

Modernity, Posmodernity and What Comes Next

To old school Classicists, the immortal words that introduce the 1960s cult science fiction classic, *Star Trek*, are linguistically illegal, a grammatical atrocity of the highest order. After all, to the obsessive grammatologist pondering the survival of our species, splitting the infinitive is more dangerous than splitting the atom. But there are bigger problems with the mission of the Star Ship Enterprise. Its mission statement was read at the beginning of each episode by William Shatner, who – as you know – was played by Captain Kirk.

Space, the final frontier...these are the voyages of the starship enterprise... its mission ... to boldly go where no man has gone before.

It's a great summary of the modern era. The myth of progress, the expanding circle of the human self, and above all the sovereignty of man – and by man, we mean, that element of the human race that really matters... man. Now, of course, there are multiple ways of understanding modernity, that can vary between different disciplines. But I think it's widely recognised that modernity began some time in the 17th Century. It is encapsulated in famous phrase of Rene Descartes, I think therefore I am. For Descartes, you cannot know much for sure. Your life, your history, your relationships, your identity – everything that makes you who you are – it could all just be a dream. Some nasty demon could have drilled fake memories in your skull ten minutes ago. And the entire universe as we know it might just be a fantasy playing out in your head-brain. So – you should doubt everything, says Descartes. Doubt everything you can possibly doubt. But then - you cannot doubt the fact that – since you are doubting, you are thinking, and because no one else can do your thinking for you, you must – after all – exist. I think, therefore I am. The world rebuilt around me – it puts me, and my thinking head-brain, at the centre of life, the universe and everything. And so, I from the solid platform of my certainty – I

can build a true picture of life, the universe, and everything. Whatever else modernity meant – it was age of the sovereignty of the self. The male self. Man is the measure of all things. Modernity.

Of course, throughout the modern era – there were those who would challenge this view. But modernity remained, by and large, the age in which the human, male self was sovereign. Then came, *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. The Starship Enterprise was now captained by Patrick Stewart himself, played by Professor X. The mission statement had changed slightly. Its mission was now an *ongoing* mission, *To boldly go where no one has gone before*. If modernity was about the sovereignty of the self, post modernity was an attempt to dethrone that sovereign, male, human self. The great theories and stories about life, the universe and everything were revealed as power claims, claims made by an obnoxious, deluded, man. Who had placed himself on the throne, at the centre of everything. Postmodernity, that emerged as a force in the late 1960s, was the attempt to dethrone him.

And so there came the reminder that the way we interpret the world, is shaped by our background, our upbringing, our community, our experience and our language. That if you scale the heights of Olympus to get a god's eye view of life, the universe, and everything – you discover that Olympus is the home of many gods. And any claims you make, are relative – relative to those of other people. That postmodernists remind us that that phrase, Man is the measure of all things, uttered 2500 years ago, was supposed to be a caution – that whatever we might know, is always, ever, only, filtered through the fallible interpretive faculties of a flawed earthling. Postmodernity.

To repeat the postmodern claim that all truth is relative, rests on the absolute truth that all truth is relative. To claim that the human self is not sovereign because we are shaped by community, fails to account for how rampant tribalism can grip

tiny communities and nation states. To claim that we have to be perpetually open-minded, tends to turn open-mindedness into a virtue that only those who disagree with me, don't have. And hey presto. The sovereignty of the self, modernity is intact. This is why some scholars preferred the term, late modernity, or high modernity, to post modernity. Because all we learned to do was wrap our certainties and our selfisms beneath a veneer of humbled language. Instead of saying, No – you're wrong! We say, "I'm not sure if you're right!" Sure, I've learned how to use a deodorised discourse, and how to demonise those who don't. I also learned to sweep the realities of my racisms, my gender-phobias, my economic elitism, all under the carpet of correctness.

So ... where does that land us, in the post-post-modern world? Perhaps we need a new Star Trek adventure. Where it is no longer man that discovers, nor even 'one' that discovers. Because there is no such thing as one – no such thing as the individual, free thinker. No such thing as an automaton in splendid isolation from others. It seems to me, there is increasing recognition that there is a world of difference between an individual and a person, a seemingly self-made individual, and a person-in-relationship.

That, certainly, is the case in Hebrew scripture. In which Adam is rooted well and truly in his environment, and fundamentally in relation to other species and people. It is also the case in the New Testament, in which – within a community, different gifts manifest themselves differently in different people. The Greeks had a word for people who defined themselves over against their community, who regarded themselves as individual, and free, above all the constraints of the city state, human beings turned in on their self-identity. The Greeks called them, *Idiotes*. And you can guess how that translates into modern English.

Perhaps then, a way of escaping the sovereignty of the human self, is to look at the non-human world around us. A human, after all, might be regarded as simply one manifestation, of something,

some physis, some life, some logos, that manifests itself in a million different ways in the world around us. If we look at the living world, the non-human world – we do not observe it from outside, as though we might find examples or lessons or messages that help us.

But maybe, we can discover something of who we already are, in the way that plants or animals or fungi live. Maybe we can learn to be more fully ourselves, by paying close attention to the roots of our being, and seeing how that same being manifests itself in other forms of life. That, is what we plan to do with this series of talks this term and next.

And we have to be careful, of course, that we don't end up slipping into that romanticism and mysticism that does nothing but project our human sentiments onto the world around us. And equally, we have to be careful about the false humility that denies a voice to anything non-human, and boldly declares that such voices are always predetermined to be nothing more than the echo of our own.

And so speakers invited over the next few months, will be paying attention to the living world we call *nature*. And even that word is problematic, because for many it reduces the complex and beautiful and infinite diversities out there into a single, static noun that is separate from us. In much the same way that a xenophobic nationalist might talk about 'foreigners'!

No, most of the guest speakers in coming months will be members of our own college. And they will be addressing these general questions from within their own areas of interest and expertise. They will help us, in other words, to pay attention to the world on our doorstep, under our nose – a universe that is often unnoticed and undiscovered. *Space*, is probably not *the final frontier*.