

The following, written by Larry Green, an Institute for the Humanities community associate, was presented at the *Eighth International Conference on Philosophy and Culture* in Seattle in January 2005.

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The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning

Identity, Trauma and Post modernity

Both post modernity and trauma bring the unwelcome news that one has been dwelling in one's meanings rather than inhabiting the world. It is shocking to discover that one has been living conceptually rather than existentially. Sketches and schemata, representations and concepts have been acting as stand-ins for the electric flux of reality.

In the first half of this paper I will attempt to back up the above opinion with supporting arguments from psychology, neurobiology and philosophy. These arguments will have an individualistic point of view. In the second half I will situate that individualist perspective within a cultural context of post modernity. I hope that by so doing I will be able to demonstrate that the culture of post modernity is reconfiguring its member's psychology.

The meanings by which we live are Janus-like in that they refer to both the self and the world simultaneously. An explicit reference toward the world contains within it an implicit reference to the self...and vice versa. A simple example: when a teen remarks, "These are stupid questions!" it is quite probable that they are also saying, "I'm afraid that I'm stupid." *Anything that challenges our conceptions of the world also challenges our conceptions of self*. Another example: I have a client who is afraid that the world (or people in it) will abandon her and so she refuses to abandon her adult son...to the point of not letting him grow up. Her treatment of her son is a mirror image of her desire for herself. When I ask her to let go of her son she resists. She resists because at some level she knows that his continuing need for her, a need that her behavior cultivates, insures that *she* will never be abandoned.

While writing the above I remembered her when she initially came for therapy. She saw her function as warding off other people's crisis or, failing that, picking up the pieces afterwards. Of course this is what she expected of her husband, her lover and her therapist. We all were expected to head off her crisis or pick up her pieces later. In her cosmology nobody stood on their own two feet. *She expected from the world what it seemed to expect from her*.

Post modernity and trauma however operate on a far more general level than the particular beliefs that these examples illustrate. Both trauma and post modernity operate as meta-challenges in that they destroy not a particular belief but rather the more general illusion that the map is the territory...that dealing with one's concepts is equivalent to dealing with the Real. Someone who has been "broken open" by trauma is ejected from the familiarities of their assumptive world and thrown into the strangeness of the Real.

I'd like to attempt to ground these global terms such as the "Real" and the "assumptive world" in neurobiology. Later in this paper I point out that the right hemisphere is responsible for proprioception and perception—those forms of direct knowledge that enable living in an ever changing world. The left hemisphere, on the other hand, generalizes from the right's multiple interactions with the environment. By so doing it builds schemata and concepts that are abstractions of the lived experience. It produces routines and protocols that make "life easier". These routines and protocols, schemata and concepts are the contents of the assumptive world.

Language, of course, greatly expands the inventory of abstractions, generalizations. Ideologies are systematic organizations of sets of abstractions. They are second hand meanings in that they weren't derived from lived experience but from communication with others. These "received" meanings allow the person access to and participation in consensual reality and are privileged partially for that reason.

To summarize, I'm suggesting that engagement with the Real¹ correlates with right hemisphere activity, whereas "living" conceptually correlates with the left. In the latter case, subjectivity relates to a conceptual system as its field of operation.

I suspect that there is a developmental dimension to all this. It's reasonable to suppose that at the early stages of development, the left hemisphere *mediates* between consciousness and the Real. At this stage the conceptual map enables us to navigate the actual territory more efficiently. It seems however; that once that step—the use of concepts to mediate—is taken it becomes easier to employ concepts as a *substitute* for the Real. If and when that occurs one is totally "flying by instrument".

This is especially true when there has been some previous narcissistic injury resulting from contact with the Real. The person's self esteem was bruised or damaged in the encounter. Often when that occurs the person responds by dissociating, by taking distance from their experience. Instead of engaging with the Real, they watch a "movie" or "video" of the event. In fact some therapies (EMDR) train clients to observe traumatic incidents in just this way. As a result the individual learns to denude reality of its "realness".

Of course the best way to denude reality of its realness is through the coding that is language. Many theories claim that trauma is overcome when it is "language'd". That is, when trauma is transformed from an eternal, horrific "now" in the right hemisphere to a coded representation in the left, its sting is muted. Once having experienced the resultant relief, many individuals are tempted to privilege language and symbol over the Real. Those coded symbols are much easier to control and manipulate than the Real thing. I'm currently working with a young man who is quite facile with such verbal productions but who has little awareness of who he actually is. I suppose that ideally, the left hemisphere would read the map while the right would navigate the territory. However, with this young man, and many others like him, I suspect that the car never leaves the garage and all the "traveling" occurs only on the map.

These ideas get some support from the Ian Hacking in his review of *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. "One part of the human organism, the brain, monitors the whole

¹ I capitalize the word "Real", in the manner of Jacques Lacan, in order to distinguish it from "reality" which I believe is actually conceptual rather than existential.

body, and helps keep it in equilibrium. Another part, *the mind*, monitors the brain and the way it monitors the body." (Italics mine). A part of me is affronted by the materialism that would locate the mind in the body. However, another, recognizes the parallels with my own thinking: Hacking's "brain" equates nicely with what I mean by right hemispheric functioning. Likewise, "the mind" seems comparable to left hemisphere activity.

Hacking's model of organism, brain and mind implies an ideal condition where both right and left hemispheres work cooperatively. In health I think that this is the case. However, as any psychotherapist can attest, many clients override their awareness of their body and the world of perception and focus instead on conceptual categories. The body remains mute and dumb while the mind works its algorithms.

Consciousness, therefore, can choose either the world or its derivative, the cognitive map, for its environment. My guess is that many of us shuttle back and forth between the two environments...sometimes "in" our concepts, sometimes in perception. I also suspect that as we age many people make a transition to a condition where concepts can become not just "stand-ins" but rather substitutions, for the Real. Such people have become "set in their ways."

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The foregoing analysis was primarily psychological in tone with some philosophical speculation. I would like to now shift my attention to cultural analysis. In particular I'm interested in the interaction of the psychological with the cultural. Let me begin with the bold suggestion that in the mass culture of the West, *modernity* has elided the substitution of concepts and ideology for the Real.² That is, the modern culture or zeitgeist reinforces (may even prescribe) the dominance of left over right hemispheric functioning. Modern culture provided virtually no challenge to its members' assumption that the map was the territory. The postmodern *correction* of this elision separates "the thing" from its representation...the concept and the Real belong to separate domains.

Before this correction takes place, both an individual's worldview and their self-definition are shot through and through with reification. If the former, one hears statements like: "This isn't just my point of view; this is the way things are." A more sophisticated version might be: "I don't have a world view; I have a world." Literalism and reification. One's complicity in one's worldview is hidden. Likewise, the *process* of constructing one's self is telescoped into the final product, one's identity, which is experienced as a given...the ground of one's being. Both trauma or post modernity deconstruct that identity with the result that a self that once was so defined, stable and opaque becomes fluid and transparent. Frequently this is experienced as a loss of the sense of self; "I'm no longer my self; this is not me; I don't know what is gotten into me; I want to get my old self back."

This is not a mere intellectual experience but strikes at the existential or even ontological core of one's identity. *Because being and meaning have been conflated, their eventual separation is traumatic.* One can get closer to an experiential understanding of this loss through phenomenology. In our everyday functioning there is an overall *felt sense* that accompanies our thought processes. This felt sense is the somatic correlate of our self-concept. At home in our body; comfortable in our own skin. A kind of familiar background hum that is always

² When I use terms like modern and postmodern I am applying them to the Western culture and neither to the avant-garde nor the intelligentsia.

with us. With trauma—suddenly there is a silence. Our bodies clench, our blood vessels constrict, and our gut tightens as we attempt to cling to our meanings...as we attempt to keep meaning and being from uncoupling and moving apart. When being and meaning are fused then one's identity is experienced as something Real. When they uncouple, the individual often begins to experience derealization and depersonalization. Both the world and one's self are experienced as unreal. In fact, what has been revealed as unreal are one's conceptions.

As one's assumptive world is undone, that familiar background hum is replaced by silence. Quickly followed by an unfamiliar background noise...dread. One experiences discontinuity. One's story is broken. In extreme cases there is a sense of an annihilation of the self.

Discontinuity, fragmentation, and incoherence: these are also descriptors of an age we call postmodern—our age.

This paper was prepared for a conference, which highlighted identity as one of the key constructs involved in reconciling unity and diversity. Identity based on difference is postmodern; replacing the modern assumption of unity based on commonality. If we think of identity as primarily an intellectual construct then it might seem puzzling that it resists reconfiguration...that people cling so tenaciously to their ethnic, gender, and class identities. So when we speak of identity crisis—as in “the whole world might be experiencing an identity crisis”—it is important to acknowledge this tenacity. I think that we can go some way to understanding its insistence if we acknowledge its somatic dimension. It is because our very being inhabits the shelter of our meanings that we cling to them so ferociously. To lose our meanings, therefore, is to be in danger of losing our being. “For what should it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul.” This quote from the bible names an ancient terror—the loss of orientation that we call self.

I'm suggesting that post modernity is a kind of slow acting, diffuse trauma that generates identity and epistemological crisis in everyone that it touches. No one can escape.



Cover Art from the Pink Floyd Album – “Wish You Were Here”

Why is this image inserted at this particular site in the text? I chose it because I think that it was created at the dawn of postmodernism. Like David Bowie, I locate the birth of postmodernism around 1970. I'm aware that Jameson and others have argued that the beginnings of postmodernism could be pushed back to an earlier time. However, I'm sticking with my marker. I do so because I'm interested in how and when *postmodernism enters the popular imagination*...not when it first occurred to one or several thinkers. I see this album art as one of the first incursions of postmodernism into mass culture. At what point can we say that it's not just a few members of the intelligentsia but rather a whole culture that is becoming postmodern? I've selected this image as a sign of such a foundational moment.

How, precisely, does this image perform postmodernism? It displays fire as content *and as context*. Fire as an event happening within the frame and fire as consuming the frame. That is, this image problematizes the conventions of representation. As long as the frame isn't on fire we see the burning man as a real event rather than as a representation, image or symbol of a burning man. We conflate image and event. As soon as we realize that the image itself has been singed we become alert and curious...we drop a conventional way of looking and begin to see.

That is, this art permitted us to see "representation". *Representation* suddenly came into view. Previously it had been soaked or absorbed into reality.

Something similar had occurred a few years earlier when Jimi Hendrix sang "Are you Experienced?" He wasn't asking the more familiar question, "What are you experienced *at*?" His question was making "experience" itself an object of contemplation. The way we "experience", the process of "experiencing" was becoming noticeable.

A few years later Supertramp produced their *Even in the Quietest Moment* album. The front cover had a snow-covered grand piano perched on a mountaintop. The back cover was the same scene, only broken into fragments of shattered glass. The back cover revealed that the image on the front was only image, only representation. It was the representation that was being shattered. It was *representation* that was being hollowed out or separated from being. To conclude this section, these are three examples drawn from the same time span that I register as the onset of postmodernism.

Trauma is the experience that meanings/concepts/assumptions failed to protect one from the invasion of the Real: a car accident; an earthquake; a date rape; a mugging on the way to the theatre; a divorce; a bankruptcy. Before the trauma, however, the person assumed that their meanings were more than adequate. The individual was supported in a hammock or net of meanings. After the trauma, though, the story is different. "I didn't notice that there was more hole than netting. Why would I? Those holes were unimportant. The only thing that mattered was the netting and it sustained my weight." In fact the person isn't aware of the holes until *after* the trauma...when every antecedent condition is being inspected for its fatal flaw.

The artwork that I've been citing is the aesthetic rendering of our postmodern condition. It demonstrates the nascent realization that meaning and being have been conflated. This conflation had made possible the illusion that living conceptually and/or ideologically was the

same as living existentially...but with far less risk...supposedly. This artwork could be read as a cause or as a symptom or both. When read as a symptom this artwork asks us to look elsewhere for causes. One candidate cause is multiculturalism. Post modernity relativises our values when it displays alternative values from other cultures. When we look for a transcendent yardstick by which to measure their values against ours, we find that there is none...and therefore no way to order or arrange competing cultural values. The solid ground of the absolute which legitimized and guaranteed our values was revealed to be the originary and relative ground of one's particular culture. And if not grounded in the absolute then falsely grounded through reification. We could no longer naively trump other cultures values. But now we could see that what we were standing on was fluid or dynamic. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, anxiety is the fluidization of everything that once was solid.

Even before our beliefs are undermined by multiculturalism we face a threat closer to home: contradiction. Being caught in self-contradiction often produces a frenzy of defensiveness that frequently borders on offensiveness. One believes in both contradicting positions but these convictions can only be upheld if their competing claims are kept apart—kept in ignorance of each other. When juxtaposed, however, their mutual exclusiveness guarantees that the truth-value of each term is suspect. That is, contradiction leads inevitably to the realization that our “truths” are incomplete, that we are in fact “suspended over the void”. Intellectuals have known this for some time but now post modernity is visiting this difficult realization on us all.

Both multiculturalism and contradiction, as features of post modernity, reveal that concepts stand between oneself and the Real as its intermediaries or representatives. Harmless signs pointing to a reality that hasn't been seen for so long that one forgets that it is there. All that is left is a landscape of signs. In summary, post modernity reveals that “reality” was actually only billboards and false fronts. That what lies behind these signs is actually some untamed beast...whose ways we know nothing about.

Suddenly we feel naked or exposed having found out that we've been living in a house with no walls. One soon learns that panic isn't a viable reaction. It compromises functioning, draws unwanted attention and leads to labeling and devaluing. Instead of understanding, one gets intrusiveness and confinement: a reduction in autonomy. That is, one's experience is defined as a personal problem rather than cultural condition.

So one learns to avoid panic reactions. Instead one learns to shut down. Dampen everything. Regulate one's arousal directly. With healthy living, contentment and ease are the byproduct resulting from successfully dealing with a life challenge. An expedient alternative, that short circuits that process, operates directly on our nervous system. We shut down. Then that “solution” becomes the new problem. That is, the person begins to experience symptoms of depression and, if those symptoms are severe enough, medication and/or counseling is sought. I suggest that the wide spread usage of anti-depressant medication is a symptom not of a biochemical deficit in the brain but of cultural change.

Turbulence on an aircraft is alarming—but just how alarmed should one be? One looks to the flight crew to see what their reactions are and their reactions become the gauge of danger.

This is, of course, a metaphor for our culture. As Geoffrey Hartman, a culture critic, observed: we look to Jay Leno, Dave Letterman and Jon Stewart for clues as to what the appropriate attitude towards current events might be. I think that we try to vouchsafe the safety of our

being by referring to other people's meanings? We try to stay "in the loop" because we sense that, *when reality is created consensually*, to be outside the loop is equivalent to ostracisation. Our meanings are also our inclusion.

But our vulnerability is more fundamental than inclusion/exclusion. It is epistemological or even ontological. We are creatures who live in two different environments simultaneously: the natural or physical and the symbolic or cultural. A bullet can wound us and so can a word.

We are born into a sea of language—our most comprehensive and intricate symbol system. Most of us know as much about this environment as a fish knows about water. We might know how to use it; but most of us don't know how it uses us. I submit that the meanings that language carries, forms a more pervasive environment than does our natural world. We operate in symbolic "space" as much as we move through physical space. Living symbolically means that we live one step removed from reality. Our minds can escape the immediacy of the physically present. Our range expands to include the past and the future. Such freedom.

This freedom has a cost however. Existential Insecurity. To the degree that we live in language and meaning, to that same degree we've been distanced from being. On a good day we suspect that we're not quite in touch with reality. On a bad day we "know" that there is something wrong and hope that we can "fake it until we make it."

We are experiencing the unbearable lightness of meaning. No ballast. No wonder we look to reification to provide the gravity that only the real can bring. No wonder we look to others as our gauge of what is going on. No wonder that we look to others to tell us who we are. No wonder we are so vulnerable to the meanings that they project onto us.

Our identities were already more symbolic than Real. Hence our vulnerability to the expectations of others. If this "other" seems sure of themselves, the certainty of my experience and my sense of self evaporates—I can become their expectation. "You want an action movie; I want an action movies." "You want a glass of Chardonnay with your meal; so do I."

I remember hearing of Milton Erickson, the famous hypnotherapist, and his work on the cancer wards. Someone had noted that many of the staff developed symptoms that were very similar to the patients'. But not Milton. When asked why this was so, he responded with, "Because, I know who I am." His groundedness protected his identity from symbolic osmosis. On a purely speculative level, I find myself wondering if Japan didn't "become" the United States after the Second World War. There was an identity vacuum after the Emperor surrendered and as a result it was but a short step to fill in their hollowed out selves with the identity of their conquerors.

Conclusion:

This line of thinking leads on to other speculations. I will give only two. The first is that postmodernism may be the first ideology of the right hemisphere. Previous ideologies were much more of a piece with left hemispheric functioning. Secondly, if meaning and being have become conflated in identity then it is understandable that people will defend their meanings with their life. However, as we come to understand that being is the true source of ground we may learn to attend to it rather than clinging ferociously to our self-concepts. Meditation is a practice that encourages that outcome. Sometimes I skip my meditation sitting. I do so

because I know what is awaiting me...my existence: the residual mood from a bad dream, some distress from an incident the previous day. But I've learned that if I let myself be...

Let myself be, without concepts to interpret, blame, explain, rationalize, or predict then, by noon, I will be quietly streaming with clean energy.