The final quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a philosophical perspective known as postmodernism. The term itself has caused a bit of a problem because it means various things to different people.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

One way to come to grips with the term “postmodernism” is to see it as a reaction to modernism. The heart of modernism was the desire to understand the world through reason. The underlying assumption of the early modernists was that the world is a reasonable place and that the reality that exists can not only be understood by the human mind, but that there is a system of fixed laws which undergird both reality and human thought at its best.

In the eighteenth century, such men as Isaac Newton began to more intensively apply their rational way of thinking to the world around them. That procedure led to the rise of science, the findings of which the modernists believed were true reflections of reality. The nineteenth century would see such individuals as August Comte and Herbert Spencer extend the scientific approach into the
realm of human society. The result was the development of the social sciences.

The modern frame of mind came to believe that the discoveries of the natural and social sciences provided human beings with certain truth, truth that was beyond doubt, human understandings that mirrored reality as it existed. Such knowledge was believed to be objective and neutral, as was the scientific method itself. The various facts of the modern outlook were utilized to form theories (metanarratives) to explain the world and the meaning of life.

Modernism also viewed knowledge as being good by its very nature. Thus discovering the truths of nature would enable people to control their world, eventually overcome human limitations, and even eradicate those destructive evils (such as diseases) that had plagued humankind throughout its recorded history. The idea of continuous progress, of course, was an important aspect of the modernist scheme of things.

Modernism, however, didn’t fulfill its promise. Science and technology, for example, brought about environmental degradation, totalitarianism, and global wars with atomic potential based on technological knowledge. Thus, as one scholar put it, “reason and science did not lead to . . . utopia.”

The reactions were many. One was the despair of existentialism. Another is what we have come to know as postmodernism. Postmodernism, as we will shortly see, is in large part a rejection of the modern view of things.

At the very outset it should be recognized that postmodernism is not a unified world view. Various proponents set forth their own theories, which at times contradict other postmodern ideas. In spite of their differences, however, the postmoderns are united in their rejection of modernism. We will note other shared ideas at the close of the section below entitled “Varieties of Postmodernism.”

Before moving beyond preliminary remarks on the nature of postmodernism, it should be noted that scholars are not agreed as to its exact significance. Some hold that postmodernism represents a new historical period that people are entering, while others view it as an extension of some of the basic concepts undergirding mod-
ernism itself. Still others see postmodernism as a kind of in-between period in which old ways are being questioned but the new era has yet to arrive. That uncertainty is reflected in the title of this chapter, which views postmodernism in its present state of evolution as an impulse or mood rather than as a well-developed and well-integrated philosophy. Only time will tell if the impulse will have permanence. In the meantime, postmodernism has raised significant issues that are at the center of educational discussion as the world moves into the twenty-first century.

PHILOSOPHIC ROOTS

Postmodernism is not primarily a product of philosophers, but rather of those whose fields of interest range from art to literature and architecture. That, however, does not mean that philosophers haven’t made important contributions to the field. Historically, David Hume (1711-1776) cast doubt onto the question of cause and effect and onto the human ability to truly know the external world. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) sought to answer Hume’s philosophy but ended up by claiming that the human mind really couldn’t know things in themselves, but only interpreted external reality in terms of mental categories already present in the mind.

While Hume and Kant laid the groundwork for the postmodern frame of mind, it was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who fleshed out the ideas. According to Nietzsche, there is no foundation on which to rest beliefs. Truth is dead and people have no option but to create their own world. Thus knowledge became a human construction based in the subjective use of language. Nietzsche arrived at the frontiers of postmodernism even though he lived nearly a century before his ideas would become “mainstream.”

Beyond the ideas of such philosophers as Kant and Nietzsche, the ideas of three philosophic movements have been especially influential in postmodernism. The first is pragmatism. Pragmatism’s commitment to the idea that knowledge is provisional, its rejection of metaphysical schemes, its socially active position in the face of human problems, and its concern for social
merely individual) issues have all found a place in postmodernism. Such neopragmatists as Richard Rorty are closely identified with postmodernism.

A second philosophic base of postmodernism is existentialism. Such concepts as Jean-Paul Sartre’s I-am-what-I-choose-to-be approach not only add to the relativistic basis of postmodernism, but also involve people in the construction of knowledge. And knowledge construction, as we will soon see, stands at the very basis of postmodern epistemology and curriculum.

A third basic philosophic outlook undergirding postmodernism is Marxist thought. Marxism’s preoccupation with class struggle and economic concerns informs both postmodern theory and practice, even though postmoderns reject the Marxist scheme of history (its metanarrative). Postmodernism’s concern with class struggle and economic issues will be most evident in our discussions of the thought of Michel Foucault in the next section and in the section on critical pedagogy in Chapter 6.

Before moving away from the philosophic roots of postmodernism, it should be recognized that the movement represents a rejection of behaviorism (see Chapter 6) with its scientific objectivity and technological approach to human engineering. Postmodernism also largely rejects the positivistic and objective views of philosophical analysis (see Chapter 7). On the other hand, postmodern theorists respond positively to certain analytic philosophers in their sensitivity to language and in their understanding of the interconnectedness of the meanings of language.

**VARIETIES OF POSTMODERNISM**

One way to get a better grip on postmodernism is to examine the ideas of some of its leading theorists. This section will examine the major contributions to postmodern theory by Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault.

We had a glimpse of Rorty in our discussion of neopragmatism in Chapter 4. Rorty strikes at the foundation of modern epistemology by criticizing what he sees as its central metaphor—the
image of the mind as a mirror of reality. Rorty, as we saw previ-
ously, rejects that view with its correspondence view of truth. To
Rorty, language and thought may be tools for coping with experi-
ence, but they certainly do not supply us with pictures of reality.
Thus with Rorty we are faced with epistemological subjectivity.
One can have opinions but not truth. As a result, people can and
must keep the philosophic conversation going even though they
are unable to objectively ground their opinions.2

The subjectivity found in Rorty is also in the work of Derrida.
Derrida has attacked what he calls the “logocentrism” of Western
society. As he sees it, the central task of philosophy has been to
understand logos or the central controlling rational principle of the
universe. Unfortunately, philosophers have failed in that attempt
because they have not been in touch with reality itself but rather
with the language that they think represents that reality. Thus all
they really have is their writings or texts and not an understand-
ing of objective reality.

The problem is that both author and readers bring to the text
personal emphases and meanings that have been shaped by their
unique experiences. Thus what they get when they read a text is
not an objective account or even what the author may have meant,
but their own interpretation based upon generally unconscious
presuppositions.

What needs to be done, Derrida suggests, is to “deconstruct”
the texts by unpacking the presuppositions expressed by such
things as word choices, the hidden meanings in puns, and so on.
When people unpack texts they will discover that the Western
philosophical perspective has tyrannized, suppressed, excluded,
or marginalized other perspectives.

Derrida holds that rather than merely being held captive by
the dominant perspective, people need to celebrate diversity. This
has encouraged some minority groups and feminists to ally them-
theselves with deconstructionists in the equal rights struggle.3

A third strain of postmodernism is found in the work of
Michel Foucault. Foucault explored the power implications in
language. He suggests that Western society has for centuries erro-
neously believed that there is an objective body of knowledge that
is just waiting to be discovered, that that knowledge is value-free,