

An Introduction to Postmodernity: Where Are We, How Did We Get Here, and Can We Get Home?

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Introduction

As a student in seminary I had a friend with severe amnesia as the result of a serious bicycle accident. In spite of previous diligent work, he had forgotten large amounts of his seminary studies. And not recognizing his wife, he had to get to know her all over again. His disorientation could have been even worse, but his happy testimony was that he was anchored in still knowing Jesus!

Many of us were also disoriented upon waking one day to find that we no longer recognized the intellectual world around us. Someone informed us that we were now living in postmodern times and had been for some time, but it all seemed so new and unfamiliar. Gratefully, we still knew Jesus, that He is the same forever; but, living as a Christian in the strange new world of postmodernity¹ would demand adjustments in our thinking.

Two decades ago we thought we knew what it meant to live as thoughtful Christians in modernity. It entailed active resistance to the manifestations of unbelief that had arisen since the Enlightenment. Modern philosophy, no longer the handmaid of theology, reveled in its newly found autonomy to reason apart from God's revelation.² Modern science, no longer seeking to think God's thoughts after him, boasted that God was unnecessary to understand either the universe or life's deepest questions.³ Most insidious of all, modern biblical criticism and the-

ology, now sitting in judgement over Scripture rather than under it, became the standard fare for seminarians preparing to feed God's flock.⁴ But at least we knew our enemies well, and with the intellectual reinvigoration of evangelicalism in the twentieth century, it appeared that the Lord had raised up a David to meet modernity's Goliath.⁵

Where Are We?

But after waking surprised that morning, we now discover the arrival of postmodernity. How different everything looks! Instead of clashing only with a worldview giant (Naturalism) wielding the sword of a strong competing truth claim, much of the world is now characterized by "liquidity."⁶ Permanence and solidity in social structures are now bygone commodities, not to mention abiding values and the concept of truth. The new colossus is characterized by opposition to epistemology, realism, essentialism, all forms of foundationalism, transcendental arguments and standpoints, truth as correspondence, canonical descriptions, final vocabularies, and meta-narratives.⁷ The new cognitive atmosphere is charged with pessimism regarding the possibility of modernity's Holy Grail, *scientia* and *veritas*. Is this new arrival on the intellectual scene a friend or foe? Is postmodernism providentially given to the Church as an ally against naturalism, or is it just one more philo-

sophical cycle of unbelief?

It is true that postmodernists and modernists have no love lost between them because they disagree on so much. The modernist strives for certainty in knowledge that the postmodernist does not believe possible. The postmodernist understands any experience of reality to be thoroughly interpretative, whereas the modernist cherishes objectivity. The modernist takes his standpoint as a knowing individual, but socially constructed realities are all the postmodernist will concede.

Western intellectual power centers, long dominated by modernists, now acknowledge the growing influence of postmodernists. For example, Public Broadcasting Service television aired a brief series several years ago entitled "The Nobel Legacy." Nobel laureates in physics, chemistry, and medicine were featured describing the fascinating details of the advances in knowledge of their disciplines and the resultant benefits for humanity. This kind of programming is nothing new for PBS. But what is of special interest was the equal time provided a postmodernist (obviously not from the sciences, but from the humanities) to attack the sciences. She sought to emasculate modernist concepts like "fact" and "progress," and she did so creatively (e.g., by walking through a desert while she spoke). The laureate in chemistry, on the other hand, prefaced his remarks with: "We didn't invent chemistry, nature did."⁸ Just a few years earlier, it would have been unthinkable for PBS to allow the citadel of modernity to be taunted so rudely.

Perhaps the classic skirmish between modernity and postmodernity is what is now referred to as the Sokal affair. Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, submitted a piece entitled "Transgressing

the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" to a postmodern journal, *Social Text*.⁹ The editors, including postmodern luminaries such as Frederic Jameson and Andrew Ross, published the article, thinking that a physicist was presenting corroboration from science for postmodernism. In the article Sokal wrote:

It has thus become increasingly apparent that physical "reality," no less than social "reality," is at bottom a social and linguistic construct; that scientific "knowledge," far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it; that the truth claims of science are inherently theory-laden and self-referential; and consequently, that the discourse of the scientific community, for all its undeniable value, cannot assert a privileged epistemological status with respect to counter-hegemonic narratives emanating from dissident or marginalized communities.¹⁰

After the article was published, Sokal published an exposé of the whole affair. As a self-confessed leftist and feminist, he noted that he shared postmodernists' liberal values. Nevertheless, Sokal felt their emphasis on relativism surrendered the intellectual high ground to the right wing. He said he was angry

because most (though not all) of this silliness is emanating from the self-proclaimed Left. We're witnessing here a profound historical volte-face. For most of the past two centuries, the Left has been identified with science and against obscurantism; we believed that rational thought and the fearless analysis of objective reality (both natural and social) are incisive tools for combating the mystifications promoted by the powerful—not to mention being desirable human ends in their own right. The recent turn of many "progressive"

or “leftist” academic humanists and social scientists toward one or another form of epistemic relativism betrays this worthy heritage and undermines the already fragile prospects for progressive social critique.¹¹

Even closer to home, postmodernism has made a significant impact upon philosophy and theology. Twentieth century philosophical approaches have commonly been classified either as continental or analytic. Until recent decades, some degree of disdain was the norm between these broad schools and their correlative relationships to theology.¹² But now, postmodernism has not only made inroads but also caused divisions within each school.

In earlier decades, continental philosophy was closely associated with the likes of phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. The continental tradition has produced what is perhaps the most radical of all post-modern philosophies, deconstruction. Its father, Jacques Derrida, is now well known for his skepticism about grounding the meaning of written texts because they are always marked by mediation, endless word play, the absence of signifier, or in short, *différance*.¹³ Derrida’s influence on theology is exemplified in the work of Mark Taylor. Taylor’s work will seem strange to ordinary Christians both in liberal as well as conservative circles. He elides the concept of truth altogether in favor of language sport.¹⁴ For example, after cavorting for almost a page through a (dubious) etymology of “err,” Taylor says that as an “erring a/theologian” he

asks errant questions and suggests responses that often seem erratic or even erroneous. Since his reflection wanders, roams, and strays from the “proper” course, it tends to deviate

from well-established ways. To traditional eyes, a/theology doubtless appears to be irregular, eccentric, and vagrant. At best it seems aimless, at worst devious. Within this framework, a/theology is, in fact, heretical. For the a/theologian, however, heresy [*sic*] and aimlessness are unavoidable. Ideas are never fixed but are always in transition; thus they are irrepressibly transitory.¹⁵

Analytic philosophy has flourished in the Anglophone world. Unlike nineteenth century continental philosophy, it has been characterized by rejection of (intentional) system building. Viewing itself as an extension of science, it has historically focused on logic and careful reasoning, and the way language is used. The post-modernism that has grown in this soil has generally been less radical than postmodernism in continental philosophy, and thus has had a less dramatic influence on Anglo-American theology.¹⁶ Philosopher Nancey Murphy is sympathetic to W. V. O. Quine’s view of the structure of knowledge as a web where individual beliefs are held in relation to other beliefs and not in relation to the world. She contends that this rejection of modernity’s foundationalism avoids the Scylla of continental relativism and the Charybdis of modernist epistemological arrogance. She argues that this approach may enable the rapprochement needed between liberal and conservative Christianity.¹⁷ The most prominent evangelical theologian to adopt a somewhat similar appropriation of Anglo-postmodernity is Stan Grenz.¹⁸

Nowhere are the effects of the *Zeitgeist*, however, more in evidence than in the popular religion of postmodernity, the New Age Movement (NAM). Postmodern relativism in general and the New Age Movement in particular are essentially revolts from within Enlightenment secu-

larism.¹⁹ Indeed, the NAM can be classified as the esoteric version of postmodernity. Common postmodern themes are featured in the NAM: opposition to Cartesian/Newtonian thinking and support for constructivist epistemologies; truth as pragmatism and science as oppressor; nonchalance about logical or ethical inconsistencies and concern for the new tolerance. Especially common among New Agers is a frustration with the exclusivity of orthodox Christianity's truth claims.

How Did We Get Here?

The pervasive influence of postmodernism in the popular culture is obvious, but it did not begin there.²⁰ The history of ideas demonstrates that critical and influential concepts begin with seminal thinkers. Their ideas are disseminated by their students and ultimately work their way down to street level in simplified and digestible form.²¹ For example, few non-academic communists could explain in detail the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx, and neither could the average layperson in a mainline church explain the impact of Rudolph Bultmann on New Testament studies. Yet the ideas of Marx and Bultmann have controlled the political and theological lives of millions.²² So to understand the roots of postmodernism, we must trace its ideational genealogy through the work of important thinkers.

Emphases similar to postmodernism are not new (cf. Cratylus, Protagoras, Pyrrho, etc.). What is most interesting about postmodern uncertainty is that it follows on the heels of modernity's epistemological confidence. Especially ironic is that Immanuel Kant, the most important philosopher of modernity, may be fairly said to have sown the seeds leading

to its unraveling. Kant considered himself a philosopher of the Enlightenment. In his essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Kant sums up his response with the Horatian motto: *Sapere aude* ("Think for yourself").²³ His intention was to undergird the Enlightenment by combating the skepticism inherent in David Hume's empiricism.

But his Copernican revolution, though attempting to bridge the rationalism and empiricism of his day, has led to the very assault on his beloved *Aufklärung* ("Enlightenment"). Kant's transformation stressed the conditioning that the mind places upon the deliverances of the senses. Beginning philosophy students are now familiar with concepts such as *Ding an Sich* ("the thing-in-itself") and how one ought to distinguish the phenomena from the noumena. This epistemology, however, contains the seeds of an ontology that would take root and bloom over the next two centuries—from mind as major constituent of the experience of the world (Kantianism), to Mind as constitutive of the world (idealism), to the worlds of minds constituting experiences (postmodernism). Of course, a detailed genealogy of postmodernism would be more complex.²⁴ But Kant began this trek by arguing that knowers contribute something to that which is called knowledge, that the world is a place where each person has *a* worldview, not *the* view of the world. Indeed, Kant himself coined the term *Weltanschauung* ("worldview").²⁵

German idealists and romantics such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Novalis developed the concept of worldview further. Their work brought about the rise of historical consciousness, with the stress shifting from the universal to the historically singular, and from the abstract to the

particular. Historical development (*Geschichtlichkeit*) becomes more important than thinking in terms of essence (*ousia*). Static human nature no longer undergirds epistemology; social and communal contributions to knowledge now come to the fore. Early nineteenth century German philosophy sounded remarkably “post-modern.” For these thinkers a worldview is “the result of unending understandings and our inner plurality.”²⁶ And again, “Curious as it may appear to many explorers of nature, it will nevertheless show itself to be the strict truth, that they themselves first put the laws into nature which they believe to have learned from her.”²⁷

A century later Wilhelm Dilthey set the stage for the secular or naturalistic emphasis in so much postmodern thought. At least the idealists anchored historical reason in a transcendental ego, but Dilthey understood competing worldviews and even values themselves to be grounded in experience alone, or to be more specific, in evolutionary naturalism.²⁸ Dilthey’s application of evolutionary theory to his *Weltanschauungslehre* is transparent when he says: “Just as the earth is populated by countless species of animals among which there is carried on an unceasing struggle for existence and for space to expand, so the world of man knows a growth of structures of world views and a struggle between them for power over the minds of men.”²⁹

As the twentieth century unfolded, thinkers from a variety of disciplines began to develop their work around this new version of pluralism. Those who sought either to escape or to celebrate the plurality of worldviews, include the psychologist/philosopher Karl Jaspers,³⁰ the sociologist Clifford Geertz,³¹ and physicist/historian/philosopher of science

Thomas Kuhn.³² Christian thinkers working early in the twentieth century also sought to formulate a response to the growing awareness of worldview competition, including Abraham Kuyper,³³ Herman Dooyeweerd,³⁴ James Orr,³⁵ and Cornelius Van Til.³⁶ So, postmodern fatigue in adjudicating competing metaphysical views is not simply the stepchild of mid-twentieth century French language philosophers. Recent modern history in the world of ideas, stemming from Kant, provides a genealogy explaining the current failure of nerve with regard to epistemology, realism, essentialism, truth, and meta-narratives.

Can We Get Home?

Some Christian thinkers believe postmodernity is a suitable philosophical home for the faith. Admittedly, frustration with modernity’s conceit does make postmodernism’s apparent openness to all worldview comers seem welcome. Other Christians will be more cautious in affirming postmodern prospects for the faith, but will rightly appreciate the current emphasis on epistemological humility.³⁷ Moreover, all Christian philosophers should agree with postmoderns that human knowledge is not gained in a static immutable environment, that various cognitive grids underlie opposing understandings of reality. It is beyond doubt that many variables affect human cognition: psychological, economic, political, historical, educational, and religious, to name just a few.

None of this, however, entails the entrenched postmodern idea that all worldviews share the same truth value, that all are true or all are false or all are indeterminate. Postmodern conceptual relativism commits the existential fallacy

by construing the fact of differing views of reality as necessitating that this is the way the world should be or has to be. But all worldviews are simply not created equal—especially the radical postmodern one. For it should be obvious that it is self-defeating to preach that no worldview can claim to be the truth, when this sermon itself—if it is to be taken seriously—must inherently claim to be the truth.

Other postmodern theoretical mainstays are equally wrong: for example, that diverse learning environments (say, different ethnic backgrounds) inevitably create incommensurable worldviews. Knowledge, according to this view, is inevitably determined. But ironically, awareness of such epistemological variables does not hinder our reading of the world or lock us into a worldview, but instead significantly aids the processes of understanding, interpretation, and communication.³⁸ Another self-referentially absurd idea is that dissimilar worldview communities cannot adequately understand each other. The idea of incomprehensible notional worlds is incoherent: To recognize that one's own worldview is radically different from another requires that the other conceptual grid be understood at least sufficiently to render any judgment.³⁹

So I do not believe we can make our bed in postmodernism: for the Christian it is just not home sweet home. A number of postmodern ideas simply do not seem to me commensurable with biblical faith. The meaning of the text of Scripture cannot be regarded as indeterminate and endlessly open to word play. Preaching the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus, though offensive to postmoderns, is a non-negotiable for His followers. Missions and evangelism can and should be something

other than cultural imperialism, for we have been captured by the grandest of meta-narratives, and have been commissioned to bring others into its liberating captivity. Christian scholarship cannot be regarded as creative fiction or propaganda. Historical study, though imperfect, is, nevertheless, a discernible *vita* of God and humanity. The pursuit of philosophical or theological understanding is more than just employing the history of ideas as a tool of oppression.

Epistemologies and truth theories (and the impossible postmodern attempts to ditch them) are inextricably bound up with underlying metaphysical views and their concomitant anthropologies. For example, a modernist anthropology, if consistent with its evolutionary naturalist assumptions, implies that knowledge is only epiphenomenal: nature and nurture alone produce in us our beliefs. If our beliefs happen to have salutary survival value, then those beliefs are more likely to be passed on via natural selection. A postmodernist anthropology rejects the view that people have an essential nature. Instead, humans are self- or societally-constructed. Knowledge and beliefs are to be manipulated pragmatically to fit a personally or communally created world. But in contradistinction to these two views, biblical Christianity holds to the reality of a divinely-imagined but dramatically sin-damaged humanity placed in a revelatory-created world, which has far-reaching epistemological implications. Therefore, in light of this reality and in lieu of the postmodern project, what follows is my sketch of a biblically faithful epistemology and theory of truth.

The pluralism evident in the human family can be accounted for by the epistemic damage wreaked by sin on our

creational finitude.⁴⁰ No biblical text indicates that Adam was afflicted with an incorrect worldview until after the Fall, but neither did he ever enjoy divine omniscience. In his innocence the reliability of Adam's belief structure was completely dependent upon the Creator's general and special revelation. But the entrance of sin changed everything. Banishment from the Garden not only barred Adam from life, but also initiated a separation between Creator and the human race, with the attendant exponential growth of epistemic confusion.⁴¹ Adam's progeny inherited not only a sin nature, but also in time a significant worldview disparity between them.⁴² The Christian, therefore, understands sin as an extrinsic *abnormality* incurred by the human race at its beginning, with insidious and devastating implications for humans in general, and knowledge and truth in particular. Because of this ultimate of tragedies, believers should cherish humility, as well as intellectual and religious freedom. We do see through a glass darkly.

But it is vital to note that the biblical worldview has more to say about the human condition. The image of God in human beings is an intrinsic *normality* that implies an anthropological essentialism (typically rejected by postmodernists). This biblical essentialism is also packed with profound epistemological implications that are enduring, pervasive, and necessary for human life under common grace. The image of God is more than just the postmodernist's social construct. The deep structures of language and the universality of logic lend support to the idea of a discrete yet perduring commonality of the human race.⁴³ Moreover, the Christian understanding of human creational freedom entails the reality of mind-depen-

dent ideas. That is, humans can acquire true beliefs, but truth is not forced upon them. Only with willingness and with properly functioning noetic faculties can persons hold right beliefs about what God has revealed in creation and His word.⁴⁴ And these right beliefs are true even if every person believes that they are false. Truth anchored in the real world stands as a transcendent witness to and against individuals and their cultures.

On the basis, then, of biblical anthropology, the *imago Dei* seems to imply the notion of a divinely intentioned mechanism of knowing for all humans. The gift of self-transcendence is related to knowing, especially knowing the Creator. And though generating epistemological pathology, not even sin can stave off humans "getting things essentially right" regarding the world around them. Peter Loftson, though not himself sympathetic to a Christian worldview, captures the importance of the Christian understanding of human nature for epistemology:

The Christian analysis makes a claim about our ontic seriousness, one that is, curiously, a kind of cousin of the aspiration to science. The very idea that we might get it right, might sufficiently transcend the causal forces that produced and condition us, to stand in even partially accurate cognitive relation to reality; this fundamental, motivational assumption of the scientific enterprise parallels the Christian notion that we occupy a moral location that transcends the specifics of our biochemistry or positions in time or space, that elevates us to inter-identifiability with any other possible variety of consciousness in the universe.⁴⁵

In light, then, of a robust Christian anthropological essentialism, I would contend that Thomas Reid (1710-96) presented a better philosophical model for human knowing than Kant's mind-con-

ditioned view. Both philosophers were responding to Humean skepticism, but Reid's ideas in the main are more helpful for explaining the puzzling human phenomena of a pluralism of worldviews ensconced in a shared reality.⁴⁶ By realism Reid referred to an objective external world that is known by taking seriously the practice of daily living. Participation in this daily world presumes a shared universe (something obviously not necessary for philosophical and theological theorizing). Reid accounts for this assumption of daily beliefs by arguing that God graces humanity with common sense: self-evident principles that include, in addition to belief in an external world, belief in other minds and in others' testimony, belief in empirical evidence, and memory beliefs.⁴⁷ Common sense has to do with the most basic level of reason necessary for human existence.

Reid also argued that beyond common sense there is a second branch or degree of reason learned by education and practice that permits philosophical theorizing, and it is this branch that accounts for conceptual pluralism.⁴⁸ Reid ridiculed the practice of setting this advanced degree of reason or philosophy against common sense. Though common sense is not particularly suited for developing and confirming particular intellectual theories, it is able to refute those contrary to common sense. For example, when philosophers "pretend to demonstrate, a priori," the non-existence of the material world except as sensations in the mind, common sense then conceives of such philosophy as "a kind of metaphysical lunacy, and concludes that too much learning is apt to make men mad; and that the man who seriously entertains this belief, though in other respects he may be a very good man,

as a man may be who believes that he is made of glass; yet surely he hath a soft place in his understanding, and hath been hurt by much thinking."⁴⁹

Rather than any of the current post-modern offerings (either continental or Anglo-American), Reid's model not only accounts better for human commonalities and divergences, but is also more hospitable to the classical conceptions of truth as correspondence and coherence.⁵⁰ Coherence and especially correspondence are out of vogue in postmodernism. Its obsession with pragmatism undercuts the common sense notion of a knowable reality independent of subjective construction, as is assumed in classical theory. Thus because what "works" for one person may not for another, the pragmatic theory lends itself to cognitive relativism. It is here that neopragmatism runs into the problem of being *relatively* useful without a *necessary* correlation with true external states of affairs:

For example, if my belief that a life vest will keep me from drowning proves useful, this is probably because it is a fact that life vests prevent drowning. But note that the correlation is not perfect. A man may find it useful to believe that his spouse is faithful, because the belief forestalls emotional disruption in his life. But it may not be a fact that his spouse is faithful, and thus, on a Realist theory of truth, it may not be true. Ironically and again self-defeatingly, when postmodernists reject correspondence and coherence and trumpet pragmatic truth theory, they must implicitly employ correspondence to do so.⁵¹

In relation to the issues I have raised, I find it useful to think in terms of three broad views of truth and reality. *Uncritical certainty* is the view of the thinker who thinks he has obtained an objective and

unbiased understanding of reality. The thinker is uncritical in not recognizing the presupposed basis for this “certainty.” Logical positivism with its early verifiability criterion is a well-known example of this position. Historical finitude is considered an epistemological problem only because the knower does not know everything, but what is known is veridically known. Trust in unfettered reason or an eidetic reduction or something else is considered efficacious for the realization of a meta-worldviewish place of privilege. But, of course, no thinker has ever been able to demonstrate compellingly that any particular human thought system has escaped the cognitive limitations that all other systems must bear. Though it is the fashion to read the obituary of this Enlightenment view of rationality, it is still the regnant position in the scientism of the Hawkings, Dawkins, and Dennetts of this world.

Uncritical uncertainty is the position that little or no objective knowledge can be gained by historically and culturally limited thinkers. The holder of this view does not think that significantly genuine knowledge of the world is possible, and thus it is characterized by “uncertainty.” I consider this stance to be uncritical in its lack of reflection on the certitude upon which daily life must be experienced. “Uncritical uncertainty” thinkers will regard worldviews as epistemological prison-houses, but are willing (at least theoretically) to include themselves among the prisoners. This view, feigning epistemic humility, presumes a place of certainty to make its skeptical pronouncement. Despite their protestations to the contrary, I consider this epistemological worldview to represent generally the epistemology of postmodernists such as

Stanley Fish or Richard Rorty.

The third pattern of epistemological worldviews I call *critical certainty*. The certainty that characterizes much of human experience is recognized, but the position is critical in that it acknowledges the genuine limitations that historical conditioning has placed on the knower. I take this position to be that which best suits a Christian model of knowledge. The Christian does not deny the indubitable claims that a shared reality and, more importantly, that God in Christ makes upon humanity. To deny the claims of the latter is to disallow the light that illumines our philosophical darkness—indeed that heals the blindness at our core and allows us to find our way “home.” To deny the claims of the former is to live in a dream world of our own making (for which none of us wants to die), effectively disabling us from carrying out our mission in sensitivity to the pain and need of “the otherness” confronting us in a world needing deliverance from the lie.

Conclusion

So perhaps the times changed while we were unaware, but now we recognize the signs of the times and how we got here. We also know that some things never change: (1) unbelief is still unbelief—modernity argued that Christianity is not true and postmodernity says that we cannot know if Christianity is true; and (2) Jesus is still Lord and the Church will make it home.

ENDNOTES

¹Though I will use postmodernity and postmodernism synonymously, many distinguish the two with postmodernity often equated with a certain period and postmodernism representing a philoso-

phy.

²Kant, the most important modern philosopher, famously despised heteronomy, the imposition of will (even God's) for morals; he characterized it as: "lust for glory and domination and bound up with frightful ideas of power and vengefulness" (Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948 (1785)] 111). I shall discuss the impact of Kant in more detail later in this article.

³This attitude is exemplified in the famous response of Pierre Simon de Laplace to Napoleon. When the emperor questioned why there is no reference to God in his important *Celestial Mechanics*, the astronomer replied: "Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis." More recently, Stephen W. Hawking has now made himself a household name probably due to the famous conclusion of his book: "if we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God" (*A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* [New York: Bantam, 1988] 175).

⁴The most influential biblical theologian of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, had this to say about the divine revelatory content

of scripture: "What, then, has been revealed? Nothing at all, so far as the question concerning revelation asks for doctrines—doctrines, say, that no man could have discovered for himself—or for mysteries that become known once and for all as soon as they are communicated" ("The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden [Cleveland: World, 1960 (1929)] 85).

⁵Notable champions would include theologian Carl F. H. Henry contending with liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, and philosopher Alvin Plantinga taking on academic atheism.

⁶Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000). See also Bauman's earlier work, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

⁷Bernd Magnus, "Postmodern" in *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸"The Nobel Legacy" was aired in three one hour segments in 1995. The Nobel Prize winners were Leon Lederman (physics), Dudley Herschbach (chemistry), and J. Michael Bishop (medicine). Representing postmodernism was the popular Canadian poet, Anne Carson.

⁹Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* 46/47 (Spring/Summer 1996) 217-252.

¹⁰The article in its entirety, along with the growing related literature, can

be accessed at www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/. The debate over the article has not died down, and the piece is now being included in anthologies as a contemporary classic on the science/postmodernism clash. Apparently it is not that hard to "sound" postmodern. For example, a Postmodern Generator is available online. It is a system designed to generate random (and meaningless) text from recursive grammars. Interestingly, the detailed technical information about the Postmodern Generator is contained in a document produced by the Monash Department of Computer Science entitled "On the Simulation of Postmodernism and Mental Debility Using Recursive Transition Networks." Here is a recent example (and the original has fake footnotes!): "Bataille suggests the use of the postcultural paradigm of context to challenge sexual identity. But Baudrillard uses the term 'Sontagist camp' to denote a conceptualist totality. If the postcultural paradigm of context holds, we have to choose between modernism and the neotextual paradigm of context. Thus, the subject is interpolated into a Sontagist camp that includes art as a whole." For more examples see <http://www.elsewhere.org/cgi-bin/postmodern>.

¹¹Alan Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca* (May/June 1996) 62-64. This piece may also be found at www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/.

¹²See *God, Philosophy and Academic Culture: A Discussion between Schol-*

ars in the AAR and the APA, ed. William J. Wainwright (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), and especially the excellent article by Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Between the Pincers of Increased Diversity and Supposed Irrationality," in *ibid.*, 13-20. Wolterstorff notes that the American Philosophical Association (analytically oriented) has tended to take traditional theism more seriously than the American Academy of Religion (continentally inclined). He refers to the rejection of foundationalism in the AAR as tending toward "interpretation-universalism" (18) blended with metaphysical anti-realism, whereas the APA typically has been less interested in the nature of understanding. Post-foundationalists in the AAR tend to be of a Kantian sort, while post-foundationalists in the APA are generally post-Kantian (20).

¹³Derrida's works are notoriously difficult to understand, with his most "systematic" being *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974 [1967]).

¹⁴"Profitless play," says Taylor, "can overcome the unhappy consciousness of the historical agent." See his *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 15. Admittedly Derrida has those who defend him as having been misread by radicals like Taylor (see e.g., John Caputo, review of *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, by Mark Taylor, *Man and World* 21 [1988] 107-126). Derrida himself complained that he is often misunderstood in "Roundtable Dis-

cussion with Jacques Derrida," Villanova University, October 3, 1994; available from www.lake.de/sonst/homepages/s2442/vill2.html. At any rate, Christians cannot base their understanding of such things as epistemology and truth, especially the Spirit-illuminated inscripturated truth of Christ, upon Derrida's explicit intention to move us away from a metaphysics of presence.

¹⁵Taylor, *Erring*, 13. Taylor's deconstruction, even if it is by his own admission heretical, is entertaining. He gambols with the death of God, the erasure of self, and the end of history—and arrives with what he calls "mazing" grace. Here is an example: "Within the inverted world of erring, Dionysus, the Antichrist, and the Crucified, the Christ, appear to be the same. Carnavalesque comedy brings the unending realization of the incarnation of the word through a process of ceaseless dissemination. The carnality of Dionysus is the word made flesh. 'Carnival' appears to derive from Latin *caro*, *carnis*, flesh and *levare*, to lift up, elevate, or raise up. Carnival might be understood as the elevation of the body, the resurrection of the flesh. As the god of 'the whole wet element in nature,' Dionysus embodies the moisture and fluidity of humor and the seminal sexuality of comedy. Wine is Dionysus' element—wine, which is never contained but always flows freely. 'Take, drink, this is my blood.' The carnal play of the word unleashes a delirium . . ." (167). Reading *Erring* reminds me of a let-

ter given me by the postmaster of a little town where I once was pastor. The letter from Offenburg, Germany was simply addressed "to the community." A few excerpts follow: "Maria translated means the Resisting One. As my mother died in 1966 and I only became aware at the end of 1977 that I am Jesus Christ, she could not have resisted me. The Bible says, 'He is a sign that is contradicted.' And because there was no one else there, the Gospel writers in their petty-mindedness gave Jesus' mother the name Maria. Maria therefore is not an honorable name. Maria and the Antichrist are the same. But not every Antichrist is a 'demonic' opponent to Christ as encyclopedias state. Therefore the New Testament (and not only the New Testament) has fulfilled its purpose with me. Most of the prophecies in the Old Testament are encoded. Most of the Truth in the New Testament is distorted." One of the pages is signed: "Germany, December 1, 1987, Your Rabbi, Jesus Christ Superstar." Perhaps this explains why computer generated recursive grammars are programmed similarly to simulate both postmodern literature and mental debility (see n. 10).

¹⁶Traditionally, some theologians have felt that continental philosophy has been less detrimental to theology. For example, an earlier generation felt that the influence of Hegel was salutary for theology, whereas that of logical positivism was not. A full blown philosophical modernist mindset in "theology" leads to the atheism found in works

like Charley D. Hardwick, *Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism, and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In the postmodern context, it could be argued that ultimately the influence of someone from the analytic tradition like Richard Rorty is no less relativistic than that of say, Michel Foucault from the continental.

¹⁷Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996). See also her *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspective on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), and Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1994).

¹⁸Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000). In his *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), Grenz speaks not only of the demise of foundationalism, but also of realism. An earlier example of the way Grenz appropriates postmodernity is in his *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), wherein he understands the believing community as theology's integrative principle.

¹⁹Two very important books that make this contention are Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism In the Mirror*

of Secular Thought (Leiden: Brill, 1996), and Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

²⁰E.g., the misconception can be seen in the following: "In the past, philosophers played the major role in defining a culture's worldview, but as the postmodern world develops, philosophers tend to describe what is happening more than they define what will happen. The forces driving postmodernity have their roots more in popular culture than in the academic institutions, though these forces have begun to alter the academic institutions" (Harry L. Poe and Jimmy H. Davis, *Science and Faith: An Evangelical Dialogue* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000] 17).

²¹Arguably, this is the way Satan controls a culture: the disseminated idea of a seminal thinker controls the *Zeitgeist*.

²²Key examples of those who have exerted enormous influence, both for good or ill might include Plato, Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud.

²³"The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant's Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1784]) 54. *Sapere aude!* more literally means "Dare to be wise."

²⁴One would have to include the epistemological revolts against Kantianism and idealism as in phe-

nomenology, the revival of various empiricisms, pragmatism, etc.

²⁵Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteils-kraft* (The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment [1790]) 1. Teil, 2. Buch, § 26, 9. Abs. See Werner Betz, "Zur Geschichte des Wortes «Weltanschauung»," in *Kursbuch der Weltanschauung*, ed. Armin Mohler (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1980) 18.

²⁶From a Novalis fragment found in Betz, 27. My translation.

²⁷Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Introduction to the Science of Knowledge," [1794-95], trans. A. E. Kroeger, in *Philosophy of Recent Times*, vol. I, *Readings in Nineteenth Century Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 24. Note how the remark sounds not only post-Kantian, but also post-Kuhnian.

²⁸Ilse N. Bulhof, *Wilhelm Dilthey: A Hermeneutic Approach to the Study of History and Culture* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980) 94-95; Thomas J. Young, "The Hermeneutical Significance of Dilthey's Theory of World Views," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 90 (June 1983) 126.

²⁹Wilhelm Dilthey, *Dilthey's Philosophy of Existence: Introduction to Weltanschauungslehre*, translation and introduction by William Kluback and Martin Weinbaum (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957) 28.

³⁰Jaspers agreed with Dilthey that there is a universe of competing worldviews, but his "psychology of worldviews" did not stress relativism. Instead he defended the circular nature of all worldviews. Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, 5th ed. (Berlin: Springer, 1960).

³¹Geertz relativized knowledge by focusing on the communal aspect of competing worldviews in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973). See also his “Anti Anti-Relativism,” in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, edited with an introduction by Michael Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 112-134.

³²Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 111-135. See especially chapter ten, “[Scientific] Revolutions as Changes of Worldview,” wherein he compared the differences in perspectives from various worldviews to the differing results of gestalt demonstrations.

³³Kuyper appeared to argue for two very different epistemological realities because the Christian doctrine of regeneration “breaks humanity in two, and repeals the unity of the human consciousness.” Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 152. Therefore, Kuyper did not believe there could be a consensus in science, only dissensus (154).

³⁴Similarly to Kuyper, Dooyeweerd contended that one worldview stems from saving faith and another from apostate “ground motives.” Concerning his own pilgrimage, he confessed that: “[o]riginally I was strongly under the influence first of Neo-Kantian philosophy, later on Husserl’s phenomenology. The great turning point in my thought was marked by the discovery of the religious root of thought itself,

whereby a new light was shed on the failure of all attempts, including my own, to bring about an inner synthesis between the Christian faith and a philosophy which is rooted in faith in the self-sufficiency of human reason” (Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. David H. Freeman and William S. Young [Ontario: Padeia, 1984] I:v).

³⁵James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World as Centering in the Incarnation* (New York: Scribner, 1887). Orr, unlike Kuyper or Dooyeweerd, believed that the Christian worldview does correlate with rationally grounded science. Carl Henry has often noted the impact of this book on his thought.

³⁶Van Til developed presuppositional apologetics in response to the post-Kantian situation: “It has not been brought out clearly in the history of non-Christian philosophy till recent times that, from its point of view, all predication that is to be meaningful must have its reference point in man as ultimate. But that this is actually the case is now more plain than ever. This is the significance of Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution.’ It is only in our day that there can therefore be anything like a fully consistent presentation of one system of interpretation over against the other” (Cornelius Van Til, “Introduction” to *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, ed. Samuel G. Craig [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948] 23-24). So, since all of life must be interpreted, Van Til went on to say:

“It would seem to follow from this that Christians ought not to be behind in stressing the fact that in their thinking all depends upon making God the final reference point in human predication. . . . There is no question of agreeing on an area or dimension of reality. Reason employed by a Christian always comes to other conclusions than reason employed by a non-Christian” (25). It is of more than passing interest that Van Til was asked to write this Introduction to a book authored by a man who took strong issue with the Kuyperian tradition.

³⁷For a range of evangelical responses to postmodernity see Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

³⁸*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Relativism,” by Gordon Lewis.

³⁹A. C. Grayling, *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic* (Sussex: Harvester, 1982) 272.

⁴⁰It goes beyond the purview of this article to discuss the issues surrounding the noetic effects of sin, such as whether unbiblical worldviews are the result of a rebellious will, epistemological blindness, or both. What is beyond debate is that God is necessarily good and omniscient, and that Satan and humans are not. It is an interesting question whether the devil labors under only a malevolent will, or since his fall does he also suffer from, not only an incomplete, but also a distorted understanding of reality.

⁴¹By the time of Noah, the devolution of the human race into wickedness

led to their incredibly corrupt worldview(s). See Gen 6:5-6.

⁴²Genesis 11 indicates that the Lord's scattering of the people at Babel by confusing their language was to shatter their rebellious unity. That unity is restored as a prolepsis of the redeemed eschatological community (Rev 5:9) by the divinely given glossolalia at Pentecost (Acts 2). The church is to demonstrate this unity by being of one mind in Christ (Phil 1:27).

⁴³Noam Chomsky notes that children master the deep structure of their native tongue in their early years. In many instances the languages modeled for children are fragmentary and even degenerate, thus the deep structure of language must be innate and not learned from experience. Because infants can be placed in any linguistic community and learn the language, Chomsky concludes that there must be a stock of a priori universals in human capability. See Grayling, *Philosophical Logic*, 174. Alasdair MacIntyre further argues that when a bilingual determines that something is not translatable from one culture to another, he or she is in fact demonstrating that untranslatability does not entail lack of understanding ("Relativism, Power, and Philosophy," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, edited with an introduction by Michael Krausz [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989] 182-204). Exaggeration of the differences between cultures ignores the many clear commonalities they share. For example, Benjamin Whorf argues that the meta-

physical grid underlying the Hopi language cannot be "calibrated" with the worldview grounding the English language. Yet, self-defeatingly Whorf goes on to convey the propositional content of Hopi sentences into English. See David Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 81-82. All this is contra postmodernist Richard Rorty who claims that language does not spell out some "deep sense of how things are"; rather people simply have "a disposition to use the language of our ancestors, to worship the corpses of their metaphors" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [New York: Cambridge University Press 1989] 21).

⁴⁴See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵Peter Loftson, *Theories of Human Nature* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 1995) 63.

⁴⁶It has been common for evangelicals in recent decades to shy away from engaging and procuring the insights of Common Sense Realism. This appears, at least in part, to be the result of the general tendency in intellectual circles to regard the philosophy as an antiquated prop for conservative and orthodox thought in nineteenth century America. But Scottish Common Sense philosophy, the progeny primarily of Thomas Reid is making a rather stunning comeback as it is being investigated again today by a number of Christian philosophers as a potential explanatory model of biblical epistemology. Ironically, this unease about the philosophy

because it was utilized more than a century ago in the defense of Christian faith is specious. Typically, American students of intellectual history place Scottish Common Sense in the context of Protestant conservatism such as that at the old Princeton Seminary. But the philosophy was highly influential at liberal schools such as Harvard, as well as at moderate institutions such as Brown and Union. Unitarians and early New England Transcendentalists employed the Scottish system as the philosophical substantiation for their religious views, though it was not always the primary element in their thought. See Richard J. Petersen, "Scottish Common Sense In America, 1768-1850: An Evaluation of Its Influence" (Ph.D. diss., American University, Washington, D.C., 1963) 7, 12, 195.

⁴⁷Thomas Reid, "What is Common Sense?" in *Philosophy and Common sense*, ed. J. David Newell (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980) 43. Nicholas Wolterstorff calls what Reid terms common sense "belief dispositions" ("Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations? In *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983] 150). They are concerned with immediate beliefs. William P. Alston refers to these belief dispositions as "tendencies, or habits to form beliefs of certain kinds in certain circumstances." He notes that a "more currently fashionable term is 'belief forming mechanism.'" (*Epistemic Jus-*

tification: *Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989] 319). For more on Reid see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸Perhaps this aspect of reason had neither opportunity nor grounds for speculation while Adam was in his innocence.

⁴⁹Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. Sir William Hamilton, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1852) 127.

⁵⁰For what has become a classic introductory article dealing with such things as the controversy over the alleged Greek and Hebrew differences regarding truth; correspondence, coherence, existential and pragmatic conceptions of truth as they relate to scripture as well as classical and modern philosophy, literature, and theology, see Anthony Thiselton, "Truth" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3:874-902.

⁵¹Richard L. Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 215. In other words, if a postmodernist claims that correspondence is not true or cannot be known to be true, either his claim is vacuous or else he is surreptitiously claiming that his belief is true by virtue of its correspondence with reality.