

ON HOLISMS: INSULAR, INCLUSIVIST, AND POSTMODERN

by Philip Clayton

Abstract. Nancey Murphy's offer to take us "beyond liberalism and fundamentalism" is an exciting one: Who wants to be caught in the clutches of a fruitless theological dispute? She argues that the key to our escape is "Anglo-American postmodernity." I analyze what Murphy means by this term and why it may turn out to be a more precarious escape route than one might think. Holism or "post-foundationalism" is indeed inescapable for science/religion discussions today, but an inclusivist holism is preferable to Murphy's insular holism.

Keywords: Anglo-American postmodernity; epistemology; fundamentalism; inclusivist holism; insular holism; Imre Lakatos; liberalism; Nancey Murphy; post-foundationalism.

At stake in these two books is nothing less than that key theological dividing line, the centuries-long debate between liberalism and fundamentalism. If Nancey Murphy is right, her view offers answers to some of the most perplexing theological debates of our day: divine action, scriptural authority, religious experience, postliberalism, and evangelicalism—and all this by appeal to a kind of theology that is not at war with science, and is not even science's poor country cousin, but rather sits proudly and sovereignly atop the hierarchy of the sciences. These are certainly claims worthy of attention!

How does she achieve such amazing results? Murphy's basic strategy in these two closely linked books is to move the analysis from a theological opposition to an epistemic one: the opposition between "modern" and "postmodern" epistemologies. One sees this quickly in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*; the details of liberal and foundationalist theology are not what do the work here, for the theologies turn out merely to be *the results or application instances* of underlying epistemological assumptions.

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The thesis of the book is that as soon as one replaces the “modernist” assumptions that fueled the opposition with “postmodernist” ones, one finds oneself, as the title suggests, beyond (or above?) the old theological battles. I thus suggest that the second volume, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, provides the key to interpreting and evaluating *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*. Conversely, the latter can be said to spell out the implications of the former; it presents theology *qua* “applied epistemology.”

I reconstruct Murphy’s argument strategy in five steps. First, she argues that both liberalism and fundamentalism, usually taken as diametrically opposed, in fact rest on a modern epistemology. It is just that they choose different concrete beliefs as their foundations, as the referents of their religious language and so forth. Murphy’s strategy is, second, to argue for a new dichotomy—that between *modern thought as a whole* and what she calls postmodern epistemology. Third, she makes the strongest case that she can for shifting from this modern theory of knowledge to a “postmodern” one (in her sense of the word). Fourth, she suggests, if one is convinced by the first three steps, one should realize that neither fundamentalism nor liberalism is a defensible position from the postmodern perspective. Fifth and finally, she suggests, one discovers that, given postmodernism, a middle position emerges on each of the major debates that have separated fundamentalists and liberals. The two warring factions now emerge as implausible extremes; and between the two extremes, like an Aristotelian Golden Mean, lies a much more rational and credible middle position, Murphy’s. In short: by changing epistemologies one can resolve theological debates that cannot be won by either side using the modern framework that we have inherited.

Once one understands the strategy, one understands why Murphy’s is a difficult position to criticize, for what question does one ask of a switch of categories? It makes no sense to ask of a new set of issues or categories, Is it true? Instead, the only sorts of questions one can ask are, Is Murphy’s modern-postmodern distinction helpful? Is it useful? and Is it a clear and rigorous distinction? We must therefore decide whether the strong separation between modern and postmodern epistemologies is helpful in this sense.

What is Murphyan postmodernity? Nancey Murphy is not, like Jean-François Lyotard (1984), responding to currents in recent French philosophy, or to the problems raised by structuralist (Saussurian) linguistics, or to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical problems (Gadamer 1964). Wrestling with Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* does not keep her awake at night, and concern with nihilism does not set the parameters of her treatment of theology (just look at the references to “nothing” in the [1997] index!). Instead, postmodernity becomes, roughly speaking, a branch of Anglo-American epistemology after W. V. O. Quine. Quine’s holism gets

major billing here, although she also seems to abstract it from the physicalism basic to Quine's own epistemology. Thus Murphy's argument (1996, chaps. 4–6) turns crucially on a threefold conversion to holism: epistemological, linguistic, and metaphysical. In the process Imre Lakatos, the hero of Murphy's earlier work, is transformed into a postmodern Lakatos through the addition of Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of tradition-bound rationality. According to this "broader theory of rationality," reasoning is always part of a tradition: "A tradition is vindicated by the fact that it has managed to solve *its own* major problems, while its competitor has failed to do so, and by the fact that it can give a better account of its rival's failures than can the rival itself" (Murphy 1997, 59, emphasis added).

The philosophy of language that is central to this book owes much to Ludwig Wittgenstein. In orthodox Wittgensteinian fashion Murphy asserts that *use* is the primary category for the analysis of language; appropriate reference and appropriate expression are subordinate factors, in that "use determines what counts as appropriate reference and appropriate affect" (Murphy 1997, 133). Further, this theory of knowledge refuses to separate descriptive disciplines, such as physics, and normative disciplines, such as ethics (and presumably theology too?). Thus in chapters 9 and 10 Murphy creates a hierarchy of all the sciences, with descriptive and normative disciplines interwoven and pictured on a single chart (Murphy 1997, 198; see Murphy and Ellis 1996 for a more detailed account of this view). The opening stages of the hierarchy—physics, chemistry, biology—are not controversial. (It is controversial, however, for a *holist* to make physics the foundation for the entire structure. Edifices built on foundations, one would think, are very antipostmodern—postmodernists need webs, not hierarchies!). Higher up, the building splits into two towers. The natural-science side moves through ecology and astrophysics (an unlikely jump) to cosmology, with the whole capped off by theology. On the social science side, biology leads to psychology, sociology, economics, political science (yes, in that order); then jurisprudence is built on, then ethics; and again the whole edifice is perfected, like *pie à la mode*, by theology.

As I noted in a review (Clayton 1991) of Murphy's *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (1990), her epistemology allows for kinds of evidence very different from those that philosophers of science have generally countenanced. For example, religious experience is treated as on a par with scientific evidence—a parity her dissertation advisor at Berkeley, Paul Feyerabend, would have appreciated! Thus she writes, "[u]nder proper circumstances . . . religious experiences might provide suitably objective empirical support to confirm religious theories" (1997, 168).

Now to our overarching question: Is the modern-postmodern split helpful? In some respects it might seem to be: it bypasses some silly

debates in theology; it reveals epistemological assumptions behind certain more extreme views in theology; it supports close discussion between theology and science, an interest shared by many *Zygon* readers; and it preserves the attention to questions of knowledge that Murphy and I have shared since publishing back-to-back books on the subject several years ago (Clayton 1989; Murphy 1990). Still, I do have some major reservations about the strategy. Murphy expresses one herself: “The new worry that is likely to have been raised by the foregoing arguments is that the system now appears too neat, too pat” (1997, 168). Let’s look at some of the reasons that might make Murphy—and other readers too!—worry that the schema is “too neat, too pat.”

First, modernity is—was?—a historical and cultural epoch. It must be extremely difficult to define, and to date, the end of anything as complex and diffuse as the core identity of the Western world over many centuries. (Think of the analogous debate in literary theory over the nature of Romanticism, which ended with the circular definition “Romanticism is the sort of attitude toward life and the world found in the Romantic writers!”) For example, consider how difficult it has been to specify the end of the medieval period and the beginning of modernity. Some find the dawn of modernity in René Descartes’s *Meditations*, focusing on his modern epistemic assumptions. Hans Blumenberg, in his now-classic tome on the genesis of modernity (1987), turns to Copernicus, making an astronomical development the key to humanity’s “homelessness” in the universe. Others associate modernity with Pico della Mirandola’s *Ode to Humanism* in the early fifteenth century, making humanism—centeredness on the human subject—the basis of modernity. Louis Dupré’s brilliant *Passage to Modernity* (1993) identifies a complex web of factors that underlie the modern period. His rich historical detail reveals the staggering complexity of defining the mood and the assumptions of the postmedieval West.

Of course, if specifying the dawn of modernity is controversial, defining its *end* must be equally (if not more) so. Recall that Murphy argues that the thinkers most often called postmodern—including French thinkers such as Lyotard, who coined and popularized the term *postmodern*—are actually modern in their assumptions. If the bulk of those who now label themselves postmodern are in fact mistaken (that is, they are really modern thinkers), one worries that at least part of the problem may lie in the term itself. Of course, as soon as one becomes skeptical about the very idea of postmodernity, Murphy’s strategy is in trouble too.

Could it not be that a broad and complex cultural movement such as modernity is inherently too rich to be fully captured by a single label or a single set of three oppositions? I fear that real-world ambiguities set up a rather awkward dilemma for the would-be postmodernist. On one hand, she could grant that a term such as *modernity* is a “fuzzy set” in that there

can be no strict opposition between it and postmodernity. The two concepts move in and out of each other, sometimes overlapping, sometimes standing in some tension, sometimes the one encompassing the other. Thus, we cannot treat the terms as exclusive options. On the other hand, the postmodernist could define her position strictly, say as a precise option within epistemology. Then, however, she would have to give up the claim that the move from modernism to postmodernity is a chronological one, a summary of actual cultural developments. Instead, the terms would then represent enduring epistemological options and would have to be debated as such, rather than as a situation in which one option has *superseded* the other. (Note also that the terms *modernity* and *postmodernity* set up a sort of bipolar opposition. But is this not precisely the sort of bipolar opposition that Murphy is trying to overcome in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*? Why would she wish to resurrect bipolarity at the (meta-)level of epistemologies?)

In light of these difficulties, my own inclination is to use straightforwardly epistemological labels so that there can be a productive, nontendentious epistemological debate. For example, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen has recently (1997) hitched his cart to the epistemological horse of “post-foundationalism.” This move has the advantage of making clear that his is a claim about knowledge and how it works. Unlike the term *postmodernity*, which implies that it supersedes the cultural epoch called modernity, *postfoundationalism* can be debated without resolving the cultural questions—for example, whether postfoundationalism is now the dominant cultural movement or whether our society has now actually left foundationalism behind. Thus van Huyssteen argues:

The key to moving beyond [the epistemological problems] lies not in radically opposing postmodern thought to modernity in a false dichotomy, but in realizing that postmodern thought shows itself precisely in the constant interrogation of foundationalist assumptions Seen in this way, modern and postmodern thought are unthinkable apart from each other, and postmodernism is not simply modern thought coming to its end. In fact, when postmodern thought shows itself best in the interrogation of foundationalist assumptions, a fallibilist, experiential epistemology develops (van Huyssteen 1997, 78)

I fear that one cannot separate epistemology and *Kulturkritik* in this helpful way when the term *postmodernity* clouds the discussion.

Of course, Murphy will not be without a response. I can first imagine her responding thus: “But in this case, however vague the starting and ending points may have been, Western history *has* shown a confluence of factors. These I called in *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* the three ‘Cartesian coordinates.’ Recently—roughly since Quine popularized the idea of webs of belief some forty years ago—these three assumptions have been cast into question. So what may have *arisen* as a cultural movement or epoch can now also be treated as an epistemic position.” Yet does

such a three-dimensional theory of modernity not unhelpfully compound *defining* modernity with *identifying* its manifestations? Clearly we find some thinkers who come out Cartesian on two coordinates but not on the third, or anti-Cartesian on two but not on the other, or the spirit of whose writing is eminently Cartesian although they score low on *all* of the Cartesian coordinates. In dealing with a cultural attitude or epoch, will it not be a matter of some coincidence whether the leading representatives really hold to a consistent epistemic position?

But then I again imagine Murphy's response—or not just imagine, because she actually responds this way at one point (1996, 6). I paraphrase: “Okay, then, let's leave *Kulturkritik* out of it. Consider my categories as ideal types in something like Max Weber's sense. I'm not trying to be a historian but rather an epistemologist. There is a conceivable epistemological position, which I have called modernism, and an opposed position, which I call *Anglo-American postmodernity*. Anglo-American postmodernity came after modernism, of course, and in my view it is a more acceptable view than modernism. This is what counts.”

This strategy also raises some difficulties, however. First, if the competing views are meant as two epistemological options, I would request that the prejudicial prefix *post-* be removed. It gives the impression that there is a Hegel-like necessity to the movement from one epistemology to the other. But if such a claim is to be defended, the advocate must enter into the messy details of the actual historical developments, showing that they reflect a unidirectional supersession that cannot be reversed. If the author does not wish to claim that the necessity of history is on her side, she should use terms that are not time-indexed—terms such as *foundationalism* and *antifoundationalism*.

More urgently, I do not think it is true that taking a position on one of the “Cartesian coordinates” compels me to take a particular position on all of the other ones. To assert this is to make a claim within the discipline of epistemology, for it is to claim that there is an entailment relationship between two concrete positions that occur within this discipline. (In fact, I think Murphy is claiming that there is an entailment relationship between a whole set of concrete positions within epistemology). For instance, all holists will have to be nonrepresentationalists. But have philosophers not often argued that language as a whole may refer? (Indeed, does not George A. Lindbeck hold a somewhat similar position in the excursus in *The Nature of Doctrine* [1984]?) A postmodern antirealist must take a physicalist view of the relation between mind and body and must assent to something like the hierarchy of the sciences summarized above (Murphy 1997, chaps. 9–10). Should such links and entailment relations not be established by individual arguments, however, instead of subsumed en masse under a blanket label? As we debate these

epistemological topics individually, our reference group must be specialists in epistemology—say, roughly, the group of those who publish in leading journals in the field. I am not yet convinced that the result of that discussion will support Murphy's contentions. Thus, my own preference is to decouple the epistemic questions and treat them serially rather than all at once. I do not think that a single rubric for a diverse set of dilemmas in the field can do justice to the complexity of the subject matter.

In conclusion, I am pleased that Murphy's recent books have raised the stakes in the religion-science discussion today. They also have helped to transform the discussion within theology, confronting it with pressing questions about its claim to knowledge and its warrant for these claims. I take this to represent a "constructive problemshift" (Lakatos 1978). Murphy has shown that debates such as that between liberalism and fundamentalism must listen and respond to developments in science and the philosophy of science, because the latter affect how we view both liberalism and fundamentalism. I also agree with Murphy's argument that how one views the scientific developments is in turn deeply affected by the epistemology that one holds. Her demonstration that differences between epistemologies undergird many of the theological debates—debates about religion and science, as well as debates between liberalism and fundamentalism—is, I believe, fully convincing. Neither the field of religion-science nor the discussion of major theological options can be quite the same after this insight.

Less convincing, however, is the contention that *the* fundamental epistemological debate is between Cartesian modernism and Anglo-American postmodernity—and ipso facto less convincing is the claim that Anglo-American postmodernity is *the* epistemic paradigm for theology today. Clearly, after reading Murphy's books we theologians, religionists and scientists will be doing considerably more talking about questions of knowledge—though this shift of focus opens a complicated discussion rather than settling all relevant questions.

I conclude with a brief story. Once upon a time there were two little Lakatoses. A few years ago they were brought into the world by two parents (working independently, I hasten to add!). One little Lakatos was a "modern" (Clayton 1989), and one was a "postmodern" (Murphy 1990). As kids are wont to do, the two seemed more similar when they were young: both defended the rationality of theology in comparison with science, and both advocated testing theological suggestions as research programs that may either progress or degenerate. Today we have seen what happened when the little postmodern Lakatos grew up and married Alasdair MacIntyre and began to have Anglo-American postmodern babies. But remember that there is a second Lakatos, who has likewise recently given birth (Clayton 1998). (I'll leave it to my critics to say

whom she has married.) This modern Lakatos continues to speak of general standards of rational progress, as even Thomas S. Kuhn still spoke of shared scientific values that run across paradigms (Kuhn 1977). Of course, the moral of our little story (and the question of who is the *real* Lakatos) will be interpreted differently by the two of us. Not to put too fine a point on it: today I have pleaded for not abandoning the modern Lakatos too quickly—the Lakatos who expected the scientific community *as a whole* still to agree, in time, about which research programs are progressing and which are degenerating. As van Huyssteen notes:

In the end a holist epistemology . . . demands a broader intersubjective coherence that goes beyond the parameters of the experience and reflection of just the believing community. . . . Lakatos was right: We should indeed have criteria to help us choose between competing research programs. (van Huyssteen 1997, 87, 89)

If we find ourselves drawn to holist conclusions in epistemology, let us at least not subscribe to an insular holism that confines itself to traditions but rather to an inclusivist holism that applies the very best of human reasoning in the search for overarching agreements at the broadest level.

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