It is for us today to realise the difficulties of the modern mind to the full, and for us to accept these difficulties as our problem. (Polanyi 1997 [1962], 93)

Our appreciation of scientific value has developed historically . . . much as our sense of justice has taken shape from the outcome of judicial decisions through past centuries. Indeed, all our cultural values are the deposits of a similar historic succession of intellectual upheavals. But ultimately, all past mental strife can be interpreted today only in the light of what we ourselves decide to be the true outcome and lesson of this history. . . The lesson of history is what we ourselves accept as such. (Polanyi 1964 [1958], 158.)

Before it was fashionable to speak of postmodernism, the scientist-turned-philosopher Michael Polanyi, quoted above, argued that most minds shaped by modern western thought have deep-rooted, culturally destructive dispositions. But it was possible, and indeed incumbent upon us, he contended, to reconsider our patterns of thought and to take a stand today upon the controversies of intellectual history. Through this process, Polanyi argued, we can move toward what he identified as “post-critical” approaches to cultural endeavors. It may seem odd to launch a discussion of Bible study and critical thinking with quotations pointing rather broadly at the cultural problems and possibilities of the modern mind. Nevertheless, it is at just this macroscopic level that I believe much of the account of Bible study and critical thinking, and their possibilities, needs to be told. I try here to frame and unite comments treating Bible study and critical thinking within the context of the history of ideas. I thus begin by characterizing some of the dominant motifs in Bible study in late modernity. Following this introduction, I shift the discussion to describe the contemporary “postmodern” cultural terrain where new digital technology is further recasting many of the commitments of late modernity. In the final section, I review some of the discussions about critical thinking and try to recast some ideas about critical thinking in terms of what, with Polanyi, I call a post-critical perspective.

Interpreting the Bible in Late Modernity

Bible scholars in the middle of the twentieth century in the Euro-American world either accepted so-called “higher criticism” (sometimes termed “scientific,” “higher critical” or just “critical” scholarship) or they were convinced that “higher criticism” was anathema. If they were partisans of “higher criticism,” this meant they favored “historical-critical” approaches. That is, Bible texts were recognized as much like other ancient texts and should be treated so. Such approaches advocated strongly historicist notions of meaning that became dominant in late print culture (i.e., the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century). Over roughly the last four centuries, the idea developed and took firm root (i.e., became presuppositional for many) that the “original” or privileged meaning of a text is that appropriate to the text’s earliest social context. Historicism perspectives try to explain (and some say explain away) any mystery in the text in terms of the earliest communicative milieu. Such an account resolves the
text-as-problem into the earliest social context, for it is believed that only in this locus is it possible to definitively delineate meaning.

Although one can find evidence of these or similar hermeneutical commitments earlier (e.g., in the Renaissance), by the nineteenth century they became an underpinning for German historical scholarship and fared well in academic circles for over a century. How and why these commitments came to dominate is an interesting puzzle, but one that I can only allude to here; likely many elements contributed. The Renaissance interest in ancient languages and the past must have contributed. The Reformation’s new attention to the Bible also certainly was important. The reformers insisted that the Bible, rather than the prevailing institutional power structure, was authoritative and must shape new cultural institutions. The emergence of pietistic but scholarly study of the Bible in new Reformation traditions was an important outgrowth of such convictions. Pietistic scholarship invited scrutiny of diverse interpretations. As I note later, the emergence of philosophical rationalism with notions about the heuristic value of doubt and the coming of the new science also have helped shape hermeneutical commitments. Finally, I expect that the mere proliferation of printed texts, after the sixteenth century development of movable type, contributed to the notion that texts belong to a particular social context.

By privileging a particular social context, the “original context of meaning,” the notion of meaning as part of every social context for a living text became philosophically complicated in modernity. Is tradition no more than the accumulated residue of misconstruals piled on a kernel of authentic meaning? What is the connection between the privileged meaning context and the meaning contexts that follow? How does one get into the so-called hermeneutic circle? One of the most celebrated late modern philosophers, Martin Heidegger, spent much effort in Being and Time to show that we always already are in the circle and the problem is getting disposed or attuned in the right way (Heidegger 1962, 194f.). Most of these questions about meaning can be reformulated as questions about the nature of history itself. What does it mean to acknowledge that understanding history is always an affair located in history? Are there in fact multiple locations within history from which to seek an account of past events? Should one assume that any account of the past made from within a place in history can provide impersonal, universal knowledge? These kinds of broad questions historical-critical Bible scholars have struggled with in the modern period; even more often, philosophers and theologians have wrestled with them and Bible scholars have tried to take over particular accounts to provide a foundation for their work.

The notion of a “sacred” text is a problematic notion to modern historical-critical scholars. In essence, acceptance of historical-critical approaches to the Bible has entailed radically reconstituting the “sacredness” (to a community) of the Bible, in the interest of understanding the Bible in a particular social context. Rudolph Bultmann, in the middle of the twentieth century, perhaps offers the most straightforward example of such a reconstitution. He represents the way in which historical-critical suppositions led to philosophical and theological questions, like those noted above, which ultimately had to be addressed. As Stephen Gunter notes, Bultmann sharply separated the faith of the New Testament from the worldview of the New Testament, and he recognized this worldview as sharply different than the modern worldview (Gunter 1999, 41). Surely Bultmann was correct that worldviews seem to differ in different eras and cultures, but what Bultmann believed this pluralism called for seems much more dubious today. He announced a program for demythologizing the New Testament, which is a strategy for picking out the understanding of existence found in the New Testament while not being mislead by the imagery of the social context of the writers. As Stephen Gunter puts it, “it is a method of interpreting the mythological understanding of humanity held by the New Testament so that it becomes comprehensible to its hearer and compels one to make a decision ‘for oneself’ with regard to the proclamation that has been heard” (1999, 41). Under the influence of existentialist thinkers, Bultmann thus claimed the Bible has in disguised form a certain existential relevance or power for today. The “sacredness” of the Bible was recast in the dress of existential philosophy or a theology predominantly shaped by existentialism.

Bultmann provides a good late modern example of an aspect of what Charles McCoy terms the dominant “Constantinian paradigm” so often found in Western Christian theology, and secondarily in scholarly Bible study: a currently attractive philosophical perspective (in this case existentialist thought) is borrowed and becomes a vehicle with which to organize or transform the blooming, buzzing confusion and diversity of human action. The plurality of human belief and practice found in history and in cross-cultural exploration is recognized only as a “problem” which requires discerning some underlying structure, essence or human potential that at least in principle overcomes the problem. With this Rosetta stone, imperial proclamations can be made which suggest that theologians “assume that they occupy a transcendent perspective, an ontological peak, outside and above the limited perspectives of historical and social location” (McCoy 1980, 29) The problem here is that we forget we are in history - and often a particular fashionable philosophical perspective seems to aid this forgetfulness on the part of theologians and Bible scholars. McCoy suggests the diversity of history ought to offer an occasion for reforming
the commitments of persons and communities but this is hampered by our readiness to move forward with ontological generalizations.

It is not only the mid-century thinking of philosophically inclined, historical-critical modern Bible scholars like Bultmann that today seems tortured. Modern conservative Bible scholars across the divide from Bultmann who were dead set against “higher criticism” seem equally strange. Such interpreters, very common in Bultmann’s era but also still present today, were not “uncritical” in the sense that they refused to reason, but they reasoned in ways that did not presuppose historical-critical assumptions. But most often those who take more literalist approaches to the Bible are heirs to centuries of print culture in which mass literacy and the transparency of texts are presumed. They rarely explore the ways in which print culture’s presuppositions inform their views. The Bible for literalists is imagined not as a complex historically fixed document that must be existentialized, but as a beacon capable of producing illumination visible across the ages to those who diligently attend to it. In late print culture, the printed word, and perhaps especially the printed Bible, is often tacitly presupposed as an unmediated representation of what is. That is, the Bible is taken by literalists to be “revelation” from God, and to so identify it solves many interpretative problems. To respect, honor and understand God’s intentions primarily requires better quality attention to a text. 3 In a certain sense, for the literalist, the complications of social location and diversity are overcome by overlooking them. The “problems” of history--problems for figures like Bultmann--are not on the radar screen because there are, for literalists, different underlying assumptions about what a deity is --that is, in particular how God, as an active and revealing deity, works in history. Many of the literalist assumptions about what past events are and the nature of our access to them are akin to figures like Bultmann. Stephen Gunter suggests “fundamentalist literalism that insists on certainty and factuality is itself a narrow expression of modernism, a victim of historicism. The irony is that this conservatism is predicated on the historical assumptions of modernism” (Gunter 1999, 68). The objectivist outlook of literalists, one that holds there are simple facts that can guide us to absolute certainty, is the naive byproduct of a scientistic culture. In such a culture, science is a dominant force, although the presuppositions, methods and conclusions of science are simplistically misrepresented in the culture’s worldview. It is just this sort of misrepresentation that has dominated Western culture under the influence of the Enlightenment in much of the twentieth century.

Finally, let us gather together the historical–critical and objectivist literalist approaches to the Bible by borrowing a sympathetic note or two from Umberto Eco’s analysis about the history of ideas of interpretation. Both approaches, in Eco’s schematization assume “that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or - in any case - its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such is independent of our interpretation” (Eco 1995, 205). Each approach is a permutation of an interpretative option grounded in “epistemological fanaticism” and is “instantiated by various kinds of fundamentalism and various forms of metaphysical realism . . .” (ibid).

The Great Change: Emerging Postmodern Hermeneutics

In the last third of the twentieth century, there emerged in the Euro-American academy a great awakening in literary and philosophical studies that produced enormous interest in language, literary critical theory and methodology, philosophy of science, sociology of knowledge and communication studies. We now call the literature generated by this movement “postmodern” philosophy and cultural studies for it seems to have displaced many of the literary and philosophical concerns and assumptions of mid century.

There is much discussion, of course, about what “postmodern” thought is and how it is distinguished from what preceded it. David Griffin has suggested that “postmodernism refers to a diffuse sentiment rather than any common set of doctrines—the sentiment that humanity can and must go beyond the modern” (2000, x). Extending the logic of this comment, James Mehl, a Renaissance historian, has argued that there is a new historical self-consciousness at the end of the old millennium and the beginning of the new. Ours is a period of rapid cultural change and it is perhaps best understood, according to Mehl, with a model of a similar period, the Renaissance. The present transitional time should be seen in terms of what he calls a “layered development” in which both the modern and the new are intertwined (2000, 411). Lyotard, in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, pointed to the problem of meaning in contemporary culture in his famous one line effort to specify the “postmodern” cultural mood: “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984, xxiv). He spoke of the “obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation” (ibid). Grand narratives seem to have lost plausibility; they no longer work very well to integrate society and inspire and justify action. On a note akin to Lyotard’s perspective, Griffin followed up, in his discussion of contemporary philosophical and theological thought, his claim that postmodern sentiment aims to go beyond the modern: it is, he argued, important to distinguish deconstructive,
relativistic or eliminative postmodern thought from revisionary or reconstructive postmodern thought. Deconstructive thought aims to upset or eliminate “various concepts that have generally been thought necessary for a worldview, such as self, purpose, meaning, a real world, givenness, reason, truth as correspondence, universally valid norms and divinity” (Griffin 2000, xi). Reconstructive thought seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews (or “metanarratives”) as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts in the light of inescapable presuppositions of our various modes of practice. (ibid)

The suggestions of all these cultural critics are helpful for understanding something of the ambience of contemporary culture and the changes in the late twentieth century that led to it. If, however, I had to select a single axis around which to organize thinking about the emergent reorientation that is associated with so-called postmodern literature and culture, I would point to an epistemological stance that has shifted significantly since the middle of the last century. At least in the West, many cultural leaders and intellectuals no longer believe that knowledge is or can be fully objective and impersonal. Nor is there confidence that a growing edifice of knowledge is assuring that human kind is “making progress.” This does not necessarily mean that science is less important in shaping culture and human outlooks; in fact, I believe science and technology is perhaps more important in molding human beliefs and practices as we enter the new millennium than it was in the middle of the twentieth century. As I note below, new digital communications technology is likely reinforcing if not helping to create, the post-objectivist cultural mood. What, however, seems most definitive is that the cultural images suggesting what knowledge is, how it is formed, and who it serves have shifted significantly over the last fifty years. Knowledge has become widely recognized as socially generated, paradigm dependent, and permeated by interests and allocations of power. It is this sort of epistemological change that has lead philosophers and religious thinkers toward what Giffin sees as the twin paths of deconstructive and reconstructive appropriations of the modern.

The early phase of the literary and philosophical great awakening that we now call postmodern thought (i.e., literary and philosophical writing from roughly 1970 to 1990), came, in rich first world societies, at almost the same time as the widespread emergence of the personal computer. The computer is what Jay David Bolter terms a “defining” technology. By this he means that it is redefining the human role in relation to nature. The human being is now acquiring new definition as an “information processor” while nature is becoming “information to be processed” (1984, 13). Digital tools have now become widely available and used for communication. More and more, North Americans are socialized to use and accept the computer and cyberspace, the world of networked computers, just as they do the telephone or other now second-nature communication tools. The computer has complemented and sometimes supplanted other communication tools. As interactive, integrated digital communication artifacts proliferate, the tacitly held values and the mental habits of earlier print culture are being transformed; they are migrating toward what Myron Tuman terms “online literacy” (1992, 22). Our larger sense of what “communication” involves, our ideas about what “reading,” and “writing” and “listening” are, and ultimately our notions about the nature of “knowledge” are leveraged by our practices using the computer.

As we enter the new millennium, what can be called digital culture has begun to supplant the culture of print; slowly, across the world, this successor to book culture is taking shape as phenomena such as electronic writing and the World Wide Web have proliferated. The mental habits of those exposed to digital communication have begun subtly to shift from the tacit dispositions that print culture nurtures. The emergence and proliferation of networked computers has produced the contemporary super-saturated information environment. The seedbed within which digital tools could quickly take root was, of course, the world of broadcast media which already had come to shape popular culture by the late twentieth century, reinvigorating our sense of the aural and pictographic. Tex Sample offers an important insight about emergent culture when he identifies what he terms “spectacle” as a primary artifactual type or category in contemporary culture:

Spectacle is a basic and indigenous practice in electronic culture whenever we find a full-blown use of image, sound as beat, and visualization. Indeed, it is the augmented power of these electronic factors that enhances a spectacle's capacity and makes it even more captivating. (1998, 57).

Sample has in mind, as a model of the spectacle, primarily rock concerts, sports events, public celebrations and similar events in which people gather and become emotionally engaged as they focus on a common object. The spectacle is an increasingly common occasion or practice through which we make or discover and enjoy meaning. Clearly, the popularity of the spectacle owes much to the broadcast and film industries. I suggest, however, that it is
the virtual world of integrated, interactive digital media that is another increasingly important domain of the
spectacle; perhaps the virtual world soon will be regarded as more spectacular than the non-virtual world of special
electronically mediated events. Digital communication artifacts, proliferating by the minute in cyberspace, gravitate
toward the spectacle. It seems likely that spending more time online leads people to expect that which is
meaningful to have more features of spectacle – including participation via the interactive dimensions of online
communication.

The online environment is one in which postmodern epistemological commitments readily become second
nature. In cyberspace, it is easy to recognize that “information” is grounded in a particular social context and rests
upon certain presupposed values and visions; it is clear that interests shape information, and information aims to
produce certain effects which inevitably fit into some political context. For example, the way in which advertising
has come to be so much a part of “information” provided (whether you like it or not) on the Web readily illustrates
this. But our sense of the perspectival and socially grounded nature of information in the electronic world is
broader than the simple case of crass advertisement. The birth of digital culture seems to have dovetailed
seamlessly with the emergence of literature and philosophy that is articulating postmodern perspectives.

Postmodern digital culture is an interesting and confusing climate within which study and promotion of the
Bible is occurring in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. The renaissance in literary studies influenced
scholarly biblical studies, giving birth to a variety of scholarly approaches to the text. This effectively undermined
naïve historicist approaches supported by many Western academics in late book culture (JimVoelz’ essay in this
volume draws a similar conclusion). However, it had little effect on some theologically conservative Bible studies
other than perhaps to deepen ideological divisions. A more literalist interpretative approach can be blended with
spectacular use of the Bible (e.g., in worship) in ways that merely reinforce existing interpretative habits. Digital
tools themselves, of course, also create many new questions for Bible study, questions such as those about the
possibility and legitimacy of “transmediated” text (see, for example, Lindvall’s discussion in this volume.) Not only
serious philosophical questions have emerged from the digital revolution, but also new complications in the cultural
politics of religious diversity have emerged as digital tools begin to serve the many different institutional religious
masters with different agendas. For some, digital tools are no more than a new avenue for marketing, and nothing
sells like high technology products with the imprimatur of the sacred text.

Biblical studies and Bible-related cultural initiatives are radically pluralistic today. Insightful (and
somewhat blunt) statements such as the following by Bible scholars identifying the limitations of the recent
paradigm for Bible study are not hard to find:

The pervasive modern emphasis on the objective recovery of the ancient context in which biblical
texts were produced has had the double effect of obscuring the significance of the Bible in
contemporary Western culture and of turning the Bible into an historical relic, an antiquarian
artifact. It has also produced a modern biblical scholarship that, for many, has become a
curatorial science in which the text is fetishized, its readings routinized, its readers bureaucratized.
Moreover, historical criticism has implicitly veiled the historical character of biblical
scholarship’s entanglements with modernity and has therefore left unexamined its own critical and
theoretical assumptions as well as the cultural conditions that produced, sustained, and validated
them. (Aichele et al 1995, 2).

As we enter a new millennium, there is no broadly shared new paradigm about how to study the Bible or how the
Bible might be a resource in postmodern culture. Psychoanalytic, feminist, structuralist, deconstructive, rhetorical
and many other approaches to reading the Bible are extant today. Is such pluralism a threat or an opportunity or
both? Certainly, it has been an opportunity insofar as it has allowed a thousand flowers to bloom, including some
non-Eurocentric flowers. But the danger of such sporting is that it at least seems that the logic of affiliation and the
grounds of continuity get lost when there is only diversity and the politics of interpretation.

Critical Thinking and Post Critical Thought
Can critical thinking reorient us in the postmodern digital world? Can it knit together the many efforts in digital
culture to use (or exploit) the Bible as a sacred or simply an old text? Can it lead us to a new paradigm to supplant
the historical-critical paradigm or the twin paradigm approach (historical-critical versus literalism) that seemed to
dominate before the emergence of postmodern literature and digital tools? I am not convinced that such questions
can be directly and simply answered. Nevertheless, the context of their emergence can be highlighted in a way that
is illuminating. Below I comment on the possibilities of “critical thinking” understood at three different levels.
Some, of course, hope that “critical thinking,” understood simply as developing logical acumen, can be used to tether the postmodern digital world which seems to move in all directions at a gallop (the Bachmans' article in this volume seems close to this hope). It seems likely that honing logic skills cannot accomplish this, if by “tether” one nostalgically hopes ultimately to recover the sort of knowledge-stable world of late print culture. The postmodern digital world is a place of radical plurality and rapid transformation. Human attention has a center, but that which is at the periphery can and quickly does become central in a world shaped by networked computers. The meaning of “meaning” has shifted away from notions in which texts could be imagined as containers with stable content inside. In a digital era, “meaning” increasingly points to a kind of absorption in the immediacy of the multi-sensate spectacle. We seek and savor participatory feeling rather than critical distance. Lindemann (see her essay in this volume) sees the potential to transform this new interest in participation into meditative reading; she hopes to see some of the traditions of earlier illuminated manuscripts reborn in the web page. Surely, however, radical plurality and rapid transformation as features of the web world work against meditative reflection. In fact, a fast moving, multi-sensate electronic reading/writing/thinking environment hampers the germination of critical questions about electronic artifacts. The web environment is unstable or volatile by nature. The emphasis in such reading/writing/thinking space is upon revision, malleability and/or the center-infinite periphery connection that can be quickly transformed. Admittedly, for many nurtured rather exclusively by book culture (i.e., most intellectuals), cultivating logical acumen is a strategy that has great appeal in the face of the rush of digital multimedia and the uncertainties of postmodern ideas. Logic seems just the medicine called for to make digital culture become a more rational space. And it remains true that study of fallacies and logic can no doubt support rational discourse. But such an approach is one that fundamentally misreads the epistemological changes embedded in the shift to postmodern digital culture.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, a critical thinking-across-the-curriculum movement emerged in many colleges and universities. The movement has been broad based—more so than efforts simply to renew the teaching of logic—since it draws extensively upon research in areas such as cognitive and moral development. It has aimed, in a wide-visioned sense, at improving human ability to form reasoned and reflective judgments. Peter Facione, an articulate spokesperson for this movement, has pointed out that critical thinking broadly understood works to nurture a disposition toward such values as truth-seeking, open-mindedness, inquisitiveness and reliance upon analytical and systematic approaches to inquiry (see Facione’s article in this volume). He suggests that nurturing a critical thinking disposition relies upon the cultivation and refinement of cognitive skills, including, but not limited to, drawing logical inferences.

It seems clear that this broad-based critical thinking-across-the-curriculum movement is an effort in colleges and universities to encourage institutions to take seriously the development of what once was termed the generally educated, intellectually curious person. Higher education has increasingly become a domain of technical and specialist training. But educational institutions at lower and higher levels do not seem, on a wide scale, to inculcate in students a commitment to disciplined inquiry. The Socratic notion that life should be examined now seems to many in Western culture a strange dictum. Narrowness of interest and limited inquisitiveness (i.e., the failure to seek a coherent account of things) enfeeble institutions and have deleterious consequences in the civic arena. Supporting a movement that works across the curriculum to inspire and invigorate inquiry seems to be a natural and commonsensical affirmation, at least for educators. How could there be opposition to values and practices that ground educational institutions? However, the critical thinking movement needs to avoid nostalgia for book culture and to appreciate both the strengths and weaknesses of postmodern digital culture. Most importantly, it needs what I term a post-critical vision of reason in order properly to situate an appreciation of critical faculties and inquiry. I turn in the following discussion to comments on these matters.

In many ways, postmodern pluralistic suppositions about knowledge and ecstatic notions about meaning are a relief from the narrow scientific objectivism of late modernity produced by Enlightenment ideals reinforced by print. Such postmodern suppositions foster creativity and wariness about the subtle ways in which cultural and/or political hegemony works. Notions of meaning that move beyond the narrowly rational open us up to riches of symbol and sense that have been diminished and deprecated in modernity. Too frequently, however, postmodernists celebrate a vision of knowledge as altogether relative and subjective. Such a vision remains within the same frame of reference that produced objectivism in the culture of the Enlightenment. Is knowledge objective and correspondent to an external world or subjective and reflective of human interests and struggles for power and meaning? This question is posed by many today but it is primarily an answer masquerading as a question. It invokes two values or metaphysical and epistemological frames of reference and assumes that they cover the options. Why must knowledge be either objective or subjective? Why must thinking about human efforts to orient ourselves in the world be linked only to an ideal of absolute impersonality or the absence of such an ideal?
must we take truth to be correspondence to external affairs or merely the reflection of the power politics of interpretation?

Western culture began developing this bifurcated way of construing matters at the beginning of modernity when Descartes separated mind and matter and recommended doubt as the principle that can help the extraordinarily capable reasoning mind find truth. The separation of mind and matter leads to peculiar visions of the human and of our participation in the rest of the created order. We imagine ourselves as fundamentally separate and distinct from the environment that nurtures us. The philosophical tradition came to see even human beings as divided or separated, hence there emerged “the mind-body problem.” Once on the path set by Cartesian rationalism or its empirical successors, we have great difficulty imagining the ways in which we are members of the environing world and of one another. We have no sense of how we extend ourselves and transform our vision and our identity through our dwelling in the other. Because we see ourselves as thinking subjects independent of the world, we overestimate our own capacities for discernment. We don’t see how our activity in the world and with our social companions provides instructive resistance that allows us to reconstruct our dispositions, but we believe that sheer willful doubt can purify our vision. Enshrining doubt as the gateway to truth has primarily served, in the modern period, to undermine traditional beliefs and the fiduciary foundations of inquiry. The critical stream of Western philosophical thought has been naïve about the pervasiveness and the function of belief and of communities in which common beliefs and practices form a tradition. Because early science resisted the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, all traditions came to be viewed as antithetical to critical inquiry. This critical stream of thought has overvalued formalization and has held up an impossible ideal of objective knowledge that amounts to a knowledge independent of any human knowers and of any communities in which such knowers are nurtured and in which such knowledge is valued.

The postmodern epistemological shift has challenged many elements of Enlightenment objectivism, but much postmodern thought continues in the venue that all modern thought has taken. Many postmodernists seem merely to have made a substitution for the high value placed upon suppositions about doubt, critical rationalism and objectivism in Enlightenment culture: the reigning postmodern assumption is that power and interest are inevitably the keys to what counts as knowledge. Just as overestimates of the importance of doubt and mental acuity have led to a misunderstanding of belief and its importance in the modern philosophical tradition, so overestimates of the importance of power and interest are leading today to postmodern misunderstandings of the process of justifying and respecting belief.

Much of postmodern thought seems to share what Charles Sanders Peirce identified as the nominalist cast of all modern thought. In dubbing modern thought “nominalist,” Mary Keeler suggests that Peirce was objecting to the philosophical preoccupation in modernity with questions about how knowledge is possible from experience. Peirce wanted to shift the focus of philosophy from the problem of knowledge to broader questions about how meaning is possible in experience. That is, philosophy needs to examine the conditions for meaning to occur; it needs to broadly consider the ongoing, public process of making meaning rather than the narrower concern with the problem of knowledge. Put in ontological language, Peirce’s complaint was that modern thought recognizes “but one mode of being, that being of an individual thing or fact, the being which consists in the object’s crowding out a place for itself in the universe, so to speak, and reacting by brute force of fact, against all other things.” (CP 1.21) Peirce held that rather than one mode of being there are three: “They are the being of positive qualitative possibility, the being of actual fact, and the being of law that will govern facts in the future.” (CP 1.23) It is particularly the nature of laws (i.e., generalities or “universals”) that Peirce held have been misconstrued in modernity, for modern thinkers consider laws, which are essentially predictions about the future, to be “a mere word or couple of words.” (CP 1.26) That is, laws or generalities are viewed as in the mind only and as having no existence as independent realities. Peirce thinks this is an impoverished, static account of reality which is grounded in false ideas about representation. Modern and now postmodern thinkers cannot appreciate the evolution of meaning because they undervalue signs, reading them in a dyadic rather than a triadic scheme. For most moderns and postmoderns, meaning is not always unfolding in the sign process, but is either an objective or a subjective phenomenon. Such a misconstrual of signs, Peirce thinks, reflects the modern commitment to a single mode of being. The “nominalism” of modernity, as Keeler puts it, is concerned with the “assumption that we can capture meaning in representational structures (of any kind)...” (1998, 169).” Human beings, especially in modernity and now in postmodernity, seem too readily to believe that particular representations are final or privileged, but such privileging serves primarily to impede further inquiry. Peirce tries to set forth a system in which the growth of meaning is central; his emphasis is upon a triadic method of logical investigation that focuses upon the way in which signs work in an ongoing cycle. As Keeler notes, “nominalism leaves our individual views hopelessly
relative,” while Peirce’s approach counters individualism and relativism: “the essential continuity of experience, giving it coherence and tendency, in which meaning is always a possibility in the future, is the fundamental theoretical hypothesis of Peirce’s pragmatism….” (1998, 170). Peirce’s thought is through and through fallabilistic even while affirming the importance of careful reasoning: pragmatism invites us to build meaning “by provisionally believing that we have captured meaning in concepts and categories—while continuing to examine them critically, from as many points of view as possible” (Keeler 1998, 171).

If a critical thinking movement is to be truly helpful for sorting thorough some of the questions about the Bible in digital culture, I expect that the study of how to cultivate a critical thinking disposition will needs to be enriched by the development of a broader post-critical and semiotic philosophical perspective. That is, the critical thinking across the curriculum movement needs to be informed by incisive criticisms of the patterns of philosophical conceptions found in modernity and in emerging postmodern digital culture. But we must go beyond mere criticisms of the philosophical presuppositions of the last several centuries. We must hammer out basic elements of a constructive philosophical stance that gets around the philosophical cul de sac, in which we have and continue to wander. I believe that the philosophical work of two thinkers, Michael Polanyi and Charles Sanders Peirce, are particularly helpful for both criticizing the critical tradition of modern thought and for reconstructing the modern tradition.

As I noted at the beginning of this essay, “post-critical” is Michael Polanyi’s term for the turn that he believes is necessary in the Western tradition of thought. As Jerry Gill puts it, Polanyi, like many postmodern thinkers, is not a foundationalist, although “he continued to maintain that there is a viable grounding, albeit of a different sort, for human cognitive activity” (2000, 8). What Polanyi does is look for that grounding in the tacit foundation of explicit knowledge. That is, Polanyi argues that we need a new and broader notion of knowledge and the process of knowing. In Keeler’s terms used above to describe Peirce’s reorientation of philosophy, Polanyi shifts the account of the problem of knowledge to a broader account of meaning. Such a new account acknowledges both the explicit (that before the mind’s eye which can be formalized) and the subsidiarily held foundation of beliefs and skills (i.e., beliefs internalized as human capacities to respond) upon which a person relies for achieving any explicit or focal knowledge. Polanyi argues that doubt is not heuristic and that belief is the norm in human affairs; belief or patterns of belief always undergird particular dispositions for human response. That is, a fabric of belief not explicitly known but tacitly relied upon, underpins human response, and that includes the disposition we term a capacity for critical thinking or inquiry. Belief, however, must be related to a tradition of thought and practice that serves as its foundation. Skill in reasoning and the capacity to be reasonable can only grow in the soil of a particular tradition. 8 In Polanyi’s view, that soil must support independent thinking, even when such thinking goes against the grain. Such independence is possible when the members of a community affirm (i.e., the living tradition of the community makes clear) that there are realities not dependent upon your or my opinions about them, realities that can be known and about which there can be agreement eventually, even though the meaning of such realities grows and develops in history. 9 A post-critical stance is one that must recover from the typical postmodern embarrassment that surfaces when talking of “truth.” Although certain notions of “truth” (e.g., simple correspondence) are not viable, this does not mean that the insistence of realities can be dismissed; the public character of knowledge and the universal intent found in the commitment of serious investigators must be respected. Rather than discarding “truth,” it is necessary to re-root it in human responsibility and human communities. A post-critical perspective embraces a certain wonder before the world as well as a deep curiosity about the world. It values inquiry even while recognizing that discoveries bear indeterminately upon the future; the veridical aspect of meaning always points ahead of us.

Finally, let me put the case for a post-critical turn in semiotic terms, an idiom that comes from the constructive thought of Charles Sanders Peirce. The emerging digital era appears to be a time that calls for the re-evaluation of reason and critical thinking along with it; such a reevaluation must situate reason within the broader framework of semiosis, the operation of signs in the world. Michael Raposa provides a straightforward account (drawn upon the often-obtuse Peirce) of semiosis:

Semiosis is an interpretative process that involves the continuous production of new signs, each itself subject to further interpretation. Human experience, from the simplest sensations and emotions to the most complex judgments about states of affairs, takes the form of semiosis. (1999, 143)

Objects, events and ideas in the world give rise to signs that shape (i.e., they make an impact or impression upon) persons as well as succeeding events. Such impressions (of signs upon us and the world) themselves become
succeeding signs giving shape to further impacts in an on-going continuum. It is the breadth and the depth of such a semiotic perspective that recasts some of the philosophical dualisms of modernity. A semiotic perspective rescues the philosophical tradition from some of the metaphysical and epistemological axes that have become presuppositional for asking critical questions: subjective-objective, phenomenal-noumenal, body-mind, percepts-concepts, mind-matter—these and other axes are recast in Peirce’s triadic framework. Objects give rise to signs; signs represent objects in some respect to those persons or things whom signs impact or impress. Such persons are linked through the sign to the object. But the impact or impression made upon persons or things becomes a sign in the ongoing flow of time. This triadic semiotic perspective, although it initially seems a complicated scheme, helps us see human critical powers in their broadest context. Human reason is our effort to coordinate and control the impact of signs in human communities; it is the primary vehicle through which we struggle to be responsible members of a particular interpretative matrix. Human beings are forever engaged in sign or sense reading endeavors as well as sign or sense giving responses. We live in a meaningful world and participate in the change and growth of meaning. While our sign reading is certainly subject to error, it is also the case that critical thought or inquiry provides our access to the continuity of signs.

If we hope to develop critical thinking as a disciplined commitment to inquiry that can help us appreciate the Bible in an era of digital communication, we need to explore the triadic logic of a semiotic perspective. Such a post-critical semiotic perspective will take us beyond the historicist versus literalist debates about the Bible of late modernity. But it will also move us beyond the sort of postmodern perspective that redisCOVERs the Bible at the price of collapsing meaning into the politics of power and interests. Critical thinking about the Bible that is grounded in a post-critical and semiotic perspective will recognize that inquiry is an ongoing endeavor grounded in the richness of tradition, an endeavor in which the growth of meaning unfolds in history.

References


Endnotes

1 Note that this is the subtitle for Polanyi’s Personal Knowledge (1964). The discussion especially in the last section below makes an effort to set forth what “post-critical” means.

2 McCoy (1980, 69ff.). McCoy has much more to say about the Constantinian paradigm than I do here. Among other things, he points out that this is an outlook that often shrinks the interest and attentiveness of theologians to institutional Christianity and to academic accounts of religious faith. This outlook fails to examine and understand the varied religiosity in the dynamic historical environment other than to regard it as a problem. Such an outlook is preoccupied with formulating doctrines for a particular religious tradition. Faith or faithful living outside the enclave (i.e., action informed by other narratives, symbols and centers of value) is “secular” or at least the business of disciplines other than theology. The variety of human believing remains hidden or at least uninteresting other than as a threat. Once that variety is rediscovered, questions about appropriate methods for theological analysis become central. McCoy proposes a “covenental or federal paradigm” which he suggests is “in continuity with the biblical Christian heritage, yet capable of coping with the pluralism and liberation of the emerging global culture” (77). Speaking as a Christian, using his federal paradigm, he sees the variety of human commitments as an opportunity rather than a threat.


4 It is something like this substitution that I think leads that master of the well-turned phrase Stanley Hauerwas to remark that “postmodernism is a far too comforting story for alienated intellectuals” (1999, 109).

5 Succeeding paragraphs discuss elements of what Polanyi regarded as a “postcritical” philosophy. One of those elements is clearly a new vision of the process of knowing and the nature of knowledge. Polanyi worked on the problem of knowledge in 1958 magnum opus, Personal Knowledge. But clearly there are other thinkers who share Polanyi’s effort to effect a major shift in the philosophical tradition. In a recent book, A Philosophical Testament, Marjorie Grene (1995) has an excellent discussion of the postcritical account of knowledge as justified belief. Grene argues that the assumed categorical difference between knowledge and belief, running through the Western philosophical tradition since Plato, is problematic: we must correct the presumption that knowledge is necessary and universal and belief is contingent and parochial, and that the two have no connection with one another. As an alternative, Grene argues, we must “look at the knowledge claims we make and see how they are structured if we take them, not as separate from, but as part of, our system of beliefs” (1995, 15). She then proceeds to discuss what is involved in justification as a complex historical-social, rational and commitmental process. Grene is very clear that this reconception of knowledge is not merely a move to “subjectivize.” She is a realist who holds that an authentic biological realism undercuts the dualistic approaches popular since Descartes. She defines her realist position as built on two theses: human beings exist within a real world and are surrounded by it and shaped by it and human beings are real. These fundamental affirmations she says are essentially an effort to get beyond the subject-object split and the split between in-here and out-there which “makes nonsense of a world that is living, complicated, messy as you like, but real. I am myself one instantiation of that world’s character, one expression of it, able also, in an infinitesimal way, to shape and alter it” (1995, 114). As this comment implies, it is also important to recognize that the postcritical turn involves a re-visioning of what a person is and that includes our relation to nature and our fellow creatures. Grene summarizes matters this way in her ecological epistemology” (1995, 26): . . . as human reality is one version of animal reality, so human knowledge is one species-specific version of the ways that animals possess to find their way around their environments. Granted, our modes of orientation in our surroundings are peculiarly dependent on the artifacts of culture. Culture mediates between ourselves and nature, and given the multiplicity of cultures, we appear, so far as we can tell to
possess, or to be able to acquire, a very much greater variety of paths of access to reality than can members of other species. Now culture, and the artifacts of culture, are of course of our own making and in the last analysis we accept their authority only on our own recognizances. But culture, rather than being a mere addendum to nature, a fiction supervenient on the naturally induced fictions of perception—culture, on our reading, while expressing a need inherent in our nature, is itself a part of nature. (1995, 144)

Charles Sanders Peirce argues that philosophy since Descartes has been extraordinarily nominalistic: “Thus in one word, all modern philosophy of every sect has been nominalistic.” See volume 1, paragraph 19 (as well as the general context, paragraphs 15-27) of Pierce (1931-58), Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Arthur W. Burks, Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss. 8 volumes. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), cited hereafter in parenthesis by volume and paragraph (CP 1.19). I am suggesting that much of so-called “postmodern” thought simply continues this trend. It overcomes certain Cartesian problems but remains nominalistic. Below I suggest briefly what this nominalism consists of, although I cannot treat this large topic with any depth here. In the previous paragraph, I have briefly outlined the dubious substitutions that postmodern thought often seem to make for the values of Enlightenment thought. Identifying the “nominalism” of postmodern thought is another way to levy the same sort of criticism. That is, the nominalistic presupposition of much postmodern thought leads to misunderstandings of the process of justifying belief.

Mary Keeler (1998) provides a helpful general account (that I follow here) of Peirce’s alternative to modern nominalism. Peirce actually goes back and reworks Scotus in order to become what a particular kind of realist (see 1.16-1.26). It is beyond the scope of this essay to try to set forth in depth what Peirce means by either his scholastic realism or his charge that modern philosophical perspectives are nominalist.

This seems to me the best sense of what Augustine and his followers have affirmed in linking faith and reason. “Faith seeking understanding” is an acknowledgment that understanding is possible only when grounded in trusting appropriation of a grounding context.

Tradition and independent thought are not at odds; independent thought or free inquiry prospers within traditions that support it through an appropriate metaphysic and an appropriate governance structure within the community. I have in mind something like the best of the scientific tradition. Science teaches the importance of inquiry. It also values novelty even while it supports both rigorous procedures for discourse about the results of inquiry. In some ways these several values of scientific ideology and practice are held together (as mutually reinforcing) by the metaphysic of science which emphasizes the interesting realities of the cosmos are knowable but are not dependent upon any individual’s opinions about them. For the ideas sketched in this paragraph, I am relying on the account of science provided by Michael Polanyi and Charles Sanders Peirce. The best brief summary of the way tradition and free inquiry work together in science is Polanyi’s “The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory” (1968, 49-72). This essay is also on the Web, <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. Although it is an early essay, Peirce’s brief “The Fixation of Belief” (available in almost every anthology of Peirce’s writing, in CP 5.358-87, and on the Web, <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html>) provides a clear statement about how a certain conviction about reality grounds scientific work. Peirce’s 1903 Harvard Lectures are an interesting later account of science in terms of logic. See Turrisi (1997) for both the lectures and commentary.