

J. L. SCHELLENBERG  
MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

A SHALLOW SPECIES IN DEEP TIME:  
MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND OUR PLACE  
IN THE POTENTIAL HISTORY OF INQUIRY

**M**y title will, I hope, do two things for me in this paper: one, tell you that I am approaching the topics of this special issue at a very general level indeed (where no distinction between philosophy and philosophy of religion can be observed but full application to the latter is nonetheless assured), and two, give you so strong and jolting a sense of the presumption and prematurity of both the optimism of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism that the whole task of the paper will be accomplished at a stroke. I have been advised, however, that at least the second of these hopes may itself be over-optimistic, so I've decided to put some text under my title.

As might be expected, analytic philosophy is in this paper associated with modernism and continental philosophy with postmodernism. But the overlaps are not exact; there are plenty of outliers in both philosophical categories. And certainly those categories are themselves not perfectly sharp or always illuminating. However the connections I will be relying on are, I think, sufficiently deep and genuine for there to be a substantial trickle-down effect from what I have to say about modernism and postmodernism to the forms of philosophy under discussion in this special issue. As for the latter's central topic: it may, by now, be clear that I am approaching things at the meta-level – not so much “mashing up” material from the two forms of philosophy as reflecting on a new reason for saying that it might be profitable to do so.

One objection should be dealt with right away. It is generated by a feature of this paper that may seem to bias and unbalance our discussion from the start: namely, the emphasis on “deep time,” which is grounded in modern sciences such as geology and astronomy and thus may seem tilted in a rather pronounced fashion toward modernism. Postmodernism is not exactly known for its embrace of modern science – or, at any rate, of modern science understood as generating clear and objective results about a real world independent of our worldly conceptions.

But I think the emphasis on deep time may instead be conducive to some provocative and potentially fruitful discussion among modernists and postmodernists (analytics and continentals), and this for the following reasons. (1) The only results of modern science to which I shall appeal are ones with the support of a consensus among scientists, which is, I take it, the sort of thing that at any rate the more circumspect and moderate postmodernist will not wish to deny outright. In any case, all I shall need is that what scientists are saying about a past and potential future on this planet measured in billions of years cannot be ruled out as false in the same way that the germ theory of disease cannot be

ruled out as false—this, in conjunction with an emphasis on intellectual humility that ought to be acceptable to both camps. (2) These results of modern science, especially those concerning the deep future and our place in time, which modernists and analytics will naturally accept when forced to think about them, are nonetheless neglected in their midst. They are also results that, upon reflection, *should give modernists a good deal more patience with the style and approach of much postmodern continental philosophy*. Thus, what seems initially unbalanced will be rebalanced by the end.

In short, modernists, neglecting what their own emphasis on science might have told them, have tried to go too far too fast, hoping to reach metaphysically realist objectives of comprehensive understanding in short order and by certain presently available means alone. Postmodernists, for their part, have confused present with permanent failure when critiquing modernism's objectives and too swiftly have given up on the modernist enterprise instead of seeing themselves as possibly contributing some of the means required for its success. A little humility should turn things around and make the modernists more pessimistic (at least in the short run) and the postmodernists more optimistic (at least when they contemplate the long run), and make both more willing to learn from each other. These are my themes.

#### DEEP TIME

Moving beyond introduction, the first thing we need to do is to sketch in broad strokes the relevant scientific results concerning time. This will mostly be a reminder, since these things are well known. What makes them significant nonetheless is our propensity, especially where they concern the future, to ignore them or underestimate them: the latter because our brain has a hard time imagining what the big numbers (billions of years) are trying to tell us; the former because evolution has made us much more concerned about immediate challenges and opportunities than about more distant ones—and moreover because biological and cultural evolution have conspired to make us somewhat self-preoccupied. It is a shocking idea that the world could get along—and someday may get along—entirely without our species!<sup>1</sup>

Now the evolutionary past gets a good deal of attention, and this also in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> But when was the last time you saw a philosophy paper about the consequences of the deep future and our place in scientific time? So let's get better acquainted with these things. *Homo sapiens*, we are told by science, arose roughly 200,000 years ago among other hominins that have left fossil evidence of their existence behind. By around 50,000 years ago our species had become dominant and generated signs of language and religion. And what is called "civilization" arose between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these matters, see my *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Take, for example, the work of Philip Kitcher as reflected in his recent book *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), or the flurry of discussion set off by Sharon Street's paper, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006), 109-166, or for that matter—in the philosophy of religion—the discussion of Alvin Plantinga's well-known evolutionary argument against naturalism.

For current members of *H. sapiens* these seem like vast periods of time, since we customarily experience time in days, months, and years. Even a century is a very long period of time by human reckoning. Nevertheless, we have learned within the last century or so about the millions of centuries that preceded *H. sapiens*—about what is called the deep past; the history of evolution on our planet whose processes are enormously slow and whose significant events are measured not on human but on geological timescales, ones comfortable with millions and billions of years. So we are starting to get a feel for how recently our species arose and the small part it has so far played in the drama of evolution.

But that's all looking *back*. And scanning only from the deep past through to the present can give one a false impression as to our place in the temporal scheme of things. We are in many ways the most impressive beings evolution has yet thrown up. We are *it!* But now continue the temporal scan into the future and think about how much *more* life the planet may see in the billion years or so before the gradually increasing heat of the Sun renders it (the planet) uninhabitable.

This is actually quite hard to do, in part because the future is the land of the “not yet,” without anything like artifacts or fossils to aid the imagination, and in part because of our self-preoccupation and difficulty with big numbers, mentioned earlier. What has happened already and especially what is happening right now is liable to bulk large in any such mental picture, with the future a grey haze. So we need to work a little harder than we are accustomed to doing in these precincts.

It may help to consider that a 10,000-year period, an amount of time that might on a very generous estimate be taken to represent how much time rational inquiry has had so far on our planet, will pass *one hundred thousand times* before the billion-year marker is reached. Thinking about this properly can induce a kind of temporal vertigo. So pull back and think only about how much longer our species will have to exercise its big brain if it survives as long as Earthly mammals do on average, that is to say for a million years. That's five times as long as *H. sapiens* has been around already, and only eighty 10,000 year periods would be required to fill the time remaining. Only eighty! Even with these smaller and perhaps more comprehensible numbers, and assuming quite questionably that intelligence will permanently pass with us, we have to say that we are at the very beginning of the beginning of the potential lifespan of intelligence on our planet, for our inquiries have covered only a bit more than 1% of the distance intelligence may yet travel through time.

Of course, whether we're working with the idea of a million or a billion years for intelligence to develop further in the future, you may be inclined to say that this is all a bit unrealistic. Three points develop this thought. (1) Intelligence won't survive anywhere near as long as that; after all, we're already at the brink of doing ourselves in, with just a few thousand years under our belts. (2) Even if intelligence survives for as long as that, who's to say that it will improve, either in its basic capacities or its results? (3) Indeed, the notion of improvement presupposes the idea of *progressive evolution*, which has long since been debunked.

But, responding in reverse order, if anything has been debunked, it is the idea of some *inherent intellectual teleology* in evolution. It's quite consistent with the denial of any such thing to say that, quite contingently and even luckily, with much backsliding and many long periods of intellectual sterility as well as plenty of dead ends, the *overall picture* in the history of evolution is one with a lot more intellectual firepower at the end than at the beginning. Who's to say that the same will not be true of the overall picture one billion years or one million years hence? But is this sort of *epistemic possibility* (our inability justifiably to deny the claim in question) really enough here? (2) can be seen as questioning this. However the answer to (2) is that it *is* enough: the optimism of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism, are deflated with an epistemic possibility alone, as we will see. And as for (1): it may indeed be that this very different sort of pessimism, pessimism about our survival, will turn out to be correct, but no one is justified today in *believing* it correct. Here too there is an epistemic possibility on each side. This is because there are simply too many factors involved, some of them presently unknown to us, to say with any confidence that the various "existential risks" faced by the species, such as destruction by an enormous asteroid or the eruption of supervolcanoes, either *will* or *will not* be navigated safely. And it is worth thinking carefully about how difficult it would be for disasters to bring a complete end to human life. Certainly something like global warming alone isn't likely to do it. Our imaginations are liable to fail us here too, but if we work at it, we should get a glimmer of the millions of branchings on any relevant "decision tree" starting from the present. Nature will make the "decisions" and a billion years will unfold, but it would be Hubris, with a capital 'H', to suggest that we know or have justified beliefs specifying what line of events—or even what events along that line relevant to our survival—will finally appear.

So it begs to be repeated that we are at the very beginning of the beginning of the *potential* history of intelligence on our planet. Our place in time, which seems so impressive when we are only looking back, will be seen to come rather early when we look forward as well. We may well be superseded in multitudes of ways. This is epistemically possible.<sup>3</sup>

#### BEHIND TIME: OUR SHALLOW OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

Human conceptions of inquiry will need to be radically stretched if they are to encompass or accommodate this thought. A different metaphor: our thoughts about thinking are here exposed as *shallow*. Strikingly, there is shallowness both in modern and in postmodern assumptions, approaches, and aspirations. Temporal insights from the previous section will make it easier to see a certain prematurity in both camps. And an emphasis on humility and the danger of radical presumption, bringing up the rear, will make crystal clear the need to

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<sup>3</sup>Scientific support for the views sketched in this section can be found in many places. See, for example, David Archer, *The Long Thaw: How Humans are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth's Climate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Richard Klein, *The Human Career*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); K. P. Schroeder and Robert Connors Smith, "Distant Future of the Sun and Earth Revisited," *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 386 (2008), 155-163; J. John Sepkoski, Jr., "Biodiversity: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Paleontology* 71 (1997), 533-539; Chris Stringer, "Modern Human Origins – Progress and Prospects," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, London (B)*, 357 (2002), 563-579.

*resist* what I am calling prematurity instead of slipping back into it, which would be easy to do given the greater familiarity and comfort of human timescales.

But what do I mean by that term ‘preaturity’? I will stick close to ordinary usage and say that I have in mind “coming too early,” with that notion applied to certain intellectual attitudes—specifically, intellectual optimism or pessimism—to be seen in modernism and postmodernism. Now one’s optimism or pessimism about intellectual results might come too early, given what we have learned in the previous section, for either of two reasons: (1) because it’s clear that intelligent beings, with a great deal more work stretching over thousands (and perhaps tens or hundreds of thousands) of years, would eventually reach comprehensive intellectual understanding, so that *present* results fall far short of decisiveness or finality and present means are quite unrepresentative of what might get us there *but* better ones could over time be achieved, or (2) because these things at any rate cannot be ruled out: we are not justified in believing them false. To avoid gross hubris or undue optimism of my own concerning what can be known, I will be pushing the latter reason rather than the former. That reason suffices. If we are optimistic or pessimistic (in the relevant senses), we believe that our intellectual results and our means of attaining them are reasonably close to final and representative of what is required to achieve a comprehensive understanding of reality, or else we believe the whole enterprise thus described wrongheaded and the realist concepts embedded in it misconceived, respectively. And both attitudes are inappropriate—and inappropriate because premature—if in this region and *at this time* we cannot be other than *in doubt* about what would be attainable over the long haul.

That we should be in doubt about this will, I hope, be clear after the previous section. Consider a few additional points that help to sustain the temporalist critique. Science will be said especially by modernists to have made a large and consequential leap forward over the past few centuries. But how far this takes us toward a comprehensive understanding of the natural world unfortunately depends entirely on *how far altogether there is to go*, and information about science’s swift progress will tell us nothing about that. Evidence of relative growth will not yield an absolute result.

Now a longstanding consensus in science across all its topics might help us overcome this obstacle. But such does not exist. Think only of scientific consternation and disagreement concerning dark matter, and over how to deal with the apparent incompatibility of quantum mechanics and general relativity. Think also about current perplexity over the relations between an understanding of mental illness and neuroscience, and what most regard as the relatively undeveloped state of the latter. Of course nothing I have said requires us to hold that the theoretical terms of present scientific theories on which consensus *has* been achieved might fail to refer to anything significant in nature. Openness to the future should make us willing to think of our best results in science as elementary, but elementary facts are still facts. (Grade 1 in school does not fail to bring with it important information and learning just because grades 2 through 12 still remain when it is finished.) By the same token there is nothing here that should make us hesitate to speak about “facts of deep time,” as I have done earlier in this paper.

Another (to my mind) very important point that can be made here, and that should have some weight with everyone in my audience, is that we humans have often been mistaken on matters of *scale* and have had our mistakes corrected by science. (At the very least, we have been rash in our judgments, limited in the possibilities we conceive, and exposed to radically new ones by unanticipated results of inquiry.) Think only of how we used to think about the size of planet Earth, about the distances between that planet and the stars, about the size of our galaxy, and about the size of the universe. Reflecting on all this, we should be willing to take seriously the idea that where the *temporal scale of intelligent inquiry* is concerned, we are *similarly* misled. And without arguments justifying the claim that it is false, we should treat as an *open possibility* that all we have accomplished in inquiry so far is no more than the beginning of the beginning of what is needed and furthermore quite unrepresentative of what is needed in the sense of—on fundamental matters—being *quite different* from what is needed in respect to both the quality of results and the ability of our methods to deliver objective truths. It follows that judgments taking that beginning as *being* representative of what is needed are misguided and radically premature.

Now, in their different ways, both modernism and postmodernism make precisely such a judgment. Modernists suggest it by the thought that with existing intellectual results we are *already close* to what is needed. Some imbued with the modernist spirit but confusingly inclined to speak in metaphor think we may soon “know the mind of God.”<sup>4</sup> Of course there is also genuflecting before the notion that much remains to be done, but when writers appear who think that new methods may need to be devised or old assumptions questioned in order to *get* it done, they reap a whirlwind of ungrateful and generally unnuanced criticism. Consider the response to the biologist Rupert Sheldrake, especially in Britain, and the reactions to philosopher Thomas Nagel and his recent book *Mind and Cosmos* virtually everywhere.<sup>5</sup> (So as not to invite vituperative comment I hasten to add that I am not saying or even suggesting that these figures may be right in their claims about *how* our thinking and its resources need to be expanded; only that science itself shows they are right in thinking *that* expansion could be badly needed.) Here one might also mention how unexceptionable it seems to most people that someone working in science might generalize from what’s on their table every day to all reality, accepting metaphysical naturalism. If modernists weren’t optimistic about the most powerful methods of inquiry today, namely, current scientific ones, turning out to be at least very similar to those that would yield the ultimate truth about things, might not such a move generate as much alarm as anything in Nagel?

But postmodernists too are guilty here. (The situation in their case is less clear, initially, and will take more time to expose.) Of course they don’t take what modernism-inspired inquiry so far has come up with, mostly to be explained in

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<sup>4</sup> So, rather famously, said Stephen Hawking at the end of his (in the present context) ironically titled *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 193.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and, for Sheldrake’s latest, see Rupert Sheldrake, *Science Set Free: 10 Paths to New Discovery* (New York: Random House, 2012). For influential earlier criticism of Sheldrake, see John Maddox, “A Book for Burning?” *Nature* 293 (1981), 245-246. For Nagel criticism, see Brian Leiter and Michael Weisberg, “Do You Only Have a Brain? On Thomas Nagel,” *The Nation*, October 22, 2012.

scientific terms, as representative of a comprehensive and final and objectively true understanding of things yet to be achieved, since they reject the very idea of such an understanding. But they do assume that nothing *better* or *more convincing* or more capable of accommodating central concerns and results of their *own* inquiry will ever appear under a modernist banner; that what we see at present is pretty much what we will get. If for modernists prematurity appears in optimism about what can be understood by extending to all aspects of nature and human life scientific methods of inquiry and analytical reasoning and about how quickly comprehensive understanding will come, for postmodernists it appears in pessimism about such understanding *ever* coming and – with that – at least implicit pessimism about modernist methods for achieving it ever becoming sufficiently rich, diverse, subtle (etc.) to deserve a second look.

Now when it comes to postmodernism's response to modernism's intellectual goals, there is an important distinction that needs to be brought to the surface. Some versions are more radical than others, rejecting the idea that there is an objective world, ontologically independent of inquirers, which inquiry can reveal, instead of simply rejecting the idea that we have what it takes to come to a comprehensive understanding, through inquiry, of such an objectively real world, should it exist. (And some teeter uncertainly here, sometimes seeming to endorse one view, sometimes the other.) The former thesis is metaphysical, the latter epistemological.<sup>6</sup> I confess to finding the metaphysical thesis confused and its denial unavoidably accepted in inquiry. (Here I think John Searle has it exactly right, even though his response to Jacques Derrida in an earlier set of reactions was, to say the least, somewhat less than intellectually empathetic and engaged – lacking in just the ways one might expect it to be lacking if my claims in this paper are on the right track.)<sup>7</sup> I *do* find interesting one rationale suggested for the stronger, metaphysical rejection of modernism – namely the idea, to be found in Richard Rorty's work, that the modernist metaphysical picture means that inquiry must (presumably as quickly as possible) become more unified rather than more diverse, and tend toward altogether less rich and interesting human activity.<sup>8</sup> This is a point worth noting in the present context because it is so conspicuously undermined by the temporalist critique of modernism and postmodernism offered in this paper. That critique asks us to expand our imaginations about where inquiry might go even further than is sanctioned in Rorty's work on the basis of some of modernism's own scientific results and in a manner consistent with the emergence of a new, chastened, more humble modernist enterprise, comfortable with the thought of enrichment and change

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<sup>6</sup> On this distinction and on who belongs where, in contemporary debates, philosophers of religion might consult Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); John D. Caputo, "Methodological Postmodernism: On Merold Westphal's *Overcoming Onto-Theology*," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), 284-296; and also J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister, eds., *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion with Religion* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012), esp. the Simmons chapter and introduction.

<sup>7</sup> On the former point, see chap. 1 of John R. Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). For somewhat more subtle argumentation in the same vein, see Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). On the latter point, see Ian Maclean, "Un dialogue de sourds? Some Implications of the Austin-Searle-Derrida Debate," in Ian MacLachlan, ed., *Jacques Derrida: Critical Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See Rorty's "Science and Solidarity," in John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald M. McCloskey, eds., *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

and diversification almost inconceivably far into the future. (Postmodernist themes in the mouths of people like Rorty often come with a historicist sensibility, but why not make room for the history of the future?) Having pointed this out, I shall, for the reason previously mentioned, leave the metaphysical thesis behind.

So what about the epistemological one? How, in its pessimism, does it reflect a premature judgment that what we see today in modernist inquiry is representative of what is required? I will offer a fairly familiar sort of example of the epistemological orientation I have in mind, Gianni Vattimo expounding what he takes to be (a part of) the contribution of Heideggerian hermeneutics:

[K]nowledge is always interpretation and nothing but this. Things appear to us in the world only because we are in their midst and always already oriented toward seeking a specific meaning for them. In other words, we possess a preunderstanding that makes us interested subjects rather than neutral screens for an objective overview.... [T]he more we try to grasp interpretation in its authenticity...the more it manifests itself in its eventlike, historical character.<sup>9</sup>

Consider first how a postmodernist who goes along with this line of thought might find in it resources for resisting my assessment of “prematurity.” What she may say is that even if history were to be greatly extended, finite beings could not escape preunderstandings and shifting historical interests, and so there is no hope of *ever* becoming “neutral screens for an objective overview.” More time won’t solve the basic problem facing a modernist mentality here. Thus it is not the case, as “prematurity” implies, that some different judgment from the one that the epistemological postmodernist makes *now* should be regarded as likely or possible *then*.

In response, let’s first set aside the straw person represented by “neutral screens.” To get things objectively right, there is no need for inquirers to be neutral, at least not if that means lacking self-interested or other-interested motives distinct from a love of truth. Of course we might hope that the love of truth would not be *subverted* by other motives, but here we have something that humans and other intelligent beings clearly might get better at over time through, for example, assiduously *cultivating* the love of truth and learning what those other motives are and how to manage them effectively.<sup>10</sup> In the same connection, let’s be sure to recognize that cultural evolution over much time might be just as messy and meandering as biological evolution has been, while still yielding creatures more complex and capable at the end than appeared nearer the beginning. (A reminder: no inherent progressive disposition in evolution has to be postulated to regard such as epistemically possible.) A related point is that the *consistency* over much time of the historically generated

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo (with Santiago Zabala), *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 44-45. I do not assume that Vattimo speaks for all postmodernists, but there is no room for interaction with a larger sample here. Having said that, I think my response to Vattimo can be made to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to a much wider range of postmodernist thinkers.

<sup>10</sup> Much more research of the sort described in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011) might well be helpful here.

interest in this or that objective of inquiry might itself become the focus of interest in history, and also be *realized* as this interest is cultivated by more and more people and entrenched in their institutions.

Already we see some glimmers of how postmodernist pessimism is premature: the absolute or totalizing emphasis on the penetration of inquiry by subjectivity, interpretation, parochial interests, and so on either cannot be sustained or doesn't have the consequences it is thought to have, so that room emerges for intellectual progress of the sort modernism seeks, albeit within a radically altered timeframe that everyone has ignored. Such progress becomes epistemically possible, and so the pessimistic judgment is unjustified.

Let's consider another way in which this theme can be developed, this time with respect to Vattimo's notion of a "preunderstanding." There is indeed an important preunderstanding affecting perhaps all humans, and ineluctably influential in their inquiry. There is a *basic picture of the world* involving such things as physical objects, conscious experience, past-present-future, our own birth and death as well as relations to other conscious beings, and the value or disvalue of things or states of affairs in the world. We are shaped by it, and our desire in inquiry, very much in line with what Vattimo says, is to *fill out this picture*. If it is mistaken, we will pass our days in illusion—and of course this possibility is taken up by radical skeptics in epistemology.<sup>11</sup> But none of this means that cognitive contact with an objective world and how things are in it is impossible for us, or that it is wrongheaded to pursue fundamental understanding of such a world as modernists do. It just means that it is a *risky* enterprise calling for intellectual courage! Inquirers are those who accept the risk; informed inquirers will respond to those who say that the whole thing could be misconceived by saying that they've taken this into account already, and that the notion that this thought needs to be set aside or behind one in order to take the risk is indeed a presupposition of informed inquiry. But they will add that by the same token our "preunderstanding" *might conform to how things are*, or with modifications that occur over the course of evolution it might yet acquire that status. And finite beings might succeed in filling it out correctly.

Contrary to the postmodernist view as developed above, with enough history we may be able to overcome some of the limitations of history. Before rejecting this idea a measly few thousand years in, one should seriously consider how many different subjects and kinds of subjects, how many different historical circumstances and kinds of circumstances, might become joined in the task of inquiry over the course of *hundreds* of thousands or hundreds of *millions* of years more.

#### INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND THE AIM OF CONSILIENCE

The result of our thinking so far is the following. *Modernist optimism should, in a way, become more pessimistic, and postmodernist pessimism more optimistic.* In the absence of a deep sense of time or awareness of our place in time, both orientations remain *shallow*, unable to plow furrows in thought that the winds of criticism cannot fill in. I now want to provide more support for this assessment

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<sup>11</sup> I discuss these matters a bit further in my book *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 169-175.

and take it further, deepening *it*, by showing that not just prematurity but also presumption is at work here. By getting past the latter, cultivating the virtue of intellectual humility, and so avoiding the shallowness of self-importance, we will attain to a perspective that is able to learn from both modernism and postmodernism, successfully resisting the prematurity I have pointed out and charting a way forward in inquiry that not only is theoretically possible but can become appealing and inviting for all of us.

As just suggested, intellectual humility is in large part negative: aimed at *avoiding* self-importance. (This isn't all that it is—we'll see a bit more of it later—but it is the part I intend to apply right here.) More precisely, and to get something that really belongs to an intellectual virtue, we might say that intellectual humility opposes self-importance when it interferes with a pure and penetrating pursuit of intellectual goals. There are many ways in which this may come to be the case, corresponding to the many ways in which self-importance can be realized. In an influential discussion, Robert J. Roberts and W. Jay Wood provide a discriminating list: an individual or group might fall prey to "intellectual variants" of "arrogance, vanity, conceit, egotism, hyper-autonomy, grandiosity, pretentiousness, snobbishness, impertinence (presumption), haughtiness, self-righteousness, domination, selfish ambition, and self-complacency."<sup>12</sup> Self-complacency, the last to be mentioned, has several faces of its own, which can be identified more fully by reference to the relevant empirical work of P. L. Samuelson et al.: overconfidence in one's own views, being overswift to judge, closed to the views of others and unhelpful to them in their own inquiry-related efforts as well as unforgiving of their mistakes, absolutist in one's stance, dogmatic, unreflective, and more concerned for closure than for accurate cognition.<sup>13</sup>

Thinking fairly generally at first, such dispositions can become intellectually unhelpful when, because of them, individuals and groups find it harder to learn from each other. And analogous points can be made about such things as finding it harder to notice when their beliefs need to be revised or dropped, to think about solutions to problems long enough to get anything close to sufficient relevant evidence, or to cooperate with others on difficult intellectual tasks.

More specifically (here I am guided by the helpful discussion in Roberts and Wood), the arrogant can be led into intellectually unhelpful emotion and behaviour by virtue of an elevated concern with what they are entitled to (if anything) on account of intellectual superiority; the vain, by such a concern with whether they are as well regarded, intellectually, as they should be by others; the conceited, by concern about establishing the impressiveness of their intellectual record; those suffering from egotism or selfish ambition, by concern for having their own intellectual interests win out over conflicting interests; the hyper-autonomous and self-complacent, by being closed to the views of others and a concern to manage, intellectually, on their own; the grandiose and pretentious,

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<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 236-237.

<sup>13</sup> P. L. Samuelson, I. M. Church, M. Jarvinen, and T. Paulus, *The Science of Intellectual Humility White Paper*. <http://trebuchet.fuller.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/IH-White-Paper.pdf>, 2013, 21-46, 67-74.

by preoccupation with how intellectually great and intellectually dignified they are, respectively; the snobbish ones, by worries about who deserves to associate with them intellectually; the presumptuous (in the narrow sense in which presumption is not just, as above, a way of talking about a lack of humility), by neglecting to see what is compatible with the limits of their intellectual powers or station; the haughty, by neglecting to see how much intellectual attention others deserve; the self-righteous, by concern with how their own intellectual excellence compares with that of others; the dominant, by a desire to wield intellectual power over others; the overconfident, by a sense of how clearly right they are; those who are overswift to judge, by how obvious the facts of a case seem to them; those unhelpful to others in their own inquiry-related efforts, by neglecting to see the importance of others' intellectual goals; those who are unforgiving of others' intellectual mistakes, by how little room they allow for error; those absolutist in their stance as well as dogmatic, by forgetting how sensitive to the results of debate one ought to be; the unreflective, by neglecting how much careful thought a subject deserves; and those more concerned for closure than for accurate cognition, by excessive concern for having in their possession an answer to the problem under examination.

Quite a list! I leave as homework just how events from the past involving modernists and postmodernists could be used to illustrate various items on the list. (Though it may be time-consuming, I doubt the homework will be difficult.) Perhaps if intellectual humility had been appropriately cultivated by all, such labels as 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' would never even have arisen. But what I want to focus on here is how the avoidance in the future of such dispositions as I have listed will require those to whom these labels are applied, or who apply them to themselves, to behave toward each other, and how the undue pessimism and optimism we have been talking about will quite naturally be avoided as a result.

Let's start again from modernism and science. We have said a fair bit about this connection already, but how the modernist emphasis on scientific procedures can prevent us from seeing other possibly important means to a rich overall understanding has been left at best implicit so far. Ages and periods called "modern" are of course those which, among other things, witnessed one breakthrough in natural science and technological marvel after another, and it has been easy to imagine that the discovery and refinement of especially approaches in natural science and related analytical techniques constitute a decisive development in the history of inquiry which sweeps all else before it. This can lead to a certain social and psychological and also philosophical naiveté, either because the corresponding subject areas are neglected or because they are treated exclusively by methods not fully suited to them. Intellectual humility would allow modernists to notice and combat this. In his most recent book, E. O. Wilson, a modernist if ever there was one, in effect concedes this point by making it one of his main themes that science must cooperate with the humanities if a full understanding of the meaning of human life is ever to be delivered.<sup>14</sup> The power of this theme is of course only made clearer when we take on the temporalist sensibility explored earlier in the paper, which natural science itself should inspire.

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<sup>14</sup> See E. O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

But is any of this a vindication of postmodernist themes? For a modernist, the postmodernist will sometimes seem almost perversely to favour the complex over the simple, the obscure over the straightforward, allusive statements over clear ones, nebulous social and psychological and historical factors over the results of quantitative analysis, rhetoric over careful argument, and so on. But with temporalist humility, recognizing that a full overall understanding may be ridiculously far ahead of where we are now and may require unbelievably many and subtle avenues of approach, and many alterations and perhaps complexifications of viewpoint, including such as we have never yet conceived, won't the modernist be provided with a perspective that prompts a different reaction? After all, with this perspective she will purposely be *looking for* new ways of doing things and new paths to insight and new insights. Modernists need to commit themselves to a careful, open, persistent, dogged search for truth by as many means as suggest themselves, with a respect for truth, which now means, among other things, a respect for the *elusiveness* and *richness* of truth. Curiosity and love of truth are here made more generous and pure and, yes, humble, with an awakening to larger forces of cultural conditioning over time, both helpful and unhelpful, and the need for greater self-awareness. The humble modernist might therefore well be led to wonder—won't a piercing of pretensions, psychological, social, political, philosophical, and a portrayal of the complexities of life and language and the problems we face, be as likely to advance understanding for an immature species as analytical treatments of specialized topics within an uncriticized and fairly narrow conceptual framework bearing the marks of previous taken-for-granted thinking? And aren't postmodernists often to be found reveling in precisely the former?

No doubt the intellectual value of theory and analysis remains—they are part of what we need in order to make perhaps painfully slow movements forward through conversation among clarified positions, recognizing that they are not free of social and political conditioning or ultimate but may lead to something more in line with the Enlightenment vision. However given our species' intellectual immaturity, precise analyses that are also accurate might elude us at the most fundamental levels of inquiry, and there may be much that can be learned, at such an early stage, from more indirect approaches which display and probe the complexities, contradictions, ambiguities, and so on to be found in our language and in our forms of life. This is all the more so given that, as noted in the previous section, we unavoidably bring to inquiry a very human "basic picture of the world." In short, the goals of truth and understanding set for itself by modern, so-called Enlightenment thinking are extremely challenging for immature beings, and it may be necessary to appreciate some postmodern ideas to become properly sensitized to this fact and deal with it effectively. Putting this last idea most provocatively: perhaps postmodernism is needed to help prepare us for a successful assault on modernist goals.

So much the humble and temporally sensitive modernist will see. What about the postmodernist? Well, if humans really do humbly "find their place" in time, then we will have not only a resistance of the positive (scientific) totalizing to which modernism is vulnerable but also a resistance of the negative (relativistic) totalizing for which postmodernist thinking and writing is so often criticized. It is too early for anyone with intellectual humility and a temporalist sensibility to give up on the basic modernist vision. Instead of thinking that modernist ends should be replaced, advocates of postmodernism might think of themselves as

offering new means for the attainment of those ends, unjustly neglected by modernists so far.

But the postmodernist may be forgiven for wondering whether an emphasis on intellectual humility does not itself proscribe such ends. Isn't it, for example, somewhat grandiose, presumptuous, and overconfident to embrace them? This point may well initially seem forceful. However it must be remembered that sensitivity to the future changes everything. In this new dispensation confident modernist beliefs about how things fundamentally are will be dropped or slip to the background as inquirers come to emphasize *positions* on how things *might* be put forward in dialogue with as many others as possible—positions open to change, and even where agreement comes to exist, passed along to future generations for further discussion.<sup>15</sup> It would indeed be grandiose and presumptuous for any of us to think that we've got it all figured out at so early a stage of investigation, but by signing on for a grand trans-generational collaborative intellectual effort no one need give evidence of any such disposition. And it is interesting to notice that one can even use an emphasis on humility to *support* such a venture, since (although this point was not made before) humility is just as opposed to *diffidence* as to self-importance. In good Aristotelian fashion we need to find a balance between extremes here, and a temporalist modernism arguably strikes it better than an unreconstructed postmodernism committed to the rejection of its ends.

It is the grand but not grandiose venture just mentioned to which the postmodernist is invited. Within the open, expanded, chastened modernism I have described, there is room for everything important to her except for her *own* (negative) totalizing. Indeed, she can make some of her points in a striking new way from within that venture. She can, for example, argue for what might be called "Hume reversed." David Hume famously showed some skeptical predilections when he said that we should, in our reasoning, respect and remain within the "limits of common life and practice."<sup>16</sup> But this, ironically, shows signs of a questionable assumption, whose questionableness a temporalist perspective and postmodernism's own revelations of the complex subtleties of human "life and practice," as well as science's considerable successes, only serve to increase: *that we know ourselves a lot better than we know other things!* A postmodernist willing to think of herself as probing regions of reality not at all (or less) accessible to science can say that we know much of the universe rather well but that our "common life and practice" is full of mysteries that we should devote ourselves to see and understand.

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<sup>15</sup> I have more to say about this important notion of a position in work that is underway, but cannot stop to develop it here. Suffice to say that it is distinct from belief, though compatible with it, a disposition to employ and defend a proposition in intellectual discussion. We are used to people defending only what they believe, but within a temporalist perspective there can be a variety of reasons for adopting a position, and there will frequently be good reason to be in doubt about whether one's position is supported by more than the available evidence (i.e. whether it is supported by the *total* evidence as well—the evidence as it would be seen by an omniscient being).

<sup>16</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 37.

While speaking this way, the “postmodern modernist” will need humbly to notice how rational analysis and careful theory may well be able to move us forward, toward objective understanding about difficult and presently mysterious things, even if not all at once. We are certainly not there yet. But, again, given temporalist humility, it is far too early to give up on the quest. The former is the concession I have hoped to extract from modernists; the latter, the concession we might hope postmodernists will in time be moved to make. Notice that even after these concessions are made, modernism still keeps what we might call its *outermost* themes and postmodernism its *innermost*. But postmodernists give up the notion that the complex richness they have discovered cannot ever be subsumed within an overall understanding of objective reality, and modernists give up the idea that the whole of reality is not more complex and rich than (today’s) science and analysis can in principle encompass—and in ways postmodernist thinking may sometimes be especially well suited to detect. Postmodernists, that is, give up their rejection of modernist *ends*, and modernists open up to postmodernist ideas as *means*.

Perhaps, by the same token, each side will reject the (now misleading) label that has come to be associated with it! But however that may be, by humbly making such adjustments as I have described to the reality of the other, and learning to *profit* from the other, each will be enabled to do much more than we now see being done to enhance the work of reason in time.

#### CONCLUSION

The work of reason includes the work of both continental and analytical philosophers of religion. My aim in this paper has not been to address this work directly. But I do hope the bearing on it of my more general arguments will be apparent. From within a temporalist framework, recognizing our place in time, it will be easier to see how we are still at an extremely early stage of this work, and how the present bifurcation may very well itself represent an initial stage that will be superseded by later efforts—efforts to which we may contribute by noticing this! We will see that much remains to be done by philosophers on matters religious, within an understanding of ends generous enough to include a fundamental understanding of how things objectively are, though of course the timescales we contemplate will be rather different from the human timescales dominant in inquiry today. We will humbly agree that all available ways of doing what remains to be done should, at so early a stage, be subjected to exploration and experimentation and, yes, to being “mashed up”! We will revel in the potential richness of how things ultimately are, and be open to having religion—perhaps a form of religion very different from any on offer today—expose at least some of it to us. By the same token, we will reject sterile choices reflecting the modernist tendency to move too far too fast—such as “traditional theism or scientific naturalism”—while welcoming each of the positions thus named into further discussion together with others, which we struggle to articulate and give a voice.

So my conclusions in this paper have clear consequences for continental and analytic philosophers of religion. I hope that others will take them up and develop them further.<sup>17</sup>

J. L. SCHELLENBERG is Professor of Philosophy at Mount Saint Vincent University and Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie University in Canada. He is the author of many books and papers in the philosophy of religion and presently is occupied with a more general work of epistemology linking the latter's problems to the deep temporality of human life and inquiry.

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