

A Probe into Postmodernism

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Abstract :

In this paper, I have tried to specify exact significance of the term 'postmodernism', and the fundamental features of it. In the context of fundamental features, I have discussed objection against reason, objection against unity, objection against self and also the problem of deconstruction.

Keywords : modernism, the idea of unity, reason-dependent science, the idea of self, deconstruction

I

Apparently the term, postmodernism seems a bit confusing. For postmodern philosophy which appeared in late nineteenth century is after all the philosophy of modern times. So what exists in modern era, what is the meaning of saying that it is postmodern? This puzzle disappears if we translate 'modern' into 'modernity'. This modernity does not refer merely to a particular historical time, but also a particular outlook -a particular mental attitude which centers not on religion, but on science. In other words, this modernism which arises during sixteenth-seventeenth century conveys a new spirit: it transcends theology of medieval transformation, turns from heaven to earth, where religion gives way to natural science which, therefore, comes to the forefront, or becomes the paradigm. Hence modernism or modernity is the tradition or trend which liberates philosophical thought from the authority of the church, and establishes it in the new horizon of reason'. Thus we have Descartes and others who, following science, and its loyalty to reason, felt the necessity of a method. It was realized that any philosophical enquiry will be erratic without a proper method. It is method alone that can give us a consistent and systematic philosophy which can capture the real nature or unity of the world amidst its various diversities.

In short, the basic identity of modernity is unwavering loyalty to science and its methodical approach where there is no room for feelings or emotions. What counts most is natural science with its devotion to pure reason which alone can enlighten us about the real nature of reality.

II

Against the rhetoric of modernism, postmodernists like Lyotard, Foucault, or Derrida provide a new outlook, a new method or way seeing things differently. They do not entertain the idea of any unity which is so dear to metaphysics. They are in favour of diversity. Thus the method Lyotard, for example, adopts in his *Postmodern Condition* is Language Games. Stepping into the shoes of Later Wittgenstein, he focuses his attention on the effects of different modes of discourse which he identifies as language games. As he continues: 'What he (Wittgenstein) means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put-exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of these pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them' (*Postmodern condition*, p.10) The lesson he derives from Wittgenstein, if there are no rules, there are no games. The implication of Lyotard's contention is clear. Different discourses like science and literature are different language games--each with its different rules which make them legitimate. The language game of science centers around truth/falsity; while the language game of literature expresses deeper feelings, emotions and realizations. All these games are equally important. There is no metavocabulary to judge which one is primary, and which one is secondary. There are only diverse games. There is no way to find any unity among them.

At the same time, postmodernists draw our attention to the limitation of reason-dependent science. When love for reason gains upperhand, then poets, saints, women are diagonalised as emotional, irrational, and therefore abnormal. Then no voice except that of reason. Rational thinking always tries to bring down everything to the level of 'abstraction by essentialization', understand things in its own terms and conditions. Consequently they are utterly blind to the deeper realization of the poets and saints -which are no less true in a very significant sense.

Again, the postmodernists reject the idea of a metaphysical self. We know that rationalists like Descartes subject all beliefs to critical examination, and then justifies them by positing self as the foundation. In contrast, the favourite slogan of the postmodernists is: 'fall of the self'. In this, their predecessors also join with them. For example, Heidegger and Merleau Ponty maintain that the idea of Husserlian transcendental self is wrong: what exists is embodied agent in the world who is actively engaged with others. This is also the position of the postmodernists. They do not believe in the presence of any disembodied self. For example, Derrida thinks that the cogito is a 'prime instance' of the 'metaphysics of presence, since on Descartes's view, self-consciousness 'is the perception of self in presence, or 'self-presence' (*Margins of Philosophy*, p.16) In that case, it is a myth: for there is no being as presence. The desire for a 'transcendental signified' is a myth. The self like anything is in a weave of differences, and can not, therefore, be present to an act of consciousness of his or her own. It is well-known that Foucault rejected the notion of self in his early writings and that, in his later work, he aimed to recover this notion. It has been argued, however, notably by Margolis, that Foucault's philosophy provides no warrant for this recovery of the self: that, in fact, it contradicts the central claims of his archaeologies and genealogies of knowledge. As Margolis puts it: Foucault 'has no conceptual resources for recovering self-identity [in any way] without the essentialising and transcendental themes his archaeologies and genealogies reject' (Margolis, 'Foucault's Polemic', 1998, p. 53). In a longer passage, Margolis describes what he sees as Foucault's appreciation of the need to recover the self, a recovery that is, however, bound to fail in the terms that Foucault is able to allow:

There is peculiarly a long delay in recovering the self. My own reading is that, for all his brilliance, Foucault was ultimately terribly naïve as a philosopher. He must have believed the political activism he encouraged through his genealogically oriented writings, particularly after *Discipline and Punish* did not rightly require a full-blooded theory of self and action. He was wrong, of course, and came to regret the mistake..... Foucault... came uneasily and with considerable uncertainty to the need to redeem the theory of self: the human agent under constructive history. He was never sure he could escape transcendentalism or essential fixities. (Margolis, 'Foucault's Polemic', 1998, p.49-50)

In this paper, I describe Foucault's rejection of the self and his later attempt to recover it. Against Margolis, I shall argue that Foucault was not in fact saddled with a conception of the self that made its recovery impossible. It is argued, in particular, that Foucault's later writings are consistent with a conception of selfhood, rooted in the idea of 'being in the world', found in the writings of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Last but not least, let us deal with the concept, deconstruction, as introduced by Derrida. Deconstruction, as Rorty points out, is the method of reading a written text. This incidentally shows his connection with the wider cultural movement where emphasis is on the recessiveness of the artist, which Barthes dramatized as 'the death of the author'. This, however, means that empirically the author is the one who has composed his works. But as soon as they are published, they are the common properties of the readers who may not bother about the author who may be alive or dead. It is only the text given to them, and this is all that really matters to them. A text has no stable meaning: there are always elements in the margin or background which can reshape the meaning of a text, unsettle the way we are traditionally accustomed to read, and promote a different reading. A new reader can draw our attention to the margin, raise questions to show the lacuna in a text which opens up the possibility of reading it differently.

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