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Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture, by Louis Dupré

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PASSAGE TO MODERNITY: AN ESSAY IN THE HERMENEUTICS OF NATURE AND CULTURE. By Louis Dupré. New Haven: Yale University, 1993. Pp. xii + 300. \$30.

The often-confusing taxonomy of postmodernism, the consequence of surprisingly diverse explanations of its cultural ascendancy, has stirred the need to name more precisely the modernity eclipsed by the troublesome prefix. Dupré's study is an important addition to a body of recent literature that has assumed this difficult task. Although modestly described as an "essay," the book is a magisterial study of the origins of modernity in the late medieval intellectual world, its account extending only as far in time as the 17th century. Like many commentators, D. identifies the spirit of modernity with the traits of autonomy and creativity. But unlike most, he judges the Enlightenment's originality in shaping these characteristics to be "singularly overrated" (2). Nominalism figures prominently in D.'s explanation as the seedbed in which modernity flowered. And while his account makes its case from the evidence of metaphysics, political philosophy, painting, and literature, it finds the testimony of religion, especially in theology and spirituality, to be particularly compelling.

D.'s first section, "From Cosmos to Nature," details the shift from a classical worldview, which presupposed the integration of the divine, the human, and the physical, to the modern worldview of nominalism, which accorded primacy to these as individualities, each with its own separate power and efficacious in its own sphere. Modernity was born, D. argues, in the consequences of this shift. In metaphysics, formal principles yielded to human understanding and will, which now exerted their creative power over nature and words. Renaissance values spurned the assumption that intellectual or artistic ideals were woven into the order of things, regarding them instead as products of human creation, as goals to be achieved rather than qualities inherent in existence. The modern canons of methodological objectivity arose with the empirical standards of scientific definition and the somewhat ironic Cartesian expectation that subjectivity itself furnished certain, first principles. While some reflective depictions continued to see the self as part of a greater reality, "increasingly the assumption that the human mind alone conveyed meaning and purpose began to dominate modern thought" (89).

"From Microcosmos to Subject" focuses more specifically on the rise of the modern notion of the individual self. Here D. sketches the efforts of the humanist tradition of letters to lay claim to the authority of the *logos* in Greek reason and Judeo-Christian revelation, though now in the liberated rhetoric of the vernacular and the time-oriented genre of the novel. D. laments that the humanist project gradually disinte-

grated as language itself became increasingly self-referential in the modern age, at the very least an indirect consequence, he suggests, of the nominalist underpinnings of late medieval culture. The result was an "indigent self" (119), isolated from a world of common meaning and inclined to understand freedom in terms of the fact of its individuality, rather than as responsibility to a divinely established natural law.

D.'s final section, "From Deified Nature to Supernatural Grace," explores the diremption of nature and grace in nominalist theology as yet another dissolution of the classical synthesis, and continues by considering several attempts to restore their lost unity in the theologies of the humanists (Valla and Erasmus), the Reformers (Luther and Calvin), and the Augustinian revivalists (Baius and Jansenius). These attempts, D. judges, were not successful, though he concludes his book with three attempts that "at least temporarily" (221) were: the humanistic spiritualities of Ignatius Loyola and Francis de Sales, the "religion of the heart" spirituality of the Reformation, and the assumption of 17th-century Baroque culture that creation is "pervaded by a natural desire of God" (243). These examples of worldly spirituality are presented by D. as missed cultural opportunities to develop a modern tradition in consonance with the values of antiquity. As such, they bring into relief an assumption that runs throughout the book that hope for an authentic modernity lay much more in Christian affectivity and action than in the Christian intellect which, more easily secularized, set the course toward modern atheism.

The story of modernity is so complex that any claim for the exclusive explanatory power of a particular thesis would be guilty of the most obvious reductionism. While there may be poor accounts of modernity there are any number of good ones, even perhaps when these latter offer different versions of the narrative. D.'s book certainly must be ranked among the very best accounts of modernity. Indeed, its greatest virtue lies in its refusal to understand modernity from the perspective of the postmodern. Though one might quibble with particular readings of the many figures D. examines (e.g., did Luther's theology "obviously" intend to reunite the orders of nature and grace? [206]), one can only be impressed by the masterly control of D.'s analysis and grateful for his remarkable erudition.

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FREEDOM AND CREATION IN THREE TRADITIONS. By David B. Burrell, C.S.C. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993. Pp. xi + 225. \$29.95.

Comparative theology as an intellectual discipline goes back some