

Editorial

Science and Postmodernism

In the 'Conclusion' of *The idea of the postmodern: a history* (Routledge, 1995) Hans Bertens refers to 'one of the paradoxes at the heart of postmodernity'. This is the combination of the view that knowledge is culturally and historically determined with the conviction that 'yet we seem to know things'. In particular he says, 'There is one cognitive style, one set of procedural principles that holds the promise of leading us to unconditional knowledge'. He means science, and he comments on the failure of scientists to be impressed by the postmodern view of knowledge. In fact some are now fighting against it. In *A House Built on Sand* (ed. N. Koertge, OUP, 1998), a group of scientists, engineers, philosophers and historians claim to provide a 'devastating criticism' of attempts to show that 'scientific results tell us more about social context than they do about the natural world'. Promoters of the view criticised in the book often claim the support of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Univ. of Chicago, 1970). Bertens points out that this is a shallow reading of the book, which in fact 'implicitly reveals' that scientific knowledge is transhistorical and cumulative. Recently in this journal (Vol. 10.2) Taylor has argued that 'it is possible to rework Kuhn's treatment of scientific paradigms in a manner which eschews relativism and affirms the validity of treating scientific paradigms as systems which aim at objective truth'. For Bertens, the existence of scientific knowledge that is transhistorical, transcultural and cumulative makes him regard 'with the strongest suspicion' postmodern scepticism about the possibility of such knowledge, even though for him 'theoretically [scepticism] makes sense'. Perhaps the 'paradox' he sees at the heart of postmodernism is more than that. Perhaps it is one of Kuhn's 'anomalies' which can call in question an accepted paradigm and lead to a revolution. Maybe the existence of scientific knowledge will be the iceberg that will sink the Titanic of postmodernism while the relativist band plays on.

In fact I wonder how postmodern our culture is. 'Incredulity towards metanarratives' is supposedly a mark of postmodernism. It is true that many people have rejected traditional religious and political metanarratives. However, many are replacing these with the metanarratives provided by cosmology and evolutionary biology. Popular presentations of these metanarratives produce best-selling books and TV programmes with high viewer ratings. Scientists appearing on chat shows to discuss the 'big questions' of life receive ten to twenty times more letters than other guests. Clearly many ordinary people do not share the postmodern scholars' scepticism about scientific knowledge. This means that it would be a mistake to imagine that postmodernism has undermined 'scientism' as a rival to Christian belief.