

3 IS IT RIGHT IF IT FEELS RIGHT?

THIS LESSON WILL FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

Objective 1. Determine whether or not postmodernism is adequate as a guide to beliefs and choices.

Objective 2. Identify ideas upon which people base their beliefs and choices.

“Truth provides the structure for feelings. Feelings do not establish truth” (Carnell 1997, 89).

“If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair.”
– C. S. Lewis (quoted in Nicholi 2003, 45)

It is amazing how frequently things that are called disagreements prove, upon examination, to be simple dislike. ‘I don’t agree with you’ often means nothing more than ‘I don’t like what you say.’ . . . People either like things or they don’t like them and would rather avoid the real labor of thinking. They have had so little practice in it that they quite unable to distinguish between reason and personal preference.
– Elisabeth Elliot

Even on a magic carpet journey you need to know where you are going or you could crash. The freedom of flight still needs the constraints of guidance. On July 16, 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr. flew a plane carrying himself, his wife, and his sister-in-law into the water below, killing all

on board. The flight had run into conditions of poor visibility. Instead of relying on objective instruments for his guidance, Kennedy apparently trusted his own, subjective feelings which led him astray. As we journey toward truth, is there an objective system to guide us or are we left to nothing more than our feelings?

We may trust our own feelings but we must at least admit we know others whose feelings have led them astray. Solomon's wisdom in the biblical book of Proverbs seems like common sense: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12). Proverbs 21:2 says that everyone's ways seem right to them. Even the way of the fool is right in his own eyes (Proverbs 12:15). Proverbs 1:22 and 2:14 both say the fool delights in foolish ways. Foolishness can feel right to any of us.

All parents learn that their children's feelings will lead them to destruction if we do not direct them in wiser paths. Maturity means learning to make wise choices in spite of our feelings. We simply cannot eat everything we feel like eating, take off every day from work in which we feel like doing something else, or express our anger every time we would like to.

Feelings are not a consistently reliable guide to truth, morals, or practical living. In any argument both parties feel they have the truth. Both sides in any military conflict feel justified in their actions. Nevertheless, at least one side must be wrong in both the argument and the military conflict. A husband feels like having an affair while his wife feels he should not. Both cannot be right. A song from the 1970's said, "It can't be wrong when it feels so right," but surely life has taught us this is just sentiment. Perhaps the moderns did not give us a sufficient foundation for objective absolutes but both our minds and our hearts continue to seek for real truth we can both know and feel with certainty. The postmodern, magic carpet ride feels great, but it lacks a trustworthy guidance system.

Furthermore, on the magic carpet it is hard to discern the difference between an oasis and a mirage. What are the real answers to life's ultimate questions? How did the universe originate? Is there a God? Which religion is correct? What is the meaning or purpose of life? There is no way to tell if we are just playing make believe.

Most postmoderns have concluded that truth cannot be really known. Reading postmodern philosophers one sometimes gets the impression

they have given up on meaning as well. They use an abundance of ambiguous terms; newly invented jargon; unnecessary prefixes and suffixes; and unnecessarily complex sentences that their works often read like gibberish. Consider this quote from postmodernist Félix Guattari:

We can clearly see that there is no bi-univocal correspondence between linear signifying links or archi-writing, depending on the author, and this multireferential, multi-dimensional machinic catalysis. The symmetry of scale, the transversality, the pathic non-discursive character of their expansion: all these dimensions remove us from the logic of the excluded middle and reinforce us in our dismissal of the ontological binarism we criticised previously.²

This obscure style seems intentional since postmodern philosophers tend to criticize philosophical substance rather than contribute to it. Lyotard defended Guattari against those who “expect, especially when reading a work of philosophy to be gratified with a little sense” (1984, 71). Postmodern philosophy, music, art, and architecture have all evolved from existentialist, impressionist, abstract, and avant-garde movements that had their genesis in the modern era. Postmodern philosophers often find illustrations for their subjective views on truth and morals in the unstructured, unpredictable world of postmodern art. (See Anderson 1997.) Whereas philosophers have traditionally considered truth and ethics to be categorically different from aesthetics (appreciation of the arts), postmoderns tend to disregard distinctions between these categories.

“Consider postmodernism’s influence on art: it is an expression of complete autonomy, an insistent banality which is nothing more than an ‘absurd conglomeration of debris.’ No longer does art represent the external world” (Ludwigson 1995, 285).

In such a world the most we can hope for is to be “authentic to our personal narratives.” In other words the best option we can find is just being true to ourselves. But there are problems with this view. It advocates absolute relativism which is a self-contradiction. If truth and morals are not relative one must supply a basis for absolutes. If truth and morals are relative one has claimed this as an absolute and thus defeated his own argument. Furthermore there are authentic liars and many other people

² Richard Dawkins, “Postmodernism Disrobed.” April 1, 2007. <http://richarddawkins.net/article,824,Postmodernism-Disrobed>, Richard-Dawkins-Nature

most of us do not want acting like their authentic selves. Jeffrey Dahmer was being authentic to his personal narrative as was Ted Bundy, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Pol Pot (McDowell and Hostetler 1998). Our authentic selves want these people to change while their authentic selves do not want to. This principle cannot work consistently. “Authenticity” is not a reliable guide to truth or wisdom.

It seems that both modernism and postmodernism leave us with blanks to fill in. If life were only a true-false test, modernism would come through with its empiricism. If it were multiple choice postmodernism would give us all an “A” since all answers are equally correct. Both systems fail to fill in the blanks in the realities of life, however. What humankind needs is a worldview that works on objective and subjective levels. We need a way to fill in the blanks with concrete truth and morals.

Following is a postmodern poetry by Michael Giardina:³

The unable to deliver

a farmer, daughter
of an Italian canner
had passion for tracing
cataract scars.

Downtown Madrid--
a popular flamco
dancer
from Kentucky.

In any event,
she hung wiry necks
from my ceiling fans,
attached teeth to the
prefixes of my nightlight.

Fueling the feed,
she gestured
for Nordic fairies;
ears to stuff in bag.

Native Kentucky rests
and garlic pressurizes
in my gut, as wristbands
stick slick like
burnt moths

crashing into the sun.

3 Michael Giardina. “Experimentations in Abstract Postmodern Poetry.”
<http://creativestudios.com/abstractpoetry.html>

"It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies" (Chomsky 1967).

Sincerely believing something does not make it true, as anyone will testify who has ever picked a wrong bottle out of a medicine cabinet in the dark. . . . faith is no more valid than the object in which it is placed. It doesn't matter how sincere or how intense the faith. . . . Believing something doesn't make it true any more than failing to believe truth makes it false. Facts are facts, regardless of people's attitudes toward them. In religious matters, the basic question is always, "Are the facts true?"

(Little 2000, 147)

False teaching can make people very happy. Let us be quite clear about that. If you judge only in terms of experience and results you will find that every cult and heresy that the world or the church has ever known will be able to justify itself.

(Lloyd-Jones 1965, 185)

While most arguments throughout history have focused on rival claims to truth, postmodernism rejects the very notion of truth as fixed, universal, objective, or absolute. (Mohler, para. 7)

To the premodernist, truth was found in revelation. To the modernist, truth can be found in reason and science. To the postmodernist truth is not found (indeed it is not capable of being found), it is created. Absolute truth is a fable. It is possible for me to create my own truth, and for cultures and subcultures to create their truth, but it is not possible to find universal truth that is applicable to all people. Such truth does not exist and should not be sought. Those who claim to possess absolute truth only do so in order to assert power over others. (Gilley 2002, para. 10)

Contemporary Math Lesson

$2 + 2 =$ whatever (tolerant math)

whatever + whatever = 4 (pluralist math⁴)

whatever (postfoundational math⁵)

$2 + 2 = 4$ (“arrogant” math⁶)

Tolerance has become one of the most sacred values to the postmodern mind, and according to the new understanding of tolerance, any claim to possess unique truth is considered arrogant and intolerant . . . Those who claim to have the truth are regarded as arrogant. (Fernando 2000, 123)

TO HELP YOU LEARN

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

1. What do you think about postmodern art and literature?

2. What guides you in making important decisions?

3. Have you ever felt imperfect?

4 Religious pluralism is the view that all spiritual paths lead to the same destination.

5 In a completely postfoundational math system $2 + 2$ could equal 4, but $1 + 9$ could equal 7 with the same validity since there would be no undergirding certainties to guide the equations.

6 Those who make claims to speak absolute truth are often called arrogant within post-modern culture.