

*Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, by **Louis Dupré**. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993. Pp. x and 300. \$30.00.

LYNN S. JOY, Duke University

Dupré's *Passage to Modernity* is a passionately written meditation on how changing conceptions of nature and the self produced in Western Europe a culture of modernity alienated from the belief that nature and the self must be conceived as dependent on a transcendent God. This is a work of immense scholarship, and one of its main purposes is to show the plausibility of the historical thesis that the principles definitive of modernity were almost fully developed in the period between the end of the fourteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century (p. 11). Thus Dupré is committed to the view that the Enlightenment was *not* the formative moment for modern European culture, but rather was preceded by several centuries of Christian humanist thought and practice which introduced new naturalistic approaches to understanding human nature. Moreover these new approaches retained a significant role for a transcendent God, whose relations with both the natural world and the human subject enriched their meaningfulness in ways that far surpassed what Dupré views as the culturally impoverished experience of nature and the self characteristic of modernity.

Such an account of the emergence of distinctively modern attitudes within a securely Christian pre-Enlightenment culture separates Dupré's diagnosis of what went wrong with modernity from those of philosophical critics like Nietzsche or, more recently, Hans Blumenberg, because they locate the origins of what went wrong with modernity in long-standing conflicts inherited from ancient Greek culture or developed at successive stages of Christianity's accommodation to Greek and Roman influences. Dupré's diagnosis also differs from that offered by those critics of modernity who treat the secular values embodied in Enlightenment institutions and systems of thought as deeply problematic and who trace modernity's mistakes almost exclusively to such eighteenth-century sources.

But this is no ordinary history book, for another of its main purposes is to lay the groundwork for a critique of modernity that will reintegrate selected modern attitudes with premodern Christian beliefs about the dependence of nature and the self on a transcendent God. Dupré praises, for instance, the religious and aesthetic sensibility of many Baroque thinkers and artists who, he argues, successfully achieved the last such synthesis of nature and grace—a synthesis that was nonetheless shortlived, ending in the decade after the settlement of the Thirty Years' War in 1648. Clearly he hopes that his own critique of modernity will not throw the baby out with the bath water. Modern culture can, he thinks, be redeemed by creating a new synthesis through the coherent revision of our presuppositions about nature, the self, and God. Essential to this revision is the study of Christian humanism broadly construed, especially as practiced by Renaissance and Reformation philosophers holding a variety of doctrinal positions.

How is one to evaluate a book of such ambitious scope? Religious spirituality, the natural sciences, theology, philosophy, art, music, and politics all are encompassed in Dupré's efforts to suggest how the culture of Western Europe changed when its people either turned away from God altogether or else sustained their beliefs about God only by grounding them in more basic commitments to naturalism or to notions of subjectivity. One might of course simply recommend that readers of *Passage to Modernity* judge this thought-provoking work for themselves, sampling and testing the author's interpretations of whatever texts most interest the individual reader. However, Dupré himself would very likely discourage this sort of reading of his book since he explicitly remarks, "A reflection on past thought that is not a search for permanent meaning leaves us defenseless against cultural nihilism" (p. 9).

Dupré's search for "permanent meaning" seems to require that a single system of meanings be found even in the heterogeneous writings of late Medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation thinkers. This system of meanings is assumed by him to underlie the kind of synthesis of cultural elements that would count as a reintegration of the natural and the divine. But it is here that scholars of Renaissance and Reformation thought may significantly disagree with his search for a once-and-future Christian synthesis. For what the study of Renaissance and Reformation texts can teach us—as perhaps no other body of writings before the twentieth century can—is that no one system of meanings was in fact elicited from the heterogeneous traditions that fueled late humanist culture. Given their impressive feats of learning, the fact that the authors of those texts failed to consolidate their respective views into a new synthesis of Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Christian, Arabic, and Medieval traditions must be reckoned with by anyone who examines the reasons why modern attitudes replaced those of the late humanists. This extended crisis of multiple authorities proved to be intolerable for Renaissance culture as a whole. As Brian Copenhaver has put it:

The prospect of choosing among metaphysical claims or among attitudes towards metaphysics . . . was a terrible freedom for a culture so well-integrated in its beliefs. Metaphysics was no distant philosophical preoccupation in the Renaissance. People died for metaphysics . . . . After the Renaissance, no metaphysics would ever again achieve the supremacy enjoyed by the Peripatetic system for most of twenty centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Renaissance and Reformation culture was characterized by an extraordinary multiplication of new and old competing traditions in nearly all areas of belief and learning. The humanists' inability to assimilate these rival commitments within a coherent, shared framework led not only to doctrinal conflict and political wars, but also ultimately to the rejection of the humanists' project of confronting and reconciling rival traditions in every field, from the natural sciences to ethics, from politics to theology. The irreconcilable differences among such divergent claims to cultural authority were what modern philosophers beginning with Descartes hoped to

avoid by making deliberate breaks with tradition. A chief aim of the moderns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to restore order to a culture which they thought had been fragmented by their predecessors. The one error many of these moderns refused to tolerate was eclecticism, or the lack of a rigorous foundation for one's own beliefs.

Dupré's suggestions for a critique of modernity in this book seriously underestimate the extent to which the very moderns whom he criticizes were dedicated to achieving a goal similar to his own: the creation of a new Christian synthesis of nature and the human subject with a transcendent God. Why does he think that his twentieth-century project stands a better chance of succeeding where the attempts of modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant failed? More importantly, why does he think that what *the late humanists and late scholastics*, such as Gassendi and Suarez, could not accomplish can possibly be achieved by anyone else? My own view is that the late humanists and late scholastics were better placed than both the moderns and the critics of modernity to fulfill Dupré's aims, and their failure to do so is one of the great lessons of history. There were indeed good reasons to become a modern in the context of that failure. Whatever else their shortcomings, the modern philosophers had no illusions about this and recognized that the methods of the late humanists needed radical revision. Dupré, who seeks to resuscitate the outlook of Christian humanism with the help of Heideggerian metaphysics, would do well to consider that much of what he regards as modernity's errors began as the rational choices of those who knew firsthand the excesses of too many beliefs about transcendent realities. *Passage to Modernity* is certainly right in its claim that modern values and attitudes were well established long before the Enlightenment, but this highly engaging book obscures a central feature of its two-stage narrative: the modernity of the Enlightenment was in many ways an unavoidable outcome of the modernity of the Renaissance. Any project which tries to revive the latter while subverting the former cannot base its claim to plausibility on an argument from history.

#### NOTES

1. Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 349-50.

*Belief Policies*, by **Paul Helm**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xiii and 226. \$54.95 (Cloth).

TRENTON MERRICKS, Virginia Commonwealth University

A *belief-policy*, according to Paul Helm, is a type of belief. A belief-policy is, to a first approximation, a belief about how what one believes ought to be related to one's evidence, given that one's goal is forming true beliefs. There is no question that many of us have higher-order