

# Postmodernism

- “Reasonable Faith: Christian Faith and Apologetics (3rd ed)”, William Lane Craig
- “Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault (expanded edition)”, Stephen R.C. Hicks
- “The End of Reason”, Ravi Zacharias
- <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/173507/IN-LIGHT-OF-SCIENCE-LETS-BEGIN-AN-EW-WITH-A-NOBLE-LIE--PHILOSOPHER-SAYS.html>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern\\_religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern_religion)
- <https://www.rzim.org/read/just-thinking-magazine/you-dont-honestly-believe-that>

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## Background

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- What is truth?
- What right does anyone have to even define what truth is?
- Is there such a thing as a universal absolute?
- Can anyone be objective or is everyone a product of environment and social structure?
- Can opposing truth statements both be true at the same time?
- Is there an absolute reality or is everything a product of my personal interpretation?
- What is morality?
- What right does anyone have to claim their morality or view of reality is the correct one?

These are just a handful of the questions that a person who holds to postmodernism struggles to answer consistently, and are some of the topics we'll touch on today as we discuss postmodernism.

**Multi-discipline:** Postmodernism is difficult to define because the term is used in multiple disciplines: literature, architecture, philosophy, religion, etc..., and it's defined differently in each of those environments.

- Thus someone who is a literary postmodernist may not be a religious postmodernist.
- This makes it difficult to provide a definition that everyone agrees on.
- Today we're going to focus on a combination of philosophical and religious postmodernism, as those have the most impact for us as a society and as Christians.
- So when I use the word “postmodernism” in class today, I'm referring to a combination of philosophical and religious postmodernism.

Before we try and define what postmodernism is, it's helpful to understand the history and context that led to it, because much of postmodernism is a reaction to previous ways of thinking.

# History of Philosophical Epochs

- When we use the word **post-modern**, we are implying that something came before, namely **modernism**.
- But in order to understand **modernism**, we need to go back one step further to **premodernism**.

Each of these three philosophical approaches tries to answer two basic questions:

- What is reality?
- How can we know it?

| Historical Philosophical Epochs (very general)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                        |                                        |                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Premodernism                           | Modernism                              | Postmodernism                               |
| When                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Past - 1650s                           | 1650s - 1950s                          | 1950s - present                             |
| Metaphysics<br>(what is reality)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Supernatural                           | Naturalism<br>(physical universe only) | Anti-realism<br>(we can't know)             |
| Epistemology<br>(how do you know reality)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Faith/Authority<br>(divine revelation) | Empiricism (senses) and<br>reason      | Social subjectivism<br>(whatever we decide) |
| Chart contents: "Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault", location 668 (Kindle)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                        |                                        |                                             |
| <b>Metaphysics:</b> branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.<br><br><b>Epistemology:</b> theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. Investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion.<br><br><b>Metanarrative:</b> overarching account or interpretation of events to give meaning and context for beliefs. |                                        |                                        |                                             |

## Premodernism

Premodernism is the oldest and longest philosophical period, and covers most of human history, including the medieval ages.

- In this view, *ultimate reality* is the **supernatural** realm, meaning the physical realm we exist in was created by some divine entity.
- It accepted a **single reality** and **absolute truth**, and **divine revelation** was the means of knowing that truth, which we accepted by faith.
- Generally speaking, you could say this was an age where reality was known based on the **authority** of someone or something else, such as an angel, prophet, or vision.

- This era includes when the Bible was written as well as the medieval ages, when the Catholic church was the ruling authority in the western world both politically and theologically.

## Modernism

Premodernism and its supernatural focus governed humanity's thinking until the 1650s, when the Enlightenment (or Age of Reason) began.

- In the 1600s, advances in science and technology led humanity to believe they could discover reality themselves without relying on divine revelation.
- Empiricism (the belief that all knowledge come from our senses) and rational thinking became the foundational approaches to knowing reality, with a focus on the physical world.
- While the Enlightenment didn't start out as a rejection of the supernatural, it slowly shifted focus from the supernatural to the natural realm.
  - As humanity started to explain everything through natural causes, there was less reliance on a divine character, and the supernatural was pushed out of the way.
  - Divine revelation was no longer accepted as the sole means of truth; only those things that could be substantiated by reason or science were accepted.
  - This eventually led to **naturalism**, which is the belief that everything is a result of physical properties and causes, and the supernatural is excluded or discounted.
- During this period most everyone in the western world agreed with the premodernists that there was a **single reality** and **absolute truths**, but concluded that **science** and **reason** were the only valid tools to discover these truths and not faith.
- These eraled to great hope and optimism, with the expectation that humanity would create utopia on earth as rational minds and technology solved all of our problems and answered all of our questions about the inner workings of the universe.
- The result of the modernist era was the general conclusion that there is no God and we don't need to rely on superstition and mysticism to know reality, but instead can discover it ourselves.

## Postmodernism

However, this utopian view of mankind led us straight into multiple world wars, the slaughter of tens of millions of people, the belief that some people or races are lesser than others, and left humanity with the stark realization that maybe we didn't have it all figured out like we thought we did.

- This bleak emptiness that mankind felt after the "Golden Age" of reason played heavily into the postmodernist movement.
- Institutions and authorities, especially the church and the scientific community, were denounced not as means of knowledge and helping mankind, but rather as tools of power used to control people.

- Since the institutions of power were now viewed with suspicion, their methods of knowing truth also became highly suspect.
- Thus people became **highly skeptical** of religion, science, and reason as the only acceptable means of knowing what is ultimately truth.
- There was a strong backlash against any **metanarrative**, which is an overarching account or interpretation of events to give meaning and context for beliefs, which would include both organized religion as well as the naturalist scientific community.
- In addition, **words** do not have objective meaning, and any attempt to assign a word a particular objective meaning is to forcefully assert power over others.
  - Just a thought, but how can someone use words to explain this to us with themselves asserting control over us?
- In short, postmodernism was a reaction to modernism, and it rejected the authority of institutions and their methods as the only valid tools to understand reality.
  - Instead of an absolute reality that can be discovered, postmodernists began positing that truth can only be determined through one's individual experiences, and thus cannot be held to any authority but my own.
  - Thus postmodernism **rejected** the claim that there was only a single reality that we discover through revelation, science or reason, and it rejected the claim that there were absolute truths that we can discover.
  - Instead, we each form our own version of reality based on our own subjective experiences and background.

That is a very brief and generalized philosophical history. You really need to understand the failures of the previous approaches in order to understand the hold postmodernist thinking has today.

In short:

- Modernism removed God and gave us reason.
- Postmodernism rejected both God and reason and said since there's no authority, whatever you want goes.

Now we're going to take a deeper dive into postmodernism.

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## Postmodernism

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Modernism was partly rejected because it failed to fulfill its promises of improving the world.

But there was another reason that postmodernists were skeptical of scientific methods and reason: philosophers and theologians had been slowly rejecting reason as a basis for knowing reality for quite some time.

## Rejection of Exclusivity of Reason

During the Enlightenment, theists rightly understood that if mankind focused exclusively on the physical and elevated human reason to supremacy, he would abandon faith and ultimately reject God.

- If you believe that only things that can be physically verified are real or true, you will deny a God because a God, somewhat by definition, exists outside of our physical existence.
- Theistic philosophers saw this trend and decided they needed to do something about it, specifically a man named Immanuel Kant.

**Kant:** Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 AD) was a Christian German philosopher during the 1700s.

- He realized that if mankind exclusively employed reason to the neglect of faith that humanity would reject God.
- Kant concluded his only option was to establish a philosophical rejection of reason as the exclusive way of knowing reality, which he outlined in his book “Critique of Pure Reason” (published in 1781).
- In a very, very, very general sense, Kant rejected the idea that our senses are neutrally observing reality and transferring that information into our minds.
  - Instead, Kant concluded that our minds actually *add* information, such that our senses don’t present actual reality to us, but only a general shape or form of reality, with our mind actively creating the rest.
  - Thus, reason cannot be accepted as a trustworthy means of understanding reality because our minds take from our own personal experiences and knowledge and add this information to what we perceive in order to make sense of it all.
- Why did Kant come up with all this? He sums it up nicely in this quote: “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (“Critique”, *preface*).
- In his attempt to defend his faith, Kant ended up providing a tool to reject reason as a means of knowing reality.
- Not only did postmodernists have the failure of modernism to motivate them, they also had philosophical arguments from leading thinkers to bolster their skepticism of reason.

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And if our minds and senses are too deceptive or too limited to actually describe reality, then anything deduced from those senses or based on them is suspect.

- That means the scientific method, which had been held as paramount for hundreds of years, is now suspect as an unquestionable means of establishing truth.

- Because these scientists weren't actually "observing" and "discovering" reality, instead they were taking their own experiences and personal views and subconsciously implanting them on what their minds saw (remember, Kant theorized our minds actively added information to what our senses perceived).

Naturalistic science had several hundred years to figure things out with reason, and after all that time we really didn't understand as much as we thought we did.

- I think Albert Einstein sums it up pretty well:
  - "For the time being, we have to admit that we do not possess any general theoretical basis for physics, which can be regarded as its logical foundation. The field theory, so far, has failed in the molecular sphere. It is agreed on all hands that the only principle which could serve as the basis of quantum theory would be one that constituted a translation of the field theory into the scheme of quantum statistics. Whether this will actually come about in a satisfactory manner, nobody can say." - ("Science", 1940)
- Reason and science were largely unable to discover ultimate reality or truth, and even their advocates didn't know when they would get there.

The roots of postmodernism were dug and planted by individuals seeking to defend religion and faith from the attacks of naturalistic rationalism.

- And the way these individuals defended faith was by destroying reason, which opened a huge can of worms that we are still dealing with to this day.
- Because if reason is not absolute or the only means of establishing truth, then you cannot employ reason to attack faith, and faith survives.

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## Words are Relative

In addition to rejecting reason, postmodernism also rejects the idea that any text, utterance, or sign can have an objective, fixed meaning.

- Traditionally, an author was permitted to determine and fix the meaning of their text.
- However, postmodernism claims the author does not have a privileged position in interpreting their own text, so their intentions have no bearing on what the text actually means.
- Instead, the meaning of a text is determined by a community that share an interpretation.
- Thus there is not a book of Romans in the Bible, there is a Lutheran book of Romans, and Catholic book of Romans, a Marxist book of Romans, etc.

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### Definition

Up to this point we've described some attributes of postmodernism, but haven't yet attempted a working definition.

**Postmodernism** is the belief that our perception of reality is filtered through our minds, which are the product of personal experience and social/cultural upbringing, such that we cannot know for certain if we are observing reality as it really is or if our minds are instead implanting our social/cultural background on what we perceive, thus there is no binding version of reality.

We're going to break this down, but that's about as concise as I can define it without feeling that I'm misrepresenting the belief system.

**Short definition:** If you want a shorter description, French philosopher Jean Lyotard defines postmodernism in his 1979 book:

- "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives" ("The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge").
- Lyotard is the one who's credited with bringing the term "postmodern" from the arts to the philosophies.

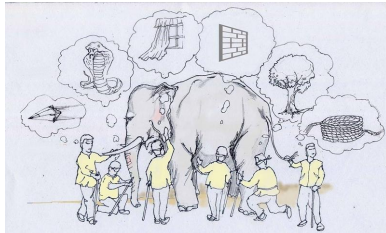
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**Breakdown:** Let's breakdown the longer definition with some added ramifications:

- There may or may not be a single reality (how would we know?).
- Since we do not have a reliable way to observe reality, we cannot speak with absolute authority in any area of life.
- We are each the inescapable product of our society and culture and cannot operate outside of this sphere of influence.
- Thus we can only speak in relative terms or describe what is currently working for me or my culture right now.
- The scientific method and reason are beneficial, but are viewed with skepticism and neither can declare it has arrived at absolute truth.
- Religions cannot claim they have the only right view of God.
  - The "real truth" is most likely a combination of multiple religions.
  - Religious texts were written by biased people trying to control and manipulate others, thus we cannot trust what they wrote or accept it as factual history.
- Since no believed truth can be established as the absolute truth, we should each be skeptical of our own views and everyone should be tolerant and accepting of all views...except those views that claim they have the absolute truth.

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**Perception:** Are you familiar with the Indian parable about the 6 blind men and the elephant?



Tusks (Spear), snout (snake), ear (carpet), side (wall), legs (tree), tail (rope)

This parable really does a good job of summarizing postmodernism.

- There is some sort of “absolute truth/reality” out there (the elephant).
- But we can only know our personal perception or interpretation of reality.
- Thus, we are all equally valid in our beliefs and in defining our “truths” and each view should be accepted.

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# Ramifications of Postmodernism

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That’s a “working definition” of postmodernism.

But what are some practical results of a society that embraces this idea that there are no absolutes, specifically with regards to morality or good and evil?

- Nothing can be criticized as immoral or evil.
- Human life has no value if it just the product of random chance and time and there are no absolutes to guide us.
- Humanity has no purpose; we will all cease to exist, everyone who knew us will cease to exist, the universe will die, and no one or anything will ever remember us.

Let’s be totally transparent about this so there’s no misunderstanding.

- A postmodernist cannot declare that the holocaust and the slaughter of millions of Jews was objectively evil.
- They cannot claim that slavery is actually wrong.
- They cannot reject the Hindu practice of *suttee* (burning widows alive with their husbands) as immoral.

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The problem here is that no one can live this **consistently** and **happily**.

- If you are **consistent**, you recognize your life has no purpose or meaning and anything goes because life ultimately has no consequences.
- If someone chooses to live **happily**, it's because they believe a self-delusional lie that there is purpose in life when there ultimately isn't.

**Noble lie:** This goes so far that philosopher Loyal Rue says our culture needs to embrace a "noble lie" that gives us a sense of purpose when there isn't one:

- "What I mean by the noble lie is one that deceives us, tricks us, compels us beyond self-interest, beyond ego, beyond family, nation, race...that will deceive us into the view that our moral discourse must serve the interests not only of ourselves and each other, but those of the earth as well...Without such lies we cannot live".

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# Myth of the Postmodern Society

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It is at this point that some Christian authors would tell us that in order to interact with our postmodern culture we need a shift in our thinking and approach.

- Don't use facts, history, or logic, since those things can't actually be known.
- Don't appeal to miracles, fulfilled prophecy, or the validity of the Bible, since those are deduced through "suspect" scientific methods and biased ancient documents.
- Don't plead with others to live a moral life pleasing to God, because our culture is relative and telling others what to do isn't very popular.
- Instead, focus on sharing your story and experiences with others and invite them to participate with you in your Christian journey.

That sounds like a pretty good approach, right? Except for one minor misconception.

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# The Myth

**We do not live in a postmodern society that rejects all absolute truths. It is a myth.**

Then why have we spent so much time on this today?

- Because our society "thinks" it lives in a postmodern culture.

- William Lane Craig's, a well-known Christian philosopher and apologist, has come to this conclusion.
- If you want to understand Craig's explanation, I recommend his book "Reasonable Faith".

Our society absolutely believes that there are absolutes and that we can know them.

- Give someone who has a headache a bottle of medicine and a bottle of rat poison and see if they believe the words on the labels actually have discernible meanings.
- Ask someone who just deposited their check into their bank account if they believe the money should absolutely be there tomorrow.
- Have you ever heard someone say "it's true for you that gravity will pull you down from this 1,000 foot drop, but that's not true for me"?

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Really, it comes down to this: postmodernism is relative in the areas of religion and ethics.

- **Religion** - you can't tell me which God is true.
- **Ethics** - you (or your God) have no right tell me what I should or should not do.

This sounds a lot like the Israelites in the book of Judges.

- "...all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." (Judges 21:25)

Postmodernism is really an **extreme form of skepticism** and doubt.

- But you know what? Skepticism and doubt are nothing new.
- We do not live in a **postmodern** society that has abandoned all truth, we live in a **modern** society that's skeptical and wants freedom to do whatever they want.

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## Postmodernism is not New

Even the philosophical discussions surrounding postmodernism are not new.

- Philosophers discussed, debated, and rejected postmodernist thinking thousands of years ago.
- "Finally, if nothing can be truly asserted, even the following claim would be false,
- the claim that there is no true assertion." - Aristotle, "Metaphysics" (384-322 BC, Greek philosopher)
- "If anyone thinks nothing is to be known, he does not even know whether that can be known, as he says he knows nothing." - Lucretius, "On the Nature of Things" (94-55 BC, Roman philosopher).

## Danger of thinking our Society is Postmodern

If we believe the myth that our society is postmodern, we may abandon certain methods of engaging with our culture, which would have disastrous results.

Apologetics and defending the Christian faith isn't exclusively a form of individual evangelism.

- It's not just about convincing a single person about the historical reliability of the Bible or the evidence of the supernatural.
- Rather, it's about influencing our culture in such a way that the Gospel of Christianity is perceived as a reasonable and viable option and allows the Gospel to spread.

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## Framework for Engaging "Postmodernists"

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So how do we as Christians interact with our society?

I want to briefly give us a general framework for talking to people who hold to postmodernist thinking.

- Since people are not relative in everything, ask **questions** about their beliefs to discover what areas they are **not** relative on and ask them why they accept absolutes in this area but not others?
- Ask someone how they came to their conclusions.
  - Did they employ reason?
  - Do they believe that their conclusion is an absolute truth?
  - If not, then why are they rejecting what you are saying?
- You are trying to get them to realize that their view is **self-defeating** and fails its own tests.
- Think of your role as putting a pebble in their shoe that creates some mild discomfort, you're not trying to force a decision right now; it may take time and involve others.

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Here are a few general questions you may encounter with some thoughtful responses.

This is by **no means** an exhaustive list or detailed approach, but rather to help you focus your approach.

General questions:

- **Who are you to judge others?**
  - Can you clarify what you mean by judging? It can't simply mean to disagree with someone or to consider someone to be wrong because then you are doing the same thing.
- **You are intolerant of others.**
  - Can you help me understand what you mean by intolerant? Normally we don't tolerate things we approve of, such as honesty; we tolerate things we disagree with. Are you defining tolerance as accepting all views to be true and valid? If so, then by saying my view is wrong, aren't you being intolerant because I disagree with you?
- **Slide 18 What's true for you is not true for me; that's your truth, not mine.**
  - Are you saying that it doesn't matter what one believes as long as it works or looks good to them? Do you want me to believe what you are saying is true? You seem to be saying that no belief is true for everyone. That sounds like an absolute statement that relativism is true and absolutism is false. You cannot say that nothing is absolutely true and then assert your view about that is absolutely true. Relativism falsifies itself. You believe your truth applies to me even if I don't accept it.
- **Words do not have objective meaning.**
  - If words do not have objective meaning, then am I justified in interpreting your words to mean "I believe in Jesus Christ and am a Christian", regardless of what you say?

Today we've established the background, context, and issues with postmodernism, but were a little lighter on what to do about it.

However, I think it would be beneficial to take a few minutes and let you all clarify what things you want to specifically address or look deeper into next week.