BETWEEN FOUNDATIONALISM AND NIHILISM: IS *PHRONĒSIS* THE *VIA MEDIA* FOR THEOLOGY?

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WHAT TYPE OF rationality is proper to theology as a discipline? If any single question dominates contemporary theological discussion, it is this. The option which is made at this fundamental level will ultimately determine the type of truth predicated of theological assertions.[1] In this article, I examine several positions relative to the rationality of theological discourse and discuss their suitability via-à-vis a Catholic understanding of revelation. I conclude that despite widespread contemporary interest in certain ontological and hermeneutical options, only one position, properly nuanced, is finally viable for revelation theology.

Particularly pertinent to our discussion is the current theological turn to *phronēsis,* or practical reason, as a *via media* between nihilism and foundationalism. This turn is seen as a possible exit from what Richard Bernstein aptly called the dilemma of objectivism and relativism.[2] Bernstein himself, without any specific theological interest, provides a convenient taxonomy for our discussion inasmuch as he, too, is seeking a rationality which is hermeneutically and ontologically appropriate to the contemporary situation. Utilizing some categories similar to his, we shall examine first the traditional forms of rationality, then the seeming obviation of rationality in certain forms of postmodernism, and, finally, the path marked out by the *phronēsis* trajectory.

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[1] "Rationality," of course, is not a univocal term. The theories of Condorcet, Adorno, Weber, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, to name a few, attest to a wide variety of meanings. The point here is that a particular understanding of the way reason is used, or a denial of reason's capacities, will affect one's conception of revelation, how it is received, and the type of truth or falsity predicated of it. The conjunction between anthropology and theological epistemology is here very tight indeed. Richard Bernstein explains well various contemporary uses of "rationality" in "The Rage Against Reason," most recently found in his collection of essays *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1992) 31–56.

[2] Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1983). Some of the issues raised by Bernstein have been discussed by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza in "Theology: Transcendental or Hermeneutical?" *Horizons* 16 (1989) 329–41.

FOUNDATIONALISM: METAPHYSICS AND TRANSCENDENTAL THOUGHT

Traditional "foundationalist" thought, whether of the classical metaphysical or modern transcendental variety, has come on hard times of late. Its critics resist the foundationalist compulsion to establish some first principle, Archimedean point, or ahistorical matrix from which to begin the search for rigorous and objective knowledge.[3] This search for ultimate and determinate ontological or epistemological grounds guides virtually the entire tradition of Western thought, wholly enveloping the Platonic-Thomistic-Cartesian-Kantian-Husserlian axis. It attempts, once and for all, to "stop the show" by means of assorted foundationalist *archai* or *principia* such as *esse, ousia, eidos, res cogitans, Wille zur Macht,* etc.[4]

Though obviously different from the Continental notion of first philosophy, the Anglo-American empirical-verificationist approach also falls under the contemporary condemnation of foundationalism. No less than traditional metaphysical and modern transcendental conceptions, logical positivism, with its "metaphysics of hard facts," seeks to provide an ultimate touchstone for philosophical and scientific validity. In its own way, it too is subject to what Bernstein has called Cartesian or ontological anxiety.[5]

The hermeneutical counterpart to foundationalist ontology is known as reconstructive or objective interpretation. This hermeneutical trajectory claims that it is possible to recreate the sociocultural world of the text and, within context, to determine its original meaning. Although sometimes criticized as Romanticist hermeneutics, this position has been developed with extreme sensitivity by Emilio Betti.[6]

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[3] Richard Rorty has been the leading exponent of this tradition in the United States. His position is developed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1979); *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1982); and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1989). One quotation may be taken as representative: "This historicist turn has helped free us, gradually but steadily, from theology and metaphysics—from the temptation to look for an escape from time and chance" (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* xiii).

[4] This criticism is developed by John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1987) 180.

[5] Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism* 16. The comment of Fergus Kerr is apt here: "The desire to bring the passing show to a halt, to secure it to immovable objects, lies deep in the metaphysical tradition. [From Plato's forms to Bertrand Russell's atomism] there is a powerful inclination to get up or down to something simple and ultimate: that which defies all further analysis, something self-sufficient and elemental" (*Theology after Wittgenstein* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986]) 62.

[6] Emilio Betti, *Teoria Generale dell' Interpretazione* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1955). German translation: *Allegemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967). Also defending the reconstructive position is E. D. Hirsch, *Validity*

It is important to note that virtually *all* of what Gadamer, Betti's chief interlocutor and opponent, claims about finitude, the forestructure of understanding, the productive role of the interpreter, etc., is also acknowledged by Betti. What separates them is that, ultimately, reconstructive hermeneutics requires some variety of foundationalist ontology.[7]

The foundationalist position and its concomitant hermeneutical trajectory have undergirded much traditional Catholic dogmatic and systematic thought. Foundationalism provides the basis for the idea that doctrinal statements, from Nicea and Chalcedon, for example, may be reconstructed and transmitted in their integrity from one generation of Christians to the next. The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II alludes to this notion with its frequent use of phrases such as the integrity of revelation, its continuity, perpetuity, and finality.[8] The foundationalist position, with varying degrees of nuance and sophistication, has been developed theologically by Lonergan, Rahner, and Kasper.[9] Each of these theologians utilizes a foundationalist ontology in order to undergird a theology which supports both the referential nature of doctrinal statements as well as their integral and continuous transmission. Kasper, in his most recent work, has been outspoken in

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in Interpretation (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1967); *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1976). The charge of "Romanticism" is leveled by Gadamer in *Truth and Method,* trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), and by Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception,* trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1982).

[7] A comparison of the two hermeneutical trajectories may be found in Thomas Guarino, "Betti and the Hermeneutics of Dogma," *The Thomist* 53 (1989) 635–54. Particularly instructive for the issue at hand is that Betti has no trouble with the two axioms which epigrammatically characterize the Gadamerian hermeneutical trajectory: that understanding is always interpretation; and that understanding is an event over which the interpreting subject does not ultimately preside.

[8] Examples may be found in *Dei Verbum* nos. 7–8.

[9] Some form of transcendental ontology is at work in each of the theologians mentioned here. Kasper's foundationalism is particularly evident in "Das Wahrheitverständnis der Theologie," in *Wahrheit in Einheit und Vielheit,* ed. Emerich Coreth (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1987); *Theology and Church,* trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989); and "Postmodern Dogmatics," *Communio* 17 (1990) 181–91. The transcendental foundations of Rahner and Lonergan need no further explanation here. It should be noted, however, that each thinker sought a more rigorous interlacing of facticity and historicity with the transcendental subject as his thought progressed. This is particularly evident in Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) and in Rahner's later essays, e.g. "Mysterium Ecclesiae," in *Theological Investigations* 17, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 139–55. The theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar logically assumes a foundationalist ontology, but, under Barthian pressures, it is neither fully developed nor explicitated.

calling for a greater role for metaphysics in theology. He goes so far as to claim that the theological loss of metaphysics, a casualty of the correct rejection of baroque and encrusted scholasticism, has become problematic for the Church at large.[10]

THE STRONG POSTMODERNIST POSITION

If it is true that metaphysics always buries its undertakers, then it is now faced with a rather formidable task. The contemporary attacks on all types of foundationalism have increased at an exponential pace. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz is representative of the present climate when he speaks approvingly of deconstructionist literary criticism, of nonfoundationalist moods in metaphysics and epistemology, and of the rejection of methodism in the philosophy of science.[11] The coalescence and intensification of the nonfoundationalist trends of which Geertz speaks has become known increasingly as "postmodernism." This is a slippery and contentious term which I hope to elucidate in the argument below. For the moment, I am equating postmodernism with nonfoundationalist thought in general. A further distinction may be made between strong and moderate postmodernism. As I will use the terms, "moderate postmodernism" indicates nonfoundationalist thought which seeks a rationality appropriate to our postmetaphysical, posttranscendental age; "strong postmodernism" is more radical inasmuch as it appears to involve an outright rejection of rationality of any kind. It is this stronger species of postmodernism, often bordering on nihilism, which I intend to discuss.

Jean-François Lyotard has constrasted modernity with postmodernity. Modernity attempts to construct some grand narrative or overarching theoretical system, one of the *grands récits* of history such as the "dialectics of the Spirit" or the "emancipation of the rational." The postmodern, in contrast, rebels against all ontotheological metanarratives and protological-eschatological schemas. It accentuates and celebrates the heteromorphous nature of discourse and life: "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."[12] Strong postmodernism eschews all metanarratives, whether they are Christian, Enlightenment, or Marxist in

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[10] *Theology and Church* 3, 195 n. 3. Also recently calling for a renewed understanding of metaphysics in theology is Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[11] Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86 (1984) 267.

[12] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1984) 37.

inspiration. Epistemic systematizations and totalizing visions are, at base, ontotheological and isomorphic illusions which ultimately seek the obliteration of heterogeneity and *différe(a)nce*. Metaphysics in particular and foundationalism in general are unblinking attempts at congruency and commensurability against which Lyotard issues a postmodern call to arms: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences. . . . "[13]

That strong postmodernism seeks no foundations for rationality and, in fact, has doubts about the project of rationality itself, is illustrated by the work of Jacques Derrida.[14] One example may suffice to illustrate his position. In the Parisian dialogue between Gadamer and Derrida in 1981, Gadamer opened the exchange with a statement on textual interpretation. Derrida replied with an obscure and barely intelligible response. To this rhetorical ploy, Gadamer correctly answered:

Is he [Derrida] really disappointed that we cannot understand each other? Indeed not, for in his view this would be a relapse into metaphysics. He will, in fact, be pleased, because he takes this private experience of disillusionment to confirm his own metaphysics. But I cannot see here how he can be right only with respect to himself, be in agreement only with himself.[15]

Of course, for Derrida and strong postmodernism, even intelligible conversation could indicate an unwarranted reversion to logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence. Gadamer's attempt at establishing a hermeneutical *via media* between nihilism and foundationalism fearfully avoids the demands of the *entweder/oder*, thereby degenerating into a lukewarm and domesticated *tertium quid*. For Derrida and the strong postmodern trajectory, the radicality of absence, alterity, rupture, and breach can allow no shred of essence to remain untouched.[16]

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[13] Ibid. 82.

[14] The literature about Derrida has reached voluminous proportions. Useful studies include: Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1986); John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (see above n. 4); and Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue Univ., 1984).

[15] H.-G. Gadamer, "Reply to Jacques Derrida," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter,* ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: SUNY, 1989) 56.

[16] What I am calling strong postmodernism is accurately described by Fredric Jameson when he says that the " . . . very concept of 'truth' itself is part of the [now discarded] metaphysical baggage. . . ." There exists only "sheer heteronomy and the emergence of random and unrelated subsystems of all kinds" (*Postmodernism* [Durham: Duke Univ., 1990] 12, 342). Similarly descriptive of strong postmodernism is the comment of John Caputo: "What more is there to do than to invoke the Nietzschean saying and the

Although this strong postmodern trajectory has won some theological adherents, it is not, in fact, the type of postmodernism which attracts the widest attention today.[17] It is what I have termed "moderate postmodernism" which is currently considered most useful to theologians. Some may object to my designating this second position "postmodern" at all; many prefer simply to speak of the "hermeneutical" trajectory. But the term "moderate postmodernism" is preferable for two reasons. First, "hermeneutics" itself is *not* a univocal term. As already noted, Betti's notion of interpretation is quite different from Gadamer's. It would be mistaken to reduce the term "hermeneutics" to the Gadamerian understanding of it. Second, what is here termed the moderate postmodern position takes into serious consideration fundamental postmodern concerns such as the radicalness of historicity, the pervasiveness of ideology, the decentered subject, the rejection of transcendentalism, the encompassing horizons of absence, and the subsequent avoidance of *Identitätsphilosophie*. The difference between the two trajectories lies in the fact that the moderate position seeks to defend a rationality which is appropriate to the newly presenced postmodern horizons. While there is a definite erasure of ontological foundations, there is no attempt to eradicate rationality itself. This rationality, however, must be "consistent with our finitude, with our historicity, with the dependence of thought on changing social conditions."[18]

THE MODERATE POSTMODERN TRAJECTORY

This ontologically appropriate theory of rationality and truth has been found, by many, in the *phronēsis* tradition of practical reason. The seeming universality of this phenomenon is attested by J. Greisch: "If it is necessary to designate a common denominator for the more systematic works in hermeneutics appearing over the last five years, it

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touchstone of a good deal of postmodernism, that truth is a fiction that we have forgotten is a fiction? Is the end of metaphysics not also the end of truth?" ("Radical Hermeneutics and Religious Truth," in *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion,* ed. Daniel Guerrière [Albany: SUNY, 1990] 149).

[17] Theological counterparts to strong postmodernism still remain in their infancy. Cf. Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1984) and *Altarity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1987). Robert S. Gall, "Of/From Theology and Deconstruction," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990) 413–37; also Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1989).

[18] Thomas McCarthy, "Scientific Rationality and the 'Strong Program' in the Sociology of Knowledge," *Construction and Constraint: The Shaping of Scientific Rationality,* ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1988) 79.

seems to me not inexact to identify this with the return of practical reason, under the species of Aristotelian *phronēsis*."[19] This moderate postmodern position, like the stronger variety, ultimately has its roots in Heidegger and Wittgenstein. This is not the place for a full-blown study of these thinkers, but it is reasonable to assert that the horizons uncovered by those two thinkers sounded the death knell for philosophical foundationalism.[20] Both philosophers sought to identify the historical-hermeneutical dimensions of thought, thereby surpassing both the empiricism of logical positivism and the transcendentalism of the regnant neo-Kantianism. In the case of Heidegger, the fundamental project was to expose the ontologically truncated philosophies of substance and subject which dominated classical, medieval and modern thought. This was accomplished by "presencing the absent," i.e. by identifying the encompassing horizons of radical historicity and worldhood which *Dasein* had epistemologically buried. The givenness of Being and the event character of thinking unmasked the traditional philosophical pretense of "stopping the show," of declaring that one had found, at last, the "winning" name of Being.[21] In the case of Wittgenstein, especially the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations,* there is a rebellion against the logical atomism of Carnap and Russell as well as against his own early positivism.[22] Like Heidegger, Wittgenstein sought to illuminate the epistemic authority of the "world," slowly distancing himself from the gnoseological solitude of Augustinian-Cartesian mentalism in favor of the custom, practice, and tradition of the enveloping *Lebenswelt.* This is the basis for Wittgenstein's attacks on ostensive definition and for his gradual acceptance of the philosophical irreducibility of the teeming swarm of life.[23]

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[19] Jean Greisch, "Bulletin de Philosophie: Herméneutique et Philosophie Pratique," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 75 (1991) 113.

[20] Significant works dealing with the two thinkers vis-à-vis the end of foundationalism are: Jeffery Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988); Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics,* trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1988); Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (see above n. 5); Charles Guignon, "Philosophy after Wittgenstein and Heidegger," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990) 649–72.

[21] John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* 171–86.

[22] According to Kerr, the later Wittgenstein "was attempting to free himself from something very like 'the absolute conception of reality' . . . which characterized the *Tractatus.*" Again, for the early Wittgenstein, "when subjectivity becomes so perfect that it vanishes into absolute privacy, reality remains in splendid objectivity" (*Theology after Wittgenstein* 26).

[23] Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* 64–65. Also K. T. Fann, *Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1971) 55–62. Wittgenstein's similarity

The moderate postmodern trajectory has appropriated these themes from Heidegger and Wittgenstein, but without giving them the decidedly Nietzschean and antirational flavor of the stronger trajectory. So, the radicalness of historicity, the forestructure of understanding, and the linguisticality of thought are all prominent themes among the moderate postmodernists. Positivistic attempts to mathematicize the universe are dismissed as ontologically naive. At the same time, even while accentuating the historical and hermeneutical elements informing thought, the moderate postmodernists, unlike their "strong" counterparts, resist epistemological anarchism and seek to maintain some appropriate notion of human rationality. Because all theories and forms of life are not equally true, criteria must be developed so as to distinguish coherency from incoherency and rationality from irrationality. Of course, it must be unceasingly stated that reason is exercised in circumstances which are thoroughly finite, conditioned, and historical. Nonetheless, it is truly *reason* which is exercised. The irrational and deconstructionist tendencies of strong postmodernism, then, are as ontologically inappropriate as are the naive and truncated forms of foundationalism. Both extremes misunderstand the commingled horizons of presence and absence.

Gadamer and Phronēsis

If Greisch is correct about the widespread recovery of Aristotelian practical reason, then there is no doubt that Gadamer has been the flag-bearer of this armada. In fact, it is Gadamer's rehabilitation of *phronēsis* which is the distinguishing characteristic of the moderate postmodernism under discussion.[24] Gadamer's fundamental argument is that the only ontologically appropriate rationality for the postmetaphysical, posttranscendental age is the practical reason championed by Aristotle in Book 6 of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. This is so because practical reason is ". . . concerned with reason and with knowledge, not

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to Heidegger is noted by Gadamer: "But the really astounding thing is that Wittgenstein's self-critique [after the *Tractatus*] moves in a direction similar to the one we have seen in the evolution of phenomenology." Gadamer is referring here to Heidegger's abandonment of Husserl's transcendental idealism (H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* trans. and ed. David E. Linge [Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1976] 174).

[24] Like Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Gadamer, too, has been the object of several useful studies. Prominent among them: Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1985); Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); and Susan Hekman, *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1986). A careful analysis of *phronēsis* in Gadamer may be found in P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude* (New York: Fordham Univ., 1991) 70–94.

detached from a being that is becoming, but determined by it and determinative of it."[25] Now, precisely what philosophy knows in the wake of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is that there is no form of rationality which is exercised apart from the contingent, finite and delimiting horizons of the enveloping life-world. Aristotle, of course, trapped as he is in the ontotheological tradition, mistakenly speaks of *epistēmē*, knowledge which deals with the eternal and the necessary (6.1139b.20–22). He understands *phronēsis* as essential, but ultimately secondary to the pure and certain knowledge yielded by theoretical reason. Gadamer, on the other hand, argues that *phronēsis* is the prime analogue for *all* rationality in the postmetaphysical age. When Aristotle says, therefore, that practical reason is equivalent to "deliberating well" in contingent circumstances (6.1140a.26–32), or when he says that practical reason issues in "some kind of correctness" (6.1142b.8) properly understood as "hitting the best thing attainable by action" (6.1141b.11), he is unwittingly describing the only exercise of reason truly available in the postmodern era.

For Gadamer, the significance of radical historicity and the consequent overcoming of foundationalism is such that to speak of *epistēmē* is ontologically inappropriate. One cannot speak about necessary as opposed to contingent knowledge because all rationality is exercised in radically finite circumstances. The knowledge yielded by deliberation in concrete situations, designated by Aristotle as practical reason, should, therefore, be taken as paradigmatic for knowing in general.[26]

This adoption of *phronēsis* as the only ontologically appropriate rationality is of a piece with Gadamer's collapse of the distinction between understanding and application. Maintaining the difference between the two traditionally distinct moments in the hermeneutical process is possible only if one is capable of reconstructing an invariant textual meaning, a meaning which is subsequently applied to contingent and changing circumstances. Following Heidegger and Wittgenstein, however, Gadamer has deconstructed the ontological possibility

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[25] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 278.

[26] ". . . the distinction that Aristotle makes between the knowledge of *phronēsis* and the theoretical knowledge of *epistēmē* is a simple one. . . . A hermeneutics of the human sciences could certainly learn nothing from the distinction between moral knowledge and this kind of 'theoretical' knowledge. Compared to this kind of 'theoretical' knowledge, the human sciences stand close to moral knowledge. They are 'moral sciences' " (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 280). Of course, at this point Gadamer still stressed the distinction between the human and natural sciences. Later, he would extend the *phronēsis* trajectory: "Even in the domain of the natural sciences, the grounding of scientific knowledge cannot avoid the hermeneutical consequence of the fact that the so-called 'given' cannot be separated from interpretation" ("Text and Interpretation," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction* 30).

of reconstructive hermeneutics. The flux of radical historicity has destroyed the foundationalist basis for the understanding-application distinction. "We too [like Aristotle, but now globally] determined that application is neither a subsequent nor a merely occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning."[27]

Interdisciplinary Appeal of Moderate Postmodernism

The moderate postmodern trajectory outlined here, whose fundamental features include both nonfoundationalist ontology and *phronēsis*-type rationality, has gained disciples, even if only implicitly, across a variety of disciplines. For example, Bernstein points out that early on Peter Winch sought to develop a nonfoundationalist, nonpositivistic sociological theory which, at the same time, would avoid irrationality.[28] Strongly influenced by Wittgenstein, and fighting against the positivism of Comte and Mill, Winch claimed that there existed a priori structures on the societal and cultural level which constituted regulative forms of life for the members of particular communities. All "knowledge" gained by individuals was, therefore, deeply informed by social practice, local custom and common usage. Concomitantly, the criteria by which such knowledge was judged, i.e. the epistemic warrants for "truth," were answerable only to the forms of life hegemonic within the particular community itself. Since modes of social life and discourse possess a logic and criteria internal to themselves, they are not subject to external verification. Winch was not calling for irrationality or nihilism, but was defending the idea that all thinking is bound to paradigms. Human rationality is exercised within radically contingent circumstances, thereby excluding overarching, "objective" criteria which would be applicable to all forms of life and discourse. In the last analysis, Winch merely sought to reaffirm Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's restoration of the "world" to the substance-subject tradition of Western thought.

The backlash against Winch's seeming obviation of universal standards of rationality was led by Kai Nielsen who defended the empirical-verificationist criteria of truth in his famous article condemning

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[27] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 289.

[28] Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). Analyses of Winch's thought may be found in Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology,* trans. James Bohman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1984) 90–92; and in Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 25–30.

Wittgensteinian Fideism.[29] Nielsen argues that by retreating into the epistemic authority of sociocultural customs and regulative forms of life, Winch, like his mentor, Wittgenstein, is unable to assert the "incoherence, illogicality, irrationality or unintelligibility of a form of life itself." If we are not to plunge irrevocably toward nihilism, then we must hold that ". . . what constitutes evidence or tests for the truth or reliability of specific claims is not completely idiosyncratic to the context or activity we are talking about."[30] Nielsen, in a way paralleling the Derrida/Gadamer encounter, seeks to push Winch into the either/or of foundationalism or nihilism.

Bernstein comes to Winch's defense, arguing that he is inchoately groping for the *phronēsis* tradition of rationality defended by Gadamer. In the harsh light of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Winch recognizes that foundationalism and its epistemological and hermeneutical correlates have been superseded. He seeks to develop and defend rationality, i.e. reason which, *in exercitu,* is utterly determined by concrete sociocultural customs, as well as by regulative paradigms, frameworks, forms of life, and traditions. Nielsen is certainly correct in arguing that one must be able to distinguish incoherency from coherency, unintelligibility from intelligibility. The proper means, however, is not in Nielsen's species of foundationalism, i.e. an inappropriate positivism, but in Aristotle's "deliberating well" in concrete and contingent circumstances.

The search for a nonfoundationalist rationality is visible not only in Winch, but also, and perhaps preeminently, in Thomas Kuhn.[31] Since the publication of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* Kuhn, like Winch, has been accused of irrationality and epistemological nihilism. His well-known insistence on incommensurability, theory-ladenness, and nonpositivistic dimensions in the process of paradigm change has, some claim, undermined the scientific process itself.[32] Indicative of just such a charge is the statement of one recent commentator that Kuhn makes the history of science appear "thoroughly discontinuous

[29] Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism," *Philosophy* 42 (1967) 191–209.

[30] Ibid. 206, 208. Similar criticisms of Wittgenstein's alleged cultural and epistemological solipsism may be found in the Popperian-based analysis by Peter Munz, *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1985).

[31] There is no need to recount here the extensive literature on Kuhn or the subsequent debates on rationality and science which his work has provoked, but it may be appropriate to note a recent theological work inspired by Kuhn's thought: *Paradigm Change in Theology,* ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

[32] Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); Karl Popper, "The Rationality of Scientific Revolutions," in *Problems of Science,* ed. Rom Harré (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1975).

and fragmented," thereby giving the impression that scientific progress is simply "a rationally unjustifiable series of lurches from one closed theoretical and perceptual framework to another with no possibility of mutual communication or evaluation."[33]

Like Winch, Kuhn is simply seeking to uncover the ubiquitous historical and hermeneutical dimensions which inform thought. His central contribution, of course, remains his piercing the fortress of natural science with issues such as theory-laden interpretation and paradigm-bound rationality. On a more fundamental level, Kuhn's calling into question the fact-theory distinction, alluded to as a central thesis of his work, indicates an obviation of the foundationalist ontological grounds which make that hermeneutical distinction possible.[34] Kuhn's mistrust of foundationalism should not, however, be equated with nihilism or anarchism. On the contrary, his introduction of historical-hermeneutical elements, or what I have called moderate postmodernism, into the philosophy of science, should be seen as an indeterminate groping after a theory of rationality which is concretely determined by its historical circumstances. Kuhn seeks in the natural sciences what Winch sought in the social, viz. an ontologically appropriate theory of truth and rationality. Many of the misunderstandings of his work, then, should be attributed to his attempt *not* to undermine scientific inquiry, but to develop an understanding of scientific truth consonant with the postmodern horizons which have been buried by foundationalist-oriented philosophies of science. Simply put, what Kuhn needs is a theory of practical reason or *phronēsis*, akin to the Gadamerian retrieval of Aristotle, which avoids both objectivism and nihilism.[35]

Habermas and Moderate Postmodernism

Gadamer's recovery of the *phronēsis* tradition, while applauded by many contemporary thinkers, is frequently considered a bit too slippery when it comes to the question of truth. The perduring issue is whether "deliberating well" and "hitting the mark" provide adequate

[33] Anthony O'Hear, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 75, 80.

[34] ". . . [the] distinction between . . . fact and theory will, however, immediately prove to be exceedingly artificial [and its] artificiality is an important clue to several of this essay's main theses" (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1962] 52). Kuhn's indictment of the fact-theory distinction should be seen as comparable to Gadamer's collapse of the understanding-application differentiation. Both distinctions are possible *only* with foundationalist ontologies.

[35] Kuhn himself begins to develop this notion of "practical reason" in his later work *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1977). The connections here with Gadamer are developed by Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism* 50–65.

criteria for determining, in any public way, coherency and intelligibility as opposed to their opposites.[36] Because of this apparent weakness in Gadamer's thought, several thinkers have turned to Jürgen Habermas, seeking to supplement the *phronēsis* tradition with a theory of communicative praxis.[37] Habermas may be classified as a moderate postmodernist inasmuch as he establishes no unshakeable Archimedean lever or foundationalist ground, no ironclad metaphysical, epistemological or transcendental first principle from which to begin the search for knowledge.[38] Despite his differences with Heidegger, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein, Habermas recognizes the thoroughly determinative and constitutive dimensions of historicity and finitude; he acknowledges that substance and subject are "saturated" with otherness and difference.

But like other moderate postmodernists, Habermas has a deep respect for the capacities of human rationality. His theory of communicative praxis seeks to reclaim the positive heritage of the Enlightenment, with its concern to unmask the distortions of the tradition and to allow reason its liberative, transformative, and emancipatory role. In pursuit of this end, Habermas speaks of the "ideal-speech situation" where free and autonomous adults can exercise their critical faculties, seeking consensus in intersubjective communication and domination-free discussion.[39] Habermas's goal, then, is to transform critical reason in light of the postmodern horizons discussed above. Reason must not

[36] This line of reasoning has been developed by Jean Grondin, "Hermeneutical Truth and Its Historical Presuppositions," in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*, ed. Evan Simpson (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing, 1987) 45–58; Lawrence Hinman, "*Quid facti* or *Quid juris?* The Fundamental Ambiguity of Gadamer's Understanding of Hermeneutics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40 (1980) 513; and Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism* 151.

[37] In decidedly theological contexts, this is the move which has been made by David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Thomas Ommen, "Theology and the Fusion of Horizons," *Philosophy and Theology* 3 (1988) 57–72; and Claude Geffré, *The Risk of Interpretation*, trans. David Smith (New York: Paulist, 1987). Bernstein has championed this point of view in *Beyond Objectivism* 109–69, and in "The Rage Against Reason."

[38] I wish to emphasize that I have classified Habermas as a moderate postmodernist despite the fact that some, like Fredric Jameson, would see in Habermas's defense of the 18th century a return to metanarrative (*Postmodernism* 61). While it is true that Habermas has emphasized, against both Heidegger and Gadamer, that the universalist positions of the Enlightenment cannot simply be eradicated from the humanist tradition, his defense of that universalism is clearly nonfoundationalist and so, ultimately, quite different from the Enlightenment itself (Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick Lawrence [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1983] 197).

[39] A summary of the "ideal-speech situation" may be found in Paul Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory: The Discourse of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

be understood as the instrument of foundationalist ontology, ruthlessly enforcing transcultural absolutes and relentlessly dominating through the mythology of universal truths. Rather, the rationality which sits deeply embedded in society, history, and language merely solicits unforced and respectful conversation.

The advance which Habermas offers over Gadamer, even though both pursue the *phronēsis* tradition of rationality, is that the former, through the notions of communicative praxis and critical reason, has given concrete and public form to the task of "deliberating well" in contingent and finite circumstances. One speaks, therefore, not simply of "hitting the mark," but of publicly redeemable truth warrants for determining the *results* of proper deliberation. What Habermas has developed is an ontologically appropriate rationality which gives determinate shape to how practical reason should proceed in a democratic and egalitarian society.[40]

The theological adherents of the moderate postmodern trajectory, in all its forms, constitute an impressive cast. Most of these have followed the *phronēsis* type of rationality outlined by Gadamer (including his correlative hermeneutical trajectory), further supplementing this with elements from Habermas's theory of communicative praxis.[41]

Despite similarities, those in the "strong" postmodernist position ardently disassociate themselves from the "moderate" trajectory, seeing in it an untenable *via media*. Thinkers like Gadamer continue to maintain deeply held strategies for presence such as *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the *Horizontverschmelzung*. In John Caputo's view, Gadamer has domesticated and betrayed the deconstructive, strong postmodernist tendencies in Heidegger; Caputo accuses Gadamer of a

[40] The inability of Heidegger and Gadamer to develop a truly *intersubjective* theory of practical reason is the ultimate basis for Habermas's reservations about their thought. So, against Heidegger, Habermas says: "But the priority of the lifeworld's intersubjectivity over the mineness of *Dasein* escapes any conceptual framework still tinged with the solipsism of Husserlian phenomenology" (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,* trans. Frederick Lawrence [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1987]) 149.

[41] Some theologians involved in this enterprise are listed in note 37 above. Paul Lakeland also follows the moderate postmodern trajectory, telling us that the only two choices for theology are Habermas or Derrida/Foucault. Otherwise, he says, theology will "degenerate into senescence by a fearful retention of a precritical outlook" (*Theology and Critical Theory* 99). John Caputo offers an explanation for the widespread theological appeal of the moderate postmodern trajectory: "That is why Gadamerian hermeneutics is so attractive to theologians—it allows them to develop moderate theories of theological traditions in which theology is neither hide-bound to archaic dogmatic formulations nor forced to throw the dogmatic baby (a terror of a child!) out with the historical bath" ("Gadamer's Closet Essentialism," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction* 261). Whether or not Caputo is correct when he says that the dogmatic baby is not lost in Gadamerian nonfoundationalism is certainly a debatable point.

"closet essentialism" which seeks to avoid the abyss, rupture and breach of radical historicity.[42] This simply echoes Derrida's implicit claim that Gadamer is furtively clinging to a last shred of metaphysics, presence, and logos-centered thought.[43]

Habermas, too, has been subjected to criticism by the strong postmodernists. As Lyotard says, "Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion as Jürgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus always does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissention."[44] Habermas has been seduced not by Hegel, but by the metanarrative of emancipation. But no less than foundationalism, Lyotard argues, these *grands récits* always veer towards totality, systematization, and dominance.

CONCLUSION

To return to our original question: Is the moderate postmodern or *phronēsis* trajectory an adequate way to understand the rationality proper to theological discourse? It is obvious that strong postmodernism, with its distrust of protological-eschatological schemas, *grands récits,* and metanarratives is intrinsically antithetical to any traditional form of Christian truth. For what are the *magnalia Dei* of salvation history if not an elaborate narrative? It is irrefragably true, of course, that the kind of "history" proper to the Christian narrative is notoriously difficult to determine. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that a constitutive dimension of Christian *faith* is the fact that God has intervened, has exhibited some sort of causality with regard to history, thereby effecting an "economy of salvation." However God's intervention is understood, the "story" of Christianity encompasses the communication of a message regarding the meaning of life, its origin, and its final end. It offers, indeed, a totalizing, systematic vision of reality, something which, however understood, strong postmodernism finds oppressive.[45] But if strong postmodernism appears antithetical to Christian claims, what of less stringent moderate postmodernism with its willingness to allow some measure of presence and continuity?

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[42] Caputo's critique of Gadamer's ontologization of history may be found in "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism" in *Dialogue and Deconstruction* 258–64, and in *Radical Hermeneutics* 108–19.

[43] Jacques Derrida, "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction* 52–54.

[44] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xxv; for Lyotard's spirited discussion of Habermas, see 60–65.

[45] This is not to say that strong postmodernism has nothing to teach Christianity. For example, Derrida's claim that words both refer and defer in the play of the signs bears a connection with the entire apophatic tradition of Christian theology and spirituality.

It is my contention that moderate postmodernism, while it has taught theology important lessons and continues to do so, cannot serve, ultimately, as an adequate alternative to theological foundationalism.[46] Of course, the fruitfulness of the moderate postmodern trajectory is easily attested to. It has corrected the stolidity of traditional theology by a congeries of historical-hermeneutical concerns: the epistemic/ontological importance of historicity, radical finitude, sociocultural frameworks, linguisticality, ideology, etc.[47] However, it is essential to remember that postmodernism, even in its moderate variety, challenges not simply woodenheaded positivism or ahistorical conceptualism. It is not merely a reminder that all knowing involves a noesis-noema relationship. Rather, postmodernism involves fundamental ontological presuppositions which militate against the type of truth which appears to be integrally linked to a Catholic theology of revelation.

What theological demands are at odds even with moderate postmodernism? The primary issue is the understanding of the cognitive status of credal and doctrinal statements that has dominated the Catholic tradition. There is no need to recount here the various struggles concerning theological epistemology which have been waged throughout the history of the Church, struggles emerging with greater frequency and urgency since the 18th century. It should be noted, however, that these debates have yielded a central affirmation concerning what the Catholic understanding of God's "revealing" himself implies: that revelation has a noetic dimension and that the Church can, in faith, grasp this revelation and make true statements (even, with all the proper qualifications, perpetually true statements) about various states of affairs. It is precisely this referential and universal understanding of revelation's cognitive claims that has propelled a vigorous search, since the rise of historical consciousness, for theories which allow for growth, development, and ever-widening inclusiveness (e.g. the unique soteriological claims of Jesus Christ and the Church) even

[46] I emphasize that moderate postmodernism continues to teach theology important lessons. For example, Habermas's ideal-speech situation, vis-à-vis the notions of Reception and *sensus fidelium,* is worthy of further exploration.

[47] Since the time of the *nouvelle théologie,* and even earlier, several of these horizons, before their white-hot intensification in recent thought, had been studied by theologians. There is no need once again to rehearse the contributions of Newman, Möhler, Gardeil, Chenu, de Lubac, Rousselot, Maréchal, and Vatican II. It is certainly true, however, that the contemporary discussion of postmodernity has forced theology to investigate still more rigorously the relationship between historicity, ideology, and thinking. A fine statement, modestly incorporating several prominent postmodern themes, was recently issued by the International Theological Commission; see "On the Interpretation of Dogmas," *Origins* 20 (17 May 1990) 1–14.

while they protect a fundamental continuity and congruency with the assertions of the patristic and conciliar tradition. The theological debates extending from *Ineffabilis Deus* in 1854 to *Mysterium Ecclesiae* in 1973 (including Vatican II) stand as testimonies to this effort to develop the idea of homogenous growth in the doctrinal tradition, i.e. to reconcile the referential and integral nature of that tradition with its actual growth, development and change. At stake here is the need to defend revelation as encompassing essential elements of *material*, not simply formal and historical, continuity. In order to maintain this material identity of the salvific, revelatory narrative, definitive ecclesial teaching requires a determinate and stable foundation which allows for the reconstructive understanding of that teaching, its integral transmission and its referential nature.

This is certainly not to contend that revelation is collapsible to its cognitive content, thereby emptying it of personalist, existentialist, or symbolic dimensions. Precisely that kind of past theological formalism or positivism spawned a properly spirited reaction. It is to suggest, however, that if "revelation" is understood as God's own self-manifestation, then there must be an irreducible cognitive dimension that is identical, noncontradictory, referential, and continuous. Moderate postmodernism, however, with its ultimate emphasis on historicity and indeterminacy, along with its logically consequent rejection of reconstructive hermeneutics, cannot sustain (despite its other, more fluid strategies for presence) the type of hermeneutics of doctrine which this notion of revelation demands. Of fundamental importance here (with ramifications beyond the scope of this article) is the Christian idea that the ultimate and overarching horizon of Being is creation, not history. One does not trace the givenness of Being to an endless series of messages, *Seinsgeschicke,* which, in the West at least, began with Anaximander. The event character of Being is ultimately rooted in a *creatio ex nihilo* from which an eternal God began a dialogue of salvation with his creatures. The final horizon is traceable, therefore, to a particular event rather than to an unending dialectic of givenness and concealedness.

The Christian self-understanding, consequently, is saturated *ab initio* with options for finality and ultimacy which strike at the very heart of moderate postmodernism. This understanding of revelation appears to demand ontological foundationalism, with its concomitant hermeneutical and epistemological correlates, in order to sustain the narrative of salvation precisely *as* narrative, i.e. as continuing dialogue between God and humanity without radical rupture, reversal, or breach. Even moderate postmodernism, with its ontological nonfoundationalism, its hermeneutical rejection of the understanding-

application distinction and its attempt to rehabilitate *phronēsis* in order to avoid nihilism, cannot, in the last analysis, preserve this Catholic understanding of the salvation narrative. It is unable to do this because, despite its insistence on the commingled horizons of presence and absence, moderate postmodernism must make its ultimate option for radical historicity, finitude, and contingency over against the finality, integrity, and perpetuity which the Catholic notion of revelation implies. Further, the nonfoundationalist move toward *phronēsis* rationality constitutes a theoretical abandonment of theory which cannot sustain the referential and final nature of truth which seems essential to revelation theology.[48] Perhaps Christian theologians must join Derrida and Foucault when they claim that one must make a choice between radical incongruity or metaphysics. The *via media* of moderate postmodernism is inadequate from both points of view.

In conclusion, given Christianity's claims to universal and referential truth, the rationality proper to theology is neither strong nor moderate postmodernism but, rather, a sophisticated and nuanced foundationalism. This foundationalism must be salubriously chastened by postmodernism, thereby incorporating the broad horizons of historicity, facticity and paradigm-bound rationality even while maintaining the metaphysical/transcendental subject. Theology then has a proper ground for sustaining the integral and continuous narrative of salvation, without rejecting the perspectivalism and subjective noetic dimensions which are gnoseologically essential. This nuanced theological foundationalism also preserves a correlationist view of theology. Indeed, a failure of theology to engage in mutual and reciprocal dialogue with the texts of other disciplines, to be *theologia discens* as well as *docens*, violates the Catholic understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. However, this "correlationist" theology is also necessarily allied with the Anselmian *fides quaerens intellectum*. This is simply to say that the revelation offered in Jesus Christ has established an unshakeable Archimedean point which is at the heart of the *mysterium fidei*, a point embracing basic dimensions of material identity, continuity, and presence. The integrity of this *fides*, then, requires a rationality which incorporates, but in the last analysis remains resistent to, the decentering currents of historicity and alterity which dominate much contemporary thought.

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[48] A similar comment is made by Geoffrey Wainwright in his charge (leveled at Lindbeck) of "ontological timidity." Of course, this is simply the foundationalist Christian rejoinder to the postmodern taunt of "ontological anxiety." Wainwright's comment may be found in "Ecumenical Dimensions of Lindbeck's 'Nature of Doctrine,'" *Modern Theology* 4 (1988) 121–32.