POSTMODERN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: A SHEEP IN WOLF’S CLOTHING?

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In public administration, as in many disciplines, “modernism” and the influence of the Enlightenment has been deplored. This criticism comes somewhat late to public administration, though is forcefully used to chastise modern governmental administration for its failure to take on innovations yielding more just and responsive behavior on the part of administrators and their institutions. Particularly, modernism’s infatuation with individualism and scientific progress has left a landscape littered with institutionalized racism, misogyny, injustice, and an incredible resistance to change. In recent years, many public administration scholars have turned to postmodernism as a means to undercut the hegemony of the modernist position in the administrative world. While we admire the goals of these authors we must deplore the way in which they have gone about their work. Insufficient appreciation for the origins of postmodernist epistemology has led many of these authors to become just as deplorably modernist as their predecessors. This mistake is to reinvent modernism in a new form, not to use postmodernism as a liberating, transformative device, as they claim to do.

Lyotard was right that we need to give up on grand narratives. But his critics are right that we have to find a way of doing so that will not dramatize our own achievement. For such dramatization will result in one more grand narrative, namely, the kind of philosophy of current events that tells us how excitingly different we intellectuals have just now become (Rorty 1995, 59).

The state of the discipline is a highly contentious subject. Whether the current debates are described as “a sign of crisis or intellectual vitality”
(Lovrich 1985, 307), scholars of public administration cannot function without being aware of the current state of discontent, both within and without the discipline. As Kettl notes, “public administration has long struggled with a...basic problem--the accumulation of knowledge” (Kettl 1990, 408). A great deal of effort has been put into developing some coherent and consistent research agenda for public administration. Yet some contend that public administration has simply “lurched from one fad to another...only to discover that ‘new’ approaches frequently rehash old ideas” (Kettl 1990, 408). Is postmodern public administration one of these fads to which Kettl refers, or is it truly a novel approach to the study of the field? This is the central question of this essay.

The development of public administration reflects a diversity that may be overstated to some extent. The traditional problems of public administration have not changed since the days of Hamilton, and public administration’s eventual divorce from political science sharpened these questions. Questions such as administrators’ accountability and authority, the proper balance between theory and practice, and attempts to define the central problems of public administration that make it a distinctive and important field of study, its raison d’etre, have plagued the discipline from its beginnings.

Despite some promising candidates for resolving the intellectual dilemmas of public administration, none have proven to be satisfactory. As a result, many conclude that public administration suffers from a kind of intellectual schizophrenia, and is forced to rely on developments in other areas of study, such as psychology, economics, and sociology without being able to establish building blocks of its own. This dependency is not regarded as a “sign of vitality,” and Nicholas Henry (1990) concludes that this will ultimately be the downfall of the discipline, and that it must strive to develop its own coherent agenda or ultimately fail.

Other theorists and scholars of public administration, discontented with the development of the field itself, have taken a different approach in their quest to resolve the major problems that public administration faces. Specifically, calls for a “postmodern public administration” are becoming increasingly popular as scholars look for alternatives to what have been perceived as the oppressive and limiting characteristics of traditional “modern” narratives. Thus, some in public administration have begun to attach themselves to what has been referred to as “postmodernism.” Some
might respond that this attention paid to postmodernism is likely to be short-lived and represents no real threat to traditional methods of training in public administration. In our opinion, such a view would already be wishful thinking: strong publishing positions and markers of respect have already been achieved and staked out. And judging by the effect that postmodernism in its various incarnations has already had on our colleagues in political science, law, history, English, and communications, one must be very optimistic to see postmodernism as a weak threat with questionable staying power.

Drawing from the work of many postmodernists, some theorists in public administration are following the lead of many others in the social sciences and incorporating the work of these philosophers into their own frameworks of study. Examples are Postmodern Public Administration: Towards Discourse (Fox and Miller 1995) and The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity, and Postmodernity (Farmer 1995). Other scholars have more tentatively attached themselves to this new perspective. While not being as explicit as Fox, Miller, and Farmer, Wamsley et al. (1990), the authors of Refounding Public Administration have a new volume, Refounding Democratic Public Administration: Modern Paradoxes, Postmodern Challenges (Wamsley and Wolf 1996), which has a distinctively postmodern character to it. These authors are not new to the field, are not the young Turk staring down the aged, but are experienced and well-published colleagues. This sort of experimentation with a new approach by journeymen and senior scholars does not indicate a fad. Additionally, the American Behavioral Scientist (1997) recently devoted an issue to postmodernism. Assuming that postmodernism is, at least for the foreseeable future, a topic of increasing interest to public administration scholars, it seems timely to define, assess, and explain what postmodernism is and where it comes from. Too often postmodernism is seen as a methodology, a “way to read” which is devoid of historical context, but the origins of postmodernism are important because for they illuminate points methodology never could.

As others who see themselves in the vanguard of sea-change in how the world is to be interpreted, postmodernists feel as though they have found the perspective from which to make a radical critique of public administration practice and theory. Although this claim may have some merit, they undercut their footing by succumbing to the same malady of the modernism they
attack: the belief that their view of the world is one undistorted by false theories, inadequate explanatory theories of reality, or the illicit use of power. Their claim is not that they see public administration differently, or that postmodemism would help us to look at it differently, but that they see it more clearly, see it as it truly is and has been.

The various incarnations of foundationalism also purported to have special access to truth. Foundationalism refers to "any attempt to ground inquiry and communication in something more firm and stable than mere belief or unexamined practice. The foundationalist strategy is first to identify that ground and then so to order our activities that they become anchored to it and thereby rendered objective and principled" (Fish 1989, 342).

Thus, an antifoundationalist perspective is suspicious of claims that theory "grounds" the real and the true:

Antifoundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extra contextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality, or rule, or law, or value; rather, antifoundationalism asserts, all of these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape. It is not just that antifoundationalism replaces the components of the foundationalist world-picture with other components; instead, it denies to those components the stability and independence and even the identity that is so necessary if they are to be thought of as grounds or anchors (Fish 1989, 345).

Postmodernism, perforce, must be antifoundationalist, but postmodernist public administration theorists have adopted the liturgy without understanding its origins and underlying epistemology. Through an examination of Wittgenstein and Davidson this paper demonstrates how current authors have failed to understand the origins of postmodernism and thus have committed themselves to a series of self-referential inconsistencies.

In the section devoted to an explanation of antifoundationalism we separate its various strands and show how these strands relate to each other,
but it is important to keep in mind that this essay is a critique more than it is a prescription. That is, this paper is simply trying to illustrate why postmodernists regress to modernist thought at some very critical points in their analyses. At points it is difficult to avoid being polemic or prescriptive, but any further defense is beyond the scope of this paper. The point here is to demonstrate what the authors should have done if they really are committed to the postmodern precepts they claim to uphold.

MODERNITY AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The difficulty with topics such as modernity and postmodernity is that they are extremely ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations. This section attempts to set some parameters for discussion before examining the approaches offered by postmodern scholars.

Modernity, modernism, and the modern project, are all associated with the intellectual and cultural developments that arose out of the Enlightenment. It is identified with such concepts as rationality, progress, science, and other characteristics of contemporary, industrialized capitalist economies (Featherstone 1988). In philosophy, modernity is identified with realism, or representationalism, which held that “meaning or truth preceded and determined the representations that communicated it” (Ryan 1988, 559). The Enlightenment picture of the person, or more accurately, the white male, is of a center of essential qualities around which swirl accidental features. The essential qualities of a person are fixed; they are what determine humans qua humans, while the accidental features of a person, such as hair color, height, and so forth are irrelevant to criterial determinations of what it means to be a person. Our center, our essentiality is what separates us from the brutes; it is the special ingredient from God that sets us apart, and it is manifest through the capacity for rational reflection. We are the special and central items of the universe, we are the knowers. Unlike all else in this universe we know or can know. We are explainers who employ rational methods of observation of matter in motion to determine irreplaceable and implacable truths.

Modernity reflects the broad scale projects aimed at self-preservation, advancement, and achievement. This period is characterized by the widespread belief that progress and advancement, through scientific
experimentation and application, could provide answers to all of the world’s problems and ultimately deliver us into a kind of utopian society where reason prevails (Adams 1994; Rosenau 1992; Featherstone 1988; Ryan 1988). “The domains of science, law, economics, government, and art, by adherence to a combination of the scientific-analytical mind set and technological progress...” would deliver us into a world where there would be “universal truth, justice, goodness, prosperity, and beauty” (White and Adams 1994, 1).

Public administration is perhaps the quintessential modernist project. With its commitment to the practical side of contemporary governance, it is also perhaps more resistant than other disciplines to approaches like postmodernism. Moreover, perhaps the quintessential modernist in public administration has been Max Weber. With an emphasis on rationality, hierarchy, specialized knowledge, and commitment to clear rational processes, Weber encompassed all that was grand about the world of modernism. In the end, the primary failing of modernity is to offer avenues of change that seem necessary under changing conditions of society. It is wedded to a scientific view of progress and truth and heavily favors the status quo. In short, it is bad ground from which to mount reformist or radical attacks on current practice. No doubt many in public administration theory realized this and seized upon postmodernism as the staging ground for their assaults.

**ANTIFOUNDATIONALISM AND POSTMODERNISM**

Postmodernism does indeed offer an attractive alternative to traditional approaches to public administration.

Post-modernism challenges global, all-encompassing world views, be they political religious or social. It reduces Marxism, Christianity, Fascism, Stalinism, capitalism, liberal democracy, secular humanism, feminism, Islam, and modern science to the same order and dismisses them all as logocentric, transcendental totalizing meta-narratives that anticipate all questions and provide predetermined answers (Rosenau 1992, 6).

However, it can be argued that these theorists fail to grasp the antifoundationalist opportunities such an approach offers, and have
themselves been blinded by the avant garde character of postmodernism. Antifoundationalism is a term that encompasses several counter-Enlightenment theories. Basically, though, it has two very different, though equally complex and deep, root systems. What unites these two systems is an underlying agreement on epistemic questions. Both denigrate and undercut the "onto-theological" tradition, the Plato-Locke-Descartes-Kant assemblage of theory that attempts to determinately ground truth and reality. The Continental branch of antifoundationalism runs from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Derrida and Foucault. Here the focus is never less than obliquely political. These theorists offer strong narratives of how people come about in a community and how they are operated upon by institutions of society. They concentrate on the construction of the psyche of the person. Usually somewhat submerged in their writings are their epistemic sentiments, which are wholly in accord with antifoundationalism and the decentering and deessentializing of the person. For these thinkers, the epistemic point is a point of departure, merely a beginning point from which to proceed to more interesting investigations of the operations of power in society.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the epistemic point is often not a point of departure but the whole focus of activity. This brand of antifoundationalism--often called "pragmatism"--runs from William James and Charles Pierce to John Dewey to Wittgenstein, W. V. O. Quine, and Wilfrid Sellars to Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty. In the contemporary incarnation of pragmatism, the concern with the political disappears, and indeed many of these thinkers feel that there was no link at all between epistemology and politics. It is true that Rorty, perhaps the most controversial contemporary philosopher, often writes political essays, though he always takes pains to divorce his pragmatist epistemology from his political beliefs.

These two antifoundationalist traditions had relatively little contact with each other until three decades ago. In the 1970s and 1980s, Rorty was instrumental in introducing Continental thought to U.S. thinkers, much to the dismay of his colleagues who had no respect for the overtly partisan political philosophizing of their European counterparts. But the academic Left in the United States greeted the import of ideas and theories with open arms, seeing in them the new ground from which attacks on hegemonic blocks of scholars and theory could be launched. Radical politics had no
home in political science or public administration, but found itself comfortably accepted in departments of English and comparative literature. In recent years, public administration theorists have caught on to the idea of Continental thought as a good starting point for critiquing the profession. These thinkers go right past the pragmatists and embrace the Europeans. What they miss in their hurry is that what makes the position of a Derrida or Foucault tenable is an underlying epistemic position. Our postmodern colleagues in public administration fail to grasp the epistemology and its historical development which makes their positions possible, and so they end up making all sorts of "errors" that could be called modernist.

It appears that these scholars do not clearly understand the origins of antifoundationalist thought. There are distinct theoretical road maps that various philosophers have followed. One of the problems with postmodern public administration is its insistence on taking these scholars out of the particular cultural and historical context which has influenced how they write. Take, for example, Farmer's reliance on Derrida, and Fox and Miller's reliance on Habermas. Derrida and Habermas are referred to as "continental thinkers," emphasizing the distinctively European character of their philosophy. Collapsing these thinkers together would bring howls of protest from both Habermasians and Derrideans. Stripping thinkers and their ideas of cultural context and using the concentrated "remainder" for alternative purposes is typical of practicing modernists.

In contrast, with the exception of Wittgenstein, this analysis relies on the philosophy of American thinkers, specifically Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett and Richard Rorty. We argue that these authors provide an approach that may be more useful and can identify clearly how postmodern public administration is just as "modern" as that which it attempts to critique. Some, such as Farmer and McSwite, have utilized Rorty in their work but have either incorrectly interpreted him, or have failed to recognize his potential. For example, in a recent article McSwite (1996) excoriates postmodernists for rejecting representationalism and then turns specifically to pragmatism and Richard Rorty as the means to rescue public administration from the postmodern menace. McSwite does not understand that Rorty's epistemological stance is identical to that of postmodernism and that Rorty rejects the representationalist tradition just as emphatically as postmodern thinkers (Rorty 1982b). In the cases of Davidson and Dennett, however, no attention whatsoever has been paid to them by public administration theorists.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein is *sui generis*. Trained as an engineer, he rarely read other philosophers, and when he did he was always disappointed. His philosophy offers a convenient starting point for us because it traverses the territory between modernism and antifoundationalism. The only work he published during his lifetime, the *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus* (1922), is an arcane work that sought to “solve” the great problem of philosophy: how we know that what we perceive is in fact true. To this end, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* developed, in David Pears’ (1987) term, a system of “basic realism” holding that the meaning of a term is dependent upon a pedigree back to some fundamental reality. This “reality” for Wittgenstein is notoriously obscure, but he concludes that the only propositions in a language that can be termed “true” are those that “picture” the world. Indeed, only statements about what is the case, what is picturable and in fact exists, may be true. All other statements, such as “John is a good man;” “Obtaining grace is the goal of all good Christians,” and “Plessy v. Ferguson was an abomination” are technically “senseless” for Wittgenstein (1922, §4.003). “Senseless” is not meant pejoratively, but as a statement of the truth value of these sorts of sentences. Wittgenstein believed that propositions in language could be analyzed into a pedigree of “ elemental sentences which are logically independent of one another,” thus revealing the “logic of language” (Pears 1987, 88). The early Wittgenstein was in many ways as foundationalist a thinker as one could image. He tried to effectively find the tie between language and matter, the way language hooks onto the world. He tried to find the way determinate truth is determined.

Wittgenstein relied upon the realist notion that the world was a priori fixed, and thus the possible true propositions about the state of affairs is finite. In the early Wittgenstein, sentences are made true by the world. The truth of a sentence could not depend upon other sentences for its truth value, for that would set up an infinite regress of sentential propositions and so yield no stopping point at a bedrock of reality. This is an adamant rejection of a social construction theory of truth. The positivists and members of the Vienna Circle read the *Tractatus* as a defense of their position, a defense of the belief that all which is knowable may only come in statements that are verifiable through a methodology of observation.

But the later Wittgenstein (1958b), the mature thinker of the *Investigations*, bitterly laments that he had been “held captive by a picture,”
and quickly abandoned his prior foundationalism. The later Wittgenstein would violate the tenets of the *Tractatus* violently through passages such as the following:

> But how many kinds of sentence are there?...There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols,” “words,” “sentences.” And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten....Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life (1958b, §12).

As Norman Malcolm asserts, “[w]ith...words...their meaning is not any thing, occurrence, or process, that ‘corresponds’ to the word, but instead it is the *use* of the word” (1986, 15). Wittgenstein wholly adopted the social constructivist view of truth by claiming that a proposition can only be true by virtue of its relationship to many other propositions. Truth is not a matter of correspondence with matter, but a compliment paid to sentences still worth using in our language (Rorty 1989). To express this thought more clearly, Wittgenstein involves the notion of a language-game.

> We can...think of the whole process of using words...as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games “language-games” and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the process of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone *might* also be called language-games....I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions on which it is woven, the “language-game”(1958b, §7).

The word “might” is emphasized here to note that the ostensiveness of this example is just one possible way of learning a language-game; it is not a prerequisite.

The purpose of the *Tractatus* is to clearly understand the logic of our language, to identify “the general form of propositions and of language” (Wittgenstein 1958b, §65) and attempt to answer the question of what all
propositions and all languages have in common. However, this quest is abandoned in the *Investigations* (1958b) where he now wants to “dissolve” all of the major problems of philosophy rather than “solve” them. Consider the following passage:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language” (1958b, §65).

In language-games “we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (Wittgenstein 1958b, §65). A useful metaphor describes the overlapping strands of a rope. Our language games are fiber twists upon fiber twists and the strength of the rope does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of those fibers (Wittgenstein 1958b).

Another point of departure for Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* is the notion of a clarification of our language. He notes that many think, as he once thought, that “our usual forms of expression were, essentially, unanalyzed as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light” (1958b, §91). The notion that some meaning or greater truth lying beneath the surface of some nature is a commonplace phenomena in many areas of human endeavor. Philosophy is no different. Nor is public administration. As Rorty (1989) frequently comments, truth is not a very interesting subject to write about, nor does it require “deep” theories.

However, when we succumb to the urge to follow through, to uncover what is not covered, we create not problems, but pseudo-problems. This is because there is no way of speaking that is of a “higher order” than any other: “[W]e are not striving after an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet get a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us...there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence” (Wittgenstein 1958b, §98). Wittgenstein set in motion a new way to formulate our environment, a means to escape from the “picturing,” “representationalist,” “foundationalist” formulations of the
Enlightenment. But Wittgenstein’s work has been furthered by another thinker perhaps as gifted and as important as Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson.

Donald Davidson

Donald Davidson has been acclaimed one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Still a force on the contemporary scene, he takes a view of language that is consistent with the later Wittgenstein. An exploration of his ideas helps further illuminate the implications that this view of language has for public administration. Davidson’s approach to language is similar to that of Wittgenstein in that he also supports a holistic, antifoundationalist approach. This viewpoint asserts that sentences, attitudes, beliefs, and truths are all functions of language; that is, they can be understood only in relation to a language.

According to Davidson, “disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement. Applied to language, this principle reads: the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject...the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree about them” (1985, 137). Thus recall Wittgenstein’s initial belief that the truth of a sentence cannot rely upon the truth of another sentence. The viewpoint offered in the Investigations (1958b) and the one proposed by Davidson here, is that truth is dependent precisely upon this fact. Sentences are true only by their relation to other sentences. This point is made more forcefully when Davidson asserts that “nothing...no thing, makes sentences true,” because truth, meaning, and intention are features of language, and so of people. “Languages we will not think of as separable from souls; speaking a language is not a trait [an individual] can lose while retaining the power of thought. So there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding (his) own” (1985, 185). As Rorty pithily puts it, the world is out there but the truth is not. This belief comports with Wittgenstein’s view which argues that meaning is use. Moreover, language and beliefs are not things we have, but things we are (Dennett 1987).

In explicating and furthering this broad view of language, Davidson invokes a unique analysis, one that proves useful for our purposes when considering public administration’s perennial questions. In a famous essay, aptly titled “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Davidson begins
with a brief introduction to the notion of conceptual schemes. "Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience" (1985, 183). These schemes may be thought of as proposed indexes for the inventory of the universe, means by which we get in touch with the real. The Enlightenment has given us a very powerful and persistent conceptual scheme based in verificationism and realism. The *Tractatus*, for example, takes a classical scheme/content approach to propositional truth. This approach replicates the underlying dualistic approach found in Enlightenment thought in that there is a world out there that needs to be carved up by the proper conceptual scheme in order to be truly understood.

As may have been predicted, Davidson opposes the scheme/content distinction, be it based on science, nature, experience, God, or language. Davidson argues that the dualism of scheme/content emerged as the "third dogma of empiricism" which replaced the analytic-synthetic dualism characteristic of analytic philosophy (1985, 189). This analytic-synthetic distinction parsed knowledge between that based on empirical discovery, the analytic, and knowledge based on pure meaning with empirical properties, the synthetic. Thomas Kuhn (1962) in his famous *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* showed that "all sentences have empirical content." By rejecting the dualism of analytic-synthetic, Kuhn and others were essentially able to "give up meanings and analyticity while retaining the idea of language as embodying a conceptual scheme" (Davidson 1985, 189). That is, they replace science with language.

Realists and modernists, with their belief in universal reason and truth, must posit some external, neutral item which works as a truth adjudicator between conflicting schemes. One must dream up the possibility of an un-language or "the unnameable proclaiming itself," or a substance in the void that provides for parallel tracking between conceptual schemes. Antifoundationalists, though, have sworn off such items.

The difficulty here is that as Wittgenstein and Davidson tell us, notions of truth, meaning and language "are not traits [an individual] can lose while retaining the power of thought" (Davidson 1985, 185) If we accept this statement, then it simply becomes inconceivable that there exists a reality or a neutral ground, or any ground for that matter, independent of language from which to assess or compare conceptual schemes. We cannot step outside of ourselves or conduct inquiry from a grid of experience independent of conceptual schemes. We have no conceivable ways for comparing
conceptual schemes; but we have no conceivable way of thinking about them as not translatable or incommensurable either. In other words, one cannot refer to a language as incommensurable without using or referring to language itself.

While it may not at first be obvious why the problem of translation is a problem at all, a reconsideration of some of the arguments already covered helps to clarify the point. The problem is whether we consider notions of truth, or meaning, independent of translation. The answer is that we cannot. If the truth of a sentence depends upon the truth of another sentence, then how can we know if our translation is correct or incorrect? This is precisely the sort of question that Wittgenstein (1958b) says makes our minds and language go on “holiday.” These questions lead us to believe that truth, in and of itself as a topic, rather than attached to some local enterprise, is worthy of deep theoretical exegesis. This is what Wittgenstein derisively refers to as the “craving for generality” (1958a), the idea that all true sentences have a common ingredient that may be separated from the context in which the sentence is used. This lies behind the modernist view that we can be wrong at the level of the conceptual scheme. The modernist worries that we can be globally wrong about the world and our perceptions. Antifoundationalists, such as Davidson and Wittgenstein, can make no sense of this claim. We may be wrong about local matters, such as “Pine is the best wood to build my deck with” or “George looks as if he’s been drinking.” But it makes no sense to say that we may be wrong as a general matter of making our way through the environment. If understanding and agreement are possible only in a web of largely true belief, then there must be some level of agreement before any disagreement can occur.

A conceptual scheme cannot be anything other than a reference to an indeterminately large number of propositions that some community of persons would judge true. But it is not something that can be seen in its entirety, taken off and replaced with another conceptual scheme as one would change vacuum cleaner attachments. It presents itself to us in the only way possible, one proposition at a time under a specific context. This argument suggests that we confine our inquiries to local matters of our discipline and stop worrying about whether or not we have adopted the proper equipment for getting the world right. We should not worry that we have something called a conceptual scheme which distorts an underlying reality, or obscures the truth about the operations of power. We should not think that
inquiries into “big” questions will show our discipline to be on track with reality or expose it to be a fraud. Only someone still haunted by the Enlightenment would think that such radical “revealing” is possible.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE “LIMITS” OF MODERNITY

A key component of Farmer’s (1995) thesis is that modernist public administration is limited. Farmer delineates the limits of particularism, scientism, technologism and hermeneutics. Unfortunately, these limitations are not new discoveries. On the contrary, scholars in public administration have been debating the problems with these categories ad nauseam. The obvious alternative, postmodernism, “does not face dead ends.” Moreover, Farmer asserts, “theorists are not likely to find the path beyond the clear dead-ends, however, unless the deep-seated hold of modernist prejudices can be loosened” (1995, 247). Similarly, O. C. McSwite talks of the limits of reason. “There is a limit to reason itself, and reason cannot symbolize, cannot represent, its own limitation” (1997, 245).

Farmer frames his discussion of modernism and postmodernism in distinctively modernist language. Talk of limits, or dead-ends, or blind spots, is modernist talk. One may talk of limits with respect to a particular situation or when discussing the attributes of a particular writer. We may say that “Johnathan’s modernist training shows itself in his limited vocabulary for describing his profession,” and so forth. But to talk generally of limits of modernism again conjures up an ur-language of reality or a privileged position with respect to the truth of the world that says “this scheme is more limited than that one.” Modernist discourse may not yield the results one wants in the profession of public administration, but dissatisfaction with a practice shows only dissatisfaction, not a limit. All the antifoundationalist can do is suggest one way of speaking over another, saying things such as, “Well we’ve thought of it this way for a long time but it no longer seems to be working with respect to X.” But to say a way of talking--in the big sense of a conceptual scheme--is limited is to say that we can compare conceptual schemes and determine which one is more suited to the job we have in mind. Such comparison, as discussed above, is quintessentially a modernist move. Recall that Wittgenstein began his work also attempting to establish the limits
of language. This endeavor, just as Farmer's, was a realist project. Unlike Farmer, however, Wittgenstein recognized the futility in attempts to establish the limits of language or of modernism.

Following this line of argument, consider the following:

Public administration theory should be the dynamo that provides light on...public administration questions. A claim of this book is that modernist public administration theory, although valuable and capable of producing even more remarkable results, is limiting as an explanatory and catalytic force in resolving pressing questions about the problems of bureaucracy (Farmer 1995, 3).

McSwite urges in a review of Farmer's work "I believe that all varieties of theory have great significance for practice, and I refuse to compromise the intellectual integrity of theoretical work" (1997, 175). Without even realizing it, Farmer, McSwite, and others have set the premise of their work upon fundamentally modernist goals. The idea that a theory, or theorizing, or any combination of theories for that matter, can or should be the dynamo for resolving critical problems must inevitably rely upon some metanarrative for justification. In this case, Farmer is contributing to the traditional problems of public administration by offering up one more theory, one more round, one more metanarrative, one more foundation. The problem with postmodernism—as it is conceived by scholars liked Farmer and McSwite—is that they reject the metanarrative of modernism only to erect their own metanarrative of postmodernism. If, as is commonly asserted even by Farmer and others discussed here, postmodernism is an incredulity toward metanarratives, then postmodern public administration thinkers violate their own adopted first rule.

Further, Farmer wishes to carve out an elitist position, an "in" club for those who have finally come to terms with the "really real." Consider the following statement: "The postmodern perspective has little appeal for the impatient thinker, for the dichotomous thinker, or for the thinker who favors Cliffs Notes" (1995, 247). This statement implies that postmodernism is deep in a way its predecessors could not be, that it reaches through the world of appearances and grabs hold of reality in a way modernists cannot. This idea itself is terribly modernist, as is the whole notion of "deep theory" as somehow exercising greater gravity over practice. This is precisely the
search for an ideal language which Wittgenstein warned us against. Theory
does not exist in some privileged position, and it is certainly no dynamo. It
is just another narrative, just another move in the push and shove in
attempting to have our view win over those of our competitors.

For antifoundationalists, the theory-practice distinction is one that does
not turn many linguistic gears. At some point in an actor’s dialogue we may
say something such as “Oh, she wants to make the point by using theory and
logic.” Propositions do not come pre-divided into those that are theoretical
and those that are not. Any such division must take place subject to a
language game under local circumstances. Theory and practice are just
shorthand descriptions of a number of propositions spoken or written with
respect to some particular setting or settings. Some of the words used in one
setting may apply to the words used in another setting, but no one form of
discourse is above another. The idea that intellectualism is above everyday
practical language succumbs to the very essence of modernist thought. It is
the impulse to see the technical as the true and the language of the everyday
as too vulgar or rough hewn to capture truth. Wittgenstein especially
disliked this view.

For this makes it appear as though we could improve on ordinary
language. Whenever we make up ideal languages it is not in order
to replace our ordinary language by them; but just to remove some
trouble caused in one’s mind by thinking that he has got hold of the
exact use of a common word (1958a, 28).

And to be sure, appeals to theory are inevitably appeals to finding an ideal
language.

Fox and Miller (1995) argue that their postmodern theory, or
“discourse theory,” also provides for a novel approach. Based on
the work of thinkers such as Habermas and Merleau-Ponty, they
assert that [a]uthentic discourse is the best hope for a democratic
theory of governance that takes into account postmodern conditions.
Discourse theory is an accurate model in the sense that it describes
events that can be observed and normative in the sense that it
Authentic discourse, they argue, is not present across the current spread of public administration theory and practice.

This effort to transplant Habermas is another one that fails to take account of cultural matrices in which arguments are framed. It makes perfect sense that Germany would need a Habermas, a strong poet whose primary duty is to prevent another descent into National Socialism. In Germany, where the distance between the intellectuals and the politicians and population is much less than here, to stake out a particular theoretical ground is to make a political statement. But the invocation of Habermas here in the way Fox and Miller use him is to present a foreground of material without the cultural backdrop necessary for the American reader to make sense of what is being presented. Habermas wants to retain the features of modernity that will do the most work in preventing another possible Hitler. Habermas does not share contemporary postmodernists' incredulity towards metanarrative, at least not toward all metanarratives. For Habermas, as any good modernist, wants to preserve one metanarrative against attack, against the destabilizing forces of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. In a very Marxist sentiment he says that we need to "preserve at least one standard for [the] explanation of the corruption of all reasonable standards" (Rorty 1991c, 164). This is inconsistent with the antifoundationalism that Fox and Miller assert is so "freeing."

These scholars most certainly would object that we have missed the whole point of their arguments. Those in agreement with Farmer's ideas of limits might argue that we are playing--or preying--on semantics. Similarly, Fox and Miller might urge that their discussion of authenticity or sincerity is more significant because it looks to establish some common form of dialogue that tries to find the common values we hold, and to solve our problems based on sincere and efficacious dialogue. They might respond by asserting that it is not the words but the ideas that are important. Our response to this point might simply be "That's what makes us antifoundationalists and you modernists." This response is not glib, for precisely the difference in mind set, the different means of responding to argument between modernists and antifoundationalists is borne out in this objection to our "word play." For the modernist there is still something left over after the word play, some remainder that exists even if not vindicated in argument, the truth that lies quiet but can still be felt. For the antifoundationalist it is word play all the way down: if you lose on the semantic field, there is no other field to move to, there
is no remainder. An exploration into Richard Rorty’s discussion of a final vocabulary may help to sharpen this point.

A “final vocabulary” is formed by the set of words that people carry with them to justify their own beliefs and judge the validity of others. It is final in the sense that when “doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no non-circular argumentative recourse...beyond them is only helpless passivity or a resort to force” (Rorty 1989, 73). Davidson makes a similar point in outlining his coherence theory of truth: “[I]f the account I have given of how belief and meaning are related and understood by an interpreter, then most of the sentences a speaker holds to be true--especially the ones he holds to most stubbornly, the ones most central to the system of his beliefs--most of the sentences are true, at least in the opinion of the interpreter” (1986, 316). This vocabulary is “final” only in the sense that there is nothing beyond it from which to arbitrate its truth-value.

Hence, if we shift to discussions about whether particular vocabularies are useful or suit their purposes, questions of authenticity simply drop out. And this makes the most fundamental problem of Fox and Miller’s thesis also an non-issue; that is, who is assigned the task of determining authentic from inauthentic? We think that Fox and Miller would urge that administrators take on this task. However, this merely reasserts the politics/administration dichotomy, which instead of privileging the political process, as Wilson did, they simply privilege the administrative process.

The realist will take his final vocabulary for granted as “commonsense,” to use Rorty’s words. It is taken as given that it represents the way reality really is. Some perspectives view the existence of God as entailing their final vocabulary; more prominent in modern society is the final vocabulary of science and progress. For these people, progress, or science, or God are viewed as the way the world was supposed to happen and is supposed to continue. From an antifoundationalist perspective, however, one recognizes that her final vocabulary is replaceable, that it is constantly subject to critique and reevaluation. Thus, one is constantly aware of the contingency of one’s own reality (Rorty 1989).

For Rorty, society is not bound together by any universal principles of goodness or rightness, but adherence to similar vocabularies. “What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes” (Rorty 1989, 86). This is not to say that members of a society share the same vocabularies, but they do share enough to bind their public hopes and fears
together into a shared political vision, even though this may be quite broad. The primary advantage of liberal democracies like that of the United States is that the government is authorized by this syncretic public vision, but does not concern itself with deciding among final vocabularies which one is the best for the community. It leaves formulation of final vocabularies to the privacy of its citizens. Habermas, and by implication Fox and Miller, blur this distinction and look for a society where public discourse and private beliefs are fused in a single vision. This is the same impulse that brings together the likes of Plato, Rousseau, Marx, and B. F. Skinner. Whatever its merits, this vision is profoundly anti-liberal, and its varieties have been resoundingly rejected by Americans on numerous occasions.

But how does one achieve hope when his final vocabulary is recognized as contingent and constantly called into question? Rorty argues that the only relief is through experimenting with other vocabularies. Therefore, social hope cannot be achieved by metaphysics, because metaphysics relies upon universal principles. Because foundationalist or realist theories rely upon the ability to identify some outside reality, they cannot accept alternative vocabularies. Antifoundationalists, or ironists, because they cannot offer arguments that their final vocabulary is the "right one," must constantly experiment with other vocabularies. To the extent then that theorists see the starting point of theory as fixed--in Human Nature, Science, and so forth--they will resist experimentation with their final vocabularies.

The postmodern analysis that Fox and Miller (1995) offer is one which attempts to identify the ways in which contemporary governance has become symbolic and monological. This tendency toward symbolism is referred to as "epiphenomenalism." Epiphenomenalism, according to Fox and Miller (1995) arises when the dichotomous entities of denotative and connotative language, reality and hyperreality, and production versus information, become increasingly disjointed so as to lose their original character. Similarly, McSwite argues that modernist governance has lost the emphasis on the public interest. However, a theory that incorporates a postmodernist approach would inherently be "grounded in authentic communication" (McSwite 1996, 219).

These authors see a postmodern public administration as offering a situation where inclusion and participation are the highest goals.
It would be a very concrete approach to governance, one in which ideology would have little or no place. As a consequence, there would be no basis for domination, for ambitious, grand, large-scale programs, and for concomitantly disastrous mistakes. Most important, however, institutions built around such a process would ipso facto, be legitimate (McSwite 1996, 219).

Not only is the question of “authentic discourse” modernist, it also implies adherence to the traditional politics/administration dichotomy. According to Wilson, the only road to effective administration is by “clearing the moral atmosphere of official life by establishing the sanctity of public office as a public trust, and, by making the service unpartisan, is it opening the way for making it businesslike” (Wilson, [1887] 1992, 18). Ideals of the public interest, informed, sincere participants, and open, empowering participation are not new ideals. Fox, Miller, McSwite, and others who propose postmodern perspectives haphazardly advocate ideals that were prevalent more than a century ago. Furthermore, the idea that partisanship, self-interest, and ideological convictions can be separated from public administration is an ideal that they themselves purport to reject. No matter how hard we try, public administration seems unable to escape this profound and all-encompassing dilemma. Furthermore, our attempts to transcend it often amount to generating our own self-referential inconsistencies.

DERRIDA AND POSTMODERNISM: DECONSTRUCTING DECONSTRUCTION

The most popular figure in contemporary interdisciplinary discussions of postmodernism is Jacques Derrida. Derrida is identified with terms like deconstruction and difference. Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion about Derrida is to state that postmodern thinkers like Farmer simply take him too seriously and they confuse a “kind of writing” for a method. (Rorty 1982a, 90). And while Farmer asserts that deconstruction is not a method, his use of it surely treats it as such. Moreover, we are not sure that this kind of writing is all that useful for public administration.

Farmer characterizes deconstruction as “good reading”--as opposed to
"bad" reading?--urging that "texts and languages are inevitably replete with binary categorical oppositions and metaphors that, while useful to a point condition and distort" (1997, 3). If we simply ask what is being distorted, the answer can only be some substrate of reality that validates one approach or set of descriptions, beliefs, and actions over others. This metaphor of "unmasking," of letting "reality show through," is common in modernist thinking. Like the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, Farmer wants to "view the world aright."

Ultimately, Farmer succumbs to the same logic that he attempts to critique. He is saying that "When I reach outside of the bounds of language, it's alright because I recognize my own contingency" (1995, 178). Unfortunately, recognition of one's contingency is not enough. Despite his claim that he is not imparting deconstruction as a method, that is precisely what he and others have done. Like devotees of the Enlightenment Project, Farmer wants some words to be more than words, to be special and talismanically powerful. Enlightenment thinkers might seize on Reason and Science to do this sort of heavy lifting, but Farmer picks on "difference" (1995, 181). After Derrida, Farmer says that difference is not a word, but spacing, and relates it to the distinction between writing and speaking. But the postmodernist cannot claim that truth is sentences or words all the way down, yet turn around and say that some of these words are in touch with special powers. As Rorty notes:

It is no use Derrida telling us that since difference "cannot be elevated into a master word or a master concept, since it blocks every relationship to theology, [it] finds itself enmeshed in the work that pulls it through a chain of other 'concepts,' other 'words,' other contextual configurations." For us Wittgensteinians, every word finds itself enmeshed in this way, and such enmeshment is no safeguard against elevation. Derrida cannot simultaneously adopt the language-game account of meaning for all words and try to privilege a few selected magic words as incapable of theological use (1991b, 103).

For Rorty, deconstruction is just Derrida's attempt to place himself within the tradition of Descartes, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Treating deconstruction as anything more that "a kind of writing" is to impart upon it a methodological
Farmer attempts to make certain words stand in for the acontextual and extrapropositional that modernists could never let go of. As Rorty remarks, "The bad thing about the philosopher's candidates for the non-propositional [such as differance] is that these candidates sit there smugly...thinking that they don't have and don't need a context" (Rorty 1996, 43). Farmer tries to elevate discourse beyond mere conversation to what Derrida refers to as "a full presence beyond the reach of play" (1978, 279).

Deconstruction, as "reinterpretation", however, is not a new concept. But when we succumb to characterize it as more than this, we impart upon it the aura of method, and to be sure, Farmer does not shy away from references to method (1995). Deconstructive argument cannot win the day by simply unmasking reality which then shows that competing theories are completely mistaken or fraudulent. Postmodernism will be successful only in the same way that any candidate for new truth is successful: by convincing people to drop certain ways of speaking and to adopt new ones. Your side wins when it recontextualizes a profession through massive, sustained redescription. Derrida is correct in arguing that there is no limit to interpretation. However, certain interpretations will make more sense, or will invoke more agreement, than others.

Moreover, the idea that the modernist project is something that must be overcome, and can be overcome only through adherence to some degree of postmodernism, is itself modernist in its aspirations. Just as Wittgenstein dissolves the theory/practice dilemma, so too would he dissolve the modernist/postmodernist dichotomy. This dichotomy may have certain uses within intellectual thought, and its characteristic debates may raise important problems for public administration. But the problem, as defined by theorists, is rather artificial. To be sure, we do have problems that involve questions of rationality and science and method, but we do not have problems of theory versus practice or modernity versus postmodernity. Such distinctions impart far too much importance to intellectual endeavors and not enough to everyday people and situations.

To make this assertion--that intellectual distinctions impart too much importance to intellectuals, at least in politics--is itself contextually embedded. That is to say, writing about public administration in an American context presupposes that we as a society do not, and rarely ever have, taken intellectual discourse to be all that important in politics. And when
intellectuals are influential in the public sector, it is not because they have revealed some truth, however you wish to define the word, about the nature of deconstruction, or metaphysics, or truth, but because they speak on a level that is precisely amenable to *Cliffs Notes*. It is because they talk about things that make a difference in people's lives in ways that are persuasive. As Rorty (1991d) asserts, it is because they speak in the banal form of casual discourse and ways of life that make them influential, not because they reveal any significant reality about metaphysics.

THE FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS OF POSTMODERNISM

This final section deals briefly with question of consciousness. In particular, two important contributions to movement toward a postmodern public administration argue to a very significant extent that contemporary problems of public administration are the result of a "false consciousness."

[O]n the societal [level], both academicians and practitioners generally lack consciousness of our actual place in the societal and political order.... We are similarly lacking in cognizance of our true interests.... Our ability to work ourselves out of our miasma and find a common normative grounding depends on our being able to suspend... our false consciousness, and this depends on our ability to make a distinction between ideology... and philosophy, a public philosophy and theory (Wamsley 1996, 359).

In similar fashion, McSwite also invokes a sense of consciousness, or rather unconsciousness, that is endemic to postmodern thought. However, his version is far more problematic to say the least.

Although consciousness is an important aspect of human subjectivity, it is not the true center. This is because the conscious attitude is a creation of social discourse and as such is an artifact of society or at least of that part of society to which a specific individual has been exposed. As such, the person as a "consciousness" is determined and predictable, not really making choices, freely responding, or doing all the other things that we associate with being truly human. This true human person must exist outside
An antifoundationalist can make no sense of the notion that language is ancillary, much less an obstacle, to being a person. What we are is language, and we can no more get rid of it than we can our endocrine system. But what does it mean to be a "truly human" person? To be confounded by such questions is to never have made the escape from Cartesian realism. The idea that we may stumble across the "true person" by poking around in the inner space of the mind is about as modernist as one can be. In any case, framing the debate in terms of conscious/unconscious or false and true consciousness is a symptom of methodological skepticism. Moreover, even if we were to miraculously settle our differences about consciousness, we doubt we would have made any progress whatsoever toward solving the kinds of problems we wish to solve, and these authors provide no evidence to the contrary.

Here is where Daniel Dennett can provide some clarification. Dennett offers an alternative to Cartesian realism that he has dubbed the "Multiple Drafts" theory. Essentially, the multiple drafts model rejects the "mirror of nature" in the mind by advocating that information in the brain is processed at no particular place or time. Processing occurs simultaneously in different parts of the brain, using a range of stimulus, some of which is stored, currently utilized, or immediately discarded.

While some of the contents in these drafts will make their brief contributions and fade without further effect--and some will make no contribution at all--others will persist to play a variety of roles in the further modulation of internal state and behavior and a few will even persist to the point of making their presence known through press releases issued in the form of verbal behavior (1991, 134).

The point here is not to dwell on the neurology of the human mind, but to change the way we think about how people come to form judgments and beliefs. To be sure, it is not by some objective observance of reality, or rational common sense. It is a complex process of input, output, retention and revision.

If we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be
likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice...justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice (Rorty 1979, 170).

Notice that any discussion of consciousness as being true or false simply drops out. The idea that humans have “true selves” and that once we identify and isolate that true self we will “see the world rightly” (Wittgenstein 1958b, §6.54) is purely a realist hope, a hope that has yet to be cashed out.

A further, related point of confusion for McSwite is the contention that consciousness emerged as a product of language. “Somehow, when we acquired language, we moved out of the “real” world and onto the symbolic...plane of consciousness, and the door closed and locked behind us” (McSwite 1997, 238). To assume that language is something humans “acquire,” or that language marks, or colors reality, is, once again, a realist, foundationalist assumption. As noted, language is something that we are, not a mere acquisition.

Consciousness is not something of which a truth value can be assessed in the sense that Wamsley and McSwite wish to do. All of this is merely to assert that rather than talk about true values, or true selves, or true texts, postmodernists would be better served by sticking to discussions about which ideas are useful, and which ones are not. Delving into philosophical realms does offer considerable pleasure, to be sure, and that is mostly what we have done here. But we are under no delusions about the utility of this kind of discourse for the world of the practitioner, at least not framed in this kind of language. If what postmodernists really want to do is expand the frame of discussion, they do not need any theoretical justifications for it. They do not need to define a modernist/postmodernist dichotomy. Only if one thought that theory hooks onto the world would one believe that when theory is adjusted or discarded the professional practice “under” the theory responds accordingly. These academicians think that to undercut the theoretical justifications for a practice is to undercut the practice. But practices go on independent of theoretical changes unless the theorists are also the practitioners.
POST-PARTEM CONSIDERATIONS

Of all the things we may accuse our opponents, we do not accuse them of insincerity. Their goals are indeed noble, and despite our criticisms they are to be commended for helping public administration to begin thinking about itself differently. Academic and intellectual institutions do have a role to play in educating public administrators to be sure, but that role involves persuasion, rhetoric, and ideology no less than anything else in life.

The point of this essay can be summed up effectively by considering Rorty's distinction between movements and campaigns. Consider this essay to be a critique of the "postmodern movement," and making recommendations for a smaller "campaign." Movements are the broader, larger, more comprehensive "maturation" processes of social existence, whereas campaigns comprise the smaller piecemeal advances which are though to compose movements (Rorty 1995, 57). The relevance for public administration is that rather than talk about what the nature of reality really is we should be discussing problem like why some organizations make people feel like they are in prisons, or why many citizens feel alienated from government. There is no deeper essence to be discovered or removed before progress can take place. And we need no theory to address these problems, we just need to start listening more. From this perspective, postmodernism is seen as rather banal (Rorty 1991d). It is too attenuated from practice to move any gears of change.

NOTES

1To be sure, one could fault our own use of Wittgenstein, an Austrian thinker. However, as will be demonstrated, Wittgenstein is unique in that his views on language are not as culturally binding as are those of thinkers such as Derrida and Habermas.

2A mistake which most postmodern writers in public administration have made. See for example Fox and Miller (1999), Farmer (1995), and Burrell (1997).
REFERENCES


