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Philosophy and Social Hope

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Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism

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The word 'postmodernism' has been rendered almost meaningless by being used to mean so many different things. If you read a random dozen out of the thousands of books whose titles contain the word 'postmodern', you will encounter at least half a dozen widely differing definitions of that adjective. I have often urged that we would be better off without it – that the word is simply too fuzzy to convey anything.[1] For the purposes of this essay, however, I shall take a different tack. Even if the word 'postmodern' is too equivocal for profitable use, its popularity among intellectuals could do with an explanation. So I shall offer a suggestion about why so many intelligent and reflective people seem to think that everything has recently become quite different.

Various as the definitions of 'postmodern' are, most of them have something to do with a perceived loss of unity. My hunch is that this sense of loss results from the confluence of a philosophical movement which is now about a century old with the realization that the institutions of liberal democracy may not endure. The sense that everything has recently fallen to pieces results from combining a renunciation of the traditional theologicometaphysical belief that Reality and Truth are One – that there is One True Account of How Things Really Are – with the inability to believe that things are going to get better: that history will someday culminate in the universal adoption of egalitarian, democratic customs and institutions. The renunciation began, I shall argue, with Darwin's explanation of where we came from. The inability to believe has increased steadily during the last few decades, as it has become clear that Europe is no longer in command of the planet, and that the sociopolitical future of humanity has become utterly unforeseeable.

Freud famously said that Copernicus, Darwin and he himself had been responsible for successive cataclysmic decentrings – of the planet earth, of the human species, and of the conscious mind respectively. Carrying through this metaphor, we may say that the nineteenth century was willing to give up the conviction that the created universe exists for the sake of our species in exchange for the belief that the human race has finally taken control of its own destiny. But that view was bound up with the belief that Europe was the centre of the world, a belief which the late twentieth century is no longer able to hold. Whereas intellectuals of the nineteenth century undertook to replace metaphysical comfort with historical hope, intellectuals at the end of this century, feeling let down by history, are experiencing self-indulgent, pathetic hopelessness.

My account of these changes will divide into two parts: the first emphasizes the importance of Darwin for the development of utilitarianism, pragmatism and twentieth-century social hope; the second takes its point of departure from the account of our present historical situation offered by Clifford Geertz in his recent book *A World in Pieces*.[2]

Plato, and orthodox Christian theology, told us that human beings have an animal part and a divine part. The divine part is an extra added ingredient. Its presence within us is testimony to the existence of another, higher, immaterial, and invisible world: a world which offers us salvation from time and chance.

This dualistic account is plausible and powerful. We are indeed very different from the animals, and the difference seems one which mere complexity cannot explain. Lucretius and Hobbes tried to tell us that complexity is in fact sufficient – that we, like everything else in the universe, are best understood as accidentally produced assemblages of particles. But before Darwin this explanation never gained any substantial following. It was easy for Platonists and Christians to argue that materialist philosophies were merely perverse attempts to regress to the condition of animals.

Darwin, however, made materialism respectable. His account of the difference between us and the brutes became the common sense

of the educated public. This happened for two reasons. The first was that Darwin had come up with the first detailed and plausible explanation of how both life and intelligence might have emerged from a meaningless swirl of corpuscles. (Lucretius and Hobbes had had no concrete evolutionary narrative to offer, only an abstract, theoretical possibility.) But Darwin's narrative, once its details had been filled in by Mendelian genetics and by an explosion in palaeontological research, was so convincing as to threaten the entire Western theological and philosophical tradition. It was the first drama to challenge seriously Plato's Myth of the Cave and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. An imaginative achievement on a level with these great works, this narrative offered the same combination of quest romance and theoretical synthesis.

Yet Darwin's theory might never have become the common sense of European intellectuals if the ground had not already been prepared by the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century and by the Industrial Revolution. These revolutions, taken together, testify to the power of human beings to change the conditions of human life; they made nineteenth-century Europeans able to feel confident in humanity's ability to take charge of its own affairs. Unlike their ancestors, these Europeans felt that they could go it alone – that they could achieve human perfection without reliance on a nonhuman power.

In previous ages, only the presence of such a power seemed to account for the fact that we did not, or at least should not, live as the animals did. Intellectuals took for granted that we were linked to the gods either by special divine favour, or by a connaturality with the divine made evident in our possession of the extra added ingredient which the animals lack, the soul or mind. If there was no such ingredient and no such linkage, Plato argued, the life of Socrates would make no sense. For there would be no reason not to regress to the bestiality of men like Cleon and Callicles.

Both before and after Plato, religious thinkers thought that commands from, and providential interventions by, a personal deity or deities were necessary if men were to live together in peace and concord. In Plato and the secularist philosophical tradition which he

helped found, the divine was depersonalized, deprived of will and emotion. But, theists and secularists agreed, we humans can do more than just struggle to survive and breed only because we share something precious with each other which animals do not have. This precious extra gives us the ability to cooperate. We do so because we are commanded to do so, either by God or by something like Kant's pure, nonempirical faculty of practical reason.

But in nineteenth-century Europe and America, large numbers of intellectuals began to wonder if their predecessors might not have made too much of the idea of morality as obedience – as conformity to something like the Ten Commandments, or Plato's idea of the good, or Kant's categorical imperative. When Blake wrote that 'one law for the lion and the ox is oppression' and Shelley that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world, they anticipated Nietzsche's thought that self-creation could take the place once occupied by obedience.

The Romantics were inspired by the successes of antimonarchist and anticlericalist revolutions to think that the desire for something to obey is a symptom of immaturity. These successes made it possible to envisage building a new Jerusalem without divine assistance, thereby creating a society in which men and women would lead the perfected lives which had previously seemed possible only in an invisible, immaterial, post-mortem paradise. The image of progress toward such a society – horizontal progress, so to speak – began to take the place of Platonic or Dantean images of vertical ascent. History began to replace God, Reason and Nature as the source of human hope. When Darwin came along, his story of prehuman history encouraged this replacement. For it became possible to see deliberate self-creation, a conscious overcoming of the past, as a continuation of the biological story of animal species perpetually, albeit unconsciously, surpassing one another.

This new outburst of human self-confidence is part of a familiar story, as is the suggestion that Darwin's animalization of man could not have found credence in earlier times. Many historians of ideas have noted that we would not have been able to accept our fully fledged animality if we had still felt as much in need of nonhuman

authority as had our ancestors. But I now want to make a slightly less familiar point, namely that these developments also made it possible to believe that there are many different, but equally valuable, sorts of human life. They made the idea of convergence to unity less compelling. Vertical ascent from the Many to the One entails such convergence, but horizontal progress can be thought of as ever-increasing proliferation.

From Plato to Hegel, it was natural to think of the various ways of leading a human life as hierarchically ordered. The priests took precedence over the warriors, the wise over the vulgar, the patriarchs over their wives, the nobles over the common people, the *Geisteswissenschaftler* over the *Naturwissenschaftler*. Such hierarchies were constructed by calculating the relative contribution of animality and of the extra added ingredient which makes us truly human. Women were said to have less of this ingredient than men, barbarians than Greeks, slaves than free men, true believers than heathens, blacks than whites, and so on. The standard way of justifying both subordination and conformity was by reference to such an ingredient, and such a hierarchy. Ever since Plato wrote the first vertical quest romance, it has been natural to ask such questions as 'Where does this fall in the Great Chain of Being?' or, 'What step does it occupy on "the world's great altar-stairs, that lead from nature up to God"[3]?'

After Darwin, however, it became possible to believe that nature is not leading up to anything – that nature has nothing in mind. This idea, in turn, suggested that the difference between animals and humans is not evidence for the existence of an immaterial deity. It suggested further that humans have to dream up the point of human life, and cannot appeal to a nonhuman standard to determine whether they have chosen wisely. The latter suggestion made radical pluralism intellectually viable. For it became possible to think that the meaning of one human life may have little to do with the meaning of any other human life, while being none the worse for that. This latter thought enabled thinkers to disassociate the need for social cooperation (and the consequent need to agree on what, for public purposes, should be done) from the Greek question: What is the Good Life for Man?

Such developments made it possible to see the aim of social organization as freedom rather than virtue, and to see the virtues in Meno's way rather than Socrates': as a collection of unrelated sorts of excellence. It became possible to substitute a Rabelaisian sense of the value of sheer human variety for a Platonic search for unity. In particular, these developments helped people to see sex as no more bestial, no 'lower', than any other source of human delight (for example, religious devotion, philosophical reflection, or artistic creation). In the twentieth century, the thought that we are free citizens of democratically ruled republics has gone hand in hand with the thought that our neighbours' sources of private pleasure are none of our business.

This latter thought is at the core of Mill's *On Liberty*, a treatise which begins with an epigraph (from Wilhelm von Humboldt) which states that the point of social organization is to encourage the widest possible human diversity. Mill had learned from the Romantics that there may be no point in grading either poems or people according to a single, pre-established scale; what counts is originality and authenticity, rather than conformity to an antecedent standard.

So for Mill and other romantic utilitarians, it became possible both to think that the only plausible answer to the question 'What is intrinsically good?' is 'human happiness', and to admit that this answer provides no guidance for choices between alternative human lives. Mill knew that his and Harriet Taylor's lives were better than those of most of their fellow citizens, just as he knew that Socrates' life was better than that of a pig. But he was willing to admit that he could not prove this to the satisfaction of those fellow citizens, and to conclude that democratic citizenship does not require agreement on the relative value of these sorts of lives.

The culminating moment of this line of thought comes with pragmatism's renunciation of the idea that truth consists in correspondence with reality. For this renunciation has as a corollary that the search for truth is not distinct from the search for human happiness. It also implies that there is no need to make all true propositions cohere into one unified vision of how things are.

A French philosopher named René Berthelot entitled his 1912 book *Romantic Utilitarianism: a study of the pragmatist movement*. That title was, I think, exactly right. So was Berthelot's suggestion that Nietzsche and

James were concerned with the same questions, namely: Given a Darwinian account of how we got here, can we still think of our inquiries as aiming at the One True Account of How Things Really Are? Should we not substitute the idea of a plurality of different aims of inquiry – aims which may require mutual adjustment but do not require synthesis? May we not think of true beliefs as reliable guides to human action, rather than as accurate representations of something nonhuman.

The utilitarian claim that we have no goal save human happiness, and that no divine command or philosophical principle has any moral authority unless it contributes to the achievement of this goal, has as a corollary the pragmatist claim that our desire for truth cannot take precedence over our desire for happiness. In a sense, the critics of utilitarianism and pragmatism are right in saying that these doctrines animalize human beings. For both drop the idea of the extra added ingredient. They substitute the idea that human beings have, thanks to having invented language, a much larger behavioural repertoire than the beasts, and thus much more diverse and interesting ways of finding joy.

I shall use the term 'philosophical pluralism' to mean the doctrine that there is a potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life, and that these ways cannot be ranked in terms of degrees of excellence, but only in terms of their contribution to the happiness of the persons who lead them and of the communities to which these persons belong. That form of pluralism is woven into the founding documents of both utilitarianism and pragmatism.

William James, who viewed himself as following in Mill's footsteps – doing to our concept of truth what Mill had done to our concept of right action – spent half his philosophical life crusading against the idealist doctrine that the universe and Truth must both somehow be One. In particular, he urged that science and religion could coexist comfortably as soon as it became clear that these two areas of culture serve different purposes, and that different purposes require different tools. Religious tools are needed to make possible certain kinds of human life, but not others. Scientific tools are of no use for many human projects, and of great use for many others.

Nietzsche, described as 'a German pragmatist' by Berthelot, agreed with James about truth. He spent much of his time campaigning against the idea that what we call 'knowledge' is anything more than a set of gimmicks for keeping a certain species alive and healthy. Displaying both ignorance and ingratitude, Nietzsche mocked both Mill and Darwin, yet he had no hesitation in appropriating their best ideas. Had he lived to read James, he would probably not have recognized a fellow disciple of Emerson, but would have mocked him as an ignoble, calculating Yankee merchant. But Nietzsche would nevertheless have echoed James's and Dewey's Emersonian appeals to the future to produce an ever-expanding profusion of new sorts of human lives, new kinds of human beings.

I think it is important for an understanding of post-Darwinian intellectual life to grasp the importance of the pragmatists' refusal to accept the correspondence account of truth: the theory that true beliefs are accurate representations of a pre-existent reality. This goes along with their refusal to believe that nonhuman reality has an intrinsic character, a character which human beings ought to respect. For notions like 'Reality' or 'Nature', Nietzsche and James substituted the biologistic notion of the environment. The environment in which we human beings live poses problems to us but, unlike a capitalized Reason or a capitalized Nature, we owe it neither respect nor obedience. Our task is to master it, or to adapt ourselves to it, rather than to represent it or correspond to it. The idea that we have a moral duty to correspond to reality is, for Nietzsche and James, as stultifying as the idea that the whole duty of man is to please God.

The link between Darwinism and pragmatism is clearest if one asks oneself the following question: At what point in biological evolution did organisms stop just coping with reality and start representing it? To pose the riddle is to suggest the answer: Maybe they never *did* start representing it. Maybe the whole idea of mental representation was just an uncashable and unfruitful metaphor. Maybe this metaphor was inspired by the same need to get in touch with a powerful nonhuman authority which made the priests think themselves more truly human than the warriors. Maybe, now that the French and Industrial Revolutions have given human beings a new self-confidence,

they can drop the idea of representing reality and substitute the idea of using it.

Abandoning the correspondence theory of truth means no longer insisting that truth, like reality, is one and seamless. If a true belief is simply the sort of belief which surpasses the competition as a rule for successful future action, then there may be no need to reconcile all one's beliefs with all one's other beliefs – no need to attempt to see reality steadily and as a whole. Perhaps, James famously suggested, our beliefs can be compartmentalized, so that there is no need, for example, to reconcile one's regular attendance at Mass with one's work as an evolutionary biologist. Conflict between beliefs adopted for diverse purposes will only arise when we engage in projects of social cooperation, when we need to agree about what is to be done. So the pursuit of a political utopia becomes disjoined from both religion and science. It has no religious or scientific or philosophical foundations, but only utilitarian and pragmatic ones. A liberal democratic utopia, on the pragmatists' view, is no truer to human nature or the demands of an ahistorical moral law than is a fascist tyranny. But it is much more likely to produce greater human happiness. A perfected society will not live up to a pre-existent standard, but will be an artistic achievement, produced by the same long and difficult process of trial and error as is required by any other creative effort.

So far I have been trying to show how Darwinism, utilitarianism and pragmatism conspired to exalt plurality over unity – how the dissolution of the traditional theologicometaphysical world picture helped the European intellectuals drop the idea of the One True Account of How Things Really Are. The new social hopes which filled the nineteenth century helped them accomplish this transvaluation of traditional philosophical values, and the resulting philosophical pluralism reinforced the sense that a perfected society would make possible ever-proliferating human diversity. At the end of that century, it seemed entirely plausible that the human race, having broken through age-old barriers, was now about to create a global, cosmopolitan, social democratic, pluralist community. The institutions of this perfected society would not only eliminate traditional inequalities but

would leave plenty of room for its members to pursue their individual visions of human perfection.

I turn now to some questions which have begun to burden intellectuals in recent decades, and which are often referred to as 'the problems of postmodernity'. These questions are raised by the fact that, as Clifford Geertz puts it, the liberalism, the aspiration towards such a perfected society, is itself 'a culturally specific phenomenon, born in the West and perfected there'. The very universalism to which liberalism is committed and which it promotes, Geertz continues,

> has brought it into open conflict both with other universalisms with similar intent, most notably with that set forth by a revenant Islam, and with a large number of alternative versions of the good, the right, and the indubitable, Japanese, Indian, African, Singaporean, to which it looks like just one more attempt to impose Western values on the rest of the world – the continuation of colonialism by other means.[4]

What Geertz says of liberalism is true also of its philosophical partners, utilitarianism and pragmatism. Most of those attracted by those two philosophical doctrines are people who had previously decided that their favourite utopia is the liberal one described in *On Liberty*: a world in which nothing remains sacred save the freedom to lead your life by your own lights, and nothing is forbidden which does not interfere with the freedom of others. If you lose faith in this utopia, you may begin to have doubts about philosophical pluralism.

Although this partnership relation is real and important, it should be clear that neither utilitarianism nor pragmatism *entails* a commitment to liberalism. That is why Nietzsche can be as good a pragmatist as James, and why Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor can be as good a utilitarian as Mill. On the other hand, liberalism comes close to entailing them. For although romantic utilitarians do not necessarily want to disenchant the world, they certainly want to disenchant the past. So they need to melt much that had seemed solid into air. The redefinitions of 'right' and 'true' offered by Mill and James respectively are indispensable to this melting process. For any non-utilitarian

definition of 'right' and any non-pragmatist definition of 'true' will lend aid and comfort to the idea that there is an authority – for example, the eternal moral law, or the intrinsic structure of reality – which takes precedence over agreement between free human beings about what to do or what to believe.

Geertz says that the partisans of liberalism

> must reconceive it as a view not from nowhere but from the special somewhere of (a certain sort of) Western political experience, a statement . . . about what we who are the heirs of that experience think we have learned about how people with differences can live together amongst one another with some degree of comity.[5]

That is exactly how Dewey wanted us to conceive of pragmatism: not as the result of a deeper understanding of the intrinsic nature of truth or knowledge, but as the view of truth and knowledge one will be likely to adopt if, as a result of one's own experience with various sociopolitical alternatives, one's highest hope is the creation of the liberal utopia sketched by Mill. Pragmatists are entirely at home with the idea that political theory should view itself as suggestions for future action emerging out of recent historical experience, rather than attempting to legitimate the outcome of that experience by reference to something ahistorical.

But the sceptics Geertz cites, the people who suspect that liberalism is an attempt to impose the outcome of a specifically European experience on people who have had no share in this experience, are likely to suggest that European confidence in liberalism and its philosophical corollaries is simply confidence in the success of Europe to make the rest of the world submit to its will. How can you Europeans tell, such sceptics ask, whether your devotion to liberalism is a result of its intrinsic merits or simply a result of the success of liberal societies in taking control of most of the resources, and most of the population, of the world?

Perhaps, these sceptics suggest, yesterday's unbounded faith in liberalism and its philosophical corollaries was a result of a tacit conviction of the inevitability of liberalism's triumph. From the beginning of the colonialist period until the recent past, it seemed obvious to most Europeans, and plausible to many non-Europeans, that nothing could withstand the force of Europe's intellectual example any more than it could the force of Europe's commercial and military power. But perhaps the transvaluation of traditional philosophical values to which I have referred – the shift from unity to plurality – was simply an attempt by philosophers to climb on an economic and military bandwagon? Perhaps philosophy was simply following the flag?

A Deweyan response to such a postcolonial sceptic would go something like this: Sure, pragmatism and utilitarianism might never have gotten off the ground without a boost from colonialist and imperialist triumphalism. But so what? The question is not whether the popularity of these philosophical views was the product of this or that transitory hold on power, but whether anybody now has any better ideas or any better utopias. We pragmatists are not arguing that modern Europe has any superior insight into eternal, ahistorical realities. We do not claim any superior rationality. We claim only an experimental success: we have come up with a way of bringing people into some degree of comity, and of increasing human happiness, which looks more promising than any other way which has been proposed so far.

In order to evaluate this response, consider some of the reasons why Europe no longer looks like the avant garde of the human race, reasons why it seems absurdly improbable that we shall ever have a global liberal utopia. Here are three:

1. It is not possible to have European democratic government without something like a European standard of living – without the middle class, and the well-established institutions of civil society, which such a standard has made possible. Without these, you cannot have an electorate sufficiently literate and leisured to take part in the democratic process. But there are too many people in the world, and too few natural resources, to make such a standard of living available to all human beings.

2. The greedy and selfish kleptocrats have become, in recent decades, considerably more sophisticated. The Chinese and Nigerian generals, and their counterparts around the world, have learned from the failures of twentieth-century totalitarianism to avoid ideology and to

be pragmatic. They lie, cheat and steal in much more suave and sophisticated ways than those used by, for example, the old Communist nomenklaturas. So the end of the Cold War gives no reason for optimism about the progress of democracy, whatever it may have done for the triumph of capitalism.

3. Achieving a liberal utopia on a global scale would require the establishment of a world federation, exercising a global monopoly of force – the sort of federation you can find described in any science fiction utopia set in the twenty-first century. (As Michael Lind has pointed out, the only science fiction stories which postulate a continuing plurality of sovereign nation states are apocalyptic dystopias.) But the likelihood of such a federation being set up is much smaller than it was when the United Nations Organization was founded in 1945. The continual splitting up of old nation states, ex-colonies and ex-federations makes a world government less likely with every passing year. So even if technology could somehow enable us to balance population and resources, and even if we could get the kleptocrats off the backs of the poor, we would still be out of luck. For sooner or later some uniformed idiots will start pressing nuclear buttons and our grandchildren will inhabit a dystopia like that shown in the film *Road Warrior*.

I think these are three plausible reasons for believing that neither democratic freedom nor philosophical pluralism will survive the next century. If I were a wagering Olympian, I might well bet my fellow divinities that pragmatism, utilitarianism and liberalism would, among mortals, be only faint memories in a hundred years' time. For very few unexpurgated libraries may then exist, and very few people may ever have heard of Mill, Nietzsche, James and Dewey, any more than of free trade unions, a free press and democratic elections.

None of these reasons why the dreams of nineteenth-century Europeans may be irrelevant to the twenty-first century, however, suggest any reason to be suspicious of the superiority of liberalism, pragmatism or utilitarianism to their various rivals, any more than the collapse of the recently converted Roman Empire gave Augustine and his contemporaries a reason to be dubious about the superiority of Christianity to paganism. Nor does contemplating such reasons help us do

what Geertz asks us to do when he calls for the creation of 'a new kind of politics', one

> which does not regard ethnic, religious, racial, linguistic, or regional assertiveness as so much irrationality, archaic and ingenerate, to be suppressed or transcended, a madness decried or a darkness ignored, but, like any other social problem – inequality, say, or the abuse of power – sees it as a reality to be faced, somehow dealt with, modulated, brought to terms.[6]

When I first read this sentence in Geertz's book, I found myself agreeing. But on second thoughts I realized that I was agreeing with the spirit rather than the letter. I take the spirit to be that we should deal with people who exhibit such assertiveness as we should deal with all other potential fellow citizens of a world federation: we should take their problems seriously and talk them through. But if one takes Geertz's sentence literally, one can reasonably object that there is no contradiction between regarding something as an archaic and ingenerate irrationality and regarding it as a reality to be faced, somehow dealt with, modulated, brought to terms.

I think it important to insist on this absence of contradiction because it is often said that philosophical pluralists like myself must abjure the notion of 'irrationality'. But this is not so. We can perfectly well use the notion as long as we do so to signify a readiness to ignore the results of past experience, rather than to signify a departure from the commands of an ahistorical authority called Reason.

We have learned quite a lot, in the course of the past two centuries, about how races and religions can live in comity with one another. If we forget these lessons, we can reasonably be called irrational. It makes good pragmatic and pluralist sense to say that the nations of the world are being irrational in not creating a world government to which they should surrender their sovereignty and their nuclear warheads, that the Germans were being irrational in accepting Hitler's suggestion that they expropriate their Jewish neighbours, and that Serbian peasants were being irrational in accepting Milosevic's suggestion that they loot and rape neighbours with whom they had been living peacefully for 50 years.

Insofar as 'postmodern' philosophical thinking is identified with a mindless and stupid cultural relativism – with the idea that any fool thing that calls itself culture is worthy of respect – then I have no use for such thinking. But I do not see that what I have called 'philosophical pluralism' entails any such stupidity. The reason to try persuasion rather than force, to do our best to come to terms with people whose convictions are archaic and ingenerate, is simply that using force, or mockery, or insult, is likely to decrease human happiness.

We do not need to supplement this wise utilitarian counsel with the idea that every culture has some sort of intrinsic worth. We have learned the futility of trying to assign all cultures and persons places on a hierarchical scale, but this realization does not impugn the obvious fact that there are lots of cultures we would be better off without, just as there are lots of people we would be better off without. To say that there is no such scale, and that we are simply clever animals trying to increase our happiness by continually reinventing ourselves, has no relativistic consequences. The difference between pluralism and cultural relativism is the difference between pragmatically justified tolerance and mindless irresponsibility.

So much for my suggestion that the popularity of the meaningless term 'postmodernism' is the result of an inability to resist the claims of philosophical pluralism combined with a quite reasonable fear that history is about to turn against us. But I want to toss in a concluding word about the *un*popularity of the term – about the rhetoric of those who use this word as a term of abuse.

Many of my fellow philosophers use the term 'postmodernist relativism' as if it were a pleonasm, and as if utilitarians, pragmatists and philosophical pluralists generally had committed a sort of 'treason of the clerks', as Julien Benda puts it. They often suggest that if philosophers had united behind the good old theologicometaphysical verities – or if James and Nietzsche had been strangled in their cradles – the fate of mankind might have been different. Just as Christian fundamentalists tell us that tolerance of homosexuality leads to the collapse of civilization, so those who would have us return to Plato and Kant believe that utilitarianism and pragmatism may weaken our

intellectual and moral fibre. The triumph of European democratic ideals, they suggest, would have been much more likely had we philosophical pluralists kept our mouths shut.

But the reasons, such as the three I listed earlier, for thinking that those ideals will not triumph have nothing to do with changes in philosophical outlook. Neither the ratio of population to resources, nor the power which modern technology has put in the hands of kleptocrats, nor the provincial intransigence of national governments, has anything to do with such changes. Only the archaic and ingenerate belief that an offended nonhuman power will punish those who do not worship it makes it possible to see a connection between the intellectual shift from unity to plurality and these various concrete reasons for historical pessimism. This shift leaves us nothing with which to boost our social hopes, but that does not mean there is anything wrong with those hopes. The utopian social hope which sprang up in nineteenth-century Europe is still the noblest imaginative creation of which we have record.

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NOTES

1 For a treatment of this topic with which I heartily agree, see Bernard Yack, *The Fetishism of Modernities* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), especially the chapter entitled 'Postmodernism: the figment of a fetish'.
2 Clifford Geertz, *A World in Pieces* (forthcoming).
3 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850).
4 Geertz, ch. iii, p. 21.
5 Geertz, ch. iii, p. 23.
6 Geertz, ch. iii, p. 27.