

# Nietzsche and Psychoanalysis

## The Fate of Authenticity in a Postmodernist World

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In the past decade postmodernism has captured the attention of a generation of artists, intellectuals, and authors to such a degree that the term has even crept into the comparatively sober psychoanalytic literature, the last place one would expect to find it. Yet any marriage between the psychoanalytic treatment perspective, with its painstaking, laborious pace, and postmodernism, with its premium on the arcane and the fashionable, is unlikely, if not altogether illogical. What would a genuine postmodern psychoanalysis entail if indeed such were possible?

In addressing this question I will explore how postmodernism insinuated its way into the contemporary cultural milieu, examine where the basic threads of the postmodernist impulse originate, and assess its impact on the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. I will argue that the postmodern perspective originated with Nietzsche, and that contemporary characterizations of it are comparatively superficial and nihilistic departures from its original inspiration.

### **Nietzsche's Impact on the Postmodern Perspective**

Although postmodernism was only recently introduced into philosophical debate by Jean-Francois Lyotard, it is commonly acknowledged that the concept alludes to a sensibility that has haunted Western culture since the nineteenth-century, beginning with Nietzsche. In fact, many of the tenets that form the corpus of Nietzsche's philosophy are basic elements of the postmodern perspective. Yet, postmodernism is not a philosophical school that one can simply adopt or reject but a movement in culture that, like the object of psychoanalytic inquiry, sneaks upon us unawares, as though we had hardly been conscious of its presence.

Nietzsche was an unusual philosopher in that he didn't write systematic narratives on epistemology or metaphysics, but instead wrote in aphorisms that resemble the pre-Socratic philosophers whom Nietzsche greatly admired. One of the reasons Nietzsche (1967) rejected questions about the nature of truth and reality was because he believed the foundations of philosophy should be overturned in light of his thesis that God is dead, and that we are alone in the universe without an ultimate purpose or reason. Nietzsche's anti-foundationalism is a core of both his

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philosophy and the contemporary postmodern perspective. Nietzsche's (1994) real target in his attack on Christianity, however, was not God but the reliance on any authority that presumes to tell us how we should live our lives. In Nietzsche's estimation, anyone who needs universal values to guide his or her actions is simply being dishonest with himself, or inauthentic. Similarly, Nietzsche rejected the worship of science and progress, which he viewed as palliatives for the masses that serve to keep them in line while saving them the trouble of assuming responsibility for their lives.

Like Montaigne and Schopenhauer before him, Nietzsche was a sceptic and disputed our capacity to know anything except our own experience - and even that is open to doubt! In contrast, most philosophers begin with a core of beliefs that are taken to be self-evidently true, such as the existence of a physical world. Such beliefs may be reasonable, but proving them, as many sceptics have demonstrated, is virtually impossible. The problem with such beliefs, though innocent enough in themselves, is that they lead to other assumptions that are also impossible to prove but are nonetheless employed to "explain" things that we cannot know, such as the purported "contents" of the unconscious. Ironically, Nietzsche is credited as one of the original proponents of the unconscious, but he used it as one of his weapons against science, which Nietzsche accused of pretending to explain everything. This anomaly implies that some conceptions of the unconscious are consistent with scepticism whereas others are unabashedly dogmatic.

A favorite target of Nietzsche's scepticism was the Enlightenment, a cultural era that began towards the end of the seventeenth century. Though there is considerable debate as to what the Enlightenment was and whether we are still living in it, it has had a decisive impact on the role science and politics play in contemporary society. Nietzsche rejected the values of the Enlightenment and Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes who held that our capacity for reason is the basis of what makes us human. Other Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau emphasized the relation between reason and political progress. Like Descartes, Rousseau believed that humans are rational creatures whose capacity for reason makes them autonomous in their decision-making, manifested in the free and informed selection of political candidates in electoral democracies. Other Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant emphasized the relationship between reason and ethics. According to Kant, Enlightenment values gave Europeans an unprecedented degree of self-confidence in their pursuit of scientific, political, and moral progress, all fundamental tenets of the Enlightenment.

If fact, if the Enlightenment can be said to embody one value above

all the others, it is epitomized by the belief in “progress.” This value in particular defines the Modern era, more or less consistent with the Enlightenment. Following Darwin, the belief in progress assumes that all living organisms are in an inexorable process of evolution, though humans, due to their capacity for rationality, are alone able to influence the course that science and society follow. The Enlightenment’s inherent Utopianism derives from the conviction that society will inevitably improve from one generation to the next and that scientific breakthroughs will make our material existence easier and, hence, more rewarding. Nietzsche rejected this assumption and countered that in other respects our lives are actually getting worse, because the more passionate side of our existence obeys neither science or reason and is even suppressed by them, a view that anticipated and arguably influenced Freud’s views about civilization. According to Nietzsche, every human being has to come to terms with the same problems that have beset human existence since the beginning of recorded history: how to be at peace with ourselves, how to live with others, and how to make the most of what life has to offer. In Nietzsche’s opinion, our capacity to reason is not as objectively reliable as Enlightenment philosophers claimed, because humans are driven by passion, the source of which is predominantly unconscious.

Another component of Nietzsche’s scepticism is his historical relativism, which is consistent with his perspectivism. Relativism argues that all so-called truths are relative to a time and place and thus are not eternal or objective, but highly personal and fluid, whereas perspectivism is based on the idea that truth is wedded to the perspective of the person who promotes it. Because everyone’s perspective is different, not merely from one person to another but from one moment or situation to the next, each of us abides by different truths at different times and occasions, so the task of ever knowing ourselves and others is constantly unfolding. Another, more contemporary way of putting this is that reality is what we interpret it to be and that our interpretations are more indebted to our passions than our reasons. Nietzsche’s view that knowledge is culture-bound has also influenced contemporary philosophers of science, such as Thomas Kuhn (1962).

Yet another target of Nietzsche’s assault on the Enlightenment was Descartes’s belief in the “self.” Disturbed by the rising influence of scepticism among thinkers of his generation, Descartes set out to determine at least one irrefutable truth that could resist sceptical doubt, which for Descartes was: I am certain I exist because I am capable of asking myself this very question, thus proving there is a mind that can question its own existence, if only my own. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* led Western culture into a radical egocentricity that instantly transformed the nature of

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every individual's relationship with the world into a "problem" that needed to be solved. His next step was to imbue the self with qualities that define permanent aspects of a given individual's "personality." The Enlightenment definition of selfhood thus became rooted in the myth of a stable core in one's self-identity that defines who each person is. Nietzsche categorically rejected the concept of a stable ego and attributed its existence to nothing more than a trick of language. Because we are accustomed to use the personal pronoun in grammatical forms of address we foster the myth that there is indeed such an entity as an "I" or a "me," what Nietzsche termed linguistic determinism. Just because we can say all sorts of things about ourselves and others grammatically - such as "I am brilliant" or "Harold is an imbecile" - we take these expressions to contain a truth about the person in question that isn't necessarily so. Nietzsche's scepticism helped him to realize that none of us can ever know ourselves or others with much accuracy, let alone certainty. Though we think, for example, that we know people when we love them, our love frequently blinds us to qualities in that person that are available to anyone else, epitomized by Freud's conception of the transference. This is only one example of how transitory and impressionable our belief in our own and the other's self can be.

Perhaps Nietzsche's most radical assault on the Enlightenment was embodied in his moral scepticism. The Enlightenment held that some morals are eternal and consistent with what it means to be civilized, and that because humans are rational they are capable of learning what it means to be moral and, with sufficient effort, to become so. Once God was out of the way Nietzsche was in a position to argue that there is no ultimate foundation for morality and that the only morals that exist are arbitrarily chosen by a given society. History has shown that each era alters its perspective as to what our scruples should be, each assuming its values are more "enlightened" than the last, a view that was zealously embraced by Enlightenment thinkers. This assumption, however, assumes that humans are free to behave in whatever manner the current morality tells them to. Though Nietzsche blamed most of these assumptions on Christianity, it doesn't matter what one's views about religion are for Nietzsche's message to be compelling. Even among those who reject religion there is a tendency to embrace a set of moral principles in dogmatic fashion, then condemn those who opt for a different set of values than their own. Nietzsche observed long before Freud that humans are duplicitous by nature and pretend to live their lives by one set of ideals while surreptitiously embracing another.

Nietzsche proposed to overcome these examples of moral hypocrisy by situating his philosophy in a pre-Socratic ideal that was in opposition to

the subsequent Christian era that has dominated the Western world since the Roman Empire. In Nietzsche's estimation pre-Christian Greeks lived their lives passionately and spontaneously and exemplified a Dionysian spirit that was subsequently suppressed by the weaker, more "democratic" Athenians, the prototypes for Christianity. He concluded that Modern Man is actually afraid of life and protects himself from his fears by overvaluing his Apollonian, rationalistic nature at the expense of his Dionysian spontaneity. While both qualities are aspects of every individual, Nietzsche argued that Western culture has emphasized the Apollonian to its detriment, culminating in what he foresaw as the collapse of Western civilization, though in hindsight we have adapted handily to our moral hypocrisy by concealing our real feelings in neurotic compromise formations.

### **The Basic Elements of the Postmodern Perspective**

So what impact has Nietzsche's philosophy had on postmodernism? Perhaps the principal problem in addressing this question is that nobody knows exactly what postmodernism is. Although there is a tendency among contemporary authors to depict the postmodern perspective as antithetical to modernism, there is little agreement as to what even modernism entails. For some authors it appears to be interchangeable with the Enlightenment, while for others it is a twentieth-century phenomenon that originated with modern art and architecture. It is probably accurate to say that the single thread that ties all the postmodernist thinkers together is their condemnation of the progressive element to the Enlightenment and their sceptical orientation, views that were initiated by Nietzsche.

I will now review those aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy that presaged the postmodernist perspective, and those that diverge from it. These can be listed as:

- a. An *opposition to authority* characterized by an anti-foundational bias.
- b. An inherent *scepticism* that permeates both Nietzsche's philosophy and postmodernism, exemplified by the *rejection of absolute truths* and any viewpoint that verges into *metaphysics*.
- c. A *perspectivist* orientation which holds that truth is wedded to the perspective of the person who promotes it.
- d. A moral and historical *relativism* based on the view that all so-called truths are relative to a time and place and, hence, neither eternal or objective but highly personal and fluid.
- e. A decentering of the *subject* that rejects the conventional notion of

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- the self or ego as autonomous and in possession of its own volition.
- f. An emphasis on *surface* instead of depth, a position which holds that there is no depth to the personality, as such, because we are what we *do*, not what we take ourselves to *be*.
  - g. An *emphasis on language* that permeates all the features of postmodernism listed above, deriving from sceptical doubt as to the accuracy of what language is capable of revealing about ourselves and the world we live in.
  - h. An opposition to *Enlightenment* values epitomized by the “grand narratives” of Utopian thinkers such as Hegel and Marx, and the notion that civilization is in a constant state of “progression” toward an increasingly beneficial future.

Whereas Nietzsche was unequivocal that such progress has an unforeseen corrupting effect on our capacity for authenticity, postmodernists are equivocal about the role of technology and even embrace it as an essential component of the postmodern era, embodied in the cinema, television, media, and computer sciences. But whereas Nietzsche retained a romanticism about the superiority of Greek culture, postmodernists reject romanticism as an artifact of the Enlightenment.

So, was Nietzsche a postmodernist? It is evident from the above that there are important differences between Nietzsche’s philosophy and contemporary postmodernism. Yet all of the principal proponents of postmodernism (e.g., Michel Foucault [1986], Francois Lyotard [1993], Jacques Derrida [1978], and Jean Baudrillard [1983]) have been profoundly influenced by Nietzsche. But Nietzsche also enjoyed an equally profound impact on phenomenology and existentialism, philosophical movements that are in opposition to postmodernism. Perhaps the principal difference between Nietzsche and postmodernist thinkers is Nietzsche’s conception of authenticity, which postmodernists oppose.

## Postmodernism and Authenticity

Although Heidegger was the first philosopher to employ authenticity as a technical term, Nietzsche’s philosophy is the principal source for Heidegger’s conception of it. For Nietzsche, authenticity characterizes the person who is not afraid to face up to the fundamental anxieties of living. Such an individual is embodied in Nietzsche’s notion of the *Übermensch*, usually translated into English as overman or superman, who would appear some day in the future with the ability to accept reality for what it is, unbowed and unafraid. In other words, such a person would permit the more dynamic Dionysian aspect of his being to dominate over his more rationalistic and repressive Apollonian side.

Postmodernists have rejected Nietzsche's ideal as merely the latest edition in a long history of mythic figures (e.g., Marx's proletarian or Sartre's existentialist hero) that fails to take into account the severe limitations that human beings must contend with and ultimately accept. While there is some truth to this assessment of Nietzsche's hero, one would be mistaken to reduce Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to nothing more than an ideal that is out of step with the realities of living. Nietzsche predicted that the dominant Christian and scientific world views would collapse and a new kind of being, the *Übermensch*, would rise from the ashes and transcend the herd mentality that modern civilization had succumbed to. Though Nietzsche is rather vague on details as to how such a society would function, his vision was clearly modeled on the pre-democratic Greece of the pre-Socratics, a dubious political model, at best. The kernel of Nietzsche's basic idea nevertheless gripped the attention of Heidegger and other twentieth-century existentialists who reframed Nietzsche's *Übermensch* into a modified characterization of authenticity.

The principal difference between Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Heidegger's notion of authenticity is that for Heidegger there is no such person who epitomizes the "authentic hero" in juxtaposition to people who are inauthentic. Authenticity is characterized as a specific act or moment in any individual's life where the context in which a situation arises offers an opportunity to behave authentically or not. Heidegger was not talking about an ideal person who would some day emerge to replace the stereotypical contemporary neurotic, but argued instead that *all* human creatures are necessarily inauthentic by their nature, but that they are capable of behaving authentically when they can rise to the occasion. Moreover, every one of us is challenged to do so virtually each moment of our lives, but we are typically too anxious or distracted to bother. So how *do* we manage to act authentically in spite of our condition and, more to the point, what would doing so entail?

In order to understand what authenticity entails it is necessary to know what it means to be inauthentic. A central theme throughout Heidegger's early work is the relationship between the individual and society and how this relationship sets up a tension that the individual never entirely overcomes. This is because humans are existentially isolated from one another and, in their loneliness, crave the comfort of feeling at one with others, not unlike the "oceanic" experience Freud rejected in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). For Heidegger and Nietzsche alike, this sense of belonging is an illusion. We spend all our lives searching for a feeling of communion only to find our reward is always one more step out of reach. This quest is inconsolable, because the only way of momentarily approximating this feeling is by selling out and thus abandoning an

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essential aspect of what we are about: our personal integrity. Hence, one characterization of succumbing to inauthenticity describes the human condition from which we cannot escape, whereas the other version becomes applicable when a person *tries* to escape his isolation by capitulating to social incentives to conform with the status quo. Yet, if we are condemned to *be* inauthentic as a fundamental facet of our existence, how can we also be granted a choice in the matter, to choose *not* to be so on certain occasions?

A good example of the inherent difficulty in recognizing this distinction was Heidegger's own fall into inauthenticity when he joined the National Socialist Party in Germany in the 1930s, when he believed he was giving his soul in service to his country. Because sacrifice is an essential aspect of authenticity, Heidegger foolishly believed he was behaving courageously and resolutely when he abandoned the comfortable role of a sequestered academic for the more political and necessarily precarious role as member of the Nazi Party. Later, Heidegger characterized his disastrous excursion into politics as an example of inauthenticity, an insight that only came to him in hindsight. So why wasn't this apparent to him at the time he committed himself to the Nazi Party instead of later? According to Heidegger, one cannot always tell when one is behaving authentically or inauthentically *in the moment of doing so*. After the fact, Heidegger realized he was mistaken to believe that National Socialism (or for that matter, any political platform) could serve as a vehicle for authenticity. Like so many others, he was caught up in the feeling of being at one with the German people and even saw himself as an instrument of National Socialism's success. Because any act necessarily exists in time, it is necessary to give one's actions the time they require to reveal, in their unfolding, what those actions were about, *in hindsight*, a fundamental tenet of psychoanalytic investigation. Thus Heidegger's conception of authenticity offers little in the way of reassuring, external markers that can discern the motives one is serving at the moment action is taken, because our motives are always, to a significant degree, hidden or, as Freud would say, overdetermined.

Both Nietzsche and Heidegger recognized the terrible sense of anxiety that lies at the bottom of behaving authentically, but Heidegger was more adept at characterizing the precise features of this dread for what it is, the experience of simply being alive. Heidegger realized that because there is no ultimate foundation for our values or our behavior, we can never feel at home in the world. Yet because we are thrown into a world that is not our choosing, it is up to us to determine what meaning our lives will have. The inauthentic individual, like the neurotic, is incapable of accepting the anxiety and hardship that our everyday existence entails.

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Instead, he complains about his lot and the unfairness of the hand that is dealt him. For Nietzsche and Heidegger alike, the ability to accept life on its terms, and suffer the day to day blows that are impossible to avoid or escape, brings with it a reward that only authenticity can offer: The comfort of genuinely *being* oneself by learning to finally accept oneself, warts and all.

Like original sin, we are all inauthentic as a matter of course, but we also aspire to rise above our base motives by resisting the temptation of following the herd. Though Nietzsche was instrumental in our era's recognition of the illusory nature of the self, he argued that *because* the self is impressionable it is imperative to find a way out of our congenital hypocrisy. This task is made difficult because it is impossible to know from one moment to the next what our motivations are, and whose motives we are, in fact, serving. It is easy to see why this conception of authenticity was so troubling to Marxists (e.g., Habermas and Adorno) who scorned the very concept as a dangerous delusion. Consequently, Heidegger's critics argue that authenticity is just one more universal value that Heidegger, despite his rejection of modernity, succumbed to. In fact, Nietzsche's and Heidegger's depiction of authenticity is not a *universal* value, because it has no foundation other than each individual's *conscience*, for better or worse.

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So how does all this pertain to the relationship between postmodernism and psychoanalysis? The conventional perception is that postmodernism has influenced recent trends in psychoanalytic theory and technique, including hermeneutics, social constructivism, the French school, American relational theory, and intersubjectivity, that in turn constitute a paradigm-shift in traditional psychoanalytic thinking. This view is predicated on the assumption that Freudian psychoanalysis is rooted in an outdated, modernist view of the human condition based on a one-person paradigm that is derivative of a Cartesian ego-centrism. Like the postmodern phenomenon itself, the label "postmodernism" has been applied retrospectively to developments in psychoanalytic theory that have been in evidence long before postmodernism emerged as an identifiable theoretical perspective. Generally speaking, any psychoanalyst that can be said to have challenged Freud's sexual model has been enlisted as a representative of a new and postmodernist departure, including the views of such disparate analytic thinkers as Sandor Ferenczi, Melanie Klein, Michael Balint, Ronald Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, Heinrich Racker, and Jacques Lacan. This list of analysts, distinguished for having

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disagreed with Freud on this or that matter, continues to grow in the form of so-called contemporary Kleinians, contemporary representatives of the British Middle School, and contemporary French and South American psychoanalysts. This group has been joined by contemporary American psychoanalysts who are avowedly anti-Freudian and, hence, in opposition to ego psychology.

The relationship between postmodernist thinking and the recent emergence of anti-Freudian theories in American and other cultures is uncertain. Increasingly, proponents of the relational perspective, including but not limited to followers of Bion, have suggested that the “two-person” model is consistent with the postmodern turn in American and European cultures. I will now assess the validity of these claims.

I don't believe anyone would disagree with the observation that Freud was a creature of the nineteenth-century fascination with everything scientific, and that he passionately embraced science and its empirical proclamations. Yet Freud also possessed a sceptical temperament that was continuously at war with his scientific aspirations. Freud's scepticism notwithstanding,<sup>ii</sup> there are five principal features of Freud's basic theory that are antithetical to the Enlightenment's reliance on science and the certitude it aspired to:

- a. Freud's conception of the *unconscious*, which is a concept of mind that contemporary scientists emphatically reject. Although Freud wasn't the first to employ such a concept (Nietzsche had already discussed the notion at length), it was a radical concept when offered and brought considerable abuse against Freud from his medical, scientifically-trained, colleagues.
- b. Freud's adoption of the *interpretative method*, which follows from his conception of the unconscious, that the patient's speech acts are overdetermined and, as with Nietzsche, indicates that language is essentially metaphorical, so the meaning of what individuals say must be interpreted according to the context in which it is offered. Virtually all schools of psychoanalysis retain this model and build on it.
- c. Barratt (1993) and others argue that Freud's novel conception of the *free association method* is antithetical to an empiricist view of data-gathering and presaged a central tenet of the postmodern perspective, that much of our communication with others occurs unconsciously. The so-called revolution in the postmodern critique of language was anticipated by Nietzsche and is also a feature of Heidegger's conception of language, which in turn influenced Lacan and Derrida, as well as the existentialists.

- d. Freud's conception of *neutrality*, a technical principle which continues to be a source of controversy. Contemporary analysts who are identified with the relational perspective (and sympathetic with postmodernism) show a surprising antipathy to this technical principle, due to its alleged authoritarianism. In fact, this is the feature of Freud's treatment philosophy that was intended to *constrain* the analyst's authority, not inflate it. By Freud's definition, neutrality means nothing more than adopting an attitude of sceptic, open-ended inquiry by not imposing one's views on the patient.
- e. The observation that *it is impossible to affect a patient's condition through appeals to rational argument or coercion*, an observation that permeates the entirety of Freud's treatment philosophy. Although Freud began his medical career learning methods that were rooted in nineteenth-century empirical practices, he had the flexibility to profit from his errors and gradually abandoned conventional psychiatric methods in favor of what evolved into psychoanalysis. All five criteria of Freud's theory are, as Barnaby Barratt (1993) observes, postmodern in spirit.

I have enumerated aspects of Freud's basic treatment philosophy that are both consistent with and anticipated elements of postmodernism, but what about those aspects of Freud's treatment model that continue to be rooted in Enlightenment values, as his critics allege? There is little question that while Freud's treatment philosophy was a farsighted and monumentally influential method of relieving human suffering, many of Freud's more fanciful theories were based on little more than his penchant for speculation that were oftentimes offered in a dogmatic fashion, sometimes alienating him from his most passionate disciples. The manner in which he offered interpretations to his patients was also frequently dogmatic and Freud had a tendency to construe any rejection of his interpretations as resistance. Moreover, Freud's initial goal was to "cure" mental illness unequivocally in a manner that is reminiscent of the grand narratives found in Hegel, Marx, Kant, and other Modern philosophers. On the other hand, Freud's theories are not essential to his psychoanalytic method, which generations of innovators have subsequently demonstrated, so why fault him on his theory when one can substitute it with another, without sacrificing the principles on which the method relies? Moreover, Freud was never satisfied with his theories and revised them throughout his lifetime. In this, Freud was a tireless sceptic and toward the end of his life (1937) came to the radical conclusion that a psychoanalytic cure of neurosis or any other form of suffering is impossible, due to the fluid

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nature of the human predicament and our incurable sensitivity to circumstances that invariably disturb our equilibrium.

In fact, the question of theory was not only a problem for Freud but continues to bedevil contemporary psychoanalysts as well.<sup>iii</sup> Were Freud a sceptic through and through he would have recognized that theories are superfluous to the psychoanalytic instrument he fashioned and he would have concluded that knowledge is not the aim of analysis, but peace of mind. Yet, how many contemporary psychoanalysts (even postmodern thinkers) have abandoned theory, even those who claim the search for knowledge is an artifact of the Enlightenment? There continues to be something suspiciously dogmatic about contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing, whose alleged virtue is its “superiority” over Freud’s. But who, in the end, is able to judge whom is right? It would serve the postmodernists well to take a page from the ancient sceptics who recognized that if knowledge is in the eyes of the beholder, then it behooves us to abandon dogmatic claims entirely, including our self-certain condemnation of those with whom we disagree.

Because the language and sensibility of postmodernism are essentially a French phenomenon, it shouldn’t be surprising that of all the psychoanalytic schools in the world, it would appear to have had the most influence on the French, principally Lacanians but spilling over to non-Lacanian analysts as well, such as Kristeva. Notwithstanding the impact of both Nietzsche and Heidegger on Lacan’s perspective, Lacan’s conception of analysis has been championed by many postmodernist thinkers due to Lacan’s theory of the “decentered-subject,” his view that language constitutes subjectivity, and his exciting if excessively complicated critique of the unconscious. While there is much merit in Lacan’s efforts to reframe psychoanalysis from a more philosophical perspective, there are many elements of Lacanian analysis that seem antithetical to the postmodern perspective, including his extreme reliance on theory, his claim to have found the “truth” about psychic processes, and his conviction that *his* psychoanalytic technique is superior to all the other technical principles that preceded it, especially ego psychology! Ultimately, Lacan is a dogmatist where his theories and pronouncements are concerned, a position that is antithetical to the sceptical sensibility that permeates the postmodern attitude, so the equation of Lacanism with postmodernism would appear to be no more consistent than with Freud, as we saw earlier.

Unlike the French, the American analysts most taken with postmodernism tend to emphasize matters of technique over theory. Elliott and Spezzano (1998, p. 73), for example, suggest that the work of Irwin Hoffman is postmodern due to his lack of certainty about what is going on between himself and his patients, in contrast to analysts who are more

invested in pinning down what is supposed to be happening in the analyst's and patient's unconscious. This is a point well taken and consistent with the sceptical outlook in contrast to the dogmatic assertions of previous generations of analysts. Similarly, the work of Schafer is said to be consistent with the postmodern perspective when Schafer questions whether patients should be characterized as "deceiving" themselves simply because the analyst sees things differently. Of course, these features of Hoffman's and Schafer's respective work could just as easily be characterized as existentialist in nature,<sup>iv</sup> so they are neither necessarily nor essentially postmodern.

Whether such views are consistent with postmodernism and how practical they are clinically I cannot say. There is an increasing tendency among analysts identified with contemporary perspectives to characterize the analytic relationship as one between equals, more or less collaborative in spirit, thus minimizing the tension that has traditionally characterized the patient's transference with the analyst. Yet none of these innovations are new, nor are they derived from the postmodern turn in contemporary culture. Matters of technique have been debated since the beginning of psychoanalysis and there is a long history of disagreement between analysts who advocate a more authoritarian posture and those who opt for a "user-friendly" variety. While some analysts believe that technique should follow theory, others argue that practice is a creature of experience, a more sceptical position. I remain doubtful that recent so-called innovations in technique are anything new, whether or not they are consistent with the postmodern perspective. Psychoanalysis is such a flexible instrument that what finally matters is the person who employs it, not which theory or technical regime the analyst is educated to follow.

## **What is the Matter with Postmodernism?**

If there are positive components of postmodernism, what about those aspects of the postmodern turn that are irrelevant or even deleterious to the purposes of psychoanalysis? There is an expanding hegemony in the psychoanalytic world evidenced by a movement toward standardization that parallels similar developments in global commerce, the internet, and the rapid disappearance of smaller, less orthodox psychoanalytic schools and organizations. The so-called global village, a quaint notion when the world was divided between the United States and the Soviet Union, now has the aura of a prison that encroaches on individualism and deviancy, if not eradicating them entirely. The decentering of the subject, while a compelling notion in theory, has fashioned a conception of the world not unlike that of the recent movie, *The Matrix*, where individuals have

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become illusions, controlled by a vast network of computer intelligence in a not-too-distant, post-apocalyptic future run amok.

In similar fashion, psychoanalysis has lost whatever edge it once enjoyed as a subversive element in society. Now it is part of the establishment - a tool of the "mental health professions," whose conception of psychic deviancy is listed in manuals of diagnostic nomenclature that are the bibles of the conventional psychoanalytic practitioner. There is something ominous about recent conceptions of treatment, where mandatory universal licensure is all but inevitable, where any day now confidentiality between patient and analyst will become an artifact of the past, along with other Enlightenment values that are suspect in an era of paranoia and suspicion. What role has the postmodern turn played in these developments? Does it question the efficacy of such values, or does it encourage them?

This is a difficult question to answer, because by rejecting universal values altogether the postmodern wears the mantle of an observer, neither cheering or condemning cultural mores. Perhaps this version of neutrality can be reconciled with a perspective that decries authenticity in principle, but the postmodern abhorrence of authenticity is both surprising and telling - surprising because the authentic individual is not susceptible to the rewards of the people, and telling because it alerts us to the likelihood that, in its alleged rejection of values postmodernism adopts values after all, but in the form of an anti-individualism that is, in equal measure, homicidal and suicidal. With no leg to stand on, even its own, postmodernism as it is currently envisioned appears to define itself as a paradigm of spiritual emptiness, a cul-de-sac that is impervious to either passion or purpose. Having abandoned any vestige of selfhood or history, it depicts a world that is, perhaps contentedly, finally alienated from its own alienation.

A culture that rejects any semblance of authority or tradition cannot help but impact the role that psychoanalysis aspires to. Psychoanalysis has always been the champion, *par excellence*, of the individual, a respite from the forces in every culture that demand obedience to the values adopted *en masse*. In this, psychoanalysis has offered a means to extricate oneself from such values - or at least to hold them in question - and to follow the beat of one's own drum, authenticity in its essence. Will psychoanalysis, like the culture at large, become a vehicle of the postmodern sensibility, or will it remain true to its original purpose, of reconciling the individual to the muse of his own conscience? Only time will tell.

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## Notes

- Earlier versions of this paper were given at Regent's College, School of Psychotherapy, Regent's Park, London, England, October 9, 2003; and the Thirteenth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference of the International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education, Lago Mar Resort and Hotel, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, October 25, 2002.
- ii See Thompson, 2000, for a thorough discussion of Freud's debt to the sceptic tradition.
  - iii See Thompson, 2004, for a more detailed discussion of the phenomenological foundation to Freud's treatment method.
  - iv See Thompson, 1994, for an exhaustive examination of the existential elements of Freud's treatment philosophy.

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