

# Postmodernism & Relativism

## Vocabulary

**Modernism** – Secular humanism (discussed last week)

**Nihilism** - A form of skepticism holding that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated.

**Postmodernism** – Postmodern philosophy is generally characterized by a skepticism toward the simple binary oppositions predominant in Western metaphysics and humanism, such as the expectation that the philosopher may cleanly isolate knowledge from ignorance, social progress from reversion, dominance from submission, or presence from absence. This is anti-foundationalism. To some critics, this skepticism appears similar to relativism or even nihilism. Defenders of post-modernism would argue that there is a distinct difference, however: while relativism and nihilism are generally viewed as an *abandonment* of meaning and authority, postmodern philosophy is generally viewed as an *openness* to meaning and authority from unexpected places, and that the ultimate source of authority is the "play" of the discourse itself. In addition, many view postmodern philosophy not as a purely abstract or logical argument, but as a historical occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

**Deconstructionism** – The postmodern view that one person cannot clearly and absolutely communicate what he or she means to another person due to the personal nature of truth and the fact that words mean different things to different people. The text must be 'deconstructed' into other possible alternative texts. An example of this would be me saying, "I Love You," to Jessica and her not really knowing what I mean by, "I Love You." 'I' is then evaluated into various meanings of 'I.' 'Love' is evaluated into various meanings of 'love.' 'You' is evaluated into various meanings of 'you.' At no point in time is any of those meanings applied with certainty to the whole and all possible interpretations are equally valid.

**Relativism** – Relativism is the idea that ethics and morals are not absolute and are subjective. An attempt to state moral relativism is something like, "There is no absolute moral truth." Of course this statement is self-refuting so it becomes futile to actually attempt to clarify this position on a logical basis.

**Amoral** – Not admitting of moral distinctions or judgments; neither moral nor immoral. Lacking moral sensibility; not caring about right and wrong.<sup>2</sup>

## Postmodernism

Basic tenets:

- Reality is in the mind of the beholder
- People are not able to think independently because they are defined or molded by their culture.
- You cannot understand other cultures.
- We cannot judge others because we cannot understand them

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern\\_philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern_philosophy)

<sup>2</sup> *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*  
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- We are not moving towards progress but arrogantly dominating nature and threatening our future.
- Nothing is ever proven by science/history or any other discipline
- Intuition: feelings tell us more about reality than reason
- View technological advances and law with cynicism, fear and distrust.
- Interested in spirituality because logic and reason are bankrupt. But reject any faith that is exclusive (like Christianity) because it is not open and claims a universal truth that all can understand.

Given the above tenets why does postmodernism produce ambiguity, non-absolute truth, racism, sexism and general discord?

## **Relativism**

There are three types of relativism: *Cultural relativism, prescriptive/normative ethical relativism, and personal relativism.*

*Cultural relativism* observes society and cultures and reports what is going on. Because it sees differences it concludes that morals are relative to culture.

*Prescriptive or normative ethical relativism* says that people ought to act in accordance with their society's code. While there may be differences they should comply with the collective norm of morals. This sounds like a nice moral viewpoint but it says that if you don't comply with your culture's moral standards you are actually a social dissident and should be restrained or stopped. Martin Luther King, Jr., George Washington, Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ are examples of radicals that should have been stopped or killed upon beginning to resist the cultural norms. Further, they could be described as immoral for not going along with their cultures' morals.

*Personal Relativism* is the idea that individual ideas and opinion give guidance for moral behavior. You do what you want to do, I'll do what I want to do.

From a personal relativism viewpoint how is Adolph Hitler convictable for murder, rape, genocide and treating Jews like sub-human beings?

Can a relativist legitimately judge you for having an opinion?

Can a relativist say you are wrong for believing in Jesus as the only way to heaven?

Quote: "When any human court is the highest authority, then morality is reduced to mere power – either power of the government or power of the majority. If courts and laws define what is moral, then neither laws nor government can be immoral, even in principle."<sup>3</sup>

## **Worldviews Part II**

What sort of heroes does Christianity produce?

What sort of heroes does Postmodernism produce?

What sort of heroes does relativism produce?

An amoral hero is a sociopath, a homicide detective's worst nightmare.

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<sup>3</sup> *Relativism: Feet planted firmly in mid-air.* Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, Baker Books 1998. Page 52.