

Meanwhile Back in Reality

Published in June 1949, “*Nineteen Eighty-Four*” by George Orwell is by any standard a modern classic. Almost all of its main terms such as Big Brother, thoughtcrime, $2 + 2 = 5$, and memory hole, have become staples in the popular lexicon.¹ Picturing a dystopian future there are, of course, many ominous concepts, but “one of the most disturbing passages has nothing to do with telescreens, Newspeak, or rats. Rather, it is the assertion by Winston Smith’s torturer that he could “float off this floor like a soap bubble” if he wished to do so.”² To be sure, the idea that truth needn’t correspond to reality seems innocuous. Actually, however, the notion that reality is “whatever I say it is” has profound implications. In fact, in the seventy years since Orwell penned his novel that idea has evolved into a quasi-worldview known as postmodernism, and today it has an ironfisted stranglehold on the West. Trying to define postmodernism is no easy task. Like nailing Jell-O to a wall, it’s almost impossible because the term is so plastic. Kimberly Patton noted that postmodernism is more a *reaction* than an argument.³ Al Mohler characterized it not as worldview in the technical sense, but instead “as a *mood* that sets itself apart from the certainties of the modern age” (emphasis added).⁴ As such, getting a handle on its basic claims may be easier after a short excursus on modernity. Modernity describes the time period beginning with the Enlightenment (≈ 1685) and extending essentially to the end of the Second World War (1945). During this period, influential thinkers such as Voltaire and Descartes sought to overthrow the cultural and intellectual hegemony of Christianity through science and reason. In their view, these methods (as opposed to the superstitions of religion) were the only reliable means for discovering truth. However, despite being a rival to Christianity in terms of authority, Modernity shared with Christianity the basic presupposition that truth exists – at least as a concept. As Mohler explains, “Christianity understood truth as something established by God and revealed in Scripture. That truth is eternal, fixed, and universal, and man’s responsibility is to align his thinking with that truth and then to bear witness to it. After all, we serve a Savior who called Himself “*the Way, the truth, and the life*” and demanded belief (John 14:6). Modern thought, by contrast, rejected the Bible as a source of truth and put the scientific method in its place. Modernity attempted to establish truth on the basis of scientific precision through the process of inductive thought and investigation. Following the lead of scientists, other disciplines also attempted to establish ‘truth’ through rational thought. Modernists were confident they could find truth by means of human reason.”⁵ The point is, both groups accepted the existence of universal, absolute, objective truths that are valid and binding for all people in all places at all times. Moreover, both Christians and Moderns agreed on the *nature* of truth seeing it as correspondence to reality. In the words of J. P. Moreland “a proposition is true when what it asserts to be the case is the case.”⁶

Postmodern Premises: Postmodernists, by contrast, reject truth as correspondence to reality and hence dismiss Christian revelation, reason, and even modern science as valid means for arriving at truth.⁷

The Truth Does Not Exist: As Myron Penner describes it, “truth is not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered. Rather, truth is ‘socially constructed.’”⁸ Therefore, what is “true” for one group is not automatically “true” for another. By their lights, objective, universal truth does not exist. As Richard Rorty put it, truth is “made” rather than “found.”⁹ Taking it a step further, “Michel Foucault and his followers argue that what is defined as “truth” is a function not of verifiable evidence or sound logic but of power-relationships that masquerade as neutral means of enforcing order.”¹⁰ In his words, “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it.”¹¹ Said differently, no claim to “truth” is actually rooted in fact; it has rather been constructed to serve those in power.

All Worldviews are Incomplete and Oppressive: Right along with their rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, postmodernists also disdain what they call “metanarratives”, that is grand stories that attempt to explain reality. This, of course, follows logically for if the truth about reality is unavailable, then “no one can claim to have a God’s-eye view. All we have are local narratives or stories that give communities structure and meaning.”¹² This is the point of Lillian Quigley’s famous story of the six blind men who visit the Rajah’s palace and encounter an elephant. As the story goes, “The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant. ‘How smooth! An elephant is like a wall.’ The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of the elephant. ‘How round! An elephant is like a snake.’ The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant. ‘How sharp! An elephant is like a spear.’ The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant. ‘How tall! An elephant is like a tree.’ The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant. ‘How wide! An elephant is like a fan.’ The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant. ‘How thin! An elephant is like a rope.’ After an argument broke out between the blind men, the Rajah intervened: “The elephant is a big animal,” he said. “Each man touched only one part. You must put all the parts together to find out what an elephant is like.”¹³ The obvious moral of the story is that “whenever

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four

² <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/04/transgender-pronouns-conservatives-should-not-use/>

³ Kimberly C. Patton, “Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion,” in Patton, Kimberley C., and Benjamin C. Ray, eds. *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 153-171.

⁴ R. Albert Mohler, *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

⁶ <https://afterall.net/papers/truth-contemporary-philosophy-and-the-postmodern-turn/>

⁷ It is astounding, for example, to listen to millennials deny basic biology and assert that a man can transform into a woman as if by magic by simply saying so.

⁸ Jeff Myers and David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times: A Survey of Competing Worldviews* (Manitou Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2015), 151.

⁹ http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%205%20Epistemology/Truth.htm

¹⁰ Douglas R. Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*: Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c2000, 2000), 30.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence E. Cahoon, 2nd ed., Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies 2 ed.: Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers, 2003, 2003), 253.

¹² Tawa J. Anderson, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview: Pursuing God’s Perspective in a Pluralistic World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 256.

¹³ https://www.str.org/articles/the-trouble-with-the-elephant#_ftn1. It should be noted that postmodernists claim to be the man watching all the others grope the elephant. They alone see the true shape of things. They have exempted themselves from their own scrutiny.

we find ourselves at odds with others, we should be humble and recognize our limitations of knowledge, and trust that others may grasp truths that we do not. Applied to religion, the story teaches that no single religion has the whole truth. We need all the religions of the world if we are going to grasp the full truth about spiritual reality."¹⁴ To say otherwise is not only arrogant¹⁵, postmodernists claim, it is also oppressive since it involves imposing one's own view of reality on everyone else.¹⁶

Postmodern Problems: So how should Christians think about and respond to such a frontal assault on our worldview? To start, we should recognize that there are kernels of truth in what they say. For example, postmodernism is rightly contemptuous of modernism's confidence in human reason. There is nothing "enlightened" about expecting to arrive at *all* truth through science or rational thought (1 Cor. 1:20-21). It is also the case that everyone is biased. It is impossible to escape one's own presuppositions. And finally, "postmodernism is correct to warn that power and truth are often connected."¹⁷ Facts are regularly manipulated for the benefit of those in power. On the whole, however, the claims of postmodernism do more harm than good. Once you accept the premise that all truth is relative, you open Pandora's box.

It Abolishes Morality: First, you abolish any ultimate moral authority beyond the individual. Moral absolutes dissolve depriving society of any transcendent standard by which to judge human behavior. In fact, no matter how barbaric an act may be committed, one can no longer (coherently) condemn it as "evil." It might not be "my preference" but it certainly can't be wrong. Stanley Fish strikingly admitted as much in his *New York Times* piece defending postmodernism in the wake of 9/11. Although he was personally revolted by the carnage he confessed that he had no objective standard by which to judge the terrorists, nor is one available.¹⁸ Moral relativism creates a further problem known as the reformer's dilemma. As I have explained before, if one's culture determines one's morality, then how can we defend those who opposed their culture for the sake of a higher cause? Martin Luther King Jr. fought the Jim Crow laws of his day in the struggle for racial equality. Should he be condemned as a moral delinquent? The same question applies to feminists and the LGBTQ community. By postmodern reckoning, they should all be condemned as immoral for trying to buck the established morality of the existing culture.¹⁹ And there are several other problems that undermine its veracity.

It is Self-Refuting and Unlivable: Second, as a theory of truth, postmodernism is self-refuting. The claim that all truth is relative is not a relative truth claim. It purports to be valid and binding for all people in all places at all times. Third, postmodernism is unlivable. There simply are no consistent relativists about truth and values. Consider the reaction you'll get if you treat something a postmodernist values as only important to them: he or she will immediately become an objectivist. Just challenge the value of diversity, gay rights, or the environment and they will instantly condemn you in a fit of rage. It's just not livable. Also, deep down no one can honestly say there's not an objective difference between the moral quality of the life of Mother Teresa and the life of Adolph Hitler. No one truly believes that.²⁰

It is Inconsistent: A fourth problem is that if all truth is relative then postmodernists shouldn't try to persuade others to be postmodernists. This problem is akin to the reformers dilemma for if truth is culturally defined, then Christian truth is true for Christians and they should not be condemned for holding their view since it is "true." But if Christianity is "true" then it creates a further problem because Christianity teaches that other religions and worldviews are false. Thus, according to postmodernism Christianity should be true but according to Christianity postmodernism is false.²¹

It is Irrelevant: Fifth, postmodernism lays a trap for itself from which there is no escape. Either (a) postmodernism is itself objectively true, or (b) it's simply an expression of one's own opinion. If one accepts option (a), then postmodernism is false because it is self-refuting. But if one accepts option (b), then postmodernism becomes irrelevant and unmotivating.²² There simply are no other options. Postmodernists have divorced themselves from truth thinking they can change biology at will or "float off this floor like a soap bubble" if they so desire. Meanwhile back in reality, Christians accept science, reason, and revelation. May we then be "valiant for the truth" (Jer. 9:3)!

¹⁴ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/3-ways-the-blind-men-and-the-elephant-story-backfires/>

¹⁵ To accuse a worldview that claims to absolute truth of being "arrogant" is to make a category mistake. Arrogance is an attribute of persons, not of truth claims.

¹⁶ Anderson, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview : Pursuing God's Perspective in a Pluralistic World*, 256.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/15/opinion/condemnation-without-absolutes.html>

¹⁹ Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*: Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England : IVP Academic ; Apollos, c2011, 2011), 337-338.

²⁰ Ross D. Inman, "Truth and Apologetic Method" (SWBTS unpublished Classroom Lecture Notes, Spring 2017).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*