

ANGLO-AMERICAN POSTMODERNITY:
A RESPONSE TO CLAYTON AND ROBBINS

by Nancey Murphy

Abstract. In *Anglo-American Postmodernity* I call attention to recent intellectual shifts in epistemology (from foundationalism to holism), philosophy of language (from reference to use), and metaphysics (from reductionism to nonreductionism), and pursue the consequences of these changes for science, theology, and ethics. Wesley Robbins criticizes the book for making overly optimistic claims for the intellectual status of theology; Philip Clayton criticizes it for giving up the quest for general standards of rational progress. Both criticisms miss the mark in not taking on the account of rationality that I have developed from resources in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

Keywords: Anglo-American philosophy; causation, top-down or downward; postmodernity; reductionism; religion and science.

Anglo-American Postmodernity is intended to be a caricature. Not in the sense of trying to make its subject look ridiculous but in the way good political cartoonists select features of their subjects and exaggerate them in such a way that we come to recognize these features as characteristic. It is a book written for philosophers¹ and thus presupposes that the *faces* of modern and contemporary philosophy are already familiar sights. As I say in my introduction to the book, one of its purposes is to induce a gestalt switch in the reader's perception of recent Anglo-American intellectual history. "If now the reader sees continuity or gradual change from Carl Hempel to Karl Popper to Thomas Kuhn; from C. I. Lewis or Rudolf Carnap to W. V. O. Quine; from Gottlob Frege to J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein . . . I hope to make radical discontinuity appear" (Murphy 1997, 1–2).

Philip Clayton argues that I have to choose between a summary of actual cultural developments and participation in debate between philosophical positions (foundationalism versus "anti-foundationalism"). However, the

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options are not clear alternatives on my view of philosophy. I see it as a central task of philosophy to expose the (often invisible) assumptions that color the thoughts, expectations, and images of a culture. Stephen Toulmin makes a similar point: in his valuable book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* he speaks of the “timbers” that structure the modern framework (Toulmin 1990). Philosophy at its best helps to sum up the most basic characteristics of an era past. Philosophers also criticize these assumptions and occasionally suggest improvements or replacements. Thus, at their best, philosophers may, if their arguments win the day, help to shape the era to come. So the descriptive and constructive tasks are not independent.

The present descriptive-constructive project began with discussions between myself and my (actual) husband, James William McClendon Jr. We were invited to a conference on “the church in a postmodern world,” sponsored by the Trinity Institute of Manhattan in 1987. The speakers included George Lindbeck, Diogenes Allen, and Robert Bellah. We asked ourselves the following question: if these speakers represent postmodernity, then what is the substance of their differences from modern predecessors? Our sense was that the nature of the questions, the very terms of the arguments, had indeed shifted, and that a handful of philosophers could be credited with the change.

McClendon and I identified three significant philosophical doctrines that together seemed to serve as the “timbers” of modern thought: foundationalism in epistemology, an approach to language based on reference and representation, and atomism or individualism in metaphysics and ethics. These assumptions, we claimed, lay behind modern debates—debates over skepticism, over the nature of ethical and religious language, over methodological issues in the social sciences, and countless others. Because participants in such debates tend to share assumptions (e.g., “mainline” epistemologists versus their skeptical critics), we suggested that modern thinkers could be placed along spectra or axes. Given that we had identified three essential assumptions of modern thought, we represented these axes as together defining a Cartesian “intellectual space.” The three-dimensional space, of course, was just for fun, but the interrelation among modern assumptions is serious and important. The best place to see this is in the work of the logical positivists: their correspondence theory of truth and verificationist theory of meaning tied epistemology and philosophy of language together; their goal was to identify sentences *representing* the *atomic* facts that would serve as the *foundation* for all knowledge. The relations among foundationalism, referentialism, and atomism are not logical entailment but rather a looser sort of relation, for which we might borrow the term Ernan McMullin uses for the relations between theology and science: *consonance*.

The claim that modern theories of knowledge have generally been, in some sense, foundationalist is not controversial, although the conclusions to be drawn from the rejection of foundationalism are. Some become relativists; I claim that there has been a rich development of holist epistemologies from Quine and Kuhn through Lakatos to MacIntyre.

The distinction between referential theories of language and theories of meaning as use is not controversial, although the labeling of the latter as postmodern is (Clayton should have attacked this claim rather than my epistemological thesis).

The claim that modern thought has been individualistic is not controversial. However, I argue that individualism in the human sphere is but one instance of a broader metaphysical predilection for atomism and reductionism. In both cases, modern thought has suffered from an inadequate account of how parts relate to wholes—seeing individuals in social groupings, for instance, as more like marbles in a bag than like the parts of a clock. Appreciation of the complex biconditioning of part and whole, I argue, can and should be a component of Anglo-American postmodern thought. If my arguments here stand up to criticism, this will be one of the book's constructive contributions. This is a topic that should be of interest to *Zygon* readers because it relates to issues such as Donald Campbell's account of downward causation in science and to the useful model of the hierarchy of the sciences (which I certainly did not invent).

If the three modern timbers I have identified are related (consonant), then should not their successor positions (epistemological holism, meaning as use, and nonreductionism) also be related? A major goal of *Anglo-American Postmodernity* is to explore this issue—and yes, Philip Clayton, I do have arguments. I claim that both the theory of language and the sort of holist epistemology that I advocate employ a *thinking strategy* analogous to that in nonreductive views of science—that is, they recognize “asymmetrical, mutual conditioning” among a variety of levels of description or analysis (chap. 1). Again, these are not entailment relations, but I have shown (chap. 2) that several philosophers who attempt to combine a postmodern epistemology with a modern theory of language run into trouble of one sort or another.

Now responses to my critics. Clayton correctly notes that after my youthful fascination with the work of Imre Lakatos I have made a more serious commitment to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. However, I have to complain that neither of my critics has taken account of the role of MacIntyre's thought in the project of *Anglo-American Postmodernity*.

Wesley Robbins's review emphasizes a shift in “intellectual self-image, from a generically Cartesian view of minds to a view of them as embodied and embedded,” and says that most if not all of the factors in my account of the shift from modern to postmodern are functions of this change. If I

understand what he means by a *disembodied* and *disembedded* mind (and some references to literature where this thesis has been explicated and defended would have been nice), then I agree that I am on his side of this issue. However, he dismisses my arguments for the intellectual respectability of theology. His argument is that, because historical traditions are crucial factors in all of our thinking, there is no way to “specify the competence of an embedded mind.” What he fails to notice is that Alasdair MacIntyre’s work begins exactly with the recognition of the tradition dependence of rationality. I describe (and advocate) MacIntyre’s account of truth in terms of *adequatio intellectus ad rem* and state explicitly that “[t]he intellect must be understood here not as a Cartesian mind but as intelligence embodied and engaged in the world” (Murphy 1997, 123).

So given the embodied and engaged character of the human intellect, and given the historical particularity of intellectual traditions, the question arises: how might one adjudicate rationally among competing traditions, each with its own nuances on concepts of truth, rationality, justification? MacIntyre has a sophisticated answer to this question (see MacIntyre 1988, 1990; Murphy 1997, 57–60). Robbins has not explained what is wrong with it. Perhaps he believes that the question MacIntyre has addressed is one of those that we should just get over.

Clayton attacks from the opposite direction.² He implies that I have given up on general standards of rational progress and pleads that we should not adopt an “insular holism that confines itself to traditions but rather an inclusivist holism that applies the very best of human reasoning in the search for overarching agreements at the broadest level” (Clayton 1998, 474). But the point of my employing MacIntyre’s account of rationality is exactly that it is (I have argued) the best account available of how agreement can be reached, in time, regarding which large-scale traditions, including theological traditions, are, in Lakatos’s terms, *progressing* or *degenerating*.

I now want to address a final question. Clayton asks: Is my distinction between modern and Anglo-American postmodern philosophy a useful distinction? I believe Robbins would want to add: Useful for what, from what historical location? So let us ask: Is the modern-postmodern distinction I have made useful for the purposes that matter to *Zygon* readers? One element of the distinction, foundationalism versus holism,³ is probably of marginal interest here, except for my claim that it is only with the more sophisticated of holist epistemologies that we can understand the epistemological status of theology, and theology’s epistemological status has consequences for how theology can be imagined to relate to science.

My analysis of modern philosophy of language helps us understand the two most popular attitudes in current society regarding the relations between religion and science. Conservatives have a propositionalist or

referential theory of language; thus religious discourse refers to the same world as does scientific discourse. This allows for genuine conflict between the accounts they give. The liberals, however, have devised a variety of expressivist accounts of religious language. Here religious language expresses religious awareness and may have no reference to the natural world at all, so the very possibility of conflict (or interaction of any sort) with science is foreclosed (see Murphy 1997, chap. 5; Murphy 1996).

The third element of my thesis, regarding a new form of nonreductionism, is potentially the most fruitful for the science-religion dialogue. Ever since Descartes, modern thinkers have been trying to avoid the consequences of reductionism and determinism in the human sphere. If the laws of physics govern the whole of nature, then what of human freedom? Often the solution has been dualism: the body may be part of nature, but the mind is independent. The result is estrangement of humans from nature and even from their own bodies. Current neuroscience has joined philosophy in making dualism less and less credible. As a result of such developments, the question of how to avoid reductionist conclusions is all the more pressing. I have tried to shed some further light on moves already made by Donald Campbell, Arthur Peacocke, and others to explicate downward or top-down causation in the hierarchy of the sciences (for my own account of the hierarchy of the sciences, see Murphy and Ellis, 1996). Peacocke's concern is with divine action, but this work is needed just as badly to give an account of *human* agency within a world governed by the laws of physics.

My account of these matters (chaps. 1 and 10) involves use of a concept recently introduced into philosophy: *supervenience*. As I use it, this term refers to a dependence relation between two kinds or levels of properties, such that an entity possesses the higher-level property by virtue of possessing the lower-level property (or properties). The original use of this concept was to describe the relation between evaluative and descriptive properties. Saint Francis's goodness supervenes on a collection of his character traits: generosity, chastity, and so forth. Goodness, however, is not *reducible* to this set of character traits because goodness depends, in addition, upon circumstances that are themselves not always reducible to the lower level of description. For example, Saint Francis's celibacy and his giving away his property might be judged quite differently if he had been a married man with children to support.

I claim that employment of the concept of supervenience helps clarify the relations between higher and lower levels of description in the hierarchy of the sciences and also helps us see why a complete causal account cannot always be given in the terms of the lower science. My discussion of the concept here is far from adequate, but it will have served a useful purpose if it inspires others to do better.⁴

So these are the values I see in making such distinctions within epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics. Whether there is any additional value in labeling these positions modern and postmodern is, I believe, a rhetorical question; it is a proposal rather than a further question of fact, and only the future will tell whether it has been fruitful. I am reminded of J. L. Austin's question: "Is France hexagonal?" "Well, for some purposes you might say that's a good approximation." "But is it *true* that France is hexagonal?"

NOTES

1. So I am particularly grateful to the editors of *Zygon* for giving it attention in this journal.
2. I am intrigued by the question of whom the other young Lakatosian has married. All I can say is, I hope it is not Wesley Robbins, since this is sure to be a long and miserable relationship.
3. I find it odd that throughout most of his review, Clayton treats the epistemological distinction as the essence of my position. I see this as a peculiarly *modern* misreading of my book, in that epistemology was (is), for moderns, "first philosophy."
4. Neither of my reviewers commented on this aspect of the book except for Clayton's claim that putting physics at the bottom of the hierarchy of the sciences is foundationalist. However, this would only be the case if everything I have said about nonreductionism were omitted. When there is mutual conditioning of levels, whether in science or in epistemology, there is no foundationalism.

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