The Enlightenment inherited from Greek metaphysics the unfortunate habit of using hypostatized adjectives--the Good, the True, the Right--as names for the goal of human progress. The secularizing thinkers of this period suggested that we could use a tool known as "Reason" in order to create a body of knowledge called "Science", and thereby get closer to a quasi-object called "Truth", defined as the accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality.

Without an initial hypostatization of the word "true", however, we should not have been able to envisage the existence of a Truth-tracking faculty called Reason. Nor should we have imagined that Science is a more reliable instrument of human freedom than, for example, Literature or Politics. Had they avoided this hypostatization, the secularizing thinkers of the 18th century might have conceived of human progress simply as progress toward greater human happiness, toward the lessening of unnecessary human suffering, rather than toward Truth.

This alternative would have been preferable. For the retention of the notion of Truth as a goal of human progress was a half-way measure. The thinkers of the Enlightenment stopped short of a fullfledged secularization and naturalization of our self-image. To have carried through, they would have had to abandon the heritage of Greek metaphysics: the idea that reality has an intrinsic nature, and that truth consists in accurate representation of this nature. They would have had to turn pragmatist, and see descriptions of the
The Enlightenment was part of the first great wave of anti-authoritarianism: the first stage of humanity's attempt to replace the question "Who or what possesses legitimate authority over us?" with the question "What can we freely agree upon?". This first wave overthrew most of the kings and some of the priests. It began the long, slow process of creating a literate and informed public—a public which could judge large questions of government policy for itself. The value of this burst of anti-authoritarian feeling for the increase of human happiness can hardly be exaggerated.

Nevertheless, the Enlightenment's replacement of the sacred by the rational still retained, because of the association between rationality and Truth, and the association of truth with the Greek distinction between Reality and Appearance, a certain authoritarian rhetoric. The juridical metaphors which center around Kant's phrase "the tribunal of pure reason" retain the idea of the authority of a court. Metaphors of duty and obligation—not to priests and kings, but to Truth and Reason, continued to dominate the nineteenth century.

Throughout that period, these metaphors were thought essential to an explanation of why both democracy, and that larger and better form of democracy which went by the name of "socialism", were to be valued. In this period, it was taken for granted that the extension of democratic government, and the reorganization of society into a cooperative commonwealth, represented a triumph of rationality over
irrationality, and of science over superstition. Revolutionary
communists and reformist liberals agreed with one another that there
was, or should be, something like a science of society—a discipline
which would tell us what had to be done to bring an egalitarian,
democratic, utopia into being.

The widespread belief in Reason, Truth and Science which was
prevalent among the intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries did not, of course, go unchallenged. There was a
counter-Enlightenment, as diverse in its various national forms as
the Enlightenment itself. The claim that something called
"rationality" is distributed equally among all human beings (or, at
least, all males), and that this equal distribution makes
democratic government and social progress possible, was challenged
in various ways—notably by Hegel's historicist challenge to Kant's
ahistoricist brand of moral universalism. But the opposition to this
claim did not really begin to gather force until the end of the
nineteenth century, when Nietzsche, Bergson and William James began
to invoke Darwin to cast doubt on this claim. Such opposition only
became sustained and full-throated toward the end of the twentieth
century.

Darwin's account of the origin of the human species made it
more difficult for philosophers to perpetuate the Greco-Christian
distinctions between higher and lower faculties (Reason and Sense,
Intellect and Emotion). Philosophers like James and Nietzsche
argued that, to keep faith with Darwin, we should have to redescribe
the "higher" human achievements in terms which would mesh with those used in evolutionary biology. John Dewey (as I say in more detail in "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin", included in this volume) combined Darwinian criticisms of Platonic and Kantian dualisms with an Hegelian and historicist account of philosophy and its cultural function. Instead of attempting to provide theoretical for democracy by showing it to be rational, or truer to human nature, than any other form of social organization, Dewey discarded both the idea of a hierarchy of human faculties and that of human nature.

Various writers of the early twentieth century grouped James and Dewey together with Nietzsche and Bergson, and saw them as advocating a similar "irrationalism". The same epithet has been used to characterize various more recent philosophers--notably Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, philosophers who have been dubbed "postmodernist". As I read these authors, their criticisms of Enlightenment notions of Truth, Reason and Science are pretty much the same. So I see a continuous groundswell of criticism of these notions throughout the twentieth century. The most interesting and distinctive philosophers of our century have been those who have criticized these Enlightenment notions.

But, of course, I think that "irrationalism" is the wrong name for what links these various thinkers. I would suggest the term "anti-authoritarianism", in order to emphasize that what these writers are doing is a continuation of the Enlightenment by other means. What links the Enlightenment to "postmodernism" is the attempt
both make to get rid of the idea of "legitimate authority", and to replace it either with the idea of democratic consensus, as in James and Dewey, or with that of existential authenticity, as in Nietzsche and the early Heidegger. The first group of thinkers were faithful to the Enlightenment hope of a democratic utopia. The latter made the mistake of thinking that if you give up the Enlightenment notions of Truth, Reason and Science you must give up that hope—that to give up Platonism is to give up the hopes of human fraternity nurtured by Christianity.

If one avoids this mistake, one can see the so-called postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment as an attempt to retain Enlightenment liberalism while abandoning Enlightenment rationalism. From here on I shall use "postmodernist philosophy" as a name for such an attempt.

Whereas the Enlightenment wanted to replace the illegitimate external authority of the priests and the kings with something like Kant’s "rational autonomy"—the ability of every human to rely on his or her innate faculty of rationality—James and Dewey wanted to get rid of such a faculty, and of the associated ideas of Truth and Science, in order to replace all three with the idea of free agreement among the members of a democratic community. They want to drop the notion of authority embodied in such quasi-objects as Truth, Reason, Science and Reality, and replace it with an ideal of human solidarity.

The Enlightenment harks back to Socrates by suggesting that
our impulse to find something to trust is right, but that this thing
is inside us rather than outside us. It harks back to Plato by dubbing
this thing "the Truth". As Kierkegaard rightly said, the whole of
Socraticism is contained in the doctrine that we have the truth within
us--pre-installed, so to speak, and accessible once distracting
external forces are neutralized. In this sense, the quest for
existential authenticity, for escape from the fine meshes of the
webs of power, is just another form of Socraticism. The second
wave of anti-authoritarianism says that the only appropriate object
of trust is not an authority, either external or internal, but simply
our fellow human-beings organized into a democratic community. This
is not because the formation of such a community ensures that its
members will listen to the voice of Reason, but because agreement
between human beings is the only way to increase the richness and
delight of human life, the actualization of all our present
possibilities and the creation of new such possibilities for our
descendants. For this second kind of anti-authoritarianism,
democracy is desirable because it increases our chances of happiness,
not because it is grounded in Reason or in accord with our nature.

One way to describe this difference between first-wave and
second-wave anti-authoritarianism is to think of the former as saying
"Once human Reason is freed from external tyranny, it will home in
on Truth" and of the latter as saying "Once we see unforced agreement
among informed discussants as the ultimate desideratum, we shall
be content to call the result of such agreement 'true', without asking
whether or not these results correspond to something distinct from such agreement". The Enlightenment said that we should be democrats because doing so would bring us into correspondence with something which is what it is apart from changing human opinion. By contrast, the twentieth-century philosophical movement I am describing says that nothing is what it is apart from changing human opinion--that changing human opinion is the measure of all things. It thus carries Hegel's historicism to the limit by stripping Hegel's account of human history of its immanent teleology.

The defenders of the kings and priests found the eighteenth-century, rationalistic, version of anti-authoritarianism scary, and warned that it might backfire. Contemporary thinkers like John Searle and Gertrude Himmelfarb who wish to defend the rationalism of the Enlightenment against postmodernist criticisms find the twentieth-century version of anti-authoritarianism scary, and warn that it may backfire. Both warnings are plausible. Napoleon arguably did more harm than a chastened Bourbon dynasty could ever have done. Some twenty-first century Third World tyrant, some successor to Stalin and Hitler whose court is as filled with postmodernist rhetoric as Napoleon's was filled with rationalistic rhetoric, may do more to slow human progress back than could a chastened First World which remained both capitalist and rationalist.

On the other hand, we should be grateful to the Enlightenment for persuading us that centuries of tradition can usefully be set aside in favor of radical social experimentation. The experiments
we have performed in our century have had mixed results. But nobody really wants to bring back either the kings and the priests, nor the ideas which were invoked in their defense: the idea of Sin, and the idea of the Sacred.

Those who welcome, as I do, the present second wave of anti-authoritarianism believe that, a few centuries down the road, nobody will want to bring back the ideas of Truth, Science and Reason. Nobody, will want to revive the Platonic-Kantian dualism of higher and lower human faculties, or the distinction between the search for Truth and the search for happiness, or the distinction between Reality and Appearance. Nobody will make much sense of a phrase like "the tribunal of pure reason". If this hunch is right, the inspirational role once played by these Enlightenment notions will be played by the notions of Freedom, Democracy, and Tolerance. Explicitly political notions will replace epistemological ones, and philosophy will seem to our descendants as irrelevant to politics as theology does to us.

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1. The appearance of opposition between Enlightenment and pomo philosophy due to the fact that the latter is read in its French rather than its American form. People read Foucault, Lyotard and Zizek (people who have given up on democratic socities) instead of James and Dewey and Davidson. But the good stuff is same in all these people.

2. The good stuff--the lowest common denominator of James,
Dewey, Davidson, Lyotard, Foucault and Zizek—is the following set of theses:

a. There is no intrinsic character of reality, no Way the World Is.
b. There is no correspondence to such reality to serve as the mark of truth; rather, we call beliefs true when they seem better tools than any as-yet-imagined alternative beliefs.
c. All truth is an effect of power, in the sense that it is a product of the interaction between the needs and interests of human communities and their environment.
d. Interpretation goes all the way down: there is no contrast between a fact and an interpretation except a sociological one—degree of consensus.

3. Pomo philosophy is neutral between human needs and interests—those of the rich and those of the poor, those of men and those of women. No roads lead from pomo phil to a leftist (or rightist) political position.

4. Nor do any roads lead from pomo phil to pomo architecture, or Pynchon, or any particular brand of painting and sculpture. There is no such thing as Postmodernism überhaupt—no relation between pomo architecture and pomo philosophy, nor between either and Pynchon (or the junk that now litters MOMA).

5. The French pomos, and their worldwide epigoni, think that pomo is a successor to Marxism, and has a political edge. But we don't need a successor to Marxism, which was a net loss for the Left, particularly after Lenin. We should just settle for social
democratic (aka "bourgeois") liberalism, and resist the urge to ginger up our politics with philosophy.

6. One effect of the popularity of pomo has been that the heirs of the New Left have gone in for academic/cultural politics, losing touch with national politics (laws). This has been a mixed blessing. It has been good for "identity groups", bad for the other interest groups (e.g., the Hawthorne workers, the Federal Express employees) which don't have identities, and therefore don't have support groups in the universities, but need political clout.