Introduction

COLLOQUIALLY, THE "MODERN" IS SYNONYMOUS with the contemporary. So the concept of "postmodernism" would seem to be a temporal impossibility. Nonetheless, the word 'postmodernism' has now firmly worked its way into the lexicon of academia and is taken to mean "after modernity."

Yet there seems to be at least as many definitions of "postmodernism" as there are disciplines: what counts for being postmodern in one discipline scarcely mirrors what counts for being postmodern in other disciplines. For this reason, the Executive Committee of the Center for the Study of Ethics decided to devote the *Fourth Annual Utah Valley State College Conference by the Faculty* to addressing the question, "What is Postmodernism?"[1]

Segmenting the history of any intellectual tradition is notoriously problematic, and defining 'postmodernity' is no exception – not to mention what posterity will name the era following postmodernity! Nonetheless, a common theme over the last several decades has been that whatever constituted modernity in the Western intellectual tradition, some kind of rupture occurred, marking the onset of a postmodern period.

In the most general terms, postmodernism asserts that obtaining an epistemological stance where incommensurable claims can be

judged as absolutely true or false is either impossible or meaningless. This does not imply, however, that there are no objective, eternal truths. For many postmodern thinkers, it is the case that such truths, should they exist, are beyond human knowing. One important aspect of postmodern thought is the idea that epistemic claims are necessarily contextual, historical, particular, and subject to refutation. In the words of Stanley Fish, Dean of College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at University of Illinois at Chicago:

> The problem is not that there is no universal – the universal, the absolutely true, exists, and I know what it is. The problem is that you know, too, and that we know different things[,] armed with universal judgments that are irreconcilable, all dressed up and nowhere to go for an authoritative adjudication.[2]

The aim of this book is to see how this problematic plays out in different disciplines.

Part 1 attempts, at least tentatively, to define "postmodernism" from specific perspectives. In "Top Ten Ways To Use the Word Postmodern in a Sentence Without Annoying Everyone in the Room," Phil Gordon emphasizes the difficulties involved in a clear understanding of postmodernism and how this leads to much of the misunderstanding and tension surrounding the word. Nevertheless, "the complexity of the word "postmodern," its resonance, its pervasiveness, and its conflicted and contradictory nature, imply that it is a significant word, that there is something important there, something revealing about the intellectual, moral, political, and cultural climate of our time." David Keller, in "Toward a Post-Modern Environmental Philosophy," recounts two features of the Modern worldview, Descartes' radically anthropocentric philosophy of self,

and the mechanistic metaphysic of nature. Post-modernism, for the environmental philosopher, is properly understood as the rejection of these two premises. "Navigating safely between the Scylla of immaterialism and the Charybdis of mechanism," Keller writes, "a post-Modern environmental ethic reaffirms our intimate organic relationship with the webwork we call nature." Pierre Lamarche, in "What Was Postmodernism?," takes a broader perspective, ending up much less confident than Keller that such a concise definition is possible: for Lamarche, it is not that we have now eclipsed the post-Modern period, it is that the term has outlasted its usefulness.

In Part 2, *Postmodernism and the Humanities*, our attention is turned to how postmodern themes are manifested in literature, dance, and film. Rob Carney, in "'All the new thinking is about loss. In this way it resembles all the old thinking': Or, How Post vs. Modern Is Post-Modern Poetry?", characterizes modern poetry as the experiment with free verse and formalism, and postmodern poetry – simply, poetry after modernism – as a "return to a more personal, almost neo-Romantic, stance." In "Postmodern Subjectivity in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*," Christa Albrecht-Crane uses an example from film to explore issues regarding the social construction of the self. The Truman show is able to explore these issues at multiple levels by allowing the audience to observe a subject in an artificially constructed social environment. Postmodern theory, she contends, "asks us to revise our understanding of self as something stable and authentic. It suggests that our subjectivities are strongly linked to cultural and political assumptions." Karen Dodwell argues, in "Jane Austen and Postmodern Biography," that traditional biographies tended to overlook or disguise the foibles and shortcomings of the great persons they describe, and that postmodern biographies address such disconcerting details. Kathie Debenham, in "Deconstruction of the Dance: A View From the Inside Out," shows how, beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, new forms of

modern dance challenged the "institutionalized" approach. Employing several examples to illustrate this new approach, Debenham demonstrates how choreographers incorporated "new uses of the elements of time, space, and the body and raised questions about the nature of dance and what a new dance might be."

Part 3, *Postmodernism and History*, addresses the effect of postmodernity on the practice of history. In "History and Postmodernism: Can Asian History be Postmodern?" John Lee identifies the impact of postmodernism on the study of Asian history and culture. Citing examples from Chinese history, he states "we can understand how the nation used the discourse of modernity to justify its oppression of local religious institutions and its expansion of power into the local cities of China. Postmodernism offers insights into the others groups such as shamans, sorcerers, secret societies, and anti-government groups, which were excluded from the powerful nationalist groups."

David Knowlton, in "Not Just in Salem and Not Just Among the Azande: Accusations of Postmodernism and Intellectual History in Anglo-American Anthropology" addresses the influence of postmodern theories on anthropological research and its implications for disciplinary unity. Anthropological postmodernism, says Knowlton, "is concerned with parts of this dilemma. It emphasizes the problems of text, of the monograph or essay as literary form with its own sets of social relations guaranteeing it. This includes a concern for the politics of the text and their implications for ethical relations between scholar and the communities and individuals among whom s/he works and about whom s/he writes. It also is concerned with the situatedness of the scholar."

In Part 4, *Postmodernism and Social Critique*, Laura Hamblin argues in her essay, "Postmodernism, Las Vegas, and Me," that Las Vegas is the quintessentially postmodern city by virtue of its artifice

and artificiality. Recounting a personal experience, Hamblin describes an IMAX movie of running rapids in the Grand Canyon as more "real" than actually doing it. This, she illustrates, is the uniquely postmodern phenomenon that is Las Vegas. John Goshert, In "Going 'Nukeyuler': The Next Devastation of Critical Vision," explores questions regarding the rhetoric of war and the possibility of critical expression in American society, stating that "The recently rediscovered American "values" such as morality and patriotism, thus contextualized, are among any number of control mechanisms which emerge from time to time in order to perform the therapeutic function of propping up increasingly shaky ideological forms." In "Sexing and Racing the Nostalgia Film: Gender and Race Politics in Postmodern Cinema," Jans Wager addresses how cinema has forced a re-conceptualization of the shift of gender roles and changing place of women in the public sphere, and how three recent films attempt to reassert, in their own ways, patriarchy and the hegemony of the white male.

In the fifth and final section of the book, *Postmodernism and the Political*, Scott Hammond's "Negotiating Power Relations in a Postmodern World" shifts our attention to changing conceptions of the exercise of power. On the modern model, power was bifurcated between the powerful and the powerless, between oppressor and oppressed. Using the work of Michel Foucault and others, Hammond argues that this model does not take into account the complex nature of power relations. Power, rather, is a multifarious interaction between points in complex webworks of power. Michael Minch, in "On Postmodern Patriotism," argues that traditional forms of patriotism are at odds with the ideals of a liberal society and the hyper-liberalism of postmodernism. A postmodern patriotism, in order to be consistent with liberal theory, must be "chastened and humble" in recognizing the distinction between nationalistic pride and the valorization of goods for their own sake irrespective of national boundaries.

In "Fear of Commitment: Notes on Postmodern Feminism," Margret Grebowicz, a Visiting Scholar from University of Houston – Downtown, uses the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard to examine the conditions under which feminist subjectivity can operate. She argues that feminism requires a belief in the "…instability of everything, in the possibility that everything is essentially refutable, even democracy and equality."

Alex Simon, in "One Evil Empire Down, One to Go: Post-Modernity's Influence on Social Thought and Social Activism," points to the shift in the social sciences from the assumption that universal, objective truths are discoverable about the human nature and society, to the view that no such truths are discernible. Nevertheless, with globalization and the growing power of corporations and financial networks over individual destiny, social scientists, who are concerned about justice and hence are also *activists*, ought not embrace the normative impotency of strong relativism in light of the absence of objective truths.

It is our hope that these papers and perspectives provide a lasting, useful reference for students, faculty, and others who are struggling to answer the complex question, "What is Postmodernism?"

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Notes

1. N.B. The conference organizers intended perspectives from natural science, assuming that the supercession of Newtonian mechanics by quantum mechanics and the breakdown of mechanistic philosophy of biology point to something postmodern, but the only paper submissions came from the humanities and social sciences.

A note on the word 'postmodern.' We have retained the syntax of the contributors. Some authors, like Keller, use 'post-Modern' in a to denote the explicit repudiation of Modernity, while other authors 'postmodern' in a less technical sense to refer to the period following modernity.

2. "Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals." *Harper's Magazine* (July 2002): 37.