

Postmodernism- Philosophical and Historical Roots 3 (Disc 1)

By Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard:

...And so they drew the conclusion that there were not that these identities did not exist that there was a variety that there was a certain kind of freedom and the basic thing to do was to train yourself how to navigate through the world. Basically the Sophocles was teachers in. Well out here in Southern California we have personal trainers you know what a personal trainer is. The safest was a kind of personal trainer except they also taught you how to speak how to win cases at court how to get along with people and in other words they taught you politics. And they said in essence when you go into the court you're going to be doing rhetoric and politics forget about logic and objective truth. Because whatever comes out of that court is it. There are very few things new under the sun. [inaudible comment] That actually they were they really were.

Except they had a pretty elaborate theory about and it was a kind of localism and they attacked these universal essays essences and this is where Socrates and Plato and Aristotle come back in and for all practical purposes they won the argument historically they won the argument and then that was buttressed by the rise of Christendom in a few centuries. Because when Christendom came in and matched up with essentially platonic thought with various variations that were injected by other movements from Greek thought there was an almost perfect match. And scholars of this time will tell you if you read the the ancient apology and others you will sense that fundamentally Greek thought which dominated the ancient world around the

Mediterranean looked at Christian Christianity and said yes this is this is the answer to our problems. So however neatly that's to be done we get this combination which emphasizes absolute fixed internal structures that express themselves in the institutions of the church. And of course this is where we begin to have troubles. As the church becomes a massive bureaucracy it begins to sponsor cosmological views of various kinds. Whether it did or not of course is subject to scholarly debate. But the idea that there are no human beings outside of the Mediterranean area of Europe. The idea that the Earth might be flat and all that sort of thing is attributed to this authority system which then began to be proven wrong as more seriously as the economic system of Europe developed. And the rise of capitalism began to make possibilities that had not existed earlier there was a drive towards freedom. And it's pretty well documented that Ockham pulls together a number of tendencies that existed long before him which insisted on the on the right of the individual and the authority of the individual against the institution or the state or if you wish the essence.

So Ockham is primarily known for nominalism. And nominalism is the view that all that exists is the individual. And in Ockham himself and Nicholas of Autrecourt and others roughly of this period that nominalism is associated with the beginnings of empiricism. Because the individual turns out to be that which a sense perceptible. And they begin to use empiricism. They had theories to the effect for example. Following Aristotelian science to the effect that what when you have a barge moving you pulling the oars and making moving then you stop pulling the oars. What happens the barge keeps moving. And so they had these theories based on things like nature abhors a vacuum and said well you've got the barge moving and as it pushes forward it pushes the air around and the air comes in the back and keeps pushing the barge. So the barge keeps moving because technically the barge should stop right. On Aristotelian physics. Then

they begin to notice things like well you know if you're standing on the back of the barge you don't feel any wind pushing on you. And what's that an appeal to? Experience. Experience and you can replicate other things like that they begin to trust experience. Now this sounds strange to us perhaps but it is an astonishing sort of thing if you've lived in a world where you trust authority and. [gap in recording] Now if you if you go from here to Iraq or Iran or Saudi Arabia and try to understand how those people behave you have to remember they don't think the same thing about experience that we do. And so this is not by any means an issue that we're done with in world history.

In any case what we see now the rise of nominalism the concentration on sense perceptible bodies. Galilean physics arises in that context. Galilean physics is essentially physics for sense perceptible bodies and their motions. Adamistically separated Descartes provides a huge boost with his Analytic geometry. What is analytic geometry basically I mean from the viewpoint of its invention it is the transferal of of motions and space curves lines and so on into mathematical formulas so that you can write in terms of numbers right a curve in terms of numbers then your operations on those numbers. [inaudible] turns out to give you something in reality. You know you just work on those numbers and if it if those numbers represent that curve you can tell where that body is moving at a certain rate down there. And then of course Pascal and Newton and Lineman's perfect the calculus of that later on this is very powerful stuff. And.

When we have to choose later on between mathematical theories and representations in terms of sense perceptions and this happens in the 1890's. In physics. When you have to choose. We say let the sensible world go we will take the mathematical theory. But in that intervening period you have two tests of reality. Mathematization and sense perception. Those are two unstably related tests of reality. And of course they fit all these standards about logic and

universality and all of that. So now one of the side effects of this that's been commented on endlessly is that the objective world is stripped of all qualities which are not mathematically formable. The distinction in Locke and you have it mentioned in the in the little selection I gave you there in the back between primary and secondary quantities. It's a Galilean distinction but it becomes very meaningful in law. Galileo. You find him observing things like well you know in a world where there were no armpits and noses there would be no tickles. Tickles don't lie about on feathers. You have to have armpits and noses and bottoms of feet to get tickled. So where do tickle wind up well tickles wind up in the minds of people. They work. Things happen in the body and a tickle appears in the mind. Color turns out to be the same thing. An odor. All of the so-called secondary qualities get shifted into the mind.

This is a huge step on the way to the representationalism that we were talking about. Because certainly the world we think we know about is a world where the colors look like they're out there right. Looks like the colors in that shirt. Well now I'm told it can't be in the shirt. Must be in my mind. See that's just another little chink in the wall of representationalism that's going to shut me off. And someone might say well what about beauty is beauty on the painting on the face? Well obviously not. And. Of course good. Doesn't stand a chance in the end. So you have to you have to understand where this is all tending of course. Alfred North Whitehead for example in his book Science and the modern world I don't know how interested you are in following up on these things. Edwin Burt metaphysical foundations of modern science. These are all excellent sources for studying how this how this goes. Basically you wind up with the world which is simply still has the essences but is not a world that anyone could recognize.

Now. Just quickly touching on page 8 with what we've already talked about Sun and the significance of it. I mentioned secondary qualities values and of course the self disappears also

now. Because the self is not mathematizable and it is not sense perceptible. Mr. Watson and Mr. Skinner- [gap in recording] Record with us about that and you talk about the some vocal motions of the musculature of the chest and identify that with thought and all of that all a good cause but it's pretty hopeless. All in a good cause they thought. So now what we have is basically the things that matter most to human beings disappear from the realm of knowledge. They disappear from the realm of knowledge. And the I've mentioned here Kant's statement in the opening to the second edition of the critique of pure reason. I must destroy knowledge to make room for faith. It's almost impossible to convey what he meant by those words to anyone without a long discussion which I'm not going to indulge in unless you just ask for it.

But basically what he meant was I must recognize the limitations of scientific knowledge in order for us to have room to live. We cannot live by scientific knowledge as it has come down his his great model was Newton of course. Now what do you do for Newt, with Newtonian mechanics when you're trying to decide how to educate your children or invest your surplus funds. Not much. And so another response to this somewhat before Kant and Rousseau is the rise of romanticism where it will becomes the Supreme point of reference. Now this is actually a revival of what was called voluntarism in the times of Descartes and earlier on in the Times of [inaudible] the idea that everything is the way it is because it is willed. Now it may be God's will. And of course in romanticism the human will becomes a cosmic force. Becomes a cosmic force. And the identification of the human will over soul, the inroads of Orientalism that begins to happen. We see it in people like Emerson for example Schopenhauer and others. All with the emphasis upon the unity of everything into the great one.

And this of course turns out to be over soul as Emerson calls it and for Rousseau the dominance of the will the idea that all evil comes from institutions not from inside the individual

that the will is a source of pure right and goodness. And. Then Kant picking up that element of will and Rousseau to make it as a basis for his own ethics. So there is a complaint to an objection a response to the loss of the self of values and that entire sort of thing and out of that comes the renewed emphasis upon freedom. We don't know quite what to do with it in the way of knowledge but still we feel like we've got to have it in order to live with it. And this emphasis Virginia was mentioning that what I had said about fundamentalism and freedom a moment ago in modernity needed a little clarification and freedom and control are both values of modernity. But when the chips are down. Freedom pays. And control is the upper. Is the upper it is the higher value in modernity.

So for example you have all that stuff about tacit consent in Locke, and his political theory. That is laying down a condition for control. In other words when are you obliged to obey the state? Well if you have tacitly consented that turns out to be almost anything that you could, you could think of like owning property or anything of that sort. And in short you've tacitly consented to government's control over you if you haven't left the country. But see that's a conflict between freedom and control and Locke of course was very sensitive to the many experiments that went on the diggers and the rest of them in England you know the conflict to freedom and authority in his own time. Now a word or two about Hegel he we have to say a little something about him because you see he's you remember that line I drew here between causation over here and logic or logic over here. He is conscious of the bind between those uh the bind between those for human life. [gap in recording]Hume himself was conscious of it. Hume recognized in official philosophical gobbledegook the distinction between synthetic propositions and analytic propositions. Analytic propositions fall inside of logic synthetic propositions fall inside of causation and and what this really meant for Hume was that there were no necessary

truths about reality. All truths about reality are contingent all necessary truths are not about reality.

So you have this continuing problem between causation sense perception the physical the logical the mental and then there is life and the realization that that life does not move by either one of these alone. So just a word or two about Hegel because in the history of the discussion you have to see Hegel's- Hegel as an attempt to save reason. By redefining it. To save logic by redefining it. And this comes in the form of what he calls dialectic. And I think you will all have heard this language out thesis synthesis antithesis, syn- thesis antithesis synthesis and so on. Basically what Hegel was saying is if you think hard enough about anything. No matter how you can can how you conceive of it, you will be driven to see its relationship to something other than itself. That is nothing but a flat denial of Adamism. If you think about anything and you try to treat it as the whole truth the whole reality you will find you cannot do it. You will be driven to something other than itself. That will be your antithesis.

Then when you look at the other and the thing you started with together, you will realize that you have a new totality. Which is their synthesis. And you get illustrations of this supposedly from logic where you start with being being means anything that you can mention a spoon red patch of a sensation a podium a person or anything of that sort and you just try to look at it and you will always be forced to consider what is other than it in order to conceptualize it because things don't exist in isolation from everything else. You'll never find anything like that. And then from being to what he fancifully calls nothing. The other. You get something nothing becoming. That's his fanciful idea. So you get a larger whole which is itself on the move toward something else. Now he applies that in history. Of course those most convincing cases are to his movements in history to social structures. The famous slave master paradigm that he uses that if

you have a slave. You've got to have a master if you have a master. You've got to have a slave start on either side and pretty soon you will find that the master by depending on the slave becomes enslaved to the slave and is therefore the slave and not the master and the slave has become the master. Or start at the other side the slave starts out as a slave. Because they are slaves. They're the ones who have to be capable and competent and by becoming capable and competent they become the master.

So the dialectic of slave and master is another is perhaps his most well-known illustration of the sort of. Well it perhaps is rather fanciful but then you recognize all of you recognize I'm sure that when you get to this level of abstraction you're pretty desperate shape for something to go on. And so you can it can be made to sound very convincing except when you try to draw up all of the little triads that are supposed to constitute reality and then it looks like a real mess but it obviously has been convincing to many people such as the Marxists. And Marx by reinterpreting Hegel and making the movement of history not just thinking but economic processes. Of course the slave master dialectic in the structure of class warfare is fundamental to the Marxist interpretation of history all along. So he's supposed to be able to explain you know how you get capitalism out of feudalism and then how you get socialism out of capitalism and how you get communism out of socialism and so on by that dialectical process now it isn't easy to understand how history works. So any almost any convincing theory looks pretty good. And of course Christianity has a theory about how history works too but the modern mindset is, and it's time to inject this thought.

The modern mindset is essentially a godless mindset. Deism is the appropriate expression of the modern mindset. And why is that. It is precisely on the point of control. When you admit God, you are abandoning control from the human point of view. And regardless of the fact that

many of these great thinkers were devout Christians. I'm not calling that into question. I'm talking about the inherent tendency of the modern mind. When you when you admit God you have abandoned the project of human control. God means nothing unless it means he's in control. Of course you know the principle of all idolatry is I'm in control of God. But that is rumored not to work too well. [inaudible question] Which. To control. Oh I agree absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. It is a form of idolatry. It is a form of idolatry.

Now. So. That's the meaning of Jesus's statement about the fellow who had the one demon cast out of him. And he went out and roamed around and came back and found the place clean and swept and brought back seven or devils devils worse than he was moved in. That's a story about the Jewish nation getting rid of idolatry. And being moved in by legalism. That's what that story is about. Look at its context and see that I know it's absolutely right. I mean to put human control in the ultimate position is the enduring form of human ideology. So now what I'm really saying is you have to recognize how desperate the project gets. And before you can appreciate why dialectic got such a hearing.

And now I've given this quote from Lenin here because I want you to see the extent to which they were prepared to take this and this was this is a Marxist reading of course of Hegel's principle but here is the fundamental proposition of Marxian dialectics is that all boundaries in nature and society are mobile. That there is not a single phenomenon which cannot under certain conditions will be transformed into its opposite. You see that is constructivism in an extreme form. You construct reality. History constructs it. Individuals don't. Transcendental egos don't like Kant had it. This is a historical process. It is on the march all sorts of tacit things here it is against evil. It is against oppression because the the enduring of the enduring Marxist value is always paradoxically freedom.

That's what history is about that part of Hegel they agreed. It's about freedom. And how do you get freedom. Get rid of oppression. How do you get rid of oppression by putting the means of production in the hands of the people? Whatever that means. Once you do that you automatically, now then Rousseau steps because Marxian Marxism is fundamentally Rousseauian and Rousseau steps in and says well no man is born free and everybody's in chains. Just get rid of them chains and baby you got it right. So that's the Marxist idea. OK. So just in sum the bottom of 80- of page 8. Thus for the modern there is still nature even if hidden by our representations of it. But the 19th century uses history dialectic to destroy nature. Now this is why in the 19th century Darwinism is such a big thing. Darwinism was not such a big thing because of the Bible. Darwinism was such a big thing because it was the first time you could mount a successful attack against Aristotelianism. And very few people understand this.

Speaker 2:

Against the notion of essences.

Dallas Willard:

Against the notion of fixed essences Marx was thrilled when he read Darwin. And he was thrilled because he understood this meant the possibility of unlimited change. And he also was one of those people who thought that Darwin's findings had something to do with the teleological argument for the existence of God which was a widely shared mistake. But there it is. OK. Now then. By the time you get to the end of the 19th century in Nietzsche. You have a man who is

nauseated with the attempts the bogus attempts to save reason. And what he just looks at all this dialectical stuff he listens to the philosophers in the universities around him supporting their little. Philosophical ideas. And what he essentially says is. And now this is a fundamental postmodern root.

But he essentially says all these people believe what they believe because they've been raised the way they've been raised. They've been enculturated in a certain way. Their morals the standards of logic everything is simply an expression of force under the guise of reason. It's an expression of force under the guise of reason. The fundamental category in Nietzsche is taken from Schopenhauer. It is what we call the will to power. Nietzsche says. And here also Darwin is influential in nature. It's amazing what mileage has gotten out of Darwin. You know you have this sense of boy the world was ready for this one but Nietzsche looked at Darwin what he saw was power. Says.

Now then he just applies it to moral systems to art forms. To institutions organizations of the Church of academies of governments and he says one thing will to power. And all the rest of this stuff is just rationalization. And he was relentless in his critiques of academics and philosophers precisely on the point that he found them capable of making any lie you please appear as the truth. And he just relentlessly attacked them. And that's why he has so many things about being a psychologist now in a very different sense than we're used to. And if you actually observe the thinking of people. You will be nauseated by the bad faith. The hokey reasoning. That they cook up. To support their views. And they all pass it off to one another and they all sort of sit there and they co-operate. They allow one another to do this and they all know what they're doing right. Now. He had a very dim view of it and in and out of it there are a lot of substances there's no doubt about that.

Of course Mark's now chimes in as we go into the 20th century with his view that the ideational structure of a society no matter what is an expression of the economic realities in that society the distribution of power. So they do fit together and then Freud comes along with the idea that that reason as it appears in our conscious mind is simply a circus that is put on by the unconscious mind to keep us going in one direction or another that we don't understand. So the conscious reason so you see knowledge really gets a beating and we're ready for something. I have a comment about Kierkegaard on the next page but I won't say anything about them. You want to make a comment or two about this now. I said anything you want to respond to or shall I just finish up this little history here. And. [inaudible comment] Sure.

Right. Well of course you always you always get a version of Freud like no one I think would doubt that Lacan finds Freud and you know he's one of ours. The trouble is of course postmodernism means so many things as you know yourself and so you'd still find a lot of people in literary theory for example I know a lot of people in literary theory. Yeah but I mean I'm just saying I know a lot who actually do think Freud is very illuminating for the interpretation of literature and along the lines of postmodernist thinking in other words that what you really have to go for are the the manifestations of the subconscious and it's drives. In. [inaudible comment] Yeah. And Deleuze and the whole discussion of desire that emerges in that group of French thinkers. So. I mean you're right to; some people could care less about Freud. Foucault for example Derrida, they don't think it's very interesting.

So Kierkegaard also some people would quarrel with that but I mean he really is a darling of postmodernism for many people who don't know that he is. And it's interesting how that one of the one of the threads that is pulled in the evangelical scheme is an essentially Kierkegaardian one with the leap of faith stuff. Now they don't normally understand what he was saying which

was that you do not make decisions by reason. That reason and knowledge is one thing and decision is another. But still he's thought to be interesting. OK. Well the final leap is the total linguist, linguisticization of consciousness. This is the contribution of Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is rooted in the debacle of introspective knowledge and the failure to defeat skepticism. In the middle or the first second quarter of this century. The endless struggle to skepticism in Western philosophy were just becoming so burdensome. And Russell's attempts to handle it and Moore and a few others by logical constructions on the contents of your mind getting out of the world of representations of the real world by means of some sort of logical construction were widely regarded as Oh yes I need to give you the I was going to mention this in connection with Nietzsche. FH Bradley and the opening of his great book appearance and reality which dominated English and American philosophy for 15, 20 years. Has these little these little very Nietzschean sorts of sayings. One is where everything is rotten it is a man's work to cry stinking fish. And the other one is metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we already believe on instinct. See that's very Nietzsche.

And in fact Bradley's whole book is a buildup to a kind of agnosticism just look we have no idea what reality is like. We just. We can't. In fact the one thing he claims to know is that reality is the sort of thing which could not possibly be grasped in a judgment. Or a sentence if you wish. Well in any case. Secondly the when the when the with the rise of philosophical journals in this country and England and in Europe. In the in the 1880s, 1890s it was thought that philosophy and psychology were the same thing. So the Journal of Philosophy still published or Columbia if you go back read the old, it's the journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and scientific method. The famous journal Mind in England is you go back and read the old ones it's a journal of psychology and philosophy. They thought it was the same thing. Now what happened was that

in the early in the 20th century people got so sick of all of the descriptions of experience and the mind and the incapacity to come to agreement. You remember I used the case of Locke saying just look look in yourself well they'd been doing that ever since Locke and they couldn't agree on what they've found. And so this is the point at which introspection gets a very bad name. And you I'm sure if you're in psychology you know how that goes.

So there is a turn away from the idea that you can't know anything about your mind by direct observation and of course this is associated the fact that if you did know it that wouldn't allow you to know anything about what's outside of your mind because of the skepticism was still there. Now. By the way incorporated is spelled with an I I see what Wittgenstein in his so-called private language is really anti private language jargon you will always see it mentioned as the private language argument but it's the anti-private language argument it's an argument against the possibility of a private language but Wittgenstein does is tacitly without arguing for it identifies consciousness with verbalization. Tacitly. Now you know the strongest philosophical arguments are the ones you don't even state. That's always true. In terms of rhetorical force at least. You don't even state them. He never argued for the identity of consciousness with verbalization, he assumed it. And he said you cannot have verbalization except in a community that provides rules for the words.

So with consciousness as verbalization you're already out of the mind, right? The community is given with the power to know. Skepticism is defeated. All there is is the world. And this is an incredibly powerful and significant kind of argument. I've used the phrase you- no wrong makes a right what he means to say is if we're not using terms under rules that could allow us to be wrong, we can't even be right. And if language were private. There would be no general rules, which would allow us to be wrong because then like Humpty Dumpty if I want to wear my

tie around my neck I can wear it there if I want to wait around my waist I can wear it and Humpty Dumpty says I use my words the way I want to. You remember Humpty Dumpty. I use it the way I want to. See that idea, Wittgenstein says if consciousness were private that would be true. That isn't true. Consciousness is not private. [inaudible question]Remind me. JP. Yeah. Because I don't it's been a long time since I looked at [inaudible] book. Yeah. But you'll have to remind me of it because I haven't been five years since I looked at that. I think you're a vitconsinian. You know you are well I do think those cases can be interestingly worked on but I understand what you're saying.

Now the next stage here is that there is no super language beyond concrete languages actually spoken. This comes out of Wittgenstein's experiments with what Russell and others call an ideal language. An ideal language was not a language; it was a logical schema which all meaningful languages were supposed to conform. And when Wittgenstein tells us that there is no super language beyond the concrete languages which we actually speak. What he is really saying is look language is something you speak. Languages exist in a community. And there is no encompassing community. There is no encompassing discussion. In which I could come down on religion on art on ethics on physics and measure them all and say well I mean there's these standards and this one comes up to about here and that one comes up through there and this doesn't come up with all that's just meaningless balderdash. Metaphysics and religion. Ethics on some account.

So this is a tremendously important development and it does retain the one great foundation of modernism namely nominalism. With some dissenters such as Chomsky those of you who read in linguistics will know what that means. Alright. So really when you complete that history folks postmodernism is in place if you accept what has developed as I have described

the developments here. If you accept that, you have bought modernism, postmodernism. If you don't buy it you at least I think will understand it pretty well. Now, uh I should say that you will find people like like Griffin in this book. He actually reverts to a kind of Hegelianism. So in response to this point about nominalism. Holism that word holism and organismism which are often associated with post-modern thinking is not exactly nominalist. They don't exactly believe the only thing is. Individuals such as you or me more encompassing kinds of individuals. Basketball teams are not reducible to individual players. Families are not reducible to individual members. Countries are not reducible and so so. Take that, maybe you should just add there under nominalism well, but remember organismism and holism.

Now again if you want to just refer to this book as a case in point and what you do. What you see is when you begin to look at books like this. Or like Houston Smith's beyond the post-modern world you begin to see the presence of what we have more or less endearingly learned to call New Age. And that comes in the association with organismism and holism. Of course has deep ties to the ecological movement anti-pollution antiwar and so on. And both of these books you will see they give you their very readable and their very nice introduction for the kind of sort of applied fast and loose postmodernism which is widely enjoyed. They don't worry too much about many of the scholarly points that we've been making. They're apt to look at someone like Friedrich Kapra the Dao of Physics and think well this since this is true and this guy is a physicist let it rip man you know.

And of course if they know a little bit about people like Bradley and Schopenhauer or even Kant in in the wide reaches of his thinking they know they've got a lot of company Hegel you know. Because positivism empiricism modernism in that form that comes up through Hume and one side of Kant and in John Stuart Mill and people of that sort. And still existed in this

country and many people like to think of themselves as scientific philosophers. It has its attractions but it does little for life. And that is the appeal. The enduring appeal of postmodern thought is, it really as I said says get on with your business take life seriously. Don't worry about whether or not you can sense perceived or fitted into a theory of some sort. Just see what interesting things you can go what can you make now when you when you come down to this book right at the end you will find this is Leotard postmodern the postmodern condition a report on knowledge is actually written for a university president Toronto or Montreal or someplace like that. Some university president commissioned this guy to write a report on knowledge. Very interesting idea that a university president would do that goes back to what I said at the outset. This is supposed to be our business. Maybe we ought to know what knowledge is and so he got he took that seriously.

And what you will find down to the end is that the only thing that counts in knowledge today is the number of tensions and difficulties it sets up to be some. The number of tensions and difficulties it sets up to the solved. Leotard starts out with the old fashioned idea that there ought to be sort of truth and that you ought to be able to support your scientific theories because they're true. Then he realizes that most scientific theories cannot be and are not in fact supported that way. That for example if you want to know why Niels Bohr's theory is true or some other physicists it nearly always comes in the form of a story. The Double Helix beautiful story. Now suppose you just set out to try to prove the double helix theory is true. You would really have a hard time. So what you get instead is a convincing story. And the power, then he talks about how scientific theories must have the power to effectually solve problems.

[End of Disc 1]