

AN EPISTOLARY EXCHANGE

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*...when these prodigies
do so conjointly meet, let men not say
'These are their reasons; they are natural
For I believe they are portentous things
Unto the climate that they point upon.*

Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene III

Dear Harvey,

In order to discuss the relative merits of two cultural points of view, two systems following each other in time, modern and postmodern, and to discuss them in terms of which provide a more appropriate and productive framework for our lives today, we have first to justify the appropriateness of dividing our immediate past and our present into two such distinct periods.

From my vantage point, I see instead a continuous change in mankind through incessant introduction of new ideas and tools from the wheel to computer networks. If we add to this process an increasing population combined with relentless depletion of natural resources, we have a result that forces upon us continuous changes in our habits. The biochemical machinery of living organisms and the evolution of species

represent a response to such an environmental challenge. In fact, if we believe Toynbee, the development of civilizations is a continuously ongoing process fueled by challenge from a changing physical environment.

Of course we like to look at the endless train of history roaring forward from the past as a neatly labelled row of railroad cars representing clearly separated epochs in time, differently colored and marked according to origin and destination. It is easier for the human mind to work with organized information. Consequently, the hierarchical structure of the past that we encounter in our books and our historical narratives is the result of the specific form of the information processing system our brain uses to store and process information. History is basically a filing problem.

Now, a large segment of Western intellectuals claim today, and have done so for some years, that we have to change cars leaving the one called modern behind and enter the next carrying a sign "postmodern." What a name! "Post-contemporary," that must be the same as "future." Thus today is already tomorrow.

Is this introduction of a new epoch all just a question of arbitrary labelling procedures, an artistic game or historians' preference? Or do we happen to live at the point of some historic watershed similar to the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, the last Universal state in the West?

Some of the postmodern augurs, the practicing philosophers, notably the French such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, seem to imply that the previous epoch called "modern," that we all have lived in until maybe the 1960s, has run out of steam, and as a consequence the basic concepts of reality that have guided us at least since the French Revolution have to be abandoned. Note that the reason for claiming the arrival of a new epoch is not that the concepts embodied in the

enlightened rationality characterizing the preceding modern age are intrinsically in error but that the application of these concepts has resulted in models for society which postmodernists believe have been unsuccessful and unjust.

Instead of attacking these models directly, the postmodern philosophers joined by the town criers-the opinion makers-proclaim instead that the basic concepts of enlightenment which have guided the development of the present-day secular society were at fault and are out of date, like short skirts.

It is amazing to me that this criticism assumes the basic principles of rational enlightenment invariably lead to social consequences such as repression of women, racism and the emergence of totalitarian societies. To believe that a set of principles, when applied, invariably leads to one outcome only is to believe that history is predetermined, which of course is the opposite to what the postmoderns proclaim to believe in.

What are the principles of enlightenment that define the modern epoch and which the postmoderns claim to be an unsuitable foundation for a worldview suitable for today?

The first I define as believing in the existence of a morally and socially responsible individual clearly able to separate itself from the surrounding society. Socrates, Galileo and Luther are our idealized models for the concept. "Our" stands in this context for those of us humanists whose moral foundation rests on rationality and enlightenment.

The second principle is the universal validity of the scientific-technical model for the physical world surrounding us, best symbolized for me by the gorgeous picture of earthrise seen from the moon.

The third basic enlightenment concept affirms the possibility of unambiguous transfer of information from individual to individual by means of language. Without this no form of universal truth or moral norm is possible.

These concepts happen also to be a part of the foundation of humanism. Thus the outcome of the dispute about the validity and usefulness of these concepts is of importance to us humanists.

Maybe it would at this point be proper to extol or at least numerate the achievements of this age based on the principles of enlightenment. I am sure we all can agree that a larger part of mankind than ever before is educated and capable of producing the necessities of life. This, however, moves the focus of discussion from principles to their application, and it can be argued that many forms of un-modern societies such as feudal or religious states could have reached the same level of opulence.

Instead of such arguments, I will try to present my major point about the reality of the postmodern/modern conflict in the form of two questions that should be answered, maybe by you, before we can proceed with a more detailed discussion.

First, then, what is the basis for claiming that the age defined as modern, better called the age of enlightenment, has come to an end? What are the portents and signs telling that a monumental change is at hand? I am trying to convince myself that the end and beginning for an epoch we claim are not arbitrary choices such as the division of the past into centuries neatly beginning and ending each hundred years. There is quite a lot of ambiguity about the scope of the modern world. The modern period in literature did not start until 1850 with Ibsen. The philosophy of Nietzsche at the same time was already abandoning the precepts of enlightenment. Maybe the postmodern school con-

siders social philosophy as the dominant theme and thus sees the recent collapse of Marxist societies as a real turning point. One can ask why the form of ownership and the distribution of excess profit should be more important than other types of changes.

The second question concerns the seriousness of postmodern claims that our time, when seen through the glasses used by humanists, seems to be out of focus. Granted, the structure of our society has major flaws and our concept of reality has been changed by media and rapid communications. However, we can ask whether the changes in attitudes and ideas that we attribute to a basically new age are not natural corrections of course inherent in modern enlightened society. We see the mechanism of thesis-antithesis and synthesis-at work. This dialectical scheme of things is not only a philosophical construct but the inherent mechanism by which society as a physical organism keeps itself on course. Thus all is really well. Our intellectual boat meanders, but we correct the course and glide ahead. If this is so, then the postmodern claims for eternal fame may represent only the 15-minute Warholian portion everybody is entitled to, and behind the corner some neo-post-postmodernists make themselves ready to appear on stage with appropriate sounds of fury.

Andreas

1 February 1993

Dear Andreas,

Thank you for your letter of 25 January. It was good to hear from you. I want to answer you directly. But something about the nature of our mutual (mis)understanding lies at the heart of the differences between modernism and postmodernism. So forgive me if I seem to respond a bit less to the letter and more to the tone

of your thoughts (postmodernism is certainly a talking-past) .

I understand your reasonable tone, something about the gradual changes in evolution, to be an aspect of modernism; some sense of progress, and all that. But that's precisely part of the problem and part of why postmodernism declares a break between then and now. You tell a good story, but many of us do not appear in it. Modernism's celebration of the individual seems cold and abstract even when appealing. And, to repeat, when a number of us look in the mirrors of the Enlightenment we do not see our images reflected there.

Part of the break has to do with the characters in your modernist accounting: "a continuous change in mankind." Why not *humankind*? Words, only words? Surely, language-in its power upon our thinking and convincing-is very important in this interchange. But you act as if the story of language is the story of human nature, buying ancient Platonisms in the name of science. Postmodernism declares it is now time to retrieve our thinking from the dualisms of science and humanities and seek wholeness.

You act the omniscient observer, sitting outside of the human fray, watching as if your personage (body, anatomy, ...) and the ways in which you think and phrase are somehow detached from your being real and social: objective and so-o-o *'reasonable*. Your acting "detached" and above it all has, in fact, had the effect of excluding many of us from the story of our own being. Whether or not this has been directly causal, who knows or cares? This century of wars, this moment of reversion to religiosity, nationalism-causes?

So postmodernism wants to explore how your story of "mankind"-while having some virtues-has been so exclusive in its workings: European, white. . . male. How come? An objective accounting about nature? Or

a story calculated to preserve the effective power of the few by omitting many of us? A question of some objective truth-or of *whose* truth, *whose* language? If humanism is to be truly human, then questions of the absolute-of deity or of science-have to be critically rethought.

Michele Foucault, especially, has helped us to see that the so-called discourses of modernism have shaped and framed much of the ways in which we see and understand the world of our experience. Certain ideas and frameworks, virtually an *edifice* of thinking and ways of interpreting, have grown up within the traditions of what we are reacting to as modernism. And much about this edifice of thought-including judgments we make about ourselves, others, the world-seems clearly, in postmodernist understandings, to have been constructed by certain thinkers, more usually within particular traditions of thinking and interpreting the world. No wonder that postmodernism claims some new ground from which to discover our own habits of seeing; habits which direct and obscure as much as they may have illuminated.

It is like the family that has lived in the same house for the past twenty-five years or so. Step by step, the family got accustomed to being in that place with the windows on the east letting in the morning sun and the sunset streaming in from the west. Little by little, all the family members got used to the windows and doors and walls and the neighborhood; the dogs, the neighbors, loves, battles. Gradually, much of this became memory: much of it literally memorized and taken into the being and identity of each member of the family. After twenty-five years or so, the children had grown up and sought other places in which to pursue their being; the dog had grown feeble and ready to give up the *spirit* (a technical and problematic term, I think, in postmodernist thinking, but banished in modernist thinking even while lurking in our understandings).

And the parents, older now, reached those moments when their lives mostly memorized, placed within that particular house in all of its settings, found that something about that house, all those years of experience, that edifice of memorization and metaphors, places in which they had conversed, made love, fought, imagined what would be, " . already *was*, and was still powerfully shaping their present thinking. All that accumulated stuff was stopping them somehow from moving on to think about their futures which now seemed to require rethinking.

"Where are we?" they asked. "How," they wondered, "can we move on? How bound and fettered have we become by all these accumulations of ten-year olds' art work and the remainder of the conceptual furniture of our lives? Today? Can we find today? What about tomorrow?"

But it proved to be that this *construction*, which they had to a very large extent actually become, was not so easily discarded. It wasn't so much that the ideas, as you put it, had run out of steam in any mere abstract sense. It was more that their present understanding of their own prior understanding no longer seemed to serve them; and they began to wonder how they had gotten here; how to move beyond it if that were possible, or more likely to break with it, if necessary; and how to get on with their lives in their ongoing present which seems quite different from their past lives.

And so they began to *deconstruct* the edifice of thinking, to see how they had gotten here: much now seemed so young and silly and misbegotten, and due to their own parents and adjustments and formulations of their selves and their parenting and thinking habits. They finally sold the house, had a large yard sale, and moved to a different, a *new* place in which the sun and the moon no longer streamed in just the same ways through the trees and windows of their memories. ...

Much of the edifice of Western thought, what we call rationality and logic, seems very much like the edifice of our earlier lives. How can we now see-literally *see through-our* own habits of thinking and being? As we begin to understand how we got here, we can accept some ideas, reject others, redo our own thinking. Can we merely extrapolate from then to now and still live in the present? Don't we need to declare a *new time*-a postmodernism-a place from which to view ourselves viewing and to develop new grounds from which we can see-and see ourselves seeing? Perhaps we can discover who we are and are to be in this *present age*. Possibly, just possibly, we can learn to see cleanly and clearly and to live our lives once again.

And whenever we actually appear in your accounting of the world and the human condition, it doesn't seem to fit either our experiences or our feelings very accurately. Your story, so reasonable, apparently has no heart, only a sense of remote mentality. It is as if the scientoids of our imaginings are coolly observing, recording, calculating. But as for the facts of this enterprise and its knowledge being interesting or exciting, well, it leaves many of us cold and undermines our own experiences.

The story of the Enlightenment, calculated and effective in killing off the myths of transcendent deities, fighting off the realities and claims of monarchy, has also of late been producing a lot of *garbage*. We live longer but don't much think about living well; save time with all of the modern conveniences but seem to live breathlessly with less and less. . . time. Chemicals, sludges, manufactured species, human intelligence and experience giving way to computers and the artificial-haven't we lost our bearings? The skepticism of the Enlightenment concerning facts of nature has entered our thinking, leading to skepticisms about the very possibility of knowledge, sliding to various

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cynicisms, and the meaning-destroying nihilisms of frantic modernists.

You may say, "all is well." But all is not so well!

And I find myself almost breathless, responding to your wanting to take Enlightenment thinking and extend it interminably. So I need to pay more attention to my body and breathing habits and quit this response with the following observation: we are in a moment when intellection and politics have become very mixed up. To merely bemoan this fact seems, well, very modernist. Your hope is to call us back to modernist thinking and searching for your notions of intellection. In fact, the Western edifice has conflated politics and intellection at least since Aristotle; and it's time to look again at this history of thought which has so captivated modernism that you haven't noticed. You don't get it!-and that's why we need a postmodern break.

Best wishes (with shrieks
of postmodernist fury),

Harvey

11 March 1993

Dear Harvey!

You make a very interesting comment in your letter before you present the main points of criticism of my exposition of modernism. Like the preamble to the Constitution, this may be more important than the following text. You say you prefer not to answer the questions or points of argument I present in my first letter. You prefer to present your case as a comment on the tone of my letter.

I well understand the dilemma of postmodern thinkers: how to participate in a dialogue without accepting the validity of Aristotelian logic and the existence of a common structure for languages allowing unambiguous translation from language to language. You have to resist the temptation to disprove my thesis with arguments because by doing so you would be practicing rational thinking, heavens forbid. We are like two chess players behind the board, each playing according to its own book of rules. The conclusion I can draw from this argument is that postmodern thinkers can participate in a dialogue only with other postmodern thinkers, more like a chorus than a dialogue. Our interchange of ideas will consequently take the form of charades. You present your story with appropriate symbols and catch phrases, and I will try to guess what it means in my world of concepts.

Now back to your text, which basically is an indictment of the social applications of the basic principles of modern, rational thought. Postmodernism appears in this context not as a superior program of higher flexibility, faster response and more advanced techniques to understand nature and humankind, but as a remedy for the side effects of present social programs. You claim that there is a modernist enlightened society that has dominated us up to the present. Its story, you feel, has been one unnecessarily concerned with the details of language: a story describing a grand edifice composed of past Western thought, a conglomerate story that has produced a lot of garbage (I suppose as a social consequence). A story that has no heart, the individuals are cold and abstract, and they are not us (postmodern thinkers, I presume). In fact, they are predominately white, male and European, a sin I confess to.

The scientific-technical aspects of the edifice, the crown jewel of Western thought has as its purpose, according to your criticism, the empowerment of the

elite. You round up the indictment with an incantation deploring the "destroying nihilism of frantic modernism." Not quite up to the "nattering nabobs of negativism," but powerful enough for me to bring out my oid rabbit's foot.

Before presenting a defense of the maligned edifice of Western thought, I want to clarify a point. In the beginning of your first letter you reject what you call the antiquated dualism of Plato, which you find in my arguments and in the works of modernists, and hold up as a contrast the postmodern search for wholeness. However, towards the end of your letter, you complain that Western thought has conflated politics and intellectualism, starting even with Aristotle (one of the first edifice builders, I presume). Consequently, when we the modernists want to separate ideas and matter, software from hardware, we are castigated; but when we claim that politics, morals and reason cannot be separated, we again seem to be wrong. It seems that wholeness is good, universal is bad-will you clarify the point? Are we playing with words?

Now let us return to the scientific-technical model for the world, the crowning glory of Western civilization. You claim that you do not insist that it is erroneous (you fly airplanes with confidence and trust your telephones), but that it should be annulled because not all people of different gender and color participated in building it. In this type of logical vein, we should whitewash the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel because Michelangelo did not employ female apprentices.

On the contrary, it is my contention that there are no alternate scientific-technical edifices possible. The form is determined by function. The design of any ax in order to function has to be based on the wedge principle. Astronomic systems capable of predicting the position of a planet must be congruous, despite differences in language used and the artistic license in drawing symbols for star constellations. In fact, take any

biological journal, cover up the names of the authors, and try to predict from the contents whether the authors were female. You cannot!

We can use your model of a house to make the point. Sure you can leave your old house; however, beware that the next house is very similar to the last one. It has a roof, windows, doors, kitchen utilities, etc. These features are necessary for it to fulfill its function. Major changes in construction lead to changes or restrictions in function.

The remarkable similarity of the bow-and-arrowtool in very different primitive tribes attests to the dominating influence of function on the form. Note that I do not want to convert the word "function" to an ideological concept; this leads or has led to functionalism and Bauhaus. I am sure that the dominance of function would prevail even without something like functionalism to make it desirable and fashionable.

What I am saying is that although the authors of the scientific-technical edifice were mostly white males, if by some variant of the dominant religions, females had been entrusted with the science, female scientists would have arrived at the same edifice we have at present.

You stress further that the scientific-technical edifice, regardless of its origin, is at present used to empower a minority. True, the use of our scientific-technical edifice as a tool is possible only for the educated. Engineers need mathematics and physicians biology. I too stand for expanded educational opportunities to allow all parts of our population to use scientific-technical tools. I feel, however, that by a vigorous use of the word "multi," we have defined a multicultural, multi-ethnic society where indeed in some subculture, science and technology may be abandoned in order to avoid an empowerment of the educated minority. I feel this is unfortunate and due mostly

because you have attached a negative connotation to the word and concept, "power."

Power is not, as it often appears in the Hollywood-style postmodern presentations, an attribute of the mad scientist and the ruthless capitalist. Christ had power, Martin Luther King had power, and so had the scientific-technical staff in Manila who ordered the evacuation of hundreds of villages before Mount Pinetubo erupted. The operational definition of power is the ability to get people to do things they would not do spontaneously. Consequently, the judicious use of power is necessary to provide for the common good in any functioning society. The question you raise can be reformulated more precisely as, "Does education and the ability to use the scientific-technical edifice give too much power to individuals?" A very pertinent question discussed with great vigor since ancient times by the populists versus the privileged. The division of power is continuously readjusted by reform and revolution from Solon and the brothers Gracchus to the founding fathers of our society. It is not the scientific-technical model for the world that is the source for disenchantment but the social models for the distribution of political power. Modernism in this respect is of course not blameless, but I fail to see how the first postmodern war, in multi-ethnic Bosnia, is an advance from the previous capitalist-socialist confrontation anchored in universal rational principles.

The final point I want to make is about the scope of the claims of postmodernists. It is the vast extension of the limits of historic time over which the postmodern criticism is applied that reserves it a specific place in the colorful procession of ideas. The attack on rational thinking and universal concepts and on the power of logos for creation of cumulative knowledge takes us back far beyond the French Revolution down to Aristotle and doctor Angelicus himself. By refuting it all, the postmodernists say "no" not only to conclu-

sions and ends, but also to means. Rephrasing in a more picturesque way suitable for our charades, we can say that whereas the previous iconoclasts such as Christ, Luther and Marx smashed our social edifices, they did rebuild it on the same foundation using the same blocks; the postmodernists say "no" to both foundation and the building blocks, and thereby to the basic principle thought to be necessary in development of human societies-that of building cumulative models of reality valid from generation to generation: "the time binding capacity" as defined by Count Alfred Korzybski. This sociological, language-bound chain is also reflected on a still more basic level in the Darwinian view of the development of living organisms. Experiences of reality are translated in a cumulative fashion from generation to generation. Are postmodernists declaring Darwinism and evolution to be inappropriate and prefer returning to the warm, cozy, oh-so-lovely poetic story of creation?

In summary, although changes in society are necessary, I want to retain (1) the core of the scientific-technical edifice-it is not arbitrary: it is defined by the physical reality; and (2) the unambiguous language based on universal concepts, admittedly often hazy and in constant need of clarification, but I see no civilization possible without acceptance of its existence. I feel you should explain how a functioning postmodern society can be built without these two foundation stones of modern thought.

As you see, Harvey, in your terminology, I still do not get it. Maybe the reason is that postmodernism is rich in criticism of the machinery of a functioning society but poor in new models for providing a better life for billions of people. As far as I can see, the only way for me to see with your eyes is to take the road towards Ephesus and hope for the best.

Andreas

8 April 1993

Dear Andreas,

I was very glad to receive your letter. It seems like a very long time since we last corresponded. There is so much to say, especially since your letter of 11 March seems to set a somewhat different *tone* than the earlier one. Your letter seems to argue very directly against the postmodernism which I try to represent by proclaiming your notion of universal and timeless truth. You seem to think I argue politics rather than knowledge; or politics against knowledge. *Truthfully*, the rhetorical forms in which we argue are certainly political, though they may be much more. And if you are convincing, does that argue for your science; possibly against it? Are we caught in some paradox?

Perhaps you try to set a direct argument or polemic when much of the positioning of postmodernism is that opposition and dualism are precisely part of the problem. I get the sense from your letter that opposing your claims to logic means to you that my position is somehow irrational. No wonder we find it difficult to establish a dialogue when you envision the only format: join you or be accused that *politics is all I know*. Why would I argue against your position directly? Rather I hope it will simply fade away, weighted down by its conceptual baggage and technological garbage. About time, too.

We are engaged in a mode of argumentation which is certainly political. You claim to own logic and rationality: the problem between us is that I must "accept the validity of the Aristotelian logic and the existence of a common structure for languages allowing unambiguous translation from language to language." I think that language and logic are parts of the larger human condition, not defining of the world. Part of the insight of this century is that nature is a human *concept* (cf.

Whitehead); and *conceptual* means to me more than logic or even language.

Life is not a chess game with rules prestructured; nor does a timeless conception of a physical universe translate to a direct understanding of the human condition; nor are logic and rationality missing from the various languages of the world. Translation is often complicated because different persons and cultures operate from different experiences and presumptions, not because we cannot or will not think *rationally*. Witness this attempt at dialogue! Much of your argument is a conflation of intellection with politics, and your claim to owning rationality seems to me a cheap shot to draw me into fighting on your turf as if your ideas extend everywhere: as if nature, properly known, extrapolates directly to human nature.

What worries me most is that your idea of nature, a kind of universal fixity of laws and structures, will be taken whole to explain all the complications and vicissitudes of the human condition. Rather than study humans, you seem to want to infer to human nature from a sense of the fixity of science. This view avoids the fact that our view of nature is a human view, and while it may be variously accurate about nature, it is also about how humans are and view and think. You seem, like Aristotle, to think that we always move in a direction toward knowing more and better, and that this means for you rational and civilized. Historically it has meant purpose and teleology and the foundation of religious thought. Which are you really doing, Andreas?

One of the complications of the discussion in our correspondence as well as in the usually abortive discussions between the postmodern and the modern, is that we *speak past* one another. We literally begin from different perspectives and orientations, arguing on an apparent axis of agreement-opposition, but disagree

on the nature of defining poles of that axis. The axis of (dis-)agreement I have noted in the present context is one which is peculiar in my experience: *naive versus stupid*. The modernists seem to think that the postmodernists just don't understand issues such as logic and reality mostly out of a naive lack of knowledge, thought, or mere pique. The opposing postmodern lament is that the modernists, as you admit, just don't get it, act stupid: that life and understanding involve interpretation and self-critical understanding beyond a direct or literal reading of the world. Better in my view to pursue knowing yourself first; then nature!

An aspect of the argument or the passings-by have to do with the intellectual edifice which has led us here. You, the confessed naturalist, focus primarily on the so-called external world which seems timeless and has laws of causality and relationships which operate irrespective of time and place; indeed of language or gender. No history here. As a postmodernist I focus, instead, on the huge (to me) history of thought through which we come to our observations and understandings of the world: human, literary, philosophical, political, and so on. (Look who invokes Aristotle!) This is a lack of agreement about where we even begin our discussion.

I'm not (personally) at all certain that the disagreements are about the nature of any external reality. It is true for many postmodernists who focus on language and literature as the route into knowledge, that external reality fades into background and blurs. But this has much to do with skepticisms which come directly from Hume, the Enlightenment, and modernism. We remain caught in some peculiar polemic between the world versus the human concept of world. (You will agree, I think, that it is we humans knowing the world, not the world in any exactly direct sense, that we are discussing; I recall your using the term "modeling" rather than "knowing.")

Perhaps method and logic can overcome human differences of age, gender, and generation. I continue to wonder if method and logic aren't primarily a reduction into areas of human knowing where we can find universal agreement-opening much knowledge but also obscuring much of our being.

I think that much of our disagreement has more to do with what humans are, how we know ourselves, than how we can know about nature. My own forays into the nature of language, for example, were dragged into metaphysics and politics immediately-from both sides. So I am understandably cautious and slightly cynical about this argument and think we need to deal early on with the political aspects of our disagreements, as they say, *up front*.

For example, your talk about your self-confessed *sin* of the European white male is less about anatomy than about how we have conceptually constructed maleness and femaleness. This is not merely about being a male; although your defense already signals that the mere state of being male determines much of your being. My sense of being male has more to do with how I live, experience, and am capable of change rather than any mere passive acceptance of testosterone leading me by...the nose. This is an argument about change and continuity, predetermination and fixity, an old dispute about the human condition which has repeatedly held that certain humans are more or less capable than others: differences which make a difference-politics once again.

Any claim or plea you make about objectivity being the same for all is colored by the history of the use of objectivity and rationality being more a male than a female trait: "biology as destiny" runs through this argument even as you portray certain persons as "primitive" and make statements about what "civilized" must really mean. Your so-called science seems to contain a variety of depictions of an evolution from simple to

complex, with your ideas of science and objectivity claiming the high ground of reason. You use or appropriate history even as you 'make claims for the universality of logic and unambiguous language. Enlightenment thinking = Andreas wins. European and males are the good guys, "rightfully" = hegemony. What a deal!

Your portrayal is a good example of what postmodernists see as an uncritical blending of objectivity with *scientism*; a conflation of intellection with politics—but in the name of science. Your salvo about an abandonment of Aristotelian logic in postmodern argumentation is, as far as I can see, a rhetorical (not a logical) move which claims to be logical, but is distinctly political. To deny politics is, in my experience, to be constantly reinventing it. So let's 'fess up! Even if you personally are the reasonable and gentle white male, there are plenty of others who use your position to downgrade others by virtue of their not being male or white, the correct color or nationality or religion, i.e., politics. How do we get out of this?

Speaking of Aristotle, it was he who constructed the edifice which conflates intellection with politics. It is he who says that some people are *by nature*, slaves (in his *Politics*). It is he who was invoked to justify the Spanish war against the more "primitive" Indians of the so-called New World (cf. Sepulveda). It is he who is still invoked when we claim for ourselves the term "civilized" to justify our forays against our perceived enemies. It is more Aristotle's *vision of nature* against which the postmodern argument is directed than against any notion of a nature per se. Nature is conceptual; it may also be actual. Which "nature" do you study?

It is Aristotle's thinking which seems to pervade yours, and this is much of the heart of our dispute. Can you always see nature, question it, test it, Andreas? Or are you carrying to nature this complex of Western lenses through which you think you see

clearly? You may seem to be arguing for science cleanly. Perhaps you think you do, but your letter indicates to me otherwise. Your conceptual baggage seems to burden understanding. And you either deny it or try to use it to justify claims to objectivity which only certain of us are capable of: not male, not white, not European, not so capable?

Trying to step away for the moment, Andreas, from defending or portraying the postmodernist position, I admit that much of this position lends itself to a deep cynicism and destructive nihilism which is worrisome to both of us. This, it seems to me, needs critique more than debate, and might lead us more to the dialogue which you do not yet see forthcoming. Here, both *sides* have a fair share of responsibility, even blame. Perhaps I/we can help set some more of the context of the postmodernist lament.

Parts of the argument directly against science come from the so-called Frankfurt school which saw in scientific *progress* mainly destruction: the madness of World War II, the Holocaust, the *Eclipse of Reason* (cf. Horkheimer). What is being done in the name of reality, nature, progress, science, and truth carries with it elements of destruction and detritus: from Love Canal to Chernobyl to global exhaustion. It seems to me that neither modernism nor postmodernism will deal directly with these issues.

In another part of my life, where I do deal with issues of bio-technology, I note a vast disagreement which mirrors ours, Andreas: whether to proceed in engineering new species with critical caution-or full speed ahead. In any axis of risk and benefit, modernism seems to see benefit and hopes risk will remain in the background, while those who come from ecological (postmodernist?) thinking see risk as outweighing benefit. There are few forums where the two approaches can find any dialogue but continue to pass each other by. much as we.

Parts of our argument arise pretty directly from issues of language and human nature which you invoke but do not (yet?) seem to question critically. Scientific philosophy presently seems stuck in an approach to reality via language whose study is itself at some impasse. Part of the problem derives from last century's development of various geometries to parallel the Euclidean. Geometry, earlier thought to provide solid ground upon which human knowledge can truly intersect nature, no longer serves to anchor us. Husserl earlier this century failed to prove that there is any external reality, and Wittgenstein leads language understanding more toward usage among people, less to how it may describe external reality. Much of the current *deconstructionist* critique derives from Husserl's failure to *prove* the existence of reality and from Wittgenstein's skepticism. We need to get beyond their thinking. While you may invoke Aristotle-an old habit in the Western tradition every time there is *trouble*-the world has changed radically in our time, and good old Aristotle would, I think, be postmodernist in this moment.

The postmodern response is to concentrate on how the human thinks about or constructs reality, rather than about the world as reality. And they note that claimants to real reality-such as you, Andreas-also carry politics and metaphysics to your arguments. No wonder that the experiences of exclusion (women, persons of color, of the *third* world) overwhelm truth, when claims to truth and to nature end in polemics rather than in any shared enlightenment. Do you want more to win-or to pursue knowledge, Andreas?

I grant that most postmodernists derive their views from literature rather than attempts to examine the external world. This derivation is intrinsically part of the two-culture problem which you exemplify so well because the question of the meaning of literature is now seen as open to the interpretation of the subjec-

tive reader; some current form of the mind-brain problem.

And it is precisely this orientation which postmodernism carries over to questions of enlightenment, reason, and so on. Do you *know* the world, Andreas, or do you *interpret* it? Is your reason, your objectivity really so free of the edifice of Western thought? Or is it full of ancient authority, repeated over and over again as Aristotle's thinking walks around in Andreas's? Thus the need for deconstruction to find Andreas and Harvey open to seeing what there is, critiquing our thinking in the attempt to see ourselves and the lenses we take to the world as free as possible of maleness or femaleness, color, or culture: so as not to deny differences and attempt to contain them in some value-free idea of rationality but to examine them, celebrate them, and move on toward knowing ourselves and the world.

I can only hope that both of us examine and critique our respective positions if we truly intend to move on, rather than to retreat more solidly into our respective positions and hope that the other will merely lose this debate, give up, or die out. No wonder a current postmodern strategy of simply keeping on talking, hoping that word play and play upon words will fill the time until the modernist edifice falls, like the Berlin wall, of self-corrosion, denial, and the detritus which technological *progress* carries even in its so-called development.

The fact is that the Enlightenment idea of progress which has carried your argument along is now in great doubt: a skepticism which turns toward cynicism and races toward nihilism and the loss of identity and the meaning of being. Your modernist knowledge has left us with more time but empty of the possibility of fulfillment. And this is why winning is losing in this so-called argument. We now witness a return to classical, to Biblical texts, to ancient ethnicities and nationalisms: a failure of Enlightenment?

If we truly wish to enter into a dialogue, then we need to work at *getting it*, not to retreat into ancient forms but to try to see through them. I understand from the end of your letter that you refuse to enter into any form of self-critique. And this is precisely why postmodernism argues *past* modernism! It does not seem open to attack or critique; no opposition is admissible or possible.

The world has changed greatly, pushed by the technologies of modernism. Many of these technologies have caused changes in the very framing of the human condition and our understanding of ourselves. This, I think, is the ground in which we ought to join: toward a *Center for the Critical Analysis of Science and Technology* (to be located in the Humanities).

I hope to hear from you soon.

Harvey

28 April 1993

Dear Harvey,

It was a pleasure to read your latest letter where you decry our tendency in the first two letters to talk past each other and maybe to engage too often in attack and riposte on a verbal level. I think it was necessary for us to present our ideas and concepts in sweeping generalities and maybe in too simplified but colorful pictures. We drew quite different pictures of humankind. The two pictures we present, although depicting the same human landscape, demonstrate the different understanding of reality the two painters have. The interesting thing is that despite the differences, there is little actual disagreement; we just seem to see different things. You drew your picture in dark colors,

highlighting cultural inequality, deprivation and faulty social experiments, whereas my abstract painting in the style of Calder shows beauty in the complex achievements of science, art and technology. I suggest that there is nothing incorrect in either of those pictures. Each of us sees exclusively our own aspects of reality. If this is only a matter of choice, then we can ask, "Why do we choose our observations so differently?"

I feel that it is not only a choice of subject matter but that the differences in style tell us about the different conceptual framework within which each of us works. I know you will agree with this because you stress in your letters the fact that in our dialogue we each follow our separate rules. We may, standing side by side, see the same landscape of nature and humans, but the conclusions we draw from our impressions and the final verbalization of our reasoning is based on a framework of reference we each use to construct images and concepts. Let me try to repeat in as clear and concise terms as I am able to what the most essential differences are in these frames of references. I hope you will expand on it because if we cannot arrive at a consensus on views of the future for humankind, we should at least be able to agree on the precise nature of differences in our reasoning.

We who claim to be disciples of modernity, rational but without claiming to be the sole possessors of that faculty, work on the premise that we humans are a subsystem within the total system of nature: a subsystem of very large degree of complexity but still a subsystem, subordinated to the universal rules governing the behavior of nature. We work in that subsystem to build a model of the total system. We strive to observe ourselves as a family of sophisticated ants whose performance is observed in an unbiased fashion from the total system by an extrapolated, rational, unreal observer. We conclude that if one day mankind perishes, the system of

nature would continue. The music of spheres will continue to be played to the empty seats.

The postmodern thinkers, correct me if I am wrong, take as their premise the fact that the human mind has created the framework within which all exists or does not exist. When the last human dies, the lights go out and the music stops. There may remain a field of force and particles, perhaps, but the universe as our concept is no more. In the postmodern frame, we are the observers, observing ourselves. Whatever humanity has created becomes by that act a fact, a document. The new discipline of hermeneutics claims that such facts are as valid as observations by our senses, restoring by that, mythology as a central force in the postmodern world.

If this is an adequate picture of the difference in the basic premises on which we base our arguments, the picture would explain why the spheres of professional interest for modernist and postmodernist mostly do not overlap. Postmodernists tend to be active in literature, psychology and associated disciplines such as sociology and architecture; disciplines where multiple conflicting theories can be applied concurrently in practice. The validity of the theories is established by the fact that each of them was chosen by a practitioner in the first place.

For rational thinkers, instead, the instructions they receive allowing them, for example, to reach the moon are unique. The validity of the instructions is determined by the fact that they are the only instructions leading to success. They appear thus as immutable laws of the universe. As a result, most natural scientists and engineers claim that they think like enlightened modernists.

It is obvious to me that both frameworks are acceptable; only we have to define them for every situation as operationally useful or not.

Yes, the scientific-technical edifice, a product of the modern system, is not garbage; it remains necessary because only within its laws can we deal successfully with the nature around us. The drawback of such a system, however, is the real difficulty for the modern thinker to understand and describe humans in this dehumanized, unbiased frame of reference.

A very extreme and rational modernist would probably answer that ultimately we will deal with this difficulty by observing humans with more and more sophisticated machines and methods. We will then understand the workings of the human mind and predict human behavior in terms of the same type of equations we use presently in biochemistry and biology. This argument for extending modernism toward some of the areas claimed by postmodernism and totally refuting postmodernist ideas is on shaky grounds. Perfect predictability is another way of saying that absolute determinism is a valid concept. Karl Popper has quite convincingly shown that an adequate definition of scientific predictability cannot be accomplished operationally. It remains thus a metaphysical concept outside the scientific-technical edifice. This conclusion leads to the corollary that however well we observe our ants, their behavior remains to a certain extent unpredictable.

In my opinion, there are further difficulties in accepting an uncompromising modern point of view. I think it is appropriate that I should discuss them; otherwise, it appears as if I am trying to sweep them under the carpet.

The modernists have always found it difficult to establish criteria for the selection of goals both for the individual and for humankind: what is desirable and what is not. Once we have determined the goals, it will become relatively easy to write a set of rules governing our actions. The much vaunted Aristotle was the first to point this out in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, although

the virtuous activity of the human soul may not be the most popular goal today. The modernist problem with goals stems from the fact that unless a grand design for the fate of the Universe is discovered, the goals remain arbitrary.

Goals for humans seem to me to be closely associated with politics. I am somewhat puzzled why you feel so negative towards politics. This is inconsistent with the otherwise consistent story you tell. If we define politics as the process by which any society or group of individuals decides priorities for their common goals, then it represents the basic decision-making process necessary for any consensual system of ethics to appear. I would think that within the postmodern framework, politics is essential because all the laws in that system represent arbitrary agreements between humans, devoid of any universality. The whole postmodern world is by definition political. It is the modern, enlightened society that pretends it avoids politics and that decisions regarding the choice of goals for humanity are not arbitrary but unavoidable conclusions based on some universally valid premise.

There is within the scientific-technical edifice no guidance for choosing goals; it is basically a wonderful system of highly sophisticated means used in pursuit of some quite arbitrary and primitive goals. We have known for some time that the premises and thus the goals for any functioning system have to be defined with the help of some criteria outside the system itself.

In order to avoid this dilemma, the more radical modernists have tried to elevate the aim of achieving efficiency in providing for the basic needs of mankind to the level of a goal in and of itself. This was clearly a gross mistake. The elevation of means to goals is an absurdity perceived with precision by Henry Miller: "Why stay alive when we can bury you for 99 dollars and 99 cents."

Some of the confusion associated with competing and ill-defined goals is with us today. For example, what is more important: a guarantee of work opportunity for each individual (Mao's iron rice bowl) or freedom of the press (if we somehow can give it a satisfactory definition)? The modern mind has no answer to such a dilemma; it prefers to be told, "Go and build a space station." It responds gallantly because the goal here is defined as doing more along the line of further advancing the means of technology itself. But we have argued already that by elevating means to goals provides us not with a real goal but with a false one.

I hope, Harvey, that you do not believe at this point that I have seen the light and switched to the postmodern frame of reference. No! Postmodern thought is useful and generally valid in its criticism of the shortcomings of modernism and the methods of rational thought. However, when it is asked to define some alternate goals and outline the means to reach these goals, it seems to become agitated and responds with nihilism, lumping means and goals together, introducing magic into science and declaring the means we have at our disposal as garbage while continuing to drink fortified milk and commute to seminars on postmodernism. It seems that the discovery of an alternate human-defined framework for concepts has been too much for postmodern groups. The bewildering variety of multicultural viewpoints and life-styles has created utter confusion in our society. The tree structure of societal norms has been declared invalid. The associated insecurity leads to a return to religion or to other types of flight from responsibility. This is no help to the serious but confused engineers of modernism looking where to build a bridge or for a means to introduce traffic jams to China.

These bridge builders, recognizing the limits of their system but still knowing its enormous powers, are not

helped by a milling crowd of ecologists, feminists, spiritualists, Afro-Americans, etc., etc., throwing flowers and bombs with equal abandon and declaring that all previous bridges are tainted and should be torn down.

The two frames of reference, the extrapolated non-human modern and the anthropoid structure of post-modern thought, need to be joined or bridged by some conversion factors. Our concepts of reality may differ, but none of us can dispute that the same individuals inhabit both houses, borrowing the house symbol from you.

You may answer, Harvey, that we should not join but instead replace modernism with postmodernism. I do not think we are dealing here with an either-or situation. It may be so in the case of changing from Christianity to Buddhism. In that case we are dealing with two unreal domains of belief defined to avoid overlap. The game of classification is good for such things; you are either man or wolf. I do not think that you or any postmodernist argues that we are dealing here in our debate with religious affiliation. Mutually exclusive domains are basically counting devices. If you do not eat meat on a Friday, you cannot be counted as part Catholic and part Buddhist. For counting purposes, you have to be either-or, provided we do not introduce a new category, Buddhist with rosary. Of course, we can define any type of overlap, as in the case of people with dual citizenship, provided we make suitable counting rules.

Now, conceptual structures designed to reflect the world or humankind are not definitions of categories used for counting heads. They should be compared to scientific models. One such model does not necessarily render another one invalid. The Newtonian system of celestial mechanics was in due time replaced by Einstein's general theory of relativity. However, when

operating on the scale and speeds of everyday life, the Newtonian model remains correct. The advantages of the Einstein model appear only when we look at the Universe as a whole. A suitable way to describe the relationship between these two models is to say that the latter amends the first and allows us to predict happenings in a less restricted situation.

How about it, Harvey? Can we do some amending?

I realize that such joining would constitute the Hegelian kind of synthesis you do not believe in. Let's be pragmatic-modernism has the advantage of containing a mechanism for change whereas postmodernism to me looks today as something out of control. Imagine, a couple of cars with drivers not able to understand that simultaneous left- and right-hand traffic may be a high point for tolerance and multiculturalism, but also a sure road to disaster.

Wow!

Andreas