Søren Kierkegaard and 21st Century Postmodernism

The Nature of Postmodernism

This paper will not attempt to fully explicate or critique postmodernism. There are many different shades of postmodernism, and not all postmodernists think alike. This paper will attempt to examine those central ideas and assumptions that postmodernists share and bring them into a dialogue with Christianity as understood and explicated by Søren Kierkegaard. We will focus specifically on the writings of two French philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, and an American, Richard Rorty. Greatest specific attention will be given to the work of Derrida because his *Gift of Death* brings his philosophy into direct contact with Kierkegaard’s philosophy, as expressed in *Fear and Trembling*, through their separate treatments of the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac,

Several elements are common to most philosophers who consider themselves postmodernists. First, they reject the notion that there is any truth that exists outside of the language in which the human mind expresses it. As Rorty wrote in his *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*: "Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there."¹ By contrast, modernists believe that objective truth exists independently of the human mind and can be apprehended by the human mind through empirical knowledge and the logical implications that flow from that knowledge. Language serves to enable humans to grasp, codify, and analyze that reality. To the modernist, truth can, at least theoretically, be

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¹ Rorty, *Contingency irony, and solidarity*, 5.
expressed with mathematical precision. If we fall short of this (which modernists agree that we often do) it is because we need additional knowledge and improved tools for obtaining that knowledge.

Postmodernists would agree that our knowledge of the universe is dependent upon the sensory data we can draw from it, but knowledge is created in the mind and is encoded in language. Postmodernists maintain that words never say everything about anything. No two objects or actions are identical. The word “man” is a classification device that separates a class of living beings by their species and, often, their gender. But no two men are identical. We can add modifiers to further subdivide men, such as “blue-eyed,” “fat,” “lazy,” etc.; but these modifiers only further sub-classify. The same could be said about verbs. How many different actions might be described by the word “run”: “run fast,” “run slowly,” “run awkwardly,” etc. Words truly never say everything about anything.

One of my university students once challenged this statement by saying that identical twins, with the same DNA, are truly identical. My rejoinder to this is that I have identical grandsons who, though they are eerily alike in many ways, still have significant differences, most notably that one is right handed and the other left handed. Also, they are significantly different in personality. Language is an abstracting, simplifying, stabilizing device that allows us to communicate. If the uniqueness of every action or event could not be given meaning by classifying it with other actions or events, it would have no point of reference and no meaning. If a word that had no linguistic ties to other words (e.g., “shrdlu”) were coined today for a particular encounter with the world, it would have no value for a similar encounter in the future since everything changes over
time. I’m a lot like the person I was yesterday, but I’m not identical with that person. And I won’t be the same person tomorrow that I am today. My name serves to bridge the gap for people I encounter more than once; but it may also serve to destroy new information. Fortunately, the classification systems that people have used to recognize and respond to me are sufficient to enable them to recognize me and communicate with me.

This last example may serve to lead into a related position of postmodernists: the importance of narrative. One of the things I must recognize about myself is that people who have known me for different lengths of time, in different periods of my life, and in different situations are likely to characterize me in very different language. If they were asked to write an essay describing me, I’m sure that their narratives would be quite different from each other: some very positive, some quite negative; some recognizing some qualities while ignoring others, some recognizing or ignoring very different qualities. They would have very different narratives. Knowledge is contained in the narratives that humans create.

Kierkegaard might agree with postmodernists that any truth that exists for us must be in our minds and shaped in terms that our language allows; but, as he argued in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, there is objective truth “out there,” though it can be grasped only by God, who exists outside the universe he created and can be objective about it. Human beings are part of that creation and cannot be objective about it.² If humans are to grasp God’s truth that has no empirical representation, it cannot be by normal human processes.

Second, since knowledge is contained in the narratives that humans create, postmodernists put great emphasis on these narratives. Because of the diversity of beliefs and desires across different individuals and different groups, Lyotard, particularly, has called into question the credibility of meta-narratives (i.e., narratives that attempt to provide a macro-theory for human activity and the history that encapsulates it). He sees postmodern society as hosting a large number of diverse micro-narratives.

Postmodernists generally believe that the western meta-narrative marginalizes other cultures and is unsustainable because of this. It is wrong because it claims superiority of western thought and doomed because alternative meta-narratives, representing diverse cultures, are gaining strength. According to most postmodernists, the modern world has been dominated by this western meta-narrative that sees the world in terms of European history and culture, a domination which can no longer be sustained. Christianity is seen as part of that meta-narrative. Postmodernists confront the western meta-narrative by deconstructing it.

Deconstruction assumes that a text may have more than one interpretation which provides the substance for a narrative. Often competing narratives, whether of a meta-narrative or micro-narrative nature, are contradictory and cannot be reconciled. The purpose of a deconstruction is to demonstrate the inconsistencies and inadequacies of a narrative and to offer an alternative narrative that better interprets history and current social patterns and substitutes an alternative narrative that provides a better interpretation and provides direction for more equitable and productive social arrangements in the future.
If Kierkegaard were alive in the 21st century, he would probably agree with the postmodernists’ view of Christianity if the word “Christianity” were changed to “Christendom.” From the beginning of his writings, his views were always somewhat countercultural, but beginning with the publication of *Practice in Christianity* in 1850 his writings were direct condemnations of Christendom, as exemplified by the Danish Lutheran Church, which he believed had perverted the Christian message. One could claim that Kierkegaard was deconstructing a 19th Century Danish narrative.

**The Story of Abraham and Isaac: Alternative Interpretations**

The story of God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and the events that followed it are recorded in Chapter 22 of Genesis. The reader is encouraged to read (or re-read) this passage prior to proceeding with the rest of this paper. Even better would be to read chapters 12 through 24 of Genesis in order to provide or renew acquaintance with the context in which this short story takes place. Our purpose in this section will be to compare the ways in which Kierkegaard and Derrida handle this passage, Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* and Derrida’s response to Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death*. This direct point of contact between two very different hermeneutical approaches provides useful comparisons and understandings in relation to a common text.

The foundation for the two different narratives is the presuppositions that each of the writers bring to the task of interpretation. Kierkegaard believes in an omnipotent, omniscient, personal God who relates to his people by means of a faith relationship. By contrast, Derrida neither recognizes the existence of a personal God nor the need for one. Kierkegaard believes spiritual guidance for the Christian comes from inspired scripture and the testimony of the indwelling Holy Spirit, though he would agree that historical,
material knowledge can be obtained to a certain degree by man’s natural faculties. For Derrida, only data apprehended through the five senses and shaped by language and logic can produce knowledge. While both agree that human knowledge is imperfect, Kierkegaard believes that man can be brought closer to the absolute truth of God through faith. Derrida believes that there is no absolute truth. Thus, while Kierkegaard would not dismiss the methods by which Derrida claims knowledge can be created and used, he would insist that they have no moral value. This is the major difference between these two great minds.

Having identified these fundamentally different foundations from which Kierkegaard and Derrida start, we will move on to see how the two actual accounts are alike and how they differ. Since Derrida’s *Gift of Death* is essentially a response to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, we can see fairly directly where their two interpretations agree and disagree and how these positions are related to their basic assumptions.

It seems evident that Derrida has considerable respect for Kierkegaard’s work and seems to have a better cognitive understanding of Christianity than most of its critics do. For example, he agrees with Kierkegaard that Abraham has transgressed the ethical order in following God’s direction to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham must choose: “The ethical is the temptation”\(^3\) to not follow God. Is he willing to follow God’s direction if it means that he will be abhorred by his fellow men? Abraham chooses to follow God despite the risk. This is the high point of his earthly life. Also, Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard that

\(^3\) Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 62.
Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac, just like Christ’s requirement that the Christian hate his family (Luke 14:26), is done “not out of hatred…but out of love.”

Derrida also indicates that he has learned a lot from Kierkegaard; but he consistently adds his own statements which reveal that he either has not really accepted Kierkegaard’s essential message or that he has doesn’t really understand it. For example, Derrida states that the biblical story of Abraham has a valuable moral, “even if we take it to be a fable.”

Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonym through whom Kierkegaard wrote *Feat and Trembling* clearly takes it as representing divine truth. The totality of Kierkegaard’s writings indicates that this was his position as well.

Derrida seems to assume that Johannes de Silentio’s voice is essentially Kierkegaard’s. Obviously this is true in a certain sense. Johannes would not be saying anything if Kierkegaard didn’t attribute the words to him. Nevertheless, we must remember that Kierkegaard chose his pseudonyms for certain reasons. One reason was that in his early writings (including *Fear and Trembling*) Kierkegaard wanted to conceal his own identity. But he also chose pseudonymous names and characters to reflect different personalities that were presenting the material attributed to them.

Various reasons have been suggested for Kierkegaard’s choice of this particular pseudonym. Though none can be proven, all separate Johannes de Silentio from Søren Kierkegaard. Whatever the particular reason or reasons for Kierkegaard’s use of this particular pseudonym, I believe that part of the reason is that Kierkegaard believed the hidden “man of silence,” (with his self doubts) could more effectively raise questions that

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would stimulate reflection on the part of the reader than would straightforward preaching furnished by Søren Kierkegaard, the self-assured, brash, witty, polemical Dane.

One instance where Derrida erroneously equates the voice of Johannes de Silentio with that of Kierkegaard is in the following statement he makes regarding Abraham’s faith:

And moreover, we don’t think or speak of Abraham from the point of view of a faith that is sure of itself, any more than did Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard keeps coming back to this, recalling that he doesn’t understand Abraham, that he wouldn’t be capable of doing what he did. Such an attitude in fact seems the only possible one, and even if it is the most widely shared idea in the world, it seems to be necessitated by this monstrosity of such prodigious proportions. Our faith is not assured because a faith never can be, it must never be a certainty.  

From the total context of *Fear and Trembling* and discourses written by Kierkegaard in the same time period, this is probably Johannes de Silentio talking, and not representative precisely of Kierkegaard’s view. While Johannes de Silentio said that he was not a knight of faith and had never met one, it is fairly clear that he recognizes that Abraham was one. On the other hand, Kierkegaard makes clear in his various discourses that not only Abraham was a knight of faith, but so also were a number of other individuals, notably Job and Anna the prophetess (though he doesn’t use that term outside of *Fear and Trembling*). Derrida states that “we are not all Abrahams, Isaacs, or Sarahs;” but the life of the follower of Christ, described in *Practice in Christianity*, seems to meet all the requirements of the knight of faith, and this is the pattern that Kierkegaard believes should be the pattern for all believers.

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8 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 79.
In the statement quoted above Derrida also makes the claim that “Our faith is not assured because a faith never can be, it must never be a certainty.” While faith can never give empirically testable certainty, it can be firm enough and based enough on spiritual reality to enable a believer to make the same decision Abraham did. Johannes de Silentio states:

Abraham had faith. His faith was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter, but that he should find blessed happiness here in this world. God could give him a new Isaac, bring the sacrificial offer back to life. He believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since been suspended.

Derrida may be right that faith can never give empirically testable certainty, but it can be firm enough, based on spiritual reality, to enable a believer to make the same decision that Abraham did. Abraham was not waiting for happiness, something in the hereafter, but was confident that God could give Isaac back to him. This is exactly the conclusion that the writer to the Hebrews reached in Hebrews 11: 19: “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.” Derrida says that Abraham had “renounced hope.” Kierkegaard and scripture maintain that he hadn’t renounced hope. And God can make every believer capable of doing what Abraham did.

This difference in interpretation points to the central difference in the assumptions of Derrida and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard believes in a personal, supernatural, omnipotent, omniscient God; Derrida rejects such a God. Derrida talks of a God, but he has a very slippery, hard to grasp definition:

We should stop thinking of God as someone over there, way up there, transcendent, and, what is more—into the bargain precisely—capable, more than

9 Derrida, Gift of Death, 80.
10 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 65.
11 Derrida, Gift of Death, 73.
any satellite orbiting in space, of seeing into the secret of the most interior places…I can have a secret relationship with myself and not tell everything, as soon as there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, and for me, then there is what I call God, (there is) what I call God in me, (it happens that [il y a que]) I call myself God—a phrase that is difficult to distinguish from “God calls me,” for it is on such a condition that I can call myself or be called in secret, God is in me, he is the absolute “me” or “self,” he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard’s sense, subjectivity.¹²

The last sentence of this paragraph, which equates a mysterious interior force that secretly witnesses within a person with Kierkegaard’s advocacy of subjectivity as the means for grasping truth, makes one wonder if Johannes de Silentio’s Fear and Trembling is the only work by Kierkegaard that Derrida has read and also how he could have possibly drawn such a conclusion, even if that work were the only one he read. One wonders how an admittedly brilliant man like Derrida could not see that he and Kierkegaard had very different assumptions and quite incompatible understandings of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. This is not to say that Kierkegaard is right and Derrida is wrong (though I certainly believe that); but there is no way that one can say that the two interpretations are compatible.

Kierkegaard plainly recognizes that there is an absolute truth but that because of his limitations man can never fully grasp it. Because that truth is contained in “earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7)) and is seen “through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), man cannot grasp an infinite God or his truth through human logic that is shaped by language (a point with which Derrida would strongly agree). Did Derrida ever read

Philosophical Fragments or A Concluding Unscientific Postscript?

Perhaps Derrida’s understanding of God as an illusive, though perhaps compelling, force within himself leads him to the conclusion that Abraham proceeded to

¹² Derrida, Gift of Death, 108.
sacrifice Isaac “without knowing why.” The second verse of the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, where this story begins, tells us very clearly why: “God said!” But, of course, if God is merely some mysterious force within me, it makes sense that Abraham didn’t know why. But this is not the God of Abraham, the Bible, or Søren Kierkegaard. When a personal, transcendent God commands, that is the only reason that is needed.

Derrida also errs in interpreting the New Testament passage (Philippians 2:12-13) that furnishes the words, “fear and trembling,” for the title of Kierkegaard’s book. The New International Version presents this passage as: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed— not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence— continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Italics added) Most other translations (in other languages, as well as English) also say, “work out your salvation.” The Greek word from which this passage is translated (katergozo-mai) means “bringing to a conclusion.” In other words, salvation is not something which the Christian earns, but something which is given him by the atoning work of Jesus Christ and which he continues to work out as the indwelling Holy Spirit works in him. However, according to Derrida this verse shows that Christians “will have to work for their salvation.” (Italics added) In other words, Derrida effectively denies the grace of God, which the Bible teaches (Ephesians 2:8-9) and which Kierkegaard believed, is the only basis for salvation. But then, how could an amorphous God that is the “absolute me” (who shares in my fallen nature) obtain eternal salvation for me?

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13 Derrida, Gift of Death, 68.
14 Derrida, Gift of Death, 57.
Once again, Derrida can reject the scriptural account of Abraham and Isaac, and he can certainly reject Kierkegaard’s treatise on it. But if he rejects those accounts, why bother to try and use them as his platform? This seems particularly out of place since one of Derrida’s most well known methodological principles is that there should be no interpretation based on what is outside the text. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida wrote:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside the text.*

Actually, in keeping with Derrida’s principle, we really should look at the Abrahamic episode within the complete story of Abraham which starts in the latter part of Genesis 11 and continues through Genesis 24. What happens in Genesis 22 with Abraham and Isaac is an integral part of the larger story that includes God’s call and promise to Abraham, God’ fulfillment of his promise to give Abraham a son by Sara when Abraham was quite old and Sara well past her child bearing years, as well as the Abraham-Isaac story in Genesis 22, which we have been considering. These highlights of the larger Abrahamic story are included in the New Testament by the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11. Whether we look at the Abraham-Isaac story strictly in terms of the narrative of Genesis 22 or at the larger narrative in which it is embedded, the story is clear that Abraham’s response is to the direction of a personal God who is “over there” and “way up there” (to use Derrida’s words), but is also down at a very personal level.

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15 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.158 (For a fuller context in which this statement is made, the reader should consult the section of pp. 157-164.)
with Abraham. Essentially, the problem for Derrida is that he cannot seem to get his epistemology in line with his ontology as he looks at the story of Abraham. Apparently, according to Derrida, one is bound by the text only if it remains within the realm of the natural. This leads to the larger problem, which is that he, along with other postmodernists, is unable to deal with the infinite.

Derrida’s epistemology is not that different from Kierkegaard’s. Both recognize that human language and thought always distort the reality which they seek to apprehend. The difference lies in their separate ontologies. For Derrida, there is no reality outside the physical world. Kierkegaard maintains that there is a spiritual world that can only be apprehended by spiritual means—for the Christian this means is faith. The material world can be apprehended by the five senses. But infinity and space in time cannot be apprehended because they cannot be apprehended or measured by the five senses. When did material reality first begin? What was before that? Nothing? But even a vacuum is something. How large is the universe? What happens when we reach the physical limits of the universe? Do we simply fall off? What do we fall into? Or do we run into a wall? If so, what’s on the other side of the wall? Or is the wall infinite in size? Or is the universe itself infinite? Mathematics (a theoretical discipline) can deal with infinity. Science (a practical discipline) cannot. To grasp the infinite in a practical way, we must find some method that does not depend upon our five senses.

Now Derrida does claim to believe in the infinite. In fact, he talks quite a bit about the infinite. For instance, he comments

There is thus a structural disproportion or dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one hand and the goodness of the infinite gift on the
other. One can think of this disproportion without assigning it to a revealed cause or without tracing it back to the event of original sin.\textsuperscript{16}

And he refers in another place to “the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment.”\textsuperscript{17} Later he adds:

> What is implied here is more than the pricelessness of celestial capital. It is invisible. It doesn’t devalue, it can never be stolen from you. The celestial offers are more secure, unbreakable, out of reach of any forced entry or ill-conceived market gamble. This capital, unable to be devalued, can only yield an infinite profit; it is an infinitely secure placement, better than the best, a chattel without price.\textsuperscript{18}

And again:

> But an infinite calculation takes over from the finite calculating that has been renounced. God the Father, who sees in secret, will pay back your salary, and on an infinitely greater scale.\textsuperscript{19}

So it appears that Derrida does believe in the infinite. But a closer look reveals that his concept of the infinite has very finite limits. When he refers to his failure to make the “infinite sacrifice,” he exemplifies that sacrifice as feeding one’s own cat at home while many other cats in the world are starving, or “speaking one particular language, rather than…speaking to others in another language?”\textsuperscript{20} As ridiculous as the first example is and as unfortunate as the latter is, neither approaches the threshold of infinity. The well fed pet will die, and so will the owner and all the other cats in the world. The provincialism of the speaker who refuses to communicate in the language of another will die when the speaker dies. These are still finite deeds that eventually lose all moral quality for good or bad if life ends at the grave. A statement, commonly attributed to Ivan Karamazov, prevails: “If there is no God, then everything is permissible.”

\textsuperscript{16} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 52.
\textsuperscript{17} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 71.
\textsuperscript{18} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 98
\textsuperscript{19} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 107
\textsuperscript{20} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 71
Derrida agrees that society would consider Abraham a murderer if he carried through on his plan to kill Isaac. Kierkegaard would agree with him on this. But Derrida goes a step further. He states:

Everything is organized to insure that this man (i.e., Abraham would be condemned by society … that same society puts to death or (but failing to help someone in distress accounts for only a minor difference) allows to die of hunger or disease tens of millions of children (those relatives or fellow humans that ethics or the discourse of the rights of man refer to) without any moral or legal tribunal ever being considered competent to judge such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of the other to avoid being sacrificed oneself. Not only does such a society participate in this incalculable sacrifice, it actually organizes it.21

I agree with Derrida, and I think Kierkegaard would also. But on what basis do we agree? We agree with Derrida because these children are created in the image of God, a God who stated in the Mosaic law: “Thou shalt not murder!” But where and when did this illusive, amorphous God that exists within Derrida make such a statement? If this God inside Derrida tells him this, that’s fine. But if an equivalent God does not tell the same thing to an Adolph Hitler or an Al Capone, why should they obey this mandate? How can a God who is confined within me and my conscience issue an imperative for all mankind? If each individual’s “god” tells each individual what is right and what is wrong, then Ivan Karamazov was right: everything is permissible.

And, on the other side of the question of what makes something evil are the positive equivalents: “What makes something good?” What gives direction for an individual’s life or a society’s life? What makes a person’s life worth living?

Infinity and Despair

This is essentially the issue that Kierkegaard raises in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The sickness that Kierkegaard speaks of is despair.

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21 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 85-86
This despair is related to a comment by Leo Tolstoy

If a man lives, he believes in something. If he did not believe that one must live for something, he would not live. If he does not see and recognize the illusory nature of the finite, he believes in the finite; if he understands the illusory nature of the finite, he must believe in the infinite. Without faith he cannot live. 22

As Kierkegaard notes: “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.” 23 Because of this synthesis humans, unlike animals, fear death. Animals, which do not have spirits, do not fear death. The anticipation of death produces despair. Despair is the inability to come to terms with one’s own self and the existence of that self in the universe. It is the misrelation of the finite and the infinite in the synthesis that causes despair. This despair, Kierkegaard notes, is universal. 24

Humans, naturally speaking, focus on the finite; but, because their spirit gives them a sense of the infinite, the finite is never fully satisfying. They buy material goods, form relationships with other people, stay busy in activities of many types. But they are never fully satisfied, and in quiet moments alone they face despair. Youth looks forward to great accomplishments and the satisfaction of all its desires in the future; but the future never comes. Older people look back on the accomplishments of their youth and long for a past pleasure that never existed. For both, the present, which cannot measure up to the past or the future, is never completely satisfying. Moments of pleasure fade rapidly. Finite desires are never fully satisfied because satisfaction of desire always creates greater desire. Death, they know, is inevitable, and they cling to the finite to provide balm for their despair. But, as Tolstoy noted, the finite is illusory, and the attempt to be satisfied by it always results in further dissatisfaction and ultimately—despair.

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22 Tolstoy, A Confession, IX.
23 Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death, 13
24 Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death, 26.
Kierkegaard, as a Christian, recognizes that despair is sin. It is a misrelation between the creature and the creator. Sin is disobedience, the exaltation of the individual’s will above the will of God. It is the pride and egoism that says with Satan: “I would be like God.” It was Satan’s seduction of Adam and Eve, with the promise to their egos that they too could be like God, that led to the introduction of sin into the human race. It led to a misrelation between man and God that was transferred through Adam to the entire human race. It is an affront to a man’s pride to realize that he can’t fully control his environment. The natural condition of mankind is to live in despair.

But, as Kierkegaard tells us, despair may be “a significant step forward.”25 Recognizing the misrelation of the finite and the infinite within himself and sensing the potential loss of the eternal, man is driven to greater despair. At the same time, however, as long as he is conscious of his despair, he recognizes that he himself cannot resolve the misrelation and thus is closer to the salvation that can come through God alone.

The misrelation between the finite and infinite in man was corrected by the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. As the original sin of man infinitely stained man, condemned him to death, and separated him from the infinite, the eradication of that hereditary stain could only be removed by an intervention of the infinite in the finite existence of man. The Incarnation, the “absolute paradox” described by Kierkegaard in Philosophical Fragments,26 provides a cure for the problem of despair. As Kierkegaard notes:

The possibility of this sickness is man’s superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian’s superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian’s blessedness.27

25 Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death, 60ff.
27 Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death, 15.
By contrast, since postmodernists do not recognize the spiritual realm or even consider the implications of the infinite, neither Derrida nor other postmodernists have any answer to the problem of despair. Psychologists may tell their patients to overcome their depression and despair by getting involved in activities around them. But this is at best a temporary solution. Finite objects and activities may distract one’s attention for a while, but in the end they fail and despair returns.

**Lyotard and Rorty**

As their name suggests, postmodernists propose a system of thought that goes beyond modernism. Specifically, they reject man’s ability to objectively describe, fully and precisely, the context in which he exists, and leading postmodernists, including Derrida, Jean François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, claim that people construct a working reality, through the medium of language, in their minds. This, of course, is not too dissimilar from what Kierkegaard proposed in *Philosophical Fragments* and *A Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The chief difference between postmodernists and Kierkegaard is that they reject a spiritual reality that can be accessed by faith to approach, though never fully comprehend, the objective reality that is fully encompassed by the mind of God.

Lyotard presented his views in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He noticed particularly the impact of computers on the greater accessibility of knowledge to a wider group of people and the crucial relationship of information to power. Information has value, and the control of information becomes crucial in the acquisition and application of power. Because of this the gap between developed and developing countries will continue to grow. At the same time multi-national
corporations, more flexible than governments, will play an increasingly pivotal role in the worldwide economy and in the affairs of individual nations.

Lyotard goes on to distinguish between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. While scientific knowledge still is extremely important, the democratization of this knowledge caused by the increased dominance of computers has raised the question of who decides what pertinent knowledge is and who determines what is to be decided. These human-social questions cannot be answered scientifically but by the narrative that determines value in a society. In past centuries grand narratives guided separate societies, and in more recent centuries, with a shrinking globe, much of the world’s society has been dominated by the grand narrative of Western society.

The increased accessibility of knowledge, including the greatly expanded opportunity for individuals to create and disseminate information, has greatly changed the knowledge landscape and, in Lyotard’s view, spawned numerous “language games” that challenge the grand narrative. These language games, according to Lyotard (building upon the work of Wittgenstein) define their own rules and represent communities of meaning that operate by their own rules, fostering a myriad of micro-narratives. He concludes The Postmodern Condition with a brief description of how these micro-narratives would work:

Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.

A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step in that direction….The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the “moves” playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time.
This orientation corresponds to the course that the evolution of social interaction is currently taking; the temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs…. We should be happy that the tendency toward the temporary contract is ambiguous: it is not totally subordinated to the goal of the system, yet the system tolerates it…..

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. Language games would then be games of perfect information at any given moment. But they would also be non-zero-sum games, and by virtue of that fact discussion would never risk fixating in a position of minimax equilibrium because it had exhausted its stakes. For the stakes would be knowledge (or information, if you will), and the reserve of knowledge—language’s reserve of possible utterances—is inexhaustible. This sketches the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown.28

How would Kierkegaard have responded to Lyotard’s analysis? First, like other postmodernists, Lyotard’s analysis has no room for a spiritual reality that lies outside what can be apprehended by the five senses. Kierkegaard, of course, would have completely disagreed with this position. For Kierkegaard spiritual reality was the foundation of all other reality and could be apprehended through faith in Christ. On the other hand, Lyotard’s rejection of human ability to fully comprehend reality through objective knowledge and logic would have been a position that Kierkegaard would have welcomed. Certainly he would have believed that Lyotard’s analysis of knowledge and its acquisition was much more honest than Hegel’s and a better recognition of puny man’s limitations in the world in which he finds himself. Lyotard’s position that mankind was involved in language games and divided among communities of meaning that struggled with one another for dominance would have been seen by Kierkegaard as

an outside endorsement of the biblical presentations of the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel.

Richard Rorty takes essentially the same foundational position as Lyotard and, as noted earlier, believes that truth cannot exist independently of the human mind. A few pages later in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he further amplifies this position, and adds to it his own atheistic presuppositions:

Only if we have some such picture in mind, some picture of the universe as either itself a person or as created by a person, can we make sense of the idea that the world has an “intrinsic nature.” For the cash value of that phrase is just that some vocabularies are better representations of the world than others, as opposed to being better tools for dealing with the world for one or another purpose.

To drop the idea of languages as representations, and to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language, would be to de-divinize the world. Only if we do that can we fully accept the argument I offered earlier — the argument that since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths.\(^{29}\)

Kierkegaard would disagree with the minor premise of Rorty’s argument. The major premise is that we cannot make sense of the idea that the world has an intrinsic nature unless we accept the existence of some originating source. Rorty’s minor premise is that we must “de-divinize” the world and reject its intrinsic nature. Kierkegaard would agree that we cannot, by human endeavor alone, make sense of the world and its intrinsic nature unless we accept a divine authority. Our five senses and finite minds cannot provide us with the ability to comprehend this. This was essentially his argument in *A Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, a work that Rorty cites with approval. However, Kierkegaard would contend that by God-directed spiritual understanding (and only by such spiritual understanding) can man subjectively (but very

\(^{29}\) Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 21.
surely) approach the ultimate reality that lies in the mind of God. Even then his approach is with “objective uncertainty.” Given the inability to grasp ultimate spiritual reality, man must try to build a better world based upon his own inadequate perceptions of the universe and to use words to construct a working reality—a reality that is always at least slightly different from the reality of every other person in the world. These different constructions, fueled by the human pride that has contaminated every person since Adam, is the source of the word’s enduring social and interpersonal problems. Except for the divine element in Kierkegaard’s view, it is not too different from the position held by Rorty, Lyotard, and other postmodernists. This single exception, however, makes all the difference.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty reviews at length the various ways that humans have attempted to arrive at a truth that can unite society in its quest for meaning and in making practical decisions that lead toward human progress. He rejects the idealism of the pre-modern age (and its continuing vestiges) and the realism of the modern age. He goes beyond the work of other postmodern philosophers, such as Lyotard and Michel Foucault, who, along with Rorty, identified the fallacies of modernism, but who failed to provide solutions. By contrast he proposes an approach, sometimes called neopragmatism, which allows humans to move forward in understanding the world in order to achieve social goals. He draws heavily upon the work of Dewey, Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Kuhn and, in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, identifies them as “heroes of this book.” His purpose, like theirs, is to debunk “truthfulness to reality in the sense postulated by philosophical realism.”³⁰

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Rorty sees Kierkegaard as one of his philosophical forebears and recognizes him for his choice of “subjectivity” over “system” and being one of those philosophers who “want to keep space open for the sense of wonder.” However, he rejects the Christianity which was so central to Kierkegaard’s message. In fact, he adamantly opposes the Bible based Christianity that Kierkegaard represented, and he sees it as a mindless delusion that needs to be destroyed:

> It seems to me that the regulative idea that we—we wet liberals, we heirs of the Enlightenment, we Socratists—most frequently use to criticize the conduct of various conversational partners is that of “needing education in order to outgrow their primitive fears, hatreds, and superstitions.” This is the concept the victorious Allied armies used when they set about re-educating the citizens of occupied Germany and Japan.....It is a concept which I, like most Americans who teach humanities or social sciences in colleges and universities, invoke when we try to arrange things so that students who enter as bigoted, homophobic, religious fundamentalists will leave college with views more like our own.

> ...The fundamentalist parents of our fundamentalist students think that the entire “American liberal Establishment” is engaged in a conspiracy....

These parents have a point. Their point is that we liberal teachers no more feel in a symmetrical communication situation when we talk with bigots than do kindergarten teachers talking with their students. In both college classrooms and kindergartens it is equally difficult for the teachers to feel that what is going on is what Habermas calls a “convergence, steered through learning, of ‘our’ perspective and ‘their’ perspective—no matter whether ‘they’ or ‘we’ or both sides have to reformulate established practices of justification to a greater or lesser extent.” When we American college teachers encounter religious fundamentalists, we do not consider the possibility of reformulating our own practices of justification so as to give more weight to the authority of the Christian scriptures. Instead, we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization....

> ...They will protest that these books are being jammed down their children’s throats. I cannot see how to reply to this charge without saying something like “...You have to be educated to be a citizen of our society, a participant in our conversation, someone with whom we can envisage merging our horizons. So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children,

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trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours.”\(^{33}\)

In 1844 Kierkegaard published *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, which dealt with the origin and consequences of what we now call original sin. Lyotard in his honesty seems to have rediscovered original sin. Rorty, in his “defiance, pride, and arrogance of unbelief,”\(^{34}\) has provided evidence to confirm it.

**The Christian in a Postmodern World**

The Christianity that Richard Rorty vilified in his writings was essentially the same distorted version of Christianity that pervaded the Danish National Church in the 19\(^{th}\) Century and which Kierkegaard ridiculed and scolded even while it broke his heart. The shallowness and hypocrisy that Rorty saw in many professing Christians are real, and Rorty’s own investigation into the human condition is noteworthy. He sought diligently for a way to end human suffering and the apparent willingness of humans to use the suffering of other humans for their own gain. But he refused to acknowledge the possibility of a spiritual world that lies behind the human condition. The sad thing is that he, Derrida, Lyotard and other leading postmodernists failed, partially at least because of their own stubborn blindness, to see the gospel of God’s love in the Christians they encountered.

Yes, there are students in universities who have grown up in families that proclaim to be Christians but have never experienced the depth of spiritual earnestness

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\(^{34}\) Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 144.
that Kierkegaard saw as essential for a true relationship with God through Jesus Christ. How often does a postmodernist professor encounter the Christianity displayed by the Amish community in Pennsylvania in October 2006, who, after having their children massacred by a wild gunman, sought no revenge, but instead openly forgave the killer and reached out to comfort the killer’s family? When money poured into the Amish community to help them in their time of grief, they insisted that a portion of the money be set aside to aid the killer’s family. Is this an exception? Perhaps it is; but if it is, it’s a sad commentary on the state of Christianity in America and most of the western world in the 21st Century. If Christians take Luke 6:35-36 seriously, what the Amish community did should be the norm, not the exception.

Nor are most postmodernists who rail against Christianity aware of the many selfless Christians across the world who themselves are living at standards well below the American average in order to help and comfort people who are less fortunate than themselves—including those who are in poverty and those who are suffering from malnutrition, AIDS, and a whole lot of other nightmares. As a boy I lived a few blocks from the skid row of North Clark Street in Chicago and witnessed firsthand the tenderness and compassion that workers at rescue missions showed to men and women whom society had thrown in the trash can, and I later saw the same scene recreated in rescue missions in Philadelphia’s tenderloin. As I write this, my grandson is working in Africa as a photojournalist with the Africa Inland Mission. The stories he sends back testify to the open hearted love of both African and American Christians as they struggle to meet the physical, social, and spiritual needs of poor, suffering adults and children. If all those who profess the name of Christ showed the same compassion and love that
these wonderful Christians demonstrate daily, it might not change the minds of many hardened postmodern atheists; but it would probably give Christians a reasonable hearing among them. These displays of Christianity go largely unobserved; but, if they received the attention and analysis they deserve, might well challenge people who oppose Christianity to ask what it is that makes these persons operate in such a non-human way and ask: “Where do these people come from? Are they from another world?” Rorty looked forward to a day when his descendants would live in a world in which the only law is love. Had he looked closer, and had all persons who call themselves Christians faithfully displayed the traits of their Master, he may have seen the promise of that vision in the conduct of their lives.

A major part of the problem is that most Christians are still tied into modernism. As a result they are still looking for empirical evidence that supports their beliefs, thinking that this is all they need. Much of this search for evidence is valid, and research that supports the biblical accounts of events and the trustworthiness of biblical documents is extremely valuable. But all the biblical events that form the basis for Christian belief turn on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and while evidence has been accumulated to support the empirical facts of the story (e.g., the number of eyewitnesses to the resurrection, the willingness of Christ’s closest followers, who were totally dejected after Christ’s crucifixion, to eagerly give their lives to martyrdom after they had witnessed the resurrection), none of this would have any meaning except for the Incarnation. This is the absolute paradox that Kierkegaard saw as the central and non-historical centerpiece of Christianity. And there is no way to empirically demonstrate that Jesus Christ was God incarnate. This is a spiritual truth that can only
be apprehended by God’s grace subjectively. The miracle of salvation operates in a
Christian’s life to make that person Christ-like in thought, word, and action.

Many professing Christians, including an increasing number in America, are part
of a comfortable middle class and often give little attention to those less fortunate than
themselves (ignoring the fact that this is exactly what Christ did while he was on earth).
If they do give of themselves, it’s usually through a check written to a church or other
agency, but usually without any personal involvement with the persons being helped. If
they do get personally involved, it’s usually for a limited period of time, such as the
Thanksgiving or Christmas seasons. Most of their conscious lives are fairly well
insulated from direct contact with the people they serve. Many of these Christians are
content with the promise of eternal salvation, forgetting that the One who made their
salvation possible through his atoning work on the cross also commanded them to
follow the pattern of love and service that characterized his earthly ministry.

If Christians were to take seriously Christ’s command that they serve him and
serve others, they might find it easier to productively communicate with
postmodernists—perhaps more easily than they ever could communicate with
thoroughgoing modernists. Postmodernists, unlike modernists, don’t claim to have the
potential for answering all of life’s most difficult questions. They share with Christians
the belief that human knowledge is imperfect and incomplete and will never be perfect,
though human knowledge may help them find better ways of understanding that enable
them to accomplish things in better ways.

Christians can often work productively with postmodernists to address problems
of hunger, disease, racism, injustice, etc. By working with them on common projects,
they can display the love of God, which cannot be accounted for by human reason.

Their conduct can provoke questions and searching on the part of the people they encounter. As the apostle Paul told the Corinthian church: “You are our epistles, written in our hearts, known and read by all men.” (2 Corinthians 3:2) The question for Christians in the 21st Century is not “How can I protect myself in this evil, postmodern age?” but rather, “How, by God’s grace, can my life be seen as a ‘living sacrifice’ (Romans 12:1) to God’s glory that will penetrate the hearts of everyone with whom I come in contact?”

References


