

Modernity and the Postmodern Revolution

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Modernity: The Tyranny of Objectivity

Postmodern prelude: seeing is believing. Both the Eastern and Western intellectual traditions have largely failed to understand that there are realms of knowledge and meaning that lie prior to the natural limit of human reason and belief. The exoteric conceptual semantic topology of language with its intersubjective, deep background cultural assumptions, embedded as they are in our habitual, preconscious conceptual and belief systems reify what we perceive and know. The great truth of Postmodernity is that our realities arise not pre-given but as intersubjective cultural webs of experience. Can we step outside this cultural “web of belief?” Yes, with a little practice, through esoteric and nondual “vertical spiritually empirical” (yogic) contemplative technologies of the noetic “new science of consciousness,” as we shall see. Now there is a cognitive precursor to this noetic process that cuts through our attachment and defences of our unexamined beliefs that so limit our psychospiritual creativity and growth. It is “*shoshin*,” the beginner’s mind wherein we “bracket” (*epoche*) or place in abeyance these concepts and beliefs so as to be open to receive new truths prior to filtering them through the fearful defensive reticulum of our present “web of belief.” This may be done—with practice—almost moment to moment and bestows a great freedom *from* the limits of belief that is also a freedom *to* grow intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Things appear in the world not as they actually are, but as we are at the moment of their arising. Einstein to Heisenberg: “What we see depends on the theories we use to interpret our observations.” Theory (concept and belief) defines and determines what we observe. Our semiotic conceptual structures do not directly correspond to any external, independent reality. The cognitive sciences, consciousness studies and philosophy of mind agree: “Perception is...an instrument of the world as we have structured it by our expectancies” (J. Brunier 1986). “...The appropriate description for a given input is highly dependent on the way the perceiver chooses to process it...” (J.M. Wilding 1982). *Thus, our conscious experience is dictated in large part by our “cognitive unconscious,” that is, our preconscious, intersubjective deep cultural background concepts, beliefs and expectations. We think and believe what we are culturally conditioned to think and believe.* Our knowledge is perspectival. Empirical observation statements are theory-dependent. “All raw data are theory-laden” (Quine), that is, theories are underdetermined by their actual evidential data. A theory-laden statement is meaningful only in the context of its theoretical presuppositions. If our statements are mostly theory-laden, then the “myth of the given”—that immediate sense experience gives us an empirical certainty that can provide a foundation for science—is false. Our observation, perception, conception and belief are infected with the unconscious deep subjective cognitive baggage of the “metalanguage” conceptual belief matrix of the cultural tradition in which we are embedded. As the greatest American philosopher C.S. Peirce observed, “perception is semiotic.” Perceptual experience is not real, not simply pre-given, but constructed and constituted by our intersubjective cognitive unconscious cultural background. Objective perception is an interpretation, a perspective. Just so, as Ken Wilber and

Keith Dowman have pointed out, the “truths” and the meaning of meditative and contemplative subjective experience are not directly given but are also semiotic elaborations of the deep background cultural packaging of the yogin’s subjective realities. Gradualist meditation is semiotic and dualistic. It is oriented toward a future goal. And that’s OK. If perception and conception are perspectival, then in the West this preconscious mindset is Modernist Realism/Materialism. In the East it is Premodern Buddhist and Hindu Subjective Idealism.

Well, how do we derive this semantic meaning from the mere logical syntax (brain or computer) of our languages? We can’t explain how, but the human brain does it all the time. Can a machine ever do it? Penrose and Searle say no (Searle 1997, Penrose 1994). Strong AI (artificial intelligence) and Turing says yes. More on this below.

It has now become very difficult to argue that we can know the world, as it appears to our senses, objectively. The perceiving, conceptualizing knowing subject is always part of the knowledge equation. It seems that perhaps the knowing subject and the separate object is a nondual (*advaya*/not two) ontological unity after all.

The very notion of unmediated observation now seems highly questionable. In light of such discoveries, the phrase ‘seeing is believing’ takes on new meaning: the very act of observation already entails a belief system that is not based simply on some hypothetical bare data. All of our observations are theory laden, and none correspond in any straight-forward way to objective objects existing in their own right independent of our experience.

—B. Alan Wallace (1996)

The post-Kantian Modern epistemological turn to the *individual* subject has now turned to Postmodern collective/*cultural* intersubjectivity. This advent of a new awareness of the inherent constitutive deep cultural intersubjectivity of our cognitive life is the good news of the Postmodern reformation. Alas, it’s a mixed bag, as we shall see.

Modernity: *Novum Organon*, a new method. “All that can be shaken shall be shaken” (Dōgen). The Brave New World that is the Modernist conceptual and intellectual revolution came to valorize our reason and rationality over the presumptive authority of the past, namely, the Premodern Greek Classical Tradition and the Christian Age of Faith. The prevailing Aristotelian Scholasticism—that cognitively comforting synthesis of Aristotle’s realist metaphysics with Christian theology (the *Disputatio*)—was supplanted by the new scientific method (Baconian/Newtonian induction replaces Cartesian deduction) in the most profound cognitive revolution in human history. This consciousness milestone became the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment and cultural and scientific revolution of Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Newton and Locke, and the very foundation of Modernity and the Modern worldview.

This objectivist, materialist ideology has become the common belief system, the “*langue*” or “background theory” of the Western physicalist materialist paradigm (epistemological Realism, the “myth of the given,” scientific imperialism/Scientism) and thereby the prevailing

ideology of the Western mind. This cast of mind is descended from the unproven and unprovable metaphysical assumption of Monistic Physicalism (Materialism), the ontology that the whole of reality is merely and only physical. Why must our ontology of nature be physicalist? Where's the proof? Isn't Physicalism merely a belief, a metaphysical presumption and habit of mind? This monolithic Western epistemic paradigm—our culture *imaginaire*—whose roots we find in the dualistic physicalist/realist ontology of pre-Socratic atomists, Aristotle, the Modernist mechanics of Descartes, Copernicus, Galileo and Newton (not to mention Buddhist *Abidharma* and Dualist *Vedanta*), assumes the existence of an objective, separate, independently existing reality (Scientific Realism), a “real world out there” (RWOT) of separate, independently existing exclusively physical objects (materialism/objectivism) given to sense perception—Wilfrid Sellars “myth of the given” —through the medium of “sense data” (*hyle*), independent, distinct and separate from the consciousness of perceiving, knowing subjects. Again, this myth presumes that mere sense experience may serve as a realist epistemological foundation for objectively certain deductive knowledge. Philosophers call this Foundational Realism. This is “Descartes’ dream” that has become the infernal Cartesian “quest for certainty” and necessity—that epistemic illusion of Modernity that resulted in a negative reactive Postmodern skepticism and nihilism. The myth of the given is the antithesis of Postmodern cultural intersubjectivity.

Most philosophers of science, mind and religion have rejected the myth of the given, at least ostensibly, but seem to miss the Postmodern truth that our deep cultural background preconscious intersubjective “web of belief” is profoundly constitutive of our ontic pretensions as to the nature of reality and the mind that would perceive, conceive and know it. Thus is Scientific Realism/Materialism the widely held “cognitive unconscious” or preconscious belief system of the Naïve Realism of most physical and social scientists, academicians and the exoterically oriented massmind of the Western multitudes. Such narrowly representational cognition can be destructively dualistic—even for the thinking classes—for it inserts a sensory medium (Rorty’s “mirror of nature”) between appearance and reality that essentially splits the knowing, perceiving subject from the object known thereby undermining subjective, introspective exoteric and esoteric noetic knowledge and spirituality, the very path to the realization of the higher truth of the symbiosis, and yes, the prior unity of knowing subject and the object known, of objective matter and subjective mind/spirit. This inherent nondual prior primordial unity of our perennial Great Wisdom Tradition is reduced by physicalist Scientific Materialism (Scientism) to mere external physical matter (Scientific Reductionism). The vast multidimensional Pythagorean *Kosmos* is reduced to the merely physical cosmos of Modern physics. “And thus has philosophy been ruined” (Whitehead).

In any case, reality is not simply pregiven. Rather, it is constituted by our sociocultural perspectival “web of belief” (Quine), or “form of life” (Wittgenstein), or “lifeworld” (Habermas), as we have seen. Is this myth a big deal? Yes and no. From the view of Relative Truth (*samvrti satya*) it is a cause of the ignorance (*avidya*) that results in suffering. From the view of Ultimate Truth (*paramartha satya*) our liberation from ignorance “is already accomplished” deep within us, at the heart of each human being. “No problem at all.” How do we awaken to this “always already” present presence of love and wisdom? Well yes, it takes a little gradualist practice. Moreover, as the ostensibly logocentric absolute realities—Brahman,

Tao, emptiness, Dharmakaya—of our Primordial Wisdom Tradition are “given” to a yogin in the spacetime dimension of Relative Truth, these realities are viewed to be intrinsically absent any essential or inherent given existence. They are not posited by the traditions, particularly Buddhist *Madhyamaka*, as metaphysical ontic entities ultimately, but merely relative-conventionally. And these are the Two Truths: Ultimate Truth, the perfectly subjective nondual Reality, and then its conceptual unpacking in the intersubjective, perspectival, conventional spacetime dimension of Relative Truth.

As to the religious consciousness, Scientism has reduced the seed of truth in religion—subjective indwelling spirit/spirituality—that is our inherent unity with godhead, to a merely conceptual objective attempt to possess God; to objectify, anthropomorphize and thereby idolize and own the perfect subjectivity of a transconceptual, non-theistic, non-spiritual, nondual godhead, the very sourceground (*cittadhatu, shunyata, Tao*) in which or in whom we and everything else arises. How do we possess or grasp *That*? We may as well try to catch the wind (*prana*). O hubris—that this prideful concept-bound ego of Narcissus would pretend to grasp all things in heaven and earth, and the very mind of God. Surely our minds are made for more than this. And this is one important difference between *separative* exoteric *Religion*—whether revealed/transcendental/supernatural, or natural/rational—and *unifying*, esoteric *Spirituality*, the non-conceptual direct and contemplative experience of our primordial source condition, nondual Spirit Itself, beyond mere concept and belief.

The great exceptions to this Modernist materialist metaphysics that became the Western Mind are Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, the non-dualistic Christian Gnostics Theodius (disciple of Paul) and his great disciple, poet master Valentinus. Indeed, Plotinus is a bridge between Western and Eastern spirituality and was the founder of the 3rd century Nondual Revolution in the West. Nagarjuna was his 2nd century counterpart in the East. These scholar-masters realized and transmitted our nondual, naked intrinsic Primordial Awareness Wisdom (*gnosis, jnana, yeshe*), and rejected Greek foundational (necessary, certain) Realism and Materialism while acknowledging a transpersonal, transconceptual, rationally ineffable but not contemplatively ineffable *ultimate* basis or sourceground of *relative* conventional interdependently arising (*bathos/pratitya samutpada*) non-reducible dimensional orders (our Great Tradition’s “Two Truths”): physical/chemical, biological, mental/emotional, and tacitly, sociocultural and historical.

Was the Modernist flight from Premodern spirituality an error? Given the wonders of modern science and modern liberal democracy, yet, is there a price paid for the hegemony of monistic Scientific Materialism and modern “natural” monotheism? Can nondual Spirit Itself be reduced to its arising merely physical and mental phenomena as described by the modern sciences of physics, biology and psychology? But first a look at the Postmodern reaction to Modernity’s cultish quest for absolute objective certainty with its destructive “taboo of subjectivity.”

The Postmodern Reformation

The Modernity of the 17th/18th century European Enlightenment was an ideological flight to reason and rationality from the tradition and authority of the Premodern Classical Tradition, and from the presumptive dogmatic authority of both the early Platonized Christian Church, and 16th century Aristotelianized Christian authority. The Enlightenment's valorization and idealization of human reason and rationality over against Premodern tradition and authority is the very heart of Modernity; that is until Modernity recognizes that it has itself become a tradition and an authority. It is here that Modernity becomes Postmodern. Modernity valorizes not only reason and science, but secularism and individualism, all double edged swords, to be sure. The good news: Modernity gave us Newton, Hume, Kant, Mozart, the computer, Western liberal democracy, that is, a moral and economic strategy as to what to do without God. The themes of Postmodernity are difference and diversity, perspectivism and pluralism. This emphasis serves as an antidote to any retro-romantic propensity to coerce the views of the world's Premodern traditions into an idealized, unified perfect world harmony. The basal primordial unity lies ontically prior to the necessary and beautiful diversity of the world of form. Our Premodern and Modern (if not Postmodern) traditions exhibit vital relative-conventional diversity, as well as an ultimate unity.

The hermeneutics of suspicion. Postmodernity then, is antimodernist, a relativist, skeptical reaction to both Premodern tradition and authority and to the Modernist tyranny of reason and objectivity. Postmodernity rejects the European Modernist ideals of reason and epistemic and social progress objectively founded in a unified system of Scientific Realism. The Postmodern Western mind rejected this idealized Modernist Materialist ontology with its requisite radical Cartesian grail "quest for certainty," replacing it with a subjectivist, antinomian, radically perspectivist Nietzschean skepticism; a pathologically pluralistic, individualistic and relativistic "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Paul Ricoeur's term) toward holistic metanarratives, toward holarchy, toward Platonist and Neoplatonist (Plotinus, Proclus, Origen) and Platonist Christian (Augustine) transcendence and unity, hierarchy, exoteric religion, and esoteric spirituality. The "masters of suspicion" were Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, and in theology, Karl Barth. Paul Ricoeur (1978) suggests that such a hermeneutics may liberate us ("liberation theology") from the logocentric false idol that is the transcendent Creator God of Western monotheism, thereby opening a way to the divine that abides not in exoteric religion, but esoterically within each human being, then spontaneously expresses as compassionate conduct in individuals, and through that, collective institutions.

Regarding this Postmodern project, we must here remember the dialectic, that the dogmatic, programmatic rejection of all metanarratives is itself a metanarrative that may not survive its own logical deconstruction. Modernist thesis begets Postmodern antithesis which begets a higher noetic synthesis. In any case, that is our thesis here.

Thus, for the postmodern mind, perceptual and conceptual experience is relativistic and perspectival. Nietzsche's radical and refreshing perspectivism asserts that the pragmatic truths of reality emerge only through many different perspectives. (We can wish that his Wagnerian anti-Semitic perspectives had been refreshingly absent.) That there is some transcendental "truth," a metaphysical, singular "transcendental signified" (Derrida) ultimate reality prior to the exoteric world of appearances is denied. Derrida's belabored emphasis on diversity and difference

(*Differance*) over Modernist unity is a primary theme of the Postmodern reformation. Indeed, such radical perspectivism is Nietzsche's excuse for the denial of objective knowledge altogether. Objectivity is but a pretense for power and Western imperialism, the last bastion of white male supremacy. But throughout these various and diverse Postmodern polemics the primacy of human authenticity and freedom is always present.

The odious squabbling in traditional epistemology and metaphysics—the “tough minded” skeptical empiricist/positivist tradition vs. the “tender minded” optimistic idealist tradition is, for Nietzsche but prodigal intellectual folly. “There are no facts, only interpretations.” There can be no metaphysically privileged perspective, no “view from nowhere” (Thomas Nagel), free of our preconscious perspectives and the intersubjective deep background assumptions of our cultural “web of belief.” And this great truth of intersubjectivity—that we possess little conscious awareness of the causes of our conceptual and belief systems—is the essential gift of the Postmodern legacy to the emerging noetic mind of humanity. Unfortunately for the Postmodern mind any transconceptual, transmateral, even esoteric reality is absent. Alas, this excludes and precludes the Premodern compassionate primordial awareness wisdom (gnosis, *jnana*), the wisdom of emptiness (*shunyata*) that transcends yet embraces our conceptual interpretations, perspectives, cultural assumptions and beliefs. For Nietzsche, “God is dead.” From the Postmodern perspective then, all our absolutes—our logocentric absolutes—are dead. What is the result? It's more Postmodern bad news. Has not this Postmodern nihilism thrown out the hopeful baby of luminous transrational post-theistic nondual godhead with the dogmatic bathwater of a Modern absolutist theistic God? And is this not a spanner in the works of a fruitful *rapprochement* of the two ostensibly incommensurable paradigms that are Modern Science and a new noetic Spirituality? To accomplish this reunion we must relax the aggressive Postmodern nihilistic reactionary mind-set and grow beyond the cognitive limits of both the objectivist absolutist Modern and the subjectivist nihilist Postmodern perspectives and beliefs into a new integral noetic view and practice that is beyond belief. As Ken Wilber has said, “We must preserve the progress of Modernity, while transcending its disaster.”

For the Postmodern mind then, Modernist unity, reason and the Modern foundational realist philosophy of the subject/self—along with the naturalized theistic “God of the philosophers”—is replaced by relativistic otherness/difference/*differance*/diversity—and a dead God. John Dewey on the cult of nihilism that is the Postmodern mind: “The despair of any integrated outlook and attitude is the chief intellectual characteristic of the present age.” The Postmodern mind will not transcend its signs, its meta-language to any subtler or deeper, even noetic (matter/mind/spirit) meaning or reality.

The nihilistic antirealist ideologues of this poststructural, Postmodern outlook, besides Nietzsche, include the new skeptics, namely the radical Deconstructionists (Poststructuralists) Derrida and Foucault, the mature pragmatic Wittgenstein and mature (Nazi) Heidegger, the Pragmatists C.S. Peirce, and the antirealist Neopragmatists W.V. Quine, Jergen Habermas and Richard Rorty. The presumptive dissonant and aggressive rhetoric of Derrida and Foucault represent the Postmodern incarnation of a long, seeming endless parade of naïve, destructive radical nihilist Gorgian/Pyrrhonic skepticism.

These important Postmodern neo-pragmatist philosophers correctly rejected the 400 year hegemony of the modernist Western “final vocabulary” (Rorty) that is “Foundationalist” (indubitably certain) epistemic Realism and Scientific Realism, with its dogmatic quest for

absolute deductive objective certainty, demonstrating that science, the very paradigm of reason and rationality has an intersubjective, theory-laden, metaphysical, dogmatic, non-rational cultural core that it cannot escape. And this is the urgent legacy of the Postmodern view that must not be forgotten.

These neopragmatists offered a practical, social action based “radically empirical” (James), naturalistic countervoice to centuries of invidious epistemological and metaphysical paradigmatic bickering (realist vs. idealist and rationalist vs. empiricist) among the logocentric foundational ideologies of the Premodern and Modern epistemic Western Canon. Dewey’s pragmatic historico-sociological approach in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, and Rorty’s neopragmatic *Consequences of Pragmatism* offer methods useful to the emerging *rapprochement* between the ostensibly incommensurable paradigms of Science and Spirituality.

A noetic doublet. Yet, even these Postmodern ideologues, the discontents of the modernist, structuralist, materialist rationality of the Enlightenment Project seem unable to move beyond the conceptual limits of habitual discursive reason toward the emerging integral noetic (mind/spirit) paradigm that synthesizes, then utilizes *both* of the defining qualities of human being in form, namely, dualistic “inferential valid cognition” (reason/*kalpana*), and dualistic, gradualist yogic “direct perception” (*pratyaksa, kensho/satori, samadhi*) that is the direct knowing wisdom (*vidya*) that may result in a nondual realization of ultimate Spirit Itself. In brief, these two defining qualities are exoteric quantitative objective reflexive conceptual rationality of the philosophers and scientists, and the esoteric qualitative intuitive and introspective subjective spirituality of the yogis. Exoteric reasoning with its valid conceptual cognition offer a guiding light to esoteric spirituality. We need both. Just so in research. A robust integral noetic science of matter, mind and spirit must utilize this phenomenological noetic doublet of science’s exoteric second and third person objective, exterior/surface methodology, and “empirically spiritual” esoteric introspective first person subjective, interior/depth methodology. Our continued development through the ascending life stages of the psychospiritual evolution of our species requires both of these methodologies. And this requires a relaxing of the Modernist and Postmodernist cognitive artifacts—absolutism and nihilism—to which we have become much attached.

Thus, the emerging integral Noetic Revolution transcends, embraces and reconstructs the nihilistic exoteric pathological pluralism of the Postmodern outlook, and the absolutism of the modernist view, then restores the creative subjectivity of our esoteric and nondual Great Wisdom Tradition. An integral noetic view and method integrates both the surface pragmatic and the deep truths of our Primordial Wisdom legacy through its Premodern, Modern and Postmodern currents.

The provident fruition of an integral noetic science of mind or consciousness (*adhyatma-vidya*) is the reconstruction and transformation of the despair of the relational trauma and conflict inherent in the narcissistic personal and social politics—commodification and consumerism—of dualistic “normal neurotic” (Freud) perception, toward our Great Wisdom Tradition’s liberating compassionate *poesis* and *praxis* as this all unfolds in Toynbee’s “rising culture” that is our new Noetic Revolution.

Let us now turn to the epistemological and ontological holism that emerged at mid-20th century, and serves as a bridge of understanding to the noetic integration of the perennial “Two Truths,” these two paradigms, that are Science and Spirit.