

2 ARE WE SURE THAT WE CAN'T BE SURE?

THIS LESSON WILL FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

Objective 1: Define the postmodern view of truth.

Objective 2: Discuss implications of the postmodern view of truth for religion and morals.

Objective 3: Indicate the impact of the postmodern view of truth on today's culture.

"If truth is relative, it's impossible to lie" (Veith 1998).

Philosophers such as Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty, who helped pave the way for the broader, cultural changes, challenged our most basic beliefs about reality. For centuries people have embraced what we call the correspondence theory of truth and the referential theory of language (also known as semantic externalism). Douglas Groothuis describes the correspondence theory of truth as the assumption that "a belief or statement is true only if it matches with, reflects, or corresponds to the reality to which it refers. For a statement to be true it must be factual. Facts determine the truth or falsity of a belief or statement" (Groothuis 2004, 65). Put succinctly, most people have believed that we can know what is real. We call a pencil real if it really exists. The referential theory of language says that words actually refer to this reality and that the speaker or writer's intent determines what a particular communication means. If an author writes about a rose bush, the correct way to understand him or her is to envision the plant all speakers of English refer to when using that term. It is not legitimate to envision a wheelbarrow in such a case. Postmodern theorists insist that there is no one, right meaning to what a person says or writes. Whereas modern readers debated the correct interpretation of a written work, postmodern

readers discuss their personal experience with the text and what that has meant to them.

The older ways of thinking about truth used to seem like common sense, but they are disputed by the new philosophers who claim that with no ultimate foundation for knowledge we cannot know anything with certainty. Many postmoderns, such as Jacques Derrida, also reject the confines of Western logic. The new linguistic theorists claim that a word or group of words can mean almost anything depending on who is listening to or reading them. The old, “modern” approach to understanding language would say you are mistaken if you believe this paragraph is about backyard barbecues. Taken to their logical extreme, some postmodern theories would say the paragraph is about backyard barbecues if that is what it means to you, regardless of this author’s intent. The words on the page do not refer to any reality outside of themselves. They “mean” whatever you feel when you read them. This is what Derrida meant in his famous saying that “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida and Weber 1988, 148). Ironically, Derrida would have objected if a reader thought he was saying something like “the text means Jacques Derrida is a bad person” (1977, 162).¹ Postmodern thinking frustrates efforts to communicate if applied consistently.

“If words no longer communicate meaning, why do postmodernists continue to publish?” (Ludwigson 1995, 288).

Most of us do not follow this relativism to its logical conclusions. How would you order a hamburger and a soda if you gave the person taking your order the liberty to interpret your words any way he or she wished? Practicalities keep postmoderns from letting this fluid concept of truth and reality carry them to its extremes. Even the strictest postmodernists will argue why others should believe exactly what they believe. Still, having cut their rope to the anchor of absolutes and logic, postmoderns are free to believe whatever feels best to them and their community. They can choose any views they find pleasing without having to explain them if they do not want to.

With the rope to the anchor cut the journey never ends. Those who think we cannot know truth see it as a journey rather than a destination,

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc., abc*, Glyph 2, (1977), 162.

believing we may pursue truth but never confidently find it since it is too elusive and mysterious. We must then let everyone have their own “truth” as long as they do not hurt anyone else or try to impose their views on others. People who proclaim dogma, especially those who proclaim religious dogma, are thought to be narrow-minded, as unfashionable to postmoderns as people wearing medieval clothes on a contemporary, city street. Stanford student Scott Scruggs was surprised to find this philosophical fashion entrenched as de facto policy by the campus administration:

Last year, a dean at Stanford University began to pressure evangelical Christian groups on campus to stop the practice of “proselytizing other students.” Ironically, what angered the dean was not the content of the message that was being shared, but the practice of sharing itself. He believes that in approaching someone with the Gospel, you are implying that the person’s beliefs are inferior to your own. Such an implication is unacceptable because it is self-righteous, biased, and intolerant. (Scruggs 2002, para. 3)

Religion is acceptable in postmodernism, just not the kind that says other religious beliefs are wrong. It is wrong to say others are wrong (never mind the contradiction). Rigid belief systems are not as nice and friendly as an eclectic spirituality which picks whatever suits a person’s appetite at the religious buffet. Transcendent, spiritual experiences from this buffet are now popular. Increasing numbers of postmoderns are practicing trans-rational religions such as Neo-paganism and shamanism. Many spiritual leaders such as Frithjof Schuon and Joseph Campbell have promoted the notion that mystical experience underlies and unites all religions while external differences merely express this unifying experience in various mythologies. Consequently, all forms of mysticism are fine to postmoderns as long as they are not associated with a literal interpretation of any religious text that claims to exercise authority over what everyone should believe and do.

Theologian John Hick expressed this pluralist concept by saying “God has many names” (1982, 40). The thought is that all religions worship the same God and they are just different roads to the same destination. Differences are considered incidental. Interfaith dialog or “conversation” has replaced evangelism or proselytizing since postmoderns consider it arrogant for anyone to believe or act as though his or her religion

is truer than any other. Since the mystical experience is the common essence that makes all religions equally valid to those who follow them, trappings such as incense and candles which elicit sacred feelings are highly sought after in postmodern religion which focuses on feeling rather than doctrine. Leaving out the systematic study and the calls to repentance, postmodern religion feels good. As Ravi Zacharias (2000) says, in the postmodern era “theology has been replaced by religion” (25).

With no overriding authority for belief there is no way to declare what is morally right or wrong. We can only say what seems right to us so we speak of values rather than morals. Moral relativism becomes the “absolute” guide to conduct. With no authoritative principles to guide us we judge the rightness of an action by how good people will feel as a result of it. “Tolerance” becomes the keyword in morality. The only things we seem to find intolerable are behaviors we think will physically or emotionally harm others. We also cannot tolerate those who suggest we be intolerant. Thus, tolerance is not an absolute, moral value. We tolerate whatever makes people happy and refuse to tolerate those things we believe deprive people of happiness.

Relativism is not humane. It is tolerant only as long as it feels like being tolerant. Once it feels otherwise, no moral law prevents it from becoming dictatorial. – Peter Kreeft

Not everyone in the postmodern era has completely surrendered to all aspects of postmodern thinking. Many people have carried old, “modern” baggage into the new era. Evangelical Christians and atheists offer conflicting, modern claims to absolute truth. Although strict modernism differs with orthodox Christianity’s belief in the supernatural, biblical Christianity does share modernism’s approach to truth as knowable and absolute. Popular, atheist author Richard Dawkins has written a scathing article about postmodernism as have many Christian leaders. These critics claim postmodernism’s theory of how we know truth and reality ultimately destroys knowledge and morals. Some critics go so far as to call postmodernism a form of willful psychosis.

However loud these voices may be though, they are in the minority. They are countercultural voices of protest. Additionally, the effects of postmodernism can be seen even within these two supposedly countercultural movements. For example, though atheists often claim to

have almost nothing in common with postmoderns, one of both groups' main objections to monotheistic religions is the same. They find the religious concepts of sin and judgment too unpleasant to bear. Though postmoderns object on subjective grounds and atheists upon objective ones, it seems the motivations of both have their roots in a dislike for rigid rules and divine retribution. Rejecting a religious claim because it seems too unpleasant is a postmodern trait even when used by "modern" atheists.

The new cultural environment has also affected many Christians. The poll referred to above found that the majority of those who considered themselves Christians did not believe in absolute truth. David Wells (1993), a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, argues that Christians are progressively being less guided by doctrinal understanding and more led by their own feelings. A Newsweek poll appears to confirm what Wells says, revealing that though most professing Christians believe in a real heaven, thinking they will go there some day, most of them do not believe in a literal hell (Woodward 1989). Hell is not popular in a culture that determines truth by how good it makes us feel. While many theologians in the postmodern era are not postmodern in thought, those that are choose to interpret the Bible in a way that allows them to disbelieve teachings that historic Christianity has held to for many centuries.

For instance, Millard Erickson (2002) points out, etiquette upstages ethics in this cultural environment:

Probably the emotional factor has overwhelmed the rational [within the church]. This is etiquette, and what has happened is that etiquette has become more important than ethics today. In this sort of environment it is a serious breach of etiquette to accuse someone of having told an untruth. This would be the case even if the person in question has told an untruth. To accuse someone of committing an improper act is disapproved of more strongly than the actual committing of such an act. (63)

The new toleration means that even Christians consider correction to be mean, and being nice is thought to be better than being right.

Frustrated critics say postmodernism leaves us with no solid foundation for knowing anything with real certitude. Postmoderns concede this,

calling their speculations on truth and reality “postfoundational,” meaning we cannot base any idea or principle on anything unquestionable. The floor has dropped out from beneath us. This is scary but it can also be fun. With nothing below us and no boundaries to confine us, nothing constrains us. We feel as free as the wind since there is no ultimate authority to tell us what is true or right. This era is reminiscent of a scene in the 1992 animated Disney film “Aladdin” in which Aladdin takes Princess Jasmine, the object of his affection, on a magic carpet ride and sings to her the following lyrics:

I can open your eyes
Take you wonder by wonder
Over, sideways and under
On a magic carpet ride
A whole new world
A new fantastic point of view
No one to tell us no
Or where to go
Or say we're only dreaming

There is no one to tell us what to think and no one to tell us we are wrong in this fantastic, postmodern point of view! Truth is a journey and the postmodern magic carpet is the most appealing product in the worldview market on which to travel. The other views look drab, slow, and limited by comparison. Why not ride since it seems so fun? But still, like a concerned parent, reason chimes in asking hard questions. Does this magic carpet have reliable guidance systems? Does it have good steering? Does it have any brakes? Is it safe to ride on? Will it get me where I want to go, or is it better to ask where I should go?

Religiously Correct Surgery

“What procedure do you guys feel good about performing today? The chart calls for an appendectomy but I’m open to whatever you think may best meet his felt psychological needs.”

In the Christian view, freedom is at bottom positive in nature; it is freedom for something -- freedom to obey the norms that structure human existence, freedom to do one's duty, freedom to bow before the imperious claims of God the Lord. . . . In the secular mind . . . freedom is generally viewed as freedom from something.

– Henry Stob

[Postmodern philosopher Michel] Foucault invites us to a voyage in search of freedom with neither compass nor star to navigate. . . . Surely an illusory hope that “even without the truth we may still be made free.”

– John Hinkson and Greg Ganssle

TO HELP YOU LEARN

Please answer the following questions in the space provided below or in your notebook.

1. Are there things about which you are sure?

2. How are you sure of these things?

3. What makes something right or wrong?

4. What does it mean to be intellectually and morally free?

ARE WE SURE THAT WE CAN'T BE SURE?