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# Reviews

## *The Metaphysics of Postmodernism*

**James Seaton**

*Michigan State University*

**Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-rational Criticism**, by Carl Rapp.  
*Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 272 pp. \$65.50 cloth. \$21.95 paper.*

Are we all postmodernists now? At first glance, it seems implausible: most Americans persist in believing in an external reality, assume there is a difference between truth and falsehood, and even claim to believe in the God of traditional monotheism. American culture, however, may be postmodernist even if those who explicitly subscribe to postmodernist precepts are few. The thesis that contemporary society is postmodernist does not assert that most people consciously accept postmodernist doctrines but that these doctrines reflect the working assumptions that most of us live by but refuse to acknowledge. It seems clear that there is little public support for the theoretical notion that there is no significant distinction between truth and falsehood, but it is unclear to what extent we remain willing to acknowledge the authority of objective truth when such acknowledgement is politically or

personally inconvenient.

If there is a debate about whether our society can be described as postmodernist, there is also a debate about whether this is a good or a bad thing. The "culture wars" are in large part a debate over whether the trends that make up postmodernism should be encouraged or resisted. The claims of postmodernist theorizing cannot, however, be refuted by condemning the social manifestations of postmodernism, no matter how justified such a condemnation may be. Although the latter provides a setting favorable to the influence of the former, it is important to note that postmodernist theories do not limit their ambitions to the affirmation or even the clarification of contemporary culture. Deconstruction, New Historicism and pragmatism each claim a relevance that extends to the past as well as the present; Derrida has deconstructed Plato, New Historicism is perhaps

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best-known for its analyses of the European Renaissance, and Richard Rorty, the leading expounder of the New Pragmatism, gained fame with a history of Western philosophy from Descartes to the present.

Arguments about postmodernism often generate more acrimony than insight, especially when it is unclear whether the topic of debate is theory or culture. In *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-rational Criticism* Carl Rapp wisely resists the temptation to become entangled in the culture wars. A reader of *Fleeing the Universal* finishes the book without learning Rapp's position on family values, affirmative action or gun control. What Rapp does offer is a convincing immanent critique of postmodernism's theoretical claims, a critique made all the more persuasive by Rapp's willingness to forgo cheap shots and polemical hot buttons in favor of a rigorous examination of deconstruction, pragmatism and New Historicism in the light of the standards they themselves use to demonstrate their alleged superiority to traditional philosophy.

The distinguishing characteristic of postmodernist theorizing is its rejection of traditional philosophy and metaphysics. The Western philosophical tradition itself is, of course, a record of debate rather than consensus. The postmodernists, however, claim to have rejected not one thesis or another but rather the entire philosophical tradition from Plato through George Santayana. Deconstructionists, pragmatists and New Historicists certainly make assertions and criticize

opposing views, just as traditional thinkers did. Unlike traditional philosophers, however, postmodernists make no attempt to tell the truth about reality. They realize, what in their view their predecessors failed to grasp, that human reason is an inadequate instrument for achieving truth. They have therefore renounced metaphysics and philosophy in favor of what Carl Rapp calls "post-rational criticism."

Rapp wastes no time considering whether such a change in intellectual history is desirable or not; instead, he asks the reader to consider whether the alleged transformation has indeed occurred. Rapp's answer, at which he arrives through a series of close examinations of key postmodernist texts, is that no such grandiose intellectual revolution has taken place. The postmodernists, he finds, cannot help philosophizing despite themselves and, even worse (from their point of view), engaging in metaphysics. Their theorizing, therefore, continues rather than terminates the career of Western philosophy.

Deconstructionists pride themselves on their awareness of the paradoxical nature of language. Previous thinkers tried their best to present their thoughts as clearly as possible, but deconstructionists know that they labored in vain; language is radically contradictory, so contradictory that it is impossible to use language to specify anything in particular. No matter how hard we try, so the deconstructionists argue, we cannot refer to anything outside language itself. On the one hand, this claim seems to rule

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out traditional metaphysical claims about the nature of God or matter. On the other hand, Rapp points out that the deconstructionist understanding of language repeats Western philosophy's first metaphysical move:

Just as there had been, for Thales, ordinary water (alongside other things) and metaphysical water (the underlying principle of all things), so, for the linguistic transcendentalists, there was ordinary language (such as French or Russian) and there was metaphysical language (conceived as the underlying explanatory principle of all things whatsoever) (54).

One reason the deconstructionists' claim to have abandoned metaphysics has been accepted despite their use of traditional philosophical strategies was their presentation of their activity as theorizing, not philosophizing. In the last few decades, Rapp shrewdly observes, "precisely because it was not recognized as such, metaphysics, in the form of theory, had a field day" (57).

Practitioners of the New Pragmatism like Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish exemplify the postmodernist inability to avoid making metaphysical commitments even as they claim to practice an "anti-foundationalism" that renders traditional philosophy obsolete. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty tells the story of Western philosophy since Descartes without attempting to judge the degree to which the systems he describes succeed in telling the truth about the nature of the universe. Restraining one metaphysical impulse does not, how-

ever, prevent another from breaking through. Rorty's very refusal to judge the philosophers he discusses by reference to their own claims reveals that his pragmatism

is really a sort of metaphilosophy, incapable of meeting, or of being met by, any of the views that come against it because it is so adept at arranging those views for purposes of aesthetic contemplation on a level or plane beneath itself.

Rorty's ingratiatingly unpretentious tone conceals a theoretical ambition no less sweeping than that of traditional philosophers. As Rapp points out,

It [pragmatism] proclaims itself to be not a way of looking at things, which might be relative to other ways of looking at things, but rather the way of looking at the ways of looking. Assuming that this is the most modest of all possible claims, the pragmatist looks at other intellectuals in the same way that an adult might look at children frolicking or squabbling on a playground (170).

Likewise, Stanley Fish's "anti-foundationalism" does not prevent him from offering the concept of "communities of interpretation" to serve as a "bedrock explanation" (62) for the theories they produce in place of the traditional reference to the real world. Rapp notes that the move from reality to communities as one's "bedrock" leaves one's commitments as "foundational" as ever:

In reducing ethics and politics to the actual behaviors of individuals and communities, the prag-

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matists arrived at their own set of “first principles,” without realizing, or at least without admitting, that anything metaphysical had happened (14).

New Historicists often attempt to set themselves off from their logocentric predecessors by proclaiming that, although their own interpretations are no more disinterested than those of earlier researches, as postmodernists they are at least aware of their biases and willing to acknowledge them. As Rapp puts it, “they often appear to be saying, ‘We are the only ones who are willing to admit that all knowledge is contaminated, including even our own’ ” (10). This admission, however, only raises another question, one which renders the entire postmodernist project suspect. How is it that one can arrive at such a deep insight as the awareness that truth is unattainable? Rapp observes that an entirely “skeptical position is simply an impossibility” since

The discovery that knowledge has been skewed by a variety of factors or circumstances that one has come to know of cannot be used as evidence that knowledge per se is unachievable. To do so would be to rely on the knowledge one has acquired concerning the factors or circumstances (8).

Any answer to Rapp’s question—“And how is this knowledge to be explained?” (9)—involves philosophical commitments as metaphysical as any thesis of Aquinas.

Devastating as Rapp’s immanent critique is to the pretensions of postmodernist theorizing, his project involves more than merely debunking

the debunkers. Rapp hopes to contribute to the rehabilitation of speculative philosophy and thus to the re-orientation rather than the rejection of postmodernism. For Rapp “the most curious thing (and the most hopeful thing) about post-rationalism is that it clearly knows more than it believes itself to be capable of knowing” (23). To move beyond the sterile antinomies of contemporary postmodernism requires that we summon the humility—and imagination—to entertain the possibility that earlier thinkers may have some insights worthy of our consideration. Rapp himself calls upon Hegel and Santayana, demonstrating persuasively that each in his own way “anticipated, and refuted in advance, the chief contentions of late twentieth-century post-rationalism” (17). Rapp calls Santayana “the most important twentieth-century American thinker to bear in mind in assessing the intellectual situation in which we now find ourselves” (19). It is Hegel, however, to whom Rapp himself turns more often; his Hegel is not the exponent of German Idealism but rather the sharp critic of the various transcendentalisms and irrationalisms of his own age. Rapp thus takes issue with his other guide, Santayana, whose “misapprehension of Hegel as an idealist” who “believed that mere thinking . . . is capable of generating existences” (254) prevented him, in Rapp’s view, from appreciating to what an extent his own criticisms of contemporary idealisms amounted to merely “his own version of Hegel’s chief objections to transcendentalism” (254).

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Whether Rapp or Santayana is right about Hegel's overall philosophy remains in doubt despite Rapp's flair for discovering aspects of Hegelian philosophy to which even non-Hegelians may turn with profit. What there seems little doubt about is that *Fleeing the Universal* provides an immanent critique of postmodernism so convincing and so fair-minded as to render the postmodernist claim to have achieved a radical break with past thought implausible at best. Rapp's work is valuable not only for

its specific achievement but for the possibilities it opens. In demonstrating that the theorizing of our era remains despite its best efforts irrevocably connected to the thinkers of the past, Rapp implicitly encourages the supposition that our intellectual, spiritual and moral heritage has not been rendered entirely obsolete by the advent of an allegedly "postmodernist" world. In doing so Rapp makes an oblique intervention in the "culture wars" which he has wisely chosen to avoid in his explicit argument.