To assert that moral, aesthetic, and factual arguments are statistically derived, is not to argue that there is no such thing as absolute goodness, beauty, or truth. It is to declare that these ultimate values have little relevance in practical argument.

- Daniel McDonald

ABSTRACT: Changes in the social, political, and intellectual climate worldwide portend radical changes in how humans view themselves and their world. This essay argues that the twenty-first century will usher in a post-postmodern age. The new epoch will be one in which argument practices more closely resemble their modernist forbears. The 'given of achievement' will overcome the postmodern 'reluctance to assent.' Argument will be practiced against the backdrop of realist philosophical frameworks and will be viewed as contributing to the accretion of knowledge.

KEY WORDS: Argument, feminist rhetoric, modernism, postmodernism, realism, rhetoric of inquiry, rhetorical epistemology, social epistemology, social knowledge.

As postmodern treatments of argument go, McDonald's assertion in the prologue is fulsomely conservative, for he appears willing at least to entertain the possibility of the existence of 'ultimate values' apart from actual human beings who 'do the valuing.' But McDonald's perspective also evidences one of the central tenets of postmodern thought, namely, that questions of human life and conduct are a product of culture and consensus or, as he puts it, they are 'statistically derived.'

Inherent in McDonald's view is a paradox of postmodernism. It is a paradox suggested by professor Simons's essay in this special issue and I would paraphrase it in terms of the following question: If we live in an age where there are no foundations for human conduct -- where such authorities as church, state, and family have lost their traditional function as unquestioned providers of the grounds for moral decision and action -- how are we to account for the fact that humans still make moral judgments, enforce moral codes, and generally treat each other within the boundaries of a normative moral framework which is in
many ways indistinguishable from those of past eras?\textsuperscript{2} Simply put, if there are no independent standards of consistent ethical conduct, whence derives the cornucopia of contemporary ethical decisions, acts, and judgments?\textsuperscript{3}

There are, I believe, other paradoxes in postmodernism. One of these is the tendency of postmodern thought to eschew such notions as ‘progress,’ ‘development,’ and ‘cumulative knowledge,’ despite what I will argue below are undeniable achievements in human culture. This paradox is especially acute in relationship to the sciences, where such literatures as epistemological skepticism and anti-foundationalism (in philosophy) and the rhetorics of epistemology, human inquiry, and cultural criticism (in rhetorical theory) aver that we can know nothing with certainty or that, if we know anything, it isn’t very relevant to the central questions of the human condition.\textsuperscript{4} Yet all around us are examples of human achievement in fields as diverse as medicine, physics, astronautics, genetics, and numerous other scientific and technical arenas. Notwithstanding certain frequently cited examples to the contrary, these achievements must now compel consideration as genuine contributions to human culture. The character and extent of these contributions, I argue, evidences certain inherent social and ethical dimensions and points toward a deeper understanding of (and, hence, ability to cope with) the human condition.

There are many additional instances that might be profitably explored, but these two enterprises – ethics and the sciences – are sufficient to cast doubt on the dour postmodernist assessments of contemporary culture. By way of preview, I contend in this essay that the paradoxes inherent in postmodernism signal not merely insignificant tensions applied fortuitously from within and without its literature, but rather fundamental and fatal flaws in ‘theoretical postmodernism’ itself.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, I suggest there is a common feature – specifically, particular genres of argument – that is discordant with the tenets of postmodernism, and which evidences what I call ‘the given of achievement.’ I contend that argument offers external standards of proof against which all modes of human inquiry can and must be measured, including discussions of postmodernism. Furthermore, I claim that postmodern theorists’s ‘reluctance to assent’ to any mode or manner of objective argument practice (the notion that we, via argument, can gain access to a largely human-independent world and can come to know certain things of technical, social, and moral significance about that world) – has resulted in the intellectual bankruptcy of theoretical postmodernism. Finally, I describe several tenets of a ‘post-postmodern’ theory of argument. Toward these ends, my first task is a clarification of some fundamental definitional issues.

ARGUMENT, MODERNISM, AND POSTMODERNISM

To identify the role of argument in the postmodern world and beyond assumes that such terms as ‘argument’ and ‘postmodern’ are understood and employed with some definitional clarity. This assumption warrants attention. We might ask first, then, what is meant by ‘argument’ and allied notions?