

A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE ON AUTONOMY

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Whatever its political colour, postmodernism retains its penchant for hybridity, relativism, and heterogeneity, its aesthetic hedonism, its anti-essentialism and its rejection of Grand Narratives (of Redemption).
(Appignanesi & Garratt, 1995: 163)

Introduction

Pennycook argues that the concept of autonomy has been mainstreamed by applied linguistics to mean something which is 'psychologized, technologized, and universalized' (Pennycook: 1997, p. 35). This mainstream concept of autonomy can be seen to arise out of a Western liberal-democratic and liberal-humanist tradition which values a notion of individual liberty which is secured by social and political structures, and has the ideal of 'a developed self, a self-conscious rational being able to make independent decisions' (Pennycook 1997:36). Pennycook then argues that challenges to this view of autonomy have come from the work of Marx, Freud, Foucault and others.

Whether from a Marxist view of the ideological regulation of classes, a psychoanalytical understanding of the role of the subconscious, or a post-structuralist version of subjectivity as discursively produced, the notion of the free-willed, rational and autonomous individual has become highly suspect.
(Pennycook 1997:38).

In this paper I take up this critique of autonomy and attempt to explore it from a *postmodernist* perspective. Usher and Edwards (1994) describe postmodernism not as a movement, but rather as a system of ideas; a way of seeing and being in the world; a way of theorising and of practising; a mode of analysis and a way of asking questions. Its realms of practice include architecture, art, literature and psychoanalysis and its realms of theorising

include philosophy, cultural studies, feminist theory, literary criticism and psychoanalysis.

Postmodernist ideas challenge the modernist project with its roots in ideas of individual freedom, rationality, progress and benevolent change. Postmodernism thus critiques the idea of the self-motivating, self-directing rational subject capable of individual agency, described by Pennycook above. Although the modernist project can be said to have arisen in the late 18th century with the rise of capitalism and industrialisation, Foucault argues that modernism and postmodernism are not epochal, but rather contrasting attitudes that are always present.

In this paper I explore these 'contrasting attitudes' by focusing in particular on the work of Derrida, Lyotard, Lacan and Foucault and on the questions they raise about the nature of language; the nature of scientific inquiry; the nature of the self; and the self-disciplining individual. I conclude the paper by summarising how we might then view a postmodern perspective on autonomy.

Before continuing, I want to acknowledge the significant debt I owe to Usher and Edwards (1994) *Postmodernism and Education*. This paper is my own attempt to make sense of the ideas they describe and of my own reading of Lacan and Foucault as this relates to the concept of autonomy.

The contrasting of attitudes is necessarily stereotyping, simplifying and dichotomising. I do not want to imply by this that ideas are therefore so easily separable, but rather to use contrast as a way of highlighting the postmodern perspective.

Language, reason and representation

From a modernist perspective texts can be said to have stable meanings which straightforwardly express the author's intended message. From this perspective language is seen as a tool, which is separate from us, at our service, and which can be mastered and used to serve our purposes.

Derrida describes this as a logocentric view which assumes that language can be controlled and used rationally in order to fully represent the world as objectively observed by the subject. Although language can be a source of bias in research, this bias can be controlled through use of the scientific method. The observing subject can thus use language with certainty in order to express reality. From this perspective we can know the world as it really is.

Derrida critiques this 'truth' which he sees rather as a desire, a desire for the world to be known in an unmediated way, to be 'present' to us, and refers to this as the 'metaphysics of presence'.

In contrast to the modernist perspective described above, Barthes in 1967 introduces the idea of the death of the author, ie if readers can be said to create their own meanings regardless of the author's intentions, then the author disappears. The idea of authorial authority (and origins) is replaced by the validity of multiple realities and interpretations.

Derrida, in contrast, shifts the authority placed on the reader by Barthes to the text. "*There is nothing outside the text*" (Derrida) ie. each act of interpretation is not a statement expressing a truth validated in an external reality, but rather is itself yet another text. And the 'originating' text itself is only ever an interpretation and continuation of previous texts. There is no originating text.

In this view language becomes reality, 'reality' is always mediated by text, and the need to achieve accuracy and validity of representation dissolves as an issue.

Thus from Derrida's perspective the meaning of the sign derives not from the relationship between signifier and signified, but from relationships *between* signs themselves, ie. the sign becomes the signifier. The idea of reference or representation is an effect of language, arises out of language, and is not the source of the sign.

Our knowledge and experience are thus produced through discourse, which is historical.

In this view language is not a tool for us to control, rather we are bound within language and the 'certainty of meaning' is constantly deferred. Closure is never possible.

Science, knowledge and progress

If language cannot be seen as a transparent tool that we can control for the straightforward rational representation of the 'real world', then the modernist project of 'knowing the world' is put into question.

The pursuit of modern scientific knowledge is based on an empirical epistemology which assumes that the application of a universal, scientific method, which is thus value free and objective, can arrive at 'true' knowledge which is then privileged by its contribution both to progress and to the speculative unity of knowledge (*The Unity of Science*, Hegel). Knowledge is thus valued for its own sake and is accorded its position according to its contribution to the unity of science.

Order, control and predictability are seen to generate 'systematic' knowledge and progress and development are seen as natural and good. Development takes place through linear progression and contributes to a

greater good, which is emancipatory in nature, and passed on from one generation to the next.

Education has a 'privileged position in the dissemination of scientific knowledge and is seen to contribute to the emancipation of individuals

Education is understood as freeing people through the process of learning and to be about the pursuit of knowledge which serves that end. Scientific knowledge is privileged as the form of knowledge which best achieves this.

(Usher and Edwards, 1994: 173)

and learning is seen as

a one-way road from ignorance to knowledge.

(Felman, 1987:76)

A quite different perspective is offered by Lyotard. He argues that science is a language game governed by the rules of language use. What is taken to be knowledge, for example, does not derive its legitimacy from its relation to a universal absolute truth but is rather legitimised by metanarratives which govern the assertions of truth that are possible within a language game. These grand narratives include ideas of truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, and emancipation, but also more recently efficiency and inefficiency, or 'performativity'.

Thus rather than there being a universal and totalising truth, Lyotard argues that there is a proliferation of diverse narratives 'flexible networks of language games' (Lyotard, 1984:17) which are partial, local, and specific. Assertions of truth do not establish the truth espoused, but are moves within a language game, governed by the rules of how one asserts truth.

For example, according to the new narrative of performativity, knowledge becomes a commodity to be produced, exchanged and consumed. Education joins the market place and the learner is positioned as a consumer of knowledge whose desires are to be cultivated and met. The question is no longer "is it true?" but "what use is it?"

Lyotard also argues that progress and development do not equal a greater good:

It is not a lack of progress, but, on the contrary, development (techno-scientific, artistic, economic, political) which created the possibility of total war, totalitarianisms, the growing gap between the wealth of the North and the impoverished South, unemployment ...

(Lyotard, 1992: 97-8)

The self

The modernist project depends on the idea of a rational, self-conscious and goal directed self. From this perspective, the self is unitary. Its identity is fixed and known. The individual has a true, essential, natural self, which exists prior to language. This self is transparent to itself, can know itself and express itself and its intentions through language. Self-presence and mastery of self are possible.

I think therefore I am
(Descartes).

... in doubting, Descartes thinks and thereby confirms the certainty of his existence, thus vanquishing the deceiver. Descartes thought therefore that he had found presence, a certainty based on the essential rationality of himself as a knowing conscious subject, with an innate rationality, immune to deception. The knowing subject not only knows but knows it knows; consciousness implies self-consciousness. Ultimately the fact of self-consciousness, of being master of oneself, is the guarantee of knowledge.
(Usher & Edwards, p. 57).

Freud and Lacan significantly disturb this perspective of mastery. The very idea of the unconscious which Freud introduced decentres the subject as there is always some part of us which remains unconscious, and unknowable.

I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think
(Freud)

We think we can master ourselves, but in doing so we repress the unconscious and fall into 'untruth' and become the decentred or opaque subject of the unconscious.

... an incompleteness which can never become completed...the subject is always in the middle of this movement, caught in a dialectical and changing relationship between itself and that which it knows.
(Usher & Edwards:1994, p. 58)

This constant lack leads to a desire for certainty through knowledge, which can never be satisfied. Mastery is always an illusion and can never equal the satisfaction of desire.

Lacan introduces the idea of the constructed, rather than natural, self through his elaboration of how the sense of self derives from both the Imaginary Order (images, projections, and visual identifications) and the Symbolic Order (language and culture). He sees the ego (the 'moi') as arising from the infant's experience of seeing itself in the mirror or in the mirror of the eyes of the Other (the Imaginary). Through this reflection of itself back to itself, the infant constructs itself as the object 'me', thus giving its fragmented body-sense a sense of unity, coherence and autonomy. This unity and autonomy are however based on a self-deception or alienation, for the sense of self arises not from 'within' but from a constant play of reflected images of 'me', of images of how others see me. The 'me' thus understands itself from a position of otherness.

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity.

(Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 4)

According to Lacan, the subject, the 'I' arises out of being born into existing language and culture – the Symbolic Order. Language is prior. The 'I' can speak, and is given a voice through the Symbolic, but the same 'I' is also spoken, named and placed through the Symbolic into a pre-existing social order. Paradoxically, through its insertion into the Symbolic, the 'I' gains identity and continuity. Yet the 'I' asserted and given identity and presence through the performative function of language is at the same time made absent through the representational function of language, since when the concrete body is made 'I', the concrete body is no longer present or relevant. Language can only refer to itself.

And the position of the subject – you should know, I've been repeating it for long enough, is essentially characterised by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech. Whether he has the right to, or is prohibited from, calling himself Pedro hangs on this place...

(Lacan Seminars, Book I, p, 80)

To the as-yet-unborn, to all innocent wisps of undifferentiated nothingness: Watch out for life. I have caught life. I have come down with life. I was a wisp of undifferentiated nothingness, and

then a little peephole opened quite suddenly. Light and sound poured in. Voices began to describe me and my surroundings. Nothing they said could be appealed. They said I was a boy named Rudolph Waltz, and that was that. They said the year was 1932, and that was that. They said I was in Midland City, Ohio, and that was that.

They never shut up. Year after year they piled detail upon detail. They do it still. You know what they say now? They say the year is 1982, and that I am fifty year old.

Blah blah bla”.

(Kurt Vonnegut, *Deadeye Dick*)

From this perspective the sense of self and of agency is a construct arising through the play of intersubjectivity and language.

Discipline and the idea of the self-disciplining individual

Foucault's work on discipline and power/knowledge offers a further critique of the modernist idea of the natural category of the autonomous individual and of education as a neutral and emancipatory practice, contributing to the good of the individual and of society.

For Foucault nothing is neutral, all discourses are bound up with the “will to power”. Foucault argues that there has been a shift over the past two to three centuries in the way power is exercised. He gives the Panopticon as an example of this new form of power, what he refers to as disciplinary power. The Panopticon was built as a circular tower within a circular space surrounded by individual prison cells, which could be observed, from any point in the tower. Power thus operates through the Panopticon by isolating the individual who can be subject to observation at all times and yet unable to see the observer. As the prisoner cannot know if and when they are being observed, they learn to discipline themselves according to what they assume is expected of them in case they are being observed.

‘Disciplinary practices’ bring into existence an individual’s socially approved aptitudes and capabilities at the same time as placing them in a position of subjection. Disciplinary practices involve two key processes - **hierarchical observation** and **normalising judgement**, exemplified according to Foucault by the Examination.

Traditionally power was what was seen, what was shown, and what was manifested...Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification. (Foucault, 1991: 187)

Thus disciplinary practices, for example the examination, bring the idea of individuality into being. Yet this is an individuality which is constantly at odds with itself. For, although the examination provides the substance of one's mark, one's competence, a place in the scheme of things, it at the same time, through the normalised hierarchy it is embedded in, identifies gaps in one and thus renders one less than others. It both provides substance and takes it away.

the exam as the fixing, at once ritual and "scientific", of individual differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity... clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the "marks" that characterise him and make him a "case". (op cit: 192)

From a modernist perspective confession is seen as a self-evident way of knowing the truth both of oneself and of others. It is used unproblematically in a number of contexts such as education (learning journals), medicine, and justice etc. But from Foucault's perspective, confession is not a natural activity but something produced by discursive and material practices constituting confession as 'truth' and subjectivity as a subjectivity that confesses.

Confession therefore results in regulation through self-regulation, discipline through self-discipline. Instead of being monitored, we monitor ourselves. (Usher & Edwards, 1994: 95)

What was being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do as one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).... Let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination.

(Foucault, 1977:138)

Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and instruments of its exercise.

(Foucault, 1979: 170)

There is thus a subtlety in the call to autonomy – for according to Foucault not only do disciplinary practices constitute self-regulating individuals who are able to contribute efficiently to the workforce, but they are also implicitly coercive and oppressive in that the energy entailed in maintaining self-direction and self-management is diverted from revolt and from struggle.

A postmodern perspective on autonomy

This review of postmodern thinking according to Derrida, Lyotard, Lacan and Foucault seems to offer both a pessimistic and an optimistic perspective on autonomy.

The pessimistic view (itself my own construction and judged to be pessimistic according to a desire for mastery!) seems to be summarised by the following ideas about the self:

- a. To be eternally incomplete and alienated
- b. To know oneself only in the Mirror of the other
- c. Opaque to oneself
- d. Bound in language, brought into being by language
- e. Culturally, linguistically, socially produced

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- f. Self-deceiving
- g. Self-Disciplined
- h. Confessing
- i. A consumer of knowledge
- j. Individualised by disciplinary practices
- k. Normalised, hierarchised, substantiated, unsubstantiated
- l. Valued according to performance criteria of efficiency and effectiveness

Whereas the optimistic view seems to be summarised by the following:

- a. Free of ultimate goals
- b. Agile in chaos and complexity
- c. A deferrer of closure
- d. A player in the game of language
- e. A narrator
- f. A deconstructor
- g. An interpreter of multiple meanings
- h. Free not to seek ultimate truth
- i. Fluid
- j. Open to not knowing, to diversity, and relativity

The task seems to be one of holding both the pessimistic and the optimistic together, at one and the same time, and for autonomy to arise in the constant struggle between the constraining and the freeing aspects of living in the postmodern.

Foucault calls on our creative selves not to engage in a journey of self knowledge and mastery but to enter into a struggle to recreate ourselves anew.

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of a political 'double bind' " (ie. individualisation and totalisation)"...not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualisation which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, 1982: 216)

Appendix

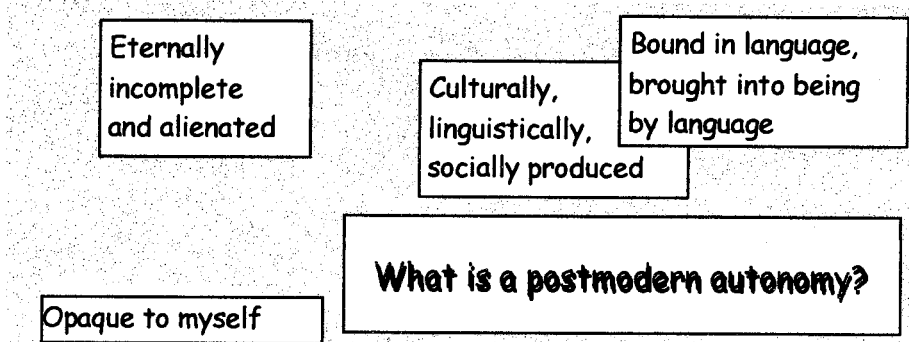


Fig. 1

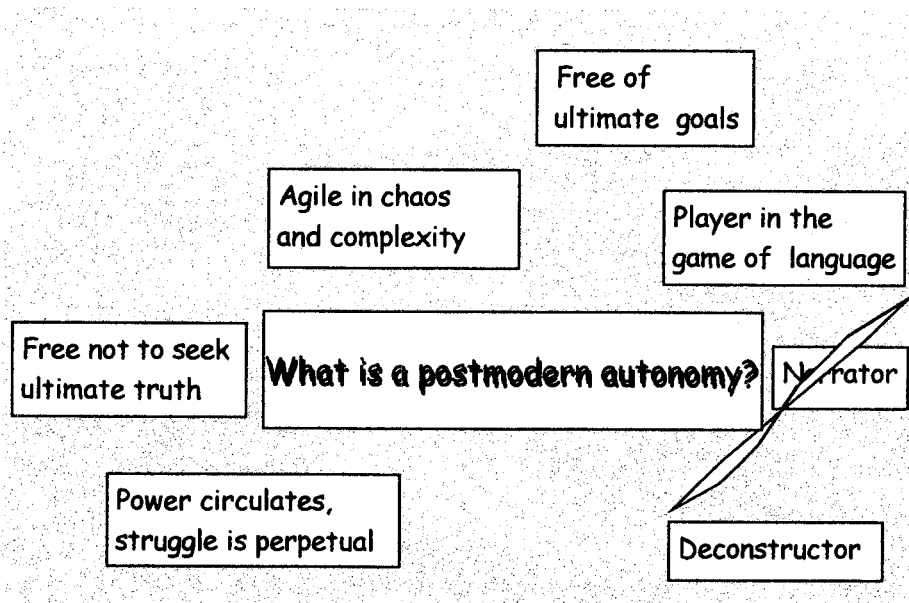


Fig. 2

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