that there can be no right answer in hard cases because the law inevitably involves vague terms: The presence of vagueness *does* mean that judges must interpret the law but it does *not* mean they cannot arrive at a unique correct interpretation.

The third of the three arguments Dworkin considers is what he calls the argument from positivism. According to this line of reasoning, to say that a proposition, *p*, is law is to say that at some point a duly constituted authority, a 'sovereign', has *decreed* that it is law. (The 'positivism' of the theory lies in the fact that it asserts a logical tie between a proposition's status as law and the occurrence of the publicly observable act of the sovereign's decree.) As we have seen, the first two attempts to show that there *is* no right answer in hard cases and that, therefore, some form of pragmatism must be

¹⁸⁵ A theory which was still in the process of development at the time that "No Right Answer?" was written (1978) and which appeared in a complete version in *Law's Empire*.

accepted have been rejected on the grounds that they do not establish the possibility of meaningfully making statements like, "The contract is neither valid nor invalid." Positivism, as Dworkin presents it, has the same goal; it claims that "This contract is neither valid nor invalid," will be meaningful when the 'sovereign' has neither decreed nor not decreed the validity of such a contract. Dworkin rejects this contention. The gist of his response is that, however the positivists' theory is construed, it has the consequence that statements like, "The sovereign has decreed that contracts of this sort are valid," are truth-functionally equivalent to statements like, "Contracts of this sort are valid." But if that is so then 'positivism' cannot be successful in establishing the no-right-answer thesis because it will be possible to use against it the arguments already employed to show that there can be no 'logical space' between statements like "The contract is valid," and "The contract is not valid."

Despite the apparent force of his arguments Dworkin resists the temptation to leap to the conclusion that there are right answers in hard cases and embarks on a strenuous attempt to find a theory which would allow the possibility of legal propositions which are neither true nor false. He introduces an analogy between legal debates and debates concerning a certain type of claim about literary works. The sorts of statements he has in mind are ones about fictional characters. As he points out, it can be argued with at least some plausibility that there are three types of statement of this sort: those that are corroborated by the text and are therefore true; those that are explicitly denied by the text and therefore false; and those which are neither corroborated nor denied and which are therefore neither true nor false. He then goes on, however, to argue that if we understand the process of literary

criticism properly, we will see that propositions in the third category — the category that is comparable to legal hard cases — *can* be shown to be true or false. Such a proposition can be shown to be true if it can be shown to 'fit' better than its negation with the statements about the character which *are* explicitly corroborated by the text. In other words, a statement about a literary work can be shown to be true, even though it is neither stated nor strictly implied by the text itself, if it can be shown that it is not only compatible with the text but that it elucidates the text more successfully than do other statements which are also compatible with it.

As his example of a statement about a work of literature which is neither explicitly corroborated nor explicitly denied by the text, Dworkin takes the claim that David Copperfield has a love affair with his friend Steerforth. He argues that this proposition

provides a better fit than its negation with propositions already established because it explains in a more satisfactory way why David was what he was, or said what he said, or did what he did, according to those already established propositions¹⁸⁶

Dworkin goes out of his way to make it clear that he sees the point he is making here as a description of the actual practice of literary scholars. He acknowledges, however, the need to face up to an obvious and superficially cogent objection to his position. He discusses this objection, which he calls the 'argument from controversy' in the final part of his article. The difficulty is that, even if Dworkin is right in his contention that much the practice of literary scholarship can be seen as an attempt to show that certain statements about works of literature are true because of their 'fit' with the text, he cannot plausibly claim that there is much agreement among schol-

¹⁸⁶ Dworkin, "No Right Answer?" 136.

ars as to *which* of these claims have been shown to be true. Nor can he deny that the natural response to the lack of consensus is to conclude that there is no way of showing that, for example, David had an affair with Steerforth. The rationale is simple and tempting: If the experts cannot agree however much time and effort they put into discussing the matter, then there *is* no correct answer.

Dworkin's reply to the argument from controversy centers on his distinction between what he calls 'hard' facts and another kind of fact which it is tempting to refer to as 'soft' although Dworkin does not actually do so. Hard facts are 'demonstrable' facts — publicly observable, scientifically verifiable. The mistake of the proponents of the argument from controversy is, Dworkin argues, the positivist error of thinking that hard facts are the *only* facts. He believes that the practice of literary debate, as he has described it, shows that there is another sort of fact.

The literary exercise I imagine . . . does require the assumption, I think, that there are facts of narrative consistency, like the fact that the hypothesis that David had a sexual relationship with Steerforth provides a more satisfactory explanation of what he did than the hypothesis he did not¹⁸⁷

In the final pages of his article Dworkin returns to his main subject, legal debate, and applies there the model he has developed through his consideration of *literary* debate. He argues that just as a Dickens scholar can support the claim that David and Steerforth were lovers by appealing to soft but perfectly respectable facts of narrative consistency, a judge can support the opinion that a certain decision in a hard case is the uniquely correct one by appealing to similar soft facts — on the one hand, facts about the fit between

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 138.

the decision and legal propositions that are taken as settled and, on the other hand, facts about the decision's ability to "capture the rights people in fact have."¹⁸⁸

From the point of view of our inquiry into contemporary philosophical ideology, however, the most interesting remarks in the entire article are those Dworkin makes, when first introducing the distinction between the two kinds of fact, concerning what might be called the 'metaphysical status' of soft facts. He makes a point of emphasizing that there is nothing in the soft facts — the facts of narrative consistency — to embarrass the up-to-date philosopher. In particular, he asserts that there is nothing in the slightest 'Platonic' or transcendent about them.¹⁸⁹ He seems perfectly willing to agree that the merest suggestion to that effect would be abhorrent to the contemporary philosophical mind. (It is hard not to interpret Dworkin's eagerness on this matter as an expression, perhaps unconscious, of his loyalty to the Postmodern Doctrine — or, if not that, at least a sign of his anxiety about incurring the hostility of the doctrine's champions.) Dworkin's refusal to grant transcendent status to his interpretive facts raises a question: If these facts are not hard, not tied to anything observable, and yet not in any way Platonic or transcendent, then, just what sort of thing are they? His proposed resolution of the puzzle of hard cases can be successful only if he develops his notion of soft facts in a convincing way. He makes an attempt to do this by suggesting that they may be *moral* facts, facts which as he puts it, "are not simply physical facts or facts about the thoughts or atti-

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 143.

¹⁸⁹ More is said in the next chapter about the connection between Platonism and transcendentalia.

tudes of people.”¹⁹⁰ This sentence by itself might create the impression that Dworkin is talking about facts that somehow transcend the physical and mental worlds, but he hastens to deny that that is what he is doing.

I do not mean that there are what are sometimes called “transcendent” or “Platonic” moral facts; indeed I do not know what these would be. I mean only to suppose that a particular social institution like slavery might be unjust, not because people think it unjust or have conventions according to which it is unjust, or anything of the sort, but just because slavery is unjust¹⁹¹

In the first of the two sentences just quoted, Dworkin unequivocally rejects the idea of transcendent moral standards and gives the reader the impression that he is about to go on to give an explanation of how ‘moral facts’ can be real *facts* — as opposed to mere opinions or prescriptions — without being either ‘hard’ or Platonic. He leads us to expect a description of a third sort of solidly respectable fact. But we do not get what we expect. All we get is a repetition of what we already know, that Dworkin as an anti-pragmatist does not want to justify his moral convictions by appeal to cultural conventions. We are offered no explanation of how slavery can ‘just be’ wrong and yet that there not be even one genuinely transcendent fact. A postmodernist sympathetic to Dworkin might try to help him out here by suggesting that he has in mind a way of settling ‘hard’ questions by appeal to ‘objective’ discourse. But Dworkin’s explicit rejection of any sort of tie between culture and morality seems to eliminate that possibility: Discourse may be independent of human mentality but it can scarcely be independent of culture. We apparently have no choice but to conclude that, at a critical point in his argument, Dworkin falls into obfuscation.

¹⁹⁰ Dworkin, “No Right Answer?” 138.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

Things are further beclouded when Dworkin says "I shall not in this essay try to make plausible the idea that moral facts exist, but I shall try to support the idea that some facts beside hard facts do."¹⁹² This remark is peculiar indeed given the fact that he has evidently introduced the frustratingly undeveloped idea of moral facts as a way of substantiating his insistence that there are non-hard facts. I suspect though, that Dworkin does have a reason for introducing moral facts here even if he goes on not only to deny that moral facts could be transcendental but also to disclaim any actual commitment even to *non*-transcendent moral facts. I suspect he realizes that, despite being ideologically disreputable at the moment, the notion of genuinely transcendent moral truths is a familiar and plausible idea, and he hopes, semi-consciously perhaps, that despite his own disavowals, some of that familiarity and plausibility will rub off on his own positive conception of what philosophically acceptable 'soft' facts might be like.

In summary, we can say that Dworkin fails in his attempt to use the notion of moral facts as support for his contention that an appeal to soft facts can justify claims about *the* correct interpretation of a law or a literary text, and we can add that, in doing so, he reveals strong but strikingly mixed feelings about transcendentalia. It does not follow from this failure, however that he cannot, in *any* way show that there is a third category of fact that is neither hard nor transcendent. Having set aside the notion of 'moral' facts, Dworkin does go on to develop more fully the crucial idea of soft *literary* facts, but he still does not succeed in constructing a convincing case to the effect that there are three sorts of fact. Soft literary facts as they are described in this part of his article are distinctly 'operational'. They are facts

¹⁹² Ibid., 138.

about the *process* of explaining literature. Here, as always, Dworkin is careful to dissociate himself from any hint of commitment to transcendentalia. He is not, as he puts it, suggesting that "in addition to hard facts there are facts like the fact that David Copperfield first read *Hamlet* at Salem House."¹⁹³ What he *is* claiming is that

the literary exercise I imagine . . . (requires) the assumption . . . that there are facts of narrative consistency like the fact that the hypothesis that David had a sexual relationship with Steerforth provides a more satisfactory explanation of what he subsequently did and thought than the hypothesis that he did not.¹⁹⁴

This is the most explicit, positive statement Dworkin makes about what hard facts are — and it is, I believe, bound to disappoint anyone who is hoping that the notion will turn out to be illuminating. Dworkin's attempt to use the idea of a soft fact to resolve the puzzle about hard cases is going to work only if he can develop the idea in a way that shows there really is something special about facts of this sort. That he cannot do this is revealed by the explication of the idea of soft facts that we have just quoted. There it becomes clear that soft facts are nothing more than *observational* facts about the process of literary explanation, and that as a consequence, Dworkin's position is, ultimately just as positivistic as the position of his pragmatist opponents. To be sure, the observational correlate Dworkin is proposing is not anything so uncontroversially visible as the pronouncement of a 'sovereign'. One of the attractions of traditional legal pragmatism is that there is unlikely to be much debate as to whether or not the sovereign actually has spoken in the appropriate way; by sharp contrast, it is unlikely that there will ever be much agreement as to whether or not a particular

¹⁹³ Ibid., 138.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 138.

hypothesis actually does "provide a more satisfactory explanation" of the behaviour of a fictional character. Still there certainly *could* be cases in which such agreement is forthcoming and in those cases confirmation would lie in perfectly observable if diffuse phenomena such as the number of scholarly articles in which the explanation was accepted and the rise in professional status of the critic who first proposed it.

Now if we reapply this explication of soft critical facts to the legal sphere, we can see that Dworkin is saying that soft legal facts, the ones that make it possible to speak of *the* correct judgment even in hard cases, are observable, 'physical' facts about the process of legal decision making. In light of what Dworkin says both in this article and elsewhere¹⁹⁵ about the nature of legal judgment, it is clear that he takes soft legal facts to be facts about the extent to which a particular legal decision "provides a more satisfactory explanation" of the relevant statutes and precedents — the extent to which, in other words, the decision interprets those statutes and precedents as consonant with current social values and principles. Needless to say, it is going to be just as difficult to decide when a legal decision has achieved this as it is to decide when a literary analysis provides the the most 'satisfactory explanation'. And in each case the reason for the difficulty will be not that there is anything special about the facts, but simply that the 'situation' they are about is immensely — and often impossibly — complicated. In short, what Dworkin's position seems to come down to is this: The reason that there are hard cases which cannot be resolved is that social practices like literary works are enormously rich and complex.

¹⁹⁵ In *Law's Empire* for example.

In summary, if Dworkin's explanation of what he means by 'soft' facts comes down to nothing more than the claim that they are claims about extremely complex situations, then his desperate desire to avoid any commitment to the genuinely transcendental, his crypto-postmodernism, has led him into confusion. In trying to avoid pragmatism he has ended up with a position which is just as positivistic as pragmatism and perhaps even less plausible.

The Need for a Genuine Alternative

George Steiner and Ronald Dworkin are very different thinkers with very different methods and interests, but despite this, there is a remarkable similarity in their attitudes toward transcendence: They are both tempted by it, and both seem to be moving toward a commitment to it; yet, in the end, they both shy away. It seems probable, moreover, that, in behaving so similarly, they share the same motive: embarrassment. Steiner, more honest than Dworkin perhaps, or more self-aware, actually speaks at one point of the embarrassment he feels about the philosophical position he finds himself driven toward. But even in the absence of any such admission it would be reasonable to conjecture that both these authors would feel extremely uneasy at the prospect of proclaiming their devotion to an idea that has been anathematized by the philosophical establishment. There is, they apparently feel, a safer way of saying what they want to say: To express, as powerfully as possible, one's misgivings about the prevailing philosophical ideology and then to take refuge, quietly and graciously, on a patch of ground which, because of the route by which it has been approached and because of the way it has been signposted, seems at first glance to be beyond the terri-

tory of the dominant philosophical ideology but which is, in fact, within the imperial frontiers.

There is another important similarity between Steiner and Dworkin. They are both interested in areas of life that are resistant to postmodern reinterpretation. Steiner is a man for whom the central fact of life is the experience of high art. Dworkin has devoted his life to the study of the philosophical basis of the practices of making and applying laws. Both law and art are capable of having profound affects on people's lives: One's world view and even one's sense of self-identity can be altered by intense aesthetic experiences; and the moral convictions of the participants in law-governed societies are largely the product of the legal system. There is, moreover, a widespread tendency to regard intense aesthetic experiences and intense moral convictions as universally valid. Proponents of the Postmodern Doctrine insist that this tendency is merely the effect of a long-standing, but completely contingent, philosophical tradition — a tradition which is, finally, in the process of being replaced. (And they would presumably hold to this view even if it were shown that the members of *all* known cultures have believed in the universal validity of their aesthetic and moral convictions.) Even if the postmodern view of this matter is accepted, however, art and law still have a significance for many people that other areas of life do not, and it is not surprising if they are more resistant to postmodernization than many other aspects of our life.

Art seems to be less resistance than law. As we have seen, 'serious' visual art in particular is undergoing a transformation that makes the Postmodern Doctrine ever more applicable to it. But Steiner does not appeal to his experience of *contemporary* art in claiming that aesthetic experience

provides contact with the transcendent. For him the importance of contemporary art is that, in its dismal mediocrity, it shows that once we no longer believe in art's ability to reveal something permanent and independent beyond the contingencies of our social, mental and physical world, we can no longer produce great work.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Steiner can elude the grasp of the postmodernizers simply by concerning himself with the art of the past. One of the major redescriptive activities of the postmodernists is the deconstruction of the 'canon'. Just as there is an ever-increasing tendency to see artistic practice as an entirely mundane activity, there is an ever-increasing tendency to argue that not even the great artistic monuments of the past have universal validity and, that consequently, they have no claim to be revelatory. The assault on the canon is significant if for no other reason than because it shows how far we have gone, not only in redescrining our world in terms of the Postmodern Doctrine, but in re-making it so it conforms to the doctrine. For the moment the influence of the deconstructors is more or less limited to certain regions of the academic world. As the effects of decanonization become more and more noticeable beyond the walls of the academy, however, it will become more and more difficult to for Steiner to further his cause by appealing to timelessly great works of art because it will become more and more doubtful that such works exist. As yet, there is little if any sign that this process is advancing quickly. The long-honoured 'classics' of nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction continue to be stocked by the bookstores. The monuments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music continue to be recorded. It is only in the area of visual art that the

iconoclasts seem to have moved out into the real world.¹⁹⁶ This, of course, may be only a consequence of the fact that the task of presenting visual art to the public has been left largely in the hands of academics and intellectuals because works of visual art, being tied to unique physical objects, do not present the commercial opportunities offered by literature and music.

Art is one thing, the law is something else. In our own culture at least, it is a long time since art has had anything more than a peripheral importance, but the law has always been an essential element of our world. So it is not surprising that, despite the influence of postmodernism and pragmatism on legal thought, there is little evidence of the law being rewritten to conform with the Postmodern Doctrine. Some such evidence might be found in the trend toward reinterpreting the 'punishment' of criminals as rehabilitation. This movement accords well with the Postmodern Doctrine because our notion of what counts as rehabilitation is discourse-dependent whereas a commitment to genuine punishment seems to depend on the existence of transcendental norms of behaviour. And here again, however, postmodernization is not simply a matter of redescription: The anti-retributivist trend has had important practical consequences. Still, visible and symptomatic as this development is, it cannot be said to have had much effect on legal practice as a whole. In the first place, the 'reforms' that have been made under the influence of the rehabilitative view of justice are not particularly drastic ones: Most of the things we do to convicted criminals would still

¹⁹⁶ They have been spectacularly successful in influencing the hanging of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris: The spacious lower levels are devoted to the grandiose and sentimental works of the 'academic' painters and sculptors of the nineteenth century — artists, who, according to postmodern historicism, have long been scorned not because of an absolute lack of quality but on purely ideological grounds. At the same time, the impressionist and post-impressionist collections, which contain dozens of 'canonical' paintings, long assumed to be masterpieces have been relegated to the barely accessible upper floors, low-ceilinged, poorly-lit, and overcrowded.

qualify as punishment from the pre-postmodern point of view. Moreover, the 'reforms' and the whole debate about punishment and rehabilitation only touch the relatively small area of criminal law while the much larger world of civil law remains unaffected .

In summary, we can say that both Steiner and Dworkin are driven toward foundationalism because they are thinking philosophically about areas of life which are resistant if not immune to the attempt to reduce the universe to discourse — but that they stop just short of committing themselves to so unfashionable a doctrine. They could perhaps have struggled on toward some hard-headed, stream-lined form of foundationalism. That would, at worst, have been no more embarrassing than the rather compromising, and *ad hoc* 'solutions' with which they content themselves — but, for one reason or another, they did not choose to do so. The first section of the next chapter, which is an attempt to sketch out a foundationalist alternative to the Postmodern Doctrine, can be read as an comment on Steiner's and Dworkin's positions — an attempt to say what they might have said had they not been so nervous about making a commitment to transcendentalia.

CHAPTER SEVEN: *THE ALTERNATIVE*

The central theme of this essay has been that, whatever its virtues may be, the Postmodern Doctrine is not entirely satisfactory as a philosophical ideology. Of course, the doctrine has not been refuted: From the beginning, we have admitted the impossibility of devising an argument which shows that it *must* be rejected. But we have succeeded — I hope — in showing that there are powerful reasons for resistance. That task, now complete, is the negative part of this study of the Postmodern Doctrine. The positive work remains to be done.

One thing that has emerged from our critique is that, since the crux of the Postmodern Doctrine is its antifoundationalism, any genuine alternative to the doctrine must be firmly foundationalist. But a rival theory, if it is to be convincing, has to amount to more than a simple proclamation of faith in the existence of the transcendentalia. It must be sufficiently deep, sufficiently detailed, and sufficiently compatible with our discursive and our natural worlds — and it must be an effective rationalization. In the following pages we will attempt to sketch out a neo-foundationalist philosophical ideology which has these qualities — and which shows that there *is* a way of being philosophically at home in our world without converting to post-modernism.

T — A Foundationalist Philosophical Ideology

Our theory needs a name. To refuse it one would be to give the Postmodern Doctrine an unfair advantage. To suggest any form of foundationalism in the face of the doctrine's increasing pre-eminence is undeniably to suggest retrogression. So perhaps, in honesty, we should choose a traditional label, 'Platonism', or 'transcendentalism', or even 'realism'. None of these works however, if for no other reason than because all would require a lengthy explanation of the differences between *our* theory and the traditional one. We could simply speak of 'foundationalism', but that label has already been used to refer, in a general way, to all pre-postmodern metaphysical theories. 'Neo-foundationalism' is tempting, but this has a ponderous, almost sinister ring. So I will speak simply of 'T' — choosing that particular letter as a way of alluding to the transcendentia whose existence the theory affirms.

The Transcendentia

The core of T is just the claim that there are transcendentia — or, putting it more cautiously, the claim that we can justifiably operate on the assumption that there are time- and culture-independent measures of truth, of goodness and of beauty. The best way of beginning the attempt to sketch out some of the detail of T is by stating just what is and what is not entailed by the assumption that there are transcendentia.

To say that there are transcendental standards of truth simply means that there is a *possibility* of making factual statements which are absolutely true — statements which are true quite independently of time and place. To say this is not to say that there *must* be general statements that are always and

everywhere true: T is perfectly compatible with the variability of the laws of nature. Nor does T imply that any absolutely true statements have ever actually been made: The theory is perfectly compatible with pervasive error, with the idea that, for one reason or another, we never get anything quite right. Its point is that there *is* a discourse-independent criterion of truth, not that we can ever be certain that that criterion is satisfied. (T is therefore compatible with epistemological scepticism despite the fact that postmodernists in their critiques of foundationalism so often assume that only the misguided need for mathematical certainty could lead anyone to believe in foundationalism.)

To say that there are transcendental standards of goodness, of morality, is simply to say that action can be evaluated against moral standards that are independent of time and culture. In other words, it is to reject any form of moral relativism — any theory that *no* moral claim can make sense unless it is tied to a particular time or place. It does not follow from the existence of transcendental moral standards that *no* moral claims are context-dependent, but only that it will always *make sense* to raise the question of whether or not a moral claim is in accord with transcendent moral standards. And it does not follow from the existence of transcendental moral standards that agreement on a precise statement of the standards is possible — or even that we can ever be sure that a particular practice or a particular act meets these standards. In other words, T is perfectly compatible with the possibility of endless moral disagreement, and even with moral scepticism.

To say that there are transcendental standards of beauty, of aesthetic quality, is to say there is a possibility of justifying aesthetic judgments by appeal

to time- and culture- independent standards. It is not, of course to deny that beautiful objects, particularly *art* objects, are products of time and culture, but simply to assert that these things are beautiful because they satisfy transcendental standards, not because of their relationship to the culture from which they emerge. T is compatible with the idea that the *style* and *content* of a particular work of art or of a particular period are contingent products of the culture from which the art emerges. The adherents of T will insist, however, that despite the influence of culture, the *evaluation* of a work of art can go beyond cultural considerations — that it always at least *makes sense* to claim that a particular work, or even an entire genre, is good art or bad art, not because it satisfies the expectations of the society which produces it, but because it satisfies absolute aesthetic standards. Moreover, just as T is compatible with endless debate about morality, it is compatible with endless debate about aesthetic quality. It is also compatible with failure to agree on any *statement* of aesthetic standards and even with the idea that such a statement is not possible.

Metaphysics

T is a metaphysical theory. This fact is reflected in the theory's generality: The transcendentia whose existence it affirms provide a basis for *all* our beliefs, *all* our evaluations and *all* our aesthetic judgments. Another reflection of T's metaphysical quality is its independence from experience; it is not merely that the transcendentia cannot be perceived; it is essential to avoid regarding them as being in any way comparable to material or even to mental objects. And, as we shall see, T is also metaphysical, in that it takes

a stand on such classically metaphysical issues as the mind/body problem and the existence of God.

It might be thought that the metaphysical nature of T is a strong consideration against its being taken seriously as an alternative philosophical ideology. After all, in the past century, our culture has tended to shun metaphysics. It is true that as modernistic positivism has given way to postmodernism, there has been less emphasis on verifiability and a comparable increase in willingness to engage in speculation. But still, in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, however anti-scientistic we may have become, we still seem to be under the sway of the positivistic conviction that to talk of entities whose existence is not experientially verifiable is not philosophically respectable. Even the most radical proponents of postmodernism in the English-speaking world go out of their way to present their views in a superficially non-metaphysical way and for some — Richard Rorty, for example, 'metaphysical' is synonymous with 'wrongheaded'.¹⁹⁷

Despite all this, T's metaphysicality cannot be held against it. In the first place, as we have had ample opportunity to see, the Postmodern Doctrine itself is a metaphysical theory. That this is so became particularly clear in our examination of the text that comes as close as any to being the philosophical manifesto of the doctrine — Derrida's "Différance." But even if there were no such text — and a philosophical ideology could certainly exist without one — the doctrine would retain its metaphysical status. It would do so simply because any theory which has that degree of generality, any theory which, like the Postmodern Doctrine is about *everything*, is by that

¹⁹⁷ See, for example, Chapter Four of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1989)

very fact metaphysical. It is the ironic fate of theories that claim to show the impossibility of metaphysics — theories such as the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, or the 'language game' analyses of the later Wittgenstein — that in making their claim they refute themselves by *doing* metaphysics. The only way to escape metaphysics entirely is to be unaware of all metaphysical questions. Once one has arisen, the damage is done.

Pluralism

There will be a pluralistic philosophical ideology. If it were not, it would not be able to rationalize our world in the way that a philosophical ideology must. It acknowledges the existence of four irreducibly distinct metaphysical types: the physical, the mental, the discursive and the transcendental. In this respect it contrasts starkly with the reductivist *monism* of the Postmodern Doctrine according to which there is only one sort of thing in the world — the discursive.

As was pointed out when the term was originally introduced, a successful philosophical ideology must, first, be *philosophically* satisfying — it must not leave us feeling that legitimate questions have been disallowed or that we have been the victims of sophistry.¹⁹⁸ This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of adequacy: A philosophical ideology must also be able to provide us with a rationalization of our world — a way of 'placing' the various elements that we take our world to comprise. A philosophical ideology that excludes a metaphysical type which we take to be a component of our

¹⁹⁸ One way of expressing the intuition which has motivated this essay would be to say that the Postmodern Doctrine does leave us -- some of us at any rate — feeling cheated and frustrated in just these ways.

world will, at best be labouring under a major handicap. Its final success will be possible only when we have been persuaded that that type does not exist after all.¹⁹⁹

Speaking of 'worlds' here, we are speaking metaphorically, but the metaphor is meant to be taken seriously. One of the characteristics of each of these realms is that it is possible to live within it, more or less ignoring all, or some of the other 'worlds'. Some sensualists and artists may succeed in living entirely within the mental world. Some people with a deeply scientifico-mathematical outlook may enclose themselves within the physical world. Sadhus of one sort or another can, perhaps, live in the company of the transcendentia and exclude all else — or at least act *as if* that is what they are doing. Semioticians and historians of ideas can live and breathe entirely within the boundaries of the discursive, and they can promote, perhaps successfully, a philosophical ideology that theirs is the only world. A proponent of T, by contrast will see all these 'worlds' not as worlds but as 'regions'— and will see a life that is lived entirely within one set of boundaries as unfortunately 'regional'.

One of the themes of the sketch that we have now embarked on will be to show that T can accommodate most of the components of our culture as well as, perhaps even better than. the Postmodern Doctrine. The emphasis that T places on 'regions' illustrates this capacity. T can admit that these enormous enclosed areas are capacious enough to be *seen* as including everything; it admits that once the monistic move is made, say in the direction

¹⁹⁹ As we have seen one of the problems with the Postmodern Doctrine is that, because it is radically reductive, it asks us to reject the existence, not only of the transcendentia but also of the mental and the physical. This would make it hopelessly implausible as a philosophical ideology for any culture except one which, like our own, contains strong, independent tendencies toward the denial of those three metaphysical types

of discursivism, that it is possible, Foucault-like, to insist, without fear of cogent contradiction, that there *is* nothing but discourse. But, just by making this concession, T refutes the argument, implicit in postmodernist monism, that because we can get away with acting *as if* there is nothing but discourse, that there *is*, in fact, nothing but discourse. And, operating in a world wherein the discursive region has arguably swollen to the point where it tends to dominate, or even to obscure entirely, the mental and the physical areas, T can, go further. It can neatly co-opt the Postmodern Doctrine, rejecting it as philosophical ideology because of its failure to provide intellectual satisfaction, but 'explaining' it as sort of 'regional' ideology, the predictable philosophical creed of those who have been blinded by the glare of the discursive — the momentarily most fascinating component of reality.

A pluralistic philosophical ideology has at least one important advantage over a monistic one: It does not force us to devalue any of the metaphysical types we pre-critically take to be the components of reality. But pluralistic ideologies also have at least one *disadvantage*: They force us to face the question of the inter-relation of the metaphysical types. Just as Cartesian dualists are plagued with worries about the interaction of the mental and the physical, proponents of T, with no less than *four* metaphysical types on their hands are, it may seem, doomed to be beleaguered by a far more complicated set of similar worries.

Fortunately, however, there is a simple way to avoid this problem: We can simply say that the various ontological types are *not* related to one another — or at least not related in a manner that raises any embarrassingly intractable questions. The difficult questions are raised by imagining that there must be *causal* relations between the types. T will insist that causal

relations obtain only within the physical realm. The other realms will be seen as *overlying* one another, not as arranged in a linear fashion which allows them to affect each other in a standard causal way. One virtue of this view is that it fits in well with the picture of the separate realms as world-like. We can think of T as asking us to conceive of reality as analogous to a picture, 'contained' on four separate pieces of transparent film; each one is complete in that it is an adequately informative image, but the full, maximally rich picture emerges only when all four transparencies are superimposed.

Just as T rejects as inappropriate any questions about causal interaction between metaphysical types, it rejects the idea of any hierarchy of types. Any ranking of this sort would be the first step *back* in the direction of reductionism and monism. This point brings us to the question of the relationship between T and Platonism. This issue is of some importance because there is a tendency to label as 'Platonism' any philosophical doctrine that affirms the existence of transcendentia. T and Platonism certainly do share a commitment to time- and culture-independent standards, but, despite this commitment to a common core doctrine, they are very different theories. (The 'core doctrine' of T, or any philosophical ideology, it will be recalled, is that aspect of the theory which is a response to purely intellectual as opposed to cultural considerations; it is scarcely surprising that two philosophical ideologies, separated by more than two millennia, and by enormous cultural transformations, should share their central, intellectually determined, doctrine and yet differ drastically in other aspects of their content where cultural considerations have played a larger role in the formation of the theory.)

The crux of the difference is that Platonism is monistic whereas T is pluralistic. Platonism famously views the transcendentia as the only things that are really real. The physical realm by contrast is seen as a ephemeral and unreliable, and empirical science is dismissed as merely the observation of deceptive shadows — an activity of doubtful importance. As we shall see, T is able to grant to science an importance that accords with the central role it plays in our culture. It can do this only because, unlike Platonism, it views the physical realm as being as important as the transcendental. If it could not adopt this attitude, if, like the Postmodern Doctrine, it were forced, into viewing science as having no more epistemological solidity than art, then it would lose some of its claim to provide an adequate rationalization of our world and, so, lose some of its attraction as a philosophical ideology.

Just as T will deny that the transcendentia are superior to other metaphysical types, it will deny that they are inferior. It will reject, for example, any tendency toward a materialistic monism that sets up the physical realm as fundamental and sees the mental, the discursive, and the transcendental as emerging from it. If T were not 'democratic' in this way, it would fall into a self-contradiction that would destroy its intellectual adequacy: 'Transcendentia' that were dependent for their existence on another metaphysical type would clearly not be genuinely transcendental.

T's stern insistence on the equality of the metaphysical types *does* raise genuine difficulties. For one thing, when metaphysical types are put on an equal footing, it becomes difficult to see how they can be connected with one another — and this might be thought to detract from T's value as a philosophical ideology. After all, in the world which T claims to rationalize, we are constantly making connections between the various 'types.' The propo-

nents of T do have an effective way of dealing with this criticism, however. They can simply point out that, no pluralistic metaphysical theory can give a satisfactory explanation of the interaction between the types it posits. (Cartesians, for example, have no solution to the mind/body problem.) And that, therefore, T's failure to do so can scarcely be counted against its efficacy as a philosophical ideology. Another way of putting this would be to point out a philosophical ideology need not claim to provide a solution to all philosophical problems; it is enough that it provide a way of stating them.

Another question is raised by T's assertion of the independence of metaphysical types: It seems to imply that the discursive — or the mental or the physical — *could* exist independently of the transcendental. In other words, in speaking of the four *completely independent* types which, as they claim, are necessary to rationalize our world, the proponents of T are inviting question along the following lines: Could there be another world, fundamentally different from ours, which required for its rationalization only two or three, or perhaps just one, of the metaphysical types posited by T? And does that not mean that you are committed to several odd possibilities? How could there be discourse if there were no minds to use it to communicate with one another? And even more strikingly, how could there be transcendental standards if there were nothing for them to be standards of? There are two comments to be made. First, it must be pointed out that, our pluralist philosophical ideology is in no worse a position here than are the monist ideologies. The Postmodern Doctrine, for example, not only allows the possibility of discourse existing independently of other metaphysical types, it actually claims that this is so. A materialist ideology would be in a similar position vis à vis the physical world, and a phenomenological ideology in a

similar position vis à vis the mental. But, beyond making such defensive comparisons, there is a more positive way for the adherents of T to deal with this issue — simply to admit that any of the types *could* exist independently and then to repeat that in our world they do not.

Science

As was remarked above, one thing in T's favour is that it allows its proponents to accept the special importance that science does, pre-critically, have in our culture. One important, and more or less uncontended aspect of the traditional view of scientific practice is that it possesses what might be called epistemological pre-eminence: Well-established scientific theories are seen as the paradigm of knowledge not only because they provide us with a degree of certainty not usually available in other areas of inquiry, but because they are about a mind- and culture-independent external world. Because of its commitment to the idea of a non-discursive, non-mental *physical* reality, T has the great virtue of being able to embrace the pre-critical view of science. The Postmodern Doctrine, by contrast, can only rationalize scientific practice by redescribing it — by insisting that properly understood it is *not* an attempt to produce an accurate description of a genuinely external world.

As we have already seen, one way that postmodernists can support this sort of contention is to appeal to the fact that certain contemporary practices and institutions seem to be evolving so as to conform to the Postmodern Doctrine. But this is a far more difficult line to take with respect to scientific inquiry than with respect to other practices; it is our social and our commercial institutions, not our scientific ones, that exhibit this trend. It is, of

course, possible to *argue*, as Rorty and Lyotard both do, that scientific practice, is better understood when it is interpreted in a postmodern rather than a foundationalistic manner. But as we have also seen, these arguments can succeed only if they show that that even basic and uncontroversial empirical theories must be understood as cultural products. That could only be done by showing that the most firmly established scientific theories such as those that explain the basic workings of the solar system or the molecular nature of heat are just as debatable, just as rationally questionable, as are comparably central principles in, say, literary theory or jurisprudence. This is something that has not been done.

This issue of a philosophical ideology's attitudes toward the epistemological status of science is made all the more important because of the importance science has in our culture. It is as simple as this: Our culture is what it is — irreligious, pluralistic, prosperous and benign — because of technology. And technology is made possible by science. T's ability to handle this aspect of our world without distortion is a tremendously important point in its favour.

Experience

One of the corollaries of the Postmodern Doctrine is the rejection of experience as a fundamental metaphysical type. This can be seen as an inevitable consequence of the fact that the doctrine is not only discursivist but monistic. It can also be seen as the consequence of the Postmodern Doctrine's origin in opposition to the 'philosophy of experience'. As we have seen, the crucial dogma of the philosophy of experience is that the foundation of our beliefs and values is to be found not in the physical world, not in the realm

of reason, but in *experience*. In the opinion of postmodernists, the persistence of this attitude into the late twentieth century represents a scandalous refusal to acknowledge the epochal discoveries of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. According to the advocates of the Postmodern Doctrine, the work of these men has conclusively established that the subject, far from being an originating foundation, is the product of discursive forces which are not only not produced by the conscious mind but are unlikely even to be apprehended by it.

This is an issue on which even the most bitter opponent of post-modernism must admit that the enemy position is powerful: There cannot be many people who possess even a superficial understanding of contemporary intellectual culture who are willing to argue that the self is independent of the influence of discourse and of the unconscious. To concede that the postmodernists have a good point here is not, however, to say that they are right in denigrating the importance of experience — or in questioning its reality. It does not, for example, follow from the fact that we cannot found all our beliefs and values on raw, culture-independent experience that Foucault is right in his contention that madness can be profitably studied without considering what it is *like* to be mad — without even raising the possibility of there being a typical *experience* of madness that could be shared by mad people inhabiting separate discursive worlds. Nor, to take another example, does it follow that structuralist and poststructuralist critics are right in refusing to acknowledge the possibility of a wordless, pre-interpretive *experience* of literature that is prior to and independent of critical commentary of any kind.

A pluralistic philosophical ideology like T is in a better position than either the Postmodern Doctrine or a subjectivist monism like the 'philosophy of the subject' to accommodate an ideological 'placing' of experience that accords with the facts of our world. Because T takes experience to be just one among four metaphysical types, it can endorse the postmodern rejection of the subject as foundation. T, of course, places great importance on the presence of foundations, but because it contends that these foundations are provided not by the mind but by the *transcendentalia*, it has no need to see experience as being epistemologically crucial. In this respect T has an advantage over subjectivist monism because for that theory, experience must not only be the basic stuff, it must be *epistemologically* basic. And T has a comparable advantage over the Postmodern Doctrine because, while avoiding the error of regarding the mental as foundational, it can not only grant the existence of experience, but can go on to emphasize its importance.

This capacity puts T at an advantage because, despite the growing influence of the postmodern view on the structure of our institutions and on the content of our art, we are a long way from being willing to forswear the idea of experience. One area in which the acknowledgement of experience dramatically facilitates the process of rationalization is the theory of art. It is odd that an anti-experiential theory such as the Postmodern Doctrine should be so concerned, perhaps even preoccupied, with this particular area of human endeavour; to rationalize artistic practice while denying the importance of experience postmodernists must, most tortuously, reinterpret art as a form of verbal thought. Within the academy at least, they have been remarkably successful in this endeavour, but there is little indication that many non-professional art lovers are tempted by this view. For them the

choice seems to be between living without a way of rationalizing their passion and clinging shamefacedly to a modern or even a classical ideology which contemporary experts dismiss. The point of T, here as elsewhere, is to offer an alternative rationalization — one which reckons with contemporary culture and its critique of the past, but which does not require wrenching redescriptions.²⁰⁰

Language 1: T and Discourse

T views experience as metaphysically basic but non-foundational. The result of this, as we have seen, is that the theory can affirm the significance of experience without falling into the extravagance of seeing it as the sole foundation of all our beliefs and values. In a similar way T's pluralism allows it to acknowledge the enormous and fundamental power of discourse without falling into the radicalism of the Postmodern Doctrine according to which discourse exhausts reality.

Being melodramatic, we might even say that one of T's virtues is that it offers escape from the discursive 'slavery' that is the fate of adherents to the

²⁰⁰ These remarks raise the question of the distinction between T and modernism — a contrast that must be understood in light of the distinction between postmodernism and modernism. As I am using the terms here, the fundamental differences are these: although not *representational* in the sense of attempting an accurate depiction of mind- and culture-independent reality, modernism remains *referential*, first, in its attitudes toward language and experience which it sees as having stability and, consequently, certain *foundational* capacities and, second, in its commitment to the reality and immutability of mathematizable form. *Post-* modernism as we have seen views language as being in a state of constant, ungraspable flux, derogates experience as being, at best, ontologically secondary and dismisses the idea of mathematizable form as a relic of a discredited logocentrism. T is in accord with modernism inasmuch as both are foundational, but, in sharp contrast with modernism, the foundations posited by T are mind- and discourse-independent. Despite its basic disagreement with postmodernism on the matter of foundations, T, because *its* foundations are transcendent, is able to express qualified sympathy with the postmodernist attitudes toward language and experience — not needing them as foundations, it can concede their fugacity and their consequent lack of epistemological reliability. And because it has this capacity, T is a more attractive candidate than is modernism for the role of a contemporary philosophical ideology.

Postmodern Doctrine. That is a willingly accepted fate to be sure, but this makes it no less horrifying to those who are not attracted to it. As we have seen in our discussion of postmodern attitudes toward dissent, the Postmodern Doctrine offers protection from the traumas of scepticism and dissent by rendering them theoretically impossible. We are trapped within the discourse that creates us; we may pretend to struggle against it, but the struggle is bound to be futile because we can have no weapons other than those provided by our opponent.

Here, once again, T's commitment to the existence of transcendentia, in combination with its pluralism, makes possible a theoretical position which, although it is not perhaps as exhilarating as the one offered by the Postmodern Doctrine, does offer a plausible alternative rationalization. The proponents of T are free to see language, not as the inescapable manifestation of all-enveloping discourse, but as a tool which may be more or less effective in speaking the truth. This does not mean, however, that they must totally reject the idea of a discourse which is somehow beyond our control. Nor does not prevent them from exploiting the insights of postmodern writers into the role that contingent, culture-driven factors play in shaping our view of nature, art and morality. It does not even prevent them from asserting, in particular cases, that our views are *determined* by such factors. Indeed T's commitment to the fundamental status of the discursive component or reality means that its adherents will *expect* independent discursive influences to play an important role in the shaping of our minds and our language. But the proponents of T, while acceding to all this, and acknowledging their debt to the poststructuralists, will be able, consistently with their philosophical ideology, to insist that there is a possibility of forging a

linguistic tool that is capable, if only partially and temporarily, of breaking through the veil of discourse and stating truths that are not truths *of* a time and place or *for* a group of people, but simply truths. They will not have to argue that they have succeeded in identifying such truths; indeed, if they are not scientists, they would be unwise even to consider such a claim. Epistemological modesty is not only compatible with T, it is an attitude which it is extremely advisable for the theory's advocates to adopt if they hope to undermine even slightly the appeal of the Postmodern Doctrine.

This difference between attitudes toward language may seem unimportant: T merely allows us to cling to an ideal without allowing it any practical importance. There is, however, great practical importance to the belief that language *can* get us beyond contingency — even though we can never be sure, in a particular case, that we have used it successfully to do so. The difference is this: Holding this belief, we will still be able to think of our descriptive, scientific and evaluative practices as aiming beyond discourse, and therefore will be able to continue to participate in them with enthusiasm.

Language 2: Platonism and Analysis

There is another way in which T is less closely tied to linguistic considerations than is traditional Platonism: T does not attempt to demonstrate the existence of the transcendentia by citing the possibility of abstract reference or predication. The 'argument' which it uses to justify its central tenet is not in any way linguistic. It appeals, not to the need to understand how language works, but to the need to rationalize practices

and institutions. Even if T succeeds in this, the classical mysteries of predication and reference will remain unsolved.

As a consequence of its freedom from linguistic considerations, T is immune from the Third Man Argument or any other line of criticism which attempts to discredit transcendentalia when they are introduced as theoretical entities required in order to explain linguistic phenomena. Because it is not justified by linguistic considerations, the type of foundationalism being sketched here is also immune to another of Plato's own objections to his theory of Forms: The idea that such a theory leads inevitably to an absurd proliferation of transcendentalia — including such ridiculous ones as the transcendental bed. T does what it sets out to do with only four transcendentalia, and none of them is embarrassingly ignoble.

There is another important contrast between Platonism and T. Not only does T avoid any appeal to linguistic considerations in order to justify the commitment to transcendentalia, it also carefully refrains from viewing the transcendentalia as verbal. In other words, the proponents of T cannot be required to provide verbal specifications of the transcendentalia they affirm. They could, perhaps, be required to do this if they were, Platonistically, arguing that the transcendentalia are required in order to explain language; in that case the transcendentalia might reasonably be regarded as the ultimate *concepts* and therefore as possible objects of conceptual analysis. But no such demands can reasonably be made of the proponents of T. They are free to view the transcendentalia as verbally impenetrable. Moreover, if they choose to take this view of the matter, they will be immune from another sort of attack that could be made against conceptualistically conceived transcendentalia: refutation by counter example. They will not

have committed themselves to any rule that can be used to determine whether or not a particular instance falls under a particular transcendental category and therefore they will be free, for example, to maintain that a particular kind of behaviour, heretofore considered to be immoral, should henceforth be regarded as moral — and to see that change as representing a sharpening of our non-verbal apprehension of transcendent goodness.

Morality and Aesthetics

We have argued that one way in which T has an advantage over the Postmodern Doctrine is that it allows a view of science that accords well with the special epistemological status that science does in fact have of our world. In the course of that discussion, we pointed out that, in order to make the facts of scientific practice compatible with their antifoundationalism, postmodern writers are forced to conflate science with artistic and interpretive activities. But what of these interpretive activities themselves? Surely the practices of analysis and criticism of art are more effectively rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine than by a foundationalist theory such as T. Here, it seems, the facts of the matter must demand relativism and historicism. Consensus in these areas is notoriously elusive and, in light of this, it is tempting to suggest that the only way to deal with the mass of contradictory opinions on moral and aesthetic issues is by saying, "Every culture, every subgroup, every individual, has a different vision of what is right and what is beautiful. It makes no sense to say that one set of moral responses, or aesthetic sensitivities is preferable to another. They're all on the same footing. We may choose our own principles and apply them, but it is wrong to criticize others for not agreeing with us."

Here again we must admit that there is something powerfully persuasive in the postmodern position. Even within cultures far more homogeneous and confident than our own, aesthetic and moral debate have always been fraught with irresolvable disagreement. If the inhabitants of those cultures could not, with time and thought and education, finally reach unanimity — or even the sort of broad consensus on basic issues that our own culture enjoys with respect to scientific theory — how can we have any hope of doing so? *Our* culture is unimaginably heterogeneous by the standards of the past; it is ethnically, economically, and intellectually diverse to an extent that must eliminate any realistic hope of genuine community of conviction.

It would be foolish to deny that there is something attractive in this line of thought and foolish to deny that, inasmuch as we are swayed by it, that the Postmodern Doctrine will attract us. But even here, where the doctrine's charms are, perhaps, most powerful, there is a good deal to be said in favour of T. We can point, for example, to the fact that there are people, even now, who have a highly developed ability to enjoy the *experience* of art and, at the same time, an extensive knowledge of its history. Because they are connoisseurs, not just historians, they cannot, without deprecating their whole outlook, agree with the postmodern view that one work of art is as good as the next, one period as brilliant as any other. They will, moreover, naturally develop a view of the history of art as a landscape dominated by a small number of 'monuments' — works of superior and permanent value. Such individuals are bound to see the Postmodern Doctrine as an insult and a threat.

Just as a certain kind of interest in art makes it impossible to accept the postmodern rejection of culture-independent aesthetic evaluation, a certain

kind of commitment to moral principles makes it impossible to accept the postmodern denial of absolute moral evaluation. Those who have this sort of commitment will also find that T is, in one respect at least, a more attractive philosophical ideology than the Postmodern Doctrine. Just as there are connoisseurs of art who are loathe to give up their right to be able to say, meaningfully, that Rembrandt is a superior painter to any working today, there are moralists who will not be eager to subscribe to a philosophical ideology which denies them the right to say that slavery and torture are wrong, not simply for our culture and other cultures which happen to share our aversion to these practices, but for all cultures at all times.

It is important to remember that neither the connoisseurs nor the moralists need a foundationalist theory that actually vindicates their particular evaluations. They will be satisfied with a philosophical ideology that merely asserts the existence of absolute standards even if it does not state them or identify them in any other way. As has already been pointed out, one of T's virtues is its compatibility with epistemological modesty.

Theology

T is perfectly compatible with religious belief as well as with atheism and agnosticism. This said, however, it must be pointed out that the doctrine is, in an important sense, deeply atheistic. Adherents of T could make space for their belief in God by, say, telling themselves that He is ultimately responsible for the existence of the transcendentia. but in making this sort of move, they would be doing something similar to what believers in the Big Bang do when they tell themselves that the original explosion was

somehow set off by the deity. In other words, God must be tacked on to T. He is definitely not part of the theory.

This is a matter of considerable importance if for no other reason than because there are historical and psychological associations between talk of transcendence and talk of God. But there are no *logical* connections. Just as it is an error to think of the transcendentalia as analogous in some way to physical objects, it is an error to think of them as being necessarily associated with religious doctrine. The chances of making this mistake are increased by the fact that the most famous transcendentalia in philosophical history — Plato's Forms — were closely associated first with mythology and, later, with Christianity. But proponents of T must go out of their way to make sure that all these associations are carefully set aside and to ensure that the austerity of *their* transcendentalia is well understood. Transcendental truth, goodness and beauty are: immutable and absolute measures, nothing more. They inhabit a unique and independent ontological category and are no more 'spiritual' or theological than they are physical/ or mental.

Once the cold, impersonal nature of the transcendentalia is grasped, T is unlikely to have any appeal to anyone whose unhappiness with the Postmodern Doctrine arises from that theory's lack of support for religious certitude. There is no hope of T coming to their rescue in the way it could come to the rescue of the aesthetes and the moralists discussed above. But there are some at least who will find this lack of religious content a positive virtue in T. Proponents of T might argue that the theory's appeal for such *dépassé* characters as the connoisseurs of classical art and the campaigners for culture-independent justice discussed in the last section, counts

against its plausibility as a philosophical ideology; after all, the beliefs of such people can scarcely be said to correspond to the collective mentality in the way a effective philosophical ideology should. But if that is so then, the theory's atheistic quality must count in its *favour* in a similar way: The chances of a revival of genuine religiosity as an effective cultural force are probably even dimmer than are the chances for a revival of widespread interest in the art of the past or of an interest in making trans-cultural moral judgments.

The Triumph of Postmodernism

The major theme of this essay, the claim that the Postmodern Doctrine is philosophically inadequate, has been counterbalanced throughout by an important subtheme: That the doctrine has great ideological power. For the most part, this aspect of the analysis has remained in the background. It came to the fore, however, during our discussion of the tension between the Postmodern Doctrine and fundamental social practice. There we had occasion to remark with respect to each of the practices discussed, that despite the apparent incompatibility between the doctrine and the traditional conception of the practice, there are signs that a process of post-modernization is beginning. At that point we were content to note, by way of defending the cogency of our critique, that if postmodernization continues, the identity of the practices will be lost. They cannot be 'defoundationalized' because they are *constitutively* foundational. Now, however the time has come to make an important concession: Even if we are right in claiming that the practices are essentially foundational and that, therefore, the evidence of postmodernization does not touch our central claim, it cannot be denied that, once

acknowledged, the existence of this trend must have an impact on the morale of the would-be foundationalist: If it were not for postmodernization, we would be able to say: "Look, we just can't get along without foundations." As things are, however, it seems we may have to be content with saying: "Things are going to end up being very different than they have been, and, in the long run, we may be sorry we gave up the old way of thinking." We will return to these perhaps depressing thoughts in the final paragraphs, but first, in order to show just how ideologically appropriate postmodern ideas may be for our time, we will look more positively at the doctrine than we have to this point.

Democracy

In Chapter Four we criticized the Postmodern Doctrine because of its incompatibility with the fundamental social practice of evaluation. We saw that, in light of this difficulty, adherents of the doctrine must either revise this practice or reinterpret it — and we pointed out that these moves would do nothing to allay the doubts of the doctrine's critics. One way of reveling the doctrine's ideological power, is to note just how useful such reinterpretation and revision might be to a culture such as our own.

To see that this is so it is first necessary to recall that postmodern culture is democratic. It is not democratic, of course, in the '*ideal*' sense: The general population does not play an important role in government. But postmodern societies *are* democratic in a looser sense: Their governments are responsive to the needs and desires of their entire population — not absolutely responsive, but certainly far more so than the governments of societies whose economies have not advanced to the stage where postmodern culture

emerges. One aspect of this concern for the welfare of the entire population is that these cultures will respect the principle of *equality*. This is not to say that these societies will actually exhibit a high degree of equality among individuals or even that there will be much agreement as to exactly what individual equality *is*, but merely that *some* conception of individual equality will be taken seriously.

The second step toward seeing why the Postmodern Doctrine is attractive to contemporary democratic cultures is to remark on the fact that there is a strong connection between respect for the principle of equality and the deprecation of the practice of evaluation. To put the point bluntly: There is an apparently universal tendency in postmodern, democratic culture to assume that evaluation of individuals — or of their work — is incompatible with equality. In the areas of legislation, formulation of government policy, and the operation of public institutions in particular we generally operate on the assumption that our conception of equality obliges us to ignore or at least to downplay any qualitative differences between individuals.²⁰¹ Of course there is no logical connection between the two things. Even on a strong, positive conception of equality according to which to say two people are equal is not simply to say they should be equal before the law, but to say that they should have equal material wealth, it does not follow that the character or the work of one individual cannot be evaluated as superior to

²⁰¹ The idea that individual excellence is not necessarily something to be sought after and rewarded has also received a remarkable amount of acceptance in the contemporary art world, particularly in the area of visual art. Moreover, it is arguable that in the professional and business worlds there is an increasing acceptance of mediocre individuals at the highest levels — and it is certainly undeniable that in North American political life excellence comes more and more to be seen as *disqualification* for leadership. It is perhaps only in the areas of scientific research and athletics that it is still assumed that the rewards given to the most highly accomplished individuals should far exceed those meted out to the merely competent and the mediocre.

the character or the work of the other. But, despite the fact that evaluation and equality are logically compatible, there is an undeniable tendency for them to *seem* to be *incompatible*. This is perhaps, most apparent in educational institutions where the idea of evaluation has long been in deep disrepute.²⁰² The rejection of evaluation is a *general* tendency, however, and one which, although it is decried by many, is obviously deep-seated and somehow useful. The Postmodern Doctrine, which tells us that genuine evaluation is impossible, is precisely what our culture needs to rationalize the abandonment of evaluation — and this fact must go some way to account for the doctrine's rapidly increasing acceptance in recent years.

Pluralism

The plurality of postmodern culture is just as salient a characteristic as its democratic organization. There is not one industrialized country which has the demographic homogeneity that, until recently could be regarded as a necessary characteristic of nationhood — and there is certainly no reason to expect that this trend will be reversed in the foreseeable future. The

²⁰² Perhaps the semi-conscious rationale behind this is: The only conception of equality that our society can afford to support, or *cares* to support, is equality of opportunity, but for 'political' reasons we must *pretend* to support equality of material wealth — or at least the idea that we all have an equal right to a certain 'normal' level. If we do not implicitly promise this kind of equality, then the masses will no longer be sufficiently motivated to drive the economy. Given an ever-increasing population, and an ever-increasing level of mechanization and computerization, it seems probable that more and more, even in the most prosperous societies, only the highly educated can expect to attain a 'normal' level of wealth. If this is so, the perpetuation of a genuinely evaluative educational system would force us to 'tell' large numbers of individuals: "Sorry, your lack of intellectual attainment means that you will never have the amount of material wealth your conception of equality has led you to feel you have the right to." This danger can be avoided in the short run at least by an educational system which allows everyone to become 'educated'. Given the needs of the society for highly trained people, some evaluation will always be necessary in some parts of the educational system, but by eliminating it wherever possible and delaying it and disguising it elsewhere, the postmodern approach to education allows us to defuse, perhaps permanently, a potential source of stagnation and unrest.

presence of so much diversity within a single culture provides another strong 'argument' in favor of the adoption of the Postmodern Doctrine.

It is easy to see how this works. Surrounded by diversity, we are bound to encounter clashes between incompatible values — a clash, for example between the values of those segments of the population who still espouse the principles of traditional European liberalism and who feel that public criticism of religious belief must be tolerated even if it is offensive to the adherents of the religion and, on the other hand, the devout Muslims for whom it goes without saying that such criticism is *intolerable*. There are two ways to view these clashes. Foundationalists will insist that the diverse value systems must be measured according to an absolute moral standard. It may be that by applying such a standard they would come to the conclusion that the freedom of speech is more important than the feelings of the devout; if they do arrive at that conclusion, then they may be unable to do anything to prevent people's feelings being hurt by public criticism of their beliefs. If by contrast, they conclude that the sensitivities of religious groups are more important than the right of free expression, foundationalists would be bound to conclude that the freedom of speech should, when necessary, be sacrificed. Postmodernists faced by this sort of clash will respond very differently: They will 'resolve' it speedily by pointing out that since the clash is a clash between two cultures, and since there are no culture-independent standards, no arbitration of such a dispute is possible. We can only say that the Muslim's values are correct for the Muslims and the liberal's for the liberals.

There is scarcely any need to ask which view of the clash is more conducive to harmony in a multi-cultural society. The liberal approach, despite its ori-

gins in a respect for tolerance, would obviously lead to tension, mistrust, and, perhaps eventually to strife. The postmodern approach, by contrast, would encourage understanding, co-operation and productivity. There are potential difficulties in the postmodern approach, to be sure. It would work well enough if the clashing cultures were separate universes that did not impinge on one another, but in the sort of situation we have been considering this is far from being the case: Not only do the two cultures interact, they are both parts of a larger culture, and this larger culture may not be able to avoid indefinitely the formulation of laws or policies which would decisively favour either the freedom of speech or respect for religion. However, the possibility that we may not be able to continue indefinitely to approach a problem in a particular way without encountering difficulties is not a conclusive reason against taking that approach. It may well be that, given a case like the one we have been considering, the interests of our society are best served by maintaining a postmodern, your-truth-is-as-good-as-mine attitude as long as possible. In most cases, perhaps all, the clash will resolve itself 'organically' before any decision is required. In sum, there is a powerful argument to be made to the effect that this attitude of trying to please everybody even if that means doing nothing — an attitude which is so precisely rationalized by the Postmodern Doctrine — serves well the sort of society we inhabit. And *that* fact must be a powerful consideration in favour of adopting the doctrine as a philosophical ideology.

Religion

Just as postmodern society is essentially democratic and plural, it is also deeply secular. It is secular not just in that there is no official religion, but in that it is not driven, even to the slightest extent, by religious motives. To

put it bluntly, in prosperous industrial societies religion is long dead as a cultural force. It may still motivate large numbers of individuals in these societies, but that is another matter.

The irreligiosity of our society provides another powerful reason for adopting the Postmodern Doctrine. Religion, after all, is a major manifestation of human commitment to discourse-independent reality. A society in which it remains a genuine cultural force can never be tempted by antifoundationalism. If an ecclesiastical establishment even hints that incompatible positions on doctrinal matters may be equally valid or that the central dogmas of the creed might not be absolutely true for all people at all times and places, it is only admitting that it has lost its power, that secular forces have replaced religious ones at the core of the social structure.²⁰³ This process has been underway for perhaps two hundred years and its beginnings roughly coincide with the appearance of the earliest harbingers of the Postmodern Doctrine. There is no reason to think that the trend toward secular society can be reversed. There are, admittedly, still places where religion is a powerful force — and even places where its power seems to be increasing; but these are not industrialized, prosperous or democratic places.²⁰⁴

In the opinion of many — George Steiner is one — the decline of religion is a grave loss to culture. It would be an exaggeration to say, even of the most devout society, that its philosophical ideology is identical with its basic religious beliefs, but there is no doubt that the theological doctrine of even a

²⁰³ That the ecclesiastical establishments of our day are often willing to make just such admissions is only more evidence of the disappearance of genuine religion.

²⁰⁴ Or if they are (an argument might be made in the case of Malaysia, for example), they have only newly become so.

moderately religious society is an extremely important element of its ideology. In particular, as was pointed out above, religion can provide a whole system of beliefs and values with an absolute and unassailable *foundation*. When religion goes, the foundations go with it. And we are left with a lot of empty theoretical space which we naturally feel the need to fill. The response to the loss of religious foundations was predictable: We looked for foundations elsewhere — in science, in the human mind, but in the long run these let us down. Science, because it is so demanding and so far removed from everyday experience, can never have had much promise as a source of moral or aesthetic foundations and even as a source of epistemological security it has proved disappointing. And, as we have seen, once the idea of the unconscious had been accepted, the idea of finding a substitute foundation in the mind became implausible. As postmodern theorists are quick to point out, it is scarcely possible to take the unconscious seriously and still believe that anything at all can be founded on consciousness.

As all this has dawned on us — and as the startling insights of our philosophers, scientists and artists have slowly trickled down, coming to look more and more like common sense as they are diffused and domesticated — it has become clear that the time for an anti-foundationalist philosophical ideology has finally arrived.²⁰⁵ If there *is* no straight-forward way of replacing our lost foundations, then the most we can do is make a virtue of necessity and devise an ideology that centers on *foundationlessness*.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ As has been pointed out, antifoundationalism is far from being a new idea

²⁰⁶ I speak of a 'straightforward' way of replacing foundations here in order to avoid contradicting the argument, used in the first section of this chapter, to the effect that a foundational philosophical ideology is a possibility. As I will argue in the concluding section, although foundational ideology is, generally speaking, a theoretical possibility, it is a *practical* possibility only for people who are troubled by certain doubts — who are inclined to ask certain questions.

Conveniently, the Postmodern Doctrine not only fills the vacuum left by the departure of religious foundations, it also fulfills other social roles previously performed by religious belief. In the first place it *flatters* us in the same way as traditional religion does by encouraging our natural tendency to believe that our way of life is automatically and necessarily justifiable. It does this in an oddly ironic way of course — by telling us first that *no* way of life can possibly be justified according to an independent standard. It follows — a consequence that is generally left implicit but is surely understood by all — that our attitudes and practices are as justifiable as any attitudes and practices could be.

And along with the flattery comes an excuse for complacency. The Postmodern Doctrine's discursivism seems to license the following sort of argument: Because we are trapped inside our discourse, we cannot succeed in making fundamental criticisms of our institutions. All the concepts we have at our disposal for making such criticisms are themselves part of the system that created the institutions. The rational course, the argument concludes, is simply to set aside guilt and accept what we are, what we must be. Moreover, as we have already seen, this same line of thought can easily be used by the establishment as a gentle, rhetorical way of counteracting unrest: "There is no point in complaining," malcontents can be told. "Your very complaints are part of the system you claim to be unhappy with." And so the Postmodern Doctrine is able to perform another traditional function of religious doctrine — the disarming of dissent.

Finally, the postmodern doctrine can mimic religion by providing a sort of hope — not hope for eternal salvation, but for the sort of quick and painless readjustment of unsatisfactory aspects of the social structure. It may seem

odd to suggest that the Postmodern Doctrine is able to offer this sort of hope when we have just remarked on its ability to *discourage* the expectation of change — and indeed it manages this feat only by contradicting itself. But this is perhaps not a serious problem since the doctrine's potential as a weapon of repression tends to come to the surface only in the higher, more theoretical regions of postmodern thought — the writings of Foucault and Baudrillard for example — whereas its 'revolutionary' aspect is more apparent in the thought of the pundits of 'political correctness' who move from the fundamental postmodern tenet that all the world is discourse to the conclusion that central human attitudes and important institutions can be changed just as quickly as legislation and rhetoric can bring about change in meanings and conceptual interrelations. Such an argument seems to involve a serious misunderstanding of postmodern metaphysics: If Derrida is right, then *we* have no control whatsoever over discourse; quite the contrary, it controls us. Still, given the *abstruseness* of the metaphysics, it is not surprising that, as the doctrine filters down, this error is made. And it is not unreasonable to count the fact that the theory quite naturally offers this invitation to convenient misinterpretation as one more indication of the Postmodern Doctrine's eminent suitability for our time.

An Argument from Authority

We will look now at one more argument in favour of the Postmodern Doctrine. This line of reasoning is an appeal to authority and therefore of no logical value, but, as we have already acknowledged, this is not an area where tightness of logic is all-important. And, moreover, even if this line of thought is completely rejected as argumentation, it remains interesting as

a partial explanation of the doctrine's present predominance. The argument is this: Some of most powerful philosophical minds of our time have devoted themselves to providing the doctrine with philosophical underpinning. Surely this shows that, at the very least, we must give it careful and sympathetic consideration.

Even though an argument of this kind cannot be logically respectable, it can have real persuasive power — but only if the assessment of philosophical skill on which it depends is accepted. The thinkers I have mainly in mind here are Foucault and Derrida. My high assessment of their importance is not universal; they are the objects of much scorn. Still, I feel they can be lightly dismissed only by those who have not read them. Whatever one may think of their prose style, their historical allegiances, the justice of their analyses and interpretations, or the quality of their argument, it is difficult to deny that they have talents and energies of the highest calibre. Wittgenstein, who has, among both Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophers, a firm reputation as a major figure of lasting importance must also be mentioned in this context. With the benefit of hindsight at least he emerges as the great prophet of postmodernity.

There is brilliance enough on the other, anti-postmodern, side to be sure, but, as we have seen, even those who set out with most determination to resist, end up making concessions which deprive their theories of any real oppositional force. If the most fundamental claims of this essay are sound — if, that is to say, it is true that the crux of the Postmodern Doctrine is its antifoundationalism, and true, too, that the only genuine alternative is blunt foundationalism — then it seems that there are *no* eminent philo-

sophical minds in view who are willing to launch a fundamental attack on the Postmodern Doctrine.

The primary reason for this absence is, I am suggesting, simply that the Postmodern Doctrine is, in most ways, a better bet as ideology than is T. But there are other, complementary forces at work as well. First-rate minds are understandably attracted to novelty, and whatever, other virtues it may have, the sort of neo-foundationalism I have sketched out in the first part of this chapter can scarcely be said to be a novelty.²⁰⁷ The very best that could ever be said for T is that it is a good job of pastiche and refurbishing.

On the other hand, the subtle poststructuralist theorizing that is required to give any metaphysical plausibility to the Postmodern Doctrine demands the pioneering courage of a Derrida or a Wittgenstein and offers the rewards of novelty and adventure to those who follow them. When the new succeeds, it soon becomes fashionable, of course — and, in the academic world at least, ideas can remain fashionable long after they have ceased to be new. Moreover, when a fashion threatens to become universal — as the fashion of antifoundationalism already does in many parts of our world — repressive forces will inevitably begin to operate against anyone who has not adopted it. The result of all this is that anyone wanting, in the present climate, to oppose foundationalism must expect to be regarded not only as dully *démodé* but also as dangerously reactionary. It is not surprising, perhaps, that there is no brilliant champion of neo-foundationalism on the scene.

²⁰⁷ Nor, as has been remarked, is antifoundationalism itself, but the possibility of an antifoundational philosophical ideology which embodies an antifoundational metaphysics *is* new.

T's Place in a Postmodern World

It seems then that we must be prepared concede that, *as ideology*, the Postmodern Doctrine is superior to T and to go on to admit that it has other things going for it as well. When to these considerations we add the realization that ideological rather than philosophical adequacy determines the social power of a philosophical ideology — we are led to the conclusion that the Postmodern Doctrine will prevail. But this does not mean that foundationalist thought must vanish. Even the most brutal totalitarianism cannot extinguish opposition; certainly a benign postmodern utopia will not be able to do so — not, at any rate as long as the *need* for foundations continues to be felt. It is possible, however, that one day that need will disappear. Perhaps foundationalist feelings will simply die away as religious feelings have done.

It is unlikely, though, that this will happen soon. Certainly there are still large number of people whose positions on fundamental matters are incompatible with the Postmodern Doctrine: those whose convictions about the special epistemological status of science cannot allow them to accept the conflation of science and art; those whose inability to accept one or another of the moral dogmas of their community leaves them no alternative but to appeal to some community-independent moral standard; those who are convinced that the artistic production of some other place or time is superior to the artistic production of their own culture. It must be admitted, however, that the mere existence of individuals — even large numbers of individuals — who hold views that are not compatible with the Postmodern Doctrine is not in itself a guarantee that foundationalist thought will

remain vital. As we have already remarked, practices, even intellectual 'practices' that center on the holding of a particular belief, may be logically incompatible with a philosophical ideology and yet live quite comfortably with it.²⁰⁸

The only people who will certainly never be able to live comfortably with the Postmodern Doctrine are those who not only hold these opinions, but who also feel a strong need to be able to fit their values and beliefs into an all-embracing philosophical structure. *They* will never be able to accept the postmodern monistic discursivism as their metaphysic because their tastes and interests will require them to include transcendent standards within their philosophical ideology. For every philosophically inclined person of this sort there will, however, be many others who have similar views and tastes but who are able to swallow the antifoundationalism of the Postmodern Doctrine without being bothered by the fact that it denies them the transcendentia which their everyday beliefs and values implicitly

²⁰⁸ The whole 'political correctness' movement can be seen as a case in point. It is easy to make the mistake of taking it to be a manifestation of the increasing power of the Postmodern Doctrine. Some of its intellectual leaders, Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish, for example, are respected postmodern theorists, and the movement is certainly related to postmodernism both historically and doctrinally in its pluralism, its fascination with discourse, and its antagonism to the foundationalism implicit in the idea of a cultural canon. On the other hand, the most salient characteristic of the whole movement is its aggressive intolerance toward any questioning of its dogmas. It disarms dissent, not in the cleverly logical way that the Postmodern Doctrine does, but with a heavy-handedness that seems to be more foundationalistic than traditional liberalism itself. In light of all this, the most accurate way to interpret the political correctness movement seems to be as a reaction against postmodernism — a reaction which shares postmodernism's rejection of liberalism but which, instead of following postmodernism in its attempt to create a novel philosophical ideology 'based' on the intrinsic uncertainties of 'difference', reverts instead to a version of pre-Enlightenment — and foundationalistic — puritanism. Some of the specific dogmas of political correctness, for example concerning the individual's right to indulge in vices such as smoking, are reminiscent of the specific prohibitions of earlier forms of puritanism. On the other hand, politically correct views on homosexuality would have been shocking to puritans of earlier generations, but even in this area the old and the new puritans are alike in the narrowness and the simplicity of their view of human sexuality and in their eagerness to punish anyone who deviates from correct sexual behaviour.

commit them to. In short, the natural, and understandable, tendency of the great mass of humankind, once presented with a philosophical ideology, will be to acquiesce to it without worrying over much about whether it really does rationalize all one's beliefs and values.

How many people are there now who have philosophical doubts about the Postmodern Doctrine? Clearly a good number. But as we have seen, the most articulate and erudite among them hesitate to actually reject the doctrine's main tenet. How many will there be in seventy-five or a hundred years when there is no one living who can remember a time before the doctrine's reign? It seems possible that there will be none, especially given the fact that philosophical resistance has apparently already collapsed.

But it is, I suppose, even greater folly to make long-term predictions about philosophical trends than about technological or political ones, and, in any case, we are not seventy-five years down the road but here — in the present. So one more question must be raised: How should those we have just described — those who are prevented by conviction, by taste, and by philosophical temperament from swallowing the Postmodern Doctrine — 'wear' their status as ideological misfits? First, and negatively, it seems they should not make the mistake of devoting all their energies to the overthrow of the doctrine. They should remember that philosophical ideologies are large, quasi-natural phenomena, and attempts to refute them are bound to be frustrating because they are simply not the kind of thing that *can* be refuted. But while avoiding a futile all-out war on post-modernism, contemporary foundationalists should also avoid falling into sullen passivity and living like intractable but respectfully silent infidels among the faithful. Our gloomy prognosis is plausible, but it is worth remembering that the

Postmodern Doctrine may turn out to have ideological weaknesses as well as philosophical ones — and that because of technological or natural change we might unexpectedly find ourselves in a situation where the Postmodern Doctrine is not as appropriate an ideology as it is at the moment. But even if none of this happens, there is at least the hope that by speaking aloud one will find company.

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