

*The Deferral of my Subject: A Review of What is Neostructuralism?*

Frank, Manfred. *What Is Neostructuralism?* Translated by Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

In a volume of about five-hundred pages comprised of twenty-seven lectures in two parts, Manfred Frank attempts a comprehensive work up of contemporary philosophy and what he views as two opposed schools that begins with a few suppositions. He suggests that there exists little to no interplay or dialogue between German rationalists and French antirationalists, that there is a perceived irreparable division. He then suggests this isn't as distinct a division as it may appear, that the lack of communication is unproductive and that much of the ideas found in French structuralism and post-structuralism can be traced to German Romanticism. Finally, Frank suggests that whatever the state of affairs, both contemporary German rationalists and French antirationalists have an underdeveloped theory of subjectivity that deserves more attention. His methodology is enough to convince us of these suppositions. The goals for the book are stated very clearly and range from reasonable to grandiose. Frank wants to define neostructuralism, a term of his own which refers to the work of theorists we might more commonly understand as poststructuralist or postmodernist. In so doing, Frank seeks to illuminate the common thread that underwrites all these often very different thinkers. He does this in the context of contemporary hermeneutics as a German scholar who had done much to chronologize German idealism and romanticism. Important to his impetus then is a desire to open a dialogue between German and French philosophy and attempt thus a sublation of the dialectical opposites. He frames these lectures as seeking to "contribute to a reawakening of Central European philosophy, to its engagement for the universal,"(4). Finally, Frank's primary concern throughout the work is in initiating a new theory of the subject and the individual. His process in *What is Neostructuralism?* is to apply the techniques of his tradition in historicizing and interpreting the neostructuralist canon. The result is both productive for its distance while also incomplete as it does a disservice to the style essential to at least his chief point of reference, Jacques Derrida, of foregrounding the signifier and poeticizing philosophy itself.

Neostructuralism for Frank encompasses quite a bit—semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalytic, aesthetic—but it is necessarily that which is contrary to idealism, to rationalism. It is the death of metaphysics or metanarratives and the positing of a new era that is the postmodern era. Frank references Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* to suggest neostructuralists prefer the word. Nonetheless, neostructuralism, in his usage is "thought under the conditions of the postmodern era." "Poststructuralism" as a term is, according to Frank, misleading because of how much of the work is dependent on principles established by what he calls classical structuralism: the ethnographic-linguistic structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Saussure respectively. Neostructuralism takes those foundational principles regarding systems, structures and meaning-making to an extreme with essays like Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" suggesting there is no stable meaning and likely no such thing as universal truth. What is important for Frank is that classical structuralism is something that can reinforce monolithic institutions and neostructuralism is a movement that inherently challenges dominant meanings and "developed out of a certain opposition to the ruling doctrine above all in the teaching of philosophy and literature, and which succeeded, despite cultural-political enmity, in effectively conquering a few universities,"(12). Throughout part one of the text, lectures one to five, Frank illustrates this through historical events, often redounding to May 68 as circumstantial evidence that the common denominator begins with the assertion of "uncontrollability" and then makes an attack directed at the very concepts of domination and system. What undermines Frank's appeal for a new terminology is an emphasis that this death of metaphysics or of the transsensuous world is what truly defines the new era in which the neostructuralists and contemporary hermeneutics are working. For the rationalists, reason still represents a certainty and a universal interpretedness to reality; that is, a metaphorical God. Kant displaces Christian ethics, Hegel Christian eschatology. Using Nietzsche's *Parable of the Madman*, Frank shows we have opened the door for the eventual death of that God as well, "seeking to transform certainties founded merely

on faith, in certainties grounded in knowledge, it led unintentionally, indeed, against its own will, to the elimination of the category of 'value' in itself," (17).

Moving into part two of the book which contains the bulk of the lectures, Manfred Frank has defined neostructuralism and what is new to it from classical structuralism in so far as it is totally dependent on structuralism but also, in a way, seemingly unique from the entire philosophical canon. He has established that there exists very little dialogue between the contemporary German and French schools; that structural interpretation is found almost exclusively in France, and transcendental hermeneutics (except for Ricoeur) solely in Germany. He has given us his goal: to read and counter post-structuralist writings from a hermeneutical approach and in so doing object to some hermeneutics as well. Aiming to broaden the horizons of each, he says, "I am seeking a true dialogue with my colleagues in France," (4). What he also does is work to reinforce a link, to which he will return frequently, between the concepts of structure and differentiation in their specific French theory usage and the work of German romanticist, Friedrich Schleiermacher who represents, for Frank, a prototype of successful integration. The remainder of the lectures are structured by three questions posed to neostructuralism: Where does neostructuralism stand regarding historicity? What is its position regarding subjectivity? And how does it arrive at an explanation of meaning and signification? However, though the lectures follow this framework in positing the work of neostructuralists as the work of destroying metanarratives where Foucault almost obdurately if contradictorily refuses the historicist, Lacan's critique of the model of reflection subverts the subject, and Derrida's semantics is a near-paradoxical death toll for interpretation, the first and final problems are each revealed to be as problematic for the subject as for themselves. Essential to that metanarrative was the "producing-conceiving subject" and the death of the metanarrative is the death of the subject.

The book carefully handles a delicate synthesis of German Idealism and romanticism with contemporary hermeneutics and French Theory. Frank historicizes and systematizes a provably underappreciated body of work through which methodology that work becomes clearer and more cohesive. If nothing else, *What is Neostructuralism?* is an exhaustive introduction to post-structuralism or contemporary anti-rationalist theory. Less successful is the word itself, Frank answers the titular question but fails to justify the need for a new term. In fact, while his synthesis is illuminating and skillfully raises post-modern concerns within the field of German theory which had been blissfully unconcerned (as clearly contra-Foucault as he is, the text explicitly reproaches those German contemporaries for not rising to Foucault's challenge), Frank's close reading on Derrida and Foucault in particular do well to illustrate why the project of deconstruction is perhaps more distinct from its predecessors than any other philosophical project has been. He both concedes that the primary figures in his analysis do not themselves identify with the term "poststructuralist," while also effectively validating Lyotard's use of the term "postmodern." More than anything, the use of neostructuralism belies Frank's preference for Saussure.

It is on the topic of historicity where Frank most successfully threads the needle. His critique of Foucault beginning with *The Order of Things* and covering later *Archaeology of Knowledge* is relentless and systematic. He attempts to draw out contradictions in Foucault's analysis of the enlightenment, what he does to change the model of representation, and the insistence on discontinuity that denies a subject of history and chastises Foucault for ostensibly applauding the death of the subject.

With regard to his most consuming goal, that is the theory of subjectivity and the resurrection of the concept of the individual—where his previous work with Schleiermacher is again essential—a concept which is distinct from the subject and which is itself distinctly responsible for the work of interpretation, Frank is successful in convincing the reader that a more comprehensive model is needed and that hermeneutics, if awakened to the semiotic or structural may be up to the task. However, neither the work of Lacan nor Derrida are sufficient for Frank in assessing the problem of self-consciousness.

The *What is Neostructuralism?* reading of Lacan suggests it is his work that comes closest to the overtly hermeneutical which is perhaps demonstrated in the "incursions it never tires of making into neighboring disciplines," (289). Lacan's assertion, however, of his primary goal being psychoanalytic makes what he does an interpretation. He doesn't shrink from the idea but still objects to the semantic business of hermeneutics, its truth seeking. Ultimately, Frank becomes frustrated by Lacan as well saying Lacan "Insists that the assertion of a semantic kernel in discourse does not stand in the service of the theory of an

autonomous subject that projects its meaning: the subject and its meaning are ‘effects’ of what he calls the *signifiant*,” (290). Lacan’s version of subjectivity and Being take a linguistic—in his words, symbolic—turn that Frank attempts to place in a historic context; though his reconstruction of the Lacan is less successful than of the Derrida.

For Frank, Derrida presents the biggest threat to our ability to make meaning. In lecture seventeen, he suggests that Derrida’s *différance*—*avec un a*—is possibly the same as Hegel’s dialectic, or at least not conclusively distinct, specifically Hegel’s idea of autonomous negation. Interestingly, in this section, Frank partially constructs his argument by effectively rewriting Derrida’s formulation in a facsimile of Hegelian prose. Even after conceding that Derrida refuses to concede to Hegelian sublation, insisting instead upon an infinite chain of negations, Frank reminds the reader it was “Schelling who first systematically raised this objection to Hegel’s attempt at sublating allegedly heteronomous ‘Being’ into the autonomous play of ‘reflection,’” (276). This methodology of reading Derrida while curmudgeonly is effective. If the Lacan and Deleuze lectures show—against Frank’s best intentions—that hermeneutics can be deconstructed, his critique of Derrida subtly illustrates proof of his theory that deconstruction can be at least interpreted or reconstructed.

Frank closes the book in lecture twenty-seven with a final critique of Derrida that reveals an almost narrative structuring to *What is Neostructuralism?* He calls upon *La Différance* a final time in restructuring Derrida’s argument against John Searle and expands on what he considers problematic, that is, Derrida’s thesis as extrapolated from the denial of semantic identity which is that “difference is more primordial than identity,”(71). In the end, Frank cannot reconcile the extreme of what he does in fact accept on a fundamental level—that meaning can only form itself in a language or structure—with the apparently essential idea of humanism that “Links the dignity of human beings with their use of freedom, and which cannot morally applaud the factual threatening of human subjectivity,”(6). Thus while the text demonstrates a way forward for theoretical integration, concluding the book by accusing Jacques Derrida of immorality is exemplary of the challenges presented to it and likely did little to initiate a constructive dialogue.

Manfred Frank concludes by assigning the most importance to the individual rather than the subject. He asks the reader to consider Derrida’s *différance* as individuality—by a definition derived from his work on Schleiermacher on which he doesn’t sufficiently elaborate here but which is distinct from subjectivity as conceived to be a universal. From the opening lecture, Frank has insisted upon the need for a concept of the subject as the generator of language, structures and meaning, tentatively agreeing with Derrida’s concept of negation but fearing the implications. *What is Neostructuralism?* doesn’t leave much room to properly convey this reconciliatory theory, but with a concept of the particular individual that originates in the general subject, the moment of differentiation and change is no longer purely linguistic. Through this foundational, grammatical issue with the poststructuralist idea of “Language that speaks itself,” Frank returns to Saussure and is ultimately only able to prove the German hermeneutics to be compatible with classical structuralism and not the neostructuralism he has named and chronicled.