



Post-Structuralism or Nothing

During a recent sabbatical I found the time to take a long-anticipated excursion into post-structuralism: Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva and their ilk. Though it's widely considered a sort of pointless, egg-headed cult phenomena, post-structuralism may well be the most significant intellectual movement of the post-war era. Its effects are seen in oddly diverse fields, from film studies to feminism to anthropology. But as with any great advancement, post-structuralism is largely derived from what went before. For starters, this includes traditional continental philosophies. I'm not a philosophy major so I had to go to the book store for background materials before I could attack my main area of inquiry.

The continental 19th-century ancestors of post-structuralism -Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, et. al.- were towering thinkers, but to really grasp them, it turns out, you need a feel for the earlier Hegelian period. This entailed for me a quick jaunt into German Idealism where I knelt at the alter of high teleology and learned that the Real is the Conceptual, and vice versa.

But just when I thought I was getting comfortable with Hegel's universal mind, it became clear that I couldn't fully assess Idealism without some knowledge of the still earlier traditions of rationalism and empiricism. Required reading: Descartes, Hume, and Spinoza.

Great stuff, but both rationalism and empiricism (and for that matter all Western Canon) rest squarely on Platonic and Aristotelian constructions. So before I could go on, I was going to have to brush up on eternal forms and essential categories. Back to the bookstore for classical philosophy.



(Is a pattern emerging here?)

I was hoping that the Greek metaphysicians would give me a foundation on which I could build my understanding of later bodies of thought. But anyone who took a philosophy survey class knows that Hellenic intellectual achievements did not simply float down from Mount Olympus. Rather, they were built on Sophist and other pre-Socratic philosophies. Just another quick detour, no problem.

I soon found, however, that it's easier to get a grip on the Sophists if one is familiar with the world views of their Bronze Age ancestors. And for a while there I got completely side-tracked on the Sumerians and Mesopotamia.

But inevitably, the Bronze Age led me to the "lithic" ages. Hello archaic Native Americans, Neanderthals, and Cro-Magnons. (Rhetorical question: Why did pre-historic humans, 20,000 years ago, take time off from survival activities to paint elegant images on [cave walls](#) deep in the ground?) I was fast becoming an armchair anthropologist and the proprietor of the local bookstore was planning an expensive vacation.



And it didn't end there: In anthropology, the cognitive abilities of paleolithic hominids are often compared and contrasted with those of the great apes. . . amazing how much research Jane Goodall, alone, produced in the field of primatology. More late nights under the covers with a flashlight.

(We're almost there.) Within the human conceptual framework, primates and other animate entities are a distinguishable class because we can contrast them with dirt and rocks and other generally inanimate things. Consulting the venerable Chinese sage, Lao-Tzu, I learned that "things" should be contemplated against a backdrop of "no-things." To understand things you must immerse yourself in nothing.

So now I find I must study nothing. It's a big project, but one that's highly compatible with other lofty pursuits --like sleeping late and spinning CDs. My tour of the annals of ontology and epistemology convinced me that **the great philosophers each had an acute grasp of their own small, proprietary piece of an unthinkably huge and interlocking puzzle. The pieces are of limited value by themselves but nobody that we know of has ever put them together into a single coherent system.** (And if someone actually did unite all the pieces, it's



likely that life as we know it would be largely negated.)

And what of the post-structuralists? As far as I can tell, they comprehend the world as a never-ending play of cognitive oppositions, a sort of psycho-linguistic yin-yang. Deconstruction is merely the exercise of exposing how the dominant term in any statement or belief system is completely dependent on a subordinate term for its identity and raison d'etre.



Deconstruction's ying/yang exposure of codependent oppositions puts Derrida pretty much in the same ballpark as the ancient eastern religious masters (and their modern-day disciples). John Lennon once quoted his drinking buddy Harry Nilsson as saying that when you're really turned on, you can see everything as its own opposite. Nilsson might have lifted that from Hegel (the dialectic thing). But Hegel was just riffing on Lao Tzu:

**Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty
only because there is ugliness.**

Therefore having and not having arise together.
Difficult and easy complement each other.
Long and short contrast each other.
High and low rest upon each other.
Voices and sound harmonize each other.
Front and back follow one another.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing,
teaching no-talking.
The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease,
Creating, yet not possessing,
Working, yet not taking credit.
Work is done, then forgotten.
Therefore it lasts forever.

- Tao Te Ching (Feng trans.)

Link to [MCS: Media and Communication Studies](#), University of Wales Aberystwyth.

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