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Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard*

by Seyla Benhabib

In the recent, flourishing debate on the nature and significance of postmodernism, architecture appears to occupy a special place.¹ It is tempting to describe this situation through a Hegelianism: it is as if the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch approaching its end has reached self-consciousness in those monuments of modern architecture of steel, concrete, and glass. Contemplating itself in its objectifications, Spirit has not “recognized” and thus “returned to itself,” but has recoiled in horror from its own products. The visible decay of our urban environment, the uncanniness of the modern megalopolis, and the general dehumanization of space appear to prove the Faustian dream to be a nightmare. The dream of an infinitely malleable world, serving as mere receptacle of the desires of an infinitely striving self, unfolding its powers in the process of conquering externality, is one from which we have awakened. Postmodernist architecture, whatever other sources it borrows its inspiration from, is undoubtedly the messenger of the end of this Faustian dream, which had accompanied the self-understanding of the moderns from the beginning.²

The end of the Faustian dream has brought with it a conceptual and semiotic shift in many domains of culture. This shift is not characterized by a moral or political critique of the Faustian aspects of modernity, but by the questioning of the very conceptual framework that made the Faustian dream possible in the first place. The following

*I would like to thank Andreas Huyssen and Wolf Schäfer for comments and criticisms.

1. Paolo Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), p. 7 ff.
2. Cf. M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), pp. 37 ff.; 60-71.

statement by Peter Eisenman, one of the key figures in the modernist/postmodernist constellation in architecture, captures the elements of this new critique quite precisely: "Architecture since the fifteenth century has been influenced by the assumption of a set of symbolic and referential functions. These can be collectively identified as the classical . . . 'Reason,' 'Representation' and 'History.' 'Reason' insists that objects be understood as rational transformations from a self-evident origin. 'Representation' demands that objects refer to values or images external to themselves . . . 'History' assumes that time is made up of isolatable historical moments whose essential characteristics can and should be abstracted and represented. If these classical assumptions are taken together as imperatives they force architecture to represent the spirit of its age through a rationally motivated and comprehensible sign system. . . . But if these 'imperatives' are simply 'fictions' then the classical can be suspended and options emerge which have been obscured by classical imperatives. . . ."³

Eisenman's statement describes rather accurately the conceptual self-understanding of postmodernism, not only in architecture, but in contemporary philosophy as well. In fact, if one were to substitute "philosophy" for "architecture" in the first paragraph of Eisenman's statement, it could serve as a pithy summary of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.⁴ For Lyotard as well the demise of the Faustian ideal signifies the end of the "grand narrative" of the moderns, and of the epistemology of representation on which it had been based. "I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative," writes Lyotard, "such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (xxiii). And like Eisenman, in the suspension of the classical, Lyotard sees the emergence of cognitive and social options which had

3. Peter Eisenman, Accompanying text to exhibit piece, "Cite Unseen," in "Revision der Moderne," Deutsche Architekturmuseum, Summer 1984, Frankfurt am Main. For some of the difficulties in characterizing Eisenmann's work, cf. Charles A. Jencks, *Late-Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), pp. 13; 137 ff.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massouri, Foreword by F. Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). All future references in the text are to this edition. Appended to the English translation is also the essay, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism," trans. by R. Durand, originally in *Critique*, No. 419 (April 1982).

been obscured by the “classical imperatives.” He defines the new cognitive option variously as “paralogy” (60 ff.), “agonistics” (16), and “recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games” (66). The new social option is described as a “temporary contract,” supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs (66).

Lyotard offers these cognitive and social options as alternatives that are authentic to the experience of post-industrial societies and to the role of knowledge within them. The hold of the classical episteme upon contemporary consciousness, however, tends to channel our cognitive as well as our practical imagination in two directions. In the first place, society is conceived of as a functional whole (11), and the condition of knowledge appropriate to it is judged as “performativity.” Performativity is the view that knowledge is power, that modern science is to be legitimated through the increase in technological capacity, efficiency, control, and output it enables (47). The ideal of the theorists of performativity, from Hobbes to Luhmann, is to reduce the fragility intrinsic to the legitimation of power by minimizing risk, unpredictability, and complexity. Not only is knowledge power, but power generates access to knowledge, thus preparing for itself a self-perpetuating basis of legitimacy. “Power . . . legitimates science and the law on the basis of their efficiency, and legitimates this efficiency on the basis of science and law. . . Thus the growth of power, and its self-legitimation, are now taking the route of data storage and accessibility, and the operativity of information” (47).

The second alternative is to view society as divided into two, as an alienated, bifurcated totality, in need of reunification. The corresponding epistemic vision is “critical” as opposed to “functional” knowledge. Critical knowledge is in the service of the subject; its goal is not the legitimation of power but the enabling of empowerment (12 ff.). It seeks not to enhance the efficiency of the apparatus but to further the self-formation of humanity; not to reduce complexity but to create a world in which a reconciled humanity recognizes itself. For Lyotard the contemporary representative of this 19th-century ideal, born out of the imagination of a German thinker, Wilhelm von Humboldt, is Jürgen Habermas (32). Had it been von Humboldt’s ideal to have philosophy restore unity to learning via the development of a language game linking all the sciences together as moments in the becoming of Spirit (33), it is Habermas’ purpose to formulate a meta-discourse which is “universally valid for language games” (65). The goal of such discourse is not so much the *Bildung* of the German nation, as it had been for von Humboldt, but the attainment of consensus, transparen-

cy, and reconciliation. Lyotard comments: "The cause is good, but the argument is not. Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value . . . We must . . . arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus" (66).

Can Lyotard convince? Is his project to formulate the outlines of a postmodern episteme, beyond the dualism of functional and critical knowledge, beyond instrumental reason and critical theory, viable? What are the epistemological options opened by the demise of the classical episteme of representation?

The Crisis of the Representational Episteme

Modern Philosophy began with the loss of the world.⁵ The decision of the autonomous bourgeois subject to take nothing and no authority for granted, whose content and strictures had not been subjected to rigorous examination, and that had not withstood the test of "clarity and distinctness," began with a withdrawal from the world. It was still possible for Descartes in the 17th century to describe this withdrawal in the language of Stoicism and Spanish Jesuit philosophy as an ethical and religious gesture, either as a "suspension" of the involvement of the self with the world (Stoicism) or as the withdrawal of the soul to a communion with itself (Jesuit teaching of meditation). These were stages on the road to an equilibrium with the cosmos, or necessary for the purging of the soul in preparation for the truth of God. The future development of modern epistemology succeeded in repressing this ethical and cultural moment to the point where the typical reductions on which the classical episteme of representation rested could emerge. The corporeal, ethico-moral self was reduced to a pure subject of knowledge, to consciousness or to mind. The object of knowledge was reduced to "matters of fact" and "relations of ideas," or to "sensations" and "concepts." The question of classical epistemology from Descartes to Hume, from Locke to Kant was how to make congruous the

5. Cf. H. Arendt's statement: "Descartes' philosophy is haunted by two nightmares which in a sense became the nightmares of the whole modern age, not because this age was so deeply influenced by Cartesian philosophy, but because their emergence was almost inescapable once the true implications of the modern world view were understood. These nightmares are very simple and very well-known. In the one, reality, the reality of the world as well as of human life, is doubted . . . The other concerned . . . the impossibility for man to trust his senses and his reason." *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), eighth printing, p. 277.

order of representations in consciousness with the order of representations outside the self. Caught in the prison-house of its own consciousness, the modern epistemological subject tried to recover the world it had well lost.⁶ The options were not many: either one reassured oneself that the world would be gained by the direct and immediate evidence of the senses (empiricism) or one insisted that the rationality of the creator or the harmony of mind and nature would guarantee the correspondence between the two orders of representations (rationalism).

Whether empiricist or rationalist, modern epistemologists agreed that the task of knowledge, whatever its origins, was to build an adequate representation of things. In knowledge, mind had to “mirror” nature.⁷ As Charles Taylor points out, “When we hold that having X is having a (correct) representation of X, one of the things we establish is the neat separation of ideas, thoughts, descriptions and the like, on the one hand, and what these ideas, etc. are about on the other.”⁸ Actually modern epistemology operated with a threefold distinction: the order of representations in our consciousness (ideas or sensations); the signs through which these “private” orders were made public, namely words, and that of which our representations were representations, and to which they referred.⁹ In this tradition, meaning was defined as “designation”; the meaning of a word was what it designates, while the primary function of language was denotative, namely to inform us about objectively existing states of affairs. The classical episteme of representation presupposed a spectator conception of the knowing

6. I borrow the phrase from R. Rorty's well-known article, “The World Well Lost,” which argues that the conclusion to be drawn from contemporary epistemological disputes about conceptual frameworks is that “The notion of the ‘world’ that is correlative with the notion of a ‘conceptual framework’ is simply the Kantian notion of a thing-in-itself. . .” (originally in *Journal of Philosophy* [1972], reprinted in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 16.

7. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 131 ff.

8. Charles Taylor, “Theories of Meaning,” Daves Hicke Lecture, Proceedings of the British Academy (Oxford: University Press, 1982), p. 284.

9. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C. B. McPherson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 101 ff. Cf. M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973), First Vintage Books edition: “In its simple state as an idea, or an image, or a perception, associated with or substituted for another, the signifying element is not a sign. It can become a sign only on condition that it manifests, in addition, the relation that links it to what it signifies. It must represent, but that representation, in turn, must also be represented within it” (64).

self, a designative theory of meaning, and a denotative theory of language.

Already in the last century three directions of critique of the classical episteme, leading to its eventual rejection, formed themselves. Stylizing somewhat, the first can be described as the critique of the modern epistemic subject, the second as the critique of the modern epistemic object, and the third as the critique of the modern concept of the sign.

The critique of the Cartesian, spectator conception of the subject begins with German Idealism, and continues with Marx and Freud to Horkheimer in 1937, and to Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.¹⁰ This tradition substitutes for the spectator model of the self the view of an active, producing, fabricating humanity, creating the conditions of objectivity confronting it through its own historical activity. The Hegelian and Marxist tradition also shows that the Cartesian ego is not a self-transparent entity that the epistemic self cannot reach full autonomy as long as the historical origin and social constitution of the “clear and distinct” ideas it contemplates remain a mystery. Here this critique joins hands with the Freudian one which likewise shows that the self is not “transparent” to itself, for it is not “master in its own house” (Herr im eigenen Haus). It is controlled by desires, needs, and forces whose effects upon it shape both the contents of its clear and distinct ideas, as well as its capacity to organize them. The historical and psychoanalytic critique of the Cartesian ego sees the task of reflection

10. The transition from “consciousness” to “self-consciousness,” from representation to desire in ch. III of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* contains also a critique of the spectator conception of the knowing subject. Hegel’s point is that an epistemological standpoint confined to the spectator conception of the self cannot solve the questions it raises; most notably, it cannot explain the genesis and becoming of the object of knowledge. It is only insofar as the knowing self is also an acting one that it can destroy the myth of the given in knowledge (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. with an analysis and Foreword by J.N. Findlay [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977], pp. 104-110). Cf. “He does not see how the sensuous world around him is not a given direct from all eternity, ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society, and indeed in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations,” K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. and introd. by R. Pascal (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 35. M. Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory*, trans. by M.J. O’Connell and others (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 188-244. J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. by J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 1-65. S. Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis” in the *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth, 1953), vol. 17, pp. 137-144. For this reading of Freud, I am much indebted to Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 419-459.

neither as the withdrawal from the world nor as access to clarity and distinctness, but as the rendering conscious of those unconscious forces of history, society and the psyche. Although generated by the subject, these necessarily escape its memory, control, and conduct. The goal of reflection is emancipation from self-incurred bondage.

The second line of criticism can be most closely associated with the names of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The modern episteme is viewed as an episteme of domination. For Nietzsche modern science universalizes Cartesian doubt. Modern knowledge divides the world into the realm of appearance on the one hand, and that of essence or things-in-themselves on the other.¹¹ This dualistic vision is internalized by the subject of knowledge who in turn is split into body and mind, the senses and the conceptual faculty. Nietzsche has no difficulty in showing that in this sense modern science signifies the triumph of Platonism. Heidegger drives the error underlying the modern episteme of representation further back than its Platonic origins, to a conception of being as presence, as what is available and present to the consciousness of the subject.¹² This conception of being as presence-to reduces the manyness of the appearances by making them available to a sovereign consciousness. By reducing appearances to what is present to it, this consciousness attains the option of controlling them. In a spirit that is quite akin to Heidegger's, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer argue that it is the "concept," the very unit of thought in the Western tradition that imposes homogeneity and identity upon the heterogeneity of material. This drive for identity of conceptual thought culminates in the technical triumph of Western ratio, which can only know things in that it comes to dominate them. "The Enlightenment relates to things as the dictator to humans."¹³

The third tradition of criticism is initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, and given sharper contours by Frege and Wittgenstein in our century. They argue that it is impossible to make sense of meaning, reference, and language in general when the view of

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Genealogy of Morals," *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by F. Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 289 ff.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harber and Row, 1962), pp. 47 ff.; "Die Frage nach der Technik?" *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Gunther Neske, 1974), fourth ed., pp. 27 ff.

13. M. Horkheimer and Th. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1980), p. 12, originally published in Amsterdam 1947.

linguistic signs as “private marks”¹⁴ prevails. Instead, the public and shared character of language is a beginning point. Both de Saussure and Peirce point out that there is no *natural* relation between a sound, the word it represents in a language, and the content it refers to. For Peirce, the relation of the sign, of which words are but one species, to the signified is mediated by the interpretant.¹⁵ For de Saussure, it is within a system of differential relations that certain sounds get arbitrarily frozen to stand for words.¹⁶ Language is that sedimented set of relations which stands ideally behind the set of enunciations, called “parole.” This move in the analysis of language from the private to the public, from consciousness to sign, from the individual word to a system of relations among linguistic signs, is followed by Frege and Wittgenstein, insofar as they too argue that the unit of reference is not the word but the sentence (Frege), and that meaning can only be understood by analyzing the multiple contexts of use (Wittgenstein).

The epistemological juncture at which Lyotard operates is characterized by the triumph of this third tradition. Whether in analytic philosophy, or in contemporary hermeneutics, or in French post-structuralism, the paradigm of language has replaced the paradigm of consciousness. This shift has meant that the focus is no longer on the epistemic subject and the private contents of its consciousness but on the public, signifying activities of a collection of subjects. Not only has there been a shift in the size of the interrogated epistemic unit from idea, sensation, and concept to the threefold character of the sign as signifier, signified, and interpretant (Peirce), to language and parole (Saussure) or to language games as “forms of life” (Wittgenstein). The identity of the epistemic subject has changed as well: the bearer of the sign cannot be an isolated self — there is no private language, as Wittgenstein has observed; either it is a community of selves whose

14. Cf. Wittgenstein’s critique of the “naming” theory of meaning and of the impossibility of viewing language as a private game in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1965), tenth printing, pp. 27-32, 38, and 39; 180 and 199 ff.

15. Charles Sanders Peirce, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. and with an Introd. and Notes by Philip Wiener (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), pp. 53-54; K.-O. Apel, “From Kant to Peirce: The Semiotical Transformation of Transcendental Logic,” in *Toward a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. by G. Adey and D. Frisby (London: RKP, 1980), pp. 77-93.

16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, trans. and introd. by Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), pp. 67 ff.

identity extends as far as their horizon of interpretations (Gadamer) or it is a social community of actual language users (Wittgenstein). This enlargement of the relevant epistemic subject is one option. A second option, followed by French structuralism, is to deny that in order to make sense of the epistemic object, one need appeal to an epistemic subject at all. The subject is replaced by a system of structures, oppositions, and *différences* which, to be intelligible, need not be viewed as products of a living subjectivity at all.¹⁷

Lyotard wants to convince that the destruction of the episteme of representation allows only one option, namely, a recognition of the irreconcilability and incommensurability of language games, and the acceptance that only local and context-specific criteria of validity can be formulated. One must accept, in other words, an “agonistics” of language: “. . . to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech-acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics” (10). This cognitive option yields a “polytheism of values,” and a politics of justice beyond consensus, characterized by Lyotard vaguely as the “temporary contract.”

The shift in contemporary philosophy from consciousness to language, from the order of representations to that of speech-acts, from denotation to performance need not lead to a “polytheism” of values, and ultimately to Wittgenstein’s dictum that “philosophy leaves everything as it is.”¹⁸ In order to see that the decline of the episteme of representation allows another alternative besides Lyotard’s polytheism and agonistics of language, it is necessary to examine the self-contradictoriness of Lyotard’s program more carefully. Lyotard wants to deny the choice between instrumental and critical reason, between performativity and emancipation. But his agonistic philosophy either leads to a “polytheism of values,” from which standpoint the principle of performativity or of emancipation cannot be criticized, or this philosophy does not remain wholly polytheistic but privileges one domain of discourse and knowledge over others as a hidden criterion. The choice is still between an uncritical polytheism and a self-conscious recognition of the need for criteria of validity, and the attempt to reflexively ground them. Lyotard cannot escape the Scylla of uncritical polytheism nor the Charybdis of criteriological dogmatism.

17. Cf. Manfred Frank, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 71 ff.; 83 ff.; 259. Pierre Bourdieu and J.C. Passeron, “Sociology and Philosophy in France since 1945: Death and Resurrection of a Philosophy without the Subject,” *Social Research*, 34:1 (Spring 1983), 162-212.

18. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 124, 49e.

Truth: The Future of an Illusion?

The differences between Lyotard's "agonistics" of language and the program of "universal" or "transcendental pragmatics," formulated by Apel and Habermas, serve as a good beginning point in developing this dilemma.¹⁹ Insofar as both Lyotard's agonistics and the program of pragmatics reject the denotative function of language, they signal a turn to its performative aspects. This turn is accompanied by a redefinition of knowledge as argumentative, discursive practice. Whereas Habermas distinguishes between the "know-how" embedded in the pre-theoretical life-world, the implicit rules of communicative competence which guide each competent speaker of a language, Lyotard emphasizes the "narrativity" of a mode of knowledge repressed and marginalized by science. He defines this as a "know-how, knowing how to live, how to listen" (*savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-écouter*; 19). For Habermas discursive knowledge is *continuous* with everyday communicative practices; already everyday communication functions as its own reflexive medium through acts of interrogation, disagreement, questioning, and puzzling. In discourses we do not enter a Platonic heaven of ideas, but we "bracket" certain constraints of space and time, suspend belief in the truth of propositions, in the rightness of norms, and the truthfulness of our partners, and examine everyday convictions in which we have lost belief. For Lyotard, by contrast, "discourse" and "narrative knowledge" are radically discontinuous. Narrative knowledge appears to be in need of no legitimation. Lyotard describes the pragmatics of narrative knowledge such that it *eo ipso* seems to preclude the kind of questioning, puzzling, and disagreement which everyday communicative practices in fact always already allow (27).

Although Lyotard describes his philosophy of language as "pragmatics" as well — albeit an agonistic one — "rhetorics" would be a more adequate characterization of the view he develops. Both pragmatics and rhetorics emphasize the performative as opposed to denotative uses of language, and both take as unit of analysis not the proposition but the speech-act. The pragmatic theory of speech-acts maintains that every act of communication is directed toward certain

19. K.-O. Apel, "Sprechakttheorie und transzendente Sprachpragmatik zur Frage ethischer Normen," in *Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie*, ed. by K.-O. Apel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 10-81; J. Habermas, "Was heisst Universalpragmatik?" *ibid.*, pp. 184-273, English translation by T. McCarthy, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 1-69.

“validity claims” (Geltungsansprüche). Validity claims can be formulated with respect to the truth of statements, the rightness of norms, and the truthfulness of speaking subjects.²⁰ By contrast, the rhetorics of language Lyotard espouses does not distinguish between *raising a validity claim* and *forcing* someone to believe in something, between the coordination of action among participants on the basis of conviction generated through agreement, and the manipulative influencing of the behavior of others. Lyotard misses the boat when he accuses Habermas of reducing all language games to the meta-game of truth. In the theory of universal pragmatics truth-claims are one among two other validity claims, namely rightness and truthfulness, and are not privileged in any way.²¹ The issue then is not whether Habermas privileges the meta-game of truth, but which view of language is more adequate: one that sees language as a *cognitive* medium through which norms of action coordination, patterns of interpretation of cultures, and frameworks for the exploration of our needs and desires are generated,²² or a view that regards language as an *evocative* medium, in which validity and force, reasoned belief and manipulated opinion, can no longer be distinguished. Is this a fair charge against Lyotard? Let us look more closely. A long passage in which Lyotard explains his pragmatics of language is revealing in this regard: “A denotative utterance such as ‘The university is sick,’ made in the context of a conversation or an interview, positions its sender (the person who utters the statement), its addressee (the person who receives it), and its referent (what the statement deals with) in a specific way: the utterance places (and exposes) the sender in the position of ‘knower’. . . (If) we consider a declaration such as ‘The university is open,’ pronounced by a dean or

20. J. Habermas, “An Excursus on Theory of Argumentation,” in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, v. 1, trans. by T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 23 ff.

21. One of Habermas’ main purposes in developing a theory of discourse and argumentation was to formulate a concept of the validity of ethical norms, which avoided the dogmatism of natural law theories (that confuse moral validity and factual assertions) and the arbitrariness of emotivism (that reduced moral claims to statements of taste). Cf. “Zwei Bemerkungen zum praktischen Diskurs,” in *Konstruktionen versus Positionen*, ed. by Kuno Lorenz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979); “Wahrheitstheorien,” in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion*, ed. by H. Fahrenbach (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), pp. 211-265.

22. Against Lyotard’s reading, I want to emphasize that linguistically mediated communicative action serves *three* functions: first, the coordination of social action among individuals; second, the socialization and individuation of members of a human group, and third, the appropriation of cultural tradition, and the generation of meaning and symbolic patterns which define the hermeneutic horizon of a culture, cf. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, pp. 100-101; 136 ff.

rector at convocation, it is clear that the previous specifications no longer apply. . . . The distinctive feature of this second, ‘performative’ utterance is that *its effect upon the recipient coincided with its enunciation*. . . . That this is so is not subject to discussion or verification on the part of the addressee, who is immediately placed within the new context created by the utterance. As for the sender, he must be invested with the authority to make such a statement. Actually, we could say it the other way around: the sender is dean or rector — that is, *he is invested with the authority to make this kind of statement — only insofar as he can directly affect both the referent (the university) and the addressee (the university staff) in the manner I have indicated*” (9. My emphasis).

This lengthy passage in which Lyotard explicates the pragmatic dimension of language-games betrays that he no longer distinguishes between power and validity. The “sender” is defined as the one invested with the “authority” to make a certain kind of statement, but then this authority is said to be invested in him “only insofar as he can affect both the referent . . . and the addressee.” But surely the *investment* of authority in someone or in an institution and the *effective exercise* of this authority are two different things. The first is a matter of *validity*, the second a matter of *power*. Just as the one invested with authority may not be effective in exercising it, there may be others effective in exercising authority but not invested with the right to exercise it. Lyotard seems to imply that only the one who effectively exercises authority is also invested with the title to it. If this is so, however, all authority would be charismatic, dependent, that is, upon the individual qualities and characteristics of a special individual, and not liable to justification through procedure, rules, and grounds. Power and validity, might and right would then be indistinguishable.

Lyotard writes: “. . . the utterance places (and exposes) the sender in the position of the ‘knower’ . . . the addressee is put in the position of having to give or refuse his assent. . . .” (9). The difference between universal and transcendental pragmatics and Lyotard’s agonistics turns around the question as to how this “giving” or “refusing” of assent is to be understood. Lyotard regards this to be a consequence of a language-game with many moves, and does not specify the process whereby assent is generated or refusal obtained. But surely there is a distinction between agreeing and giving in; consenting and being persuaded to do so; presenting reasons to convince and blackmailing; refusing and being obstinate. Lyotard actually does not eliminate these distinctions altogether, for he writes, “to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics. *This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win*” (10. My emphasis). The question is, why not? Why isn’t language simply a sphere

through which the universal power-game is carried on? Why isn't all conversation seduction? all consensus conquest? all agreement the result of a delusion, of a "narcissisme à deux," as Lacan would have it?²³ Despite a certain ambivalence, Lyotard cannot escape these conclusions.

The line between truth and deception, consensus and coercion disappears in Lyotard's agonistics, for, to speak with J.L. Austin, Lyotard cannot differentiate between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech-acts. According to Austin, "the illocutionary act . . . has a certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act . . . is the *achieving of certain effects* by saying something"²⁴ (my emphasis). For example, *in* saying I would shoot someone, I threaten them (illocutionary act); *by* saying I would shoot them, I alarm them (perlocutionary). The consequences attained by an illocutionary act can be stated at the beginning of a statement in the form of an *explicit* intention, "I threatened to shoot him"; in the case of a perlocutionary statement, however, the speaker can only attain the desired effect as long as his or her intentions are not explicitly made part of the speech-act.²⁵ If it is my goal to alarm someone, I do not begin a statement by saying "I want to alarm you that . . .". In this case my act would be illocutionary, and intended with the purpose of apprehending you about a certain state of affairs. This in turn leaves open the possibility that you may assent or refuse to respond in the way I desire you to. In perlocutionary acts, however, the speaker wants to generate a certain effect upon the hearer *regardless* of the assent or dissent of the latter. In fact, it is necessary to achieve certain effects that the

23. Quoted in Frank, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?*, p. 111.

24. J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 120.

25. Admittedly, the interpretation of the distinction between "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" acts is controversial (cf. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, pp. 120 ff.). The difficulty with Lyotard's interpretation of Austin's thesis appears to be that he conflates the illocutionary force of an utterance with the producing of certain effects, intended or otherwise, by means of an utterance. Thus he describes a "performative utterance" as one whose "effect upon the recipient coincided with its enunciation" (*Postmodern Condition*, p. 9). Austin, however, identifies an illocutionary act as an act we perform *in* saying something (*How to do Things with Words*, p. 99), and the description of which can figure in the first person indicative as "I pronounce that," "I warn you that," "I inform you that," etc. In his valuable article, "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," P.F. Strawson clarifies in fact how irrelevant the achieving of certain effects upon the hearer is to the identifying of illocutionary acts; he shifts the focus instead to the overt intention of the speaker and the recognition by his hearers of this intention, regardless of how they choose to respond to it; in *Philosophical Review*, No. 73 (1964), 439-460.

intentions of the speaker not be revealed. For Lyotard the primary use of speech is perlocutionary. The use of speech to affect and influence the hearer, for whatever purposes, is the paradigm. But then the agonistics of language can no longer distinguish between manipulative and non-manipulative uses of speech. The consequence of this position is that not truth alone, but all claims to validity are at best pious wishes, at worst illusions fabricated to deceive.

It is not difficult to show that any theory which denies the claims to truth, and the possibility of distinguishing between it and sheer manipulative rhetoric would be involved in a "performative self-contradiction."²⁶ This may not be terribly difficult, but it does not settle the issue either. For, from Nietzsche's aphorisms, to Heidegger's poetics, to Adorno's stylistic configurations, and to Derrida's deconstructions, we have examples of thinkers who accept this performative self-contradiction, and who self-consciously draw the consequences from it by seeking a new way of writing and communicating. That, following this tradition, Lyotard has not experimented with style in *The Postmodern Condition* may be more the result of accident than of conceptual consistency. We must seek to approach Lyotard's presuppositions through yet another route.

Science: The Same Old Dream

In a recent article on "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," Richard Rorty has described the impasse between Habermas and Lyotard as follows: "To put the opposition in another way, the French writers whom Habermas criticizes are willing to drop the opposition between 'true consensus' and 'false consensus,' or between 'validity' and 'power,' in order not to have to tell a metanarrative in order to explicate 'true' or 'valid.' But Habermas thinks that if we do drop the idea of the 'better argument' . . . we shall have only a 'context-dependent' sort of social criticism."²⁷ Rorty observes that Lyotard would respond to Habermas' claim that even the sciences are propelled beyond themselves towards self-reflection, by responding that "Habermas misunderstands the character of modern science."²⁸ Indeed, Lyotard's discussion of postmodern science is intended to ac-

26. Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Rereading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *New German Critique*, 26 (Spring-Summer 1982).

27. R. Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," *Praxis International*, 4:1 (April 1984), 33.

28. *Ibid.*

compish a most peculiar function. This is also the point at which we see that Lyotard avoids the performative self-contradiction of stylistic self-deconstruction à la Derrida, by falling into dogmatism, i.e., by privileging a knowledge-practice above others to serve as their criterion, while failing to justify this explicitly.

Drawing from such diverse sources as Gödel's metamathematical research, quantum mechanics, microphysics, and catastrophe theories, in an obscure discussion, Lyotard attempts to show that the pragmatics of postmodern scientific knowledge has little to do with performativity or instrumental criteria (54).²⁹

Lyotard writes: "Postmodern science . . . is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. *It is changing the meaning of the word knowledge, while expressing how such a change can take place.* It is provoking not the known, but the unknown" (60. My emphasis). This epistemic privileging of mathematical and natural science is problematical. It avoids a series of questions which any serious epistemological theory would have to face. The distinction between the natural, social and human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) is completely ignored. It remains to be shown that problems of concept formation, formulation of law-like generalities, procedures of verification, the interaction between pre-theoretical and theoretical cognition in the social and human sciences can be illuminated by the model of postmodern knowledge Lyotard proposes.³⁰ The privileging of developments in mathematical and natural science does not break with the tradition of modern sciences which simply ignores the knowledge claims and problems of the human and social sciences.

More significant is the question "What is the relationship between the antimodel of pragmatics of science, and society? Is it applicable to

29. This argument is somewhat unconvincing because Lyotard does not distinguish between the internal *cognitive dynamics of science* and its *social* uses. Performativity, or what is known as "scientism" in the tradition of critical theory, is a view that legitimizes science by an appeal — although not exclusively — to its social-technological uses. That scientism is not an adequate theory of the natural sciences has been argued forcefully by others like Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). However, in attacking this ideology, Lyotard ignores the social reality it expresses. The fact that postmodern natural science operates with a discontinuous epistemology of instabilities, does not decide the question of its social role. Lyotard emphasizes the internal, cognitive dynamics of modern science, while ignoring its social-technological aspects. For the distinction between the cognitive and social dynamics of science, cf. G. Bohme et al., *Finalization in Science*, ed. by W. Schaefer (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1983), pp. 3-11.

30. For a recent statement of problems and issues, cf. R.J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

the vast clouds of language material constituting a society? . . . Is it an impossible ideal of an open community?" (64). Lyotard's answer to this question is incoherent. On the one hand he admits that social and scientific pragmatics are different, for social pragmatics is not as simple as scientific pragmatics, "but is a monster formed by the interweaving of heteromorphous classes of utterances" (65). On the other hand, the postmodern epistemology of science is said to approach the practice of narrativity (*le petit récit*). In other words, either Lyotard privileges natural and mathematical science, thus falling into traditional scientific dogmatism, or there is a criterion of knowledge, transcending modern natural science, and with reference to which science itself is legitimized, and which, in turn, needs to be defended. It would appear that narrative knowledge is such a criterion.

Indeed, Rorty as well interprets Lyotard as wanting to diminish the distance between scientific and narrative knowledge.³¹ In Lyotard's construction of narrativity, Rorty discovers affinities with his own contextual-pragmatism. Closing fronts with Lyotard, he writes that "the trouble with Habermas is not so much that he provides a meta-narrative of emancipation as that he feels the need to legitimize, that he is not content to let the narratives which hold our culture together do their stuff. He is scratching where it does not itch."³² Rorty's argument is revealing for two reasons: first, it indicates that epistemological questions flow into assessments of culture and society. Whether "the narratives which hold our culture together do their stuff" is an empirical question. Likewise, whether critical theory "scratches where it does not itch" depends upon our understanding of the problems, struggles, crises, conflicts and miseries of the present. Epistemological issues are indeed closely linked with moral and political ones.

In the second place, we must note that Lyotard himself is not as sanguine as Rorty about the vitality and continuing role of narrative in modern society and culture. Narrative knowledge, far from being an alternative to the modern scientific one, is sometimes described as if it were "premodern" knowledge, a historically lost mode of thought.³³ Yet, narrative knowledge is also viewed as the "other" of discursive knowledge — not its past historical but its contemporaneous other. Narrative knowledge, to use a phrase of Bloch's, is the "non-contemporaneous contemporary" of discursive knowledge. The scientist "classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, cus-

31. Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," 34.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Frank, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?*, p. 106.

toms, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children" (27). Is the meaning of Lyotard's postmodernist epistemology then a gesture of solidarity with the oppressed? A gesture toward the recognition of the otherness of the other? This may seem so, but Lyotard constructs the epistemology of narrative knowledge in such a way that it can no longer challenge scientific knowledge, let alone provide a criterion transcending it. Narrative knowledge belongs to the ethnological museum of the past.

"Narrative knowledge," writes Lyotard, "does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation in that it certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof" (27). This global characterization of narrative knowledge as prereflexive, as a self-sustaining whole, flattens the internal contradictions and tensions which affect narrative no less than discursive practices.³⁴ It also implies that all change in this episteme must come from without, through violence. Such an episteme has no self-propelling or self-correcting mechanism. But, in fact, this is to condemn the subjects of this episteme to ahistoricity, to deny that they inhabit the same space with us. We do not interact with them as equals, we inhabit a space in which we observe them as ethnologists and anthropologists, we treat them with distance and indifference. But if this is not so, if indeed narrative knowledge is the "other" of *our* mode of knowledge, then Lyotard must admit that narrative and scientific knowledge are not merely incommensurable, but that they can and do clash, and that sometimes the outcome is less than certain.³⁵ To admit this possibility would amount to the admission that "narrative" and "discursive" practices occupy the same epistemic space, and that both raise claims to validity, and that an argumentative exchange between

34. Cf. E. Gellner, "Concepts and Society," in *Rationality*, ed. by B.R. Wilson (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), pp. 18-50; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 22-30.

35. In portraying this relationship, Lyotard adopts the *observer's* point, the standpoint of the curator of an ethnological museum of the past. Had he adopted the *participant's* perspective, he would have had to concede that "gazing in wonderment at the variety of discursive species" is hardly the attitude to take when confronted with the moral and epistemic problems that the coexistence of incompatible discursive modes pose for us qua children of the modern West. In this essay, I am only arguing that these modes of thought cannot harmoniously coexist in one epistemic space, that their very presence next to each other poses moral as well as cognitive problems, or that the question of validity inevitably confronts us, and that we cannot extricate ourselves from an answer by gazing in wonderment at the plurality of language games and life forms. For a recent statement of these thorny questions, cf. *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. by Steven Lukes and Martin Hollis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).

them is not only possible but desirable. You cannot respect the “otherness” of the other, if you deny the other the right to enter into a conversation with you, if you do not discard the objective indifference of an ethnologist, and engage with the other as an equal. Instead of reckoning with this dilemma of recognition and distance, acceptance and tolerance, Lyotard agrees with Wittgenstein that philosophy must leave everything as is. “It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different. All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. Lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative. Such a reaction does not necessarily follow. Neither does an attempt to derive or engender (using operators like development) scientific knowledge from narrative knowledge, as if the former contained the latter in an embryonic state” (26-27). If we cannot lament the passing away of narrative knowledge, nor indicate a possible line of transition from one knowledge type to another, then in fact narrative knowledge possesses no epistemic priority to scientific knowledge. Equipped with “undecidables, ‘fracta,’ catastrophes and pragmatic paradoxes,” we can face the brave, new world of postmodernity.

Thus in the final analysis, Lyotard avoids performative self-contradiction, or simply incoherence, by privileging one practice of knowledge to serve as a criterion over others. This criterion is provided by the model of a discontinuous, fractured, and self-destabilizing epistemology, said to characterize modern mathematical and natural science. We may have woken from the Faustian dream but not from the scientific one!

Let us return once more to the question, what are the options opened in the present by the demise of the episteme of representation?

The Politics of Postmodernism

As Fredric Jameson has remarked, “The problem of postmodernism . . . is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one. The various positions which can logically be taken on it, whatever terms they are couched in, can always be shown to articulate visions of history, in which the evaluation of the social moment in which we live today is the object of an essentially political affirmation or repudiation.”³⁶ Jean-François Lyotard’s political trajectory led him from the

36. Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate,” in this issue.

Socialisme ou Barbarie group to a farewell to Marx and Freud, and to the embracing of Nietzsche in *Économie Libidinale* (1974). Casting aside the mask of the social critic, as simply a disguise for clerical and Christian values, Lyotard put on “the mask of paganism, polytheism.”³⁷ “So you would challenge Spinozist or Nietzschean ethics, which separates the movements of being-more and those of being-less, of action and reaction? — Yes, but let us be aware of an entire morality and an entire politics, with their sages, militants, courts and jails, taking advantage of these dichotomies to appear again . . . We do not speak as liberators of desire.”³⁸

Lyotard writes as a disillusioned Marxist, as one who has discovered that the grand metanarrative of history leads to an “entire morality and an entire politics.” Lyotard prefers the Spinozist or Nietzschean conatus of being, the drive of the will to preserve itself, to the Republic of Virtue and Terror. In fact, for Lyotard this choice between a polytheism of desire and a republic of terror appears so compelling that no one who has ever spoken in the name of Humanity, History, Emancipation, and Unity can escape its curse. Terror did not begin with the citizens’ committees of the French Revolution, nor with the banning of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries from the revolutionary Dumas. No, it is not Pol-Pot or Stalin, but Kant and Hegel who lie at its origin. This total loss of historical perspective in the rhetoric of disillusionment leads Lyotard to finish his essay “What is Postmodernism?” on the following note: “Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games. . . . and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us witness to the unrepresentable, let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (82). Surely Lyotard knows that under the heading of “Absolute Freedom and Terror,”

37. I adopt this phrase from Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 184.

38. Lyotard, *Économie Libidinale*, pp. 54-55, as cited by Descombes, p. 185.

Hegel in chapter six of the *Phenomenology* provided one of the most brilliant discussions of terror in the history of modern political thought.³⁹ Surely, he also knows (or should know) that Habermas and Wellmer, whom he accuses of propagating a “nostalgia for the whole and the one,” are not German neo-Romantics, but thinkers who have insisted upon the need to revitalize whatever fragile tradition of participatory, civil-libertarian democratic resources the Federal German Republic possesses. Why then this misunderstanding? What is at stake?

As with the crisis of the representational episteme, the demise of the metanarrative of traditional Marxism suggests diverse possibilities, among which the return to Nietzsche and Spinoza is one among many, and not the most compelling one. Whereas the demise of the episteme of representation initiated a shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language, from denotation to performance, from the proposition to the speech-act, the demise of the metanarrative of traditional Marxism opens the possibility of a post-Marxist radical, democratic politics. The issue is whether the conceptual polytheism and agonistics proposed by Lyotard aids in this project, or whether indeed under the guise of postmodernism, a “young conservatism”⁴⁰ is not establishing itself among the avant-garde of the 1980s.

Lyotard’s project is ambivalent. His defense of the morally uncompromising gesture of the aesthetic avant-garde, his insistence upon the spirit of innovation, experimentation, play, and his call “to activate differences and save the honor of the name” (82), could be constituents of a post-Marxist radical, democratic politics. Indeed, *The Postmodern Condition* intends to sketch “the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown” (67). Yet insisting upon the incommensurability of language games, in the name of polytheism, may generate moral and political indifference; the call for innovation, experimentation and play may be completely dissociated from social reform and institutional practice, and the activation of differences may not amount to a democratic respect of the right of the “other” to be, but to a conservative plea to place the other, because of

39. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 355-364. Indeed, it is this condemnation of the Terror that leads Hegel “to conceptually legitimize the revolutionizing reality without the Revolution itself,” Habermas, “Hegel’s Critique of the French Revolution,” in *Theory and Practice*, John Viertel, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 123 and ff.

40. J. Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter 1981), 13. In his “Questions and Counter-questions” (forthcoming *Praxis International*) Habermas has modified this charge somewhat, but it strikes me as being quite accurate for at least one possible implication of the postmodernist epistemological positions.

her otherness, outside the pale of our common humanity and mutual responsibility.

The moral debate between Lyotard and the tradition of critical theory concerns the nature of the *minimum cognitive and moral commitments* necessary to keep the fronts clear between a post-Marxist radical, democratic politics and a postmodernist, young conservatism. Critical social theory at the present defines these cognitive and moral criteria as the defense of a communicative, discursive concept of reason; the acceptance that knowledge should serve moral autonomy, and the recognition that intentions of the good life cannot be dissociated from the discursive practice of seeking understanding (*Verständigung*) among equals in a process of communication free from domination. Admittedly, whether a non-foundationalist justification of these commitments, which also avoids the metanarratives which Lyotard so effectively dismantles, is possible, needs to be investigated. This is surely Lyotard's challenge to the program of a critical social theory at the present. Only Lyotard's agonistic theory of language and paralogistic theory of legitimation cannot serve as a basis for a post-Marxian radical, democratic politics. The political alternatives that follow from Lyotard's epistemology are twofold: the first is a vaguely defined neo-liberal pluralism; the second, a contextual pragmatism.

Lyotard ends his essay on the postmodern condition with a plea to "give the public free access to memory and data banks" (67). This is justified on the grounds that it would prevent the total computerization of society, and supply groups "discussing metaprescriptives" with the information they need to make knowledgeable decisions. "Language games would then be games of perfect information at any moment. But they would also be non-zero sum games" (67). Despite Lyotard's caveat that his task is not to supply reality with models but "to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (81), the reader might well want to know who these groups discussing "metaprescriptives" are. Are they social movements, citizens' groups, institutions, interest groups or lobbies? How far would the demand "to give the public free access to memory and data banks" go? Can IBM or any other multinational corporation democratize its trade secrets and technical information? Is the military likely to democratize its procedures of acquiring, processing, and storing information? It is not incumbent upon Lyotard to provide a "blue-print" of the society of the future, but this image of a society with free access to data banks on the part of competing groups whose identity remains unclear, is hardly "the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown." Lyotard ends up with a neo-liberal

interest group pluralism plus the democratization of computers.⁴¹

Surely there is much in the traditional liberal conception of pluralism, tolerance, and the public competition of ideals that would need be incorporated into a post-Marxist radical, democratic politics. Yet the difficulty with political liberalism, old and new, is the neglect of the *structural* sources of inequality, influence, resource, and power among competing groups. In the absence of radical, democratic measures redressing economic, social, and cultural inequalities and forms of subordination, the pluralistic vision of groups Lyotard proposes remains naive. It would fail to redress the plight of those for whom the question of the democratization of information is a luxury, simply because, as marginalized groups in our societies, they fail even to have access to organizational let alone informational resources. At the present, these groups include increasing numbers of women, minorities, foreigners, unemployed youth, and the elderly.

Lyotard's neo-liberal interest group pluralism is naive in yet another way. The assumption that language games would be games of perfect information, suggests that language games do not compete, struggle with, or contradict one another, not in the sense of jousting in a tournament, but in the actual sense of struggling to delegitimize, overpower, and silence the language game of the other. To take a concrete example: surely Lyotard cannot maintain that the current attempt of conservative, pro-life groups to establish a "new reverence for life and creation," to deny the moral legitimacy of abortion, to even ask science to provide exact criteria as to when the fetus becomes a person, are "narratives" in our culture that point to a happy polytheism of language games. The polytheism of language games either assumes that culture and society are harmonious wholes, or that the struggles within them are plays only. But there are times when philosophy cannot afford to be a "gay science," for reality itself becomes deadly serious. To deny that the play of language games may not turn into a matter of life and death, and that the intellectual cannot remain the priest of many gods but must take a stance, is cynical.

The second political gesture which follows from Lyotard's agonistics of language games was described as "contextual-pragmatist." Actually, it is Richard Rorty who articulates this position most clearly. His view, however, is a perfectly logical consequence of Lyotard's claim that "narratives . . . thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they

41. Albrecht Wellmer makes a similar point in his "Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne," forthcoming, *Praxis International*.

do" (23). Rorty agrees with Lyotard that Habermas' difficulty is that "he scratches where it does not itch."⁴² This means that neither our culture nor our societies need justification or criticism, adoration or reprimand. We have to satisfy ourselves with context-immanent criteria that the political practices of Western democracies provide us with.⁴³ Rorty further advocates the development of a "de-theoreticized sense of community," the growth of an "analogue of civil virtue — tolerance, irony, and a willingness to let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their 'common ground,' their unification. . . ."⁴⁴ This admirable demand, to use an expression of another decade, "to let hundred flowers bloom," is motivated by a desire to depoliticize philosophy. "Then one might see," writes Rorty, "the canonical sequence of philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche as a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering which made the North Atlantic culture what it is now, with all its glories and all its dangers."⁴⁵

Perhaps one should admire the honesty of one of the leading philosophers of the Anglo-American culture in this sad avowal of the marginality to which the "glorious North Atlantic culture" reduces philosophical thought. Yet, Rorty's statement is sad in another way. It reveals the internalization by an intellectual of the distrust and disparagement of intellectuals, accompanying the modern temperament from Edmund Burke to Norman Podhoretz. In fact, it reveals the internalization of the charge that were it not for the "Weltschmerz" of a few "pessimistic and too exclusively German individuals"⁴⁶ and those influenced by them, we would not have an adversary culture in this country. Isn't there indeed a curious convergence between postmodernism and "young conservatism"?

Thus, the agonistics of language games leads to its own paralogsms. On the one hand, there is Lyotard's faith in the aesthetic avant-garde intellectuals as messengers of the "sublime," and harbingers of the way to the "unknown"; on the other hand, there is Rorty's advice to abandon the "illusion of the intellectuals as a revolutionary vanguard,"⁴⁷ and to return to a strange synthesis of Deweyian pragmatism and

42. Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," 34.

43. *Ibid.*, 35.

44. *Ibid.*, 38.

45. *Ibid.*, 41.

46. *Ibid.*, 38.

47. *Ibid.*, 35. This is a curious demand, since the whole revival of critical theory in Europe as well as in this country, and certainly a main political impetus behind Habermas' and Wellmer's works, was the abandonment and critique by the Student Movement and of the New Left of the illusion of a revolutionary vanguard. It is as if some

British conservatism.

Hence, the frustrating eclecticism of postmodernism in philosophy and elsewhere. Just as the postmodern architects of the "Chicago Seven" can cite classical, oriental and Renaissance themes and details, all in one breath, in their plans for Chicago town-houses,⁴⁸ contemporary philosophy, dazzled by the dissolution of the episteme of representation, is anxious to cite American pragmatism, French Nietzscheanism, British conservatism, and Heideggerian wisdom all in one breath. It is likely that we will have to live with this polytheism, and dazzling "play of surfaces," as Jameson has named them, for some time to come. Nor is it unwelcome that the frozen fronts of philosophy are becoming so fluid again. Only it is necessary that we think the epistemic alternatives created by the present also to their moral and political ends. For questions of truth, as Lyotard admits and Rorty denies, are still matters of justice as well.

The paradigm shift in contemporary philosophy from consciousness to language, from the denotative to the performative, from the proposition to the speech-act, need not lead to a self-contradictory polytheism and to a vision of politics incapable of justifying its own commitment to justice. This paradigm shift can also lead to an epistemology and politics which recognizes the lack of metanarratives and foundational guarantees, but which nonetheless insists on formulating minimal criteria of validity for our discursive and political practices. The struggle over what lies beyond the classical imperative remains unresolved. In this sense, the definition of postmodernity may be that of a future which we would like to think of as our past.

French and American intellectuals are suffering a lapse of memory in the 1980s, accusing the Student Movement and the New Left of attitudes that they did most to combat.

48. Cf. the works of the Chicago School (Stanley Tigerman, Frederick Read, Peter Pran, Stuart Cohen, Thomas Beeby, Anders Nerheim) exhibited at "Die Revision der Moderne," Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt, Summer 1984.