

degree defective, then in lieu of redesigning the production process so as to eliminate error (let us say this is not technologically feasible), we might produce machines that once in operation can monitor and correct for their defects. The most significant defects in the present case (human selves) would be those in the self-formation process that affect our ability to deliberate well, to reflect in an objective manner, to understand ourselves and our projects, and to be effective in satisfying our most important desires. Psychological and mental development may have introduced distorting mechanisms into our rational processes, frozen pathways that affect but are not accessible to our deliberating, rigid obsessions that contaminate rational thought, and so forth. So we want a society that not only gives us room to deploy our deliberative capacities, but also encourages processes that help us to monitor and repair defects even in the very mechanisms of our deliberation and choosing.

But is that instrumental reason for encouraging self-making selves the whole story? The thought of the German idealists was that a fully satisfying human life is one that is *conscious* of its freedom, that is aware of itself as freely willing in its activities. It is not enough that we simply have undistorted deliberating. We must, in order to be genuinely self-relating in the manner that autonomy requires, be able to take ourselves to be autonomous, and to be to a considerable degree responsible for being the sort of selves we are. There must be that measure of *reflexivity* in our freedom, not only because this is a good way to make us better deliberators but also because that kind of self-experiencing belongs intrinsically to what it is to be free. There is something right about that claim, even if we must be careful not to let this good overwhelm all other ones. The modern process of intensifying subjectivity, and of concentrating there all significant powers of determination, needs to be limited. But we are left with self-relating and self-determining selves with a surprisingly small loss of status. And attacks on metaphysical notions of interiority will not reduce the importance for us of a rich inner life, and of the commitments it makes possible.

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8

Postmodernism

The Character of Postmodern Thought

Many positions may call themselves postmodern, or may be called so by others, and the modern period against which the postmodern is defined will depend on the subject matter one is treating. In what follows I shall make a type out of what is clearly a diverse group of individuals, with sometimes rather weak family resemblances. The postmodern thinker gains prestige through giving credit to, even if not through giving a proper account of, certain perceptions shared by many intellectuals today. There is the experience of living in a world in which television, advertising, and media manipulation seem to give reality itself the character of a manufactured image. One has the sense of the self as having lost a depth formerly attributed to it, so that it is now, as is the case with the world, a shallow artifact of cultural production. There is also a considerable disenchantment with the projects set in place by the Enlightenment. The emancipation of individuals through rational reflection has been accompanied in modern liberal democracies by subtler forms of coercion. And we are more fully aware of the ways that harmful biases can inhabit Enlightenment legal and political institutions, while claims to truth and objectivity are seen to mask relations of power. Recent culture also forms in us a highly developed self-consciousness concerning the contingency and artificiality of our systems of belief and of our forms of artistic production, so that an ironic play with conventions and vocabularies may become more appealing than using them to let the world display itself.

Postmodern thinkers will typically move on from those perceptions and habits of thought to radical conclusions that at least sound philosophical, though the intent behind them may be a rhetorical one. Where reality itself has become a manufactured image, it will be said, it can no longer make sense to measure our beliefs against how matters really stand. When selves are understood to be cultural artifacts, then the notion of self-discovery and self-emancipation is a delusion. If rational practices must occur within a nexus of power and taken-for-granted biases, then the goal of coming to have a more objective account of reality and of ethical relations is a foolish one.

So the postmodern thinker cannot criticize society in the way that,

say, a Marxist can. The latter will claim, for example, that a late capitalist society distorts and conceals the real needs of individuals and the real social relations among them. But the postmodernist will claim that there are no such hidden needs and relations to be discovered; social construction is not imposed on a recalcitrant material but goes all the way down to generate reality, selves, and needs as artifacts of its working. If we have described a progression by which modern philosophy led to the picture of an ever thinner world, we have now reached, with the postmodern conception, a point at which the world has truly disappeared over against the machinery of cultural production. The modern notion of a representation or of a constructed objectivity retains its contrast with a world whose ultimate character is perhaps, to us, inscrutable. In Heidegger's history of Western thought, that sense of a representational objectivity is gradually replaced by a more technological mode of encountering the world, as reality becomes no more than a "stock in reserve," an inventory to be used up in order to keep the blind processes of modernity in operation.¹ But still here we have the suggestion of an absence, of a reality that has withdrawn itself from us and that might become available again to a different sort of attention. But with postmodern thought even the shadow of such a contrast is no longer present. We are dealing with simulations, artifacts, and signs all the way down. We can play with them cleverly or not, manipulate them self-consciously or with little awareness. But there is nothing missing here, no deeper reality that we might even want to strive for, no contrast with something that has a better sort of reality. So there is little point left in calling the view an antirealist one. The very distinctions have broken down between reality and a simulation of it, between truth and fiction, between objectivity and rhetorical manipulation.

(The reader may wonder here what is the significance of the claim that everything is a sign or a simulation once the implicitly contrastive content of those expressions has been removed. The claim that everything is a text is no longer very controversial if I have guaranteed its truth by expanding the sense of 'text' in such a manner that I am merely using that widened sense to redescribe ordinary beliefs. Hegel is again an instructive thinker here. On my reading of him, his claim to find the structure of subjectivity wherever there is any metaphysical determinacy belongs to a project of redescription, rather than to one whose outcome will be that the world is less substantial than we thought it was. So he does not fit the postmodern mold at all.)

It is often unclear how seriously one is expected to take the post-

¹ That history is summarized in Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, Joan Stambaugh, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Three of the four essays in that book are from the second volume of Heidegger's *Nietzsche*.

modern positions. Some groups use them as a tool against more entrenched opponents but then proceed quite earnestly to put forward claims whose rightness and objectivity one is expected to acknowledge. With some thinkers it seems that the universities can be a place for self-indulgent play now that they are isolated from meaningful political discussions, so that the play in question cannot have a damaging effect on the Enlightenment political and legal institutions upon which everyone depends. What must be evident is that there is an enormous gap between the evidence of the cultural experiences that the postmodernist addresses, and the radical philosophical conclusions that are thought to follow from them. Granted that the technological development of new media may give us a changed sense of reality. Very little, if anything, follows regarding how realist an account we ought to give of our success in the natural sciences. Granted that we are more aware today of the ways that our movement toward greater objectivity may hide new forms of coercion and control. It certainly will not follow, from those considerations alone, that reason, truth, and objectivity become useless notions.

Insofar as arguments are given, they tend to be general indictments of Enlightenment hopes that we can use metaphysical accounts to support modern forms of life. It will be said, for example, that we can no longer believe in the sort of metaphysical self that can stand outside its practices in order to criticize them; so our task of bringing about progress through self-critical reflection is in trouble. Nor can we have any confidence in the great Enlightenment metanarratives about the triumph of reason or of the proletariat. Such metanarratives are dangerous, history has shown us, in the ways they excuse great suffering so that their purposes can be accomplished. We are now better off, it will be said, in a postmetaphysical age.

But just how much are we giving up in thus becoming postmetaphysical? It has been one of my claims throughout that we do not have to give up all that much. Even if we join Davidson in his attack on reifications, we can retain a robust sense of getting things right, of having to accommodate our beliefs to a world that regulates our accounts of it. Even after we accept the disenchantment of subjectivity, and no longer make any appeal to the powers of a noumenal self, we can have a satisfying sense of ourselves as self-relating and self-determining. Even when we give up the belief that reason can guide history in the way that divine providence was thought to guide it, and when we recognize that universal laws of reason cannot be derived from the nature of a pure subjectivity, still our practices of rational inference and evidence gathering retain their importance and prestige, and have a very wide scope of application instead of being either quite local phenomena or fashions to which we are temporarily committed. In one sense of the term, we are postmodern in having to face up to practices and

conceptions that have lost their deep metaphysical support. But it turns out that we remain modern in that these practices and conceptions can to a very considerable degree survive the changeover.

We shall be willing, then, to give up the metaphysical conceptions of the Enlightenment if by that is meant a giving up of a divinized model of subjectivity or of reason. The self cannot take up a God's-eye stance toward its own practices, nor can it confer determinacy upon the world or upon itself. And we should not see reason as occupying the available slot in the divine model we have described: that of a self-relating in relating to otherness. Reason, according to that model, appears as an imperialist power that seeks to have its own modes of articulation mirrored in everything it touches, so that all otherness is swallowed up into its working, as in certain conceptions of God. Then we have a dangerous notion of reason that is easily associated with violence and with a colonizing of the world and of the self. But it should be obvious that in giving up that metaphysical conception we are hardly giving up our faith in our everyday notions of truth, objectivity, and rational self-criticism. In earlier chapters I have defended just such notions while assenting to radical attacks on the divinized models of modernity.

What, then, can be behind the postmodern leap to a radical metaphysical account when the arguments that are available support a much smaller step away from the Enlightenment picture? My claim should not be a surprising one at this stage; I believe that even in supposedly ridding themselves of the metaphysical pictures of the modern period, the postmodernist retains a deep pattern of thought that we located both in late medieval and in modern philosophy. Let us reconsider the triangular structure whose sides are the world, the speaking or acting self, and cultural practices relevant to determining what selves and the world are like. We might talk of an energy system at work within that triangulation, and of how the power to generate determinacy is distributed across it. Earlier we examined, and resisted, a number of pressures that, in the relation of subject and world, would make all the determining power migrate from the latter to the former. Much of recent philosophy, we have said, can be seen as examining what happens when the third position (cultural practice, linguistic codes, the activity of interpretation) becomes more dominant in the triangle. One possibility (which I will persist in calling theological) is that all the determinative power will flow to the third position. Then the first two positions become too insubstantial to constrain that power significantly, and the projection of determinacy from the third must appear as external and arbitrary, as not made more or less fitting by what is the case in the world or in the self. The other possibility is the more balanced distribution I have argued for in previous chapters, with world, self, and cultural practice each helping to determine the content of the other two positions.

I take it to be typical of the postmodern thinker to adopt the first picture, that is, the one where all determinative power flows to the position of cultural practice and interpretation. There is a standard move that occurs in work that is called postmodern and that is frequent enough to be a signature. A claim is made that a set of beliefs is responsive to some independent givenness, to some independent determinacy; but then the postmodern thinker replies that what is thus being measured up to is itself an artifact produced by that which is supposedly being sensitive to it. Did the scientist match his beliefs with what reality is like? No, says Rorty. He made his beliefs conform with what conversational practices had frozen as the background that fixed what everyone would count as real. Did the study of madness or sexual deviancy produce a better understanding of these phenomena? No, says Foucault. The psychiatrist's beliefs were matched with objects that had been newly constructed by the psychiatrist's discourse: the madman and the sexual deviant. Does a particular form of political life fit the real needs of human individuals? No, it constructs humans with the sort of needs that will fit that form of political life. Do contemporary therapies help us to discover and to liberate ourselves? No, they teach us to form the kind of selves that will fit smoothly into contemporary modes of discourse, that will be just the sort of thing that therapeutic discourse will be well-poised to uncover. Did the canon of great works of literature arise because of a sensitivity to genuine quality in those works? No, those in power simply created and projected standards of quality that would enforce their own self-esteem. Does the careful study of a literary text help us to have a better sense of what *it* says? No, one learns to follow the construction codes of one's profession and so to generate a text out of fairly neutral raw material.

Now such claims may be persuasive in particular cases. But what interests me here is how dominant the move we are discussing becomes in postmodern thought. One is not just trying to show, as the parochial realist wants to show, that what one brings to the world in lighting it up will shape what is there to be found. Nor is one arguing that bias and power interests will distort the picture we arrive at of how things really are. One is instead inflating the role of cultural practices so radically that world and self virtually disappear as constraints on those practices or as measures of their success. And one tends to make that move across the board, in all areas, without qualification.

What could motivate one toward that very radical stance when there are many appealing compromise positions that fall well short of it? We are back to a familiar structure: There is an opposition between a determining power and that which is other to it, and gradually the latter is transformed into the merest reflection of the former. The world first becomes, for the moderns, an indeterminate sensory givenness, and then

in Fichte even that givenness seems to disappear, as the finite ego and the world confronting it are both said to derive from a deeper subjective activity of self-positing, one that lays out a world as that against which the self's ethical activity needs to exert itself. The self-to-other structure is generated out of the self, so that the otherness of what is other becomes to a considerable degree illusory. And that pattern of thought goes back, we have seen, to earlier theological accounts. The world retains a weakened ontological stability in the subtle balances of Aquinas's picture, but it is further undermined in the thought of the later medieval. It is then difficult for theologians to give an account that prevents what is other from collapsing into God's own activity, that allows a genuine space for the metaphysical integrity and personal agency of created beings. A divine self-relational structure erodes the determinacy of everything else, so that the relation to otherness is itself generated out of that activity of self-relating.

It seems that the postmodern mode of thought retains the theological picture instead of rethinking it. Otherness is swallowed up into cultural and hermeneutic practices; self and world become no more independent and substantial than the world itself could be for the voluntarist God. It is as difficult to find a space for human activity over against the formative power of the cultural economy as it was to find a space of genuine human agency over against the absolute freedom and predestining power of the divine will. (Even if one turns against God, that turning has already, for the late medieval thinker, been given its place by God's creative power and foreknowledge. Even if we set ourselves over against the culture and demand that it recognize our reality, that stance has already, for the postmodernist, been constituted in advance by cultural institutions.) Codes of discourse, like the activity of divine knowing, find only reflections of themselves as they relate to the world, and selves are created by the discourses that purport to be about them. The distinction between thought and reality is itself set forth, as in Fichte, within a self-positing activity of discursive machineries. The enduring power of those earlier models makes the radical picture here more appealing, when what evidence we have warrants much more modest conclusions about the power of our cultural practices.

I have suggested that postmodern thought often employs a shift in the field marked out by modern philosophy, rather than a rethinking of it. Interpretation or cultural practices or criticism will do to the realm of semantic and psychological phenomena what the turn to the subject once did to the world itself. And we can see here a different way in which that pattern appears. Recall the description in Chapter 5 of the structure of modern self-assertion. The modern self may peculiarly combine modesty and passivity with ambition. That which thins out the world and makes it an appropriate realm for human construction and projec-

tion is precisely its relation to an absolute power that humans cannot hope to fathom, and that makes possible at every step of the way our working upon the world.

A space for postmodern self-assertion arises in a similar fashion. On the one hand, the self acknowledges that it is the artifact of cultural processes that it cannot hope to understand or control, and that are responsible for producing the self virtually out of nothing. But then the field of intentionality itself has been thinned out by those divinized cultural practices, and that very emptying out opens up a space upon which readers and critics, depending on the group they represent, can project whatever meanings and values they wish. One had to give the cultural practices a divineline power of determination in order to thin out the space of semantic and mental phenomena in that fashion. The modern self acknowledges its humility over against God and then proceeds to become a demiurge constructing a substitute world of controllable appearances. The postmodern self acknowledges its humility as against cultural practices of production and then takes up a demiurgic role toward the minds and texts of others. The loss of the world gives the modern self a freedom it only gradually assumes, while the disenchantment of subjectivity, understood in the postmodern fashion, gives the postmodern critic or interpreter a freedom and power it assumes more readily. Whereas the freedom of the Hegelian self came not through a power to construct and project but through having genuinely comprehended the metaphysical character of the world, the postmodern self earns its freedom in the modern way, by the emptying out of that which opposes it.

Postmodern claims are often accompanied by generalizations far more sweeping, and from far less evidence, than the claims found in the supposedly dangerous metanarratives mentioned earlier. Here is a summary by Lyotard:

The 'philosophies of history' that inspired the nineteenth and twentieth centuries claim to assure passages over the abyss of heterogeneity or the event. The names which are those of 'our history' oppose counterexamples to their claim. - Everything real is rational, everything rational is real: 'Auschwitz' refutes speculative doctrine. This crime at least, which is real... is not rational. - Everything proletarian is communist, everything communist is proletarian: 'Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980'... refute the doctrine of historical materialism; the workers rose up against the Party. - Everything democratic is by and for the people and vice versa: 'May 1968' refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism.²

That sort of thinking can hardly be expected to get us to pay more attention to the details of particular cases, to the ways they resist our

² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Georges van den Abbeele, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 179.

large stories, to the differences between otherwise similar events. What can be more ludicrous than the claim that the events in Paris in May 1968 "refute" parliamentary liberalism? But the mention of such a refutation suggests the move that is at work here. Certain large meta-narratives were such as to have the theological tendency to colonize all otherness, to make themselves real by violently assimilating "heterogeneous" events into the large machineries described by and embodied in those narratives. We shall, with Lyotard, not regret their loss of influence. But then he wants to describe the rational and political and legal practices fostered by the Enlightenment as if their support had to come from such a violent metanarrative.

What seems to happen in these discussions is that one accepts the field of conceptual play set up by the inertia of earlier theological patterns, and then proceeds to stigmatize reason in a global manner suitable for play only on that sort of field. The postmodern thinker will define the enemy, Enlightenment reason, as if it still occupied a position in the earlier structure, and therefore the sort of opposition that seems possible and necessary will be one determined through being set over against such a divinized opponent. But once we stop thinking about the institutions of the Enlightenment in those terms, then we can see that the practice of reasoning carefully and forming one's beliefs responsibly encourages a thinking that is pluralist, skeptical, critical, and attuned to particular contingencies. The destruction of the planetary environment is not due to the advance of Western reason across the globe, but to deeply irrational policy making. The swallowing up of difference and otherness may seem to be accomplished by Reason if one looks at the West with the earlier conceptual field in mind, and if one looks at the results of processes of social rationalization. But it is clear that a rational human would much prefer to live in a world that keeps alive very different ways of living as possibilities, even if not real possibilities for every individual, of what living a human life can be like, so that it is rational to oppose the erosion of difference. The cause of Auschwitz is surely not that there was too thorough a triumph of the Enlightenment legal and ethical and political institutions.

Our result here has analogies with the position found in Habermas.³ Much of what he says about the structure of "subject-centered" reason in Hegel and Marx fits well with what I have been saying about the divinized self-relational structure that keeps appearing in different guises. Habermas feels that after we reject that way of understanding reason, we still have to recognize the not yet fully developed potential of Enlightenment thought to bring about emancipation, justice, and happiness.

³ I am thinking especially of the set of lectures he has published as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Frederick Lawrence, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

He mentions the virtues of our institutions of procedural justice, for example. I do not see any arguments on the postmodern side that would cause us to reject that conclusion.

One result of the postmodern turn will be a skepticism about the virtue of rational reflection on our forms of life, in any manner that might be thought to have practical effects, since reason is either theological and metaphysical or the artifact of practices of power. Lyotard wants, for example, to isolate large political ideas from those practices through which beliefs are typically formed and tested.⁴ Such ideas and political revolutions as well are for him like Kantian Ideas of Reason or like the Kantian sublime: They may edify us in a way that promotes solidarity, but they cannot be tested against evidence and they offer us no help at all as we try to understand developments in history or to adjust our own institutions as we look to the future. Then there seems to be little room for anything but the most ad hoc reflection on and criticism of our forms of life. But that skepticism about reason has not been properly earned if the arguments for it still rely on attacking theological pictures that we are ready to do without. The larger stories are dangerous when they distort our rational practices and make them less rigorous. We have to distinguish between the falling away of Christianized models of how selves are related to the world, and, in contrast, the ongoing worth of the practices and values of the Enlightenment.

There is a result here something like one that we saw in Davidson's work. The defeat of the metaphysical reifications of modern thought does not, as Davidson understands that defeat, make us give up the claim that we refer successfully to the world and that our beliefs put us in touch with things as they are. Rather the loss of those reifications made it easier to establish the claim. In a similar way, the giving up of modernity's strong metaphysical accounts of world, self, and reason should not lead to a loss of faith in our Enlightenment practices. Rather we thereby remove the theological structures that in their contemporary form, as affecting how we think about reason, would undermine those practices.

It is typical of postmodern thought to suppose that once we see we cannot achieve a pure objectivity untainted by any bias at all, then we must assume that belief formation is a matter just of rhetoric and power. But we can very clearly make distinctions, as we examine the

⁴ Lyotard, *The Differend*, pp. 166–70. There is a useful discussion of Lyotard in Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990), pp. 6–15. I find many parallels between my own account of postmodern thinkers and that of Norris, and my reading of *The Differend* was influenced by his discussion of it. Norris's own interest is in resisting the way that various postmodern accounts would erode a space for a socialist political criticism.

development of natural science and of institutions to ensure social justice, between more objective and less objective ways of seeing. We can not only make sense of a point of view that has overcome, better than most others, the limitations built into it as a point of view; but can also see that some actual practices and institutions in our history help us in moving toward such a point of view. Perhaps we might usefully look at matters by asking about the pressures to which a belief-forming process in us will be sensitive. There will be pressure in this regard from four sources. It will come from the world, first of all, as we try to make our beliefs accommodate themselves to what is really the case, through putting ourselves in position to have the world generate beliefs in us and test the adequacy of those we already have. A second kind of pressure will come from the rational constraints on linking beliefs with other beliefs in chains of inference. Very many of our beliefs will not stand up to a rigorous evaluation of the inferential support we take them to have, as introductory classes in critical thinking quickly make evident. A third pressure on belief arises from our own interests and desires and prejudices. We shall prefer some beliefs to be true rather than others, and the acceptance of some may increase our power in dealing with those around us. A fourth pressure will be the inertia of previous beliefs and utterances. Our sayings echo, and are shaped by, many earlier ones, and we operate on the basis of discursive codes of which we may be very little aware.

Now we might express one disagreement between the postmodern thinker and a modest supporter of the Enlightenment in the following manner. The former holds that of those four pressures just listed, the first two collapse back into the second two; the world and our rational practices become the shadow of the inertia of discourse and of the play of prejudice and power. The Enlightenment supporter holds, in contrast, that the first two remain relatively independent pressures on the formation of our beliefs. The postmodern thinker performs a valuable service by showing us that when we think we are directly confronting reality and expressing things as they are, our beliefs are being very much shaped by intradiscursive factors that help to define what is sayable and what is not. And we are shown as well that when we think we are putting our arguments under the sway of reason, we are often working within practices that express our interest in power or that extend possibilities of coercion and control. But the demonstration of those results, worthwhile as it is, will hardly take us very far toward establishing that the pressures on belief from the world and from the constraints of good reasoning will collapse into the other two pressures defined above. A typical move is to give historical examples where power and interest have distorted belief formation, and then to draw such radical conclusions, unsupported by those examples, as the following: that the world is only what those

in power, or discourses themselves, constitute it as being; that our categories did not arise at all from an accommodation to the world but are inventions for the sake of coercing those out of power; that rational justification reduces to what we are willing to count as such because of the inertia of discourse.

Why go for those more radical conclusions when more modest ones will do? My suggestion is that what these thinkers say is true of discourse is to a great extent true of their own discourse, even if it is not true of belief systems generally. The pressure of testing one's beliefs against the world, and the pressure of evaluating the validity of inferential connections, become very much diminished in their work, so that the inertia of discourse and the pull of interest can operate more freely. One feature of that inertia will be the appeal of the theological pictures that have remained, in various guises, in philosophical accounts, and that suggest the unconstrained operations of a privileged determining power over against a thinned-out universe.

Derrida, Language, and Philosophy

It is an embarrassment, perhaps, to my treatment of the postmodern that Derrida, whom some regard as the prototypical representative of the movement, does not fit my description at all well. I think that lack of fit says something about the character of his work, and it will turn out to be important to the claims I am making that Derrida is not a postmodern thinker in the sense I have been articulating. Some readers will be very familiar with Derrida's work, some not at all. Since I have proposed to give an account of what philosophy is like as it moves toward the century's end, let me give a brief description of what he is about, before I comment upon some outcomes of his work.

Suppose one accepts Wittgenstein's claims about meaning and rule following; that is, one accepts that the meaning of an utterance depends on what counts as saying the same thing on another occasion, and that all the facts about the utterance on the occasion of its use, including the mental states of the utterer, are insufficient to fix what other instances will properly be counted as the same. Suppose one also accepts the full range of Davidson's attacks on mental and semantic reifications. One endorses, then, what we called the disenchantment of subjectivity and the disenchantment of language, and one accepts a nominalist picture of the subjective realm. Then one will already have much of Derrida's philosophical position, though he is interested in having his work do other things besides stating philosophical claims.⁵

⁵ I want to make clear from the start the limitations of my treatment of Derrida. I just want to give, especially for philosophers whose tradition makes them unfamiliar with his work, an overall account of some philosophically interesting positions Derrida seems to hold,

So we find in Derrida the claim that the *repeatability* of what is meant is not something that attaches to meaningful strings afterwards; only by being part of a chain of possible repeatings can an item have meaning at all. And there can be no closure such that a chain of signifiers can complete its repetitions and make semantic determinacy no longer deferred. Semantic determinacy always depends on sayings elsewhere and at other times, even in the future, that help fix sameness of meaning; there are no ideal semantic entities from which to derive this sameness. Derrida thus speaks of a movement of differing/deferring that is a condition for our meaningful utterances.⁶ His early work rejected the Husserlian belief that at the ground of any sameness or determinacy or objectivity there is an activity of meaning conferral, or an immediate presence to self by which there is a "preexpressive" sense to one's mental intendings.⁷ (We can see clear parallels between that work of Derrida and some of the topics we considered in earlier chapters, for example, in the treatment of externalism about mental content.)

If repeatability is a condition for meaning, then there must already be a possible field of difference against which the activity of counting as the same can occur.⁸ Derrida tries to suggest what is at issue here, the structural relation to a presence that is always elsewhere, by using terms such as "trace," but we do not thereby have a trace of something that can itself appear on another occasion. Every trace, in the Derridean economy, can only be a trace of other traces, in an endless chain that does not stop by finally bringing the *real thing* into immediate presence. That vocabulary of traces and the like may seem odd to some readers, but what he means is a least similar to what is meant by more familiar claims. Recall that in Davidson, for example, there is no relation of

without trying to defend my reading by giving extensive textual citation. I should grant, then, that the reading I have done to develop this account tends toward that part of Derrida's work that can more easily be taken up by philosophers. Among the relevant readings: *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, D. Allison, trans. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Positions*, A. Bass, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); *Margins of Philosophy*, A. Bass, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); *Of Grammatology*, G. C. Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976); and the debate with John Searle in the pages of *Glyph*. See in regard to the last named my own analysis of that debate in Farrell, "Iterability and Meaning: The Searle-Derrida Debate," *Metaphilosophy* 19 (1988): 53-64. I have done no reading at all in some of Derrida's more playful works, such as *Glas* and *The Postcard*. I have also paid only a little attention to Derrida's own rhetorical stances in his work. Does he hold the positions that he seems to be holding or would a more complex rhetorical analysis of the work leave us in some doubt? I shall not consider that issue.

⁶ See especially the essay "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 1-27, but these ideas are found throughout Derrida's work.

⁷ See Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 60-87.

⁸ Rodolphe Gasché uses the "conditions of possibility" reading of Derrida in *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

reference that breaks us free of the holistic connections within language and anchors individual words to things in the world. There are no propositionlike entities that language mirrors, and we cannot steer individual sentences into confrontations with the world that make them, individually, true or false. There are no meanings a grasp of which allows a translator to come to rest at finally having brought the other language into contact with what is really meant. Since meanings and beliefs and intentions are assigned simultaneously by the Davidsonian interpreter, in a holistic account of the speaker, there are no mental states such as acts of intending that, if we could only uncover them accurately, would fix authorial meaning for us. I do not see that Derrida would have any disagreement with these findings.

Derrida refers frequently to what he calls the "written" character of semantic and mental items.⁹ The traditional view is that meaning is somehow more fully present in the spoken word than in writing, since once's mental activity provides an ideal content that is immediately present in the case of speech, while written words are "dead" letters that usually become absent from the meaning-conferring activity of mind. Derrida holds that what we have taken to characterize the written word characterizes all meaningful activity. The semantic activity of the mind itself can be only an adding of "written" tokens to chains whose signifiers form systems of difference and repetition. We have a "nominalist," nonideal world of tokens spread out in space and time, with no set of tokens able to determine, in a final way, what another token must be if it is to count as an instantiation of the same content. Derrida's proposal that writing is prior to speech seems a strange one until we see that it is intended to attack semantic reifications that attempt to create ideal entities out of the chains of material signifiers. We find a similar result when we look at another move in Derrida: the challenging of the distinction between use and mention and the distinction between original speech and citation.¹⁰ But his point is that any use at all is already an implicit mentioning or citing of other uses elsewhere, not only the other texts that my own utterance can play off but even future utterances that will help determine what my own saying means right now, by contributing to the fixing of what is a saying of the same thing. So the "original" utterance implicitly makes reference to and depends upon (and thus in a sense "repeats") the repetitions of it — not the most common way of making the point but not an odd claim in itself.

⁹ This theme is developed especially in *Of Grammatology*, but again one finds it throughout Derrida's writing.

¹⁰ This is one of the themes of his debate with Searle. See his account of "citation" in "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 307-30, and my analysis of his argument in my essay "Iterability and Meaning: the Searle-Derrida Debate."

Derrida's account provides him way of reading texts, especially the texts of philosophy. These will have contradictions in a special sense. They will explicitly make metaphysical claims about meaning and thought and determinacy, but the very machinery that is making it possible for the text to work shows these claims to be false. It is rather like the discourse presented to a psychiatrist. There is the explicit narrative that tells a certain story about an individual's life. But then there are the rhetorical gestures, the evasions, the marginalization of certain themes, all of which may be aspects of another, more fragmented discourse that is denying what the explicit narrative is saying. Similarly, Derrida looks for those moments (rhetorical usage, marginal comments, metaphors, the moves that set up a rhetorical context but disappear behind the main themes, the points that resist the logical shape and hierarchy of the text, the "fissures" that indicate, to the trained eye, where heterogeneous elements have been forced together like different geological plates) where the text itself shows the effects of the signifying machinery that makes meaning possible, but that is denied or "repressed" by the explicit claims being made.¹¹ (That is what we mean by 'deconstruction.')

In Hegel's logic, limitation and determination by what is external and arbitrary must eventually be understood as an internal self-limiting and self-determining. But Derrida is deeply skeptical of that move. There is no entity or utterance or text, he believes, whose internal self-articulation can limit in advance the power of further "merely" external and arbitrary features, things that get added on afterwards, as "supplements," to play a role in making it determinate. There can be no deep distinction available in advance between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to something's being what it is. In the case of meaning, each repeating as the same introduces elements of externality and arbitrariness, and yet the structure of repetition is basic to there being any meaning at all. No text can control which further sayings, and what about them, will be relevant to what it means.

Derrida is a sophisticated philosopher and his sophistication is such that it is difficult to see him as supporting the outcomes that I have been ascribing to postmodern thought. Unlike Rorty in his work of the past decade and a half, Derrida gives us a rich engagement with philosophical texts. He has a long essay, for example, in which he considers Hegel's treatment of the sign, and shows that it is important that Hegel places

¹¹ He makes much, for example, of where Searle's name and copyright notice appear on the draft of a manuscript. See "Limited Inc abc," *Glyph*, vol. II (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 162-254. Searle is supposedly, with his signature and copyright notice, claiming ownership over certain ideas, but Derrida suggests that the very claims Searle is making against him are (because he has misunderstood Derrida) claims that Derrida has himself already made.

that treatment under psychology in the philosophy of subjective spirit.¹² Representation and images and writing are treated in the context of the self-relating activity of mind. In representing or remembering something the mind is more at home with itself than when having things immediately present. And in putting itself forward into signs it is more at home with itself when using spoken signs than written ones, or when using a phonic alphabet as opposed to hieroglyphics. For it has a more plastic and "spiritual" medium in which it can express its movements.

So far that would be a traditional reading. But Derrida then looks at some of the metaphors in Hegel's writing on the topic, especially that of the pyramid, which can be both an image of the way in which spirit is entombed in a bodily form when we use signs, and (in another of Hegel's works) an example of how symbolic art is at a lower level than classical art, since spiritual ideas have not yet found an external vehicle for themselves that is adequate. It is a long essay, but what we gradually see happening is that within Hegel's texts the interconnectedness of various symbols and metaphors has begun to form a different chain of meaningful connections from the one being put forward by the progression of Hegel's argument. At the very same time that Hegel is telling us that the processing of Chinese characters or of a Leibnizian formal language cannot be an adequate vehicle (in the way that sounds can be) for spirit's generation of meaning, it is the "hieroglyphic" aspect of his text (the way that symbolic *shapes* such as the pyramid connect to one another) that is engendering meaning, a process that goes on linking the Hegelian texts to future ones such as Heidegger's. A textual machinery *external* to conscious mental life is setting up a space of meaning production, and that very machinery by its working shows Hegel's account of signs and meaning to be false.

Now I think that Derrida could be much clearer without loss of complexity. But one also has the sense that he is engaged in an important philosophical project of trying to understand the ways in which our discussions take for granted not so much premises of arguments, but the most fundamental background "scenes" that make a discourse possible and that already favor some ways of thinking rather than others. Even in his much-criticized encounter with John Searle, it seems clear that his play, if it may appear at times offensive, is intended to call attention to the *rhetorical* space that sets Searle's arguments in motion but that never appears explicitly in what he says. And doing that requires, Derrida believes, that he make visible the rhetorical moves by which Searle presents himself as a masculine analytic thinker able to take responsibility for, and indeed to have ownership over, what he means, and able

¹² Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology," in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 69-108.

to defend, as the now mature son, the ideas of his symbolic father, J. L. Austin, who is no longer around to defend them.

In some respects Derrida extends Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as therapy. Like a good theapist, he is more interested in setting up textual encounters that produce certain effects in the reader than he is in getting the reader to agree with his arguments. The philosophical analysand may accept arguments attacking metaphysical reifications, but his obsession is such that the symptoms keep appearing in other forms, in the less obvious ways that one takes for granted some notion that lets one bring a discussion to closure, by finally (one supposes) bringing matters to a confrontation with things as they are. So Derrida's task is to lead the analysand through so many different instances of these obsessive symptoms that we develop the habit of no longer looking for deeper metaphysical support for our practices. To take another example: Instead of just defending the claim that there are no ideal semantic entities that offer a constraint from without on how interpretation must go, only material signifiers in various sorts of intermeshing chains, Derrida keeps calling attention to their materiality by having his essays turn on puns, the way the words look on the page, the positioning of notes in the margin, and so forth.

On the other hand, I do not see how we can get from Derrida's careful investigations to large-scale postmodern claims about the end of the enlightenment, the death of the author, the death of the subject, the world as a postindustrial product, the freedom of the interpreter to impose meaning on an indeterminate text, and so forth. He seems to me more like Davidson and Wittgenstein in that he radically attacks certain metaphysical notions but in a way that leaves our ordinary practices relatively unchallenged. After deconstruction, with all our after-Derrida sophistication, we can reinscribe the distinctions important to our practices within the new account. If we consider authorial intentions to have a metaphysical independence and depth such that they control interpretation without being implicated in its chains of signification, then we shall be vulnerable to a deconstructive attack. But once we realize (with Davidson) that authorial intentions themselves are articulated within an overall interpretive practice, rather than having a deeper metaphysical authority, then we are free to go on appealing to the intentions of the author when we are asking about the meaning of a text.

To have attacked certain accounts of semantic determinacy is not at all to have professed a belief in some radical indeterminacy of meaning. It is quite clear that Derrida's own readings of texts pay very careful attention to what *they* do, to the operations that *they* engage in, rather than taking them to be thinned-out fields for critical play. (I hasten to say that to present Derrida as one who offers little support for radical postmodern claims about meaning is by now a relatively

common move in the literature, even if it expresses thinking of mine that goes back to when it was not yet common.¹³) Derrida should be seen as encouraging a radical disenchantment of subjectivity and of language, but he does not reconstitute the modern theological structure with interpretation or cultural practices taking over the privileged position, as do many of those usually classified as postmodern. (There are passages in Derrida that might support placing him with the "loss of the world" philosophers such as Rorty. But I see him as more like Hegel, in the following respect. There is a sense in which Hegel makes the world "subjective," but then we see that he has reworked that notion so that self-articulating entities in the world can count as activating, in lesser fashion, the "logical" structure of subjectivity. He is redescribing the world in his vocabulary rather than supporting an undermining of its metaphysical character. Derrida, too, sees the structure of "textuality" at work wherever there is any determinacy, but again we should perhaps see his move rather as redescriptive than as reductive, so that he is not letting the world disappear over against the power of a linguistic subjectivity.)

Some may hope that the practice of deconstruction can play a needed antiauthoritarian role. But just the same moves of differing or deferring, exclusion, marginalization, and so forth, will occur in all texts. Why should deconstruction, any more than psychoanalysis, show favoritism for some texts over others? Perhaps the answer is that deconstruction reverses the relation between authoritative and marginal; it takes the "inferior" second member of an opposition and shows that it is more important for understanding the opposed pair and their relation. (We may properly see that as a move against Fichtean and theological notions of determination.) We saw that writing, instead of being seen as inferior to speech, is shown to control the opposition, so that speech becomes a form of writing. So deconstruction will favor the discourses of the marginalized. But just what will be the result of that favoritism? By showing that speech has features that philosophy would have assigned just to writing, we do not thereby make written work more important than spoken. Indeed the spoken-versus-written opposition recurs *within* the newly constituted "written" that now has a wider sense than before, and there will still be very many contexts in which the spoken form of written (wide sense) communication will be superior to the written (narrow sense) form.

The same goes for the relation of philosophy and literature. Derrida argues that the move by which philosophy distinguishes itself from literature (by contrasting its clarity of argument, for example, with

¹³ Again, I would mention Christopher Norris's *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* as giving a similar account of Derrida's relation to postmodernism. See pp. 49-76 and 134-63.

the vagueness of literature) itself rests on a metaphorical system that associates reason with light and transparency. So philosophy uses metaphorical and rhetorical means to distinguish itself from the metaphorical and rhetorical.¹⁴ Let us just suppose that Derrida is right in his claim. Should philosophers then start using more literary methods and be less attentive to the quality of arguments? Not at all. The philosophy-versus-literature distinction may have to be understood within an overall structure that has to some degree a literary constitution, but within that structure we can still distinguish clearly between the practice of philosophy and the practice of literature, and for many purposes we may find the former to be better suited. Certain metaphysical defenses of philosophy's status will have to be given up, but there will still be good reasons, in very many circumstances, to prefer clarity, tightness of argument, and the philosopher's sensitivity to subtle logical distinctions. Derrida is not arguing on that level but is asking about the constitution of the space in which we begin to think about the distinction between philosophy and literature.

I think that the task of supporting a more radical criticism owes much less to Derrida's actual work than to the theological picture we considered earlier of a thinned-out world or text upon which socially constructed readers or experiencers project determinacy, meaning, and value.¹⁵ Derrida's own work, I am suggesting, does not support the account that encourages that outcome, but the work of another thinker popular in literary criticism attempts to do so, as we shall now see.

Fish and the Loss of the Text

Criticism is a wide-ranging field where trends change very rapidly; a set of essays by a single figure, and from more than a decade ago, will hardly be representative of that range, or of what is most contemporary. But Stanley Fish remains a figure of great influence, and I think that the essays collected in *Is There a Text in This Class?* make explicit a set of assumptions that are both widely shared and deeply suspect, and I do not see that his more recent work makes any very substantial revision of his views.¹⁶

¹⁴ "Classical rhetoric, then, cannot dominate, being enmeshed within it, the mass out of which the philosophical text takes shape. Metaphor is less in the philosophical text (and in the rhetorical text coordinated with it) than the philosophical text is within metaphor." Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 258.

¹⁵ I have mentioned that while I have looked at much of Derrida's work, there is a considerable range of his texts that I have not consulted. Perhaps in some of those there is greater support for the "loss of the world" thesis.

¹⁶ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). As all my references in this section will be to that book, I shall from here on put page numbers in the body of the text.

Fish is arguing for a particular conception of what happens when we interpret. While his claims might be thought to have a special significance for the interpretation of poetry, he makes them such that he will be taken to be putting forward large assertions about language, meaning, and objectivity. In an often-mentioned essay, he notes that the utterance 'Is there a text in this class?' may have two meanings (303-21). It may be an inquiry into whether there is an assigned textbook, or it may have a more theoretical meaning familiar to most students today in literary criticism: It may be a shorthand way of asking whether the professor is committed to the view that the text has an objectivity that constrains what interpreters may properly take it to mean. To understand either of those meanings, one must be able to bring to bear a set of background beliefs and assumptions that help to fix, and to disambiguate, the move being made by someone producing the utterance in question.

Fish presents that conclusion with the air of someone who has proved something quite daring. But very few will disagree with a claim that on different occasions of utterance that appeal to different frameworks of interpretation, a particular sequence of linguistic shapes may be properly assigned distinct meanings. When I hear the statement "There is something wrong with the safety," it will make a considerable difference to my interpretation whether I am hearing the announcer of a football game or am with a group of hunters checking their guns. No linguist will find anything controversial there, and Fish must define an imaginary opponent who holds a much more extreme view. An utterance, he says,

does not have a literal meaning in the sense of some irreducible content that survives the sea change of situations; but in each of those situations one meaning (even if it is plural) will seem so obvious that one cannot see how it could be otherwise, and that meaning will be literal. (277)

Fish seems to be distinguishing himself from an opponent who is forced to hold that a sequence of linguistic shapes must have a determinate meaning independently of any context of utterance. He suggests that those who believe in determinate meanings are in trouble once they recognize that 'The air is crisp' might mean one thing when we are walking in autumn and another when we are listening to a musical piece (309-10). The idea is that once there is a need for introducing subjectivity at all, as in the need for an interpreter to bring to bear background beliefs and assumptions, then meaning cannot be objective. Fish's opponent is forced into the position of holding that where meaning is concerned, there is a "bedrock level of objectivity" that remains after all connection with interpretive contexts and interpretive practice has been severed. Such an opponent (who could he be?) believes that apart from any situations and from the frames of knowledge implicit in them,

there is "some mechanical and algorithmic procedure by means of which meanings could be calculated" (318).

Perhaps he is making a different claim from the one he appears to be making by defining his opponent in that (absurd) fashion. Perhaps through his discussion of the student's question about whether there is a text in the class he is supporting the following Davidsonian theses: that we cannot specify conventions of a language that would reliably determine what an utterance means as used by a speaker; that there is no standard meaning that is agreed upon by speakers of the language in advance of interpretation; that the situation of normal interpretation has more of the character of the situation of radical interpretation than we might suspect; that the holism of interpretation makes beliefs comprehensible only against a background of other beliefs; and that the skills required to interpret a speaker, rather than being strictly linguistic skills, shade off into the general skills we employ for getting around in the world.

He would then be joining Davidson in attacking linguistic and semantic reifications, though he hardly makes any such claim very clearly. Both would then be interested in the way we can readily interpret others, even when they use a linguistic sequence in a manner rather different from what the dictionary meaning would give us. But it is important that Davidson sees the results of those attacks on standard notions of convention and language to be consistent with the view that the meaning of an utterance in a situation is to a very large extent objective, and that there is very much a matter of "getting it right" when encountering such an utterance. So by considering and accepting what Fish and Davidson have in common, we would not get far toward establishing the claim that texts are just shapes upon which interpreters, depending on their own social construction, project some meaning or other. In the case mentioned by Fish concerning 'The air is crisp,' it is clear that a dictionary with even a modest amount of semantic information about the expressions 'air' and 'crisp' would indicate how we are to distinguish the two meanings; there is no great challenge there to the semantic theorist. There is not even a need to go as far as Davidson's anticonventional account of language. There would just be two distinct conventional meanings for 'air.'

After vanquishing his imaginary opponent, Fish presents himself as having arrived at a controversial conclusion. He says that "the positing of context- or institution-specific norms surely rules out the possibility of a norm whose validity would be recognized by everyone, no matter what his situation" (319). What can Fish be suggesting here? He seems to be saying that if the standards for interpreting a statement are relative to the context of utterance and to an institutional community that uses the statement a certain way, then validity itself is relative. But that is not the

case. It is a very common occurrence that a particular string of shapes or sounds can carry more than one meaning, and that I must settle what language is being spoken, and in what institutional setting, before I can determine what is meant. That sort of relativity is a natural feature of language, and has nothing to do with a more philosophically worrisome relativity regarding truth. For once the meaning of the utterance has been determined by the context, its truth conditions are fixed for any interpreter who interprets the sentence properly. There is no further relativity to differing standards of validity.

A stronger claim about indeterminacy of meaning is made in another essay (322-37). There he tells about a time when he left on the blackboard a list of authors for a class assignment, and then told his next class that it was a poem they had to interpret. It should be no surprise that they were able to discover a wealth of poetic meaning in the list. To Fish this result suggests that a text has no meaning on its own; it is a series of shapes for interpretation, and we *make* texts by what we as interpreters do with those shapes. Any interpretation is as acceptable as any other provided one can situate oneself in a community, however small, whose practices will count the interpretation as valid. The intentions of the producer of the shapes do not matter.

Yet in the previous essay discussed here Fish has argued for something quite different. The professor *misunderstood* the student who asked whether there was a text in his class. He was not getting matters right when he supposed the student to be asking whether there was an assigned textbook. Getting matters right involved understanding the student's intentions, as suggested by a disjunction offered ("Is there a text in this class, or is it just us?"), and Fish can make fun of a philosopher who was not smart enough to know what the student really meant. He will say that even those assigned intentions are a product of interpretation, but again we need to make a distinction that he himself fails to make. There is the Davidsonian claim that there is a holistic assignment of beliefs, intentions, desires, meanings, and so forth to the speaker; in that sense intentions emerge from an interpretation. But we do not thereby remove from consideration the careful scrutiny of others' intentions, and the use of that scrutiny in assigning meaning. Fish, with his example of the list on the board, seems to be suggesting a much stronger claim: that there is no such constraint on us imposed by the intentions of the producer of semantic shapes. But the fact that we might be able to do many things with a pattern of linguistic shapes if we see it out of context does not establish that stronger claim.

It soon becomes evident that what Fish is getting at is a full-scale philosophical conception of what objectivity is. It is not just that we have to appeal to different contexts of interpretation; no one denies that. But Fish transforms these contexts into something quite different:

into relativized Kantian schemes that construct their own objects and determine their own rules of validity. He says that "the entities that were once seen as competing for the right to constrain interpretation (text, reader, author) are now all seen to be the *products* of interpretation" (17). (That sort of antirealism should by now sound very familiar.) These schemes are very much reified in Fish. A believer inhabits one of them and takes its construction and validity-determining rules so much for granted that he accepts with certainty the beliefs they program into him. Then social programming may engender in him a different scheme, and he accepts without question its constructions and validity determinations, and the facts they make available. So Fish says that "one believes what one believes, and one does so without reservation" (361). Also:

The fact that a standard of truth is never available independently of a set of beliefs does not mean that we can never know for certain what is true but that we *always* know for certain what is true (because we are always in the grip of some belief or other), even though what we certainly know may change if and when our beliefs change. (365)

I may, in some sense, *know* that my present reading of *Paradise Lost* follows from assumptions that I did not always hold and may not hold in a year or so, but that "knowledge" does not prevent me from knowing that my present reading of *Paradise Lost* is the correct one. (359)

It is always possible to entertain beliefs and opinions other than one's own; but that is precisely how they will be seen, as beliefs and opinions *other than one's own*, and therefore as beliefs and opinions that are false, or mistaken, or partial, or immature, or absurd. (361)

This is an extremely odd picture of the formation and regulation of beliefs. Virtually no room is left for rational deliberation about beliefs, for understanding and investigating beliefs without yet being committed to their truth or falsity. The interpretive rules of one's scheme (according to this picture) make one see the world in a way such that one takes a certain set of facts as facts, and without being programmed with those rules, those facts will be invisible. Fish complains that his opponent in a debate could only hear Fish's claims as wrong; he simply wasn't within the way of seeing that determined the truth-conferring and object-constructing rules of Fish's system (299). Anyone who disagrees with Fish simply hasn't accepted the rules of his game; that very disagreement shows that Fish is right in saying that we cannot see a claim as true unless we come to inhabit the game whose construction rules automatically make it true. I can communicate something, believes Fish, only to someone who already knows what I am trying to tell him, since he must already have my way of seeing the world to understand me. (We have seen that there are Wittgensteinian and Davidsonian reasons for supposing that we must take others whom we interpret to share very many of our beliefs, but it does not at all follow that quite novel beliefs cannot be communicated to others.)

Such a reification of ways of seeing is foolish. For Fish, the scheme programs beliefs into us that we accept absolutely and certainly, then we move into another way of seeing and accept just as certainly the beliefs that are determined by its programming. But of course we do not operate that way. We assign different degrees of acceptance to our beliefs. We can come to be familiar with the context that makes it possible to understand what a statement means without thereby accepting a scheme that makes us automatically accept a set of facts that its rules determine. (That is a distinction Fish very often fails to make.) We have more general skills of belief regulation that are common across many different contexts and interpretations, and we measure widely differing interpretations against one another when we are trying to determine what we should believe. We often hear others' beliefs not as false or absurd or partial, as Fish claims, but as likely candidates for acceptance on our part. (That is how we learn; it is typical of Fish to make learning come down to the programming of new construction rules that are neither better nor worse than the ones to which we were previously committed.) In accepting a way of conceptually lighting up the world, we are ready to be surprised by how the world presents itself to that sort of sensibility; it is not that objects and truths as well are simply determined by the conventions of a scheme.

Fish's position requires that he treat in the crudest fashion an issue treated with more subtlety by Quine and by Davidson. There is the metaphor Quine took from Neurath that a system of beliefs is like a boat whose planks must be changed in passage, so that we must hold most beliefs stable while bringing some of them up for review. Then there is Davidson's claim that to interpret others, we must take them not only to share a wide set of beliefs with us but also to be very roughly in agreement with us about what counts as good reasons for believing. Fish is obsessive in urging upon us his (obviously true) claim that no one can stand outside his beliefs in order to criticize them; we must take some of them for granted in order to have beliefs at all and in order to communicate with others. But in Fish this claim turns into the picture of interpretive communities as insulated sectors whose fixed background structures determine true beliefs almost all the way down, so that there is little room left over for genuine argument. It should be clear, however, that we can maneuver rather nimbly among different such communities, moving higher or lower depending on the context, so that more or fewer of our beliefs will come into question, even if not all of them can come into question at once. Working as a philosopher in semantics or in the philosophy of mind, I shall agree in advance with my colleagues on many points about what beliefs we may take for granted and about what kinds of arguments and thought experiments are presently most fertile. But I may also step outside that community to a larger one that I share

with intellectuals more generally, and from that standpoint, with its more general conditions of good argument, I may wonder whether some of the work programs I engage in as a philosopher will have a long-term value or are rather like an intellectual chess game that seems important only because others at the moment are taking it to be important. Perhaps my moves toward objectivity will not take me as far as a Kantian community of noumenal reasoners, but they will surely take me much farther than Fish allows.

By now it should be evident that Fish exemplifies very well the patterns of thought that I discussed at the beginning of the chapter and that owed their power, I claimed, to the inertia of theological pictures. World and self and text are thinned out to the point of disappearance. They are then reconstituted as products of divinized cultural practices that create their own objects and that come upon the scene in an external and arbitrary fashion not itself under the world's epistemic regulation. Fish says that beliefs are not "subjective" because they are based on communal rather than individual practice (14). But he is just raising up a communal subjectivity that still inhabits the overall modern structure.

Note that Fish's account here will make an important difference to the practice of speaking to one's colleagues. The analytic philosopher tries to persuade his listeners to accept inferential connections they have not previously accepted. The follower of Derrida tries to get us to see what is invisibly at work in the setting up of a field that makes possible our ways of thinking about a topic. The encounters of Fish with his audience will be of two kinds. Either he will appeal to what his listeners already accept, so that there is a ritual celebration of what members of "our" group believe, with the familiar nods from the audience as the right words are said and the right enemies skewered. Or he will use rhetorical power, and not any rational persuasion, to get listeners to jump from one scheme of "facts" to the one that he (Fish) now favors.

It is the presence of the world in the Davidsonian triangulation that, in its constraining of proper interpretations of statements about it, makes us all count as having a wide range of beliefs in common, so that we could not be employing very different schemes of ordering the world. But as the world drops out of Fish's picture, that source of common belief is gone. So we shall think of change of belief not as an accommodation to a common world, but as a movement from one validity-determining scheme to another. Such schemes are then likely to appear as reified, so that there is something of a boundary crossing as one moves from one to another, and comparison of different ones is difficult or impossible, since each brings its own validity-determining rules to the debate.

Should we advocate a return to the text then? Fish is afraid that any

restoration of integrity to the text, with its accompanying notion that the text is a source of constraint, will bring with it a "police state" mentality about interpretation (337). But if one considers the parochial realisms we described earlier, it will hardly be the case that a goal of attending to the text itself will produce a momentum for making a single reading authoritative, or for giving more credit to traditional readings than to those that have recently been popular. Still, the text will have sufficient objectivity to make very many readings of it wrong, indeed to make many of them hopelessly wrong. It is Fish's claim that the text cannot play even that role of regulating interpretations. It is not even substantial enough, he says, to make some readings "off the wall" (357). Given the right interpretive community, even the most "off the wall" reading can be valid, since there can be no further measure of rightness than what some community accepts as right. But even communal practices of interpreting can themselves be regulated by the world and by texts; some of them do a poor job of letting the text display its real articulations and possibilities. So the agreement among members of just any community at all cannot be an adequate criterion of rightness.

Some may say, in finding the work of Fish attractive, that a philosophy of the sort we saw earlier in Davidson is dangerous, because of its "conservative" tendencies. Compare the Davidsonian claim that most of our beliefs must be true with the notion that the text is an insubstantial pretext for a competition among different interest groups to make their way of projecting meaning onto the text predominant. Will not the former claim support the status quo? But it is of course true that only a small percentage of false beliefs is needed to produce a system of terrible injustice. One could be a Davidsonian and support extremely radical attacks on our various institutions. But Davidson makes us focus on the right issue. It is not that we must jump to a new scheme, but that we are unwilling to criticize our own beliefs rigorously enough, with all the means at our disposal.

World, Self, and Reason in Foucault

Michel Foucault is skeptical about the Enlightenment picture of self-knowing and self-determining selves. That picture has it that through individual and collective reflection, we shall transform ourselves and our institutions so as to allow for greater rationality and autonomy. But that interest in self-knowledge and freedom, says Foucault, may increase the power of coercive social forces. We are under the sway of a Christianity-shaped notion of a "deep" self whose truth must be discovered and expressed, so that happiness depends upon finding the vocabulary in

which such expression can occur.¹⁷ That deep self, says Foucault, is a cultural invention. Our need for self-discovery leads us into therapies and confessional practices that provide greater access into individual lives for our culture's ways of talking and its techniques of self-formation, and we become more easily subject to its management procedures and "normalizing" practices.¹⁸

Modern reflection will also be collective as we come to study ourselves scientifically, in the social or human sciences. Through a more scientific understanding of how humans develop and how various modifications of their behavior can be brought about, we can, it is hoped, make more rational, humane, and effective our institutions that concern education, criminal justice, social welfare, mental illness, juvenile delinquency, and the like. But here, too, says Foucault, the interest in knowledge and truth allows more coercive entry into individual lives. In the last two centuries the social sciences and public bureaucracies have greatly multiplied the intrusions of knowledge-gathering practices into the lives of many. Individuals are encouraged to see themselves as fitting under the categories of the new knowledge systems, for example, the intricate categories dealing with kinds of mental illness or of sexual deviance. He also traces the rise of "disciplinary" techniques that are worked upon bodies for the sake of a more rational organization of their powers, in the military, in factories, and in schools.¹⁹

Foucault talks about regimes of "power/knowledge"; systems of discourse and relations of power work together to form normalizing conditions that construct both selves and objects:

These 'power/knowledge relations' are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power/knowledge and their historical transformations.²⁰

¹⁷"In the California cult of the self, one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is. Therefore, not only do I not identify this ancient culture of the self with what you call the California cult of the self, I think they are diametrically opposed." Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," a series of interviews with Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 245.

¹⁸Foucault traces the development of a science of sexuality, with its normalizing power over us, in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I: An Introduction (New York: Random House, 1980).

¹⁹While this theme occurs frequently in Foucault, his most important work on the topic of the development of the modern "disciplinary technology" is *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, A. Sheridan, trans. (New York: Random House, 1979). See also *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I, pp. 135-59.

²⁰Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 27-8.

Systems of knowledge are not simply in the business of discovery. They generate a field of objects that makes the application of power more effective and more easily justified. There is for Foucault no concentration of power toward a single point from which the rest of the field is determined. The determinative power is instead dispersed among the very many sites where knowledge and power intersect, in those everyday actions where social workers, teachers, forensic psychiatrists, and judges bring their knowledge to bear upon individuals. But that dispersal is part of a "totalizing" process that brings ever more aspects of life into the modern economy of confession, control, and surveillance, with coercion becoming less a matter of the state's policing power and more a matter of an internalizing of vocabularies by individuals.

The character of our interpretation of Foucault will depend on how strong a reading we give to his claim that both the subject who knows and the objects known are the "effects" of regimes of power/knowledge. The stronger and more controversial reading will repeat the familiar pattern of a theological system of determination. A relationship of self and other will be thought of as produced out of one side of the opposition, so that the otherness of what is set over against a certain determining power becomes empty and insubstantial. The relationship between discourse and the objects it speaks about will be itself generated out of a deeper self-positing "subjectivity," here the regimes of power/knowledge. On this reading, how the world is and what selves are like will offer very little constraint on how our discourses are to articulate the world into proper classifications, or on how cultural processes of self-formation ought to go if they are to be justified. For that which the discourses are supposedly measuring themselves against, when they look to the world as such a measure, are objects that they themselves have articulated and continue to secure as objects, through the inertia of the culture's conversational habits. (God, we are assured by a similar structure, can be sure of knowing the things that he has created and that he continues to hold in existence by the conserving power of his will.)

One is not, on this stronger reading, looking for social practices that respect, and allow to prosper, selves of the sort that humans are. For the regimes of power/knowledge are constructing both selves and the needs they wish to satisfy. A social change does not occur because institutions have learned to adjust themselves to what humans really need and desire, but because we have learned to form ourselves in accord with a new discourse, a new set of categories that bring their own kind of coercion. Let me refer again to a religious analogy I appealed to earlier. God creates me out of nothing and his causality is at all times underwriting my own; and there is no site from which I could justly complain about his treatment of me, as to whether or not I am saved, and no site from which I might genuinely resist his will. For it is his activity that

defines what justice is, and his activity that has determined in advance just what moves I shall undertake while I exist. In the stronger reading of Foucault it is discourse/power configurations that seem to create selves and objects out of nothing, that seem to raise up by their own powers everything that might be thought of as carving out a space that is independent of them. No room is left for an account of self-development that can provide a criterion for evaluating various kinds of intrusion into, and coercion of, individual lives. As everything is swept up into the all-encompassing power of self-relating discursive practices, there can be no more sense in questioning the rightness of those practices than in questioning the rightness of God's interventions in the world. The ways they form selves and objects must be arbitrary enactments concerning which reason can say nothing at all, since it comes to life only as an artifact of those enactments. And any resistance to those regimes can only be what they themselves have generated *as* resistance. One must settle for describing the various ways that power is applied.

There is, on the other hand, a weaker reading of Foucault, a reading that does not lead to the extremely thin world that always accompanies a theological account of subjectivity, even when that subjectivity has become a matter of impersonal discourses. This weaker reading will present a picture of the relation between discourse and the world that resembles, in several respects, the account attributed earlier to the parochial realist, where coming to know what the world is like is a matter of both discovery and invention, both of adjustment to its articulations and of "lighting it up" so as to make some classifications significant and other ones not. Let us, for a comparison, consider two topics that followers of Foucault often discuss: homosexuality and madness.

The strong reading gives us an austere world of events that puts very little constraint on what categories we may successfully apply to it. So we can say, on that reading, that homosexuality and madness come into being only when the classifications available in a discursive practice begin to make certain groupings of acts or of traits of character significant. (Some will therefore say that homosexuality has been around for only a century or two.) When one large discursive practice is replaced by another in history, the character of the world itself will play very little role in bringing about the transition. Rather, one way of projecting classifications on the world will be replaced by another, and new objects will thereby become available to be talked about. 'Truth,' 'rationality,' and 'reality' are themselves products of those changing discursive formations. Freedom comes from recognizing that none of the ways in which societies classify us have any deeper basis than that; none have a more natural basis in how the world arranges matters.

The proponent of the weaker reading of Foucault will present an account that is quite different. We should not underestimate, he will

grant, the ways that our categories do much more than reflect articulations of the world. We raise some possible boundaries to metaphysical prominence, and some ways of grouping people to social and cultural importance. The ways that people learn to describe themselves will very much affect how they live and what attitudes they take toward themselves. And many of our groupings are artificial ones that could be very different from what they are. So it is certainly to some degree up to us, or rather up to our institutions and our habits of talking, what categories relevant to sexuality and mental illness become important to us. A society that takes homosexuality to be a defining factor of identity will be different from a society that does not, and homosexuals in the former kind of society will be trained to live rather different lives from those lived by homosexuals in the latter kind. And the way we divide up the world into the mentally ill and the mentally well, and the subcategories we establish under the larger category of mental illness, will be due in important respects to what sort of society we inhabit.

But the one who supports this weaker reading thinks that something further now has to be said. The global picture of a very thin world upon which discourses project their classifications is simply wrong. The world's own way of articulating itself plays a much greater role in setting the conditions for our correct employment of categories; we learn in many areas to adjust our way of seeing things to its own arrangements, and those adjustments are often responsible for historical changes in our discursive practices. If the strong reading were not only the correct reading of Foucault but also an accurate account of how matters really stand, then we could know in advance, without investigation, that the social constructivist must give us the correct analysis of our social categories, such as those concerning sexuality and mental illness. But we do not know that in advance. Foucault would claim, correctly, that our notion of objective reality as guiding our beliefs itself arises within our practices; we cannot separate out the world that is doing the guiding as a simply external standard, untouched by our practices. But it does not follow that such a notion is a projection in the interests of power. Our idea of world guidance is itself world guided, and our evolving conception of how matters really stand may show us that the nonsocial world gives a very considerable basis to our classifications regarding sexuality and mental illness.

We are in a very real sense freer when we recognize how many of the ways in which we are described do not have as deep a basis as the social order often takes them to have. But it will do us no good to adopt the sometimes pleasurable illusion that all such categories are shallow and artificial. A resistance to all categories put forward by systems of discourse will make us blind to the causal processes by which selves are formed and by which they come to lead satisfying or unsatisfying lives.

That blindness will make it difficult to determine what sort of institutions of self-formation are needed to make individuals have a real chance at making their own lives, and at making their choices from a range of desirable options.

Now what is the importance of that distinction between the strong and the weak readings of Foucault? Simply this. Consider the topics mentioned earlier in the chapter: those of the self, the world, and reason. It is important that in each of these three areas, the Enlightenment thinker finds a space where some independence is available over against a culture's regimes of power/knowledge, so that there can be a measure of how those regimes must develop if they are to be justified. If the Enlightenment project is to make any sense, then there must remain certain pressures on our belief formation that are not just a product of the intersection of discourse and power. There must be a pressure from the world, as we try to make our beliefs more accurate; pressure from the standards of rational argument, as we try to assent to beliefs for which we have good inferential support; and pressure from what human selves are like, as we experiment to produce forms of life that we shall find satisfying to live. The strong reading would erode any independent space over against the regimes of power/knowledge, and would let those three sorts of pressures collapse into ongoing systems of power. On the weaker reading, in contrast, Foucault can come off as a skeptical and highly insightful friend of the Enlightenment project, one who has seen, better than most others, the ways in which liberating and "enlightening" discourse can introduce insidious new kinds of coercion and control, and the ways in which the modern belief in the metaphysical depth of subjectivity can be dangerous.

It should be clear, from a consideration of my arguments in earlier chapters, that I do not have much confidence that the strong reading can give us a correct global account of the relations between discourse and reality, though it may very well give a correct account of the position that Foucault himself has put forward, at least intermittently. It is significant that the stronger reading seems even more powerful when used against discourses that attempt to liberate marginal groups than when used against more traditional forms of coercion. Let us see how it goes wrong in a practical case, one that seems suitable for an analysis in the style of Foucault. He wants to see where liberal discourse that intensifies our interest in sexuality and in therapeutic intervention makes possible new kinds of control over the lives of individuals. So the issues of sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, and spousal relations, as discourse about them has developed in America, can be used to show how a new network of power/knowledge brings about greater opportunities for surveillance, regulation, and management, and trains individuals to accept a vocabulary and the classifications it assigns them.

Certainly there is something to be said for Foucault's point of view here. There is a discourse about child abuse, for example, that encourages a very high level of intervention in family life and that supports therapies by which adults are taught to "remember" being abused as children. Yet it is hardly the case that the discursive practices having to do with child abuse, spouse abuse, and sexual harassment construct their own objects. At least very many of our beliefs in these areas are caused by the fact, sorrowfully, that the world is a certain way. We can still accept the modest conclusion that it is due to the implicit codes of the new discourse, and to the ways of seeing supported by those codes, that we now are able to talk in certain ways, and to see as objects of concern features of the world that were there but too often ignored. And there is certainly a strong element of construction in the ways our discourse gives a specific shape to child abuse or sexual harassment as objects to be talked about. But we shall not be able to support a stronger, theological conclusion, according to which the world is, on these issues, a reflection of discursive networks, rather than an independent shaper of their content.

On the issue of selfhood and autonomy, it is again true that Foucault will give us useful warnings about self-discovery and liberation. But however much we are shaped by our cultures into finding some kinds of lives more satisfying than others, and however much our position in history limits what we can take to be worthwhile ways to live, still what humans are like is enough to place sharp constraints on what kinds of social institutions and practices can be acceptable. It is very likely *part* of the explanation that when we learn to form ourselves as beings for whom freedom is an important goal, we are learning to fit ourselves into categories defined by cultural discourse. But there is *discovery* here as well, as we come to understand better both the worth of a self that can relate to itself as something to be worked upon and chosen, and the processes of self-formation that produce humans who can do that sort of thing very well. In recognizing that earlier treatment of slaves and of women was wrong, we did not just pass over into a new discourse that invented a new way to be; we discovered that very many human lives were not being given a fair measure of an autonomy that is quite real and that is worth securing for humans generally, given the sorts of beings they are. And that notion of autonomy will be at least part of an account that shows why some increases in surveillance and control that the new discourses make possible are justified, because of the benefits they provide for women, children, and others. We are, of course, formed by our biology and by our culture. But if we are lucky we are trained in habits of reflection and argument that are not tools in the service of present systems, but that allow a genuinely critical stance toward what is taken for granted by those systems. And so we can have a proper, even if

limited, sense of ourselves as self-reflective and self-determining, both individually and communally. Laziness is often more of a barrier to rational self-criticism and autonomy than is some mysterious coercive power of discursive regimes.

Foucault suggests that when we see a set of practices that are instrumental in a new sort of self-formation, we should make ourselves aware that those practices are contingent, and that the self constituted by them is contingent as well. But then we need to ask whether his own work is part of a discourse that is encouraging a new kind of self-formation. He appears to find attractive a self that can disengage itself from the disciplinary regimes of his society, that can mark their contingency, that can find new ways of inventing itself. But that is itself a particular kind of self that will be favored by certain cultures rather than by others. The sophistication of the contemporary consumer of information is reflected in a certain distance from texts that are being interpreted, and in an awareness of the artificial and the rhetorical that are present in any appeal to the natural and the true. A self emerges that is ambiguous in its commitments and skeptical about global programs, mobile in its employment of vocabularies and weak in its commitments to any of them. The modes of information by which the world reaches us make it less likely that we can see the world as having depth or enduring value, or that we can think of our projects as extending far into the past and into the future, in a stable field of meaning that gives a proper scale to what we do, and allows us to appreciate the way meaning takes shape over time. So there is a valuing of an ego made for playful, fluid maneuvering through symbol systems. We have here the sort of self that Rorty has praised, ready to move quickly on to new vocabularies when older ones become tired, and ready to stitch together old texts in novel and interesting juxtapositions.

But is that a worthwhile sort of self to be? I am quite certain that Nietzsche, so often a hero in postmodern thought, would look with scorn upon the kind of selves just described, and on a society that tended to produce them. Now it is true that Foucault's recent work on self-making in the ancient world suggests that there may be a kind of working we can do on ourselves that produces selves that it is worth being because they are aesthetically well made, and in being so may be more than mobile sites for the play of codes. Perhaps in that turn to material from the ancient world, we can see at least a hint that he would not find the life of the postmodern self, as I have described it, an admirable form of life.²¹

²¹ In talking about techniques of working upon the self that are less Christian and more like some of those in the ancient world, Foucault by no means advises a return to ancient practices themselves: He says, "you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people." ("On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 231.)

Perhaps that sort of self is too fluid and shallow to be the point of a self-making worth endorsing. But the matter is very much unclear, and Foucault's death has left it that way, so far as his own work is concerned.

Foucault was happy to be considered an antihumanist philosopher. He thought that man was "invented" during the last couple of centuries, since it was only then that the human sciences arose and constituted humanity as an object of scientific study. He saw in structuralism and its descendants the beginning of a move by which man, having been thus invented, would in some sense disappear through a discursive revolution that no longer gave humans and their mental lives a central role. Now in certain respects one wants to endorse an understanding that makes humans and their lives less important in the universe. We know the world through a human perspective, and much of it is a world that we have made over through our labor, but it is not a human world, and its dimensions have no intrinsic link to the time span of our species. Perhaps others in the distant future, on this planet or on other ones, will take up and improve upon the scientific and cultural achievements that we have worked so hard to produce, and we recognize our responsibility to keep the only planetary biosphere we know of flourishing, not just for ourselves but for its other inhabitants. Antihumanism can be a spur to realist conceptions in philosophy, rather than to those that overemphasize the importance of our human faculties.

But Foucault's antihumanism accompanies a severe underestimation of the human goods brought about and maintained by the institutions we owe to the Enlightenment, and of the very real improvements that our habits of self-criticism have effected in the disciplinary practices that he studied. There is sometimes in him a childish irritation at *any* of the ways in which a culture shapes and disciplines its members, and the suggestion that all the pressures that make belief formation go in some directions rather than others are akin to totalitarian coercion. That analysis will apply even to the ways that scientists form beliefs on the basis of evidence. The notions of subjectivity and authorship as well will be seen as forces limiting the free circulation of signs in a text. Yet at the same time he grants that it is the operation of these disciplinary and coercive forces that is a condition for generating meaning and the objects of discourse. One sometimes senses in him the appeal of the anarchic to those whose more rigid upbringing may have given them the habits and discipline needed for success, and whose sympathies seem unaroused by those growing up in truly anarchic family and social situations. So he is not going to be of much assistance when we come to very detailed questions about the forms of life for which our various kinds of education and habit formation ought to train individuals. And his picture is so onesided that it will be unhelpful in analyzing the complex ways we

both control and are controlled by cultural forms, so that our sense of ourselves as to a considerable degree self-determining is not a myth.

Yet when these points have been made, it remains true that Foucault is an important philosopher whose influence will justly be felt in future decades. He reminds us, as Nietzsche did, that what seems an abstract tolerance for any form of life in modern liberal democracies is actually a set of powerful pressures that shape us into being some sorts of selves rather than others. Regarding the project of coming to a satisfying manner of weighing against one another the various goods possible for human lives, it is still unclear just what relative weight we ought to give, in the long run, to self-knowledge, autonomy, and the rational ordering of individual lives and social relations. We do not yet know whether, from the perspective of the distant future, the lives produced by our present form of life will appear admirable and well lived, and whether the culture that produced them will be seen as constituting a period in which the species flourished.

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