AUBREY NEAL

# HOW SKEPTICS DO ETHICS

## A Brief History of the Late Modern Linguistic Turn

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# INTRODUCTION

*I am a very conservative person.... The constancy of God in my life is called by other names.*[1]

— JACQUES DERRIDA

**ABOUT TWENTY YEARS AGO,** a prominent Canadian social theorist told me the 1960s had been "a wonderful time" for him. "I announced to myself God was dead and so all things were possible," he explained. He declared his loss of traditional faith with the unalloyed confidence of Europe's historical Enlightenment. He was the skeptical attitude incarnate. Those famous words, "God is dead" are the gauntlet of a fully fledged, out of the closet, skeptical scion of the modern age. The declaration did not surprise me. I had reached a similar conclusion at about the same time in my own life. It was the word "wonderful" that caught me by surprise. That was one of the last words I would have used to describe the loss of traditional religious faith. The social theorist was a successful public intellectual. His work was grace under pressure; he was a player, a doer, and a leader in his field. I appreciated his position. Our differences were not professional. They were more a matter of personal emphasis. I was surprised to find I was not as "modern" as he. I was, colloquially, not as "with it." I still liked the old tunes. In spite of my doubts, I still enjoyed the old creeds. I missed the traditional meaning of the old words and I still enjoyed trying to truth-say in the old unequivocal ways.

Reflection and study indicated a complex history lay behind our differences. If the theorist knew the history, it did not seem to bother him. I decided it bothered me. Martin Luther had been the first to propound the "death of God" in his theological quarrel with the Nestorians. G.W.F. Hegel had been the first modern philosopher to use the phrase with unequivocal skeptical intent. He had shed crocodile tears of "infinite grief that God

himself has died" in 1804. Friedrich Nietzsche turned Hegel's grief into a sound byte in *The Gay Science* (1882). Nietzsche's madman stood in a town square screaming "who has drunk up the sea?" Like most well-read skeptics, the theorist knew Nietzsche's sound byte, but he did not seem to know or seem to care about Hegel's grief. Informal solicitation of the opinion of friends and colleagues came down solidly with the theorist. There was not a mourner among them. Friends were indulgent, colleagues looked askance, and my wife stopped taking me to parties.

Hegel's grief was not in evidence among friends and colleagues with whom I broached the topic. Their discretion was monolithic. To me, it was amazing. Hegel's grief was a metaphor for a significant historical event. Hegel had felt the first deep impact of science and materialism on daily life in modern Europe. He had experienced firsthand the crossover from metaphysics to materialism at the end of the Enlightenment. His grief reflected the emotional trauma of skeptical Enlightenment in modern history. My friends and colleagues were as incredible to me as a group of feminists who had forgotten about the pill. Fascination with Hegel's "grief" became the determination to do a project sometime in the early 1990s. The university has a remarkable tolerance for navel gazing. The formal phase of the project began with an unstructured feeling of emotional difference. Inexplicit differences are not pleasant. If language is the home of man, Hegel's grief has no home. Finding an expository style for the project was difficult. Finding the appropriate tone for the project took a long time. A few readers have expressed doubts it took long enough.

Hegel's grief is not a conventional topic for historical research. In the majority view, as far as I could see, a sorrow like Hegel's is a latent sign of eccentricity or, even worse, unpublishability. The majority point is: Hegel got over it. His "grief" was temporary. Hegel grieved during a transition stage in his development as a philosopher. When he overcame his grief for God, Hegel was able to abandon superstition and embrace science. When Hegel became a religious skeptic and an historical positivist, his thinking rose to a new level. His career as a philosopher took off. He grew confident in his new faith. He realized history did not threaten the substance of the old religions. The moral practices of the old religions remained alive, but their violent side was eliminated from modern history in the West. Why mourn the absence of religious fanaticism and political intolerance? Transcendental categories of right and wrong distilled from epochs of traditional religious experience were still available for reflection.

History, in the West, had shorn religion of its violence and preserved what was valuable. The moral anthropology of modern life draws on the practical wisdom of traditional ethics in a new and progressive environment. Ideally, the old wisdom gives politics a conscience. The religious heritage balances the coldness of the scientific view and humanizes the predatory nature of states. Hegel's grief was a stage in getting the modern balance right. The educated secularist in the modern Western tradition is a happy, well-adjusted example of the Hegelian phenomenology of mind minus the grief. History has done us the service of eliminating the prejudices of the old traditions while confirming their proprieties.

Describing the modern philosophy of history is easier than criticizing it. History permeates public discourse like the soft buzz of a fluorescent light. Readers like the light, they get used to having it on, and so they barely notice the noise. History supplies politics with its store of popular anecdotes. Politicians like the stories, accept the conventional wisdom and hardly notice a downside. One of the practical difficulties which separated me from most my friends and colleagues was over this cozy nineteenth-century view of modern history. Hegel's philosophy of history did not seem to me to include Hegel's loss of traditional religious faith. Hegel's grief was still alive to me. I believed, on the basis of my personal experience, Hegel's grief was still active in subtler ways than modern historical idealism was able to comprehend. Hegel had an emotional experience powerful enough to change his philosophy of life. Hegel was important so Hegel's grief had to be important. Given the importance of his philosophy, Hegel's "grief" must have reflected a general convulsion. God's metaphorical "death" seemed a research path into a social history traditional scholarship had neglected.

The documents subsequent to 1804 do not show any grief. If Hegel still felt it, it stayed a private matter and did not affect his influential theories of dialectic, consciousness, and political right. I decided, as much for my own purposes as any other, that traditional scholarship was not satisfactory in this area. The traditional scholarship seemed to reflect an inadequacy in the traditional method. Hegel had expressed and then repressed an important emotional experience. I believed he had committed a kind of philosophical sin deep down in the heart of his philosophy. Hegel got over his grief by building a boisterously secular tradition into the heart of the old theology. I subsequently discovered David Hume was Hegel's silent partner in the hostile takeover of dialectics from the church. Hegel

was as silent about Hume as he was about his grief. His hostile takeover of Christian dialectics looked like corporate business practice or a military campaign. Nothing indicates he was worried about the *ad hoc* political alliances the death of God had let him make. Hegel's secularization of history was like the "Machiavellian moment" John Pocock describes in the Renaissance.[2] All that was good congealed into politics. All that was noble melted into air. Skeptics have to accept the moment, but surely they could be indulged a few modest regrets. It seemed to me Hegel's system or, alternatively, the system for which he spoke, was in denial. Hegel used history to side-step his grief over the political take-over of all that had been holy. That was my side. The psychological and emotional side of modern history intrigued me. Hegel's grief had a history. I was sure of it.

Jürgen Habermas is one of the most respected critical theorists of the twentieth century. Moral conscience and history are two of his recurrent themes. In his view, the modern West is torn emotionally between its moral duty to others and its historical obligation to democratic politics. His eponyms for the two sides of the schism are Kant and Hegel. Kant is the ethicist and Hegel is the politician. Habermas wants his work to relieve us of the Hobson's choice between Kant and Hegel.[3] He hopes Western history can gather its senses and develop a conscience without having to curtail its traditional freedoms. Habermas raises the heritage issue of moral practice in secular terms. The complexity of the task is reflected in his Germanic prose. I turned to Habermas because skeptics who refuse to mourn the loss of the old certainties may have ethical issues with their politics. I thought the ethics of side-stepping the death of God might show up in what Habermas calls, "communicative behaviour."

Habermas believes the fundamental social issue in modern public life since the Enlightenment is how skeptics can even do ethics. Like Freud commenting on his children, he is amazed we remain, basically, decent people. Habermas chooses high-profile protagonists to illustrate his arguments. He often returns to the moral puzzle of Marxist politics. Logically, Marxist politics is reasonable, but Marxist moral indignation is a paradox. A materialist has no standard of comparison for how things could be other than the way they are. Logically, a materialist is a well-adjusted realist. S/he has no measure for behavioural anomaly outside the norm and no higher standard than politics by which to make general moral judgments. Injustice might concern her as a matter of policy, but Marx is angry. Why would a materialist be angry, Habermas wonders? Habermas

supports Marxist politics in practice, but his philosophical side wants to know how they are possible. Jürgen Habermas is a very complicated man. The complexity of the modern moral problem, as he sees it, indicates the old religions are not obsolete.

In the early nineties Habermas conceded:

> I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person and individuality or freedom and emancipation without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history … Without the transmission through socialization and the transformation through philosophy of any one of the great world religions, this semantic potential could one day become inaccessible.[4]

Old Hegel comes through clearly in phrases like "understanding … the substance … of history" and "Judeo-Christian understanding of history." The world spirit moves through the "great world religions." Any of the great historical religions can be an instrument of "freedom and emancipation." Modern history makes progress using the collected wisdom of the traditional texts of all historical peoples. The last eight words are the cutting edge of the passage. Habermas is afraid the "semantic potential" of religion "could one day become inaccessible." He is candid. He has not backed off from the modern problem. He puts it obliquely, but there it is. The world still needs ethics. The prospect is not pleasant to Pangloss skeptics who want the best of all possible worlds without paradox, sorrow, and political inconvenience.

The last eight words of Habermas's concession pose a serious general issue for a skeptical society that uses history to conserve its moral heritage. In a world where "God, himself, has died," skeptical realists are left with only the "semantic potential" of the old wisdom. From this perspective, good intentions are not their only responsibility. They are keepers of the language. Since they are morally responsible for the substance of the traditional wisdom, they have to do more than keep the old language in play. They have to keep it alive. Habermas expresses concern the wisdom of the great world religions will die unless their "semantic potential" is preserved. Protecting the full semantics of the heritage religions is part of the skeptical challenge in late modern life. Habermas believes the semantic heritage is as important as the physical environment. The deep

green skepticism of scientific doubt has just as much responsibility for the language environment as it does for the physical one. Habermas feels obliged to protect the semantic heritage from pollution by power politics and other less thoughtful aspects of "the public sphere." He believes the modern tradition assaults the language of traditional moral reflection at a number of key points. In his view, the conflict between the modern tradition and the moral tradition has caused a "legitimation crisis" in modern life. What should be done cannot often be plausibly defended. The right and just in the old moral traditions are not legitimate issues in the modern one.

The ethical paradox Habermas describes has an ambivalent pedigree. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) are the German idealists who founded the tradition in which Habermas works. They are irreconcilably different in their approaches to the problems of knowledge and belief. Kant is the founder of modern aesthetics, and Hegel is the father of philosophy of history. Kant is a moral idealist, and Hegel is a political idealist. Continental philosophy has wrestled with the warring angels of these two traditions for almost two hundred years. Habermas aroused my curiosity about these two giants. The plainest difference between them is the way they treat the act of reflection. Kant sees the world as a reflection of mind. Hegel sees the mind as a reflection of world. After my project was underway for a few years, my confidence in Habermas ebbed. His skill remains an inspiration. His goal of reconciling Kant and Hegel now appears to me to be futile. One philosopher has to take precedence over the other in any organized discussion of modern intellectual history. The attempt to adjudicate their respective claims led this project to postmodernism and the late modern linguistic turn. My conclusion is that postmodernism was a Continental act of philosophical adjudication between the competing claims of Kant and Hegel. From the postmodern perspective, Kant won, hands down.

Let me sketch how it happened from a postmodern perspective. The most significant details and their implications make up the body of the narrative. In 1768 Immanuel Kant looked at himself in the mirror and saw something he had never noticed before. He realized he could interpret the left/right reversal of a mirror image without being conscious of it.[5] Kant's reflection changed Western moral philosophy forever. His reflection convinced him the mind is the first ordering principle of the world. The difference between himself and his reflection made him a transcen-

dental idealist. In truth, he did not need a lot of convincing. His last short publication in 1770 announced his intention to rethink his approach to philosophy:

> It is one thing to conceive for oneself the composition of the whole.... It is another thing to represent the same concept to oneself in the concrete by a distinct intuition.[6]

Until 1770 Kant had thought of philosophy as an intellectual process of logical construction. Philosophers built up large and inclusive concepts about things in general from simple propositions about things in particular. After seeing himself in the mirror for the first time, he decided modern philosophy was looking through the wrong end of the telescope. Its historic task was the opposite of the one it had set itself since classical times. The major task of philosophy was to discover the simple propositions behind the complex process of logical perception. Kant called his new insight a "Copernican Revolution" in thought.

The reflection paradox convinced Kant knowledge was not a linear progression and philosophy should not be a series of linear propositions. Knowledge was a complex function of two related, but fundamentally different, mental operations. Philosophy's new task was to explain the complex relation between two contrasting operations going on simultaneously in the human mind. The mind conceives and reflects. Knowledge requires a concept *and* a concrete intuition of the concept in external form. Kant claimed our concrete intuitions of the external world were a spontaneous reflection of our own purposes. The world is there but we give it order. Spontaneous intuitions which suit our own purposes take place beneath the threshold of consciousness. Kant did not use the word *unconscious*, but he said our intuitive capacity operated spontaneously and it was beyond the scope of all critical philosophy at that time. Kant reflected on what he thought he had discovered for eleven years. He broke his silence with a book many philosophers consider the greatest single intellectual achievement in the history of Western civilization. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* opens with the following words:

> There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience.... How then should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action?

Kant's answer is the beginning of postmodernism and the late modern linguistic turn. It is, simply put, the way skeptics have to do ethics. We are categorically responsible for the order of things. The meaning of life, history, and human culture is in our hands. We moderns have given the world a logical order which suits our physical purposes. When that world or any part of it goes awry, the blood is on our hands.

Kant was not as dramatic as my summary. He was the consummate professional at all times. Kant's baby-step approach to the problem of a skeptical ontology continued as follows:

> But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.... If our faculty of knowledge makes any addition [to experience], it may be we are not in a position to distinguish it from the raw material.[7]

Skeptics have to sort out what they know from how they know it. Knowledge itself is dialectical. The conceptual half of an experience is analytical, i.e., rational and, hopefully, enlightened. Analytical concepts are pure. The synthetic reflection of concepts is not pure. The human mind plays tricks with its own reflections. It surreptitiously organizes experience to suit its concept of it. *The synthetic process of empirical reflection is hidden from us. It does not belong to the conscious mind*. Kant called the hidden process a synthesis *a priori*. He believed ethics were the only way to verify the empirical process of spontaneous reflection. Since our mind routinely plays tricks on us, the standard of judgment we apply to ordinary experience has to be categorical. The conceptual world must rigorously mirror a universal experience. We cannot measure the validity of experience by our view alone. A concept of experience is not valid unless every ordinary experience *of that category* can be reflected within it. Kant's theory of skeptical reflection prohibits privilege, special cases, and political expediency. One world, one system of thought, one common human experience – these are the cornerstones of the Kantian system. He thought they were as permanent and fixed as the starry sky.

*World* is the governing term in the Kantian moral epistemology. Kant refused to stop his *Critique of Pure Reason* at any point smaller than the whole world. When we see the world whole and entire, then we see the world from a moral perspective. Ethics are the one and only way a human being can concretely intuit the world whole and entire. An ethical world

is the only intelligible world. It is the only world where we can trust our senses. The moral freedom of an intelligible world is unexceptional. It sees every part of the world in the same way. The same laws apply to all parts of the world in all places at all times. There are no acausal holes in Newton's scientific universe, and there were no behavioural holes in Kant's moral one:

> *Synthesis* does not come to an end until we reach a whole which is not a part, that is to say, [until we reach] a WORLD.[8]

The unflinching congruence between abstract concept and concrete, sensory intuition has been the ground and rule for secular moral theory ever since Kant. I believe Kant's moral epistemology provides an answer to the Habermas question about Marx. How can a materialist have moral indignation? Kant's approach provides a relatively simple answer. Marx can be angry at the bourgeoisie because, arguably, they commit the fundamental intuitive error which Kant confronted in his own reflection. The bourgeoisie let their mind play tricks on them. They conceive the world one way and they experience the world in another. They conceive the world in terms of spiritual growth, peace, prosperity, and economic development. The world they conceive is not the world reflected in most people's experience. Marx claimed bourgeois values hid a concrete world of exploitation, imperialism, and double standards. His charge was polemical, but, by Kant's standards, his logic was impeccable. Karl Marx understood the way skeptics have to do ethics.

The American version of Continental philosophy is called *pragmatism*. The name which Charles Sanders Pierce and William James gave to the study of "things" (*pragmata*) stuck to the tradition of American philosophy that was continued by C.I. Lewis, Willard van Orman Quine, Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, J.L. Austin, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson.[9] They took William James's psychological "pragmatism" and applied it to the study of philosophy. Charles Morris expanded pragmatism into cultural studies at the same time C.I. Lewis was re-grounding it in Kant. Lewis's *Mind and the World Order* (1929) argued that the "action orientation" of expressive concepts had to be understood historically in terms of what he called "their temporal spread."[10] Lewis criticized the practical effect of interpretive systems, including (by implication) American historical studies. It was Lewis, in the American tradition, who was the

first to articulate Kant's moral epistemology in plain language. He called the concrete sensory side of knowledge an "action orientation." Modern life has "action orientations" which are learned from childhood on up. The learning only ceases when we die. Jobs, politics, and interpersonal relationships continue the learning process after the period of formal education. Lewis refused to stop his evaluation of the "action orientations" in modern life short of anything smaller than the whole world. Lewis laid the foundation for plain language moral philosophy in the United States. Plain language is the approach which will be favoured here.

"We live in an age of skepticism," Lewis explained in 1955.[11] The glassy stare of fish-eyed skeptical doubt had been a central fact in his long professional life:

> Men have become doubtful of any bedrock for firm belief, any final ground for unhesitant action, and of any principles not relative to circumstance or coloured by personal feeling or affected by persuasions which may be only temporary and local.[12]

The skeptical attitude only needs "principles relative to circumstance" and "persuasions which may be only temporary and local," Lewis continued. The flexibility of the skeptical attitude fares brilliantly in the hard sciences. It encounters some difficulties when the same habits of mind are introduced into the traditional questions of ethics, faith, and religious belief. Protecting the good in the temporal and local faces a number of procedural problems. The largest one, according to Lewis is:

> Objects do not classify themselves and come into experience with their tickets on them.... Knowledge must always concern principally the relations which obtain between one experience and another, particularly those relations into which the knower himself may enter as an active factor.[13]

Lacking guidance from a higher spiritual entity, all judgment is relative. It may even be trivial. Issues of time and place have to be left to time and place to decide. Skeptical social skills may be high, but the skeptical moral situation is dubious. The skeptical observer has no higher authority than history. His historical perspective is part of the skeptical moral problem. How can history awaken skeptical reason to the need for *principled*

action? History only stipulates something happened. It makes no value judgments.

Lewis's work was continued in the United States by Hilary Putnam. The redoubtable Putnam enlisted a colleague for service in the cause:

> Hartry Field says we have *low standards* in theory of language; and we ought to have the same standards that we have in other natural sciences, especially if, as good physicalists, we view language as a natural phenomenon.[14]

Field expressed this disagreeable possibility in the William James lecture at Harvard University in 1974. Field had trouble getting even so prestigious a lecture published and Putnam used Field's unpublished manuscript during the writing of his in 1978. Putnam found Field's message "fascinating" because, he thought, "it illuminates an issue that has been submerged in philosophy for a long time, and that has surfaced in the twentieth century."[15] Field thought a theory of language might be the best way to discuss a skeptical moral perspective. The conceptual bridge between language and life might be an entry point for a plain language approach to this relatively abstruse topic.

Field's theory of language was Kant's mirror to Putnam. He was fascinated by the complexity of an everyday event he had always taken for granted. The simple one-to-one correspondence between words and things had no essential foundation in reason, truth, or history. For Putnam, the "crisis" Habermas belabours boiled down to a less caustic question. Putnam was not directly concerned with grand issues like materialism, religion, and history. He said he simply shared the general interest of all academics with regard to the matter of scholarly references. Putnam wondered if it was entirely clear how scholars and writers do them. With the apparent soul of innocence, he asked:

> Is *reference* just … a relation which is as much a part of the natural-causal order as the relation, "is chemically bonded to"? Is it to be studied in the same way?

And then, the bombshell:

> If not, are we viewing language as something transcendental?

Field had said, "Yes," language has become something transcendental to people, many of whom do not otherwise believe in transcendence. In a skeptical society, references to the world are made in the language of the same world. References are circular. Words mirror whatever is the case; the relation between words and things is taken from the use for things at hand. Words have no innate "bond" to a higher truth. The "catch," Putnam writes, "is that the concept of truth is *not* philosophically neutral."[16] Formal reference is reflexively loaded with unspecified pragmatic assumptions. Those who share the assumptions understand the reference.

Putnam's way of speaking is less dramatic than Habermas's, but his position covers the same range of issues. For example: In the West, wealth exists prior to our discussion of it. Western Europe and the United States have accumulated large quantities of capital over the last 250 years. Most Europeans and North Americans grew up with it. Those who do have it see it all around them. Wealth induces a sophisticated form of political reflection among those whom it benefits. The majority of people in Western Europe and North America are relatively rich by world standards. They tend to see the larger world pulled through the looking glass of their own personal experience. They hold well-tutored economic and political expectations of what the world is like. Their affluent environment is the mirror in which they see the rest of the world. From a non-Western view, these well-tutored expectations reverse the correct relation between morality and politics. In the West, politics looks like a religion and religion is just a lifestyle choice.

In the previous example, the developed and the non-developed world are made to show diametrically opposite points of view. The example is pejorative, but not irrelevant. The "reference problem" is not about who has the most evidence to support their point of view. The "reference problem" is not a problem of proof. Putnam uses the word reference to denote a question of discourse – hopefully an amicable one. Putnam is concerned human cultures do not discuss differences very well. He surmises one of the reasons they disagree obdurately, at times, is because words are confused with the real process of reflection. The best things in life are not about words. They are about the relationships the words imply. Confusing the word with the thing can cause severe misunderstandings. The Continental tradition has produced several philosophers who were very excited about these kinds of problems.

"Here," Jean-Paul Sartre said, "we must face that unexpected revelation, the strip tease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words were only alibis for our aggressions."[17] Sartre called his autobiography *The Words*. He believed his life had been a morbid history of honeyed words. Near the end of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre screams into print the primal pain of a war-torn Europe:

> Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. *But the idea of God is contradictory* and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion.[18]

Sartre's cry is the anguish of a history without god, grief, or ethical introspection. Sartre's pain is the existential torment of a sensitive soul imprisoned in a culture of bad faith. It is impossible to be innocent in such a place. Existentialism is no longer in fashion. Sartre's philosophy may be passé, but his *Nausée* (1938) is not. Sartre's nausea is the emotional sickness of denied grief. His vertiginous sense of nothingness is the symptom of extreme moral paradox. His visceral longing for moral certainty is a symptom of the legitimation crisis in late modern life. Sartre's antihero, Roquentin, confronts the most personal of all reference problems in the form of a chestnut tree just outside Bougainville. The feeling Sartre describes is the visceral self-loathing of a man facing his own complicity with evil:

> It was the chestnut tree. Things – you might have called them thoughts – which stopped halfway, which were forgotten, which forgot what they wanted to think and which stayed like that, hanging about with an odd little sense which was beyond them.... And I was inside, I with the garden.... I hated this ignoble mess ... filling everything with its gelatinous slither.[19]

Roquentin's melodramatic depression mirrored the disillusionment of many Europeans after World War I. Roquentin's rant fails as philosophy, but it excels as an honest confession of grief. It succeeds as a sensory illustration of the difficulty Habermas and Putnam were trying to warn

us about. Roquentin's emotional breakdown is the primal scream of a modern skeptic whose language has failed. The semantic potential of his church, his politics, his art and culture are no longer sufficient for his life. He has no thoughts of his own. Normative adjustment has degraded his spirit. He is a creature of time and place. Roquentin is that most desperate of human beings – a man absolutely alone – a man without a soul in the world to share his pain.

Michel Foucault called Sartre a terrorist thirty years before the word was in fashion. Sartre's nausea terrorized Foucault. My perspective is that Continental philosophy is the Kantian unconscious of modern history. It is the moral mirror of a bourgeois history the Romantics turned inside out and then tried to deny altogether. The late modern linguistic turn was taken by real-life people like Roquentin who believed their language had been robbed of its moral power. They were sickened by the violence politely mirrored in the politics of their time. Roquentin's "nausea" is the reason for postmodernism and the late modern linguistic turn. The semantic heritage of modern history is Roquentin's spiritual disease. He is sick from its honeyed words. The word world weighs heavily on his heart. The word pictures of modern progress have not comprehended the violence and suffering which have accompanied them. They have trapped him in their coils. The sweet dreams of history have him in their grasp. Roquentin's revulsion at seeing himself mirrored in the violence of history reverberates across half a century. He is sickened by the sight of what he has become and sickened by the fact he became it all unawares. He was guilty before he realized it. The world had turned him inside out and he had never seen it coming. Roquentin is the existential heir of Hegel's infinite grief. He cannot stomach what history has done to the heritage he once thought he knew and knows, with certainty, he still loves. Roquentin was a direct inspiration for the postmodern movement in France. He was also the historical product of a great collective grief. Roquentin is the modern voice of that deepest and maddest of sorrows. He is the grieving skeptic for whom words have failed. He is Hegel without the opiate of history.

Roquentin dramatizes the guilty side of the Kantian moral conscience. Kant's ethics are the background of the novella. Sartre could not have published *Nausée* if Europe's leading intellectuals had not been reading Kant. The intellectual history behind the dramatism is, I hope, at least as useful as Roquentin's morbid suffering. The history of Roquentin's grief goes

back to Europe's historical Enlightenment. David Hume was the greatest skeptical philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment. He had bouts of suicidal depression which he called "the academic disease." History saved him from it. Hume believed in history and he made a relatively good living writing it. Hume's expository brilliance was audacious at the time. He believed modern history had given the old moral theology a scientific foundation. Hume's secular faith in modern history was the perfect foil for a moralist like Immanuel Kant. Kant thought modern history was the enemy of moral progress. Hume and Kant were divided by their attitude toward modern history. The division between them was touted by the Romantics of the next century. The Romantics wanted a world rigidly divided between history and ethics. They chose Hume over Kant and Hegel over the whole pre-modern moral tradition. Hume and Kant were divided over history, but they were united in their opposition to the perspective which prevailed in Europe in the next century. Hume and Kant wanted ethics to be a practical force in modern history. They both wanted a unified world united in peace.

In many ways postmodernism and the late modern linguistic turn are a return to the great moral debate between Hume and Kant. Most of the characters discussed here have re-read the Hume/Kant debate and rejected the conventional interpretation of it. Their "deconstruction" of modern intellectual history is difficult to penetrate because their critical premises are not widely discussed. This extended essay defends postmodernism and the linguistic turn. It suggests postmodernism grew out of a widespread dissatisfaction with Hume's and Hegel's confidence in modern history. This essay suggests the premises for the "post-" this and that movements of the late twentieth century were a positive reaction to a fundamental misreading of modern intellectual history. The Romantics of the nineteenth century entrenched their conventional explanations of how skeptics do ethics in modern academic culture. Postmodernists wanted to change the way skeptics do ethics so they had to challenge those conventional explanations. Their topics and their writing style reflected the perceived failure, in their minds, of modern ethical theory and moral practice at the most basic level of modern life.

From the perspective developed here, modern intellectual history is not a footnote to Plato, as Whitehead imagined. It is a seminar on Immanuel Kant. Major conceptual problems with the skeptical attitude were openly admitted in the eighteenth century. Kant summed them up. His secular

summae were seriously bowdlerized in the Romantic era which followed the French Revolution. Hegel is the arch-villain of this piece, even though his grief is honest and his hopes are humane. Hegel mugged Kant's ethics and bequeathed to us a moral pabulum of predigested political aestheticism. The most contentious and misunderstood issues in modern intellectual history derive from the aesthetic reading of Kant's philosophical opus passed down to us from the Hegelians at Marburg University in the 1860s. It may be crediting academics with too much influence, but I believe they have been instrumental, in some instances, in driving the world mad.

Immanuel Kant believed science was "intelligible." He did not say "right" or "corresponding to reality." He said it was intelligible because it was internally coherent with itself from top to bottom in all parts of the known universe, with no exceptions, no exclusions, and no special exemptions. The ultimate measure of "intelligibility" was what Kant called a "categorical imperative." The "intelligibility" of science was a "categorical" fact. Kant tried to make the logical standards of modern science into a secular standard for the modern moral life. He believed a moral life was intelligible from top to bottom in every place, in every time with no exceptions, no exclusions and no special exemptions. Kant thought men of science had to live up to their own intellectual standards because it was the only way they could live a moral life. Lampe, Kant's moody manservant, is said to have complained Kant's philosophy was destroying his faith. Kant assured Lampe he wanted "to make room for faith."[20] Kant's faith is moral faith. Kant believed the ethical philosophies of the world's great religions were compatible with science. Science could not prove the existence of God, but it could prove the truth of God's moral teachings. Kant understood a personal grief like Hegel's. He knew the deracinated moral life would be a life of loneliness and despair. His "categorical imperative" is a prescription for psychological and emotional health in a skeptical world that does science.

Modern intellectual history has shown less attention to these old Kantian questions than they deserve. Kant explicitly believed in science. He did not hide his faith. What do the moderns believe in? What are the explicit categories of their diverse and disputed faiths? What gods govern the word world wars of late modern culture? The late modern linguistic turn and postmodernism saw the language of modern public life as a categorical problem. Low language standards had made slogans, shibboleths, and buzzwords the measure of modern faith. Language had, as

Field and Putnam concluded, become something transcendental. Words with a meaning in themselves had become corrosive to ethical philosophy and moral practice. Rhetoric had replaced faith. Talismanic words became the highest measure of mutual understanding. Modern language became the magic mirror where soft-core solipsists saw only their personal view of the world. Obligation was unsayable, ethics were unintelligible, and traditional morality was all but impossible in the chaos of a world where words rule and reason is speechless.

This book reflects a condition of chronic consternation I have felt all my adult life. On the up side, the research gave an old skeptic the opportunity to scrounge intellectual history for the long-lost solace of his childhood faith. On the downside, it has not repaired the innocent idealism which seemed so palpable when I was young. If I could go back in time before the race riots, the Vietnam War, the Nixon shocks, Iran, Afghanistan, Reaganomics, and the Bush men, I would tell that innocent idealist to take Kant's advice: "Make room for faith." In the immortal words of Miracle Mets relief pitcher, Tug McGraw: "You gotta believe," kid. What religious traditionalists, philosophical realists, and political idealists call utopian, a skeptic calls survival. The no-gloss, full-time skeptic has no other world but this one. S/he had better believe it can work. The shortest and fastest route to nausea is lost faith in the only world for which there is credible evidence. In a skeptical world room for faith is room for everyone. The leading exponents of a consistently skeptical position have all believed the human race can live in peace. They believe the economy and the spirit can coexist. They have all been deep green boosters of a better world. Violent superstition is difficult for a no-gloss, full-time skeptic to comprehend. Pious citizens of the economically developed world have no reason to be proud. Among the most violent of modern superstitions their political abstractions have prominence of place. Western politics (absent the God its politicians claim to worship) has made a secular trinity of democracy, freedom, and global development. These Molochs of modern political correction have been drafted into the service of every violent double standard in the world. They illustrate a practical reason for Putnam's theoretical concern. The language of modern politics has become something transcendental. Those interested in avoiding the existential forest around Bougainville might appreciate the story of how it happened.

The challenges of this project require a cautionary paraphrase from Theodore Adorno. He often warned about the implications of discussing

qualitative terms like ethics, truth, and culture. Discussing them does not mean, perforce, you have them. I must emphatically repeat Adorno's warning. The story here has become, Dan McAdams might say, the story I live by. However, like Proust's "poor old Swann," I think about it more often than well.

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