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Book Review: Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives On Science, Religion, And Ethics

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explanatory power is greater than that of atheism. But as John Hick has highlighted in his work, religious experience is itself something that both the religious believer and atheist must explain. Another possibility is that the author decided not to address both religious experience and the evidential problem because of his desire to produce a book suitable also for a metaphysics course. (See my comments below on the book's suitability as a text.)

2. See e.g., R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Ian T. Ramsey (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 53-73; and possibly D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

3. Such a view is parallel to the meta-ethical error theory of J. L. Mackie. See *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 35.

4. I am not here assuming that the notion of a spiritual goal or truth need necessarily be tied to belief in a transcendent God. However, it does seem plausible to me that a genuine distinction between what is spiritual vs. moral or psychological presupposes metaphysical claims of some kind.

Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics by **Nancey Murphy**. Westview Press, 1977. Pp. xxi, 228.

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According to this brilliant book, "our Western conceptual scheme, at its most basic level, is in the process of change," change so "drastic" that the "radical discontinuity" between ourselves and our most recent predecessors is as great as that "between Descartes and his Jesuit teachers" (pp. 1-2). What makes the argument so bold and challenging is that Murphy locates this sea change, not in the French, poststructuralist philosophies of flux and transgression but in an Anglo-American scene in which Austin, Quine, and Kuhn rather than Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard represent philosophy's answer to the three tenors.

More specifically, Murphy locates the change as occurring in epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics; and, since the three themes or strategies being overthrown and replaced can well be taken as utterly basic to philosophical modernity, she appropriates the rubric 'postmodernism' from the French as the most informative name for the intellectual revolution she explores.

In epistemology, modernism is characterized by foundationalism. Murphy does not distinguish between 1) the weak foundationalism that merely claims that while some of our beliefs rest on other beliefs, other, basic beliefs do not and 2) the strong foundationalism that permits as properly basic only those beliefs which, by virtue of the certainty pertaining to them, can provide a *fundamentum inconcussum* for the edifice of knowledge. Most of the time when people talk about the collapse of foundationalism it is strong foundationalism that they have in mind; and many, if not most, of the arguments against the certainty claims of strong foundationalism take the form of attacks on the weak foundationalism it presupposes. Murphy's argument follows this pattern.

In philosophy of language, modernity is characterized by a representational or referential view according to which the primary task of language is to describe facts, to mirror the world. And in metaphysics, modernity is characterized by an atomistic individualism that goes hand in glove with a reductionism in which complex wholes are nothing but a function of the parts which make them up.

Much of the time Murphy talks as if holism is the postmodern response to the metaphysical atomism that makes reductionism look plausible in philosophy of science and social theory, but a closer look at her argument makes it clear that Anglo-American postmodernism is a series of holistic responses to the theses of modernity. In epistemology, foundationalism (both weak and strong) collapses when we take seriously such phenomena as the theory-ladenness of the facts that are supposed to confirm the theories. The web (Quine) and the paradigm or research program (Kuhn) replace the atomistic image of knowledge as a building.

In philosophy of language, Austinian-Wittgensteinian speech act theory calls our attention to the fact that describing or asserting facts is only one use to which language is put and that meaning, accordingly, is a function of usage rather than of reference. Since these usages are embedded in social practices that make up language games or even forms of life, the meanings of individual statements are a function of the contexts in which they occur and are related to them very much as facts are related to theories - in a word, holistically.

Finally, in metaphysics, supervenience theory leads the way in showing that entities composed of, say, physical parts can have, say, biological properties that are not explainable from those parts. Here once again, context is causally significant. Holism signifies the reciprocal interaction of part (physical particle, statement, fact, person) and whole (field, language game, theory, society), of lower level and higher level. There is top down causality as well as bottom up.

Chapter 1 sketches these changes. The next three chapters explore the philosophy of science in these terms. After briefly suggesting that holism undermines scientific realism, Murphy turns her attention to the specter of relativism raised by Quinean/Kuhnian holism and develops a sophisticated theory of justification drawing on Lakatos, Meyering, and MacIntyre. Its goal is to escape the dilemma of rationalism/skepticism by providing criteria for a "limited relativity or proliferation" (p. 65) of theories or research programs.

Chapters 5 through 7 turn from science to theology. Murphy argues that the split in Protestantism between liberalism and fundamentalism is to be understood in terms of the philosophical modernity they shared. Thus, for example, it is foundationalist assumptions that lead to the attempts to make inerrant scripture or religious experience the basis of theology. Turning to postmodern resources for theology, Murphy sketches possibilities for a post-conservative theology by analogy with the postliberal theology associated with Lindbeck and the Yale school. The extrapolation of MacIntyre's theory of justification from science to theology plays a key role here and is an important preparation for the later claim that theology and ethics be included among the sciences.

Postconservative theology will appeal to biblical authority, and here the relativism that threatens concerns interpretation. Once again relativism is

not to be abolished but controlled so that we have “(relatively) stable linguistic conventions, (approximate) fulfillment of a variety of relevant historical conditions, and close (enough) correspondence between what the authors intended to say and what they actually said” (p. 145).

The final three chapters might be thought of as applications. Chapter 8 argues that in the light of postmodern philosophy of science, religious experience can have evidential value for theological claims. Chapter 9 argues that the social sciences have value presuppositions, that they require ethics as a higher science to adjudicate those issues, and that ethics in turn requires theology as a higher science to adjudicate its disputes. The final chapter is devoted to an analysis of supervenience and the non-reducibility of ethics to biology.

Drawing creatively on a wide variety of literatures, Murphy offers many challenging claims deserving careful examination and wide discussion. But the reader should not look for help in grasping the relation between Anglo-American and French postmodernism. Here Murphy’s massive erudition fails her. Too dependent on secondary sources, she too readily passes on such popular but insupportable claims as that deconstruction refutes itself (p. 60), denies reference (p. 136, 140-41), and argues for a “total indeterminacy” of meaning (p. 141). The latter would be the case, of course, if the only alternative to total determinacy were total indeterminacy, but that is just the kind of modernist thinking Murphy herself repudiates in favor of meaning that is “(relatively) stable”. So on her own account it simply doesn’t follow from French arguments against total determinacy that the authors espouse total indeterminacy.

A more helpful treatment would have asked: why is Anglo-American postmodernism so preoccupied with the question of justification and its criteria while French postmodernism is not? No one, I think, can challenge that fact. But how to explain it? Perhaps the solution is to be found in that heritage of modernity that is most important to each side to preserve in some postmodern form. Modern philosophy was about justification in large measure because it was about critique. Anglo-American postmodernity asks the question: how is justification possible after foundationalism? French postmodernism asks the question: how is critique possible after foundationalism?

Critique and justification were essentially inseparable in modernity. Perhaps they should be for postmodernity as well. Perhaps we should not think with Murphy of Anglo-American postmodernity as a safer alternative to the French versions but, to use one of her own phrases, seek “an integrating model” (p. 81) in which the two are, well, integrated.

Rush Rhees: On Religion and Philosophy, edited by **D.Z. Phillips**. Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xxii and 389. Cloth \$69.95

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Rush Rhees is best known not because of his philosophical writings, but because of his philosophical connexions. A student and friend of Wittgenstein (later one of his literary executors), he became the teacher