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But language is a treacherous thing, a most unsure vehicle, and it can seldom arrange descriptive words in such a way that they will not inflate the facts—by help of the reader's imagination, which is always ready to take a hand and work for nothing, and do the bulk of it at that.

—Mark Twain



WAYS OUT OF THE POSTMODERN DISCOURSE

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DURING MY RECENT WORK on Russian colonialism and its consequences, I could not but immerse myself in postmodern discourse. This discourse has irregular boundaries, somewhat like a melanoma spot on the skin: it reaches toward, and identifies itself with, feminism and women's studies; it allies itself with Michel Foucault's vision of history; it lays claim to non-Western writings; and it rejects not only Aristotle but also, and primarily (for Aristotle had been rejected earlier) Descartes and the Enlightenment. In short, it rejects all forms of essentialism, or logocentrism, whether grounded in God-created reality or in qualities of the human mind. It also discovers new territory: that of women's history and of white ethnic history, that of the bedroom and of the servants' room. It discovers marginalized literatures and other marginalized writings. While the founder of postcolonial discourse was not entirely consistent in finagling his way through the encounters with essentialism, [1] his followers have by and large eschewed it like the plague. A feature that distinguishes postmodern discourse from modernity and pre-modernity is the insistence on a discourse-without-presence, to use Jacques Derrida's expression. [2] In that regard, the trajectory from Nietzsche to Derrida has been clear and consistent.

Postcolonial discourse is usually classified together with the post-modern, and indeed it probably would not have developed were it not for the "school of suspicion" out of which postmodernism sprang. The states and empires engaged in colonialism caused much damage to the colonized, especially when, as was the case with Russia, they expanded militarily into areas whose social organization and civilizational advancement were superior to those of the colonizer. Thus the attempts to study Russia and its colonies have to be laced with suspicion toward official Russian history. I was partly motivated by a sympathy toward the voiceless peoples whose history has been obliterated by the victorious imperial voices, and whose economy and culture were appropriated by the Russian conqueror in ways that, even among the misdeeds of other colonial empires, appear to be particularly heinous. In that regard, Foucault's notion of the archeology of history was particularly appealing: it was the suppressed part of history that I wanted to revive, uphold, and make present.

But here is the rub: these were essentialist concerns. Any kind of sympathy for the weak and the defeated is essentialist in nature, for it is grounded in a hierarchy of values and goes against the Darwinian thesis that the fittest should and must win. Furthermore, the idea of "making anything present" went against the presumed instability of any argument, any verbal structure, dependent as it is

(or so the postmodernists say) on the ever-changing circumstances in which it is advanced or heard. One cannot make a past present to our eyes because circumstances have changed and the illusion of "recovering" meaning is just that, an illusion. So goes the postmodern argument. Thus, as I was delving into various deconstructive practices, I realized that I was simultaneously proclaiming concepts that were most definitely logocentric. I was subverting Foucault. I was also struggling against that incompatibility of discourses which Alasdair MacIntyre pointed out in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, Tradition* (1990). I tried to use the insights of "genealogical" discourse while in fact upholding "tradition."

Indeed, my postmodern reviewers pounced on my logocentric concerns. The postmodern methodology did not fool them. They wanted colonialism to be seen in the context of land, race, production, and consumption; I spoke of nations, of aggressive and defensive nationalisms, and of a desire to preserve identity. They spoke of ways of constructing identity (note that "constructing identity" does away with any kind of center that identity was assumed to possess in traditional discourse; in postmodern discourse, one can only speak of a process of assembling, without ever reaching the universal).

This "construction of identity" is one of the significant phrases students learn in the humanities and social science courses in the early twenty-first century. It is comparable to de Saussure's "signifier-signified" of the 1960s. It is a cliché of the period. I spoke of nationalism quoting Anthony Smith and criticizing Ernest Gellner. Nationality is a continuous process of construction, agreed; but that does not mean that nationhood can be reduced to a construction process.

My encounter with postmodernism made me reflect on how to re-enter debates that are now closed to thinkers who craft their arguments with the help of syllogisms and analogies; those who believe that one can grasp wholes and totalities. The problem is words, of course: their definitions, the meaning of meaning, the problems that seem so esoteric as not to merit attention in our pragmatic country, where being a conservative all too often consists of quoting the Fathers of the Republic, without reflecting on whether these sentences have acquired new meanings owing to disappearance of their philosophical foundations. The meanings that seemed self-evident two centuries ago can no longer be taken for granted because Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and countless others undermined customary usages and put to shame the easy epistemol-

ogy of the Age of Enlightenment.

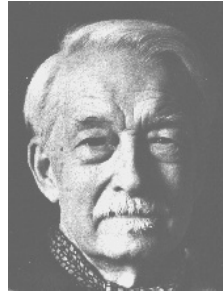
As stated in the Introduction to a popular theoretical text, "the major project of postmodernism [has been] the deconstruction of the centralized, logocentric master narratives of European culture." [3] A corollary project is the ejection of moral judgment from intellectual theorizing. Edward Said notes that "Orientalism is ... a discourse ... shaped to a degree by the exchange with ... power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we' do)." Of course it is impossible to write about anything intellectual without injecting one's own humanity into the argument. [4] However, the illusion of objectivity which the Enlightenment proffered should not lead us to a rejection of the thesis that after laborious arguments and discussions based on syllogistic thinking and conducted in an atmosphere as free from pressure as possible, one can arrive at an approximation of truth. Here Jacques Maritain's argument (discussed below) becomes relevant: there are degrees of truth, and partial truths, and incomplete truths. Derrida would have none of this gradualism: for him, the usage of the word "truth" in the above sentence damns the sentence tout court, for it involves logocentric usage annulled by postmodern assumptions.

Existentialism was probably the last philosophical and cultural trend that allowed for an essentialist use of words without the need for further elaboration. Since the time of Camus and Sartre, intellectual vocabularies have been so transformed that the language of conservatism often sounds hollow when used by those who refuse to take into account the semantic losses and detours resulting from a new use of words by the "centerless" postmodernists. Words cannot be used the way they had been used in the Religious Age or even in the Age of Reason. From MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, among others, we have learned that in the Age of Suspicion discourse has been redefined by those who have eloquently voiced their suspicions; and words, like an old person's teeth, ceased to stand in a row in an orderly fashion, at a straight angle to the gum, and instead wobble left and right because of overuse and prolonged misuse. We have also learned that the centering of discourse, so long taken for granted, cannot be so taken any longer, and logocentrism has to be defended in more fundamental ways than was the case a generation ago or two ago.

There might be three elements in such a defense, it seems to me. First, it is necessary for intellectual conservatives to become aware of what the centerlessness of word usage is all about. A good look at one of Derrida's seminal essays would be of help here. Second, one has to revisit those philosophers who articulated most effec-

tively and self-consciously the road to meaning on the level of language itself. The conservative discourse in America is so pragmatic and so given to the Enlightenment assumption that language is a translucent plate of glass through which the subject matter is clearly visible that to try to dislodge this assumption has to be the work of many writers over a long period of time. I am convinced, however, that epistemological discussions have to become much more common if any progress is to be made. Third, the areas of discourse so far monopolized by the postmodernists have to attract the attention of those in opposition to postmodernist assumptions. Why is it that so few conservatives write about gender issues, for instance? And what about the white ethnic minorities?

I personally found three recent philosophers to be exceptionally helpful in sorting out these issues: the late Mortimer Adler, the late Jacques Maritain, and Alasdair MacIntyre.



They reexamine theoretical problems of how meaning arises and what "the meaning of meaning" might be; how not to fall into the trap of solipsism or skepticism, the way John Locke and the British empiricists have done; and how not to get separated from reality, the way Descartes and his descendants have done. Adler, Maritain, and MacIntyre head in the same direction even though they take on different aspects of the contemporary shifts in meaning.



I begin, then, with Derrida's remarkably frank assessment of the development of philosophy as it related to language and his call to empty language of its logocentric assumptions. Ten years before Alan Bass and Gayatri Spivak translated Derrida's abstruse works, *Writing and Difference and Of Grammatology* (the English edition came out in 1976), Derrida contributed a paper to a conference underwritten by the Ford Foundation and hosted by the Johns Hopkins University. In this paper he explicitly outlined the foundational premises of his works, and he did so in a language that was still easy to understand. He began with the notion of structure, or rather, with the structurality of structure, and he noted that, in

Western culture, the concept of structurality has been modified by the process of giving it a center. One of the fundamentals of Western thinking has been the notion that structures have a center, and that centerless structures have a center, and that centerless structures are unthinkable. This center was the governing element of a structure, while itself escaping structurality. The notion of a center gave Western thinking "a reassuring certitude" and "a fundamental immobility." From the Greeks all the way to Friedrich Nietzsche, this tacit binary idea of structure/center has not been challenged in Western thought.

While Derrida invoked Nietzsche's name with obvious reluctance (he was not naive enough to attribute a "rupture" to a single philosopher), his choice of a name symbolizing "the new leaf" is revealing. Nietzsche's unmatched "achievement" is *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) where he presented his brilliant argument against the Western conception of good and evil. In his rebuttal, Nietzsche breaks down these "centered" concepts into processes and elements, thus emphasizing "structurality" and elbowing out the notion of core. Derrida's invocation of Nietzsche has little to do with Nietzsche's notions of supermanhood, of self-realization and the rest; rather, it has to do with his attempted deconstruction of core-oriented concepts that have been fundamental to Western culture. Nietzsche's argument in *Genealogy of Morals* undermines the unarticulated presence without which the stability of moral concepts cannot be sustained. It is much more destructive of logocentrism to question the "naturalness" of the concepts of good and evil than to question the existence of God. Such questioning goes deeper than blunt atheism; it destroys what seemed obvious rather than merely going after someone's notion of divinity. Derrida rightly zeroed in on Nietzsche as the one who was particularly effective in ushering in a "rupture" between the old thinking and the new.

What was happening before the "rupture" came about? Derrida posits that, over the centuries, philosophers have been substituting "center for center" in their search for fountainheads of meaning:

Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of this word ... the center ... has always designated the constant of a presence—*eidōs*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia*, *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. [5]

Derrida is right on target. He knows that to transform Western culture, one must attack and change its language. Since the ancient Greeks, philosophers and ordinary people used language in precisely the way he describes. What is significant is that even some philosophical atheists used language as if it partook of that center or presence that Derrida wants to uproot. Indeed, it is this mysterious "something" that gives language its range and beauty, and makes it the most astounding tool at the service of human beings. The seemingly unlimited creativity of language points to Life, or Center, at its inception. Many philosophers and ordinary humans have had difficulty accepting the notion of God, but they took for granted the centering of language. Derrida rightly says that they were inconsistent. But perhaps their inconsistency was more acceptable than Derrida's radical insistence that we drain language of centering. At a certain level, it does not matter how we name the concepts we accept as fundamental. If we do accept one or more of them, the project of postmodernism fails, for its discourse is one continuous argument against presence in language of a telos.

In a poem titled "Word," the Russian poet Nikolai Gumilev compared that centering to a queen bee that gives life to the bees in the hive. In a queenless hive, bees "are dead and they smell bad," says Gumilev. The postmodernist project is likewise set on draining language of its vitality.

Starting with Nietzsche, the draining has begun. Tens of thousands of books have exercised the option outlined by Derrida. Some of these books have not been entirely consistent in following Derrida's assumptions, but the erosion is visible in the way humanistic discourse is conducted today in the leading journals of history and literature. Little by little, concepts have been deconstructed, and then reassembled in such a way that their former meanings seem to have evaporated. Such concepts as those quoted by Derrida—man, transcendence, telos, ousia, God, consciousness, and conscience—cannot be used in scholarly discourse today without numerous updates, clarifications, explanations. Concepts such as heroism, the sublime, the sacred can hardly be used at all. Logocentrism is routinely attacked, and nothing damages the reputation of a humanistic scholar more than an accusation that he or she is an "essentialist." The assumption that language is self-referential, or that any kind of identity is "constructed" and has no core, is routine in scholarship. Repeated usages affix these new interpretations in the educated person's subconscious, and slowly language and communication abandon the assumption that the idea of origin or the idea of core lie at the basis of meaning.

Thus, postmodernism has ushered in a new way of using words. The postmodernist formula has all but deprived concepts of that presence that is so clearly visible in the works of Shakespeare or even in the writings of early twentieth-century thinkers. A prolonged non-essentialist use of words by intellectuals, and the leaking of these usages into popular discourse, have made a tremendous difference; in some areas of humanistic scholarship, words have already been fully appropriated for a new usage.

Sometimes the best defense is poetry which relies on essentialist usages and which is the hardest to deconstruct. Consider the following: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!" Both the irony and the innocence of Hamlet's exclamation resist the process of "draining off of identity" recommended by Derrida. Great poetry resists the trimming off of the roots of language, the breaking off of that mysterious connection between literal and anagogic of which Dante spoke.

The reason that the writings of the politically conservative thinkers sound meaningless to the postmodernists is that the first seem to be blissfully unaware of the assault on "the fixed origin ... the point of presence" that has substantially damaged the English language. These Pollyannas do not notice that a fierce battle took place in the city of language itself, and that taking leisurely walks among the ruins is inappropriate. What has been successfully assaulted by postmodern thought are the fundamentals of language and not the Constitution or family values. Conversely, the current usage of language in the leading scholarly journals seems meaningless to conservatives, and so they stop reading them, ceding victory by default to their adversaries.

In order to be able to be understood by postmodern audiences, the conservatives have to notice, and speak about, the damage done by tacit acceptance of these changes. We are no longer living in the best of all possible worlds, linguistically speaking. What is needed is the airing of such concerns, debating them and rejecting them, giving the Deriddean philosophical option enough notoriety to make at least some people aware that it is not the same as the option for atheism or for sophisticated intellectualism.

The discourse that makes it to the journals of intellectual history enjoying the greatest prestige in academia is the discourse that has already been thoroughly postmodernized. It is so de-centered that an average educated reader (who still retains an expectation of the

traditional Western centering system) has long ceased to follow it. A discourse against which Derrida lashed out was comprehensible to an educated reader because it was nested in those concepts that Derrida rejected. Deprived of this nesting, the discourse becomes brittle and hard to follow; it is still comprehensible, of course, but the effort expended to comprehend it seems excessive to the uninitiated--and so conservatives give up, which is perhaps what the erleuchteten wanted to begin with: for de-centering brings in the division into the initiated and the uninitiated, it creates a group of "experts" who cannot be challenged because they talk "above the heads" of ordinary people. Society thus becomes divided into those who conduct such discourse among themselves (being at the same time the advisers to Power—for universities are the prime recruiting grounds for politicians), and those who produce the goods and consume the entertainment. The creation of a caste of people trained to perpetuate and advance the "drained-out" discourse seems to be the goal of today's academia. We are becoming a caste society.

Other than raising the conservative consciousness, what else can be done to restore the legitimacy of a centered discourse in mainstream humanities? Alasdair Macintyre invoked the idea of neo-Thomism and its ability to crack the armor of Nietzsche and of other postmodernists. Jacques Maritain pointed out that the problem has been the divorce between thinking and the senses. Mortimer Adler argued that Enlightenment rationalism was faulty because it confused "objects of thought" with "ideas," or "formal signs" with "instrumental signs." In order to revive logocentrism, it is necessary to revisit discussions about these issues, bypassing de Saussure, the Russian Formalists, the French structuralists, and the rest. It may be necessary to return to the old quarrel about universals. Mortimer Adler thought so when he wrote *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985).

Adler begins by reexamining John Locke's postulate that our ideas (derived wholly from our sensual perceptions) indirectly refer to the world, yet at the same time they are subjective and arise individually in our consciousness. In Locke's words, ideas are "objects of understanding" that fill men's minds when they think. The mind processes sensual perceptions and comes up with ideas. While "the world" that the mind thus processes remains a constant (an important interpretation of Adler's, one that places him squarely outside the postmodern camp), the "ideas" arise individually, and thus there is no guarantee that your ideas will be similar to mine. There seems to be a contradiction here, says Adler: the private experience of processing sensual perceptions cannot guarantee that the "ideas"

will be the same for you and me. If one accepts Locke's terminology, one has to accept the proposition that everyone has a different set of ideas, rendering communication virtually impossible. And yet, we do communicate.

Adler's way of dealing with this paradox is to consider ideas as the means by which we apprehend objects that are not ideas. He points out that Locke's usage is imprecise: ideas are not objects of apprehension but only tools by means of which we apprehend "objects of thought." Ideas are signs that point us to objects of thought and to the real world. "We apprehend objects of thought, but never the concepts by which we think of them." [6]

The "splitting" of Locke's ideas into objects of thought and signs by means of which we apprehend these objects of thought allows Adler to avoid the above-mentioned contradiction between subjectivity of thought and objectivity of the world. Without this distinction, Locke's (and Hume's) positions lead either to skepticism concerning the possibility of acquiring any knowledge common to all, or to solipsism (as in those linguistic theories that assert that language is ultimately self-referential and it says nothing about the world; indeed the experience of "the world" is a purely subjective experience). This skeptical and subjectivist approach has dominated twentieth-century philosophy, and it allowed for the appearance of such ultimate skeptics as Jacques Derrida or Richard Rorty. We have grown so accustomed to the minimalist yields offered by the recent philosophers that we came to believe with Soren Kierkegaard that religious faith requires an irrational leap, and that religion is private and subjective.

Adler points out that the distinction he proposes allows us to avoid the pitfall of subjectivism and skepticism and express in theory what we know from practice: that common knowledge is indeed possible, that when two people look at an object and think about it, they are thinking about the same object, even though their ideas may differ. Thus Adler returns to the famous maxim of Thomas Aquinas who was the first to emphasize that our ideas are that by which we apprehend, not that which we apprehend. This is not splitting hairs. This is fundamental. It provides ground for an essentialist and logocentric use of language, and it makes communication possible.

Having asserted that ideas are simply meanings and that meanings are derived from our mental faculties and from the senses, Adler goes on to explain that when we think and talk, we do not think and talk about meanings but about the objects of thought to which

these meanings refer. Ergo, it is not true that we all live in separate worlds filled with ideas constructed by ourselves only (here Descartes begins to beckon); and it is not true that language and discourse are merely an exercise in which meanings are arrived at by referencing other meanings. Language is not a cat chasing its own tail. While our ideas (meanings construed by us on the basis of sense experiences and with the help of our own mental faculties) may differ, the objects of thought to which these ideas refer are the same for all of us. It is against this essentialist approach that post-modern thought is directed, with its denial of an Ur-meaning being a prime example.

Adler's achievement consists in pointing out, in ways vastly more productive than those of Theodore Adorno's, that the Enlightenment assumptions about language were wrong; but he also demonstrated, albeit in an indirect way, that Derrida was wrong as well—and so was Adorno, of course.

Adler's distinctions deal with matters remote from the pragmatic concerns of educated Americans. But Jacques Maritain's treatise on Descartes might engage even those from whom the word "philosophy" elicits a habitual yawn. *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (1928) is a down-to-earth book. It differs remarkably from Maritain's usually abstruse prose. It does not make an appeal to a speculative mind but to a practical one. The section on Descartes is crucial, as it deals with the way we use language. Its defense of a logocentric use of language, however, is not based on an analysis of the content of our thoughts, but rather on pointing out the necessity of building what we know on previous experience and previous reasoning.

Maritain agrees with Locke that the material world provides material for our thinking. If we do not acknowledge the dependence of our minds on the world of physical objects, on our bodies in particular, we are likely to go astray in our thinking. Descartes erroneously replaced the "I" with "my mind," and we have followed suit. The catchy phrase summarizing that replacement, *cogito ergo sum*, has become the foundation of modern and postmodern discourse. The cogito here is the cogito of a mind that knows things intuitively rather than by means of an elaborate argument that can be compared to a laborious climb upward, step by step, towards understanding. In Descartes, the mind flies over those flights of stairs, rather than negotiating them slowly by means of syllogisms. And here is the crux of the matter. A temptation to rely on intellectual intuitions is the greatest temptation of all: it gives us confidence in areas where we should have none, it makes us forget the

limitations of our minds (dependent as they are on our physical bodies) and the fact that without empirical or syllogistic proof, the validity of our thoughts is not vouchsafed by anyone or anything.

Yet it is precisely this intellectual intuition that has guided philosophy since Descartes: an ability of the mind to invent ways of saying, thinking, and creating an intellectual universe that we then try to "sell" to our fellow human beings. Hegel's system is a stark example of such an invented system: with no empirical or syllogistic proof whatsoever, Hegel's powerful ability to create intellectual systems has charmed and conquered thousands of excellent minds, all acting on the premise first formulated by Descartes. Over the last two centuries, many sophisticated philosophical systems have been created, each of them independent of the others and neither of them able to "discourse" with the others. This total disconnection between the systems is a mark of the intellectual arrogance initiated by Descartes; the final point of its trajectory is total subjectivism disallowing any communication whatsoever.

Descartes did not say: "I weigh 150 pounds and I can feel my own body; therefore, I am." He was not interested in the body. He detached the body from the thinking mind. He did not even take into account the fact that the process of thinking involves physical changes in the brain that presuppose the existence of the brain (with its mysterious limitations) to begin with. He likewise disdained to acknowledge that human knowledge proceeds by accretion, by comparing various facts and propositions and drawing conclusions from them; and then, differentiating between these conclusions.

Before Descartes, it was still possible, within the Eurocentric universe of discourse, to perceive philosophy as a dialogue in which the participants shared the same premises and moved within the same body of concepts. They could argue against each other and disagree with one another, but they all spoke a language that was comprehensible to all (even if they belonged to different nationalities and spoke different national tongues). When intellectual intuition became the foundational concept of philosophy, discourse ceased to be discourse, and became a collection of monologues. Communication between different philosophers became impossible because they belonged to diverse conceptual platforms created by different intuitions. Syllogisms became irrelevant: there was no need to use them because philosophical arguments became statements rather than arguments, a bit like in Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* (1937) where Dr. Philifor and Dr. Anti-Philifor conduct learned soliloquies instead of debating issues.

Is there no place for intellectual intuition, then, in Maritain's way of thinking? Of course there is, in the realm of art and in certain religious experiences. But in philosophy, reasoning by intuition rather than by "climbing the stairs" of syllogisms is a mistake. This mistake is so firmly entrenched in our thinking that to raise one's voice against it may sound like a call to form a Flat Earth Society. But the goal is to re-invent the way of reasoning where public debates would not be stifled by fundamental conceptual incompatibilities of the debaters, where generally comprehensible arguments could be made about rank-ordering personal and social priorities, and where words would be nested in a common set of centering concepts.

It can hardly be denied that the role of the syllogism has been substantially weakened in postmodern discourse. Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault, and others proceed by means of statements enunciated with the same degree of certitude. One almost hears, "It is thus and so." In the Preface to *On Grammatology*, Derrida notes that "the notion [of example] is not acceptable within my argument." [7] In *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault points out that the "innate discursivity" of words disappeared from Western discourse around the end of the eighteenth century, and was replaced by a foregrounding of structures (grammatical and linguistic) to which words belonged. [8] Foucault confirms Adler's observation that Enlightenment epistemology led to solipsism. In Derrida's "Margins of Philosophy," we hear of difference that is "neither a word nor a concept;" [9] the word itself is used "provisionally," in fact, it is not used but rather "it imposes itself [upon the author] in its neographism." The point is that the graphic difference between difference and difference cannot be heard, and, indeed, it "bypasses the order of apprehension" altogether; yet Derrida finds it expedient to use the word because for him, it symbolizes (if one can use this verb at all with regard to this thinker) "negative theology," the de-centered written language, the refusal to acknowledge a point of departure: "What is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility." [10]

Maritain calls this kind of reasoning "a lust for pure spirituality" and "the denaturing of human reason." Language acquires "perfect autonomy [and] absolute independence ... thought breaks with Being." [11] In contrast, the discourse based on the syllogism acknowledges the dependence of our knowledge on past knowledge; it builds on past knowledge rather than soaring independently of it or in defiance of it. Syllogistic thinking acknowledges the varying

degrees of certitude, as when converging circumstantial evidence (arrived at syllogistically or by means of examples) produces a set of conclusions for which no perfect truthfulness is claimed but which seem to point most coherently to the probable state of affairs. Maritain observes that from Descartes on, "It is always by method, or by methods, and no longer by the spiritual quality ennobling the intellect, that the austerity of knowledge will be measured." [12] He is aware that the "rupture" of which Foucault and Derrida spoke occurred much earlier than Foucault suggested. Descartes taught us how to shove ontology into a dark corner, proclaiming it to be an archaic science, a sort of alchemy which was good for the primitive minds of medieval thinkers but which became obsolete in modernity. In Derrida, the human mind becomes the arbiter of meaning, and it fashions its objects as it sees fit. It is no longer sufficient to point out contradictions in a philosophical text: the logical principle of non-contradiction has been tossed away. Paradoxes entered philosophy and the humanistic sciences generally, rather than being confined to the realm of poetry and mysticism. The identity of the subject has likewise been tossed away in the general campaign against "essentialism."

Both Maritain and Adler speak of the gradualness and incompleteness of the thinking process. In Alasdair MacIntyre's reflections on contemporary intellectual life, the emphasis is rather on the inability to communicate that is a result of Cartesian reliance on intellectual intuition. In Derrida, the incommensurability of philosophical systems is taken for granted.

Incommensurability is also the topic of MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. MacIntyre repeats over and over that the unity of Western discourse, as known in pre-Cartesian times, has been thoroughly fragmented in our time, but this fact has not been acknowledged by Western universities or by other centers of learning. Learning and study go on at universities as if incompatibility of epistemological premises did not exist, and as if all scholars shared the Enlightenment-based fundamentals to which lip service is routinely paid at commencements and on other official academic occasions. The three incompatible epistemological positions that MacIntyre names have their roots, respectively, in the Enlightenment, in Nietzsche's attempt to deconstruct the unity and continuity of the subject, and in the Thomistic worldview. [13] MacIntyre concludes his book with a proposition that universities become places of "constrained disagreement" where incompatibility of epistemological stances is acknowledged, proclaimed, and respected, and where opportunities are provided for representatives of the diverse ways of using language to debate their views. This is

a novel way of dealing with the enormous losses which logocentrists have incurred: since such losses cannot be instantly recouped, at least demarcation lines between different epistemologies might help defend whatever is left, and might attract epistemological converts.

It does not seem likely that universities will follow up on that proposal. Thirteen years have elapsed since MacIntyre published his book, and there are no signs that the professoriate at any of the fifty leading universities (I refer to the U.S. News and World Report ratings available on the Web) have clamored for badges signaling the fundamental philosophical position they occupy. The differences remain invisible to the layman's eye. Society is presented with a fake united front of a professoriate that, we are told, is on the cutting edge of humanistic research. The most common set of labels one encounters in public comments on American university professors is that they are divided into left and right. Some say that the professoriate is mostly leftist, others maintain that it is center-right. Needless to say, this division (sometimes expressed as a division between Democrats and Republicans) has nothing whatever to do with the problems I am describing. But the very fact that discussions take place on so shallow a level indicates that the deeper currents of academia have entirely escaped the attention of society. In particular, what MacIntyre describes as the third epistemology, one that is most emphatically logocentric, has been elbowed out of universities. Essentialism in all forms has been purged from humanistic pursuits. An attempt to submit to a mainstream humanistic journal an article in which one of the epistemological premises would be the existence of a telos in language would end in a rejection of said article, and it would consign its author to marginality in American academic life. To restore any kind of essentialism to a respectful place in discourse will take more than an honest scholar's honest proposal that we all be treated equally.

Most of us essentialists, or logocentrists, immediately recognize the writings of another logocentrist. We cherish examples, and we try to point out parallel situations. In academia, we are the ones who teach such courses as "Survey of World History from Ancient Greece to Modern Europe" or "Survey of English Literature from the Venerable Bede to James Joyce." But we are clearly an endangered species in a stage of decline. The courses that use the chronological approach have been all but eliminated from American academia. "Buddhist Meditation Theory" (Religion), "Women and Men" (Religion), "Gender and Politics in European History" (History), "The Spatiality of the Public Sphere" (German) [14] are

the more typical as titles of courses routinely offered at universities. In courses of that kind, students jump from century to century and from country to country without much idea about the telos that generated certain social patterns and behaviors, and they judge them all by the contemporary American yardstick. Philosopher David Tracy spoke of "the analogical imagination" as he tried to explain logocentric thinking. Indeed, it is the willingness to embrace analogy as a concept of fundamental importance that characterizes a logocentrist and an essentialist. Things can be similar or they can be dissimilar; A cannot be a non-A; identity and non-contradiction are the rules, and the syllogism is the way to proceed.

But an even more fundamental principle behind all such traditional discourse is that it is possessed of an ontological presence. Meanings are connected to some universally understood truths, such as "eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia, aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man"—all essentialist concepts. If you accept this, the argument, no matter how complex, is easy to follow. MacIntyre's books are abstruse at places but they do not leave a logocentrically-inclined reader in the middle of the road as it were, without any road signs as to where one is going and what is the purpose of the trajectory. In contrast, the writings of the postmodernists strive for the impression of a vacuum in which the conversation proceeds. Postmodernist texts resemble the monologue of that arch-postmodernist, Ivan Karamazov's alter ego, "a Russian gentleman of a particular kind ... accommodating and ready to assume any amiable expression ... ready for any affable conversation." [15] In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky managed to create a perfectly postmodern monologue. It seems to make sense while one reads it, but it conveys nothing at all and it cannot be paraphrased in any fashion. Ivan's devil's argument flows somewhat like theoretical mathematics detached from the daily reality of numbers (except that mathematics claims it is simply an exercise of the mind, whereas postmodernist humanities make much more substantial claims on human beings and society).

The non-essentialists seem to live in those "ethereal spaces" where a finger put on the ax would freeze ... if there could be an ax over there, as Ivan Karamazov says. No wonder Ivan's alter ego loves "the realism of this earth" and would like to become incarnate "in the form of some merchant's wife weighing two hundred fifty pounds." This passage reflects one of Dostoevsky's most profound insights. When emptied of "the realism of this earth," discourse becomes opaque, it loses its purposiveness and rooting in reality. Even in books that deal with historical subjects (such as, for instance, the horrors of Stalinism), one finds a certain vagueness,

emptiness, and a lack of substance if essentialist perspectives are not brought to bear. [16]


The proclivity of contemporary social sciences to speak about "constructing" identity, nationality, colonialism, is a manifestation of that avoidance of acknowledging the core that has been a mark of modern thinking. Kant was the first modern authority to assure us that we shall never know the essence of things; it follows that discourse should avoid essences which are unknown and unknowable. Discourse should be "constructed" in such a way as to discard the old medieval notion of intelligibility. Contemporary writing's love affair with puns is another instance of this postmodernist proclivity toward creating meaning rather than referring to meaning. Films, journalism, and advertising avail themselves amply of puns. The TV series "Sopranos" seems to refer to female singers, but it turns out to be the surname of a Mafia family. A wonderful Polish expression, "rozchwianie znaczenia" (literally, meaning in convulsions) conveys this phenomenon better than any other expression I know. Thus in the discussions of nationhood, the essentialist idea of group ties based on remembered victories and defeats is rejected in favor of a structuralist approach ("a community of communication") or a Marxist approach ("an imagined community").

Thus it seems to me that the battle for the restoration of meaning cannot be fought using the language of the Enlightenment and limiting the range of topics to those untouched by postmodernist handling. The emptying of language of its former epistemological foundations has to be discussed more widely. That "fixed origin" against which Derrida railed needs to be approached from the point of view of epistemology rather than religion. MacIntyre has shown yet again that a nonessentialist use of language is parasitical, that it depends on concepts ostensibly rejected and declared unfit for contemporary usage. Yet without those concepts the postmodern enterprise fails.

So again, what makes a postmodernist are not the fashionable topics that range from postcolonialism to feminism. The key is developing a discourse where traditional centering does not take place. The authors I discussed above are helpful in restoring an awareness of that centering. They put the issue of centering back on the table.

My postmodernist colleagues rightly sensed that my book on Russian colonialism did not belong to the fold. It offended them that a logocentrist dared to encroach upon an area they discovered and would gladly keep to themselves, in the hope perhaps that future generations will forget about the "traditional" areas of discourse

and embrace only those mapped out by the postmodernists, together with the new epistemology so well encapsulated in Derrida's essay. I was spotted and exposed as not a "true" postcolonialist. But at the same time, I made a dent in an area of discourse that used to be an exclusive domain of deconstructionists. This experience taught me that it is important to make forays into areas of discourse that seem off-limits to conservatives.

Taking on topics that so far have been monopolized by the postmodernists, and subverting them by introducing logocentric epistemology into the study, derails the postmodern project. The topics discovered by the postmodernists are waiting for such subversion: the "other" history of America, that of the white ethnics, of women, of the voiceless; the hybridity of colonial empires. Why do conservatives shun these topics? It matters little that the territory was discovered by one's philosophical adversaries. It is there. To pretend that it does not exist is unwise. While venturing into such territory, one should bring one's own weapons, however. I am convinced that it is within such territory that logocentrism can be reintroduced into discourse, and issues raised by MacIntyre, Adler, and Maritain can best be upheld. 

NOTES

[1] In Edward Said's "Afterword" to *Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1994), 329-352, an anti-essentialist argument is advanced, only to culminate in an essentialist confession that "Orientalism is a partisan book, not a theoretical machine" (339). On page 333, Said remarks that "anything like a stable essence is constantly under threat." This is hardly a firm anti-essentialist stance. [2] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, 1970), 247-271. [3] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York, 1995), 117. [4] Not infrequently, the postmodernists break their own rules in that regard: consider for instance the customary use of the word "fascism," loaded as it is with essentialist meanings from Mussolini to Pinochet. [5] Derrida, in *The Structuralist Controversy*, 249. [6] Mortimer Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York, 1985), 14. [7] *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, 1978), lxxxix. [8] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* [Les Mots et les choses] (New York, 1971), 280-281. [9] Jacques Derrida, "Difference," in Mark C. Taylor, editor, *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago, 1986), 396. [10] *Ibid.*, 399. [11] Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Descartes, Luther, Rousseau*

(Port Washington, N.Y., and London, 1928), 78. [12] *Ibid.*, 66. [13] This is a very loose summary that omits MacIntyre's references to *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the one hand, and to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, on the other. [14] These are real courses taken from a catalog of Rice University in 2001/2. Other esoteric undergraduate courses in the same catalog: "History as Text in Modern France" (History), "Jihad and the End of the World" (Religion), "Egoism, Altruism and the Postmodern Self" (Religion). [15] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett (New York, 1976), 602-603. Subsequent quotations come from the same edition. [16] Dariusz Tolczyk, *See No Evil* (New Haven, 1999).

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