THE DIALECTICS OF TRUST AND SUSPICION

Patricia A. Sayre

In this paper I discuss implications of the postmodern critique of transcendence for our understanding of the philosophical enterprise, focusing in particular on its implications for Christian philosophy. I take for granted that standards of rationality are embedded in cultural matrices, and look at trust and suspicion as two quite different attitudes one can adopt given the contingency this implies. I argue that both trust and suspicion are important in philosophy, but while an attitude making trust more fundamental than suspicion is crucial to a religious sensibility, an attitude making suspicion more fundamental than trust is antithetical to it.

I

Captain. ...Moral: don't believe in anyone too much.
Doctor. Don't believe too little either.[1]

—August Strindberg, *The Father*

Nietzsche has recently been gaining ground as an intellectual hero among contemporary philosophers, especially among those philosophers who describe themselves as postmodernists. It was Nietzsche, these philosophers say, who first saw clearly that there is no such thing as a claim free of cultural, historical, or personal bias. This being the case, it is foolish for philosophers to invest time and energy in the old-fashioned task of formulating and justifying universal principles. Instead of constructing elaborate justifications for such principles, their new task is to become as suspicious as possible of all such justifications, deconstructing them and undermining their pretensions to universality by showing them to be informed by hidden cultural biases.

The postmodern idea that suspicion is important to philosophy has an ancient lineage. It has long been part of the philosophical enterprise to suspect there is more to what people say than they are willing readily to admit, and our sense that Socrates is the first truly great philosopher in the western tradition has much to do with his uncanny ability to ask uncomfortable questions that unearth previously unnoticed assumptions. Furthermore, a careful reading of both Plato and Aristotle suggests neither is a stranger to nor enemy of the idea that rationality both theoretical and practical makes sense only within a specific cultural context. There is, nonetheless, a radical difference between modeling one's philosophical style on Socrates and modeling it on

567

Nietzsche. Socrates knows how to use suspicion in his role as an effective gadfly, but Socrates is more than a gadfly. He is also a midwife. He holds out to his interlocutors the promise that if they trust him to coach them through their labor, there is a chance they will give birth to ideas that are not mere windeggs. Thus in the Platonic dialogues suspicion arises and is dealt with in the context of trust. In Nietzsche's philosophy, on the other hand, the relationship between trust and suspicion is reversed. Nietzsche seduces his readers, doing everything in his power to engage their trust, while at the same time doing everything in his power to induce a profound sense of unease. The deeper one goes into one of Nietzsche's texts, the more suspicious one is of the world around one—a world that is tainted through and through by self-interest and cultural prejudice. To have a perspective on the world at all may well require taking something or other on trust, but for the Nietzschean the trust is shallow and framed by suspicion.

My own view is that both trust and suspicion are necessary elements in intellectual life, but that an attitude that makes suspicion more fundamental than trust is not at all the same as one which makes trust more fundamental than suspicion. The former way of understanding the relationship between suspicion and trust is quite antithetical to a religious sensibility, while the latter way is, it seems to me, quite crucial to a religious sensibility. Thus it is no accident that, while comparisons are often drawn between Socrates and Jesus, Nietzsche sees Christianity as a hypocritical lie. My aim in this paper is to explore further this dialectic between trust and suspicion. More specifically, I want to take it for granted that standards of rationality and morality are always embedded in cultural matrices and thus are always in some important sense contingent, and then look at suspicion and trust as two fundamentally different attitudes one can adopt in the face of this contingency. My primary concern will be with how the dialectic between these two attitudes works in philosophy, and, in particular, what it portends for Christian philosophy in a postmodern age.

II

> The little god o' the world sticks to the same old way,
> And is as whimsical as on Creation's day.
> Life somewhat better might content him,
> But for the gleam of heavenly light that thou hast lent him:
> He calls it Reason—thence his power's increased,
> To be far beastlier than any beast.
> —Goethe, *Faust*, Prologue in Heaven[2]

Before providing my analyses of trust and suspicion, I want to offer a quick sketch of some key themes in postmodern thought and report briefly on what at least some postmodern thinkers have been saying about the future of

philosophy. The term 'postmodernism' is used in a wide variety of contexts.[3] Architects write books on postmodern design, and artists struggle to articulate a postmodern aesthetic. Literary critics supply postmodern readings of post-modern texts. Pundits and politicians talk about the social challenges of life in a postmodern culture. And philosophers and theologians worry about the survival of their disciplines in a postmodern age.

Postmodernisms are as diverse as the modernisms they reject. Postmodern architecture is premised on a rejection of the principles of modern design developed by the Bauhaus school, while in social theory, postmodernism involves a rejection of the abstract and totalizing economic and political systems characteristic of modern societies. In literature and the visual arts, postmodernism is premised on a rejection of formalist modes of interpretation and representation, while in philosophical and theological circles, postmodernism is a rejection of the ideals and aspirations informing the period we now call 'modern philosophy,' a period that began with Descartes and culminated in Kant. At the heart of all these rejected modernisms is the attempt to achieve something transcending cultural, historical, and personal bias. In architecture and the arts, for example, modernists aspire to create artifacts so thoroughly self-referential that the context in which they are produced or displayed becomes irrelevant. Thus we get box-like buildings in the International Style, whose design can be replicated everywhere because it makes no special accommodations anywhere, and abstract paintings so resolute in their refusal to point beyond themselves that they simply are what they are—paint on canvas—no matter where they are hung. In social theory, on the other hand, we get a distinction between modern and primitive societies that has much to do with the degree to which a society is able to measure its well-being in quantitative terms. Here too there is an attempt at transcendence, and a faith that personal and cultural biases can be shed by speaking the language of numbers. Although the conviction that this language is the key to a proper understanding of modern social structures did not come into full flower until our own century, it had its roots in the mathematical turn the natural sciences took several centuries earlier. Coincident with this turn came the grandest modernist project of them all: the heroic attempt of the modern philosopher to legitimate laws both scientific and moral through the transcendental exercise of pure reason.

If modernism in every instance involves an attempt to transcend the particulars of time and place and escape cultural bias, then postmodernism is the rejection of this "transcendental pretense." [4] For postmodern philosophers, this means rejecting the claims their predecessors made on behalf of pure reason and insisting that all our reasonings, and indeed the very standards we employ as we reason, are contingent on the complex cultural matrices within which they take place. This shift away from transcendental reason toward

embedded reason has the effect of politicizing reason: "postmodernists urge us to recognize the highest ideals of modernity in the West as immanent to a specific historical time and geographical region and also associated with certain political baggage."[5] The model of rationality passed down to us by modern thinkers thus reflects the power struggles that characterized the emergence of modernity. Had less power been yielded to those working in the natural sciences, the sorts of evidence we find compelling might be radically different; had women held more powerful positions in the culture, a sharp distinction between the rational and the affective might be much less a part of our intellectual lives; had antagonisms between Reformers and the Church taken a different turn, we might place far less emphasis on the individual knower and far more on the community of knowers; and so on.

The politicizing of reason raises important questions about the role of philosophy in a postmodern age. There is a long tradition, going back at least to Plato, that distinguishes philosophers from political power brokers; philosophy is not to be confused with sophistry, for philosophers are concerned not with power but with truth, and, more specifically, with a kind of truth that transcends the political maneuvers of the day. Now, if the transcendence sought by modern philosophers reflects a core aspiration of the entire western tradition, then rejecting this aspiration is a very serious matter indeed, for it amounts to rejecting the entire tradition. And so we can see why some contemporary philosophers have felt forced to draw the discomfiting conclusion that with the dawning of the postmodern age the history of their discipline has come to a close.[6]

Before moving too quickly to the conclusion that philosophy has no place in a postmodern world we should pause to consider the following. First, the notion that the entire western tradition can be summed up in terms of a single core aspiration is surely oversimple. It may even be oversimple as a reading of the period we call modern. If so, rejecting the urge to transcendence need not mean rejecting the entire tradition of western philosophical thought. Instead of proclaiming the end of philosophy one might instead call for its transformation: philosophy has a role to play in a postmodern age, but because the postmodern age is a different age than the modern, its role will be different. As I see it, taking seriously the postmodern claim that our reasoning is always embedded in complex cultural matrices does not require, and in fact prohibits, adopting the extreme view that philosophy has come to an end. Here I can do no better than quote Derrida, who despite frequent billing as a partisan of the extreme view, quite sensibly points out that critiques of philosophy "still belong to our western culture and so are never totally free from the marks of philosophical language."[7] The notion that we can cease to do philosophy when we live in a culture so mightily shaped by the philosophical efforts of our predecessors has all the marks of yet another attempt

to transcend our cultural milieu by shedding all our cultural baggage over-
night. Appealing to postmodern thought to argue we have come to the end of
philosophy thus violates a key postmodern insight.

Although taking seriously the postmodern critique of transcendence does
not require and even militates against the view that philosophy has come to
an end, it may still require thinking seriously about ways in which philosophy
needs to be transformed. For the remainder of this paper I will take it as given
that philosophy is not about to disappear any time soon. My concern will thus
be with ways we might transform our ideas about what philosophy has to
teach us. If we are in fact feeling our way toward a new paradigm in philoso-
phy, then it is hardly surprising that we should take a special interest in the
work of those philosophers in our recent past who see themselves as making
a radical break with tradition. My guess is that one reason for the recent
revival of interest in Nietzsche's philosophy is our fascination with his claim
to have seen a new species of philosopher "coming up over the horizon."[8]
This new philosopher, Nietzsche seemed to think, will come at the world with
a fundamentally different attitude than earlier philosophers: an attitude of
suspicion. I want now to turn to a closer examination of this link between
suspicion and philosophy, beginning with a brief analysis of suspicion, and
then moving on to consider how suspicion might serve to transform philosophy.

III

'You're probably right,' Leighton said. 'As soon as something
looks suspicious, everything looks suspicious....'[9]
—Amanda Cross, *No Word from Winifred*

Suspicion takes many forms. It can be directed at a specific proposition, as
when we say we suspect *that* something or other is the case, or it can be
directed at a person or situation, as when we say we are suspicious *of* some-
one's motives or some plan of action. When I say I suspect *that* something
is so (as opposed to saying I believe or know it is so) this may be a way of
indicating that my attitude toward the relevant proposition is somewhat ten-
tative. On some occasions, it may also be a way of warning the person to
whom I am speaking that I am about to assert something the truth of which
would run counter to normal expectations. When I say I am suspicious *of*
someone, the question of whether a given proposition is true or false may not
even arise, for to be suspicious of a person or plan of action it is not necessary
to suspect that something or other is the case. I can, for example, be suspi-
cious of you even if I know relatively little about you and thus am entirely
incapable of saying what it is that makes me so uneasy in your presence. On
the other hand, while 'suspicion of' is not itself a propositional attitude, it
supplies an attitudinal context which can give rise to relevant propositional
attitudes. Being suspicious of you can serve to make me more attentive to

details of your behavior than I would be otherwise, and I may eventually come to believe I have seen through your ostensible motives to the real motives lurking beneath the surface. I may also conclude that this puts me in a better position to exercise control over you, and my having this belief may in itself be enough to alter significantly the balance of power in our relationship.

Let us now consider what it might mean for suspicion to supply a context for the philosophical enterprise. Paul Ricoeur identifies Nietzsche, along with Freud and Marx, as one of the great 'masters of the school of suspicion.' He writes that

> If we go back to the intention they had in common, we find in it the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false conscious-ness'.... What all three attempted to do was to make their 'conscious meth-ods' of deciphering coincide with the 'unconscious' work of ciphering which they attributed to the will of power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism.... The man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsifi-cation of the man of guile.[10]

For Nietzsche, the 'man of suspicion' is none other than the new philosopher he spies coming over the horizon. This new philosopher, he claims, has a "duty to be mistrustful, to squint most maliciously from every abyss of sus-picion."[11] Suspicion, then, is a moral calling; it is the only attitude one can responsibly adopt given that "the fallaciousness of the world in which we think and live is the firmest and most certain thing that meets our eye."[12]

The suspicion Nietzsche describes here is a radically generalized version of the 'suspicion of' described earlier. It does not merely color our relations with another person; it colors our experience of the world as a whole. Pressing the analogy to 'suspicion of,' we can think of Nietzsche's generalized suspi-cion as a habit of mind keeping us alert to details and dissonances, highlight-ing breaks in the patterns that shape our experience while simultaneously stimulating us to see new patterns in those breaks. But if we generalize suspicion so radically that, as Ricoeur puts it, we suspect "the whole of consciousness," these new patterns also become suspect. Our philosophical deciphering become every bit as much an exercise of the will to power as the nonphilosophical ciphers they address. Philosophy can no longer lay any claim to have transcended issues of power so as to deal solely with issues of truth. The distinction between truth and power falls away as irrelevant and the distinction between sophistry and philosophy collapses.

Adopting radical suspicion as a fundamental attitude toward the world thus brings us to just the place the postmodern philosopher claims we should be. But if philosophy is simply a matter of offering new ciphers in place of old, is there any reason for us to continue to bother with it? Here the philosopher of suspicion might respond by pointing out that the urge to transcend is strong and is unlikely to be eliminated from human affairs any time soon. As long

as this urge persists, we will need philosophers trained in the art of puncturing its pretensions. Suspicion aids philosophers in this task by increasing their sensitivity to elements that jar and putting them on the alert to hidden biases. In pointing out these biases, the philosopher will, of course, also be working from a biased position. But this, rather than spelling the doom of philosophy, guarantees its future: philosophy as critique supplies endless fodder for further critique.

So far my discussion of philosophy and suspicion has been primarily descriptive. I want now to offer some evaluative remarks. First, it should be obvious by this point that the themes informing postmodern philosophy are not entirely new in the history of western thought. Postmodern thinkers may be more extreme in their claims about the degree to which our very standards of reason are biased then previous skeptics and relativists have been, but the challenges they pose to the ideal of transcendent reason have been around a long time. We find similar challenges posed in the Platonic dialogues, and, in those same dialogues, we find strategies for responding to them. The most popular of these strategies is to point out that attacks on transcendence inevitably run into self-referential difficulties. We can thus imagine an objection to postmodernism that goes something like this: Postmodern philosophers claim that transcendence is impossible and that all our claims are tainted by cultural bias. If they intend this claim about cultural bias to be unbiased, they are caught in a logical inconsistency, for they are making a claim to transcendence at the same time as they are claiming transcendence is impossible. On the other hand, if they allow that their claim is biased, we have no reason to pay more heed to it than to opposing claims. But surely the claim was put forward with the intention that it be heeded; thus putting forward the claim that all our claims are biased, where this claim is itself biased, is a self-defeating exercise.

While there may be something to this objection, I do not find it entirely satisfying. To explain where I think it falls short, I want to consider briefly the effectiveness of accusing adherents of classical skepticism of self-referential incoherence, looking at both Academic and Pyrrhonic skepticism.[13] The Academic skeptic claims to have arguments by which we can come to know that nothing can be known. Here the charge of self-referential incoherence has considerable bite, for in this case the skeptic engages in the activity of argumentation with the clear intention of supplying knowledge at the same time as, if successful, he or she makes knowledge impossible. The situation is rather different in the case of Pyrrhonism. Here arguments are given to the effect that we cannot know whether anything can be known, not with the intention of supplying knowledge, but with the intention of inducing *ataraxia*, an attitude of tranquility and unperturbedness in which we cease to strive after knowledge. Now, it might be that the Pyrrhonist's arguments turn out

to be poor devices for inducing the desired state of mind, but this is to accuse the Pyrrhonist of a rather different sort of failure than a failure of logical coherence. Indeed, there is a sense in which the logical coherence of the Pyrrhonist's arguments is neither here nor there as long as they produce the desired attitudinal effect. Furthermore, to those who object that putting forward arguments at all runs counter to the goal of achieving *ataraxia*, Pyrrhonists can reply as Sextus Empiricus did, and ask their objectors to view their arguments as ladders that those who strive after knowledge are obliged to take seriously, but ladders which once climbed are to be kicked away. Understood in this fashion, there is a sense in which the Pyrrhonist's activity of offering arguments is self-defeating, but it is a form of self-defeat conducive to achieving the desired rhetorical end.

It seems to me that postmodern philosophers of suspicion are engaging in a Pyrrhonic rather than an Academic activity. That is, their claims are put forward primarily to induce or reinforce a certain attitude toward the world. This being the case charges of logical incoherence simply miss the point. All that matters is that making these claims proves useful in cultivating the desired attitude. If these claims provoke the response that they reflect the biases of a postmodern culture, this is all to the good, as it indicates the seeds of suspicion are being successfully sown. Furthermore, the fact that these claims are biased does not mean they can be ignored. The postmodern rejection of transcendence is presented not simply as an abstract thesis about the limitations of rationality, but as a moral drawn from quite detailed and extensive work critically examining the biases inherent in the projects of modernity. Here, as a prime example, one might think of the work of cultural historian Michel Foucault. Or, consider the work of contemporary feminists like Carol Gilligan, who are reimagining rationality to reflect biases in women's patterns of thought rather than men's. These postmodern thinkers may not themselves transcend bias, but they are raising questions about bias that anyone who claims to reason from a transcendent point of view cannot responsibly ignore.

Suppose we grant our models of rationality are bound to be biased by the cultural context in which they are employed, and that philosophy is indeed served by and servant of generalized attitudes toward the world. This still leaves us with the question of why philosophers should cultivate this attitude rather than that. Having granted the postmodern philosopher as much as we have, we are forced to acknowledge that any attempt to offer a universally acceptable justification of the desirability of a particular attitude is bound to fail. But just as the inevitable embeddedness of rationality has not prevented feminist philosophers from trying to imagine alternative modes of rationality, so the impossibility of offering a universally acceptable defense of one atti-

tudinal context over another need not prevent us from trying to imagine alternative attitudinal contexts for philosophy. This is what I want to do in the section that follows, where I consider trust as a generalized attitude that can serve and be served by philosophy.

IV

> ...the clever one desires by the help of evasions to have strength in advance. He wishes to misuse it like the soldier who, in order to be sure of being distinguished in battle, demands his distinction in advance. And yet this picture is untrue, for it is doubtful how far the battle gives strength. But it is certain, that the confidence, wherewith he has ventured, does give superhuman strength. Yet it is also certain (oh wonderful accuracy!) that the one who does not have trust does not receive this strength.[14]
> — Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*

Trust, like suspicion, can be construed as a propositional attitude. When I say 'I trust that the bank is still open' I assume the proposition 'The bank is still open' is a true description of a particular state of affairs. Saying I trust that this is so, rather than that I believe or know it is so, can be a way of reassuring my hearer that I am familiar with the bank and its hours of business. It can also be a way of conveying my belief that the bank is still open while at the same time indicating I have no direct evidence that this is so. Trust that something is the case thus seems to presume a certain degree of familiarity with the relevant circumstances while also leaving open the possibility that circumstances with which one is unfamiliar may prove one wrong. Trust *in* differs from trust *that* in being directed at an agent rather than a proposition. The agent can be personal ('I trust in you to do what is best') or impersonal ('I trust in fate to work matters out for the best'). Trust in an agent need not be bound up with specific expectations about what that agent will do. Trust in fate to work matters out for the best implies a willingness to construe a wide variety of outcomes as ultimately serving some beneficent end. Similarly, trust in other persons to do what is best is often compatible with their acting in a wide variety of ways, many of which could not have been anticipated in advance. The deeper my trust in you, the more freedom I will give you to act as you see fit and the less dependent my trust will be on your acting in a way I could have foreseen. The power relations set up by trust are thus quite different from those put into play by suspicion; to trust in someone is to give power over to them rather than to try to gain power over them.

We can get some idea of what it might mean to do philosophy in a context of trust by looking at the relationship between Socrates and his interlocutors. In a famous passage in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates offers a lengthy description of himself as an intellectual midwife. Along the way, he makes it clear that he cannot practice his skills on just anyone:

> Dire are the pangs which my art is able to arouse and allay in those who
> consort with me, just like the pangs of women in childbirth; night and day
> they are full of perplexity and travail which is even worse than that of women.
> So much for them. And there are others, Theaetetus, who come to me appar-
> ently not in a state of pregnancy; and as I know that they have no need of
> my art, I coax them into marrying someone, and by the grace of God I can
> generally tell who is likely to do them some good. Many of them I have given
> away to Prodicus and many to other inspired sages.[15]

Socrates concludes the passage by telling Theaetetus he is a young man who
appears to be pregnant with some great conception. This is not, however,
always the case with Socrates' interlocutors.

Consider, for example, Meno. When an impatient Meno comes blustering
up to Socrates, demanding to know whether virtue can be taught, Socrates
refuses to answer that question until they answer the prior question of what
virtue is. When Meno takes a stab at defining virtue Socrates quickly reduces
him to perplexity and the whole discussion threatens to run aground on a
sophistical paradox. Socrates then calls over a slave boy and shows Meno
how one reduced to perplexity can be brought into clarity. He proposes to do
the same for Meno, but Meno refuses to follow the example of the slave boy,
insisting on bypassing the difficult business of trying to define virtue, to
return to the question of whether it can be taught. Socrates yields to Meno,
saying he cannot do otherwise seeing as Meno can think of nothing but trying
to control him. From that point on, the dialogue is an exercise in pure soph-
istry, complete with poetic praises extolling the Sophists as teachers of virtue.
Meno has clearly been found unfit for the practice of philosophy and has, as
it were, been "given away to Prodicus."

Now contrast Meno with Theaetetus. From the start Theaetetus is willing
to put himself in Socrates' hands, saying that if he should make a mistake
along the way in their discussion, he is sure Socrates will set him right. With
Theaetetus there is no impatience and no rush, but time for lengthy digres-
sions. Theaetetus commits himself to the long haul, and is willing to follow
the discussion wherever it may lead. His first attempt to define knowledge
pulls on that which is familiar and close to hand—perception—but as the
dialogue proceeds he launches out into less familiar territory, until by the
end, he says, he has given utterance to more than he knew he had in him.
Although he and Socrates are no more successful in arriving at a definition
of knowledge than Socrates and Meno were in arriving at a definition of
virtue, Theaetetus is not handed over to the Sophists, but rather, to the
Stranger. In the sequel dialogue to the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, Theaetetus
and the Stranger not only succeed in defining the terms they set out to define,
but, along the way, clear up various confusions about the nature of false
judgment that had been problematic in the earlier discussion with Socrates.

Notice how much depends here on the attitudes each of these interlocutors

brings to their relationship with Socrates. Meno appears on the scene ready to engage in a battle with Socrates; throughout the dialogue he does his best to impose his own agenda on the conversation. Theaetetus, on the other hand, is willing to trust Socrates to take the conversation where he thinks best. Rather than eyeing Socrates suspiciously across a battlefield. Theaetetus entrusts himself to Socrates in the way that patients entrust themselves to their physicians. And though all the children Theaetetus gives birth to under Socrates' care turn out to be windeggs, his labor has not been in vain—for, as Socrates says at the end of the dialogue, their exercise together will at the very least serve to make Theaetetus more gentle with those around him and less apt to think he knows something he does not.

So far, then, we have a vision of philosophy that does not seem to violate the postmodern strictures against the transcendental pretense. As was the case for a philosophy of suspicion, Socratic philosophy has its end, or so it seems, in the cultivation of a particular attitude toward the world. The arguments Socrates offers serve a rhetorical purpose, and the measure of their success is the impact they have on the way Theaetetus carries on in his own quite specific cultural context. But Theaetetus' interactions with Socrates are not the end of the story. Socrates includes among his skills as midwife a talent for matchmaking. Meno he consigns to the Sophists, but Theaetetus is put in the hands of a master dialectician. Clearly Plato, unlike the philosopher of suspicion, makes a distinction between sophistry and philosophy. Socrates himself is neither sophist nor philosopher, but something between the two— the sophist of noble lineage. Although he does not explicitly name him, Socrates is clearly the 'purifier of the soul' the Stranger has in mind when he tells Theaetetus that

> as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted and from his refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudice first and made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more.[16]

Thus although Socrates, operating on the turf midway between sophistry and philosophy, cannot himself give Theaetetus knowledge, he can prepare Theaetetus to "benefit from the application of knowledge" once he is put in the hands of the true philosopher.

At this point it may seem we have left postmodernism behind and returned to just the vision of philosophy we earlier rejected. The notion that we can be 'purged of our prejudices' and go on from there to acquire knowledge seems diametrically opposed to the postmodern insistence that all our claims to knowledge are tainted by biases of one sort or another. But I am inclined to think the version of the philosophical enterprise we see on display in the

Platonic dialogues is not as antithetical to postmodern thought as it at first appears. In these dialogues everything hangs on the attitudinal context in which discourse is carried out. We can see this when we compare the way things go for Socrates' various interlocutors, but we also have the words of Plato himself in the Seventh Letter to consider. There he makes it clear that "close companionship" and "benevolent disputation by the use of question and answer without jealousy" are necessary preconditions for that flash of understanding that blazes up when the mind, as it exerts all its powers to the limits of human capacity, is flooded with light.[17] But now what about that flash? Have we here just another example of the transcendental pretense? Perhaps so. But it is worth noting that the understanding that blazes up is nondiscursive: "there is no way of putting it in words like other studies."[18] Thus we still have an understanding of philosophical discourse as serving a nondiscursive end.

Whatever Plato himself may have had in mind here, I think we can use the material he gives us in his dialogues to construct an alternative to the philosophy of suspicion that need not violate the postmodern strictures against transcendence, but which at the same time does not collapse the distinction between philosophy and sophistry. When I read the *Sophist*, it often seems to me that what is going on there can be read as surprisingly Wittgensteinian in spirit. In the first segment of the dialogue, Theaetetus and the Stranger repeatedly apply the method of collection and division to produce a quite thorough map of the various uses of the term 'Sophist' that were abroad in Athenian culture. A number of definitions are offered that taken together display to very good effect the family resemblances between these various uses. A closer look at these definitions, however, leads them into confusions of a sort that even then had a long philosophical pedigree—confusions Theaetetus had earlier shown himself prey to in his discussion with Socrates. There then follows a lengthy exploration of the philosophical language game surrounding the use of terms like 'being' and 'nonbeing.' The confusions are eventually dispelled, and a final definition of the sophist is offered that both Theaetetus and the Stranger find satisfactory.

If we allow this description of what is going on in the *Sophist*, we have a model for doing philosophy that does not pretend to a perspective of transcendence, but is distinctly grounded in a particular linguistic framework that at least in some respects could have been other than it was. The job of the philosopher is to clarify usage, uncovering sources of confusion and eliminating them so that we might, as the Stranger puts it, reach an explicit agreement about the definition of our terms. The precondition for this achievement in the *Sophist* is the attitude of trust Theaetetus brought to the conversation, an attitude that was initially present but which was also cultivated in his interaction with Socrates. By trusting Socrates, Theaetetus was

purged of his prejudices, not in the sense that he was removed from his cultural context and set loose on the exalted plane of pure reason, but in the sense that he was made ready for the kind of give and take that allows one to form explicit agreements with others. In *The Man Without Qualities* Robert Musil describes one of his characters as "longing to talk, for once, to somebody with whom he could wholly agree...then the words are drawn out of the breast by some mysterious power and none of them misses its mark."[19] In the *Sophist*, much turns not only on the mutual trust between Theaetetus and the Stranger, but on the fact that together they are willing to trust the "mysterious power" of dialectic to draw out their words. They are not merely reaching an agreement between the two of them as to how to use their words, but are exploring a larger language game that places various constraints on them and acts as a corrective when they take a wrong turn. It is this sense that one can be corrected that is missing from the discourse of the Sophist. The Sophists, the Stranger says, engage in a "shadow play of discourse" which they impose upon the young, but, he goes on to ask, is it not "inevitable that, after a long enough time, as these hearers advance in age...all the illusions created in discourse will be completely overturned by the realities that encounter them in the actual conduct of life?"[20] The implication here is that if the Stranger and Theaetetus succeed in moving beyond shadow play to arrive at a definition of the Sophist that "hits the mark," it will not be because their words have somehow magically flown free from their linguistic context to attach themselves to a transcendent reality, but because their words can now be used to communicate without producing confusion in the actual conduct of their lives.

V

> Understanding oneself properly is difficult, because an action to which one *might* be prompted by good, generous motives is something one may also be doing out of cowardice or indifference. Certainly, one may be acting in such and such a way out of genuine love, but equally well out of deceitfulness, or a cold heart. Just as not all gentleness is a form of goodness. And only if I were able to submerge myself in religion could these doubts be stilled. Because only religion would have the power to destroy vanity and penetrate all the nooks and crannies.[21]
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

At this point we have considered two quite different attitudinal contexts for philosophy. In describing these two attitudes I appealed (quite selectively and somewhat idiosyncratically) to works by both Nietzsche and Plato. Both these philosophers are, of course, far more complex than I have let on, and, similarly, so is the current state of postmodern discourse. Postmodern discourse is not by any means universally a discourse of suspicion. For every Richard Rorty who wants to transform philosophy into an ironical enterprise,

there is an Emmanuel Levinas who wants philosophy to open us up to "the infinity of the other who transcends every attempt to reduce him to our totalizing grasp."[22] The situation is further complicated by those postmodern philosophers who veer back and forth between a philosophy of suspicion and a philosophy of trust. There is Derrida the philosopher of suspicion for whom "the only justification for transforming philosophy into a specialized discipline is the necessity to render explicit and thematic the philosophical subtext in every discourse."[23] And there is Derrida the philosopher of trust for whom deconstruction is "a positive response to an alterity...a vocation—a response to a call.... The other precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any questioning can begin."[24]

Perhaps the moral we should draw here is that both trust and suspicion have a role to play in postmodern philosophy. The important question is whether suspicion is to provide the attitudinal context for trust or *vice versa*. To engage in discourse at all one must invest a minimal degree of trust in what one is doing. One must, for example, trust that the words one chooses will have certain sorts of effects. Yet this trust, if colored by an attitude of suspicion, is shallow and does not leave much room for "hitting the mark" in the way Musil describes. "Man," to quote Musil again, "is a being that can no more stand up to suspicion than tissue paper up to rain."[25] The same could be said of our philosophical discourse when it takes place in a context of suspicion. Instead of conceiving of philosophy as teaching us to suspect what we trust, however, we might reverse the formula and conceive of philosophy as teaching us to trust what we suspect. Philosophical discourse, on this reading, is an attempt to articulate our suspicions regarding the implications of our beliefs. By trusting these suspicions, we allow ourselves to be drawn along in directions we could not have previously anticipated, raising puzzles that, once worked through, might bring us a clarity regarding our own forms of life which otherwise would have eluded us.

But now what does all this imply for Christian philosophy in a postmodern age? The view that philosophy should provoke us to suspect that which we trust closes in on itself in a way that strikes me as being incompatible with a Christian perspective on the world. In the first place, philosophy done in this way cultivates an attitude of generalized suspicion that runs counter to the Christian message of redemption. As Wittgenstein notes in the quote heading this section, any action done out of good and generous motives can also be seen as having its source in some deceitfulness. Viewing oneself through the lens of a generalized attitude of suspicion, one will look for, and inevitably see signs of this deceitfulness. Now, doubts about the purity of one's motives can play a useful role in the life of the Christian, if they are the means by which he or she is reminded of the need to trust in God's redemptive power. But to play this role, suspicion must operate in the context of trust, rather than *vice versa*. This, I take it, is Wittgenstein's point in saying

that "...only if I were able to submerge myself in religion could these doubts be stilled." Religion makes possible a generalized attitude of trust that can color even our worst suspicions regarding our deceitfulness with the hues of redemption. Without religion, suspicion gains the upper hand; our doubts can never be stilled, and our preoccupation with our own sinfulness becomes in effect a rejection of redemption.

By sending us off on an infinite series of critiques of our own critiques, a philosophy that teaches us to suspect that which we trust produces the intellectual analog of the self-absorbed sinner. A Christian philosopher is committed to believing that there is a reality that transcends our own constructions of it, and focusing all our energies on deconstructing these constructions closes us off from all contact with that reality. But is a philosophy that teaches us to trust that which we suspect any better in this regard than one that teaches us to suspect that which we trust? Diogenes Allen urges that a committed Christian giving the reasons for his or her commitment wants to say that, in the end, he or she believes in the Christian story because it is *true*.[26] If we think of philosophy along the lines I suggested when giving my Wittgensteinian reading of the *Sophist*, it may seem we are making truth a matter of agreement. But if I say I am committed to the truth of Christianity, this is saying more than that members of the Christian community have agreed to treat certain claims about Christ as true. It may be saying at least that much, but it is surely also saying more, where this more has something to do with a transcendent reality.

The question then becomes how we are to construe the role of a transcendent reality in our conception of this 'more.' Throughout this paper I have simply been granting the postmodern thinker that there is no such thing as pure reason that we can employ to get at truth from some transcendent point of view. Perhaps this was a mistake, and we need to go back and look at the arguments for and against transcendence more carefully. My own inclination, however, is to think that the postmodern philosopher is right, and that it is part of our being creatures that all our reasonings are inevitably embedded in culture and history—and in the attitudinal contexts within which we operate. Taking a close look at these attitudinal contexts can, I think, provide the Christian with a way of rejecting the transcendental pretense without also rejecting the Transcendent. As we saw earlier, adopting an attitude of trust involves one in a dialectic between the familiar and the unfamiliar that requires being open to having one's expectations transformed by an attentiveness to that which is other than oneself. For the Christian, the openness to transformation will have to be very radical indeed, for the Christian assumes there is an Other whose power to correct and transform goes beyond anything we can readily imagine. The Christian is called, in other words, to a very deep form of trust. The transformation made possible by this deep trust is not a matter of my suddenly ascending to a transcendent point of view as I

articulate my Christian commitments, but rather, it is a matter of the Transcendent descending to infuse my utterances in such a way that there is a context of agreement between God's will and my own.

Thus when I say I am committed to Christianity because I believe it is true, I am not simply claiming to have come to an agreement with other Christians about how I use certain words. On the other hand, when I say the Creed, if my words hit the mark, it will not be because this or that proposition can, from some neutral perspective of pure reason, be seen to map on to a particular state of affairs. If my words will hit the mark it will be because the whole context of my utterance is in agreement with God's will and infused by God's spirit. And, because an important part of the context of utterance is my membership in a community of believers, bringing the context of my utterance into agreement with God's will requires me to join with other believers in the articulation of the Christian language game. Christian philosophers can provide a genuine service in contributing to this articulation—not by providing transcendent and culturally neutral accounts of God's nature which then set the stage for our relationship for God, for that is the way of idolatry, but by setting out to clarify and explore our discourse about a relationship God has set the stage for by reaching out to us in our very particular cultural settings.

Much of what contemporary Christian philosophers are doing at the moment amounts to exploring the language game played by the Christian community, working out the kinks raised as we try to speak about a good God in a world where there is much evil, for example, or clarifying our concepts of rationality and considering ways in which our standards of rationality might be influenced by our Christian commitments and *vice versa*. This is important work, and in itself is enough to guarantee Christian philosophy a future in the postmodern age. It seems to me, however, that Christian philosophers can and ought to aspire to more. If the vision of postmodern philosophy I have been presenting above has any lesson to teach it is that philosophical discourse on these matters will serve and be served by generalized attitudes of one sort or another. The attitude of radically generalized trust I have been associating with a Christian perspective on the world demands a radical openness that should push the Christian philosopher beyond dialogue simply with other Christians. In that case, the importance of the contributions Christian philosophers will make to philosophy in a postmodern age will have less to do with the topics they discuss than the attitudes they bring to the discussion. If we are persuasive, we will persuade not just by what we say, but by what we show in our way of saying it—by our openness to correction, our patience in our explorations, our benevolent disputation, and our willingness to trust.[27]

Saint Mary's College
Notre Dame, Indiana

NOTES

1. P. 102, August Strindberg, *The Father*, pp. 81-119 in *Classics of the Modern Theater: Realism and After*, edited by Alvin B. Kernan (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965).

2. As quoted by Edith Wyschogrod in *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 125.

3. A useful discussion of this range of contexts can be found in Steven Connor's *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

4. The term 'transcendental pretense' is borrowed from Robert C. Solomon. His *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) contains in its final chapter a useful account of the emergence of postmodernism out of structuralism and poststructuralism, as well as a brief introduction to the key themes in the thought of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

5. Linda J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 4.

6. A useful collection of pieces relevant to postmodern debates on the end of philosophy can be found in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, edited by Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987).

7. Jacques Derrida, as quoted in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 109.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Marianne Cowan (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1955), p. 3.

9. Amanda Cross, *No Word from Winifred* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), p. 10.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 33-34.

11. Nietzsche, p. 41.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

13. In my characterization of the difference between these two varieties of skepticism I am relying on Richard H. Popkin's *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

14. Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, translated by Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1938), p. 129.

15. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151b, pp. 245-46 in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

16. Plato, *Sophist*, 230c, p. 973 in *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961).

17. Plato, *Letter VII*, 341d, 344d, pp. 1589-1591 in *Plato: Collected Dialogues*.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 341d.

19. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, volume I, translated by E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser (New York: Perigee Books, Putnam and Sons, 1980), p. 257.

20. Plato, *Sophist*, 234d, p. 977 in *Plato: Collected Dialogues.*

21. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 48e.

22. Kearney, p. 49.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

25. Musil, p. 243.

26. Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 1.

27. Much of the initial research for this paper was carried out at the 1992 Coolidge Research Colloquium in Cambridge, Massachusetts; I also owe much to Morar and John Lucas whose generous hospitality enabled me to continue my research in Oxford, and to the Wheaton College Philosophy Department for the opportunity to present this paper at the 1992 Wheaton Philosophy Conference on "Christian Philosophy in a Post-Modern World." In addition, I owe a special debt to Jeanne Rodes for her wisdom and insight that, at a crucial moment in the writing of this paper, made all the difference.