



ROUTLEDGE

Michael Luntley

# REASON TRUTH and SELF

the postmodern reconditioned

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# Reason, Truth and Self

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*'Reason, Truth and Self* is an honest and spritely attempt to counter the corrosive relativism of postmodernism. Far from old-fashioned, the author offers a sterling defence of Enlightenment virtues, including reason and truth. Highly recommended.'

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Postmodernism has had a significant and divisive impact on late twentieth-century thought. Proponents of the postmodernist critique of absolute knowledge have felt it necessary to jettison the Enlightenment concepts of truth, reason and the self. Opponents of postmodernism have seized on this abandonment of rational standards to ignore the very real problems raised by the postmodernists. Michael Luntley provides a lively introduction to the debate and offers a clear and careful exposition of how rational standards can survive even if the main postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment is accepted.

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**Michael Luntley** is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *Language, Logic and Experience* (1988) and *The Meaning of Socialism* (1989). He also plays the tenor sax.



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Michael Luntley



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for  
Chris, Sam and Nicky



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# Preface

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This is a picture book. Its aim is to provide a picture of how we can continue to think about ourselves and our world as subject to the demands of truth and rationality while acknowledging the critique of those concepts that passes under the label 'postmodernism'. The book provides a picture of how this can be achieved. It does not seek to argue definitively for the truth of the picture. The picture is a comprehensive picture, but taken from a considerable distance in order to fit so much within the viewfinder. In order to argue satisfactorily to the truth of the position described one would need to look in much greater detail at everything that lies within the conceptual landscape I survey. But it has not been my purpose to convince you of the truth of the position described. My main purpose has been simply to exhibit the fact that a picture such as the one presented is so much as possible and makes a coherent whole.

The concepts of reason, truth and self have been central to the search for knowledge ever since the Enlightenment. They have been the motors for our achievements in science, history, art and literature. According to a growing number of contemporary thinkers these engines of enquiry are now thoroughly clapped out. Students in all faculties in our universities are familiar with the banner proclamations of the postmodernist loss of rational standards of belief. This supposed loss is regularly reported in the mass media.

The picture that I offer shows that much of the fuss about postmodernism is misconceived. It shows that, if you take the time to think through the detail of the criticisms levelled against the Enlightenment concepts of reason, truth and self, you will find that

these concepts survive postmodernist critique and, appropriately refashioned, can continue to shape our sense of cognitive purpose. The picture I sketch is then offered to anyone who has wondered how to meet the designer despairs of postmodernist fashion. The picture is a philosophical picture, although it is of relevance to any student, especially of the arts and social sciences, with a concern for the foundations of their discipline.

The book is intended to be introductory; it might serve on a number of introductory courses in philosophy and sociology. It is not introductory in the sense that it offers a detailed introduction to all the topics covered, for, as noted, its chief aim is to provide a picture. However, it is intended to be introductory in the sense of offering a wide-ranging invitation to engage in the rescue of significant notions of truth, knowledge and reason from a set of premisses from which too many claim that irrationalism is the only option.

This book grew out of work that I did on a series of programmes called 'The Real Thing' made by London Weekend Television for Channel Four and transmitted in August 1992. Philosophy does not often make for exciting television. The medium is predominantly visual and although philosophers are rarely short of things to say, the quality of their visual sense is generally inversely proportional to their ability to discourse. Accordingly, most television philosophy tends to be a radio discussion format with cameras rolling. However, in 'The Real Thing' Nick Metcalfe made the boldest attempt so far to think through the issue of how to make maximum use of the medium in constructing a televisual essay in philosophy. Audio and visual signals were filled with sounds and images in the effort to communicate some of the issues that surround postmodernism. The widespread communication of ideas is intrinsically subversive and 'The Real Thing' was mainline subversion.

Nick produced and directed the series. It was a pleasure to work with him and I am proud to have been associated with the result. Thanks Nick. Thanks also to Tom Boyd, Nick's research assistant, who first suggested to Nick that I should help relieve their conceptual headaches.

At one point I was going to write this book to accompany the television series, but various delays in scheduling and other production concerns meant that, in the end, there was too little time to get a manuscript completed before transmission. Instead I

wrote a pamphlet, *The Real Thing*, that Channel Four published at transmission and I shelved the book that I had started. Two years on, the book has changed in tone. It resolves issues where the television programmes were content simply to raise them. It covers much greater ground than the programmes ever dared.

We had hoped that the television series would cover issues of agency, morals and politics. However, the need to work to the constraints of the medium meant that there simply was not the time available in the slots provided to cover as much as we had initially hoped. This book not only offers a picture of how to resolve the core issues about truth and knowledge raised by postmodernism, but also fills in the gaps on the nature of the self and its knowledge of morals and politics.

The last three chapters covering the self are much more exploratory than the rest of the book. The closing chapters are promissory notes towards further research. If there is anything original in what follows other than in the arrangement and order of presentation, it lies in the ideas about how to think through the contingency of the self. As noted, the aim of the book is to show the possibility of reconditioning reason, truth and self in the light of postmodernism. It is the reconditioning of the self that stands most in need of more detailed fine tuning. What I offer in the closing chapters is only a start in that direction.

At Warwick, Peter Poellner and Martin Warner have regularly helped me think through some of the issues that follow; thanks to them and to Steven Lukes whose seminar in Florence assisted in the exploration of early versions of some of the ideas that have now found their way into the chapters on the self. Thanks also to my doctoral students, who keep me on my toes, and especially to Eric Newbigging and Paul Sturdee, whose own projects I can locate in the genealogy of some of the ideas contained herein.

Dee provided the sanity and much else besides, and Chris, Sam and Nicky the immediate reason for caring about the sort of future we create.



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# Introduction

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## THE THREAT OF ANARCHY

Once upon a time the answer to the question ‘What should I believe?’ was relatively easy. You believed what your elders and betters told you. However, as a way of finding out the truth, this was not altogether reliable. Too many elders were mistaken about too many things. In early modern Europe, the idea gained ground that there was a method to employ in answering this question. It was the method of reason and experiment. It was the method exemplified in the new sciences. It was, in principle, a method available to anyone. The answer to the question ‘What should I believe?’ became ‘Believe in the results of science.’ Such faith in the methods and results of science has served us well. But the idea that scientific method is a reliable way of finding out the truth is now being undermined. It has become fashionable to question whether human reason conforms to any objective standards of belief. It has become fashionable to question whether there is such a thing as human reason at all.

The fashion to deny any objective standards of belief is sometimes called ‘postmodernism’. That is not a particularly useful label. It has many connotations that obscure rather than assist discussion. Like any label it is not worth fighting over. Nevertheless, there are profound and important philosophical issues that underpin this fashion. This book is an exploration of those issues.

The central issue concerns whether or not there is a legitimate notion of what we ought to believe. This is a general question. It is the question about whether or not there is a legitimate concept of objective truth. We can ask this question with regard to

different areas of enquiry. For example, we can ask: is there such a thing as what we ought to believe with regard to the natural world? Is there such a thing as what we ought to believe about the rules of conduct? Is there such a thing as what we ought to believe about art and literature? Asking these questions amounts to asking whether a concept of objective truth can be applied to our discourses about the natural world, about morality or aesthetics.

Most interesting of all, we can raise the question whether there is such a thing as what we ought to believe about ourselves. Does a concept of objective truth apply to our conception of ourselves and, if so, what kind of conception of self is available to form our self-understanding? What kind of creature are we? In the first instance, we can raise and attempt to settle the general philosophical issue about whether any concept of objective truth is available to us regardless of the area in which we want to apply truth.

It is the general critique of any notion of objective truth that underlies the contemporary fashion for thinking that there are no objective standards of belief. This fashion is most apparent in the field of morals and in the arts. It has also entered the arena of current affairs. By what standards, if any, are we to judge the *fatwa* which condemned Salman Rushdie to death—or, for that matter, to judge him for publishing a novel which blasphemes Islam? The apparent lack of standards for our beliefs is no idle academic affair.

The idea that there are no objective standards of belief is an idea that comes from many sources. In 1887 Nietzsche said that ‘The greatest recent event—that “God is dead”, that the belief in the Christian God has ceased to be believable—is even now beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe.’<sup>1</sup> With less melodramatic flourish but with greater influence, Darwin’s discoveries also challenged the need to see a divine design in the natural world. In our own century the Holocaust, two world wars, the enormous growth in knowledge of other cultures and ensuing acceptance of cultural diversity, not to mention countless postimperialist conflicts, have shaken the common confidence with which people had once thought they knew what they ought to believe about how the world worked, what our place was in the world, and what kinds of conduct were acceptable and what were not.

In 1776 Mozart wrote, ‘We live in this world to compel ourselves industriously to enlighten one another by means of

reasoning and to apply ourselves always to carrying forward the sciences and the arts' (W.A.Mozart to Padre Martini: letter of 4 December 1776).<sup>2</sup> The sureness of vision and purpose that we find in Mozart now seems alien to the modern mind. Our uncertainty in comparison to Mozart has doubtless been brought about by the buffeting and bruising from the historical and social forces unleashed from Nietzsche and Darwin onwards. How could anyone feel sure of the objectivity of moral values in a century which has seen the technology of mass destruction applied repeatedly with such clinical ease? But underlying the social and historical causes of our current uncertainties about what we should believe, there lie deep philosophical problems about the legitimation of belief.

It is one thing to note that the confidence of earlier worldviews has been shaken by various historical developments. The philosophical issue concerns whether, despite all that, it is still legitimate to work with a notion of what we ought to believe. That is to say, despite the obvious pressures that have caused despair where Mozart enjoyed certainty, can we still hold on to the idea that in many different areas of human enquiry, whether in science, art, morality or religion, there is such a thing as truth? That is the question I shall answer in this book. The answer that I defend is that the concept of truth and the possibility of objective knowledge survives the current fashion for anarchy. In the rest of this introduction I want to sketch some of the ideas and issues that will be raised in the rest of the book.

## RATIONALITY AND HISTORY

To say that something is true is to hold that it is true independently of what we may hope, wish, believe, etc. Truth is independent of us. That is why one can say that despite the social and historical causes of our current uncertainties, we can still ask whether there is such a thing as truth for morals and politics. Whatever we may be caused to believe by various social pressures, we can still ask the question about what we ought to believe. We need to distinguish between truth—that which we ought to believe—and those beliefs which we hold due to all manner of causes many of which may be irrelevant to, if not in opposition to, the truth.

This distinction is between the normative issue of what we ought to believe and the descriptive issue of what we actually believe and

have been caused to believe. Descriptively, it might be correct that certain social forces have caused people to entertain certain beliefs. For example, a train of theorists from Hume through Marx to Durkheim have hypothesised that religious beliefs have been held because of the social role they perform. If correct, that is a descriptive point. It is separate from the normative issue of whether such beliefs should be entertained. The general validity of the distinction between the descriptive account of the causes of belief and the normative truth of belief can be seen with a simple example.

It seems plausible to think that the preponderance of 'green' beliefs in contemporary society is, in part, caused by the following fact: the 'greenness' of a product is a valuable means by which a product can achieve a distinct position in the market. That is to say, many of us have been brought to consider 'green' issues because advertisers hit on the idea that 'greenness' provided a way of carving a distinct niche for the products they were promoting. 'Greenness' provides product differentiation. This is a causal claim. Suppose that it is true. Nevertheless, if true it does not follow that 'green' beliefs are unworthy, or false. If this causal claim were true it might give us reason to examine a little more carefully the warrant with which we adopt 'green' beliefs. But it can do no more than induce such caution. Of itself, the causal claim shows nothing about the truth or falsity of 'green' beliefs.

Of course, when advertisers try to cause us to entertain beliefs they are perhaps uninterested in the truth of the beliefs. Their interest extends no further than the utility of the beliefs with regard to the increased sale of the products in question. But if it is true that advertisers have no interest in the truth or falsity of the beliefs they try to instil in us, that still means that the issue of how they cause us to entertain beliefs is independent of the issue of whether they are beliefs that we ought to entertain.

Similarly, it seems right to distinguish our rationality from our historically and socially conditioned habits of belief. We are prone to think of rationality as a neutral ahistorical faculty. It is the faculty by which we employ our reason and the evidence gathered by our senses to arrive at the truth. The operation of rationality is, so the common picture goes, distinct from the operation of those methods of belief formation that are embedded in concrete historical and social settings. Some people believe things because authority figures tell them to. Some people believe things because

advertisers induce them to do so. These are some of the ways in which people are caused to believe things. They are distinct from the rational normative method: the disinterested pursuit of truth which, in principle, accepts no authorities.

What is true is not necessarily the same as what we are caused to believe by our history and by our culture. The rational method for acquiring beliefs is distinct from the blind acceptance of historical and cultural traditions. Whether or not a belief is rational is distinct from the issue of how it came about. The genealogy of a belief does not determine its truth.

However, to proclaim the above stark distinction between rationality and history is already to have missed what I shall take as a central claim of postmodernist philosophy. This is the claim that rationality itself is historically and contingently conditioned. In particular, it is the claim that the idea of pure reason, the idea of a faculty unaffected by historical, cultural and other contingent conditions, is an illusion. Furthermore, if rationality is historically conditioned, then different historical settings may produce different notions of rationality. Rationality itself would become fragmented; so too would truth.

On the face of it, the thesis that rationality is historically conditioned runs into a number of obvious difficulties, difficulties that make it easy to refute. There are two familiar ways of understanding the thesis that rationality is historically conditioned that need to be mentioned now in order to clear the ground for a proper evaluation of the thesis.

First, the idea of different concepts of rationality appears to endorse relativism. Relativism is the thesis that what is true is relative to different traditions, cultures, epochs, etc. But relativism is self-defeating, for if the relativist does not endorse some notion of objective truth, why should we believe in relativism? And anyway, if relativism were true then different societies and cultures could not find themselves in opposition, for they would be operating by different standards. That conflicts with what is most apparent in our world, namely, the extent to which different societies and cultures are in opposition.

Second, the idea that rationality is historically conditioned looks like a blurring of the normative/descriptive distinction already noted. Such a blurring is familiar in much sociology. Some sociologists have attempted to give a sociological reduction of the concepts of belief and truth. That is to say, they offer a

sociological causal theory to replace the normative account of belief formation. A classic example of this is Marx's claim that morality is ideological. This is an example of a descriptive claim which appears to undermine the normative character of morality. It is a claim that says that what we take as reasons for what we ought to do are no more than rationalisations that serve the function of protecting our economic class within the political status quo.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that there are many cases in contemporary life in which it is fruitful to consider the Marxist analysis and ask questions such as: what function, economic or otherwise, does the promulgation of such-and-such beliefs serve in our society? Very often, raising such a question is the first step to a critique of those beliefs. What is misleading about the general 'Morality is ideological' claim is its very generality. The fact that some beliefs may serve certain functions in a society does not show that all such beliefs serve that function. The thirst for a general theory which accounts for, say, all moral beliefs in exactly the same way is unmotivated. And, once again, such claims do nothing to undermine the idea that a causal explanation of a belief has nothing to do with the normative assessment of the belief as true or false.

Of course, it has to be admitted that it is difficult not to be impressed by the diversity of options currently available for conceptualising our social and political life. Should we be liberals? Islamic fundamentalists? Democratic socialists? Free-market conservatives? These choices take on a very different flavour when viewed from the array of perspectives from which people currently try to make sense of their lives. In a Poland recently released from the state capitalism of Stalinism the swing to embrace a Catholic state seems almost inevitable at just the same time that Ireland struggles to shake off the very same option. In a climate of such diversity and seemingly interminable conflict the idea can take hold that perhaps there are no rational choices to be made about such matters. The worry prompted by relativism and sociological reductionism is that in the face of such diversity our choices are more a function of how our history pushes us than a matter of our making rational decisions.

However, despite the variety of moral and political systems around the globe, to despair at this and conclude that rationality cannot guide us in politics is to give in to a glib generalising sociology that sees all belief formation as a function of social and

historical forces. The apparent lack of rational criteria of selection between fundamentalism and liberalism, between socialism and conservatism, may be more a function of our ignorance than of the impossibility of rationality taking hold here. The fact that we are currently having a hard time making sensible selections about how to order our politics does not show that no sensible selections can be made. It simply suggests that if such selections can be made, we are not very good at it yet.

To the idea that rationality itself might be fragmented and historically conditioned there is then a simple response. It is to say that the complexity of the historical, social and cultural influences upon our beliefs does not force us to give up on the idea that truth and rationality apply in these areas. That such forces act upon our beliefs and our belief formation does not entail relativism or sociological reductionism. However, to make this simple conceptual point and say no more is to miss the opportunity to uncover the real philosophical issues underlying the apparent fragmentation of truth and rationality. For to respond with the correct conceptual claim that a genealogy of belief does not entail anything about the truth of a belief is to indulge in a complacent appeal to concepts of truth and rationality which stand in need of legitimisation.

What I take as distinctive of philosophical postmodernism is the critique of a model of truth and rationality that arose from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and which saw rationality as a neutral ahistorical tool. It was seen as a tool of pure reason. The paradigm of rationality became the abstract manipulation of symbols as found in the natural sciences, mathematics and logic. On this model, rationality was most clearly evidenced in our linguistic dealings, our ability to handle symbolic operations in ways that could be discussed in isolation from their historical context. Meaning itself was thought of and theorised in a way independent of context. The phenomenon of meaning came to be theorised as a function of symbol manipulation. No wonder then that a train of philosophers from Leibniz to Fodor should postulate variations on the idea of a pure language of thought—a symbolic system in which our very thought processes and rationality would be laid bare for what they were: sentence juggling.

In contrast to this, theorists of this century have repeatedly emphasised the contextual character of meaning, of language

and of its understanding. They have emphasised how meaning can only be understood in real historical contexts, not borne by sentences construed simply as abstract strings of symbols. According to some interpreters, Wittgenstein derived the most intoxicating paradoxes from the insight of the essentially contextual character of meaning. His rule-following arguments are held to show that no determinate meanings can be tracked down for our sentences. For any given sentence, an infinite sequence of interpretations is always possible. No one interpretation is ever fixed. Derrida has similar thoughts when he speaks of the unending ‘deferring’ of meaning, as interpretations of a text are replaced with other interpretations and further ones still, so that the idea of a real meaning is always deferred.<sup>4</sup>

Wittgenstein, I am sure, peddled no such paradoxes, and the jury is still out on Derrida. Nevertheless, in an intellectual climate that has been so unsure about the robustness and context independence of meaning, it is perhaps no surprise that rationality and truth should be thought to succumb to contextualisation. It is this contextualisation which provides what I am taking as postmodernism’s central challenge. It is a challenge that fragments the ahistorical character of reason as conceived by the Enlightenment. Reason is just one of the ‘Big Ideas’ that the Enlightenment bequeathed us and that helped shape the modern world.

The ‘Big Ideas’ were truth, rationality and the self. The idea that these concepts picked out universal timeless notions that would shape all human knowledge is the key to the Enlightenment project. These central concepts constitute what have been called the ‘meta-narratives’ of modernity; they are central concepts that have shaped our modern world. It is the fragmentation of these ‘Big Ideas’ into a jigsaw of contextualised accounts of them that I take as the definitive claim of philosophical postmodernism. On this account, postmodernism challenges the very distinction between rationality and history with which I opened this section. This is not necessarily to endorse relativism. It is not necessarily to endorse a general sociological reduction of truth and rationality. However, it is to expose real philosophical difficulties with the idea that these ‘Big Ideas’ can be understood in a timeless ahistorical manner. As such, it is a challenge that needs to be examined. If there is any truth in it, and I think there is, it is a

challenge that requires us to offer a legitimisation of the way we now proceed with these central ideas.

Postmodernism provides a challenge and an invitation to legitimise our concepts of reason, truth and self from a contextualised and historically embedded point of view. It is not enough to respond to postmodernism with the simple conceptual claim that the historical forces that shape belief do not show that belief to be true or false. We must provide an account of truth, rationality and selfhood that shows that it is legitimate to continue using these ideas, even if they have to be cut down to size a bit. We need to give an account of these concepts that proves why they are still in working order. That is the job of legitimisation. That is what is required. That is what this book will attempt.

The challenge of philosophical postmodernism is then twofold. First, it comprises a critique of the idea that the central concepts of truth, rationality and self could be understood in an abstract way, abstracted from real historical contexts. Modernity's ideal was to disinherit our real historical human perspectives and achieve a transparent direct contact with reality. In the first instance, postmodernism criticises the idea of our experience, meaning, truth and rationality being treated as other than inheritances, embedded in real historical traditions. The challenge here is to see in what sense this critique is right. Second, the task this critique presents us is to legitimise the concepts of truth and rationality in a way that acknowledges the real historical contexts which shape them. Having done that, the job is to give an account of the self which is also embedded within real history but yet still rational and subject to the normative demands of truth and rationality.

What labels we employ here is, to an extent, a matter of choice. The critical point of postmodernism is an attack on the idea that reason, truth and self can be understood abstracted from history. This is an idea that originates in the Enlightenment. There is also considerable currency to the description of the idea that these concepts have no history as the hallmark of modernity.<sup>5</sup> In art and literature modernism is more often seen as a late nineteenth-century reaction to this conception of ahistorical reason than as an identification with it.<sup>6</sup> Still, reaction or identification, there is a common thread through these usages.

It is probably not possible to employ a usage that is coherent with all previous usages. But as long as it is clear how the label is

used, that is all that can be required. I shall use ‘modernity’ as a label for the thesis of the ahistorical character of the concepts of reason, truth and self. This use is particularly relevant, for I want to discuss the philosophical problems that arise when modernity is criticised in the context of a particular model for the ahistorical treatment of these concepts. It is a model that grew out of the Enlightenment, but is a later development. It is the scientific model. This gives further reason for the label ‘modernity’ as the kernel of ideas to set postmodernism against. It also connects with the critiques of the dominance of scientific models of knowledge found in the works of the leading postmodernist philosopher, Rorty.<sup>7</sup>

In legitimising truth and rationality I shall be defending a position I shall call ‘cognitivism’. I could call it a form of ‘realism’, but that word gets used for so many different things in philosophy that we would be in danger of being led up too many blind alleys. ‘Cognitivism’ is a useful label because it highlights the point that the use of reason in belief formation is to gain knowledge. When we gain knowledge we are in possession of truth. When we gain knowledge our beliefs are those that we ought to believe, they match an ideal notion of those beliefs we ought to hold if we want the truth. As a label ‘cognitivism’ is useful, for although it carries few of the suspect connotations of ‘realism’, like the latter label it applies easily to different fields of enquiry. So we can speak of a cognitivism about morals, a cognitivism about religion, a cognitivism about the human mind and self, etc. In each case, these are labels for positions that admit that there is such a thing as the truth, that which we ought to believe if we want to gain knowledge.

## **THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE END OF METANARRATIVES**

In order to legitimise the concepts of truth, rationality and self, we need to show how they can be employed in a contextualised way that is sensitive to their historical character. We need to show that there are ways of thinking of these concepts that do not require the ‘Big Ideas’, the meta-narratives of the Enlightenment.

In order to see how these ideas are problematic, I shall trace their role in the biggest meta-narrative of all, the idea of a grand narrative that is a complete and exhaustive account of the world

that captures everything that needs to be said. This idea of a grand narrative is the idea not just of the truth, but of the whole truth. To employ another metaphor, it is the idea of the God's-eye view of the world; the account of the world that God would give from a vantage point that saw and comprehended everything. If the self, truth and rationality could be conceptualised in a thoroughly ahistorical manner, then these concepts would provide the framework for this absolute God's-eye view of the world. The true self would be the self stripped bare of its history, culture, gender, race and social class. It would be the self that disinherited its history and stood naked, beheld by the eye of God. Truth would then be what God thinks; rationality would be identified with God's way of thinking. Of course, these are mere metaphors, but they capture real and powerful ideas that have done much to shape our modern world.

Once again, this idea of a God's-eye view of the world can be traced to the Enlightenment. However, it is a more modern secular version of it that I shall be concerned with. The Enlightenment was a period during which our confidence in our cognitive abilities reached a peak at which it seemed, to those of religious faith, that mankind was learning to read the mind of God. Our understanding of the natural world developed rapidly during this period. With the achievements of Newton's general theory of mechanics it seemed that we were finally learning the secrets of the universe. The human mind was unravelling the way the world worked. We were unpicking the world's secrets, a world that was, to most Enlightenment thinkers, an object of divine creation. By learning to read the workings of the world, we were learning to read the mind of God. In the light of this success, not only did it seem that knowledge was possible, but also that we were on the point of achieving an almost divine state of revelation about the workings of the universe. For the Enlightenment thinker, truth was available. Human reason was the tool by which this knowledge had been achieved and, by the further application of human reason, one day the whole truth would be available to the human mind.

The Enlightenment project was an attempt to complete the task of acquiring the whole truth about creation. It was the project to attain absolute truth, the truth that transcends local points of view. It was the project to attain the truth that is available from the

God's-eye point of view, the truth that makes up the grand narrative about the whole of creation.

The idea of this grand narrative has acquired a number of labels over the years. Sometimes it is called the 'absolute conception' of the world. A more extreme version of this idea has the label of the 'view from nowhere'. Whatever label is employed, what is at issue here is the idea that in seeking truth we are seeking an account of the world that gives a complete unified account of everything. It is tempting to employ deistic metaphors when trying to articulate this idea; hence, 'the God's-eye view'. A secular version of that label might be 'the world's own story'. That is the term I shall employ from now on. I shall use 'the world's own story' and 'absolute conception' or 'absolute truth' as inter-changeable.

The Enlightenment then was a time when philosophers believed that there was such a thing as the world's own story. It was a religious story. They thought we were beginning to learn what this story was. Modernity proper, I take as the view that the world's own story can be told in a thoroughly ahistorical manner, abstracted from traditional beliefs. For modernists, the world's own story can be put together from first principles by pure reason and experience alone. That means it must be a secularised story, for the traditions of religion will, like all traditional beliefs, have to be disinherited. That such a thing is possible is what Rorty denies. It is what Lyotard denies when he says that there are no more meta-narratives.<sup>8</sup>

Writers such as Rorty and Lyotard, in arguing that there is no such thing as the world's own story, are arguing that the only accounts that we can give of the world are local human accounts. There is no such thing as the world's own story, but only varied and conflicting human stories about the world. This is the fragmentation of truth and rationality that is distinctive of postmodernism.

These postmodernist philosophers are not making a sceptical point about the unavailability of knowledge. They are not saying that knowledge is impossible to get. Rather, they are saying that the idea of the world's own story, the unified picture of reality, is an illusion. There is no such thing as the whole truth. The only stories to be told about the world are local stories and there is no presumption that such stories will have anything in common. The styles of narrative, the very kinds of things talked about in local human stories, may present no more than a patchwork of different