

POST-POST MODERNITY

The title of this essay is intentionally ridiculous but it is only slightly more ridiculous than the phrase postmodernity which was the focus of some passionate debates during recent decades. Fortunately, the “postmodern” may be slowly fading from the modern world. However, before it is given a final resting place in the past, postmodern deserves a post-mortem examination as to where the idea came from and why it took hold in the academic world. Most of the world may have never heard of the postmodern world but esoteric discussions can filter into popular discussions of important issues. The idea that we are living in a postmodern world was an unhelpful distraction for dealing with modern problems and drawing on historical knowledge for help.

When there is a term that sparks debate it is usually helpful to ask who coined the term, when was it invented, why was it thought necessary, and how has the term evolved. For most important words which have a long, rich, and complicated history those questions might not have a clear answer. Sometimes, terms have nearly reversed their meaning; the old meaning does not disappear and both meanings can float through a debate. Both parties in the debate are right but they are using two different meanings that the term has. “Modern” has a long but remarkably consistent meaning. “Postmodern” has a short but confused set of meanings.

The term postmodern was coined to express opposition to works of art that had the illogical description of “modernism.” The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of great experimentation in literature, music, painting and architecture. The tag of being modernist expressed the belief that there was great novelty in these areas. “Modernism” is an ideological term that lays claim to representing what is truly modern. If you can get people to call your work modernist it becomes very difficult to criticize your work. Who, especially in the United States, wishes to be thought of as out of date and not living in the present?

A close parallel to the ideology of modernism is the use of the word “realism” to discuss everything from literature to international politics. “Realism” is one group’s interpretation of what is real. If the group can get influential sources to call them “realists” they win the game. Critics of people who are called realists can be dismissed as “unrealists” or, by the slightly less condescending term, “idealists,” meaning people who have nice ideas about how the world should be but do not live in “the real world.” In time, a group’s realism might be shown to have been not so realistic but that conclusion can take a century or more. United States foreign policy since the 1950s has been dominated by attitudes that go under the name of realism. Military might it was thought was central to protecting freedom against Soviet power. The collapse of the Soviet empire hardly caused a ripple in the realist need for more bombs to keep peace in a world of unending conflict.

What was called realism in the arts was a central factor in the spread of the word postmodern. An attempt to disagree with whatever has established itself as realism leads to convoluted expressions for criticizing whatever trend has become established as

realistic. Modernism was itself a way to counter what had previously been taken as realistic. One way to disagree with what was called modernism was with the paradoxical phrase postmodern. At least it was better than being called unrealistic, idealistic or anti-modern. Since “postmodern” had no logical meaning it could not be dismissed as a call to return to an earlier time of history; in fact it might suggest that one had moved on to a bright new world that was only being discovered now by a few explorers.

If a group of people wish to make up a name for a school of art or for criticism of the arts, that is their prerogative. But if the term migrates from that setting and begins to be taken at face value it can lead to confusion and frustrating arguments. The term postmodern embodied a contradiction that was not a big problem so long as one recognized the ironical purpose of dissenting from a school that had arrogated to itself a claim to understand and represent the real world of the present.

The term postmodern was given a boost in the United States from disappointment with architectural projects that had been celebrated as modernist. The 1960s unleashed a more general rebellion against what the early twentieth century saw as new and experimental, but was now seen as a new orthodoxy. Linguistically, however, there was a problem with how to describe a time that was going beyond the modernism of the past. “Postmodernism” served a limited purpose in the arts but using the term to refer to an historical period implies changing the meaning of modern, a difficult task indeed.

The Modern

The English word modern has a history of over six hundred years, having been borrowed from Latin and French. The term has had a remarkably consistent meaning throughout its history. The modern refers to what is present, novel, and up-to-date. It was coined to draw a contrast between the present and the past; “modern” continues to have that meaning. The Latin *modernus* originated in the late fifth century for expressing a contrast between the Christian era and the preceding classical and Roman civilizations. This coining of the term modern did not represent the invention of a sharp difference between present and past; it was more a shift of emphasis for how the present distinguishes itself from the past while at the same time can draw upon that past for nourishing itself.

The Christian movement had from its start drawn a clear line between the present and the past signified by the language of old testament and new testament. Jesus, who was proclaimed as the Christ, was the answer to all of human history. The human race was “redeemed” from sin and could start over. People who are not Christian find this belief puzzling. The Jew asks: Is this a redeemed world? When Jesus did not immediately return to bring an end to history, the belief was that the followers of Jesus had to finish the story after the decisive event had happened. Augustine of Hippo took these developments into account in elaborating a Christian philosophy of history. History had entered its final era but that period of time can be a thousand years or more. Augustine, writing at the beginning of the fifth century, did not have available the word modern. Cassiodorus in the sixth century could speak of the Christian Church as modern, the legitimate successor to all of classical civilization.

In the language of pre-modern and modern, nothing can follow the modern period of history except the end of history. That idea is, of course, a live one. It affected Jewish religion before the Christian movement made it quite central by adopting the Book of Revelation (or in Greek, Apocalypse) as the last book of the New Testament. The idea of apocalyptic ending was present in the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth but how central it was in his teaching was a contentious argument that has never been resolved. Augustine tried to domesticate the idea of apocalypse or revelation by using it to refer to church doctrine (derived from a divine revelation) instead of history's end. Official church teaching has never entirely succeeded in controlling the use of apocalypse by dissident sects of Christianity. The influence of apocalyptic forms of Christianity in the United States has made that country a hotbed of announcements that the world is about to come to an end.

Augustine's philosophy of history dominated Christian thinking until the eruption of new forms of science (knowledge) began to occur in the twelfth century. Then there emerged one of the most influential thinkers in history, Joachim of Flora. He established the language of an ancient world, a present world, and a world about to break in. This way of thinking was not entirely new. Joachim derived his ideas from the Book of Revelation and its promise of a "new heaven and a new earth." Joachim profoundly influenced the Western world's way of thinking about history, starting with the idea that there are stages of history and that history is progressing toward an end, whether that end be a return to an original paradise, a new paradise of technological marvels, or simply the utter destruction of everything. The fact that the word apocalypse is now a well known word and it is taken to mean a fiery and violent event suggests that many people are unsure that the world is getting better and better every day and in every way..

Once the assumption that history has periods or stages became accepted it was anyone's speculation as to where lines should be drawn. Joachim had named his stages of history the age of the Father, the age of the Son, and the new age that was going to arrive any moment, the age of the Holy Ghost. A new prominence of the Latin word for modern can be seen in the spirituality called the *devotio moderna* and its emphasis on "the following of Christ."

As the Christian Church was undergoing upheavals in the fourteenth century, the word modern appeared in what were called modern languages, first in French and then in English and other languages. This development could suggest there was some doubt about where the Christian Church had drawn the line which divides new and old, present and past. For some people, Christianity was being relegated to the old era. Nevertheless, the Church was involved in the birth of what came to be the modern period. The most obvious sign of Christian power is the fact that the calendar used around the world still dates all events from the supposed year of the birth of Jesus. The dating was off by a few years and scholars now use CE or Common Era instead of AD which means "Year of Our Lord," but the Gregorian calendar of the sixteenth century still reigns.

Since where to draw a line between past and present is always somewhat arbitrary, the language of modern in contrast to pre-modern can have many references. The beginning

date that people assume for modernity can span several centuries. However, if one follows the word rather than the idea, the spread of “modern” in the early sixteenth century suggests looking at that period as the one of drastic change. The case can be made that in the space of three or four decades, the perception of the world changed drastically and that we still live with the features of the world map drawn at that time. It was a change in European perception but since that change included Europeans setting out to conquer the whole world their new view found its way around the world.

In the late fifteenth century European explorers searched for a more efficient way to get to Asia, by sailing either east or west. Spain became more interested in a western route after the success of Portugal in going east around the Cape of Good Hope. The westward journeys brought surprises. Although there had been various stories about what lay out in the Western Sea what was confirmed was a large land mass and another great sea beyond that.

In 1503 a ten-page pamphlet appeared and became a best seller. It had what was needed for an international best seller: it was short; it contained a sensational mix of fact and fiction; it had an eye-catching title which came not from the author, Americus Vespucci, but the market-conscious printer. The title of the pamphlet was *Mundus Nova*, the new world. A group of German map makers met in 1506 to revise Ptolemy’s map that had stood since the first century of the Common Era. Their data was skimpy but the map makers did remarkably well in imagining the land to the west of Europe and a great sea beyond that. They had little hesitation in naming this “new world” after the explorer, Americus, who was assumed to be its discoverer. They used the feminine form America to correspond with Europa, Asia and Africa and wrote the word America across what would later be Brazil and Venezuela. Details and corrections would be added and still are but the map attributed to Martin Waldseemüller is still with us.

Christopher Columbus had died in 1505 a mostly forgotten man. His four voyages did contribute to the picture of the new world that gradually emerged. His son Ferdinand was a chief lobbyist in establishing the proposition that “Columbus discovered America in 1492.” The more important event in 1492 was the exclusion of the Jews and Moors from the Iberian peninsula. The move signaled a more aggressive attitude on the part of Christians to converting everyone on earth. Gunpowder and the bible were to accompany European efforts to gain control of the world. Columbus wrote to his financial supporters in Spain that there were riches in this recently discovered world that could finance a new crusade.

A contrast of new and old *worlds* seems strange today when we most often mean by “world” everything that there is. At that time “the world” referred to a place of human habitation on earth. A new world meant that the world no longer was imagined as an island but as bodies of land that were connected by water. The most important discovery at that time was not land but the oceans and the navigation routes that connected the entire world, both old and new. Up to that time “continent” had meant lands that touch; now “continent” meant lands that are separated by oceans but can be connected by ocean travel.

The revision of Ptolemy's geography introduced the idea of a new world; it also stirred up a different conception of the earth's relation to the world. Ptolemy is best known for a map of the heavens which placed the important body, the earth, at the center. An astronomer named Copernicus inspired by the map of the "new world" began plotting a map that would show the earth as one of many bodies revolving about the sun. He did not publish his findings until 1543 but his idea was developed decades earlier as the meaning of "modern" was taking hold. His book was entitled "On the Revolution of Heavenly Bodies." Galileo would later get most of the credit in history books, partly because of his conflicts, but Copernicus' revolution along with the new map of the earth set the framework of the modern world. There were revolutions in art, politics and religion in the early sixteenth century that reinforce the notion that the modern era began in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Subsequently, the experimental sciences and the practical arts filled out the modern conception of "the world" in both its meanings and the process has continued to this day.

The "Postmodern"

As noted above, "postmodern" arose in the arts in an effort to counter examples of what had been called modernist. The term postmodern was known to a very limited audience who were familiar with art and art criticism. When the term postmodern moved out from that location to be used for a new period of history, it gained a wider notoriety but less intelligibility. Because "modern" still meant present, up-to-date and the novel, the assertion of a period of history after the modern did not make sense. That did not stop the spread of the term in the 1980s.

The moment of transition from the art world to human history can be identified with a book published in 1979. Jean François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* set off a worldwide discussion of postmodernism. Lyotard had published several previous books and he published many subsequent books but none got the attention that the 1979 book got. Lyotard spent much of the rest of his life backing away from the argument in *The Postmodern Condition* but that was a hopeless undertaking. His enthusiastic readers had gotten the message and could not be brought back. The phenomenon is common. A book with a catchy title or one that can be reduced to a slogan makes the author famous. Then the author tries to convince his followers that they have misunderstood what he or she meant but almost no one accepts the correction.

The Postmodern Condition has two fundamental errors. Lyotard obliquely admitted the errors almost immediately. The book opens with a pronouncement: "The word postmodern is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts." The first clause in that sentence is not true; the second clause contains the two errors on which the claims in the book are built.

By saying that the term postmodern is being used on the American continent, Lyotard conveys the impression that he is not introducing a novel use of language; he is merely clarifying an established idea. The claim that "postmodern" was being used in art

criticism on the American continent is true, although Lyotard did not have to go that far to find such a use of the term. The additional claim that “postmodern” was in use in sociology is unsupported. The one book he cites is Derrick Bell’s *Post Industrial Society*. Bell’s first chapter in that book discusses various terms that begin with the prefix post, such as post-capitalist, post-bourgeois, post-puritan but his one reference to postmodern is to dismiss it. Lyotard could have cited Bell’s *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* which has many references to postmodernism, but all of them are negative. Neither of Bell’s books was a sociological discussion of the postmodern period of history.

Lyotard’s reference to Bell allows him to create a parallel that he several times uses: “post-industrial society and post-modern culture.” Using post-modern to modify “culture” is not to stray very far from the art world. However, associating it with Bell’s “post-industrial society” suggested a time line that Lyotard introduces in the second half of the above statement, namely, that the term post-modern “designates the state of culture following the transformations since the end of the nineteenth century.” There is here a casual introduction of a line in history that separates the modern era from an era that has followed. His location for that line is surprisingly early. Modernism took hold only at the end of the nineteenth century and most of what came to be labeled as postmodern culture does not describe the early twentieth century.

The reason for drawing the line at the beginning of the twentieth century is indicated by Lyotard’s claim that the transformations at that historical moment “have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts.” True, it can be shown that there were extraordinary changes in the sciences and the arts in the early decades of the century. However, the tricky claim is his reference to “game rules” in each of these areas. The reference, it quickly becomes clear, is to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s metaphor of “language game.” That is the second fundamental error of the book, a misuse or misunderstanding of Wittgenstein. One might argue that Lyotard was simply adapting rather than misusing Wittgenstein’s metaphor. He does not indicate an adaptation; he simply cites Wittgenstein as his source. More important, Lyotard later admits that his use of “language game” was misleading. In 1988 (in *The Differend*) he says that “language game is too general” for his purposes, a statement which might be translated as “I made a mistake.” He immediately re-introduces something similar to what Wittgenstein meant by language game under “phrase regimes.” And what Lyotard had previously called language games he now calls “genres of discourse.”

The misuse of “language game” might seem an esoteric matter for language philosophers but it was the basis of the line for which the book is most famous: “the incredulity of meta-narratives.” He claims that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.” That line has been repeated thousands of times as if it were an obvious fact instead of one man’s generalization which seems to have been based on his disillusionment with Marxism.

What Lyotard supposedly showed is that no one in this postmodern age can believe in a “grand narrative.” (The invention of an English word, meta-narrative, only worsened the abstruseness of the claim). The two examples that Lyotard almost invariably provides are

Hegel's philosophy and Marxist doctrine, the first which offered "the speculative narrative" of universal history, the second, the "narrative of emancipation" which promised the liberation of humanity. Those two narratives constitute the modern ideologies. Their common note is belief in progress; for Lyotard and many other people modernity means a narrative of progress for all humanity. In later essays such as "Universal History and Cultural Differences," Lyotard mentions two other examples of grand narratives that promise human progress: Christianity and capitalism.

Grand narratives stand in contrast to small narratives which are stories about a particular place and particular events. Obviously these small stories exist but a comprehensive story about the whole world is now said to be impossible. On the face of it, the assertion seems preposterous. Take as an example more than a billion Muslims who adhere to a grand narrative of Islam; or Christianity, despite its problems in Europe, still has believers by the billions. As for capitalism as a grand narrative, Lyotard's use of that term is confusing; he often describes capitalism as an overarching enemy that the postmodern must resist. At other times he cites capitalism as one of the grand narratives, one that was refuted by the Depression of 1929. Despite this claim that capitalism has been refuted it surely has more believers today than ever. In the crisis of 2008 there were few voices saying that capitalism's grand narrative is dead; the concern of believers in China, Russia, Germany, United States, and elsewhere was to adjust the markets so that the worldwide system would not collapse.

The dismissal of grand narratives was based on the fact that no theory is universal. The contrast of small and grand referred to the contrast between the particular and the universal. It is quite easy to show that no theory is universal, meaning true for all times, in all places and in all circumstances. That is hardly news although people do frequently refer to something as universal when clearly it is not. Every language such as French, English or Chinese is particular. If anyone had a universal theory there would be no language in which to express it. There have been many modern attempts to create a universal language, usually by young mathematicians who thought that they understood human communication. The postmodern choice was said to be between the particular and the universal, and since the universal is not possible then only the particular is the province of the human.

The actual choice for human beings is either to start with individual cases and abstract generalities about them, or else to consider in depth particular cases that give intimation of what might approach universality. There is nothing new or mysterious about this latter possibility; it is the standard logic of art and religion. A work of Shakespeare is about particular people in particular circumstances; it is also a work that goes beyond its place and time to speak to anyone who is open to it. Northrop Frye wrote of *Macbeth* "if you wish to know the history of eleventh-century Scotland look elsewhere; if you wish to know what it means for a man to gain a kingdom and lose his soul, look here." *Macbeth* is not the universal man but he embodies characteristics that have been recognizable to countless numbers of people in various places, times and circumstances.

In religions, the logic of Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions is that there are events of one time and one place that can provide insight to anyone who has ears to hear. The

struggles of one community or a person in that community can be instructive for people of all times and all places. Not everyone agrees on which story best points toward the universal but the belief is not absurd. Religious doctrines can be intolerant if a group does not allow that other people have their own interpretations of a divine revealing. However, the belief in particular peoples, events and practices as having a nearly universal meaning is not in itself intolerant.

Something similar to religion can be said about ethics and morality. Ethical theories intend a universality which they can never achieve. Every ethical statement is particular. The rational character of ethics makes ethical statements less restricted than religious beliefs. Nevertheless, ethicists who try to state universal rules of conduct can only reach general principles that do not solve particular ethical problems. Religious beliefs are not general truths; they are reflections on the life of a people. The claim to *near* universality in religions is based on people, community and action. For philosophical ethics to be a practical guide it has to be supplemented by morally good lives that intimate a near universal understanding of the good.

One of the most often repeated mantras in political discussions is a phrase attributed to former Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neil: "All politics is local." The saying is an endorsement of the obvious; human beings are located in one place and one time; all political decisions are local. The implication of the slogan, however, is that politics does not go beyond the local. But especially today, political events and decisions can have worldwide repercussions. A responsible politician is aware that what is said or done in one locality of time and place may have effects in other countries and for future generations. The political hack is only interested in getting good things for the neighborhood.

Lyotard's use of "language game" posited that each area of the sciences and the arts has its own way of speaking in which the rules of physics, architecture, psychology, sculpture and the rest, control the use of the words within that particular game. Since there is no language game beyond particular language games, no grand narrative of the human race is possible.

Lyotard's assumption that what he calls "language games" are self-contained areas of discourse is simply not the case. The physicist speaking physics uses language in particular ways and invents some new words for discussions that are incomprehensible to anyone who is not trained in physics. Nonetheless, a physicist, chemist or biologist draws upon a common fund of language that is used by millions of non-scientists. The scientist may need to define a particular word for use in that science so as to eliminate ambiguities in the popular use of the term. The danger is that someone can come to think that the scientific definition is the real meaning of the term. Terms such as power, force, energy, evolution, life, and hundreds of such words do not mean what the scientist says they mean. The words have long histories that science may contribute to, but an earlier meaning and a wider meaning do not disappear. A failure to recognize this fact leads to fruitless debate (for example, over "evolution") that can go nowhere.

For Wittgenstein, examples of language games are preaching, questioning, praying, confessing, lecturing, and innumerable other “forms of life.” Words have their meaning within the context in which they are used. It is important to know what kind of statement one is dealing with. For example, one sees at football games signs that say John 3:16. The reference is to the fourth gospel of the New Testament. It makes a big difference whether one reads the verse – “God so loved the world as to send his only begotten Son that those who believe in him may have life everlasting” – as either a prayer of thanksgiving or else as an assertion that everyone but Christians are damned.

Consider the term development which is at the center of the modern world. Who doesn’t believe in development? But in the literature of economics, “development” is about money and economic resources. That meaning makes sense but economists often assume that development means what economics means by development. The term development is also a favorite in psychology. Psychology came rather late to the game but the psychologists also assume that development is their word. Both economics and psychology can make valuable contributions to *human* development (in the context of the nonhuman environment) but each can be a distortion when scholars are not acutely aware of the particularity of their fields.

Economists and psychologists do not deny that there are other uses of “development” than theirs. They just assume by the way they speak that their assertions are the case, unless they are challenged by outsiders. It might be a good exercise for economists to do some study of psychological development; likewise, psychologists might consider the economic assumptions in their theories of psychological development. The result would probably be more modesty about the claims of their respective theories. The modern economist might even become aware of an earlier and much richer meaning of the term economy that is still with us; and psychologists might acknowledge that there is wisdom in reflections on the psyche or soul from well before the nineteenth century.

I said above that Lyotard gave up the use of “language game” and replaced the idea with genres of discourse. He reintroduced “phrase regime” for what bears similarity to Wittgenstein’s meaning of “language game.” However, one of Lyotard’s chief reasons for talking about various phrase regimes, such as asserting, questioning, or apologizing is to insist on the separation of epistemology from ethics, that is, a separation of fact and value, denotation and prescription. Ironically, Wittgenstein introduced “language game” to overcome that separation. In his early work, *The Tractatus*, Wittgenstein lists “facts” about the world but says that ethics and religion belong to a realm of values above language. In his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein pokes fun at his younger self for thinking that language can have only the form of factual statements.

“Development” is an example of a term that is neither fact nor value. When an economist or a psychologist uses “development” to describe the world he or she unavoidably is involved in moral advocacy. As soon as one goes beyond numbers and introduces words there is a choice to describe the world one way rather than another. Lyotard divides language into denotation and prescription. He claims that a lack of any distinction leads to “totalizing” theories, citing as usual Hegel and Marx. Although it is true that a dictator who thinks his prescriptions describe the real world does terrible harm, there is an equal

danger of separating science and statements of ethics. The problem here lies in Lyotard's saying that ethics consists of "prescriptions," which is to use a misleading metaphor.

The best known use of the term prescription is an order for a medicine that passes between physician and pharmacist. The patient trusts that what is written by the physician and deciphered by the pharmacist is the cure for an illness. Consider an alternate use of language. I am charged with a crime; I go to a lawyer and we discuss my problem and how best to argue a defense. There can be a variety of strategies. The lawyer advocates my cause before the jury; if one approach is not working, another can be tried. If my lawyer's advocacy is successful I am declared not guilty. There is no prescription in abstract formulas; instead there is advocacy in humanly persuasive terms of the truth that I did not commit the crime.

Prescription is a crude form of ethics. If it has any role it is secondary to approximations that arise from human discussions and communal rituals. These days not even a physician would consider the writing of prescriptions to be the main activity of the health care professions. If I were to go to a physician who did a quick test with a machine and wrote a prescription for me, I would find another physician. I would look for one who talked with me, explained possible options, and encouraged me to use the resources of my body, with possible help from medicine or surgery, to recover my health.

Ethics is not about "values" that are in a realm separated from facts. Ethics is language that starts with givens about human beings and with forces already in play. Ethical statements are about directions in which human life can move. Movement in one direction can be a disaster; there are nearly universal condemnations of murder, rape and lying. Movement in other directions might be either encouraged or discouraged by a society. There is plenty of room in ethics for debate and for a range of choices depending on personal preference and particular situations.

Many of the terms used in ethics function both as accurate statement of the way things are and in moral judgments of the right and wrong ways to act. For example, human beings are "developmental." They are born that way and they develop throughout life. At first their development is physical and mental; moral judgments on the action of a two-year-old are inappropriate. At some point – exactly when is debatable – a child's development can be called moral. Moral education does not require injecting an entirely new language into children's heads. Instead, it is an encouragement of what is already in motion together with steps to prevent disaster and to persuade a person that one way of developing is better than another.

The development of one's own life is never entirely separate from some bigger picture of the universe. Everyone has some story about the direction and meaning of his or her life. The problem is not that there are no believers in a grand narrative but that the grand narrative of so many people is not grand enough. The learned scholar might look condescendingly on the beliefs and the dreams that motivate ordinary people but the great scientist could be living in a fairly cramped universe. Kierkegaard ridiculed the Hegelian philosophers of his day who were intent on completing the grand house of ideas that they were building while they were living in a hovel next door. A scientist is prone to seeing

the whole world through the lens of his or her field of study: physics, biology, anthropology or another established science. The only solution is an admission that one's scholarly study of one department of knowledge does not make one an expert in how to live. An astrophysicist, like the rest of us, has to learn from a variety of sciences and from people of past and present who have lessons of life to teach us.

Lyotard's Retraction of a Postmodern Age

In addition to his misusing "language game" to claim that people cannot have a comprehensive story about life, Lyotard's first and most basic error was a seemingly casual claim that a new period of history has begun. When did it begin? I quoted his statement that this new period of history began at the end of the nineteenth century. He has other ambiguous references which may suggest a beginning in 1789, 1945 or 1968. Subsequent debates that focused on when the postmodern era began skipped past the issue of whether the idea made any sense at all. Lyotard's main interest was describing "the postmodern condition" or "postmodern culture" which implied to most readers that he was talking about a new stage of history that can be called postmodern.

Lyotard was probably surprised at the success of his book and chagrined at the way people were reading it. Almost immediately he offered a correction in an essay three years later. The title of the essay is "An Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern" That was as direct as he could be. He would clear up the ambiguity in the book and provide the definitive answer to the meaning of "postmodern." The essay is admirably clear in answering what he means by postmodern. Lyotard says that there are three artistic or cultural presentations called realism, modernism and postmodernism. The latter two are a reaction against the first. Every age has art and culture that are accepted as realistic. Modernism and postmodernism are contrasting but paired movements that challenge the realism of any era. His example of "Don Quixote" as postmodern makes the point that postmodernism did not begin at a particular time.

In a later book, *Postmodernism Explained*, Lyotard was still trying to make the point that modernism and postmodernism are twin responses to realism. He distinguishes how they offer a challenge by using the examples of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Proust's novel does not accept the reality of the present as all that there is. It delves into layers of memories that can change our perspective on everything. That is what modernism is but it is a fairly timid shaking up of what we take to be real. Joyce as an example of the postmodern writer radically disrupts linear development and the ordinary narrative sense. Not only the content of the novel but the form it takes leave us at a loss. The loss can be enjoyable because it is "the presentation of the unrepresentable" which can both enthrall and horrify.

In this contrast between modernist nostalgia for a presence once experienced by a human subject and postmodern experience that can conceive of "inhumanity" and new rules of the game, Lyotard relies on Immanuel Kant who is described as both prologue and epilogue of modernity. Hegel and Marx have been dismissed as merely modern but Kant's eighteenth century writing is a chief support of postmodernism. Kant already had a name for the experience of what is unrepresentable; he called it the sublime. The

modernist sublime is tied up with the feeling of loss; the old language games no longer present the world adequately; the feeling evoked is a wish to return to stability. The postmodern sublime is a sense of excitement at the failure of language games. The old rules have failed; let us discover new ones.

Whether or not one accepts this Kantian distinction, Lyotard is clear in asserting that “postmodern” is a particular artistic reaction that is not circumscribed by one period of history. In numerous places Lyotard insists that the postmodern is not an historical period. At times he is slightly disingenuous by referring in *The Inhuman* to “so called postmodernity” and “what some people have called the postmodern” as if he were a spectator instead of the person who introduced “so called postmodernity” into the conversation. He is more forthright in his pointed attack on “postmodernity” in the essay “Rewriting Modernity.” He admits his own role by saying “I have myself used the term ‘postmodern.’ It was a slightly provocative way of placing (or displacing) into the limelight the debate about knowledge.” Once more he explains what he meant by postmodern: “Postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity, and first of all modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole, through science and technology.” Even in this denial, the term postmodernity (in contrast to postmodern) suggests a period of time.

In “Rewriting Modernity,” Lyotard says that the title of the essay “shows up the pointlessness of any periodization of cultural history in terms of pre- and post-, before and after, for the single reason that it leaves unquestioned the position of the ‘now’, of the present from which one is supposed to be able to achieve a legitimate perspective on a chronological success.” One could argue that he has overshot the mark in this generalization. “Periodization” of history has been unavoidable ever since human beings started a systematic study of their past. Divisions that use pre- and post-, before and after, are markers in the lives of individuals, communities, nations and humanity. They do not explain the “now” but neither are they an obstacle to understanding the present.

The specific problem of “periodization” for which Lyotard bears a responsibility, is the assumption that to periods of history called ancient, medieval and modern one could simply add another period called postmodern. If one really wished to argue that the last twenty, fifty or a hundred years is a new stage of humanity, one would have to redo the language of ancient, medieval and modern. That could conceivably be done but it cannot be accomplished simply by saying that we are now in a “new age” for which the past offers no clues of what to think and do. Lyotard wishes to question “the now,” which is a worthy project. The best way to do that is to use the rich store of knowledge we have of the past, including especially the origins of the modern age and the way it now shapes our perspective. The reactions of early modern thinkers against everything ancient were often too severe. We are now in a position to rethink some of those reactions and to open new dialogues with Europe’s distant past and with other traditions and cultures which were once dismissed as quaint or childish.

As talk about postmodernity slowly fades from memory it would be unfortunate if it is simply remembered as a fashion whose time has passed, much like a view of the 1960s as simply about gaudy clothes and student protests. People latched on to the idea of the

postmodern because of the upheavals in modern life. The pace of technological change has accelerated beyond anyone's ability to fully grasp what it all means. An apocalyptic image is at the edge of human experience, especially for the young. However, encouraging the young to think that their age is unprecedented is not a help to them. It only reaffirms a linear idea of history in which the past is always being lopped off at the rate of sixty minutes per hour. Hegel and Marx were not completely wrong in finding patterns of history but many others before and after 1789 have something to say to our contemporary predicaments. Understandably the child and the teenager cannot get much perspective on their experiences which are novel to them. People who have been through more than a few trends, fashions and crises of history have the responsibility of appreciating the past for an understanding of the present.