

1 CAN WE REALLY KNOW THE TRUTH?

THIS LESSON WILL FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

Objective 1. Discuss the philosophical, cultural, and religious differences between modernism and postmodernism.

Objective 2. Explain the strengths and weaknesses of modernism and postmodernism.

“Man will occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of the time he will pick himself up and continue on.” – Winston Churchill

A group of explorers discover a massive cave system. Eventually the explorers lose their way and settle down to live in the cave. Generations pass and each new one adjusts more skillfully to the environment. The thoughtful among them begin to scoff at the old myths regarding an “outside world.” Since no one has ever seen such things as “light” or “colors” the more sophisticated among the cave dwellers begin to call themselves “moderns” who reject such fairy tales. They mock the “premoderns” who still believe in these things.

As time passes some of the cave dwellers claim to have spotted shafts of light at certain remote spots in the cave. This light reveals that colors do actually exist. Perhaps there is really an outside world. Maybe the old myths contained some elements of truth. For lack of a better term, the cave dwellers who entertain these ideas call themselves “postmoderns.” One day a modern and a postmodern are working together in a remote part of the cave when outsiders spot and rescue them. Rescuers take them to a nearby house while teams are formed to find the others. Wishing to make the men comfortable, the rescuers take them to a large living room in the house belonging to the wealthiest of them. The modernist is the first one to discover the television. He meticulously takes the set apart and puts it back

together. He describes with great enthusiasm the principles behind such things as the cathode ray tube. Rather bored with the modernist's approach to the new device, the postmodernist sits in the comfortable chair across from the television. Finding the little hand-held device that has a button labeled "on," he turns on the TV and begins to enjoy the programming. The modernist takes copious notes as the postmodern channel surfs. Eventually the modernist announces his formula for determining which programs are best. The postmodern scoffs. There is no solid basis for saying which shows are better than others. "Better" is a subjective category. Whatever one likes best is best for him. Others will have their own preferences. Thus, many "best" shows will coexist simultaneously. As more of their friends are rescued from the cave and brought to the living room, they form rival clubs and assert their way of looking at the television phenomenon is superior to the others. Which club would you join?

"Television then, like literature, is a window on our world. Everything about it tells us something about ourselves and our culture"
(Sire 1990, 174).

Many sociologists say we have entered a new era called postmodernism. This era contrasts the "modern" one (covering the eighteenth century Enlightenment to the mid twentieth century) which saw science and logic as having concrete, absolute answers to all of our questions. Postmoderns say moderns have not thought deeply enough about the world we live in; nor have they taken feelings and experiences sufficiently into account in their view of this world. Stanley Grenz and John Franke (2001) summarize postmodernism as "the rejection of certain central features of the modern project, such as its quest for certain, objective, and universal knowledge, along with its dualism and its assumption of the goodness of knowledge. It is this critical agenda, rather than any proposed constructive paradigm to replace the modern vision that unites postmodern thinkers" (21–22).

Moderns have largely limited their knowledge to empirical findings. The only things they tend to accept as real are those things that have a purely natural or physical explanation. Postmoderns have dared to ask by what authority moderns make such absolute claims. If someone claims to have an experience "outside of the cave" who are the moderns to dismiss it out of hand? Just because the moderns are limited to the darkness and limitations of the cave does this mean with certainty that nothing else exists?

When moderns evaluate the world around us they also lack sufficient categories to discuss purely subjective elements. Their absolutist approach to the world demands that they speak of absolute truth and morals. Any communication is seen to have only one legitimate meaning. What is the foundation or basis for these absolutist beliefs? Postmoderns say that moderns have yet to offer a sufficient foundation for their belief system.

This is not just an abstract, philosophical debate engaged in by pipe-smoking professors with elbow patches on their corduroy sports coats. The changes in the halls of academia are tangibly paralleled in our everyday lives. Postmodernism is both an academic trend and a popular mood. To illustrate let us once again consider the ubiquitous nervous system of our culture—television programming. You turn on the TV and a couple on a talk show is discussing how they feel about their marital problems. The moderator eventually intervenes and tells both people what to do, although he gives no reason why they should do what he says other than that he believes it will “work” for them. You change the channel and on another show the audience is wiping away tears as the host talks about getting in touch with our spirits, but this host never says how we can know we have a spirit. Looking for something else, you change the channel again. On this one a guest psychic is telling people about their lives. The psychic just seems to “know” these things. No one on the show appears to care how. Finally, you decide on a sitcom. The characters are cheating, lying, and having casual sex outside of marriage. It is all supposed to be harmless and funny.

Our culture has changed. At one time people would have asked why they should do what the confident expert says. They would have asked what the other host meant by “getting in touch with your spirit” and they would have been more skeptical of the psychic’s claims. Fifty years ago the conduct of the sitcom characters would have been portrayed negatively and would have led to dire consequences in the episode. It seems like these days people are less rational and more subjective and the more subjective we become the more we tolerate behavior that once was frowned upon. We have grown weary of the limitations of “cave life.” Truth and morals are no longer seen as universal and absolute. People can have conflicting ideas but both are “true for them.” One poll conducted in 1991 found that 66% of Americans believe “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” 72% of those between the ages of 18 and 25 rejected all notions of absolutes (Barna 1991, 83–85).

Many people today are rebelling against the old limitations of modernism. The postmodern branch of architecture designs buildings with random, unpredictable appearance. Rather than teach traditional math skills, today's teacher may use an ethnically sensitive math curriculum that focuses on approaches to math found in various cultures. Generation Yers, now in their twenties, spend many hours on Myspace and YouTube, but do not seem to care much about grammar, punctuation, or spelling. We are forging new, more intuitive paths and many of the old concerns with rules, logic, and morals are largely passé.

Postmoderns are more concerned with stories than with ideas and logical argumentation. Propositions are too concrete and seem too absolute for postmoderns who prefer to speak about narratives. They find personal anecdotes more persuasive than research or evidence. Peters and Waterman (1982) advise contemporary businesses to recognize this phenomenon and appeal to customers through stories rather than information: "'Does it feel right?' counts for more than 'Does it add up?' or 'Can I prove it?' ... Simply said, we are more influenced by stories ... than by data ... people reason intuitively" (55). The mind is no longer an absolute tyrant. Postmoderns think and feel their way toward truth.

Some postmodern thinkers go so far as to say that all we really have are stories. For example, rather than speak of the proposition that all men should be equal in the eyes of the law, these postmoderns claim that all we can legitimately speak of are the stories or experiences that cause people to feel this way. They insist that these stories or narratives may provide meaning to our community and us but they do not teach universal truths. No person, church, or organization, they say, has "metanarratives." A metanarrative is an all encompassing view of truth and life such as Christianity or Communism that claims to have absolute truths that apply to all people of all cultures and times. The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard said "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, xxiv). In other words, truth is not above people and cultures; it is created by them, and different people create different truths. One culture's narrative which asserts polygamy as acceptable is just as valid as cultural narratives that see monogamy as the only valid option. Finding truth is like choosing a TV show to watch. There is no "right" one. We just pick whatever we like best.

The postmodern era is one in which we challenge long held assumptions, value our own experiences, respect the experiences of

others, and seek for trans-rational answers to questions about life's meaning and purpose. Modernism is a dry well in the search for such answers. The notion that we are just a chance assemblage of molecules makes us no more significant than a dirt clod. Our heart tells us there is more to the story.

"There is nothing outside the text; all is textual play with no connection with original truth" (Derrida 1985, 3).

The lack of overriding plots and the frequent display of situational ethics on Seinfeld have caused many commentators to consider it an example of postmodern television. (See Erickson 2002.)

The visual imagery of television has aided and abetted the rise of postmodern culture, at least at the popular level of experience ... True, false, good, bad, are the stuff of language and ideas, not visual images. In a video dependent society, moral decisions are emotive, not rational, not based on reasons or principles but on existential ecstasy or terror. (Brown 2001, 315, 319)

Sincerity does not change error. A man may mistakenly board a plane for New York thinking that he is going to Los Angeles, but that does not change his destination. – Robert Coleman

To argue for truth today is to stir an immediate debate, as if a heresy of devilish proportions has been invoked. The so-called death of God spelled the death of theology, but the morticians of the Absolute were not content to stab God-talk. Inevitably God's undertakers were marching to their own funeral, with all of knowledge being pronounced dead. (Zacharias 2000, 25)

The biblical claim is that there is a meta-narrative which is descriptive of all, and normative for all. God is the sovereign Creator, whose word spoke all into existence and who continues to work through history bringing the biblical metanarrative to its fulfillment (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28) ... In redemption, the metanarrative places the focus of history on the incarnation and the person and work of God the son. (Phillips 2001, 263)

TO HELP YOU LEARN

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

1. Do you consider yourself to be postmodern?

2. Do you think you can really know the truth?

3. How can you be sure that what you believe is true?

4. If something is true for one person, is it true for others?
