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Postmodernism has evoked great controversy and continues to do so today, especially now that it is disseminating into general discourse. Some see its principles, such as its fundamental resistance to metanarratives, as frighteningly disruptive, but a growing number are reaping the benefits of its innovative perspective. In *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, Stephen K. White outlines a path through the postmodern problematic by distinguishing two distinct ways of thinking about the meaning of responsibility, one prevalent in modern and the other in postmodern perspectives. Using this as a guide, White explores the work of Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Habermas, as well as that of “difference” feminists, with the goal of showing how postmodernism can inform contemporary ethical–political reflection.

Postmodernism’s well-known stances of resistance and impertinence must be supplemented, he argues, by a more affirmative orientation to “otherness,” taking the form of a certain “lightness of care” that emerges from cultivating an ambivalent mood in which grief at the loss of certainties and delight in difference are inseparably intertwined. In his concluding chapter, White examines how this revised postmodern perspective might bear on our thinking about justice.

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and State University*



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To
LYDIA

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PREFACE

The term “postmodernism” is one that elicits both enthusiasm and distrust. The former results from the polysemic implications of being liberated from the dogmas of modernity; the latter from concern about the ways in which postmodern modes of thinking sometimes seem to revel in a refusal to engage problems central to any continuity of modern discourse. This tension is compounded by conceptual complexities surrounding the notion of postmodernity. For example, it seems to stretch in unclear ways, from art, architecture, and literature to philosophy, social theory, and politics; and it is associated with other hotly contested concepts, such as “post-structuralism.” I attempt to chart a course into this field of tension, with the primary intention of illuminating ethical and political questions.

I begin by laying out what, from my perspective, are the essential postmodern issues that contemporary ethical–political reflection needs to address. I refer in the Introduction to a “post-modern problematic,” constituted by four phenomena: growing incredulity toward traditional metanarratives, new awareness of the costs of societal rationalization, the explosion of informational technologies, and the emergence of new social movements. The elucidation of this problematic, however, merely pro-

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vides one with some prominent landmarks. It does not yet tell one how to travel, or, rather, how to think through the problematic. That answer begins to emerge in Chapter 2, where some distinctions are offered that help one understand why a peculiar repetitiveness is evident in the battles that swirl around postmodernism. These distinctions are initially elaborated in the context of specific controversies between some of the main participants in these struggles, especially Jürgen Habermas, on the one hand, and Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard, on the other. In regard to what animates the basic reflections – moral, political, aesthetic – of each side, I distinguish between a sense of “responsibility to act” and a sense of “responsibility to otherness.” Corresponding to this distinction is one relating to language: its “action-coordinating” function and its “world-disclosing” function. Understanding these distinctions, as well as why they are viewed differently by the two sides, is the key to seeing what is at stake in the debates over modernity and postmodernity.

Already at this point, I suspect that a strong defender of postmodernism would be in the throes of Nietzschean laughter. He or she would immediately draw attention to the irony of starting a book about postmodernism with the assertion that everything can be cleared up with the help of a couple of metaphysical–ontological-sounding binary distinctions. However, my use of these two sets of binary distinctions does not imply any strong metaphysical or ontological claims. These distinctions are simply the most basic terms of my scheme for interpreting some of our present dilemmas (“our” refers here primarily to liberal, highly industrialized Western societies). The “validity” of these distinctions is shown only to the degree that they help us address the frustrations and dissatisfactions of modern life, while at the same time doing at least some justice to the traditions and modes of reason that are embedded in that life.

The wrong way to think through the postmodern problematic is to essentialize one side of these distinctions at the expense of the other. And it is just such a strategy that characterizes most positions in the debates over postmodernity. All of my efforts in this book are directed toward finding ways of thinking and acting that keep the two senses of responsibility and the two under-

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standings of language in fruitful tension, allowing neither pair to dictate terms to the other.¹

The sense of responsibility to act and the understanding of language as a medium for the coordination of action are part of the deep structure of modern Western styles of thinking about ethics and politics. The contrasting pair of concepts constitutes a challenge to this orientation. In Chapters 3 and 4, I argue that it is in Martin Heidegger's work that one finds the most perceptive initial statement of this challenge. In elucidating this work's implications, I pay attention not only to the continuities with current postmodern positions but also to discontinuities. In particular, I argue that in Heidegger's later work there are insights about otherness that have not always been adequately remembered by contemporary postmodernists. At the same time, however, Heidegger leaves us with a perspective on politics and ethics that is at best opaque and at worst disastrous. Heidegger's legacy, then, is one of extraordinary insights into the responsibility to otherness, matched by deeply flawed insights into the responsibility to act. Chapter 5 looks more directly at some contemporary postmodern thinkers, concentrating on this question of how their conceptualizations of responding to otherness might reorient ethical–political action. The exploration here leads to the suggestion that the notion of a certain “lightness” of care for others offers some basis for such a reorientation. In Chapter 6, I turn to “difference” feminism's analysis of care and the fostering of otherness for help in correcting and further developing the insights I draw out of Heidegger and the postmoderns.

The speculation about new practical orientations that is begun

¹ There *may be* some overlap between the sort of tension I want to argue for and that proposed by Richard Rorty. Our “final vocabulary,” he writes, should not provide us with a unifying cement but rather should reflect a tension between “one's sense of obligation” in interaction and one's “ways of dealing with finitude.” (The way in which I see finitude being involved in the sense of responsibility toward otherness becomes clear in Chapter 4.) Rorty's thinking about this distinction is quite interesting, but the way it is related to ethical–political issues is unenlightening. All these issues are laid to rest by simply mapping the distinction onto another, naively deployed distinction between the public and private spheres. Our bifurcated vocabulary then fits unproblematically into two airtight boxes. This arrangement yields no difficult questions for public life; and it is precisely such questions that I want to explore. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially pp. 68–9.

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in Chapters 5 and 6 becomes more focused in Chapter 7. At issue there is a reconceptualization of justice. The underlying intention is to illustrate the kinds of guidelines one must use in rethinking basic concepts in light of the postmodern problematic. To the degree that my analysis of justice is plausible, others should be encouraged to undertake similar efforts with regard to other concepts.

A few words are in order about what this book is not. It is not intended to be a survey of all the themes that have emerged in discussions about postmodernism. That would require a big book; this is a small one with a specific thesis. Nor does it cover all the philosophers and social theorists who are associated with postmodernism. The omission of thinkers like Jean Baudrillard, however, is not meant to imply that their thought has nothing to say to us about cultural, social, or political analysis.² It is a result simply of my judgment that they do not wrestle in quite as sustained a fashion with the ethical–political themes highlighted in these pages as do Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard. Finally, this is not a book that will flesh out an elaborate picture of what a politics more sensitive to postmodern concerns might look like. Although I do speculate about this in the last chapter, my primary task is to make the case for a partial displacement of the ways we traditionally come at ethical–political reflection. If this effort is successful, the next step is to look more concretely at what this different perspective might imply in terms of altering the shape of specific political processes and institutions.

² Some of the implications of Baudrillard's work are explored in Timothy W. Luke, *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination and Resistance in Informational Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), and Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

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In the spring of 1989, the Humboldt Foundation was generous enough to invite me back to Germany, to a conference on Heidegger in Bonn. The paper presented there helped me formulate some of the ideas in Chapters 3 and 4. Near the completion of the manuscript in spring 1990, I presented a paper on “The Critical Theory/Postmodernism Controversy” to the inter-

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disciplinary graduate program in Methodologies for the Study of Western History and Culture at Trent University. This was most helpful in the final refinement of my overall perspective, and I thank Douglas Torgerson and Robert Carter for that opportunity.

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