Chapter 1
On the Notion of Truth: From Modernism to Postmodernism

I. Introduction:

As the name suggests, postmodernism began as a reaction to all the ideals, principles and values that lay at the heart of the enlightenment or modern mind-set. In particular, postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous, rational individual. Rather than seeing humanity as consisting of thinking individuals, postmodernists think of humans as social constructs. That is to say, human beings are nothing more than products of culture. Hence we cannot have independent or autonomous access to reality. Accordingly the mind no longer becomes the “mirror of nature.” Instead, as argued by the postmodernists, we view reality through the lens of culture. Consequently, postmodernists reject the possibility of objective truth. In the place of objective truth and what postmodernists call “metanarratives” (comprehensive world views), we find “local narratives,” or stories about reality that “work” for particular communities—but have no validity beyond that community.

By its very nature the postmodern worldview is difficult to define, and some would resist calling it such. One aspect however, is of special interest to philosophers and is central to the entire postmodernist movement is stated most clearly by Stanley Grenz in A Primer on Postmodernism: “(Postmodernism) affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependant on the community in which we participate...there is no absolute truth, rather truth is relative to the community in which we participate.” Also, a postmodernist might say, ‘Truth is what people agree on’, or ‘Truth is what works’, or ‘Hey there is no truth, only lots of little ‘truths’ running around out there!’ For the most part, postmodernists seem to reject the idealized view of truth found in modern philosophy and replace it with a dynamic, changing ‘truth’ bounded by time, space and perspective.

In this chapter I will first of all look into the origin of postmodernism as a philosophy and in particular the transition from the modern to the postmodern conception of truth. To begin with, I will briefly survey the traditional or modern understanding of truth. This will be
followed by a glance at some of the most prominent features of postmodernism and a brief outlining of some of the cultural expressions of postmodernism as manifested in contemporary society. Next, I will focus on some of the most influential spokespersons of postmodern philosophy whose thoughts have had a significant impact on the postmodern outlook over the last few decades and finally conclude with a highlight of some of the general criticisms made concerning postmodernism.

II. Traditional or Modern Conception of Truth:

Modernism initiated by the Enlightenment had entertained an unbounded faith in the objective, universal and absolute truth and the capacity of the human mind to know it. Accordingly, several modern theories of truth were advanced to settle on the question of truth: What does truth consist in? To put it another way, what is the nature of truth? Also of great importance was the criterion or criteria of truth. Foremost among these truth theories are the Correspondence Theory, the Coherence Theory, and the Pragmatic Theory of truth. It is to these theories or as some would prefer to call them “tests of truth” (as there is really only one truth) that we will now turn though the survey undertaken here is not an exhaustive one.

First proposed in vague form by Plato and Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, this realist theory says, truth is what propositions have by corresponding to the way the world is. According to Aristotle, “To say what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.” To use J.P. Moreland’s definition of the correspondence theory of truth, a proposition is true just in case it corresponds to reality, when what it asserts to be the case is the case. More generally, truth obtains when a truth bearer stands in an appropriate correspondence relation to a truth maker, where truth makers are facts and truth bearers are propositions. Consider the proposition “Grass is green.” This proposition is true just in case a specific fact, viz., grass’s being green, actually obtains in the real world. That is, reality makes thoughts true or false.

In view of its stress that propositions have to match with facts or reality this theory have met with a number of objections some of which are: How can one test a correspondence in a sentence like “all centaurs have human-like heads.” Since centaurs exist only in fiction,
how can one determine whether they have human-like heads or not? The problem of the nonexistent does pose serious questions for the correspondence theory. Then again, everyone agrees that 2 plus 2 equals 4, but how can this idea be tested by comparing it to reality? Accordingly, P.F. Strawson, in an extreme reaction against correspondence has said that what the correspondence theory needs is "not purification but elimination."

It is important to note, however, that the theory does not limit the objects of direct awareness to ordinary sensory objects. What this means is that a knowing subject is also capable of direct acquaintance with a host of non-sense-perceptible objects such as one's own ego and its mental states, various abstract objects like the laws of mathematics or logic, and spirit beings, including God. Hence it can be argued that in as much as the knowing subject is aware of the external objects, he is equally aware of his inner mental states and other abstract objects. To cite an instance, "2 plus 2 equals four" is in correspondence with a particular mental state.

Of course, the theory is not without any weakness or limitation. But to call for its elimination may be unwarranted. Indeed it cannot be denied that some of the criticisms assume too much. Take for instance the objection centering on the illustration "all centaurs have human-like heads," which seemed at first to be difficult, but the question is: "are there centaurs?" Given that there is no such thing as a centaur in space or reality then the second sentence "have human-like heads" to which it is said to correspond makes no sense. As Roark puts it, "If intention rather than fact is used concerning some statements, then we would understand that centaurs with human-like heads have real meaning in fiction but not in fact."

One important question emerges at this point, which is, must there be only one test of whether something is truth? Cannot there be complementary tests? This takes us to the next theory, the Coherence Theory.

The Coherence theory is the belief that a proposition is true to the extent that it agrees or coheres with some specified set of propositions. To put it simply, truth is a property of a related group of consistent statements or propositions such as mathematical propositions. Coherence as a theory however, "looks beyond the mere self-consistence of propositions to a comprehensive, synoptic view of all experience ... Any proposition is true, if it is both self-
consistent and coherently connected with our system of propositions as a whole.”

It is admitted by coherence advocates that one cannot attain absolute coherence, but as one presses on toward that ideal the presumption is that better truth will be had.

As with the correspondence theory of truth so also with the coherence theory of truth there are problems. One argument used against the Coherence theory is that since it is a “system of interdependent judgments without a beginning or end,” it is unintelligible. Now as indicated by Roark, this objection may possibly stand, but experience built upon empirical learning and reason has a beginning. A child who knows from experience that fire burns will not accept without great questioning the proposition that fire does not burn. This knowledge may then be the basis of directing new experiences in the future. As for having no end, it could be that coherence doesn’t, but then as Roark pointed out, this is only to say that neither coherence, correspondence, nor any other theory has an absolute grasp on all truth.

Coming to the Pragmatic theory of truth, it is the belief that a proposition is true when acting upon it yields satisfactory practical results. As formulated by William James, the pragmatic theory promises in the long term a convergence of human opinions upon a stable body of scientific propositions that have been shown in experience to be successful principles for human action. Now more will be said on this theory for without doubt, it brings us from the modern to the postmodern concept of truth.

James credits Charles S. Peirce with originating the movement by means of an article “How to Make our Ideas Clear” published in the Popular Science Monthly for January of 1878. Peirce’s ideas about pragmatism are sufficiently different in emphasis from the later popularizations of James. Because of this difference Peirce discarded the term pragmatism for ‘pragmaticism’.

Now one of the most popular ideas associated with later pragmatism is that truth leads to action or works. Pierce however was cautious enough to assert that “the pragmatist does not make the summum bonum to consist in action…” Then he went on to say, “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is real.”
Though the movement began with Peirce, it turned in a different direction with William James according to whom, "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons." In an essay on the conception of truth, James declares that "true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot." Intending to reject the idea that truth is static, James asserts that "truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events." He illustrates this by a man who is lost in the woods and is starving. He sees a cow path and reasons that it should lead to a farmer's house. If it does, he saves himself. For James the idea has practical results. Roark however feels that this would qualify more as an illustration for coherence since a conclusion is drawn about the cow path that is based upon previous experience and when the man follows the path his action is consistent with past experience and the reasoning based upon it.

As Roark observes, there is a fluidity with respect to the nature of truth as expressed further in James words: "Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc. are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is made, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience."

Perhaps one of the most contentious statements of James is that "we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood." Now this sounds like sheer relativity, but in its most acceptable sense James means no more than what is implied in coherence or correspondence. Without doubt, we have advanced beyond Babylonian astrology, Ptolemaic astronomy, Newtonian physics, and have come now to Einstein's theory of relativity. Perhaps this also will have to be discarded—in the future—for a better truth, or a better description of the facts.

Before assessing pragmatism, a brief look must be taken at John Dewey who preferred to call his version Instrumentalism and used the term "warranted assertability" instead of truth. By this he means that any statement or judgment made now will stand the test of either past, present, or future inquiry. Thus an idea "is true which works in leading us to what it purports."
Following James, Dewey is also of the viewpoint that truth or rather truths must be made. This does not mean that we can declare truth to be what we want it to be, but it is more like an investigation that succeeds in solving some great problem or need. Truth for Dewey is also that which works though this does not imply any working truth. Truth is that which satisfies the condition of inquiry. To be more precise, the final basis of warranted assertability for Dewey is verifiability. This corresponds to the sense that “a key answers the conditions imposed by a lock... or a solution answers the requirements of a problem.”

Finally, Dewey accepted Peirce’s idea that “truth is the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate....”

A number of objections have been raised against the pragmatic theory of truth but not all of them have the same validity. Given a literal interpretation, James’ comment that we have to live by today’s truths and call them falsehoods tomorrow does point in the direction of relativism. This however does a great deal of injustice to the reality of the statement that many changes have come in what we regard as truth, but this change has not invalidated everything we have regarded as true... Again, if we must throw away the truths of yesterday, why do we do it? Roark gives several answers to this: First, what we thought was truth wasn’t. They were beliefs that had some truth in them, but we mistook them for truth instead of beliefs. Second, if we discard the old “truths” or beliefs, it is because we claim a more valid explanation than the previous ones. So underlying James’ claim to discard “truths” of yesterday is actually the standard of truth which seeks to escape relativism. Put differently, when we discard truths of yesterday it only proves that there is only one truth to be believed at a time. Hence, charge of relativism does not stand. But then it cannot be said as for correspondence and coherence that pragmatism believes in the existence of one absolute truth irrespective of what our claims our. For the pragmatist, any idea can be made true provided it solves our present problems and needs.

A more serious question to be considered is the question of usefulness. One objection is that a truth can be useful, and workable, but not necessarily verified. Some so-called “truths” have worked for an extended period of time but were eventually found to be false. Verification was indeed defined by James in these terms: if it works, it is true. Yet on closer
look there are serious problems here. First, there is the problem expressed in the previous criticism that some things work for sometime, but this would not pass as verification. A second problem is in whose eyes something is verified. For example, my friend “tries” to start her car that has broken down and fails. I “try” to start the same car and succeed. Why could she not have done it? Two things are pointed up: “trying” something means different things to different people and may involve unobserved and unknown ways of doing it. The other thing relates to the length of trying. One may try to break a small cable by rapidly bending it back and forth and fail, while another man may try it longer and succeed. How long does one have to try an idea or project before truth or falsity can be pronounced on it? 

Furthermore, as Roark argues, although pragmatism and instrumentalism protest against truth as being static, yet some norm keeps creeping back into the issue, albeit it may be called by some other name. Obviously, there are more warrantable assertions than others, and the reason being that some statements are more true than others. Why is this? What is the nature of the truth that is being approached? Instrumentalism tries to evade this in opting for warranted assertability. Likewise, in avoiding this question pragmatism also ignores a basic distinction in epistemology, which is, the nature of truth versus how we find it out. Perhaps pragmatism is more efficient in discerning what a specific truth is as against giving an answer to the nature of truth. An alternative way of looking at it is that the pragmatist re-defines truth in a way different from coherence or correspondence.

Having tried to interpret James’ remarks about changing truth in the best context, there is yet another question about the firmness of truth. This lack of firmness has led to the question of whether one can rightfully speak of a theory of truth at all in James. In the words of Roark, “Even its emphasis on experimentalism requires that certain things be permanent and stable. An experiment without certain elements as unchanging would be incapable of producing anything. So in the growth of knowledge there must be some things that are established upon which one can build. If there is not some permanence in the learning system one would be driven both psychologically and intellectually into skepticism.”

Now the pragmatist understanding of truth has come a long way from the modern and traditional understanding of truth that there is one truth and it does not change. What can
change are only our assertions of it, say, when we want to correct, revise, modify or improve on them. For the pragmatist however, truth, being equated as it were, with “ideas that work”, one truth keeps changing for a better truth. And neo-pragmatists, such as Rorty, have even gone to the extreme of saying that there is no such thing as truth. All we have are our vocabularies that keep creating “truths” for us. This brings us to another important question, which is, how did this radical change in the concept of truth come about? To put it another way, what caused the transition from the modern to the postmodern concept of truth? But before we look at these causes of transition, it is necessary that we make a distinction between modernism and modernity and between postmodernism and postmodernity.

III. Modernity and Modernism:

Modernity is defined as a period or condition loosely identified with the Renaissance, or the Enlightenment. One “project” of modernity is said to have been the fostering of progress, which was thought to be achievable by incorporating principles of rationality and hierarchy (i.e., social order/structure) into aspects of public and artistic life. Modernism on the other hand, is the philosophy that arises out of the enlightenment. Descartes, Hume and Kant in the early phase, and Bacon, Herbert Spenser, Feurbach, Marx and Freud, in the later phase, became the philosopher-spokesmen for modernism. Rationality became both the instrument and the standard of knowledge. According to MacIntyre, the contemporary moral philosopher, the goal of Enlightenment was freedom from superstition, founding of philosophy and civilization on rational enquiry, empirical evidence and scientific discovery. The buoyant belief was that objective truth can be discovered by the use of rationality.

IV. Postmodernism and Postmodernity:

Postmodernity is a term used to describe the social and political implications of postmodernism. It is used by philosophers, social scientists and art critics to refer to facets of contemporary art, culture, economics, social and political conditions that resulted due to the unique features of late 20th century and early 21st century life. These features include globalization, consumerism, the fragmentation of authority, and the commoditization of knowledge.
One definition of postmodernity says, "Postmodernity concentrates on the tensions of difference and similarity erupting from processes of globalization: the accelerating circulation of people, the increasingly dense and frequent cross-cultural interactions, and the unavoidable intersections of local and global knowledge." This approach defines postmodernism as the name of an entire social formation, or set of social/historical attitudes.

Postmodernism as the philosophy of postmodernity represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built. Although many scholars will not agree as to what postmodernism involves, they have nonetheless reached a consensus on one point: this phenomenon marks the end of a single, universal worldview. Of the many explanations of what postmodernism is, I have chosen one by Grenz that says, "The postmodern ethos resists unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations. It replaces these with a respect for differences and a celebration of the local and the particular at the expense of the universal. Postmodernism likewise entails a rejection of the emphasis on rational discovery through the scientific method, which provided the intellectual foundation for the modern attempt to construct a better world. At its foundation, then, the postmodern outlook is anti-modern."

But postmodernism describes more than an intellectual mood. The postmodern rejection of the focus on rationality typical of the modern era finds expression in various dimensions of contemporary society. Today, the postmodern mind-set can be seen reflected in many of the traditional vehicles of cultural expression, including architecture, art, and theatre. In short, "postmodernism refers not only to an intellectual mood but also to an array of cultural expressions that call into question the ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the modern mind-set." Differentiating these two one position one may say that whereas postmodernism is the "cultural and intellectual phenomena" postmodernity is focused on social and political outworkings in society.

V. From Modernism to Postmodernism:

We begin our discussion on this with an excerpt from Cahoone's "From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology": "At a minimum, "postmodern" implies that something
about recent society or thought in the "advanced" societies since, let us say, the 1960s, reveals a discontinuity with earlier phases of the modern period, hence with the socio-cultural forms, or ideas and methods, characteristic of modern Western culture. This discontinuity may cut so deeply as to signal the "end" of the modern, or may indicate merely a novel phase within the modern. Those who affirm that these changes are inescapable facts, or who affirm the implied critique of older principles, are thus in some sense "postmodernists," adherents of "postmodernism." In this way, postmodernism is the latest wave in the critique of the Enlightenment, the criticism of the principles characteristics of modern Western society that trace their legacy to the eighteenth century.

What brought about this shift from modernism to postmodernism? According to many writers such as John Ralston Saul, postmodernism came about as a result of an "accumulated disillusionment with the promises of the Enlightenment project and its progress of science, so central to modern thinking." According to Cahoone, "The positive self-image modern Western culture has most often given to itself, a picture born in the Enlightenment, is of a civilization founded on scientific knowledge of the world and rational knowledge of value, which places the highest premium on individual human life and freedom, and believes that such freedom and rationality will lead to social progress through virtuous, self-controlled work, creating a better material, political, and intellectual life for all." However, this combination of science, reason, individuality, freedom, truth, and social progress has been questioned and criticized by many. A number of critics see modernity as a movement of ethnic and class domination, European imperialism, anthropocentrism, the destruction of nature, the dissolution of community and tradition, the rise of alienation, the death of individuality in bureaucracy. More sympathetic critics have argued skeptically that modernity cannot achieve what it hopes, e.g. that objective truth or freedom is unavailable, or that modernity's gains are balanced by losses, even if there is no alternative either to modernity or to its discontents.

Grenz, when speaking of the postmodern consciousness says, "The postmodern consciousness has abandoned the Enlightenment belief in evitable progress. Postmoderns have not sustained the optimism that characterized previous generations. To the contrary, they evidence a gnawing pessimism. For the first time in recent history, the emerging generation does
not share the conviction of their parents that the world is becoming a better place in which to live. From widening holes in the ozone layer to teen-on-teen violence, they see our problems mounting… The postmodern generation is also convinced that life on the earth is fragile. They believe that the Enlightenment model of the human conquest of nature, which dates to Francis Bacon, must quickly give way to a new attitude of cooperation with the earth. They believe that the survival of humankind is now at stake.”

In addition to its dark pessimism, the postmodern consciousness operates with a view of truth different from what previous generations espoused. The modern understanding as we know linked truth with rationality but this was now questioned by the postmodernists who are unwilling to allow the human intellect to serve as the sole determiner of what we should believe. By the latter part of the 20th century the whole “Enlightenment Project” was attacked by its critics, the postmodernists, who realized that human beings are not entirely rational, that at no time can man be said to come of age (or reason). The whole modernist agenda thus stands in need of “deconstruction,” a term made popular by one of the leading figures of postmodernism, Jacques Derrida.

We come then to another important question, which is, how did postmodernism as a philosophy develop or originate? According to Cahoone, the term “postmodern” understood as distinguishing the contemporary scene from the modern seems first to have been used in 1917 by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz to describe the “nihilism” of twentieth-century Western culture, a theme he took from Nietzsche. Indeed many scholars consider that postmodernism originated with Nietzsche. According to C.R. Agera, “With his iconoclasm against reason versus will (to power), he could, in a sense, be said to be the founder of Postmodernism.” Nietzsche did not stop with the modernist’s attack on Christian theism and beliefs. With his “death of God” (Gottesdammerung) philosophy, he also attacked the Christian morals as well as the Christian cultural values declaring they have no moral foundation. What counts then is the “will to power.” As Agera puts it, “It is not the generality of mankind that is important, but a few supermen that are worthy of existence; the others merely exist as a part of the rabble, the “anonymous crowd”.” What transpired philosophically out of Nietzsche’s transvaluation of all values is extremely significant to us: “All objective orientation, fixed meaning, divine providence, divine purpose for man and objective knowledge itself
are...irretrievably lost. Power relations rather than objective rationality and values became significant. Not the universal, but the personal perspectives determine our conceptions of truth: No truth but truths.”50 To put it simply, in this new postmodern outlook, truth is no longer discovered but constructed from within our own socio-linguistic contexts.

Interestingly, some have traced this “constructivist aspect” in postmodernism to Kant’s philosophy so much so that Kant has even been considered to be one among the many historical precursors of postmodernism. Sebastian Heck in his “Is There a Truth to Set Us Free? -- The Epistemological Impasse of Postmodernism” has pointed out certain features of Kant’s epistemology which paved the road for what he call a “postmodern crisis of epistemology.”51 He explains: “And, truly, just as in Copernicus’ hypothesis, the sun replaced the earth as the center of the planetary system, so in Kant’s hypothesis, the activity of the mind replaced the primacy of objects as the center of the knowledge transaction.”52 What Kant argued is that the mind is active in and a constitutive part of what is known. In other words, our minds do not simply discover objective reality but is constructively active in the knowing process. And so while the postmodernist spokesmen have called into question the legitimacy of the notion of objective reality altogether, they have picked up on the constructivist aspect of Kant’s thought. Such constructivism comes to expression first and foremost in Nietzsche’s statement that “the world is a work of art that gives birth to itself”.53 That is to say, when there are “no facts, only interpretations” and all that “truth” is, is a multiplicity of perspectives, each with as much rightful claim to truth as any other, truth is then, in a way, constructed.54 According to Grenz, “Nietzsche’s assertion that the world is aesthetically self-creating was a far-reaching innovation. He has been hailed as the founder of what developed into the “aesthetic metacritique” of that understanding of truth which views “the work of art,” “the text,” or “language” as providing the grounds for truth’s own possibility.”55

Then there’s Heidegger, who like Nietzsche, believes that “a work of art creates its own world.”56 And language, through its connection with thought, plays a vital role in bringing the human world into existence.57 Yet at this point, Heidegger seems to be going much farther than even Nietzsche for his assertion that we do not so much create language as move within it.58 As Grenz puts it, “Our “being in” language allows us to discover that language (which for Heidegger is reality or Being) gives itself to us.”59
Thus Srivastava in his paper presentation entitled “The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy,” has pointed out how following Nietzsche, philosophers have grappled with two major problems which further gave impetus to postmodernism. These are, the problem of hermeneutics, i.e., textual interpretation and the problem of language. The first problem deals with the question: How do I know the true interpretation of a text? Here Srivastava cites Hans-George Gadamer who asserts that an interpreter can never objectively understand the exact mind and intent of the original author of a text. Rather, a meaning for us emerges from a text only as we engage in a dialogue, in a “hermeneutical conversation” with it. Gadamer’s position, then, like Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s, “undermines the enlightenment epistemological program.” Meaning does not inhere in the world; rather, it emerges as the interpreter engages in a dialogue with the “text” of the world.

As for the second problem it deals with the question: Can language objectively describe truth? Here Srivastava refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein who thinks that language is socially conditioned. Essentially, what Wittgenstein asserts is that each use of language constitutes a separate “language game” complete with its own rules. Hence no proposition can be limited to one meaning only for meaning is dependent on its context, the “language game” in which it appears. Thus, “any sentence has as many meanings as the contexts in which it is used.” Furthermore, this characterization of language as a “game” presupposes that language is not a private phenomenon that occurs when the mind gets hold of some truth or fact about the world but rather that language is a social phenomenon, acquiring its meaning in social interaction.

During the 1960’s, various post-humanist and anti-metaphysical discourses emerged under the rubric of post-structuralism and, later, postmodern theory. Indeed some have even traced the history of the most famous strain in postmodernism to this period, i.e., the 1960s, characterized by the emergence of a new group of philosophers in France who were not only deeply critical of the ranch academic and political establishment – a rebelliousness not new in French intellectual circles – but also critical of the very forms of radical philosophy that had given the establishment headaches in the past, primarily, Marxism and Existentialism, and to some extent phenomenology and psychoanalysis as well.
The new French philosophers of the 1960s—including Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigary, Lyotard, and above all, Derrida and Foucault—wanted to fight the political and academic establishment. They had all been schooled by a theoretical movement, *Structuralism*, developed by linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jacobson, and advocated in mid-century by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Structuralism discards the centrality of the self and focused instead on the supra-individual structures of language, ritual, and kinship which it believes, make the individual what he or she is. Simply put, *it is not the self that creates culture, it is culture that creates self.* But while the structuralists have retained the objective, scientific methods in their study of cultural signs such as words, family relations, etc, these new philosophers have rejected anything “objective” for to them even the human sciences themselves are cultural constructions. Because of this they are commonly named “Post-Structuralists”, meaning not that they rejected, but radicalized, structuralism. The import of their work appeared radical indeed as they announce, quoting Cahoone, “the end of the rational inquiry into truth, the illusory nature of any unified self, the impossibility of clear and unequivocal meaning, and the oppressive nature of all modern western institutions.”

One another factor in the development of postmodernism since the early 1970s deserves special mention: the decline of Marxism. According to Cahoone, Marxism had provided a philosophy of history which, for a sizeable segment of the secularized Western intellectual, had served as a promise of worldly salvation, a realization of that great modernist hope in progress, what Christopher Lasch called the “True and only Heaven.” Cahoone goes on to say, “For many irreligious intellectuals, the hope for a utopian socialist future gave badly needed significance to a life lived after the “death of God.” The loss of hope struck a sizable portion of this group much as the loss of religion had already struck traditional society: absent a historical telos or goal, it seemed that the world had become centerless and pointless once again.” In fact, Ernest Gellner dubbed it the “second secularization.” Postmodernism in its French origins could thus be said according to Cahoone, to be a wayward stepchild of Marxism and in this sense a generation’s realization that it is orphaned.

Simultaneously, in British and American philosophy, where phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis had been far less influential, related, albeit quieter, changes
were taking place. Logical empiricism, also called Positivism, which had by mid-century swept aside the indigenous American Pragmatist philosophical tradition as well as English Idealism and Empiricism, pursued a systematization of human knowledge founded in the certainties of logic, combined with a scientific explanation of "sense data." No longer would Philosophy occupy itself with metaphysical musings and ethical pretensions but concern itself with logic, the clarification of science's method and results, and the dismissal of traditional philosophical questions through a careful analysis of language. Positivism was in fact, only one of a wide variety of philosophical movements of the first half of the twentieth century, which attacked the very possibility of philosophical inquiry into the ultimate nature of reality, the existence of God, or universally valid ethics. 73

All the same, subsequent philosophers of language, logic and science began to cast doubt on the adequacy of the positivist picture. A complete and consistent logic complex enough to include Arithmetic was shown by Kurt Godel to be impossible, rendering unrealizable not only the complete axiomatization of Mathematics, but the greatest hope of an "ideal language" in philosophy as well. The distinction between analytic or logical statements and synthetic or empirical statements, and the distinction between statements of observed sense data and theoretical explanations of those data - oppositions crucial to positivism - appeared more and more to be porous: there seemed no way to say what we sense without already using some unverified theoretical language in order to say it. 74 What was implied in all of this was that verification in a strict sense is impossible, since any statement of "fact" (sense experience) must presuppose the theoretical perspective it might be offered to verify. 75 Wittgenstein's own later philosophy as appeared in his Philosophical Investigations (1953), suggested that the attempt to discover the foundations of knowledge was as senseless as that of speculative metaphysics. On no account did the English and American Philosophers feel kinship with the French Poststructuralists, but by the 1960s they were becoming equally doubtful about the canonical aims of modern philosophy and the ultimate hopes of rational enquiry.

In the late 1970s, three books galvanized postmodernism as a movement: Charles Jenck's The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (1977); Jean-Francois Lyotard's al Condition Postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir (1979); English translation: The Postmodern
Condition: A Report on Knowledge, (1984); and Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979). The last, while not employing the term “postmodern,” argue that the developments of post-Heideggerian Continental Philosophy and post-Wittgensteinian Analytic Philosophy were converging on a kind of pragmatic anti-foundationalism. Rorty thereby became an American representative of postmodernism, albeit in pragmatic garb, giving “postmodern” a meaning for philosophers outside the European tradition. ⁷⁶

Having taken a peep into the history of postmodernism and in particular, what caused the transition from the modern to the postmodern concept of truth, I will now attempt to recapitulate some of the most prominent features of postmodernism. No doubt postmodernism is so complicated a theory that it is difficult – some would say, impossible – to summarize what postmodernism means, not only because there is much disagreement among writers labeled postmodern, but also because many deny having any doctrines or theories at all. The very idea of a summary may be antithetical to postmodernism. Nonetheless, an understanding of what postmodernism means must begin somewhere and for this I have, for the most part, referred from a section entitled “What Postmodernism Means” found in Cahoon’s From Modernism to Postmodernism. ⁷⁷

VI. Some Prominent Features of Postmodernism:

First, there is no one truth and hence no one representation of any object. Take Nietzsche for instance, according to whom truth is nothing but a metaphor couched in linguistic signs and symbols. As a metaphor then there is no limit to the number of representations it can have of any given object. To put it another way, every object is so incorrigibly, dynamically complex, no one representation can be said to constitute complete knowledge of it. In traditional metaphysical language, this is the denial of simples, the constitution of phenomena by ultimate irreducible parts. And so “any conceptual scheme, any fundamental distinction, any law or rule, is prone to violation, not just because of limits on representation and cognition, but because of the nature of what is to be known.” ⁷⁸

Speaking for himself and other postmodernists, Joseph Natoli claims that “No one representation, or narrative, can reliably represent the world because language/pictures/sounds
(signifiers) are not permanent labels attached to the things of the world nor do the things of the world dwell inside such signifiers." Unfortunately," according to J.P. Moreland, "even granting the fact that language (and certain sensations) is problematic if taken to represent things in the world (e.g., that the language/world hookup is arbitrary), it follows that human subjects cannot accurately represent the world only if we grant the... claim that representational entities are limited to language (and certain sensations)." However, according to Moreland, what correspondence entails is that only propositions are truth-bearers and propositions being neither located in space or time nor sense-perceptible are not at all identical to the linguistic entities and symbols that are used to express them.

Again, as Daniel Dennett has reminded, a search for truth does involve a war of metaphors, viz., linguistic signs and symbols. As tools of thought they are unique. But they are not the only such tools. In this he doesn’t agree with Rorty who wished he (i.e. Dennett) had taken a further step and say that metaphors are the only tools inquiry can ever provide. However, Dennett doesn’t take that step for he says, there are other tools as well that can provide us with the truth: “But I would never take that step, for although metaphors are indeed irreplaceable tools of thought, they are not the only such tools. Microscopes and mathematics and MRI scanners are among the others. Yes, any inquiry is a matter of getting us something we want: the truth about something that matters to us, if all goes as it should.”

At any rate, the postmodernists are adamant in their claim that truth is socially, or to be more specific, linguistically constructed. Truth or reality is not outside our representation of it—and here it often means, outside the sphere of linguistic signs and concepts.

Second, postmodernists also denies that anything is “immediately presence” hence independent of signs, language, or representation. In short, this is the denial of presence. Now philosophers have often distinguished perception or sensation or sense data, as immediate conduits or mediums for reality, from judgment, thought, conception, interpretation, theory, hence symbolization. Postmodernism rejects this distinction between presentation and representation. To put it plainly, nothing is immediately present so it can present itself to the knowing subject in an unmediated way. Every object is known only through its representations. According to Cahoone, this denial of presence is crucial: “(I)f there were valid immediate judg-
ments, then postmodern doubts about and criticisms of standard modern conceptions of knowing could not even get started. Postmodernism must in consequence reject foundationalism, the attempt to justify realist knowledge through recourse to "basic" or fundamental or incorrigible cognition."

Third, there is no unified self. In other words, there is no fundamental nature that can be said to constitute the human self. It was Structuralism who first rejected the centrality of the self by positing the notion that it is not the self that creates culture but culture that creates the self. However, while the structuralists have retained the objective, scientific methods in their study of cultural signs such as words, family relations, etc, the post-structuralists have rejected anything "objective" for to them even the human sciences themselves are cultural constructions. Each self is therefore uniquely and distinctively constructed and as Heidegger has pointed out, "authentic" individuality only takes place when there is a radical self-differentiation from others. Then there's Richard Rorty who speaks of redescription, which is really a redescription of the self using new vocabularies instead of the old ones.

Fourth, there is no one meaning of a text. Postmodernist are generally constructivists about knowledge. Now according to Cahoone, "Construction does not need to imply a creation ex nihilo; one may say more modestly that knowledge is always a selection from a phenomenal or semiotic complexity too great to exhaust." From here the postmodernists come to make their particularly radical point, that meaning is repression. Every semiotic act or judgment obscures, represses, mystifies; if it did not, it could not mean.

The denial of presence and the acceptance of constructivism occasionally lead postmodernists to substitute the analysis of representations of a thing for discussion of the thing. The most famous global expression of this approach is Derrida's claim that, "There is nothing outside the text." This does not mean that there is no real world, but that we only encounter real referents through texts, representations, mediation. The world we know is, or is constructed by, representations. We can never say what is independent of all saying.

Fifth, not only that there is no one meaning of a text, there is also no one text or narrative that can claim to be the only valid one in legitimizing truth-claims. Postmodernists are deeply suspicious of the so called "Grand Narratives" such as the scientific
narratives, in bestowing legitimacy upon social institutions thus defining what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question. 88 Most prominent among them is Lyotard who in his The Postmodern Condition defined postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” 89 With the transition from modernity to postmodernity, meta- or grand narratives have given way to “petits recits,” to modest narratives that have a limited validity in place and time and that are sometimes identical with what Lyotard, borrowing from the later Wittgenstein, calls “language games.” According to Bertens, “A language game may serve to regulate and implicitly to legit­mate a whole culture – it may contain “deontic statements prescribing what should be done...with respect to kinship, the difference between the sexes, children, neighbors, foreigners, etc.” – but that legitimation is always imminent.”90

Sixth, there is no universal moral law. Indeed all moral laws have been derived from a certain social context to serve certain social interests. Now what this amounts to, according to Cahoone, is a denial of dualism not only metaphysical but methodological.91 Now dualism often functions in a philosophical system to put the means by which we know and judge things outside the things judged, e.g., by making the validity of the rules of reason or morality independent of nature or human convention. Normative immanence in contrast affirms that the norms we use to judge processes are themselves products of the processes they judge. There is no access to an ‘outside’. Cahoone here gives the example of the postmodern’s notion of idea of justice. Where most philosophers might use an idea of justice independently derived from a philosophical argument to judge a social order, postmodernism regards that idea as itself the product of the social relations that it serves to judge; the idea of justice was created at a certain time and place, to serve certain interests, is dependent on a certain intellectual and social context, etc. That is, “Norms are not independent of nature or semiosis (sign production and interpretation) or experience or social interests.”92

VII. Postmodernism as a Cultural Phenomenon:

As have been pointed out before, postmodernism not only refers to the intellectual mood but also to the cultural expressions that are becoming increasingly dominant in contemporary society. So for a moment let us shift our attention to some of these cultural expressions of postmodernism as manifested in contemporary society.
At the outset it is important to note that the central hallmark of postmodern cultural expression is pluralism. In celebration of this pluralism, postmodern artists deliberately juxtapose seemingly contradictory styles derived from immensely different sources. They have also employed features of older styles specifically in order to reject or ridicule certain aspects of modernity. All this is evident in the various contemporary cultural expressions as described below:

1. **Postmodern Architecture:**

   In architecture, as in other aspects of culture, modernism dominated until the 1970s. Modernist architects developed what came to be known as the “International Style” wherein they constructed buildings according to the principle of unity. Frank Lloyd for instance declared that a building should be “one great thing” instead of a “quarrelling collection” of many “little things.” With the advent of postmodernity modern architecture came to be regarded as too austere the requirement that buildings be designed to display an absolute unity. In contrast, their (i.e. the postmodern architects) works, deliberately explore and display incompatibilities of style, form, and texture. As Grenz puts it, “(l)n response to the modernist contempt for anything unessential or superfluous, postmodern buildings give place to ornamentation. Further, where modernist architects sought to demonstrate an absolute break with the past by rigorously purging from their designs any relics of earlier eras, postmodernist architects retrieve historical styles and techniques.”

2. **Postmodern Art:**

   One of the great virtues for modernist artists is stylistic integrity. Now modernism has always sought to engage itself in self-criticism in order to purge itself of what it is not and become what it is. Likewise, modern artists engage in this sort of self-criticism in order to render their art pure. Thus, the expression of modernism in art, like its expression in architecture, follows what is known as the univalence impulse. Postmodernist art, in contrast, “moves from an awareness of the connectedness between what it acknowledges as its own and what it excludes...it embraces stylistic diversity, or “multivalence.” It chooses “impurity” rather than
the "purity" of modernism. Moreover, postmodern artists don't view stylistic diversity merely as a means to grab attention. Rather, it is all part "of a more general postmodern attitude, a desire to challenge the power of modernity as invested in institutions and canonical traditions." 98

3. Postmodern Fiction:

Like all other postmodern cultural expressions, postmodern literary works center on contingency and temporality, completely denying the modern ideal of an atemporal, universal truth. Postmodern fiction also reinforces the focus on temporality so as to dislodge the reader from his or her attempt to view the world from a vantage point outside time. What the postmodern authors really intend to do is to leave the reader naked in a world devoid of eternal essences that are unaffected by the flow of time and the contingencies of temporal context. An example of a postmodern fiction that rejects the modern quest for truth is science fiction. In short, science fiction stories are "less interested in uncovering timeless truth than in exploring otherness. They bring other worlds or other realities into collision in order to highlight the disparities between them." 100

4. Postmodern Music:

Postmodern music is both a musical style and a musical condition. As a musical style, postmodern music is characterized by "eclecticism in musical form and musical genre...It tends to be self-referential and ironic, and it blurs the boundaries between "high art" and "kitsch." Moreover, while the music of modernity viewed primarily as a means of expression, the music of postmodernity is valued more as a spectacle, a good for mass consumption, and an indicator of group identity. For example, one significant role of music in postmodern society is to act as a badge by which people can signify their identity as a member of a particular subculture. 102

5. Postmodern Clothing Style:

Postmodern fashions reveal the same tendencies found in other pop cultural expressions. We see it in the popularity of clothes prominently display trademarks and product labels,
for example, a feature that blurs the distinction between fashion and advertising. In particular, this postmodern outlook is evident in what is called “bricolage.” As Grenz writes: “In pointed defiance of the traditional attempt to coordinate individual pieces of clothing in a unified look, the postmodern style intentionally juxtaposes incompatible or heterogeneous elements, such as garments and accessories from each of the preceding four decades.” Like other expressions of postmodernism, the juxtaposition of traditionally incompatible fashion elements is not simply random as it is “to produce an ironic effect or to parody modern fashion norms or perhaps the modern fashion industry as a whole.”

VIII. Postmodernism: An Intellectual Outlook:

Postmodernism thus assumes various forms. It is embodied in certain attitudes and expressions that touch the day-to-day lives of a broad diversity of people in contemporary society. Such expressions range from fashions to television and include such pervasive aspects of popular culture as music and film. Postmodernism is likewise incarnated in a variety of cultural expressions, including architecture, art, and literature. But postmodernism is above all an intellectual outlook or as Steven Connor has put it, “a philosophical disposition.” In the following paragraphs therefore, we will take a closer look at the thoughts of some of the most influential spokespersons for the postmodern turn over the last few decades.

1. Michel Foucault - Truth as The Function of Power Relationships:

Foucault rejects the Enlightenment assumption of truth as theoretical and objective and instead links truth and knowledge to power - particularly those forms of power embodied in specialized and institutionalized languages. Following Nietzsche, Foucault inverts the common-sense view of the relation between power and knowledge. The modernist’s thesis, originally advocated by Bacon was “Knowledge is power.” What is implied in this is that knowledge of the laws (truth) of nature would lead us to the mastery of nature. The belief persisted throughout the modern period and became an important item in the agenda of scientific reason. Foucault now boldly turned the Baconian thesis upside down: “Power creates the forms of knowledge”; knowledge itself becomes the function of power. Whereas we might
normally regard knowledge as providing us with power to do things that without it we could not do, Foucault argues that knowledge is a power over others, the power to define others. 109 He says, “truth isn’t outside power…truth is a thing of the world, it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint…and it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth, that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.” 110 In other words, it is the practices and institutions - such as the universities, army, writers, or the media - that produce those claims to knowledge that the system of power finds useful.

Foucault concludes from all this that “truth” is a fabrication or fiction, “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.” 111 Furthermore, this system of truth stands in a reciprocal relationship with systems of power that produce and sustain it. Truth is just the product of the practices that make it possible. The power of knowledge reveals itself in a discourse through which it arbitrarily, and for its own purposes, engages in the invention of “truth.” In this way, says Foucault, knowledge produces our reality. 112 Apparently, Foucault’s position undermines any conception of objective science. For science itself is nothing more than an “ideology” that is irremediably caught up within the relations of power. 113 That is to say, truth, far from being a function of verifiable evidence and sound logic, represents the function of power relationships. 114

From a Foucauldian perspective then, power is everywhere. The idea that “power” is located at, or emanates from a given point is based on a misguided analysis. In Foucault’s view power is not always exercised from above in a negative or repressive way but is an open cluster of relations that extend to every aspect of our social, culture and political lives. Accordingly then, Sarup explains, “Power (according to Foucault) is not an institution, a structure, or a certain force with which certain people are endowed; it is a name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society. All social relations are power relations.” 115 But then he asks, “If all social relations are power relations, how do we choose between one society and another?” 116

When posed with a question such as this Foucault became evasive. According to Sarup, Foucault had placed himself theoretically in a position where he could not use terms like equality, freedom, and justice. These concepts are just tokens in a game, in an interplay of
forces. This is a stance very much like that of Nietzsche who wrote, "when the oppressed want justice it is just a pretext for the fact that they want power for themselves". History, according to this view, is an endless play of dominion. Foucault is trapped within a logical 'impasse'. As pointed out by Sarup, "Given his conception of power, there can be no escape, no locus of opposition or resistance, because power itself has no specific basis or ground."

Another criticism on Foucault's assumptions about truth has been provided by Barry Allen in *Critical Essays on Michel Foucault* when he suggested that there must be a real difference between the "manufactured" knowledge that is generated from an economy of discourse and a "traditional" perceptual epistemology. Besides, talk can only remake a social environment; there is more to our environment than society, and more to knowledge than discourse. Agera for instance, cites self-evident truths as those that are known independent of experience. Regarding self-evident truths, they are neither created nor dissolved by powers. Yet their actuality cannot be denied for they constitute the basic principles of the constitutions of many modern democratic and socialistic states, of the declaration of human rights, of independence movements and of the United Nations Charters.

2. Jean-Francois Lyotard - A Rejection of Grand Narratives:

The writings of Lyotard were largely concerned with the role of narrative(s) in human culture, and particularly how that role has changed as we have left modernity and entered a "postindustrial" or postmodern condition defined as "incredulity towards metanarratives." He argued that modern philosophies legitimized their truth-claims not (as they themselves claimed) on logical or empirical grounds, but rather on the grounds of accepted stories (or "metanarratives") such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. Lyotard's argument is that in our postmodern condition, these metanarratives no longer work to legitimate truth-claims. Instead, "petits recits", i.e., local narratives or "language games" are being developed following their own specific set of rules, via the discourses that are employed by social institutions and professions. How did Lyotard come to make this verdict, that metanarratives be replaced by petits recits?
To begin with, Lyotard compares between scientific knowledge and what he calls narrative knowledge such as popular stories, legends and tales and comes to the conclusion that, scientific knowledge alone does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in competition and conflict with another kind of knowledge, narrative. Here Lyotard refers to the traditional societies in which there has always been a pre-eminence of the narrative form. These narratives bestow legitimacy upon social institutions, and/or represent positive or negative models of integration into established institutions. In a word, they define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question and through their set of rules constitutes what can be said to be a social bond.

In time however, in the face of those of the abstract, denotative or logical and cognitive procedures generally associated with science, the claims of these narratives began to retreat. Scientific rules became the basis of what nineteenth-century science calls verification that gave legitimation to all that could be considered universal knowledge. In contrast, Lyotard argues, narrative knowledge certifies itself without having recourse to argumentation and proof. Scientists therefore question the validity of narrative statements and conclude that since they are never subject to argumentation and proof, they belong to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology.

Here is an interesting twist in Lyotard’s argument. He says that scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all. In short, there is a reappearance or recurrence of the narrative in the scientific. He cites the example of the state which spends large amounts of money to enable science to pass itself off as an epic. The state’s own credibility is based on that epic, which it uses to obtain the public consent its decision-makers need. Science, in other words, is governed by the demand of legitimation or justification. The two narratives that have acted as justifications for the pursuit of knowledge—the project of science, broadly speaking—that of the liberation of humanity and that of the speculative unity of all knowledge—are both national myths. The first, political, militant, activist, is the tradition of the French eighteenth century and the French Revolution. The second is the German Hegelian tradition organized around the concept of totality.
Today however, Lyotard argues, these (older) master narratives no longer work or function in society. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. And he traced the cause for the decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives of speculative and emancipation to the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means. He cites as an illustration of this shift of attention from ends of action to its means, from truth to performativity, the present-day educational policy. The question now being asked by the student, the state or the university is no longer “is it true?” but “What use is it?” The emphasis in the educational institutions today is on skills rather than ideals. In fact, what Lyotard had envisaged and which to a large extent is true today, is that knowledge will no longer be transmitted en bloc to young people, once and for all; rather it will be served a la carte to adults as a part of their job retraining and continuing education.

For his views Lyotard have met with various criticisms. As maintained by Lyotard, the best that we can put forward to replace the universalist legitimations is that of performativity. According to Bertens however, “such utilitarian, instrumental, legitimations have only limited applicability. He quotes Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson according to whom postmodern legitimation is “plural, local, and imminent...Instead of hovering above, legitimation descends to the level of practice and becomes imminent in it.”

Another criticism is that although Lyotard rejects totalizing social theories, the master narratives, because he believes they are reductionist and simplistic, yet he himself is offering a theory of the postmodern condition which presumes a dramatic break from modernity. As Sarup puts it, “But surely the concept of postmodernism presupposes a master narrative, a totalizing perspective? While Lyotard resists grand narratives, it is impossible to discern how one can have a theory of postmodernism without one.”

3. Jacques Derrida – Deconstruction:

Jacques Derrida, to whom deconstruction is attributed, argues that all language is a self-enclosed system, a collection of symbols, signifying nothing outside the language. There is
no extra-linguistic reality. From here he comes to his famous dictum, there is nothing outside of the text. The meaning of a written text therefore can never be exhausted by the author’s intended meaning. There are as many meanings as there are readers. Besides, no single interpretation can be judged to be better than the others. If a text is “deconstructed,” it reveals its ultimate contradictory and ambiguous nature.\textsuperscript{133}

One way of understanding the term is that it involves discovering, recognizing, and understanding the underlying — and unspoken and implicit — assumptions, ideas, and frameworks that form the basis for thought and belief. Accordingly, its meaning in different areas of study and discussion consists of various shades for by its very nature, it cannot be defined without depending on “un-deconstructed” concepts.\textsuperscript{134}

Many including Derrida himself have tried to define deconstruction but with little success. When asked what deconstruction is, Derrida once stated, “I have no simple and formalizable response to this question. All my essays are attempts to have it out with this formidable question.”\textsuperscript{135} There is a great deal of confusion as to what kind of thing deconstruction is. Nevertheless, various authors have provided a number of rough definitions.

One rough-but-concise explanation of deconstruction is by Paul de Man, who explained, “It’s possible, within text, to frame a question or to undo assertions made in the text, by means of elements which are in the text, which frequently would be precisely structures that play off the rhetorical against grammatical elements.”\textsuperscript{136} Thus, viewed in this way, “the term ‘deconstruction’, refers in the first instance to the way in which the ‘accidental’ features of a text can be seen as betraying, subverting, its purportedly ‘essential’ message.”\textsuperscript{137}

Another definition as found in The New York Times Magazine, January 23, 1994, Sunday: “To deconstruct a “text” (a term defined broadly enough to include the Declaration of Independence and a Van Gogh painting) means to pick it apart, in search of ways in which it fails to make the points it seems to be trying to make. Why would someone want to “read” (defined equally broadly) like that? In order to experience the impossibility of anyone writing or saying (or painting) something that is perfectly clear, the impossibility of constructing a theory or method of inquiry that will answer all questions or the impossibility of fully comprehending weighty matters, like death. Deconstruction, in other words, guards against the belief
- a belief that has led to much violence - that the world is simple and can be known with certainty. It confronts us with the limits of what it is possible for human thought to accomplish.\textsuperscript{138}

Who are the precursors of deconstruction? Though the precursors are many yet we will only look at one of them, namely, Nietzsche. For Nietzsche there is no single physical reality beyond our interpretations. There are only perspectives. There are no final conclusions; the text can never be fixed and as a result it can never be deciphered either.\textsuperscript{139} For Nietzsche then, there is no possibility of a literal, true, self-identical meaning. He explains this by equating every idea expressed in language with metaphors.\textsuperscript{140} While some people feel that technical and scientific language should be purged of metaphor, philosophers such as Nietzsche are of the view that metaphorical expressions are rooted in language itself.\textsuperscript{141} For example, we tend to think of theories as though they were buildings, and so we talk of foundations, frameworks, etc.

Following Nietzsche, Derrida makes the point that all language is ineradicably metaphorical, working by troupes and figures. It is a mistake to believe that any language is literally literal. In short, philosophy work by metaphors just as poems do, and so just are just as fictional.\textsuperscript{142}

In trying to understand Derrida's work one of the most important concepts to grasp is the idea of 'sous rature', a term usually translated as 'under erasure'. To put a term 'sous rature' is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. The idea is this: Since the word is inaccurate, or rather, inadequate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible. This strategically important device which Derrida uses derives from Heidegger, considered to be another precursor of deconstruction. Heidegger would often crossed out the word \textit{Being} and let both deletion and word stand because the word was inadequate yet necessary. Heidegger felt that Being cannot be contained by, is always prior to, indeed transcends, signification. That is, "Being is the final signified to which all signifiers refer, the 'transcendental signified".\textsuperscript{143}

In Derrida's view of language the signifier is not directly related to the signified. There is no one-to-one set of correspondences between them. Unlike in Saussurean thought where
a sign is seen as a unity, in Derrida's view, a word and thing or thought never in fact become
one. He sees the sign as a structure of difference: half of it is always 'not there' and the other
half is always 'not that'. Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching
in new combinations, thus revealing the inadequacy of Saussure's model of the sign, ac-
cording to which the signifier and the signified relate as if they were two sides of the same sheet
of paper. Indeed, if one consults a dictionary, one soon finds that one sign leads to another and
so on, indefinitely. Signifiers keep transforming into signifieds, and vice versa, and you never
arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself. Besides, in each sign there are traces
(the French meaning carries strong implications of track, footprint, imprint) of other words
which that sign has excluded in order to be itself and also traces of the ones which have gone
before. In fact, all words/signs, according to Derrida, contain traces.

Based on Derrida's view of language then as a chain of signifiers with no final meaning,
he comes to his famous dictum concerning the text, "There is nothing outside of the text". That
is, text is thought of not merely as linear writing derived from speech, but any form of depiction,
marking, or storage, including the marking of the human brain by the process of cognition or by
the senses.

In short, Derrida is asking us to change certain habits of mind; he is telling us that the
authority of the text is provisional. If a text seems to refer beyond itself, that reference can
finally be only to another text. Just as signs refer only to other signs, texts can refer only to other
texts, generating what he calls an intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called
intertextuality. In the words of Sarup, "There is a proliferation of interpretations, and no
interpretation can claim to be the final one." According to Hedges, "(D)econstruction is not
something critics do to a text, but a way of highlighting things that texts do to themselves and
each other." Accordingly, deconstruction "kills the author, turns history and tradition into
intertextuality and celebrates the reader though the reader himself is unstable." The work,
now called 'text', exposes beyond stable meaning to the radical and ceaseless lay of infinite
meanings. As James E. Faulconer puts it, "Deconstruction is one moment in the continua-
tion of philosophy."
Now deconstruction has been criticized by many philosophers. One major criticism concerns Derrida’s dictum that no meaning can be fixed or decide upon. What this entails is that without any undifferentiated nor a literal bottom or ground, the activity of interpretation becomes endless; every text tends itself to deconstruction and to further deconstruction, with nowhere any end in sight. As Sarup observes, “Finally, no escape outside the logocentric enclosure is possible since the interpreter must use the concepts and figures of the Western metaphysical tradition. The term used to describe the impasse of interpretation (‘there is no way out’) is aporia. The supreme irony of what Derrida has called logocentrism is that its critique, deconstruction, is as insistent, as monotonous and is inadvertently systematizing as logocentrism itself.”

Gary Brent Madison, reflecting on Rorty and Derrida in his *Coping With Nietzsche’s Legacy: Rorty, Derrida, Gadamer*, says, “It is of course true that Derrida is no more of a believer in the traditional metanarratives of philosophy than is Rorty and is thus, like him, a kind of postmodern agnostic who sets no store by philosophy’s traditional claim to “knowledge” and is in fact out to undermine it as best he can...Furthermore, just as Rorty undermines the “epistemologically centered philosophy” of modernity, so Derrida’s deconstructive undertaking calls into question not only modern philosophy but the entire philosophical tradition, or what Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence.” But the trouble with deconstruction is that it does not seem to “go” anywhere...(H)aving deconstructed metaphysics but unable to get beyond it, remaining, as he might say, “on the edge,” Derrida is left, and leaves us, sitting in the rubble of this once magnificent monument to human pride and presumptuousness.”

4. Richard Rorty - A Rejection of Truth and Epistemology:

Being one of the most prominent defenders of postmodern philosophy, Rorty calls for an abandonment of truth and of epistemology altogether. What replaces it? Rorty suggests that philosophers should stop seeing philosophy as a matter of discovering the truth or of “mirroring reality” and instead see it as a matter of continuing conversation and social practice. As regards the aim of this conversation, it is not to find truth but to look for an intersubjective agreement on what is “good to believe” with the hope of achieving solidarity. Truth therefore is not to be
found "out there" but within language. Philosophy thus, like any other cultural phenomenon, is a thoroughly linguistic phenomenon and truth is nothing more than a creation of language. Not much will be said here concerning Rorty since his philosophy will be discussed at length in the following chapters. However, a brief summary on his understanding of the concept of truth would certainly prove useful at this point.

Rorty’s view can be summarized by saying that since there are no universal or objective truths then no one theory can claim to have power to arbitrate among competing languages or descriptions. Accordingly, Rorty contends that no theorist can properly criticize, argue, evaluate, or even "deconstruct," since there is no fulcrum from which to push one claim as "right," "correct," or "better" than another. The theorist is replaced by the ironist, one who is aware of the ineliminable contingency of selfhood and discourse. Accepting the new limitations, the ironist can only "redescribe" the older theories in new languages and offer new descriptions for ourselves and others...Every vocabulary is incommensurable with another and there is no "final vocabulary" with which one can adjudicate normative and epistemological claims. For Rorty, there is always the possibility of a "better vocabulary" that will describe better our lives and actions.

In view of the above then, truth no longer becomes the goal of inquiry for Rorty. In its place we should look instead for justification of those "agreed upon" beliefs and which now form a part of our final vocabulary. In fact, Rorty is very emphatic when he says that such phrases as "the good in the way of belief" or "what is better for us to believe" are interchangeable with "justified" rather than with "true."

One would think this would commit Rorty to relativism, but he denies the term on the grounds that it belongs to a discredited foundationalist framework, as the term "blasphemy" makes no sense within an atheistic logic. What Rorty hopes to do is to argue for "new" descriptions — those that celebrate contingency, irony, solidarity, and liberal values - over others though he claims that one cannot "argue" for the new description. The only thing one can do in the course of a conversation is to offer new descriptions and hope others will find them appealing and more useful for (liberal) society. Dethroning philosophy, Rorty claims that literature is a far more powerful mode of interpreting the world and offering the descriptions needed for self-creation and social progress, which he explained in terms of social solidarity.
Perhaps it would be worth mentioning here another postmodernist, Frederic Jameson, who has gone a bit further in that while Rorty still talks of “descriptions of the world” implying thereby that the world (though not truth) exists out there, Jameson says it is hard to think of the world as existing outside our narratives. What Jameson believes is that narrative is not so much a literary form or structure as an epistemological category. Sarup explains: “This is not to say that we make up stories about the world to understand it; Jameson is making the much more radical claim that the world comes to us in the shape of stories.” Whatever we may try to substitute for a story, it will most likely be, on closer examination, another sort of story. Physicists, for example, “tell stories” about subatomic particles. In Jameson’s opinion, structures may perhaps become useful as conceptual fictions, but reality comes to us in the form of its stories.

IX. Some Common Criticisms of Postmodernism:

Having glanced through some of the most crucial aspects of postmodernism as propounded by various postmodern philosophers as well as their criticisms, I would like to conclude this chapter by highlighting some of the more general criticisms that have been made concerning postmodernism.

To begin with, many have questioned whether postmodernism as a philosophy have really replaced modernism. As some have argued that postmodernism is actually not a break with modernism but a continuation. According to one critic, “(M)odernity was not actually a lumbering, totalizing monolith at all, but in fact was itself dynamic and ever-changing; the evolution, therefore, between “modern” and “postmodern” should be seen as one of degree, rather than of kind - a continuation rather than a “break.” Using Rorty’s vocabulary, postmodernism is but a continuing conversation that has now taken over from modernism.

Some theorists such as Habermas even argued that the supposed distinction between the “modern” and the “postmodern” does not exist at all, but that the latter is really no more than a development within a larger, still-current, “modern” framework. As maintained by Agera, “There is a sense in which it could be said that postmodernism builds on modernism.” This is because while postmodernism accepts most of the conclusions of modernism such as, the
denial of the divine reality of the divine mind, the immateriality of the human mind, its metaphysical reality, distinct from the physical brain by reducing it to purely biological and the biochemical processes, it also adds more. Agera thus concludes, "The prefix "post" in postmodernism, if sought to be vindicated, is not without an element of continuity." According to Ilhab Hassan, "Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall, for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once. And an author may, in his or her own lifetime, easily write both a modernist and a postmodernist work."

Another often made allegation against postmodernism is that it is filled with contradictions. The argument is that if postmodernists literally and explicitly undermine truth, objectivity, and the univocal meanings of words, then this would undermine their own writing as well, undercutting their meaning of truth. Postmodernism would then be in the position of denying the validity of their own denials. Then again, as pointed out in Wikipedia, "Hostility toward hierarchies of value and objectivity becomes problematic to them when postmodernity itself attempts to analyze such hierarchies with, apparently, some measure of objectivity and make categorical statements concerning them."

Yet again, speaking of postmodernism and its contradictions Terry Eagleton say, even though it (i.e., postmodernism) may have jettisoned ontological foundations, metaphysical grounds, apodictic truths, unimpeachable authorities, and the rest, the advanced capitalist orders to which it belongs certainly have not, and indeed cannot. He says, "No capitalist society is more secular than the United States, and none is more virulently metaphysical." He then went on to say, "The more market forces level all distinct value and identity to arbitrary, aleatory, relative, hybrid, interchangeable status, confounding fixed ontologies, mocking high-toned teleologies, and kicking all solid foundations from beneath themselves, the more their ideological superstructures...will need to insist, more and more stridently, upon absolute values and immutable standards, assured grounds and unimpeachable goals, the eternal givenness of a human nature which is mutating before their very eyes, the universal status of values which are being exposed as historically partial even as we speak."
It is in this sense, Eagleton says, that postmodernism is both radical and conservative together, springing as it does from this structural contradiction at the core of advanced capitalism itself. As an example Eagleton cites China where, he says, we are witnessing a spectacular contradiction between a still highly authoritarian political superstructure and a progressively capitalized economic base. At one end of Tiananmen Square, an outsized portrait of Mao still peers expressionlessly down, while just opposite, the luminous arches of the McDonald’s logo scale the evening sky. One can appreciate in this context just what a bold project Chinese postmodernism is, with its resolute determination to deconstruct all hierarchies, elites, and immutable values. 167

Finally, postmodernism is yet to establish itself as a meaningful philosophy for many see it as nothing more than a kind of rhetorical gymnastics, more sophistry and rhetoric than substance. 168 Now this could be attributed in part to postmodernism’s attempt to avoid contradictions. But as pointed out by Cahoone, though the charge of self-contradiction is an important one and though postmodernism certainly makes use of obscure rhetorical strategies, yet some of the criticisms that postmodernism makes of traditional inquiry cannot be altogether dismissed as baseless. As stated by Cahoone, “To say then that postmodernism critique is invalid because the kind of theory it produces does not meet the standards of traditional or normal inquiry is rather weak counter-attack. It says in effect that whatever critique does not advance the interests of normal or traditional inquiry is invalid.” 169

Without doubt, postmodernism has raised certain issues that have, in a way, called into question certain supercilious assumptions of modernism such as the positivist claim that only that which is verifiable is true knowledge. Nonetheless, in its attempt to be tolerant to all claims to truth, it has succumbed to one contradiction after another thus failing to establish itself as a meaningful and valid philosophy in the way traditional philosophies hope to be. To conclude I would again emphasize the fact that some of the challenges that postmodernism raised are crucial and cannot be so easily written off or dismissed. As to whether it is right, it is, of course, another matter.
Notes and References:


4 Dallas Roark, “When Can We Say We Know?” webpage.


6 Ibid., webpage.

7 Ibid., webpage.

8 Ibid., webpage.


11 Ibid., webpage.

12 Ibid., webpage.


16 Ibid., webpage. (See Castell, *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 160.)

17 Ibid., webpage. (See Castell, *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 161.)

18 Ibid., webpage.

19 Ibid., webpage. (See Castell, *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 168.)

20 Ibid., webpage. (See Castell, *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 170.)


22 Ibid., webpage. (See Hill, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, p. 343.)

23 Ibid., webpage. (See *Pragmatism*, ed. by H. Standish Thayer, p. 97.)

24 Ibid., webpage.

25 Ibid., webpage.

26 Ibid., webpage.
27 Ibid., webpage.

28 Ibid., webpage.

29 Ibid., webpage. (See Hill, Contemporary Theories of Knowledge, p. 318.)

30 Ibid., webpage.


34 Shannon Weiss, & Karla Wesley, “Postmodernism and its Critics” (Department of Anthropology: The University of Alabama) webpage, http://www.As.Ua.Edu

35 Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism, p. 12.

36 Ibid., p. 12.

37 Ibid., p. 12.

38 "Postmodernity", Wikipedia, webpage.


41 Cahoone, From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology, p. 9.

42 Ibid., p. 9.

43 Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism, p. 13.


46 Nihilism is, quite simply put, belief in nothing. It means that there is no meaning. There is no universal truth or underlying reality that could serve as a basis for morality or meaning. (See Sebastian Heck, “Is There a Truth to Set Us Free? – The Epistemological Impasse of Postmodernism,” Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa, May 2005, p. 15.)

47 Cahoone, From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology, p. 2.


49 Ibid., p. 22.

50 Ibid., p. 22.


52 Ibid., p. 8.


56 Ibid., p. 107.

57 Ibid., p. 107.

58 Ibid., p. 107.

59 Ibid., p. 107.

60 Dinesh Chandra Srivastava, “The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy” (Presented at the National Seminar on “*Postmodernism: Modernism and its Discontents*” organized by the Philosophy Department, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong on 14-16 March, 2007.) p. 6.


63 Ibid., pp. 111-112.

64 Srivastava, “The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy,” p. 6.


66 Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, p. 3.

67 Ibid., p. 4.

68 Ibid., p. 4.

69 Ibid., p. 4.

70 Ibid., p. 4.

71 Ibid., p. 5.

72 Ibid., p. 5.

73 Ibid., p. 5.

74 Ibid., p. 5.

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76 Ibid., p. 9.

77 Ibid., p. 10.

78 Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy and the Postmodern Turn,” webpage.

79 Ibid., webpage.

80 Ibid., webpage.

81 According to J.P Moreland, in spite of the differing views on propositions, most philosophers would agree that that a proposition 1) is not located in space or time; 2) is not identical to the linguistic entities that may be used to express it; 3) is not sense perceptible; 4) is such that the same proposition may be in more than one mind at once; 5) need not be grasped by any (at least finite) person to exist and be what it is; 6) may itself be an object of thought when, for example, one is thinking about the content of one’s own thought processes; 7) is in no sense a physical entity.
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123 Ibid., p. 247.
125 Ibid., p. 135.
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161 Ibid., p. 24.


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167 Ibid., p. 5.
