

WEEK 7 | POSTMODERNISM

In 1979 Jean François Lyotard gave what might be the most succinct description of postmodernism when he described it as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹ In other words, the defining element of postmodernism is its rejection of the idea that there is any one worldview that is universally true for all people at all times. In many ways postmodernism is an anti-worldview—a rejection of worldviews or metanarratives that explain reality as it is.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who first saw the consequences of modernity. Rationalism and empiricism had, seemingly, removed the necessity for “the god hypothesis,” the necessity for God’s existence to explain the universe as it is. As much of the intellectual world rejoiced at this (apparently) liberating revelation, Nietzsche sought to warn society of the cataclysm that was to come. In his brilliant parable of the Madman, Nietzsche calls modernity’s bluff. Having done away with God, society had “unchained this earth from its sun.” We had removed the foundation upon which culture had been built and were left with, in Nietzsche’s mind, an artificial edifice devoid of any real meaning or purpose. Near the end of this parable is a scene of particular importance:

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars -- and yet they have done it themselves."²

Here Nietzsche recognized that society had not yet come to grips with the consequences of killing god. “This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men.” Nietzsche’s prescience was remarkable. Postmodernism is, in many ways, that “tremendous event” when society comes to grips with the shortcomings of modernity and seeks a new way forward.

HISTORY

If postmodernism is in its essence an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” we must ask: why this extreme skepticism towards worldviews? Much of this has to do with the historical context in which postmodernism developed. The 1950s and 60s were a turbulent time in western culture. The world was still coming to terms with the devastation that two world wars had brought as

¹ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), xxiv.

² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. By Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 182

well as the unthinkable atrocities that human beings had committed against each other. America was rife with turmoil, experiencing in one decade the assassination of President Kennedy, the Vietnam war and war protests, race riots in several urban centers, the civil rights movement, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assassination of Robert Kennedy. The cultural and political landscape in the US had shifted dramatically.

Concurrent with this social upheaval was an upheaval in the realm of philosophy. In 1962 Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published and shook the scientific world. In this landmark work Kuhn argued that scientific progress does not happen gradually by the slow accrual of accepted facts and theories built upon preceding knowledge. Rather, scientific progress is episodic, coming in dramatic leaps or what he called paradigm shifts. A paradigm shift is the movement from one way of thinking about something to another. When a new paradigm is adopted scientists within that community begin to use that new paradigm and great leaps in scientific progress is made. Over time bits of data are added to that paradigm, but data that challenges it is collected as well and require a new paradigm. Kuhn noticed that there was great resistance to paradigm shifts, and they are only made when the mountain of challenging data becomes unavoidable. This showed that there is inherent subjectivity in science based on the researcher's community and *a priori* beliefs. Kuhn writes, "Observation and experience can and must drastically restrict the range of admissible scientific belief, else there would be no science. But they cannot alone determine a particular body of belief. An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time."³ The myth that science is entirely objective had been dispelled.

This revelation had significant ripple effects. If scientific knowledge was subjective and called into question, the same must be true for its foundation: rationalism and empiricism. Further, all other forms of knowledge would be equally questionable. Modernity—and all that it stood for—was called into question.

CORE CONVICTIONS

Postmodern is a broad philosophy with many different nuances among its adherents. To better understand it we will identify ten core convictions⁴ that explain how and why postmodernism rejects metanarratives.

- 1) **Postmodernism challenges the Enlightenment confidence in human reason:** it rejects Descartes core conviction that we can achieve certain knowledge through human reason alone.

³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 4.

⁴ These are adapted from Stewart E. Kelly and James K. Dew, Jr, *Understanding Postmodernism: A Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017), 5-9.

- 2) **Postmodernism believes the human person is heavily situated rather than a neutral observer:** it places an emphasis on the subjective aspect of our beliefs, values, and convictions. It argues that these things are heavily influenced by our situation in life. We are *situated observers*. That is, we can only view reality from a perspective that is influenced by our upbringing, culture, and environment.
- 3) **Postmodernism rejects the idea that language simply and transparently captures the world around us:** it “rejects the idea that language accurately represents external realities and the idea that language is stable over time.”⁵
- 4) **Postmodernism views truth as something that is created/constructed by human beings, rather than something discovered that is (in some sense) already out there:** it has always been assumed that what is true exists independent of an observer or knower to observe it and know it. Postmodernism claims that humans create, rather than discover, truth.
- 5) **Postmodernism rejects the idea that the human self is stable and continuous over time:** premodern and modernism believed in a fixed human nature and that the self remains stable over time. Postmodernism rejects the idea of a fixed human nature; the self is created over time through our choices and environment. Being is becoming.
- 6) **Postmodernism doubts whether the methods used by historians and the social sciences provide any hope of arriving at objective truth:** it rejects the idea that historians use methodological objectivity when evaluating history. Rather, it argues that the same subjectivity present in the sciences is present in the social sciences.
- 7) **Postmodernism challenges the traditional idea that Europe and North America are (somehow) morally superior to countries in Asia, Africa, and so on:** it argues that history has largely been marked by brutal oppression rather than fairness and decency. Historical writing has been written largely by the oppressors and thus does not accurately reflect historical events, and the idea that the west is morally superior has been shattered.
- 8) **Postmodernism sees truth as more therapeutic than static and objective:** because every person is heavily situated, no one can reach objective truth, so no one can make a truth claim that is more “true” than another. There are no metanarratives, only local stories (determined by one’s context, or *situation*) that help us cope with the difficulties of life.
- 9) **Postmodernism sees metanarratives as inherently oppressive and as generally beyond the ability of humans to grasp:** this stems from their view of history (see numbers 6 and 7) and their skepticism towards universal truths (see numbers 2, 3 and 4).

⁵ Ibid., 5.

Given the way metanarratives have been used to mask the realities of oppression, they are ought to be trusted.

- 10) **Postmodernism rejects what has been called to omnicompetence of reason:** postmodern thinkers see reason highly limited, “certainty as an illusion, and the idea of human progress as being shattered by the devastation of World War I, the death camps and the Holocaust, and the mass slaughter of millions in the most violent century in human history.”⁶

This list of core convictions shows that the concerns of postmodernism are broad and its implications far reaching. Time would not allow us to respond to each of these points in turn. However, there is (I believe) a common thread that weaves its way through all of these. At postmodernism’s core is a faulty epistemology—a philosophy concerning truth, knowledge, and knowing. That corrupted epistemology then infects every other part of its (anti-)worldview: its ontology, anthropology, ethic, and much more. We will begin by attempting to evaluate the postmodern epistemology and then trace its implications for other areas of belief.

THE POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

The postmodern epistemology is characterized by radical skepticism towards our ability to know truth and in our ability to communicate anything true. These issues arise from several postmodern convictions that we will address in logical sequence.

I. PEOPLE AS SITUATED OBSERVERS

First, postmodernism asserts that we are situated observers. That means that all our beliefs and convictions are caused or determined by factors such as our place in society, our upbringing, our cultural environment, our religious background, etc. In other words, our beliefs are dictated—not just influenced or informed—by our environment.⁷ The individual is unable to transcend their environment to achieve an objective vantage point. Everything belief and truth claim is relative and, thus, not absolutely true. Thomas Nagel famously said that there is no view from nowhere; our perception is always affected by our situation. This is in diametrical opposition to the Enlightenment belief humans could be objective observers and that through reason we could acquire certain, absolute knowledge.

Postmodernism divorces reason from knowledge and holds that knowledge is entirely subjective and irrational. It asserts that truth claims are just disguised power claims and that “truth” becomes a means of oppression. Keith Jenkins writes that “in the end history is theory and theory

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ This has an ethical significance because it removes our responsibility for our beliefs and lays the responsibility at the feet of impersonal environmental factors.

is ideological and ideology is just material interest.”⁸ In other words, historical inquiry is dictated by a theory of how history should be done, that theory is dominated by a particular worldview, and that worldview is dominated by personal and material gains or profits.

We should recognize that this viewpoint is not entirely untrue. We must admit that our socialization—the “lifelong social experience by which people develop their human potential and learn culture”⁹—certainly does influence our perceptions and beliefs so that we cannot achieve perfect objectivity. However, the postmodern position also goes too far. As Stewart Kelly writes, “Situatedness does not entail radical subjectivity. . . Radical subjectivity (no degree of objectivity possible) would follow only if different worldviews entailed an inability to critically compare two such views.”¹⁰ In other words, reality itself limits the range of possible perceptions; there are only so many ways to perceive what is actually there. It also provides a metric which can be used to compare different perspectives and determine which one best corresponds to what is actually there. Thus, true knowledge can be ascertained.

Further, the claim postmodernism makes is internally inconsistent. The belief that all truth claims are determined by one’s environment must extend to that belief itself. In other words, if one claims to believe:

EC—one’s environment causes one to believe everything they believe

then EC itself is only a product of that individual’s environment and cannot be applied to another individual in a different environment that produces different beliefs. To make the above assertion, the postmodernist needs to believe that there are some truths—including their own belief—that are universal, something that contradicts the heart of their belief.

If the options relating reason and knowledge were put on a spectrum it would look like this:

Rationalism \leftrightarrow modest rationalism \leftrightarrow non-rationalism

We should see that, while we would likely reject the extremes, there is another option that both accounts for our situatedness, finitude, and the noetic affects of sin while also recognizing that we do not need absolute certainty to affirm something as true. The modestly rational view asserts that we can achieve high levels of probability in certain truths claims based on their reasonableness and correspondence to reality such that they can be treated as trustworthy and reliable. We do have the means of achieving a certain level of objectivity in assessing reality that enables us to acquire true knowledge.

⁸ Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 23-24

⁹ John J. Macionis, *Sociology*, 11th ed. (Boston: Prentice-Hall, 2007), 118.

¹⁰ Stewart Kelly, *Truth Considered and Applied*, 76.

As Christians we also recognize that God has graciously given us objective truth through Divine revelation in Scripture. This provides us a transcendent and objective perspective that informs our own perspective on reality and guides us “into all truth” (John 16:13).

II. LANGUAGE, STRUCTURALISM, & POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Postmodernism asserts a very different philosophy of language than most people would be familiar with. Traditionally it has been understood that language is able to truly describe reality and to communicate that truth from person to person. In the early 20th century these assumptions came under serious question. Rather than viewing language referentially (as having reference to something in the real world), philosophers began to view language relationally. That is, a word/concepts meaning is defined by its relationships to other relevant words or concepts according to the structure of that language.

Take, for example, the word dog. Rather than viewing the word dog as a word that refers to an actual, physical animal, structuralists argue that in order to understand “dog” you must understand the structure of system of language the word “dog” is a part of. We must understand what an animal is and what a mammal is. We also need to understand “dog” negatively: “dog” is not cat, not a bird, not a human, not an inanimate object, etc. All of this is necessarily to properly understand what a dog is and what the word “dog” means. Thus, “dog” is understood by its relationships to a constellation of words in that language structure, each one of which is also defined by its relationships to other words and concepts.

Many of these concepts that are part of a language’s structure are arbitrary. For example, we did not have to divide animals as mammals and nonmammals. They could have been categorized by size or some other factor. More groups or subdivisions could have been added. This means that, in some ways, human language is arbitrary and, as structuralists would argue, *socially constructed* (recall the discussion on our *situatedness*). All this is to say that words are not defined by external reference but by internal relationship, and the meaning of a word is “the sum total of its relation to all other words being used. Each word is thus understood relationally and intertextually rather than referentially and extratextually. Words are defined by *their role in the system in which they are enmeshed*.”¹¹ As one of the original structuralists writes, “Each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms.”¹²

The consequence of this view of language is it becomes inherently unstable. If you make one small change to the structure of the language—by adding a new term or adjusting the meaning of an existing term, for example—the meaning of every word is affected because they are all related. Further, it divorces language from external reality. Language is dictated only by the internal rules of the system with no external referent.

¹¹ Kelly & Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 74-75.

¹² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 88 (emphasis original).

There are several problems with structuralism:

- 1) First, it ignores a word's historical development and views language synchronically rather than diachronically. In reality, however, words do not arise out of nowhere but in an historical context.
- 2) Second, structuralism ignores the authorial intent that is inherent in all communication. When we speak or write we are intending to communicate something. Structuralism ignores this intention and focuses only on the word as it is defined relationally within the language structure.
- 3) Third, an overemphasis on structure can fail to grasp differences in meaning. For example:

(A) George is easy to please.

(B) George is eager to please.

While these examples appear to have the same structure (noun-copulative verb-adjective-infinitive), in reality they are very different grammatical. In the first, "George" is the direct object of the verb "to please," while in the second "George" is the subject of the verb. Structuralism cannot account for these differences in grammar and meaning.

- 4) Structuralism ignores the reality that language "is defined by its grammatical structure and this grammatical structure is grounded in the workings of the human brain."¹³ Even the most simple statements involve a speaker asserting a claim with the intention that the receiver would understand it and believe that the speaker is committed to the contents of that statement. All communication is rich and complicated, including speech acts, referents, and intention—all things that structuralists deny.

Clearly structuralism is inadequate to explain language. Over time it was superseded by another postmodern view of language that is even more radical: poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism, also known as deconstruction, is a critical analysis of language that "emphasizes the internal workings of language and conceptual systems, the relational quality of meaning, and the assumptions implicit in forms of expression."¹⁴ Poststructuralism, exemplified in the works of Jacques Derrida, argues that language is not simple, straightforward, or neutral. Rather, there is under the surface polemical, ethical commentary on what and who is good, bad, etc., contained in the structure and lexicon of that language.

Why is language viewed this way? Derrida argues that human language can never capture the full meaning of a concept. Further, he argues that there is no "meaning" apart from language. That meaning is constructed through human language, and then only partially captures the concept of the real thing. Meaning, then is a construct of language rather than something that has a referent in the real world. Language is largely metaphorical. Thus, it can be used as a means

¹³ Kelly & Dew, Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 78.

¹⁴ Archie Hobson, *Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115.

oppression by imbuing certain words and ideas with certain meaning according to the interests of the group in power who controls the language.

An example will help make this more clear. Historically the word “man” has been used to refer to both males and the human race in general. A poststructuralist would argue that this linguistic convention is promoting a patriarchal establishment and keeping women in a state of oppression.

Deconstruction seeks to take apart the language piece by piece to reveal what is going on beneath the surface as a way of delegitimizing the authority structures being propped up by the language itself. In the poststructuralist/postmodern view, language is a tool of oppression and deconstruction is a means of liberation. By arguing that a text is metaphorical and has no fixed meaning anchored in reality, the way is open for a text to have multiple different meanings based on the interpretive community. In this way, power is decentralized and oppressed groups are liberated.

Like its predecessor, poststructuralism/deconstruction fails to adequately and realistically describe what language is and how it works:

- 1) First, it fails to take into account authorial intent, which is necessary for any sort of objective communication to be possible. If communication can have multiple meanings, in reality it has no meaning at all. All communication would devolve into absurdity and pointlessness. Even the most ardent postmodernist, however, believes that when he communicates these arguments people are able to understand what he is intending to communicate.
- 2) Secondly, flowing from the first, deconstruction ignores the reality that our communication is highly effective. If it was true that language is largely metaphorical with little or no reference to reality, then no meaningful communication would ever take place. The fact that it does shows how erroneous this view is.
- 3) Third, the exclusion of external referents simply does not match our experience. When I describe the laptop I am typing this on, there is, indeed, a real physical laptop to which I am referring, that really is the color silver and really does sit on my wood desk. To say there are no external referents in language is absurd. It is this denial of external reference that leads many postmodernists into anti-realism (discussed below).

Our experience tells us that language works far differently from how structuralists and poststructuralists describe. The postmodern conception of language is deeply flawed, but one can see how it flows into their political views of oppression and liberation that are commonplace today.

III. ANTI-REALISM

One of the consequences of the postmodern view of language (above) is that many hold to an anti-realist philosophy. Realism is the belief that “the ordinary furniture of our environment—

cats, trees, stones, etc.—exist independently of us and our thoughts on the matter.”¹⁵ That is, there is a real world out there whether or not we are there to experience and describe it. There is a reality to reference in language.

Anti-realism, on the other hand, believes that human language has “significant constructive or world-making abilities.”¹⁶ Anti-realists assert that, since words do not have reference to reality but only their relationships to other words, language simultaneously makes exploring reality impossible yet “keeps alive the notions of such a reality by considering the signified [that to which the word or sign seems to refer] as a concept *of* something.”¹⁷ In other words, “the existence of an external reality depends on what *we* do with language—we are minigods in our ability to create.”¹⁸

Essentially, anti-realism claims that all-knowledge is mind dependent. It’s not that there isn’t a real world out there, it is just that our knowledge is not of those things but rather a phenomena of those things. This is an outflow of postmodernism’s radical subjectivity. Because we are situated observers, our perspective of the world is determined by our unique cultural and environmental situation, including our own emotions, desires, and beliefs; our perspective is not connected to reality (this would imply at least a modest objectivity). As Kant wrote, “Our rational cognition applies only to appearances, and leaves the thing in itself unrecognized by us.”¹⁹ As Kelly writes, “if the mind is active, then it is structuring, ordering, and possibly even distorting the data collected by the senses as it ‘represents’ the outside world. What this means is that there is a very real possibility for a sharp disconnect between reality and the representations of reality found in our perceptions.”²⁰

Postmodern thinkers took this belief and advanced it by arguing that one’s situation—their cultural, social, historical, and religious environment—greatly shapes their perception of reality. This subjectivity lends itself to the philosophy of anti-realism, that everyone’s perception of reality is entirely subjective and determined by their situatedness.

We should recognize that postmodernism is correct in recognizing there is an element of subjectivity in our perception of reality and in our beliefs. However, postmodernism offers no coherent explanation for how a lack of perfect objectivity leads to total subjectivity and an inability to truly perceive reality as it is. It is asserted but never proven. There is a massive leap

¹⁵ Micahel Devitt and Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 266.

¹⁶ Kelly and Dew, Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 92.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 106 (emphasis original).

¹⁸ Kelly and Dew, Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 92.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 10.

²⁰ Kelly and Dew, Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 154.

made when one argues that, because our knowledge of reality is constructed in the mind, therefore the reality itself is constructed in the mind. Further, the successes of modern science call into question the notion that we do not perceive and interact with reality as it really is. If this is the case, then it would be beyond miraculous all the scientific and technological advancements of the 20th 21st centuries. Alistair McGrath writes, “The credibility of realism arises directly from the experimental method, which discloses patterns of observational behavior which seem to be best accounted for on the basis of the realist point of view.”²¹ Anti-realism simply does not pass the litmus tests of experience and livability.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is clear that there are deep flaws with the postmodern epistemology, and already we have been able to see how those flaws bleed over into other areas of the postmodern worldview. The things to take away from this section is postmodernisms radical skepticism, its emphasis on subjectivity and the inability of human beings to transcend their situation, and the inability of language to communicate truth. In this system, truth is relativized, even seemingly obvious truths like the reality we see and perceive around us.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ONTOLOGY

The implications for ontology were largely seen above in the discussion on anti-realism. When it comes to questions of existence, the postmodernist sees the individual as the creator of their own reality since this “reality” has no reference to the external world. Though most postmodern thinkers would likely adopt a naturalistic explanation for the origins of the universe, their primary concern is our inability to make observations and draw true conclusions from those observations of the natural world due to our radical subjectivity and our inability to trust that what we perceive corresponds to reality.

As mentioned above, the fundamentally error postmodernism makes is to confuse epistemology with ontology. It makes a leap from its theory of knowledge to its theory of existence. Essentially, the postmodernism says that since all I can know is the reality I construct based on my situatedness as an observer, then that is reality. . . at least for me. It confuses the actual world with ideas about the actual world and speaks about them as though they are the same thing.

Further, no anti-realist will live consistently according to their convictions. If you were to walk up to one and scream “Watch out!” they would almost certainly react, despite the fact that whatever it is you are perceiving is determined by your perspective and does not have a referent in the external world outside your mind.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ANTHROPOLOGY

²¹ Alistair McGrath, *Reality*, 123.

The premodern understanding of the self was that the self “referred to the soul of a human being whose nature was established by God and was reflective of the divine image. The nature was innate and intrinsic, able to be influenced by external factors, but not determined by them.”²² Over the course of several centuries that view has slowly eroded. We will trace that process briefly here:²³

- 1) **The Rational Self:** Enlightenment thinkers dispensed with the metaphysical soul of a person as the seat of self and replaced it with human reason, identified as either the continuation of consciousness and memory or the collection of perceptions at a given moment. Regardless, all still believed that there was a universal human nature all people possess.
- 2) **The Transcendent Self:** In the 18th century Jean Jacques Rousseau defined the self as its “inner goodness” rather than its rational capacities. For Rousseau, the self was essentially expressive, our inner activity displayed openly to the world. This means the self can transcend itself and project itself onto society. Kant affirmed this, identifying the self as actively expressing itself onto the world of experience rather than a passive entity capable of experience. These thinkers still affirmed a universal human nature.
- 3) **The Dissolving Self:** In the 18th and 19th centuries the idea of a universal human nature came under attack. Georg Willhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that all reality was just one thing that was spiritual in nature, what he called the Geist. The idea of an individual self, a human nature, stemmed from culture but was not intrinsic to a human being. This dovetailed with Nietzsche’s “God is dead” philosophy. If there is no God, there is nothing outside of us to define us (like a human nature); we define ourselves. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) further subverted the notion of self, arguing that the self was merely the subconscious struggle of the psyche and, because it was primarily subconscious, unknowable.
- 4) **The Extinct Self:** postmodernists would go beyond Freud and completely reject the self altogether. By applying structuralism to the self, postmodernists would argue that the “self” is really just “various material and cultural factoes (structures) that give rise to the various manifestations we call human beings. . . the structures of culture and the material world create the self. Humanity was a social construction from the universal structures at play on all people everywhere.” Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who perhaps is the the clearest representation of postmodern philosophy, went further by denying that the structures that determine the self are themselves universal. Rather, Foucault asserted there was only power, and power gives rise to individuals. “Power sources and power structures manipulate, shape, and form the ‘individual’ and make us what we are. . . humanity lacks, according to Foucault, a fixed essence or universal essence shared by all people.” Even the self, then, is subjective, determined by one’s situation and the external forces at play.

²² Kelly and Dew, Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 118.

²³ Adapted from *Ibid.*, 118-35.

In short, Descartes moved the locus of self from the soul to the mind. John Locke and David Hume looked to psychological properties. Hegel shifted the locus of self to the one universal Geist, undermining the idea of individual selves. Nietzsche and others saw the self in the will, specifically the will to power. Freud saw the self as the outcome of the struggle within the psyche, something that could never be fully known. Postmodernists went one step further, seeing the self as social-construction, thus dissolving the idea of the individual self completely. There was no such thing as human nature, only power and power dynamics that produced manifestations we call human beings.

As Christians we would respond by first acknowledging that social forces certainly have an influence on us and shape us in significant ways. At the same time, the postmodern position overstates the impact these social forces have on us. That they influence us does not mean there is no intrinsic human nature—in fact, there must be something there to influence. Further, there are similarities that all human beings share, pointed to a universal nature that postmodernism cannot explain.

Second, we see the Bible clearly defines a human nature that was created by God (Gen 1:26-27) and that Jesus assumed in his incarnation (John 1:14). The reality of human nature, in other words, is critical to the Christian faith. The fact that what Scripture teaches mirrors our experience only further lends credibility to its position.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICS

By denying objective, universal absolutes that apply to all people at all times, postmodernists necessarily deny that there is an objective standard of morality. If there is no metanarrative, if there are only “local stories,” then moral truth is likewise relative.

Further, what we have seen throughout this discussion is the removal of guilt from individuals. An individual’s beliefs—and thus the actions dictated by those beliefs—are the result of the external cultural, economic, and religious forces outside their control. Who we are as individuals is likewise determined by power structures and dynamics in which we are situated and have no control over. In this sort of philosophy, it is hard to find a place to lay the blame for bad behavior—except, that is, at the feet of the oppressor, the one who is using language and culture to facilitate their own power and position. Even in the postmodern view we can begin to see the seed of critical theory and its ideas of social justice that have become so prominent in our modern society.

The central ethical claim of postmodernism is that metanarratives are inherently oppressive and worthy of rejection. While it is true that metanarratives have been *used* or perverted to enable oppression, that does not mean that the metanarrative is inherently oppressive in and of itself. In fact, we see that the Christian metanarrative is just the opposite: it is liberating.

The postmodern (anti-)worldview rightly recognizes the symptoms present in society: oppression, suffering, injustice, etc. However, because it rejects God's revelation in Scripture, it misdiagnoses the problem, identifying social structures and their power dynamics as the cause of society's ills rather than recognizing the issue is sin residing in every human heart. No matter what social structure is implemented, sin will still be present, and sinners will still sin against one another. Only through the gospel can sinners be freed from the bondage of sin and death, freed to love God and love one another. The liberation the postmodernist seeks will not be found in their philosophical system. They, like all people, need the gospel.