

Post-structuralism

A Very Short Introduction

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What is Post-structuralism? Who is best able to explain it? A critical outside observer, or a proponent? In the first case you will tend to take it as an authoritative text, being informed of an objective judgement; in the second case you will read it much more critically, reading it, in the words of R.G.Collingwood, not so much for what it says, but for what it means. Clearly the latter is a much more demanding exercise. Rather than entering into a congenial relation with the author, you find yourself in a confrontational one. Rather than taking the word of the author, every single word is in the nature of a provocation.

Now post-modernism or post-structuralism, whatever the designation (I would personally prefer to use the terms interchangeably), is clearly something quite fashionable, yet something that has deep roots. They have been with us since antiquity, then in the form of sophists, who, according to Socrates, tended to get drunk on their own cleverness, as happy to argue one side of the question as the other, just for the fun of it. Clearly this frivolous attitude to truth and the pursuit of the same, naturally was very anathema to someone like Plato, although he often lets Socrates argue in a sophistic manner. Whether this is to be seen as a weakness of Plato, or just another example of his pervasive irony, I will not speculate upon at the moment.

Also Post-Structuralists have strong ties with a classical philosopher such as Nietzsche, who in his writings have anticipated many of the key ideas of this version of modern philosophy. More generally the philosophical movements, in as far as it can be identified as such a one, naturally sits in the tradition of what is usually called the Continental Philosophy, whose heterogeneous nature only finds a common theme in its opposition to the so called Analytic Philosophy of the predominantly Anglo-Saxon tradition. While Continental Philosophy is idealistic in its conception, analytic philosophy tends to be more objective and in a way more materialistic. It is a philosophy of realism, meaning that there is something 'out there' independent of us. In particular analytic philosophers make a distinction between mere epistemology and ontology, a distinction that is moot among post-structuralists, who scoff at the idea of ontology. Furthermore analytic philosophers pride themselves of being clear and precise, sometimes putting far too much emphasis on the latter to the detriment of the former; while post-structuralists seem to take pride in obscurity, not to say opaqueness, claiming that it is a consequence of the density of the text. Of course against such claims it is almost impossible to argue.

Catherine Belsey is a post-structuralist herself. She writes the book in a strident tone, with the shrill conviction of someone who has seen the truth and is out on a missionary assignment. She is a woman who clearly lives on a higher meta plane, who disdains everyone who does not share her general views. This could be rather exasperating if you

would insist in making the kind of contract with her, that a reader usually makes with an author. On the other hand, if you see her as a defendant in a court, stating her case, you may be sufficiently detached not to become irritated. Expecting no agreement, you look out for what she really wants to say, disregarding anything else as so much padding.

First she makes clear that the father of post-structuralism is not Protagoras, nor Nietzsche or any of the other classical philosophers, but the linguist de Saussure. As a linguist he noted that there is no direct way of translating between languages, one is not able to make a one-to-one correspondence between different concepts in different languages, hence he drew the somewhat rash conclusion that languages do not really refer to anything 'out there'. There are no canonical signifiers, each language each culture cuts reality up in different ways. So in fact, is not language all what we have, and to speak about a reality beyond language is meaningless. Language is what makes us human, and objectivity does not go beyond the notion of a shared language. In fact what we refer to as reality is something we create, or is created by language. Whether language is something that has an autonomous existence apart from individuals is not really clearly stated. If so, we would have a situation in which language and as a consequence the world itself has no objective existence outside humanity, but as far as the individual is concerned it has at least an objective existence.

Now this may sound very clever, and I do not deny that it is so. The radical attitude is not devoid of precedents. Berkeley argued famously that it is meaningless to speak about anything beyond what is perceived. It is the perception we have, anything else is redundant. This is clearly a case of Occams Razor being applied to a very large chunk of what we commonly refer to reality. Of course in the end Berkeley has to posit the existence of a God to make sense of it all. Post-structuralists would naturally explain this by his profession, he being a clergyman after all, eventually to rise to the station of a bishop. The post-structuralists take a similar stand, but being atheists, they do not resort to such desperate stratagems.

A common argument against post-modernism is their inconsistency derived from their self-referential banter. After all they are constantly talking about how much cultural pre-conditioning influences not only our categories of thinking but even the results thereof. This is very general and very sweeping, and clearly should apply to themselves. Or do they implicitly assume that they are above that, that they have achieved that state of being above such petty conditions? A kind of intellectual Nirvana, in which they have divested themselves of all false consciousness. As can be seen ironies abound. Now such charges do not worry the post-modernists much, they are clearly beyond such pettiness.

A charitable view of post-structuralists, is that they are full-fledged skeptics. Unlike most other people they have seen through it all, and in addition made visible and hence removable all kinds of blinkers that saddle the less illuminated. The problem with skepticism is that whoever doubts everything on principle makes him or herself very vulnerable to becoming excessively gullible. In a sense everything can be doubted, including doubt itself; but doubt is only justifiable when we have no other choice. As William James remarked, instinctively we are ready to believe everything. Growing up means becoming far more discriminating. Yet beliefs are only given up reluctantly, and should in fact only be done so. To give up a belief should be a case of courage, not one of frivolity. To boast

that you doubt everything, which may be construed as daring and heroic, is in the end an empty boast. In fact if you doubt everything, including your doubt, that very fact becomes an irrefutable fact on which to build, not unlike the sought after fixed point, Archimedes rhetorically asked for, in order to move the earth. Now, such hair-splitting is not within the interest of post-modernists. They are clearly immune to logical attacks, against which they have been successfully inoculated. To fire such barrages, is clearly a waste of shot and ammunition. Yet, they take pride in their unsentimental skepticism, they see it as a sign of sophistication, as well as providing a weapon against which there is no defense. Any attack on the post-modernist attitude is nothing but a confirmation of the same.

du Saussure is in a sense the founding father, at least in retrospect, whether he himself would have approved on that status is quite another matter. He died before his seminal work was published, and had been dead for quite some time before being made into a cult-figure. But a founding father is not enough, there also has to be a succession of clever interpreters who keep the tradition alive and growing. For a movement who prides itself on its anti-authoritarian spirit, it is indeed ironic that it relies so much for its justification on authority figures. The book presents a few of those key players. One is Althusser, a Marxist, who elaborated on Marx ideas about the bourgeois and that values are class-specific. Marx was in a way an early post-structuralist in the sense of pointing to the importance of the place we occupy in the hierarchy of possession, when it comes to our views and interests. But Marx believed after all in a class-less society, in which such extraneous constraints on our knowledge and understanding would have been removed, thus making us truly free. It may be seen as a utopian vision, but at least it is a vision on par with Platonism, with which Marxism has quite a few common points. And after all, that is not so surprising, Plato being the Western philosopher par excellence, anyone seriously studying philosophy cannot help being deeply influenced, consciously or not. Then there is Foucault, who rejected the professed Marxism of Althusser, as yet another one of the rigid belief systems in which people are expected to submit to. To Foucault, knowledge is power. To learn is to submit to someone else's power. Any relation between people is based on power, and also, not to forget, the ability or power if you prefer, to defy it. Power is inevitable, and thus one concludes that by successfully resisting subjugation, you only end up yourself subjugating others. But if power is inevitable, there really is nothing moral about it. To resist power, is just a preliminary to exert it. Yet, clearly some forms of power repression are more onerous than others. It is not that we always look upon with the same kind of principal sympathy on the underdog. There seems to be an unstated desire to free yourself of power relations altogether. To do away with repression once and for all. Yet another instance of a Nirvana to which to aspire.

Foucault also had the commendable desire to pin-point post-structuralism to something more concrete, and in his case it was sexuality. A key theme in modern post-structuralism is the fixation on gender, how it defines and constricts people, how it forces unwarranted and irrelevant identifications. Foucault famously claimed that before the 19th century there were no homosexuals. To identify people with their sexual inclinations and habits, was something unthought about until relatively recent. Of course the old Greeks engaged in homosexual practices as a matter of course, but they had the sense of not making a fuss of it. Foucault himself was passionate about homoerotic acts, and engaging

in it in the early 80's exacted its price. A price beyond linguistic categories and controls, and he died in his late fifties in AIDS. A moral story, some anti-post-modernists may be tempted to proclaim.

But the post-structural fixation on gender remains with us, and in recent decades gender studies have attracted a lot of attention and concomitant government support. Its practitioners are surfing on a very profitable wave, and would be stupid would they not take advantage of it. In particular and hardly surprising excessive attention is paid to the importance of gender in language. But many languages do away with gender distinctions altogether, do such cultures (such as the Finnish?) exhibit a more sexually egalitarian attitude, because not being seduced by language? I doubt it. It points to the basic question, as to how much language forms our thinking, which lies at the heart of the Post-structuralist philosophy. Obviously it would be hard to think without language, but is language use equivalent to thinking?

Another basic component of the history and development of post-structuralism, is the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. He was a well-known anthropologist who conceived of the reasonable quest to find through all human cultures some underlying similarities, in particular when it came to myths and basic cultural traits. His ambition was to reduce the multifarious appearance to a few general principles and templates, which could generate transformations of one to the other. Ultimately his ambition was to reveal the common thread of humanity. The project was called structuralism, intended to lay bare the underlying structure of all belief systems. Of this you may be skeptical, without necessarily being a post-structuralist yourself. As Belsey points out reasonably, what would be the ultimate point? Once this had been achieved, would it mean that human culture had once and for all been explained, and we could go on the other and better things? No, instead, *vive la difference*. What is interesting about the variety of human cultures is in what way they differ. This sounds reasonable and sympathetic, but cannot be much more than a half-truth. After all it is the very similarity of human cultures that makes their differences so exciting. As William James has remarked, what provokes our curiosity is not the outlandish, but that what we know well and its various modifications. James referred to the natives of Hawaii, who were far more intrigued by the rowboats that Cook used as life-boats, than his ships. The former were close to their own experience, while the latter was to different from anything they were familiar with. One may argue that the same goes for imagination, which stands in an intimate relation to curiosity. Your imagination is most effectively provoked when you are labouring under severe constraints, usually in a situation in which you are very familiar. As the opponent of Lévi-Strauss Belsey puts Barthes, another of the post-structural icons, and who is credited for discrediting the inflated claims of the structuralists in his 'Mythologies'. Barthes is also known for the slogan 'Death of the Author', claiming that a text is in fact independent of its author, who has no say on its ultimate meaning. This makes sense in view of the fact that every person is conditioned by his or her cultural constraints and congenitally unable to work out all their various implications. The author does not give meaning to a text, the reader does, and hence there are in effect as many meanings as there are readers, one reader's meaning not being superior to that of another one. And this is again a charge against which there is no argument possible.

The emphasis on multi-culturalism is another common theme in modern post-structuralism. The idea that all cultures are equally valid and valuable, and to assert otherwise is to be guilty of racist repression. This is a theme that has become particularly wedded to the notion of political correctness, against no one can rebel unless on pain of ostracism. It has in particular been wedded to the quest of anti-colonialism, a quest that has become particularly aggressive once colonialism per se, as a political institution has been dismantled. One may also remark that the variety of human cultures owes something to mutual hostility and isolation. The very forces that created the variety are seen as their main foes. But of course this is a digression, suffices it just to remark, that the individual who strives for political correctness, nowadays finds himself in a dilemma, being pulled in opposite way by cultural tolerance and islamophobia, the latter remarkably almost being widely acceptable. Such dilemmas are bound to raise nothing but glee in the ostensible independent observer.

Then there is Lacan, who used post-structuralism, in an admittedly creative way, to reinvigorate and reassess Freudianism. He was claiming that there was nevertheless a gap left by language, that there is in fact nature that exists outside it, and to which language has no claim. But this gap is nevertheless felt by the individual through desire. Desire is deeper than its mere manifestations. Desire is about desiring something that is inheritantly inaccessible. Desire is not just erotic longing, or longing for knowledge, the two being inextricably connected, it is even more fundamental. This is elegant, and it is poetic, and I deplore that there is not more of this in post-structuralism. It does not have to be true in any factual sense, it can be inspiring nevertheless.

Finally there is Derrida. Maybe the quintessential post-structuralist. What does he stand for? Impossible to pin down, and that is the whole point. You associated him with de-constructionism, a vague pliable concept that has seduced countless students and undercut departments of literary studies all over the States. Derrida is hard to understand, the author concedes, but there is a reason for this, he is so erudite, he makes so many associations, assuming that his readers are almost equally erudite. He is also wordy and repetitive she admits, because his thoughts are so subtle and his mind so precise, that he struggles to put them in print. More remarkably she confesses that what in the master is commendable can appear a bit painful in the writings of his disciples and emulators. Clearly Derrida is Derrida and tolerates no growth nearby but requires splendid isolation.

What to make of it all? It is of course rather clever, that sophists are clever was not even denied by Plato. In fact a bit too clever by half. It is thought fed on itself without exterior constraints. Such an activity is of course very seductive and heady. It is in fact analogous to another phenomenon, this one in the so called world of nature - I am thinking of tumors. Tumors are characterized by unconstrained growth, meeting no obstacles. The post-structural thinker seldom encounter any obstacle in his thought, be they of an empirical or logical nature, In fact the post-structural thinker has moved beyond the categories of the synthetic and the analytic. The only kind of stricture he may encounter is a social one. His game is one of social up-manship and his attitude towards philosophy and knowledge is strangely reminiscent of the rules that govern social interaction. Truth in society is not an issue, the appearance of it is. In social relations we are governed by power and duplicity, trying to get the upper hand. Consensus is

important, but as an expedience rather than a permanent position. The dangers of the growing tumor has been noticed and deplored. Russell rallied against it, seeing with horror and disappointment at the latter Wittgenstein, who had turned philosophy into a party-game. Gellner wrote a diatribe against the decline of philosophy, even of the analytic variety in its recent emphasis on language. Coolingwood deplored the fact that philosophy no longer gave any moral guidance to the young. He was thinking in the 20's and 30's on the growing predominance of analytic philosophy and its narrowing technical focus. What had he made of post-structuralism? Although the post-structuralists may approve of his seemingly post-modernist conception of history, as the reconstruction of the past into the present. Of course, just like psycho-analysis in the past, post-structuralist have arguments which allow no rebuttals. Russell, we may be told, was simply a Victorian. This, of course, says it all. The very word 'Victorianism' conjures up naive faith in progress, economical stratification, class-repression, prudence and sexual inhibition and hypocrisy. Russell is thereby defrocked and made into an old opinionated maid. No doubt that Gellner and Coolingwood may be disposed of in similar ways.

Classical western philosophy is about ontology, of trying to go beyond the merely social and human, to so to speak gaze and ponder the starry sky above us. Post-structuralism is making a virtue of epistemological impotence, forever foresaking the ambitions of reaching the stars. From many points of views this pragmatic approach has its advantages. It is clever and it is safe and it is seductive to those to whom thought is an activity on par with defecation.

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