

**Cornel West, "Nietzsche's Prefiguration of Postmodern American
Philosophy." *boundary 2* 9 (3)(1981), 241-269.**

You ask me about the idiosyncracies of philosophers? ... There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred of even the idea of becoming, their Egyptianism. They think they are doing a thing honor when they dehistoricize it, sub specie aeterni—when they make a mummy of it. All the philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive. They kill, they stuff, when they worship, these conceptual idolaters—they become a mortal danger to everything when they worship. Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth, are for them objections-refutations even. What is, does not become; what becomes, is not ...

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.

Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*

Nietzsche is the central figure in postmodern thought in the West. His aphoristic style—the epigram as style—governs the elusive texts of postmodern philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and E.M. Cioran. His anti-hermeneutical perspectivism underlies the deconstructive stance of postmodern critics such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. His genealogical approach, especially regarding the link between knowledge and power, regulates the neo-Marxist textual practice of postmodern critic-historians such as Michel Foucault and Edward Said. And his gallant attempt to overcome traditional metaphysics is a major preoccupation of postmodern thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In this paper, I will try to show the ways in which Nietzsche prefigures the crucial moves made recently in postmodern" American philosophy. I will confine my remarks to two of Nietzsche's

texts: *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Will To Power*.¹ The postmodern American philosophers I will examine are W.V. Quine, Nelson Goodman, Wilfred Sellars, Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty. The three moves I shall portray are: the move toward anti-realism or conventionalism in ontology; the move toward the demythologization of the Myth of the Given or anti-foundationalism in epistemology; and the move toward the detranscendentalization of the subject or the dismissal of the mind as a sphere of inquiry. I then shall claim that Nietzsche believed such moves lead to a paralyzing nihilism and ironic skepticism unless they are supplemented with a new world view, a new "countermovement" to overcome such nihilism and skepticism. Lastly, I will suggest that postmodern American philosophy has not provided such a "countermovement," settling instead for either updated versions of scientism (Quine and Sellars), an aristocratic resurrection of pluralistic stylism (Goodman), a glib ideology of professionalism (Kuhn), or a nostalgic appeal to enlightened conversation (Rorty). Such weak candidates for a "countermovement" seem to indicate the extent to

¹ The English translations I shall refer to throughout this essay are: *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlessex, U.K.: Penguin, 1968), and *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968). References to these editions, designated *TI* and *WP* respectively, will be incorporated in the text. The first work, written in 1888, was one of Nietzsche's last and best texts; the second, is a selection from Nietzsche's notebooks, 1883-1888. Nietzsche's philosophical (and metaphysical) views have not been examined in relation to the latest developments in postmodern American philosophy primarily because of the distance between his work and Anglo-American philosophy. This distance exists owing to two basic reasons. First, Nietzsche and Anglo-American philosophers radically disagree on the appropriate mode of philosophizing, on how philosophy should be done, pursued and codified. For Nietzsche, philosophy is a consuming passion, a gay vocation—hence more adequately pursued in a literary mode for a general intelligent audience; whereas, for most Anglo-American philosophers, philosophy is a pedagogical activity, a serious profession—hence more adequately pursued in a technical mode for a highly specialized audience. Second, Anglo-American philosophers are noted (and notorious) for "their lack of historical sense." Therefore, their interest in and attention to philosophical figures preoccupied with history, e.g., Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, is minimal. It is not surprising that of the five major books on Nietzsche in English—Walter Kaufman's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), R. J. Hollingdale's *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1973), Arthur Danto's *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), Crane Brinton's *Nietzsche* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1941), and J. P. Stern's *Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin, 1979)—only one is written by an Anglo-American philosopher, namely, Arthur Danto. And Danto is an atypical Anglo-American (or analytic) philosopher, with diverse interests and publications ranging from Croce, philosophy of history and Sartre to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

which postmodern American philosophy—similar to much of postmodern thought in the West—constitutes a dead, impotent rhetoric of a declining and decaying civilization.

Anti-Realism

The originary figures of modern analytic philosophy—Gottlob Frege, Alexius Meinong, Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore—are the acknowledged ancestors of postmodern American philosophers. These figures constituted a formidable realist revolt against psychologism, conventionalism and idealism.² Frege revolted against J.S. Mill's psychologism and J. Venn's conventionalism in logic; Meinong, against Franz Brentano's psychologism in object theory; Russell and Moore, against F.H. Bradley's Hegelian idealism in metaphysics and epistemology. Each separate attack shares a common theme: an attempt to resurrect realism.

There are many forms of realism in modern analytic philosophy, including naive realism, Platonic realism, critical realism and internal realism.³ The basic claims of any form of realism are that objects, things, states of affairs or the world exist externally to us and independently of our sense

² It comes as no surprise that analytic philosophy, with its "lack of historical sense," has produced little historical reflection and interpretation of itself. Besides Richard Rorty's early introductory essay in *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967) and his recent book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), there is only John Passmore's *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin, 1970) which is pedantic reportage and straightforward exposition—neither historical reflection nor interpretation—of late 19th and 20th century developments in European philosophy. The pertinent works of Frege, Meinong, Russell and Moore I have in mind are Frege's classic "On Sense and Reference," in Peter Geach and Max Black, eds., *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952); Meinong's "The Theory of Objects," in Roderick Chisholm, ed., *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology* (California: Glencoe, 1960); Russell's "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions," *Mind*, Vol. 13 (1904), 204-219, 336-354, 509-524; and Moore's "The Refutation of Idealism," in *Philosophical Studies* (London, 1922).

³ For noteworthy examples of naive (or common-sensical) realism, see G. E. Moore's "A Defense of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World," in his *Philosophical Papers* (London, 1959); for Platonic realism, see Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* (Cambridge, 1903) and to a lesser extent his *Problems of Philosophy* (New York, 1912); for critical realism, see Roy W. Sellars's *Critical Realism* (Chicago, 1916) and his "A Statement of Critical Realism," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, Vol. I (1938-1939), 472-498; and for internal realism, see Hilary Putnam's recent work, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Part Four entitled "Realism and Reason."

experience; and that these objects, things, states of affairs or this world, in some fundamental way, determine what is true, objective and real.

This two-prong definition of realism suggests two important elements of any realist position. First, it links any realist position to some notion of correspondence (or re-presenting) between either ideas and objects, words and things, sentences and states of affairs, or theories and the world. Second, this definition proposes something other than human social practice to serve as the final court of appeal which determines what is and what we ought to believe. To put it crudely, realism is preoccupied with assuring us that there is an external world and with obtaining the true (accurate, objective, valid) copy of this world.

Postmodern American philosophers affirm the first-prong of the definition of realism—thus bypassing idealism—but see no need to build the notion of correspondence into the way the claim is stated. In short, they are highly critical of the subject-object problematic embodied in the first-prong of the definition such that grasping reality consists of crossing the subject-object hiatus, leaving one's inner world in order to get in contact with the external world, and of one's ideas copying or corresponding to the world.

Postmodern American philosophers reject the second-prong of the definition of realism—thus promoting conventionalism in ontology. They refuse to accept the view that the world determines truth or that the world is the final court of appeal which compels us to accept what is or believe as we ought.

This rejection is based on two major insights of postmodern American philosophers: the conventional character of constructing (reductionist or nonreductionist) logical systems of the world

and the theory-laden character of observations. The first insight crystallized after Rudolf Carnap's highly acclaimed yet unsuccessful attempt in his *Logical Construction of The World* (1928) (and better known as his *Aufbau*) to rationally reconstruct the process of acquiring knowledge by reducing (or translating) statements about the world to those of immediate experience. The second insight was gained from A.J. Ayer's popular yet no less unsuccessful attempt in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) to defend the verificationist theory of meaning (or roughly promoting the primacy of observational evidence for determining the meaningfulness of a sentence).

Almost a decade after his painstaking study of Carnap's *Aufbau* in his masterful work, *The Structure of Appearance* (1951), Goodman concluded in his renown essay, "The Way The World Is,"

What we must face is the fact that even the truest description comes nowhere near faithfully reproducing the way the world is ... for it has explicit primitives, routes of construction, etc., none of them features of the world described. Some philosophers contend, therefore, that if systematic descriptions introduce an arbitrary artificial order, then we should make our descriptions unsystematic to bring them more into accord with the world. Now the tacit assumption here is that the respects in which a description is unsatisfactory are *just those respects in which it falls short of being a faithful picture*; and the tacit goal is to achieve a description that as nearly as possible gives a living likeness. But the goal is a delusive one. For we have seen that even the most realistic way of picturing amounts merely to one kind of conventionalization. In painting, the selection, the emphasis, the conventions are different from but no less peculiar to the vehicle, and no less variable, than those of language. The idea of making verbal descriptions approximate pictorial depiction loses its point when we understand that to turn a description into the most faithful possible picture would amount to nothing more than exchanging some conventions for others.⁴

After his search for a criterion of adequacy for constructional systems, such as Carnap's phenomenalistic one, or for scientific theories, such as Einstein's special theory of relativity, Goodman held that the choice is not based primarily on mere agreement with the facts, i.e.,

⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Problems and Projects* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), pp. 29-30.

observational data, but rather on, among other things, structural simplicity. In his influential essay, "The Test of Simplicity", he writes,

Thus selection of a theory must always be made in advance of the determination of some of the facts it covers; and, accordingly, some criterion other than conformity with such facts must be applied in making the selection. After as many points as we like have been plotted by experiment concerning the correlation of two factors (for example, of time and deterioration of radioactivity), we predict the remaining points by choosing one among all the infinitely many curves that cover the plotted points. Obviously, simplicity of some sort is a cardinal factor in making this choice (we pick the "smoothest" curve). The very validity of the choice depends upon whether the choice is properly made according to such criteria. Thus simplicity here is not a consideration applicable after truth is determined but is one of the standards of validity that are applied in the effort to discover truth.⁵

In a later essay, "Art and Inquiry" and in his most recent work, *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), Goodman advances the notion of fitness as appropriate to (and as replacement for) talk about truth.

Truth of a hypothesis after all is a matter of fit-fit with a body of theory, and fit of hypothesis and theory to the data at hand and the facts to be encountered.⁶

Briefly, then, truth of statements and rightness of descriptions, representations, exemplifications, expressions-of design, drawing, diction, rhythm-is primarily a matter of fit: fit to what is referred to in one way or another, or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization. The differences between fitting a version to a world, a world to a version, and a version together or to other versions fade when the role of versions in making the worlds they fit is recognized. And knowing or understanding is seen as ranging beyond the acquiring of true beliefs to the discovering and devising of fit of all sorts.⁷

In his famous essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine observed that in Ayer's attempt to correlate each meaningful sentence with observational evidence, i.e., empirical confirmation, Ayer remained tied to Carnap's reductionist project by trying to reduce the meaningfulness of a sentence to its empirical import.

⁵ Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, pp. 279-80.

⁶ Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, p. 118.

⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), p. 138.

But the dogma of reductionism has, in a subtler and more tenuous form, continued to influence the thought of empiricists. The notion lingers that to each statement, or each synthetic statement, there is associated a unique range of possible sensory events such that the occurrence of any of them would add to the likelihood of truth of the statement, and that there is associated also another unique range of possible sensory events whose occurrence would detract from that likelihood. This notion is of course implicit in the verification theory of meaning.

The dogma of reductionism survives in the supposition that each statement, taken in isolation from its fellows, can admit of confirmation or infirmation at all. My countersuggestion, issuing essentially from Carnap's doctrine of the physical world in the *Aufbau*, is that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body.⁸

Quine extended his critique of updated empiricism to the most cherished notion of modern analytic philosophers—the notion of analyticity, the idea that a statement is true by virtue of meanings and independently of fact. Given his Duhemian holism, the idea of an isolated statement being true without empirical confirmation is as unacceptable as the idea of an isolated statement being true with empirical confirmation. His main point is that the basic "unit of empirical significance is the whole of science,"⁹ namely, competing theories (versions or descriptions) of the world, not isolated statements, since the truth-value of such statements can change relative to one's theory of the world.

If this view is right, it is misleading to speak of the empirical content of an individual statement—especially if it is a statement at all remote from the experiential periphery of the field. Furthermore it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision.¹⁰

⁸ Willard Van Orman Quine, *From A Logical Point of View* (New York, 1963), pp. 40-41.

⁹ Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*, p. 43.

Goodman and Quine are the (retired, Harvard) patriarchs of postmodern American philosophy. Their respective holistic critiques of Carnap and, to a lesser degree, Ayer, constitute the emergence of postmodernity in American philosophy and mark the Americanization of analytic philosophy.¹¹ If Goodman and Quine are the patriarchs, then Richard Rorty and Thomas Kuhn are the renegade stepchildren. Rorty and Kuhn have followed through most thoroughly on the anti-realist, historicist and conventionalist implications of the views of Goodman and the early Quine.

In his celebrated article, "The World Well Lost," Rorty concludes that the theory-laden character of observations relativizes talk about the world such that appeals to "the world" as a final court of appeal to determine what is true or what we should believe is viciously circular. We cannot isolate "the world" from theories of the world, then compare these theories of the world with a theory-free world. We cannot compare theories with anything that is not a product of another theory. So any talk about "the world" is relative to the alternative theories available. In response to the second prong of the definition of realism—to the notion that the world determines truth—Rorty states,

Now, to put my cards on the table, I think that the realistic true believer's notion of the world is an obsession rather than an intuition. I also think that Dewey was right in thinking that the only intuition we have of the world as determining truth is just the intuition that we must make our new beliefs conform with a vast body of platitudes, unquestioned perceptual reports, and the like.¹²

¹¹ Wilfred Sellars, son of the aforementioned Roy Sellars, deserves a similar place, alongside Quine and Goodman. But his highly technical style of writing as well as his position at the University of Pittsburgh (slightly removed from the center of fashionable intellectual activity and notoriety) unfortunately has rendered his writings less accessible and influential.

¹² Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXIX, No. 19 (1972), p. 661.

Kuhn, the other stepchild of Goodman and Quine, has received more attention than any postmodern American philosopher of science primarily because he has provided a new descriptive vocabulary which gives a new perspective on a sacrosanct institution, i.e., natural science, in our culture in light of the early Quine's pragmatism and Goodman's conventionalism. His controversial yet highly-acclaimed book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) serves as a rallying point for anti-realists owing to statements such as the following:

A scientific theory is usually felt to be better than its predecessors not only in the sense that it is a better instrument for discovering and solving puzzles but also because it is somehow a better representation of what nature is really like. One often hears that successive theories grow ever closer to, or approximate more and more closely to, the truth. Apparently generalizations like that refer not to the puzzle-solutions and the concrete predictions derived from a theory but rather to its ontology, to the match, that is, between the entities with which the theory populates nature and what is "really there."

Perhaps there is some other way of salvaging the notion of 'truth' for application to whole theories, but this one will not do. There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like 'really there'; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its "real" counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle.¹³

If I am right, then 'truth' may, like 'proof', be a term with only intra-theoretic applications.¹⁴

There surely have been anti-realists (such as Hegel), conventionalist philosophers of science (such as Pierre Duhem) and pragmatists (such as John Dewey) prior to the rise of postmodern American philosophy. But I claim that it is Nietzsche who most openly and unequivocally prefigures the anti-realist, conventionalist move made by postmodern American philosophers.

¹³ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 206.

¹⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, "Reflections on My Critics", *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 266.

For example, in the section entitled, "How The 'Real World' At Last Became A Myth" in *Twilight of The Idols*, Nietzsche comically mocks the notion of a theory-free world, a "world" that can be appealed to in adjudicating between competing theories of the world.

4. The real world-unattainable? Unattained, at any rate. And if unattained also unknown. Consequently also no consolation, no redemption, no duty: how could we have a duty towards something *unknown*?

(The grey of dawn. First yawning of reason. Cockcrow of positivism.)

5. The 'real world'—an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer—an idea grown useless, superfluous, consequently a refuted idea: let us abolish it!

(Broad daylight; breakfast; return of cheerfulness and *bon sens*; Plato blushes for shame; all free spirits run riot.)

6. We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*

(Mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.) (*TI*, pp. 40-41)

Nietzsche clearly subscribes to the insight of postmodern American philosophers which holds that facts are theory-laden. He writes in *The Will To Power*,

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—"There are only *facts*"—I would say: No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing. (*WP*, p. 267)

There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is—our opinions. (*WP*, p. 327)

Goodman's pleas for a pluralism of versions of the world as manifest in the following passages:

The movement is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making.¹⁵

There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. And when we say of them that they all involve conventionalizations, we are saying that no one of these different descriptions is exclusively

¹⁵ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. x.

true, since the others are also true. None of them tells us the way the world is, but each of them tells us a way the world is.¹⁶

echoes Nietzsche's quip,

No limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted; every interpretation a symptom of growth or of decline. Inertia needs unity (monism); plurality of interpretations a sign of strength. Not to desire to deprive the world of its disturbing and enigmatic character! (*WP*, p. 326)

As we saw earlier, for Goodman, this pluralism suggests multiple criteria for accepting versions of the world-in science and art.

Truth is not enough; it is at most a necessary condition. But even this concedes too much; the noblest scientific laws are seldom quite true. Minor discrepancies are overridden in the interest of breadth or power or simplicity. Science denies its data as the statesman denies his constituents-within the limits of prudence ... Truth and its aesthetic counterpart amount to appropriateness under different names. If we speak of hypotheses but not works of art as true, that is because we reserve the terms "true" and "false" for symbols in sentential form. I do not say this difference is negligible, but it is specific rather than generic, a difference in field of application rather than in formula, and marks no schism between the scientific and the aesthetic.¹⁷

Similarly for Nietzsche, seeking after 'truth' is essentially a matter of positing a goal and achieving that goal.

The ascertaining of "truth" and "untruth," the ascertaining of facts in general, is fundamentally different from creative positing, from forming, shaping, overcoming, willing, such as is of the essence of philosophy. To introduce a meaning—this task still remains to be done, assuming there is no meaning yet. Thus it is with sounds, but also with the fate of peoples: they are capable of the most different interpretations and direction toward different goals.

On a yet higher level is to *posit a goal* and mold facts according to it; that is, active interpretation and not merely conceptual translation. (*WP*, p. 327)

¹⁶ Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁷ Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, pp. 117, 118.

Note the way in which Nietzsche's perspectivism, most clearly stated in the following passage,

That the value of the world lies in our interpretation (—that other interpretations than merely human ones are perhaps somewhere possible—); that previous interpretations have been perspective valuations by virtue of which we can survive in life, i.e., in the will to power, for the growth of power; that every elevation of man brings with it the overcoming of narrower interpretations; that every strengthening and increase of power opens up new perspectives and means believing in new horizons—this idea permeates my writings. The world with which we are concerned is false, i.e., is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is "in flux," as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for—there is no "truth." (*WP*, p. 330)

anticipates the early Quine's pragmatism, best articulated in this famous paragraph,

As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries—not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. For my part I do, *qua* lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer's Gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.¹⁸

Note also the crucial role of utility and human interests in the early Quine's pragmatism and Nietzsche's perspectivism.

The quality of myth, however, is relative; relative, in this case, to the epistemological point of view. This point of view is one among various, corresponding to one among our various interests and purposes.¹⁹

The apparent world, i.e., a world viewed according to values; ordered, selected according to values, i.e., in this case according to the viewpoint of utility in regard to the

¹⁸ Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, p. 19.

preservation and enhancement of the power of a certain species of animal. The perspective therefore decides the character of the "appearance"! (*WP*, p. 305)

Postmodern American philosophers, unconsciously prefigured by Nietzsche, are aptly described by Rorty, when in the process of delineating what he calls 'edifying' philosophers such as Dewey, Kierkegaard and the later Heidegger, he writes,

These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described.²⁰

Nietzsche catches the flavor of this passage when he writes,

That the destruction of an illusion does not produce truth but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our "empty space," an increase of our "desert" (*WP*, p. 327)

Demythologizing the Myth of the Given

The Myth of the Given is an attempt to secure solid foundations for knowledge-claims; it is a quest for certainty in epistemology.²¹ The Myth of the Given roughly holds that there is a given element—a self-justifying, intrinsically credible, theory-neutral, noninferential element—in experience which provides the foundations for other knowledge—claims and serves as the final terminating

²⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 367.

²¹ This phrase was popularized by Wilfred Sellars's influential University of London lectures originally entitled "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" and now known simply as "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. I, Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, eds. (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956). For a brief, cogent and sympathetic elaboration on this Myth, see Michael William's *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), Chapter 2 and for the only treatment I know of how this Myth functions in traditional philosophical hermeneutics, see my essay, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics and The Myth of the Given," Special Hermeneutics Issue, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2 (Winter 1979), pp. 71-84.

points for chains of epistemic justification. Therefore the attempt of postmodern American philosophers to demythologize the Myth of the Given is a move toward anti-foundationalism in epistemology. It is not surprising that such anti-foundationalism is akin to the anti-realism, holism and conventionalism we examined earlier.

The two major proponents of the Myth of the Given in modern analytic philosophy are C. I. Lewis, a beloved teacher of Quine and Goodman and H. H. Price, an appreciative student of Russell.²² For both philosophers, the given element and its interpretation constitute the basic characteristics of knowledge and experience. As Lewis states:

There are in our cognitive experience, two elements, the immediate data such as those of sense, which are presented or given to the mind, and a form, construction, or interpretation, which represents the activity of thought.²³

Price also notes after acknowledging the data of the historian, general and detective,

But it is obvious that these are only data relatively and for the purpose of answering a certain question. They are really themselves the results of inference, often of a very complicated kind. We may call them data *secundum quid*. But eventually we must get back to something which is a datum *simpliciter*, which is not the result of any previous intellectual process.²⁴

²² For C. I. Lewis's pertinent work, see his *Mind and the World Order* (New York: Dover, 1956) and "The Given Element in Empirical Knowledge," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 61, 2 (April 1952), pp. 168-73. For H. H. Price's relevant work, see his classic *Perception* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1964). Lewis's book was first published in 1929, Price's in 1932. More recent defenders of the Myth of the Given include A. J. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958), R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1977), Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), and John L. Pollack, *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975). For a survey of the variety of versions of the Myth of the Given, see J. J. Ross, *The Appeal to the Given* (London: Macmillan, 1970). Lastly, for a fascinating and original attempt to reject the Myth and Quine's holism (at the same time!), see Clark Glymour's *Theory and Evidence* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980).

²³ Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, p. 38.

²⁴ Price, *Perception*, p. 4.

As we said earlier, for Lewis and Price, the very foundations of knowledge are at stake in this distinction. Lewis is quite candid about this,

If there be no datum given to the mind, then knowledge must be altogether contentless and arbitrary; there would be nothing which it must be true to. And if there be no interpretation which the mind imposes, then thought is rendered superfluous, the possibility of error becomes inexplicable, and the distinction of true and false is in danger of becoming meaningless.²⁵

Similarly for Price, the phenomenological investigation of the particular modes of perception (which lies outside of science) provides the foundations for science. "Empirical Science can never be more trustworthy than perception, upon which it is based."²⁶

We are fortunate to have Goodman's direct response to Lewis's two component view of knowledge owing to a symposium in which they both (along with Hans Reichenbach) took part at an American Philosophical Association meeting at Byrn Mawr in 1951. Needless to say, Goodman is critical of Lewis's view. He replies not by denying the notion of the given but by severing any links of a given element with notions of the true, false or certain.

But this all seems to me to point to, or at least to be compatible with, the conclusion that while something is given, nothing given is true; that while some things may be indubitable, nothing is certain. What we have been urged to grant amounts at most to this: materials for or particles of experience are given, sensory qualities or events or other elements are not created at will but presented, experience has some content even though our description of it may be artificial or wrong and even though the precise differentiation between what is given and what is not given may be virtually impossible. But to such content or materials or particles or elements, the terms "true", or "false", and "certain" are quite inapplicable. These elements are simply there or not there. To grant that some are there is not to grant that anything is certain. Such elements may be indubitable in the vacuous sense that doubt is irrelevant to them, as it is to a desk; but they, like the desk, are equally devoid of certainty. They may be before us, but they are neither true nor false. For truth and falsity and certainty pertain to statements or judgments and not to mere particles or materials or elements. Thus,

²⁵ Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, p. 39.

²⁶ Price, *Perception*, p. 1.

to deny that there are empirical certainties does not imply that experience is a pure fiction, that it is without content, or even that there is no given element.²⁷

Five years later in his essay on Carnap, "The Revision of Philosophy", Goodman picks up the given-interpretation issue again and this time he rejects the distinction outright.

Any such view rests on the premise that the question "What are the original elements in knowledge?" is a clear and answerable one. And the assumption remains uncontested so long as we are dominated by the tradition that there is a sharp dichotomy between the given and the interpretation put upon it—so long as we picture the knower as a machine that is fed experience in certain lumps and proceeds to grind these up and reunite them in various ways. But I do not think this view of the matter will stand very close scrutiny.²⁸

And in his latest book, the very notion of epistemological foundations and the given element in experience are dismissed and dispensed with.

With false hope of a firm foundation gone, with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions, with substance dissolved into function, and with the given acknowledged as taken, we face the questions how worlds are made, tested, and known.²⁹

The most explicit attempts in postmodern American philosophy to demythologize the Myth of the Given are those of Wilfred Sellars and Richard Rorty. For Sellars, the Myth of the Given results from a confusion between the acquisition of knowledge and the justification of knowledge, between empirical causal accounts of how one comes to have a belief and philosophical investigations into how one justifies a belief one has. This confusion dissolves when one realizes that knowledge begins with the ability to justify, the capacity to use words. Everything else, he holds, is a non-cognitive causal antecedent. Sellars' psychological nominalism claims that there is no such thing as pre-linguistic awareness; or, to put it positively, that all awareness-of abstract and particular

²⁷ Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, pp. 61-62.

²⁸ Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, p. 9.

²⁹ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 7.

entities-is a linguistic affair. According to his view, "... not even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of a language."³⁰

Sellars's view precludes the possibility of any form of the Myth of the Given because it rules out any self-justifying, intrinsically credible, theory-neutral, noninferential epistemic element in experience. This is so because if knowledge begins with the ability to justify, then its beginnings (or "foundations") are public and intersubjective, matters of social practice.

For example, one of the forms of the Myth of the Given subscribed to by traditional empiricist philosophers,

... is the idea that there is, indeed must be, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world.³¹

This privileged stratum of fact is justified by appeals to prelinguistic awareness of self-authenticating, 'phenomenal' qualities. Price tries to defend this view by characterizing a normal perceptual situation-of a tomato under regular circumstances of light-in which he arrives at certain indubitable beliefs.

One thing however I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape, standing out from a background of other color-patches, and having a certain visual depth, and that this whole field of color is directly present to my consciousness ... This peculiar manner of being present to consciousness is called *being given* and that which is thus present is called a *datum*. The corresponding mental attitude is called *acquaintance*, *intuitive apprehension*, or sometimes *having*.³²

³⁰ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," p. 289.

³¹ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," p. 293.

³² Price, *Perception*, p. 3.

Sellars then replies,

... that one couldn't have observational knowledge of any fact unless one knew many other things as well ... For the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g., that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form X is a *reliable symptom* of Y ... The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.³³

Sellars concludes that the conception of knowledge based on the Myth of the Given, along with its concomitant picture of epistemology,

... is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once.³⁴

Rorty's epistemological behaviorism extends Sellars's psychological nominalism, accenting even more the intersubjective, i.e., social character, of the "foundations" of knowledge.

Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call "epistemological behaviorism," an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein. This sort of behaviorism can best be seen as a species of holism-but one which requires no idealist metaphysical underpinnings.³⁵

Following Sellars's attack on the Myth of the Given and linking this attack to Quine's holism, Rorty claims,

³³ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," pp. 298-99.

³⁴ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," p. 300.

³⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 174.

A holistic approach to knowledge is not a matter of antifoundationalist polemic, but a distrust of the whole epistemological enterprise. A behavioristic approach to episodes of "direct awareness" is not a matter of antimentalistic polemic, but a distrust of the Platonic quest for that special sort of certainty associated with visual perception.³⁶

By combining the insights of Sellars and Quine, Rorty arrives at his own radical conclusion.

When Sellars's and Quine's doctrines are purified, they appear as complementary expressions of a single claim: that no "account of the nature of knowledge" can rely on a theory of representations which stand in privileged relations to reality. The work of these two philosophers enables us ... to make clear why an "account of the nature of knowledge" can be, at most, a description of human behavior.³⁷

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche acknowledges that fundamental quest in Western philosophy for self-authenticating, self-justifying, intrinsically credible beliefs and concepts must rest, to use Stanley Cavell's Wittgensteinian phrase, "outside language games."³⁸ For Nietzsche, as for Sellars, such beliefs and concepts must presuppose some other kind of knowledge rather than serve as the foundation of our knowledge; they are grounded on what we already know rather than serve as the grounds for all that we know. He writes in section 4 of his Chapter entitled " 'Reason' in Philosophy,"

The *other* idiosyncrasy of philosophers is no less perilous: it consists in mistaking the last for the first. They put that which comes at the end-unfortunately! for it ought not to come at all!-the 'highest concepts', that is to say the most general, the emptiest concepts, the last fumes of evaporating reality, at the beginning as the beginning. It is again only the expression of their way of doing reverence: the higher must not be *allowed* to grow out of the lower, must not be *allowed* to have grown at all ... Moral: everything of the first rank must be *causa sui*. Origin in something else counts as an objection, as casting doubt on value. (*TI*, p. 37)

Nietzsche considers the quest for certainty and the search for foundations in epistemology—

any forms of the Myth of the Given—unattainable and ultimately self-deceptive. Any such quest and

³⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 181.

³⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 182.

³⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford, 1979), p. 226.

search must be subordinate to an inquiry as to why the will to power takes the form of such a quest and search.

It might seem as though I had evaded the question of "certainty." The opposite is true; but by inquiring after the criterion of certainty I tested the scales upon which men have weighed in general hitherto—and that the question of certainty itself is a dependent question, a question of second rank. (*WP*, p. 322)

Any attempt to ground knowledge-claims must be demystified such that the practical aims and goals concealed by such an attempt are disclosed.

Theory and practice.—*Fateful distinction, as if there were an actual* drive for knowledge that, without regard to questions of usefulness and harm, went blindly for the truth; and then, separate from this, the whole world of practical interests—

I tried to show, on the other hand, what instincts have been active behind all these pure theoreticians—how they have all, under the spell of their instincts, gone fatalistically for something that was "truth" *for them*—for them and only for them. The conflict between different systems, including that between epistemological scruples, is a conflict between quite definite instincts (forms of vitality, decline, classes, races, etc.).

The so-called drive for knowledge can be traced back to a drive to appropriate and conquer ... (*WP*, p. 227)

Nietzsche's rejection of foundationalism in epistemology results from his acceptance of the Heraclitean flux, of the world of becoming which forever slips out of the arbitrary conceptual schemas through which humans come to "know" the self and world.

The character of the world in a state of becoming as incapable of formulation, as "false", as "self-contradictory." Knowledge and becoming exclude one another. Consequently, "knowledge" must be something else: there must first of all be a will to make knowable, a kind of becoming must itself create the deception of beings. (*WP*, p. 280)

A world in a state of becoming could not, in a strict sense, be "comprehended" or "known"; only to the extent that the "comprehending" and "knowing" intellect encounters a coarse, already-created world, fabricated out of mere appearances but become firm to the extent that this kind of appearance has preserved life—only to this extent is there anything like "knowledge"; i.e., a measuring of earlier and later errors by one another. (*WP*, p. 281)

For Nietzsche, as for Quine, Goodman, Sellars and Rorty (and against Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Kripke and Levi-Strauss), knowledge is not a matter of grasping fixed forms, static essences or permanent substances and structures. Rather knowledge is a matter of perceiving phenomena under a description, within a theory or in light of a version in order to, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase, "help us get about." On this point, the early Quine's pragmatism and Nietzsche's perspectivism again converge.

Each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic.³⁹

Not "to know" but to schematize—to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require.

In the formation of reason, logic, the categories, it was *need* that was authoritative: the need, not to "know", but to subsume, to schematize, for the purpose of intelligibility and calculation ... (*WP*, p. 278)

Nietzsche's conception of knowledge as elastic in character and creative in content is echoed in Goodman.

Furthermore, if worlds are as much made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting. All the processes of worldmaking I have discussed enter into knowing. Perceiving motion, we have seen, often consists in producing it. Discovering laws involves drafting them. Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together.⁴⁰

Coming to know means "to place oneself in a conditional relation to something"; to feel oneself conditioned by something and oneself to condition it—it is therefore under all circumstances establishing, denoting, and making-conscious of conditions ... (*WP*, p. 301)

³⁹ Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*, p. 46.

⁴⁰ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 22.

Nietzsche debunks the Myth of the Given because, for him, knowledge is not a set of beliefs to be "grounded", but rather a series of linguistic signs which designate and describe the world in light of our evolving needs, interests and purposes.

It is an illusion that something is *known* when we possess a mathematical formula for an event: it is only designated, described; nothing more! (*WP*, p. 335)

He surely would agree with Rorty that demythologizing the Myth of the Given—and promoting anti-foundationalism in epistemology—results in, "... preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions."⁴¹

Detranscendentalizing the Subject

The last crucial move of postmodern American philosophy I will examine is the detranscendentalizing of the subject—the dismissing of the mind as a self-contained sphere of inquiry. This move is a natural consequence of the anti-realism, holism, conventionalism, and anti-foundationalism we examined earlier.

It is important to note that notions such as the subject, self-consciousness, ego, and "I" were under attack by modern analytic philosophers. Therefore this last move of postmodern American philosophers is part of the general trend of modern analytic philosophy.

For example, Quine's treatment of this matter follows, in many ways, the logical behaviorist position put forward in Gilbert Ryle's classic work, *The Concept of Mind* (1949). This position, largely intended to debunk the Cartesian myth of the "ghosts in machines", roughly holds that talk about mental states, i.e., an intentional idiom, is but a clumsy and confusing way of talking about

⁴¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 379.

dispositions to behave in certain ways under specific circumstances, i.e., a behavioristic idiom.

Quine's well-known passage in his *Word and Object* (1960) summarizes his own behavioristic position,

One may accept the Brentano thesis either as showing the indispensability of intentional idioms and the importance of an autonomous science of intention, or as showing the baselessness of intentional idioms and the emptiness of a science of intention. My attitude, unlike Brentano's, is the second. To accept intentional usage at face value is, we saw, to postulate translation relations as somehow objectively valid though indeterminate in principle relative to the totality of speech dispositions. Such postulation promises little gain in scientific insight if there is no better ground for it than that the supposed translation relations are presupposed by the vernacular of semantics and intention.⁴²

Underlying this viewpoint is Quine's eliminative materialist position, namely, the view that there simply are no mental states, but rather neural events. In this way, Quine detranscendentalizes any notion of the subject.

Rorty deepens this version of detranscendentalizing the subject by abandoning the very notion of mind-body identity. On his view, the social practice of speaking in neural events (by those who know neurology) and the social practice of speaking in mental states (by those who do not know neurology) "are just two ways of talking about the same thing."⁴³ And the "thing" being talked about in each case is that which is posited within one's theory. As Sellers points out, such thing-talk, be it neurological or common-sensical, occurs in,

a framework of "unobserved," "nonempirical" "inner" episodes. For we can point out immediately that in these respects they are no worse off than the particles and episodes in physical theory. For these episodes are "in" language-using animals as molecular impacts are "in" gases, not as "ghosts" are in "machines." They are "nonempirical" in the simple sense that they are *theoretical*—not definable in observational terms ... Their "purity" is not a *metaphysical* purity, but, so to speak, a *methodological* purity ... the fact that they are not

⁴² Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 221.

⁴³ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 122.

introduced as physiological entities does not preclude the possibility that at a later methodological stage, they may, so to speak, "turn out" to be such.⁴⁴

Sellars's methodological behaviorism—his way of detranscendentalizing the subject—permits him to be a behaviorist (like Quine) without thinking that all one's theoretical concepts in relation to "mental events" will turn out to refer to neurological phenomena (unlike Quine)—though, of course, they may.

The behavioristic requirement that all concepts should be introduced in terms of a basic vocabulary pertaining to overt behavior is compatible with the idea that some behavioristic concepts are to be introduced as theoretical concepts.⁴⁵

Nietzsche's dismissal of the mind as a self-contained sphere of inquiry is illustrated in section 3 of his Chapter entitled, "The Four Great Errors" in *Twilight of The Idols*.

... the conception of a consciousness ('mind') as cause and later still that of the ego (the 'subject') as cause are merely after-products after causality had, on the basis of will, been firmly established as a given fact, as *empiricism*... Meanwhile we have thought better. Today we do not believe a word of it. The 'inner world' is full of phantoms and false lights: the will is one of them. The will no longer moves anything, consequently no longer explains anything—it merely accompanies events, it can also be absent. The so-called 'motive': another error. Merely a surface phenomenon of consciousness, an accompaniment to an act, which conceals rather than exposes the *antecedentia* of the act. And as for the ego! It has become a fable, a fiction, a play on words: it has totally ceased to think, to feel and to will! ... What follows from this? There are no spiritual causes at all! The whole of the alleged empiricism which affirmed them has gone to the devil! (*TI*, p. 49)

Like Ryle, Nietzsche's detranscendentalizing of the subject begins with a critique of Descartes.

"There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks": this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as "true a priori" our belief in the concept of substance—that when there is thought there has to be something "that thinks" is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed. In short, this is not merely the substantiation of a fact but a logical-metaphysical postulate. (*WP*, p. 268)

⁴⁴ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," p. 319.

⁴⁵ Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," p. 316.

Similar to Rorty and Sellars, Nietzsche views subject-talk as mere convention, a matter of social practice rooted in our needs, interests and purposes.

"Everything is subjective," you say; but even this is interpretation. The "subject" is not something given, it is something, added and invented and projected behind what there is. (WP, p. 267)

However habitual and indispensable this fiction may have become by now—that in itself proves nothing against its imaginary origin: a belief can be a condition of life and nonetheless be false. (WP, p. 268)

He concludes that subject-talk is a linguistic social practice derived from our grammar, namely, the subject-predicate structure of our judgments.

In every judgment there resides the entire, full, profound belief in subject and attribute, or in cause and effect (that is, as the assertion that every effect is an activity and that every activity presupposes an agent); and this latter belief is only a special case of the former, so there remains as the fundamental belief that there are subjects, that everything that happens is related attributively to some subject. (WP, p. 294)

Nihilism

If Nietzsche prefigures certain important developments in postmodern American philosophy, then it is appropriate to note briefly that he believed such developments ultimately lead to nihilism unless they are supplemented with a new world view. He makes this point clearly in his Preface to *The Will To Power*.

For one should make no mistake about the meaning of the title that this gospel of the future wants to bear. "*The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*"—in this formulation a countermovement finds expression, regarding both principle and task; a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism—but presupposes it, logically and psychologically, and certainly can come only after and out of it. For why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these "values" really had.—We require, sometime, *new values*. (WP, pp. 3-4)

For Nietzsche, this nihilism results from certain ideals of modern Europe, especially those ideals which presuppose belief in the categories of "aim", "unity", and "truth". Nihilism is a natural consequence of a culture (or civilization) ruled and regulated by categories which mask manipulation, mastery and domination of peoples and nature.

Suppose we realize how the world may no longer be interpreted in terms of these three categories, and that the world begins to become valueless for us after this insight: then we have to ask about the sources of our faith in these three categories ...

Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a fictitious world*.

Final conclusion: All the values by means of which we have tried so far to render the world estimable for ourselves and which then proved inapplicable and therefore devaluated the world—all these values are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination—and they have been falsely *projected* into the essence of things. (*WP*, pp. 13-14)

Nihilism ushers in an era in which science—the great pride of modern Europe—provides greater and greater instrumentalities for world domination. As Maurice Blanchot observes,

The moment Nihilism outlines the world for us, its counterpart, science, creates the tools to dominate it. The era of universal mastery is opened. But there are some consequences: first, science can only be nihilistic; it is the meaning of a world deprived of meaning, a knowledge that ultimately has ignorance as its foundation. To which the response will be that this reservation is only theoretical; but we must not hasten to disregard this objection, for science is essentially productive. Knowing it need not interpret the world, science transforms it, and by this transformation science conveys its own nihilistic demands—the negative power that science has made into the most useful of tools, but with which it dangerously plays. Knowledge is fundamentally dangerous ... for a universe cannot be constructed without having the possibility of its being destroyed ... by making science possible, Nihilism becomes the possibility of science—which means that the human world can be destroyed by it.⁴⁶

Nietzsche considers nihilism to be "partly destructive, partly ironic". (*WP*, p. 14) It is marked by philosophical positions of anti-realism, conventionalism, relativism and anti-

⁴⁶ Maurice Blanchot, "The Limits of Experience: Nihilism," *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. and intro. David B. Allison (New York, 1977), pp. 122-23.

foundationalism. We have seen that postmodern American philosophers support such positions. Quine describes himself as a "relativist,"⁴⁷ yet warns against associating him with the "epistemological nihilism"⁴⁸ of Kuhn. Goodman labels his position "as a radical relativism under rigorous restraints, that eventuates in something akin to irrealism."⁴⁹ Rorty calls himself an "historicist"⁵⁰ and Kuhn admits to subscribing to a form of relativism.⁵¹

The crucial moves made by postmodern American philosophers are highly significant in that these moves disclose the unwarranted philosophical assumptions and antiquated theoretical distinctions upon which rests much of modern analytic philosophy. Yet—and in this regard they resemble their counterparts in postmodern literary criticism—postmodern American philosophers have failed to project a new world view, a countermovement, "a new gospel of the future". Quine's and Sellars's updated versions of scientism not only reflect their positivist heritage, but, more importantly, reveal their homage to an outmoded cultural mode of thought. Goodman's attempt to infuse the idea of style with new life is intriguing yet ultimately resorts to an old aristocratic preoccupation. Kuhn's unequivocal promotion of the proliferation of learned societies (or groups) engaged in puzzle-solving under converging paradigms amounts to an unimaginative ideology of professionalism. And Rorty's ingenious conception of philosophy as cultured conversation rests upon a nostalgic appeal to the world of men (and women) of letters of decades past. These viewpoints do

⁴⁷ W.V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York, 1969), pp. 50ff.

⁴⁸ Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. x.

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 9, 10.

⁵¹ Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics," p. 264.

not constitute visions, world views or, to use Gilles Deleuze's phrase, "discourses as counter-philosophies"⁵² to the nihilism to which their positions seem to lead. Instead their viewpoints leave postmodern American philosophy hanging in limbo, as a philosophically critical yet culturally lifeless rhetoric mirroring a culture (or civilization) permeated by the scientific ethos, regulated by racist, patriarchal, capitalist norms, and pervaded by debris of decay.

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," *The New Nietzsche*, p. 149.