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Can Humanists Talk to Postmodernists?

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Academia's Version of the Tower of Babel

The short answer to the short question posed by my short title (bereft of postcolonial discourse since it has no colon) is *no*. Humanists cannot talk to postmodernists. This might seem paradoxical at first since people who consider themselves humanists do, in fact, talk to people who consider themselves postmodernists every day. They meet, for example, in faculty dining rooms and on payroll lines, and they discuss, for example, whether the cafeteria chili should be avoided or whether their health plans cover anti-depressants.

So it is necessary at the outset to define the three key terms: *humanist, postmodernist,* and *talk.* By a "humanist," I mean a person who believes that human beings can formulate true or false opinions about a reality that exists independently of their thoughts and language--and that the truth or falsehood of such opinions is gauged by their correspondence with empirical evidence analyzed in light of fundamental rational principles. By a "postmodernist," I mean a person who believes that the perception of a reality existing independently of thought and language is illusory, that what the humanist perceives as reality is in fact a linguistic construct of the phenomena of subjective experience that is continually adjusted in response to a fluid social consensus. Finally, by "talk" I mean to put forward opinions, or sets of opinions, in such a way that they may be either verified or falsified. Of the two possibilities, verification and falsification, I would lay particular emphasis on falsification since it is less provisional. (Falsification, in other words, is less contingent on evidentiary standards. For example, it only takes one black dove to falsify the proposition "All doves are white"; whereas, the standards of support required to verify the proposition inevitably vary.) To talk, by my definition, is to risk one's continued avowal of an intellectual position, to enter willingly into the so-called "marketplace of ideas" in which logical demonstration is recognized as the final arbiter between opposing viewpoints. My thesis, then, is that no such marketplace of ideas can ever truly exist between humanists and postmodernists because postmodernists neither pursue verification nor risk falsification in their exchanges.

To proceed, therefore, we must first ask: What is the necessary framework for a marketplace of ideas? What conditions must be agreed on in order for the processes of verification and falsification to occur? This is an issue addressed by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* in his discussion of "the starting-points of demonstration":

> [B]y the starting points of demonstration I mean the common beliefs on which all men base their proofs; e.g. that everything must be either affirmed or denied, and that a thing cannot at the same time be and not be, and all other such premises. (*Metaph.* III.2.996b.28-30).

Aristotle's "starting-points of demonstration" are familiar nowadays to logicians as the Laws of Thought. In modern configurations, they are expressed as *the law of excluded middle* (that anything must be either *A* or not-*A*); *the law of non-contradiction* (that nothing can be both *A* and not-*A*); and, implicit in the first two, *the law of identity* (that if a thing is *A*, then it is in fact *A*). What's critical to recognize, from a humanist viewpoint, is that these laws comprise more than a particular methodological option, for they are invoked whenever a predicate is attached to a subject; the consequences of their rejection, in humanist terms,

would be absolute cognitive silence--since the decision to reject the laws could not itself sensibly be uttered except by invoking them. For example, the assertion "I *do* reject the law of non-contradiction" amounts to an implicit denial of its contradictory, namely, "I *do not* reject the law of non-contradiction"--or else the predicate of the initial assertion hasn't been asserted of the subject. Indeed, the laws of thought are so basic that humanists take them for granted in meaningful discourse. So, again, if I affirm a grotesque proposition such as "Hitler was a man who promoted the well being of all people," the humanist's natural response will be to cite the genocidal persecutions of the Jews, Slavs and homosexuals; these instances are cited in order to establish the denial, or contradictory, of the initial proposition, in other words "Hitler *was not* a man who promoted the well being of all people." The humanist will seek to establish the denial because he knows instinctively that the two propositions, the affirmation and the denial, cannot be held simultaneously; hence, the moment he can convince me that Hitler *was not* a man who promoted the well being of all people, I'll be compelled to abandon the proposition that Hitler *was* a man who promoted the well being of all people. This is the height of self-evidentiality--at least to a humanist.

By contrast, from the perspective of several conspicuous postmodernists, the law of non-contradiction is by no means self-evident. Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, describes one of the signal concepts of his deconstructive methodology, the *arche-trace*, as "contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity" (61). Yet the particular "logic of identity" to which Derrida refers is, from the humanist standpoint, simply *logic;* it's not one logic among many. Furthermore, since "the logic of identity" is contingent on acceptance of the laws of thought, Derrida's insistence that his concept is unacceptable within that logic amounts to a declaration of nonsense--*nonsense* being a pejorative term only from a humanist point of view. In fact, a reasonable paraphrase of Derrida's words might be: *The concept of the arche-trace is indeed nonsensical, but play along anyway*. (Derrida's disciples often point to the sense of "play" in his work.) To be sure, Derrida himself embraces the senselessness of the concept: "The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general" (65).

It would perhaps be credible to read Derrida's remarks about the arche-trace as mere rhetorical flourishes, or even burlesques of traditional reasoning, except the context belies such a reading: he *builds*--which is itself a humanist enterprise-- on the concept of the arche-trace. Nor are his remarks in *Of Grammatology* isolated instances. In *Dissémination* Derrida states:

> It is thus not simply false to say that Mallarmé is a Platonist or a Hegelian. But it is above all not true.
>
> And vice versa. (207)

As the logician-critic John M. Ellis has pointed out, the key to the passage surely lies in the final sentence, in the apparent throwaway "vice versa." The humanist, trying to make sense of Derrida's words, might allow a distinction between saying that a proposition is "simply false" and "not true": a proposition that is meaningless or absurd ("The invisible ostrich looks purple.") might be deemed "not true" yet not "simply false." Still, the "vice versa" undermines any attempt to get at what Derrida's means. (The postmodernist critic Barbara Johnson illustrates the danger of attempting to paraphrase Derrida's meaning in coherent humanist terms: "Instead of a simple either/or structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says neither 'either/or,' nor 'both/and' nor even 'neither/nor,' while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either."--cited by Ellis, p. 6)

The problem of intelligible meaning in Derrida's writing arises again in his book *Positions*. He begins with a typically bizarre checklist of "undecidables": "supplement," "hymen," "spacing," "incision," etc. These spooky-sounding concepts, he declares, "can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it" (43). Thus, for example, "the supplement is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the compliment of an inside, neither accident nor essence" (*ibid*). How any of this, even theoretically, resists and disorganizes "philosophical opposition" is never made clear since the phrase itself is never defined. If the "philosophical opposition," Derrida seeks to resist and disorganize is comprised of the laws of thought, it must be noted that he has not set up logical contradictories in his pairings--as would be the case if the "supplement" were neither *accident* nor *non-accident.* That would indeed resist and disorganize logic; it would overthrow the law of excluded middle. Still, a humanist will necessarily inquire on what grounds Derrida bases his pronouncements in the first place. His method, insofar as it can be delineated, is to free-associate with a given word until he is able to tease out a connotation that belies the sense of the

original word; but does this mean that he has undermined traditional logic? Whence, the humanist will ask, the "is" in Derrida's declaration "the supplement *is* . . . "? Finally, however, none of these questions matter. For Derrida winds up his analysis with another logical throwaway: "Neither/nor, that is, *simultaneously* either *or*" (*ibid*). In other words, whatever Derrida is affirming, he is also simultaneously denying. From a humanist perspective, the only way to read Derrida on his own terms is mentally to insert the phrase "or not" after every one of his statements.

If Derrida attempts to dance around the law of non-contradiction, a number of his postmodernist cohorts seem determined to stomp it into the ground. Roland Barthes, for instance, opens his book *The Pleasure of the Text* with an invitation to imagine the ideal reader as someone

> who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions . . . by simple discard of that old specter: *logical contradiction;* who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony (leading the interlocutor to the supreme disgrace: self-contradiction) and legal terrorism (how much penal evidence is based on a psychology of consistency!) (3).

This kind of reader, for Barthes, is ideal because he is uniquely capable of taking pleasure in a text. Yet even if a humanist were to allow Barthes his premise that a reader is often conflicted at the same moment that he's enjoying a text (John Keats, indeed, had a similar notion and called it "negative capability" a century and a half before Barthes.), the humanist will insist that the reader's inner turmoil doesn't comprise a *logical contradiction*--which is simply a simultaneous affirmation and denial of a predicate. (As we'll see later, slippery usage of the term "contradiction" is a key to postmodernist rhetoric.) A given reader, for example, may feel both sympathy and *contempt* for Othello; but he won't feel sympathy and *no sympathy* for Othello at the same time and in respect to the same action. Moreover, from the humanist standpoint, the "pleasure of the text" often comes in the attempt to resolve these conflicted feelings, perhaps even to arrive at a judgment--aesthetic, moral, or otherwise--concerning characters, actions, and even structures. But Barthes has conflated the ideas of *conflict* and *contradiction* and concluded that the existence of a conflicted reader who is enjoying himself somehow shows that the law of non-contradiction deters the pursuit of pleasure. Even more disturbing, from the humanist perspective, is the nastiness of the final passage--Barthes's suggestion that "penal evidence based on a psychology of consistency" constitutes "legal terrorism." Hence the rapist, convicted because he contradicted himself in testifying, is a victim of "legal terrorism" because he has not been allowed to maintain that while he *was* at the crime scene he also *was not* at the crime scene.

As with Derrida, Barthes's rejection of the laws of thought is no isolated instance. In "On the Fashion System and the Structural Analysis of Fiction," Barthes states,

> The revolutionary task of writing is not to supplant but to transgress. Now, to destroy is both to recognize and to reverse; the object to be destroyed must be presented and denied *at the same time;* writing is precisely what permits this logical contradiction. (47)

If Barthes is equating "denied" in the passage with "not presented," he is saying nothing; a thing cannot be *presented* and *not presented* at the same time. True, you can write the sentence: "The object is presented and not presented." It's just that the predicate, which is both affirmed and denied, nullifies itself and becomes meaningless. "Writing" does not permit logical contradiction--notwithstanding Barthes's claim--any more than rational thought permits it. Perhaps, though, I should qualify that: Writing *that can be read and understood by a humanist* doesn't permit logical contradiction.

That Barthes is untroubled by laws of thought is evident. When asked by an interviewer about inconsistencies in his writings, Barthes replies, "I explained in my preface why I didn't wish to give a retrospective unity to texts written at different times: I do not feel the need to *arrange* the uncertainties or contradictions of the past" ("I Don't Believe in Influences" 26). This is perhaps just as well--since he goes on in the same interview to declare: "I don't classify books in such a cut-and-dried manner, according to some literary Good and Bad." Whereas, in "On the Fashion System . . . " he states: "Fashion literature is bad literature, but it's still writing" (47). The point, however, isn't the fact that he does indeed contradict himself--sooner or later, I suspect, most philosophers do.

But when philosophers in the humanist tradition do, they feel compelled either to show how the apparent contradiction isn't one, or else to renounce one of the statements. But in the case of Barthes, the position he has staked out is one in which logical contradictions are embraced. It is therefore an invincible position; yet it is, once again, a nonsensical one.

Another notable postmodernist who, presumably, would be untroubled by the charge of nonsense is Michel Foucault--who invokes a "new metaphysical ellipse" (171). But what exactly is this new metaphysics? According to Foucault, it is the metaphysics of the "phantasm" behind which "it is useless to seek a more substantial truth" (*ibid*). Common sense is the enemy for Foucault because it carries "the tyranny of goodwill, the obligation to think 'in common' with others, the domination of a pedagogical model, and most importantly--the exclusion of stupidity" (181). Because a metaphysics based on common sense and goodwill-- in other words, a humanist metaphysics--excludes stupidity, Foucault argues, "we must liberate ourselves from these constraints; and in perverting this morality, philosophy itself is disoriented" (*ibid*). How, then, do we get with the new metaphysical ellipse and thereby become fashionably stupid? According to Foucault, stupidity

> requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction . . . What is the answer to the question? The problem. How is the problem resolved? By displacing the question (185).

This strikes me as rather close to a working definition of postmodern argumentation. Yet it is, in humanist terms, once again nonsensical. Foucault calls for "affirmative thought" that "accepts divergence." Non-affirmative thought, thus, must be thought that does not accept divergence. It is non-affirmative thought that he wants to avoid. But this distinction itself, between affirmative and non-affirmative thought, is contingent on the law of non-contradiction. As he distinguishes the kind of thought he likes from the kind he doesn't like, Foucault underscores the logical necessity of the kind he doesn't like: the very act of *distinguishing* invokes thought *with* contradiction and negation. Still, he insists that traditional humanist logic in general, and the law of non-contradiction in particular, must be abandoned as part of a heroic intellectual movement, a counter-counterreformation, in which accusations of stupidity become badges of courage.

Such passages beg the question: why would postmodernists reject such a fundamental logical rule? The answer returns us to the thesis of this essay--that humanists cannot talk to postmodernists. For I believe that the postmodern rejection of the law of non-contradiction is strategic: *Without the law of non-contradiction, no one can ever demonstrate that you're wrong.* In an argument on any topic between a postmodernist and a humanist, each party will attempt to discover a logical contradiction in his opponent's case. For the humanist, the discovery of a actual contradiction is deadly; he must abandon, or at minimum clarify, his position. But for the postmodernist, a contradiction is *only* a contradiction--a sign, perhaps, of the depth of his thought. The postmodernist's position, in other words, becomes unfalsifiable.

For a humanist, however, it is only the potential falsifiability of a given position that makes an argument meaningful. In the Hitler example cited earlier, if an evidentiary proof that Hitler *was not* a man who benefited all people does not undermine the position that Hitler *was* a man who benefited all people, then the argument was pointless in the first place.

Indeed, the postmodern rejection of the law of non-contradiction constitutes, from a humanist standpoint, not merely a rejection of logic but of the rational element in human nature. The humanist does not view logic as a cultural construct, a pattern of thinking inculcated by years of repetition; rather, he views it as the way in which the rational mind has always worked. To operate rationally is, instinctively, to rely on logical reasoning. There is, for the humanist, no *getting around* the laws of thought. The claim, often advanced (See, for example, Gayatri Spivak's introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology,* especially *xvii-xviii.)* that the project of postmodernism involves suspending logic in order to call it into question skims over this crucial point: Nothing can be *called into question* unless it can be affirmed or denied. But to affirm or deny, as we've seen, is to invoke logic, to invoke the laws of thought. Just as you cannot suspend the rules of arithmetic in order to do calculus, you cannot suspend the laws of thought in order to do analysis--for these laws precede every rational epistemology. Descartes's "I think: therefore I am" presupposes that he cannot be and not be simultaneously. Husserl's phenomenological reduction relies on being able to distinguish that which *can* be doubted from that which *cannot* be doubted--and

furthermore presupposes that certitude is a more valid ground on which to build knowledge than doubt. Even Wittgenstein's verifiability principle must take as axiomatic the law of non-contradiction (which itself is not verifiable) in order for the process of verification to proceed. That a thing is what it is; that a thing cannot be and not be simultaneously; that a cause exists for every effect--no culture has ever existed which did not, explicitly or implicitly, reason in accordance with these laws. Our remotest ancestors reasoned in this way. They built their mud huts--and perhaps observed that one of the huts collapsed. Whereas we would now attribute the collapse to bad geometry, they perhaps attributed the collapse to the displeasure of a god. Regardless of whose interpretation is correct, the laws of thought remain the same. The hut did not collapse without a cause. (That is the law of causality.) To build the same hut, in the same place, under the same conditions, will bring the same result. (That is the law of identity.) The next hut will either collapse or not collapse. (That is the law of excluded middle.) But it cannot do both simultaneously. (That is the law of non-contradiction.) The rational inklings that inspired Cro-Magnons out of their caves became, in the course of time, the methodology of Aristotle: it became, simply, *logic.* What Cro-Magnon Man intuited, Postmodern Man has come to disavow. The schism is not merely academic but evolutionary.

Postmodernism, in fact, constitutes an explicit rejection of the element of *sapientia* in *homo sapiens,* as evidenced by the epistemological nihilism in the literary critic Jane Tompkins's remark that "there really are no facts except as they are embedded in some particular way of seeing the world" (577). Such a claim denies the facticity of facts, reduces facts to the status of received beliefs. This would be mere relativism except that a paragraph later, Tompkins insists, "This doesn't mean that you have to accept just anybody's facts. You can show that what someone else asserts to be a fact is false." The obvious question, though, is: *How?* With no independently existing reality against which assertions of fact can be measured, how can you "show" that a "fact" is "false"? Even if a humanist were to overlook the pragmatic difficulties of Tompkins's position, he would still be compelled to inquire how exactly she arrived at her conclusion of the cultural embeddedness of facts. She cannot have deduced it from a fact that is *not* culturally embedded--since she states that no such facts exist. Nor can she have induced it from her own experience since she would have to know the factual validity of the laws of thought, of observation and inference, of inductive reasoning. Tompkins's claim, from a humanist perspective, must therefore be taken as mystical--a conclusion she reached *despite* evidence rather than *because* of it. But mystics cannot be rationally engaged. Their testimonies are not subject to verification or falsification. There is no marketplace of ideas among rival faiths.

Then again the very distinction between an article of faith and an article of rational knowledge is, for the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, an instance of "binary opposition" that postmodernists can "deconstruct" (132-133). Eagleton demonstrates such a deconstruction:

> Thus, for male-dominated society, man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this. . . . the 'other' of man: she is non-man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle. But equally man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite, defining himself in antithesis to it, and his whole identity is therefore caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which he seeks to assert his unique, autonomous existence. (132)

Eagleton's cynical use of politically-charged rhetoric again highlights the reason humanists cannot talk to postmodernists. What might seem, on the surface, a traditional humanist mode of argumentation turns out to be an illusion of logic, a game of bait and switch. Eagleton at first equates "woman" with "non-man"--the binary opposite (the more accurate term would be *logical contradictory)* of "man"--thereby, allegedly, showing how man requires the repression of woman in order to retain his definition of himself. But Eagleton's usages have become slippery. Terms like "non-man," "excluded opposite" and "identity" indicate he is operating within the vocabulary of Aristotelian logic. Yet terms like "antithesis" and "negative value" invoke Hegelian dialectics. This is critical since the Hegelian sense of contradiction as an *inner tension* (for example, between man and woman), upon which the passage is based, has been conveniently muddled with the Aristotelian sense of contradiction as a *binary opposition* (for example, between man and non-man). Eagleton's implication is clear: Logic itself is implicated in the subjugation of women, for man must continue "parasitically" to exclude and subordinate woman so as to preserve his own identity (133). Except that in the *binary opposition* of "man" and "non-man," the second term does not

equate with "woman." The category "non-man" encompasses all things that are not male and human; it includes mandrakes and mannequins, black holes and blond wigs, coyotes and road runners. Does man, thus, also subjugate a peanut butter sandwich in order to preserve his own identity? Does a shoehorn, like a woman, stand "as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being" (*ibid*)? Why not? Both a peanut butter sandwich and a shoehorn are as much members of the category "non-man" as a woman.

What Eagleton is doing, in other words, is feigning logical analysis, utilizing sly terminological shifts to obscure a calculated series of non sequiturs, thus allowing the impression that he is still working within the standard humanist framework-- a framework wherein premises must be constantly examined for hidden biases and logical rules rigorously followed to produce defensible conclusions. Yet he is risking nothing. He need not disown the passage cited above--despite its undeniable inconsistencies--for the valuation of logical consistency, of fixed definitions and linear deductions, is itself, from a postmodern standpoint, no more than a humanist fetish. "What you choose and reject theoretically," Eagleton contends, "depends on what you are practically trying to do" (211). Since, moreover, Eagleton himself happens to reject the ideology of capitalism, the notion of competing within a marketplace of ideas--a capitalist metaphor if ever there was one--is inimical to what he's *trying to do.* Eagleton has, strategically and self-consciously, liberated himself from the "tyranny of goodwill" to which Foucault refers. Yet it is that very goodwill, argumentative goodwill, characterized by common sense rules of evidence and strict uses of language, upon which humanists depend in their intellectual exchanges.

That is why humanists, in the end, cannot talk to postmodernists. If acceptance or rejection of an idea is, for the postmodernist, contingent on what he is trying to do, then the humanist pursuit of logical demonstration becomes futile. What is logic, the postmodernist asks, except another form of practical expediency? Even the law of non-contradiction, for the humanist the *sine qua non* of rational thought, does not bind the postmodernist. There is, therefore, no final arbiter between the humanist and postmodernist positions.

Nor can there be.

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