

Can You
Believe
It's True?

Christian
Apologetics
in a
Modern &
Postmodern
Era

John S.
Feinberg

“Many Christians are unprepared to answer the postmodern notion that truth is unknowable and hence ultimately unimportant. That premise refutes itself, of course, but for those already steeped in existential and postmodern ways of thinking, self-defeating propositions are standard fare, and even the simplest truths can seem elusive. Persuading those who love darkness and revel in contradiction can be quite a challenge. Dr. John Feinberg is uniquely qualified to untangle the knots of modern and postmodern thought, pointing us to a better way of understanding truth in the clear light of Scripture. This is an extremely helpful study.”

John MacArthur, Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California

“John Feinberg meets the challenge of modern skepticism head on, with the full confidence that Christianity is rational and defensible in the marketplace of ideas. Your mind will be stretched and your faith strengthened when you read this book.”

Erwin W. Lutzer, Senior Pastor, The Moody Church, Chicago, Illinois

“Dr. Feinberg, a well-respected philosopher and theologian, has written a rigorous and learned work. The first two sections give a careful prolegomena to apologetics, emphasizing epistemology and apologetic method—subjects that are all too often ignored or glossed over in works on apologetics. He then applies his apologetic method to some of the most important questions in apologetics. The attentive reader will be richly rewarded.”

Douglas Groothuis, Professor of Philosophy, Denver Seminary; author,
Christian Apologetics

“John Feinberg’s book is an insightful, thoughtful, and thorough analysis of the modern and postmodern mindsets and a guide on how to engage them. In addition to astute treatments of traditional apologetical themes, such as the Gospels’ reliability and religious pluralism, this volume incisively engages skepticism, truth, and knowledge quite unlike the standard texts in apologetics. Carefully argued yet quite readable, Feinberg’s book has much to offer the expert, the novice, and those in between.”

Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach
Atlantic University

“John Feinberg is one of today’s most accomplished Christian scholars. Having written on ethics, the doctrine of God, and on the problem of evil, he here turns his attention to apologetics in a modern *and* postmodern world. *Can You Believe It’s True?* manages to make a large and complex body of material accessible. In Feinberg’s rendering, truth is neither irrational nor strictly modern (foundational), but *biblical*. Both theoretically solid and ultimately practical, this book will contribute enormously to showing how Christian faith is reasonable, credible, and pertinent to our confused world.”

William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary,
Philadelphia

“John Feinberg is one of the most perceptive Christian thinkers of our time. In *Can You Believe It's True?* he affords an accessible and helpful guide for pastors, ministerial students, and laypersons about how to articulate the truth of Christianity effectively in our postmodern era.”

Steve Lemke, Provost and Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary; Director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry; editor, *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*

“Having provided detailed analyses and assessments of modernist and postmodernist assumptions, Professor Feinberg offers a sympathetic critique of Reformed Epistemology (Plantinga) and presuppositionalism (Van Til), noting virtues and limitations. He follows this with a presentation and defense of his own evidentialism, including sample applications. This is a major contribution to current discussion as to the best approach to Christian apologetics.”

Keith E Yandell, Julius R. Weinberg Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, University of Wisconsin Madison

“This volume by John Feinberg presents a more extensive range of subjects than many apologetics textbooks. Beginning with truth and the modern-postmodern debate, Feinberg wades into waters that are explored too seldom in this context but that perhaps include the most gems. Other topics include a detailed investigation of apologetic methodologies, along with specific issues such as the problem of evil, the reliability of the New Testament text, Jesus’s resurrection, and pluralism and tolerance. Each is discussed with understanding and insight. While this is the thorough treatment one would expect from Feinberg, its accessible and relaxed tone gives it a sense of a conversation throughout. I recommend this enjoyable text that can be used at more than one level, depending on the student’s needs.”

Gary R. Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor, Liberty University and Theological Seminary

Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Simplicated Studio

First printing 2013

Printed in the United States of America

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-3900-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3901-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3902-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3903-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Feinberg, John S., 1946-

Can you believe it's true? : Christian apologetics in a
modern and postmodern era / John S. Feinberg.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3900-8

1. Apologetics. 2. Philosophy, Modern.

3. Postmodernism. I. Title.

BT1103.F45 2013

239—dc23

2012047649

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

Though I have taught apologetics for many years to graduate students, I hadn't actually planned on writing this book. Most of my attention academically has been occupied with systematic theology and ethics. Of course, I am greatly interested in apologetics, but to write a text would require covering a number of diverse issues. In addition, in recent decades, many outstanding works in Christian apologetics have been published, so I thought those were sufficient. And, my brother Paul was planning to write an apologetics text. Though it would have been a different book from this in various ways, I didn't sense an urgent need for there to be two apologetics textbooks written by two Feinbergs.

So, what happened? I changed my mind more than a decade ago, because I saw truth being relentlessly attacked both by nonbelievers and even by some who call themselves Christians. And, I didn't see much of an answer to the onslaught of epistemological relativism, especially in the most virulent and deadly forms of postmodern skepticism about truth and reason.

But truth matters enormously—if there is no such thing as absolute truth, or if none of us can know what it is, then many of us are wasting our lives in a futile pursuit of it and deluding others and ourselves into thinking that we are leading them to find truth. So, even though this book is usable as a general text in apologetics, the greatest burden and passion of the book is to defend the notions that there is truth, humans can find it, and we can “know that we know” what is true. Not only are these ideas presented, but detailed arguments and explanations are offered to support these views.

In order to accomplish such a goal, it is necessary to understand the times in which we live and the reasons that so many of our contemporaries

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are not only convinced that we can't know absolute truth, but are quite comfortable with that conclusion. Though many in our day have capitulated to the beguilement of postmodern skepticism about reason, knowledge, and truth, there are still many who hold some form of modern epistemology. Many moderns, like postmoderns, are skeptical about the truth of Christianity, but not because they believe it is impossible to know what is true. They just don't think there is enough evidence to support Christianity as true. Thus, the first major section of the book presents both modern and postmodern forms of skepticism, and offers detailed answers to both. I begin the book this way, because unless it can be established that there is such a thing as truth and that humans can know what it is, there is little sense in talking about the best way to defend the truth of Christianity (or any other beliefs).

After answering reasons for skepticism about religious beliefs in general and Christianity in particular, the book turns in part 2 to consider several methods of defending Christian truth that have been prevalent among Christian apologists during at least the last century (some have been around much longer). The third part of the book turns to Christian evidences. Originally, I had planned to cover all of the major areas that Christian apologists have traditionally defended with arguments and evidences. However, as earlier chapters and the pages piled up, it became clear that to cover all areas of Christian evidences would result in a book much too long. So, I decided to limit my coverage to just a few issues, and to use the chapters in part 3 to illustrate the methodology I had presented as my own approach through the first two parts of the book.

Undoubtedly, some will be unhappy that I didn't cover their topic of special interest. In particular, some won't be pleased that I didn't do a chapter on the existence of God. I didn't include such a chapter, in part because I have elsewhere presented in detail traditional arguments for God's existence,¹ and I wanted to cover some issues I haven't previously defended in print. There are other reasons for this decision that you will see as you read my comments on methods of defending Christian truth. So, if I didn't defend a doctrine you had wanted, I apologize, but please remember that while I have tried to present the strongest case possible for each tenet of the faith I defend, I am also using part 3 of this book to illustrate the methodology worked out in the earlier parts of the book.

There are a number of people who have been very helpful in producing this book, and I want to acknowledge them. First, a word of thanks is due to Crossway for its willingness to publish the book, and for its patience in waiting for me to finish it. I am grateful to Marvin Padgett, who saw to it that the book was contracted by Crossway. In addition, Allan Fisher has been most supportive as I have worked on the book, and his advice on what to include and what to omit has been very helpful and is greatly appreciated. As always, I am indebted to the extraordinary editorial skills of Bill Deckard; in my experience, no other press has an editor who can match Bill's expertise.

In addition, I have been helped by a variety of student assistants with the gathering of bibliography. Some have also read portions of an earlier draft of the manuscript and made helpful comments. In particular, I want to thank Shawn Bawulski, Todd Saur, Ike Miller, and Jessica Wilson.

One other person has been enormously helpful. My dear friend and colleague Harold A. Netland is a tremendously gifted apologist/philosopher of religion and an exceptional teacher. Harold read and commented on the whole manuscript. In addition, we have had a number of conversations about the book and its various topics. I found all of his counsel greatly helpful, and have tried to accommodate all of his suggestions. The book is significantly better because of his input, and so I am very grateful to him. Errors that still remain are, of course, my responsibility, not Harold's.

Then, I must say a word about my brother Paul, in whose memory this volume is dedicated. Soon after I decided to write this book I also decided to dedicate it to Paul. I had hoped that he would get to see it, but sadly, rather unexpectedly he went to be with the Lord some eight years ago. Throughout my life, Paul was a great encouragement to me about everything. In my judgment (and that of many others), he was also a brilliant theologian and philosopher/apologist. His clear and cogent stand for Christ and for the truth of Christianity has been and remains a great source of inspiration to all who knew him. And, his clear and loving voice in defense of truth is greatly missed by all who knew and loved him! I can't say that Paul would agree with everything in this book, but I know he would be pleased to find that this project is finally finished! In his memory this volume is lovingly dedicated.

Today truth, especially Christian truth, is under attack seemingly from

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all quarters. As you read this book, I trust that you will be convinced that there is truth, and that we can know what it is. Even more, I hope that you will see that Christianity is truth, truth you can believe. May God grant us knowledge and faith to see this, and may he give us strength and courage to take an unwavering stand for the truth!

John S. Feinberg
July 2012

PART ONE

The Question of Truth

Chapter 1

Introduction

The great twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say if, after he died, contrary to his expectations, he found himself standing before God and God asked him why he hadn't believed in God. Russell replied that he would say, "Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!"¹ Russell believed, in the words of W. K. Clifford, that "it is always wrong, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."² Russell further believed that our world doesn't contain enough evidence for God's existence for anyone to believe in him. As Clifford wrote about beliefs based on insufficient evidence, it is our duty "to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence."³

Implicit in what Russell and Clifford said is a belief that it is rational to hold only beliefs supported by evidence. There is also an implicit faith in our ability to gather accurately (by observation of the world and by reflection on observed data and on principles of reasoning) and to evaluate accurately the quality of various purported evidences in support of an idea. Reason can be trusted to tell us what to believe and what to reject about the world around us.

Somewhat later in the twentieth century a very different perspective on the search for truth by compiling evidences arose. Willard Van Orman Quine, espousing the view that what we know and understand is a product of the communities in which we were raised, wrote the following:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, *is a man-made fabric* which

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impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some statements. Re-evaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections. . . . But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. *No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field*, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole⁴ (italics mine).

These are remarkable claims! If all our concepts are man-made, then the world is not simply mirrored on our mind through sense perception, allowing us objectively to read off the results. Nor do our observations and reasoning “see things as they are.” What we claim to know is actually an interconnected web of beliefs that touch reality, experience, only at the borders of that web. But, note that Quine says that the total field of our knowledge is underdetermined by experience. This means that experience and our contact with it are such that there simply is insufficient evidence from experience for us to know which beliefs are true or false or whether our whole perspective on the world is right or wrong.

The problem of deciding which views are correct is further exacerbated by the fact that different cultures have their own constructions of reality which are not the same as another culture’s. As Diogenes Allen explains about the most radical current approaches to epistemology,

We not only construct the world, so that all knowledge, value, and meaning are relative to human beings, as Idealists since Kant have argued, but now the radical conclusion is drawn that there is no reality that is *universally* constructed because people in different periods of history and in different societies construct it differently. There is no definitive procedure or universal basis to settle disputes in the natural sciences, in ethics, and in the interpretation of literature. Every domain of inquiry and every value is relative to a culture and even to subcultures.⁵

In short, there is no absolute truth, or if there is, no one is in a position to know what it is. If so, what is the point of marshaling evidences in support of a belief?

As is clear from comparing the comments of Russell and Clifford, on the one hand, and those of Quine and Allen, on the other, something very significant has changed. Sometimes in philosophy it takes a long time for entrenched ideas to change; at other times change seems to come rather quickly. Shortly after the middle of the twentieth century, philosophers made some major changes in their assessment of reason's abilities to know the world aright. Doubts about whether there is such a thing as absolute truth (and whether, if so, anyone is in a position to discover it) became the norm. In addition, philosophers raised serious doubts about whether some set of beliefs should be seen as foundational to all other beliefs and hence relatively or even totally immune from all attack. Of course, there have always been some skeptics about the mind's abilities to "get things right," even in Western cultures that shared a basic commitment to Christianity. There were, for example, skeptics in Augustine's era, and he addressed the issues they repeatedly raised. In addition, there was widespread skepticism about knowledge and religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it became even more vocal in later centuries.⁶ In our day skepticism seems to be the predominant attitude toward knowledge, not just among trained philosophers but among ordinary, everyday people.

These more recent beliefs about reason's inadequacies involve what scholars call a move from a modern to a postmodern understanding of our world. While it is safe to say that not everyone has made this switch, evidences of the postmodern mind-set becoming increasingly entrenched are too numerous to deny. We cannot merely say these are views relegated to ivory-tower academics who need something to think and write about in order to justify their salaries. In many areas of life, we find that various postmodern themes have trickled down into everyday life among "ordinary" people. Some believe this flirtation with things postmodern will be short-lived, for when one understands its contours, its most radical expressions, and its ultimate implications, one realizes that no one can or does live consistently with such a mind-set. I am not a prophet, so I cannot predict how long postmodern thinking will last, but I do know that many non-academics with whom we rub shoulders every day are very much captivated by some of postmodernity's most fundamental themes. Hence, in constructing a strategy for defending Christianity, if we are to challenge nonbelievers who are postmodern in their outlook, we must take postmodern themes

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seriously. Of course, not everyone has completely abandoned the modern mind-set, and thus, we must also think of how to defend the Christian faith to people of that persuasion.

At this point you may be interested but uncertain about how to proceed, because you are not quite sure about what modernity and postmodernity are and how they differ. Rather than first present a set of ideas associated with each perspective, let me introduce you to these understandings of reality through two imaginary conversations which will illustrate them.

Let us imagine first a conversation between two university students that takes place sometime between 1955 and 1969. One student is a nonbeliever working within the modern mind-set. Let us call him Modern Joe, or MO JOE for short. The second participant knows Christ as his personal Savior. Let us call him Joe Christian, or JOE C for short. JOE C is quite concerned about the spiritual condition of his university friends and acquaintances, and so he witnesses to them whenever possible. Let's listen to this imaginary conversation between MO JOE and JOE C:

JOE C: I'm really glad we could get together for coffee today, Mo Joe.

MO JOE: Thanks for the invite. I'm always open for free coffee. What did you want to talk about?

JOE C: I wanted to talk to you about spiritual matters.

MO JOE: Spiritual matters? I don't believe in ghosts! Is that what you mean?

JOE C: No, I'm talking about what you think about God and whether you have a relationship with him. Specifically, I want to share with you what's called "the four spiritual laws."

MO JOE: Joe C, I didn't know you were into some religious cult. Mind control and all that. Oh, well, I guess everyone has a right to do his own thing. But that's not for me.

JOE C: Mo Joe, I understand your concerns, but I'm not into any cult. I am concerned, though, about what you think about God and where you're planning to spend eternity.

MO JOE: Oh, brother! I'll spend it where everyone else does. Planted six feet under in some cemetery. Reason and experience

tell us that death ends it all—period! So, you’d better plan to enjoy yourself while you’re here, because there’s no second chance once you’re dead and gone.

JOE C: That’s an interesting philosophy, Mo Joe. I’d like to share a different one with you that I’ve found very meaningful. It’s based on God’s Word, the Bible, and it involves those four spiritual laws. The first law says that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

MO JOE: Hold on, Joe C. Your so-called first law contains a lot of unproved assumptions, and I don’t think you can prove any of them.

JOE C: Uhm, can I go on to the second law?

MO JOE: Not so fast! We need first to identify those unproved assumptions in your first law, and you need to give me some evidence why I should believe them. Without sufficient evidence, I can’t believe anything, even if it is something others find helpful. Let me point out those unproved assumptions I was talking about. For example, your first law assumes that there is a God, but offers no proof. I think we can explain everything in our universe by an appeal to natural laws and evolution. Don’t you know that science tells us everything we need to know to get along in our world? There’s no need to appeal to the supernatural. Anyway, I only believe what’s provable through reason and the five senses.

JOE C: That’s a very interesting theory, Mo Joe. Are you saying that human reason and sense perception never make mistakes?

MO JOE: No, Joe C. Reason and sense perception aren’t infallible, but that doesn’t mean they don’t work at all. There is a real world outside of our minds, and through our reason and sense perception we are able to understand that world correctly most of the time. When we’re wrong, others with the same intellectual equipment can steer us in the right direction. Joe C, I’m not a skeptic about knowing anything. I’m just skeptical when someone wants me to believe something without evidence.

JOE C: But, Mo Joe, I’ll bet you do believe in things you can’t confirm by reason or experience through the five senses. For example, I bet you believe there’s such a thing as love.

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MO JOE: Sure, but I can feel what love is like. And, I can see love's results when I look at a newlywed couple, for example. So, it's not so invisible as you suggest. Anyway, speaking of love, you said your God is a loving God. That's another unproved assumption. If God is so loving, why do terrible things happen in our world? Murders, disease, wars, famines? No, I can't believe in a loving God, when so many evil things happen. If God really does care about all this, then he must be powerless to do anything about it. And, if that's so, then he's no God after all.

JOE C: I agree that those problems are hard to explain, but they aren't impossible to answer. Anyway, Mo Joe, answer me one question: If there is no God, why does anything ever go right in our world?

MO JOE: That's easy. Natural laws run our world. Our universe is all a product of chance, but once it got here, it keeps running according to natural laws. There's plenty of evidence that this is how things work; hence I don't see that it's rational to postulate a supernatural being who keeps our world running. If you want me to believe otherwise, you need to present enough evidence to support your belief. As for me, I trust what reason and my senses teach me about the world, and they don't show me that there's a God. If you want to believe in such things, that's your business, but I'm not going to be so irresponsible as to believe what can't be proved!

JOE C: But that's my point. Who runs the natural laws and keeps things going according to those laws?

MO JOE: I don't know. Maybe Mother Nature. Maybe not. But why do we have to have an explanation for everything? Things just run by natural laws in our universe. That's a fact, and that's all there is to it. But we're digressing. Your so-called spiritual law not only says God is loving. It says he loves me and has a plan for my life. There you go again. More unproved assumptions.

JOE C: What do you mean?

MO JOE: I mean that if you knew what's been going on in my life, you wouldn't say God loves me. My life is a mess, and no one steps in to help, least of all your supposed God. If

there is a God and he loves me, he sure has a funny way of showing it.

- JOE C:** No one is guaranteed exemption from all problems in life, Mo Joe. As bad as things are now for you, they might be worse if not for God's loving hand in your life. Besides, he showed his love for you by sending Christ to die for you.
- MO JOE:** I don't need Christ or anyone else to die for me. I need help with living—you know, paying bills, staying well, and the like. No, there's little evidence of a God of love in my life. In addition, you say that God has a plan for my life. There's another unproved assumption. Even if God does care about our world, what's the proof that he can act in history or that he does? History is going nowhere, and so is my life. Neither has any meaning.
- JOE C:** Christ would give meaning to your life, if you'd let him.
- MO JOE:** I'm sorry, but how can someone who's dead bring meaning to my life? I know you believe God has this great plan for my life, but how can that be? And even if he does, I repeat that nowhere do we see God's hand in history. Evidently he's locked out of this world, if he even exists in the first place.
- JOE C:** Actually, he's acting all around us all the time. If you only had the faith to see his hand!
- MO JOE:** Yeah, that's what you Christians always say. I'm still waiting to see the hard evidence to support your claims. As for me, I believe what I can touch, see, smell, and the like, and what appears reasonable to me.
- JOE C:** How sad that you feel that way. There's so much more to life with Christ at its center.
- MO JOE:** Joe C, that may be fine for you, but not for me. You utter all these pious-sounding phrases, but what do they mean? I think what you're talking about amounts to nothing, since you can't prove a thing you say. You know, the logical positivists warned us about people like you. You go around using theological and religious language as though you are making meaningful claims about the world. But you aren't. Logical positivism has shown us that unless we know how to verify a sentence, what it asserts is

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meaningless. Since no one knows how to verify theological and religious propositions, all of them are meaningless, and what they talk about is probably nonexistent. By the way, that includes your first spiritual law (and probably all the others as well).

JOE C: My, you have thought a lot about this! Have you ever considered the claims of Christ?

MO JOE: No, nor those of Muhammad, Buddha, or anyone else. Why should I? I consider seriously only what I can touch, feel, et cetera. Things that run by natural laws. Which reminds me, Joe C. You've been talking about spiritual laws. What sort of thing is a spiritual law? Is it some law that controls my driving? Is it a law passed by Congress? Is it something like the law of gravity? Is it a law about spirits? I have no idea of what you are talking about, and I doubt that you know what it means either. Just points up the problems I was mentioning about religious and theological language.

JOE C: Well, Mo Joe, I'd really like to talk to you more about all of this, but I have a class in a few minutes. Can we get together and talk about this some other time?

MO JOE: Sure, talk is cheap, and I'm always happy to have someone buy me coffee. But next time, bring evidence to support what you're saying! Have a good class, Joe C. See you later.

If you went to a secular university or college during the 1960s or before, I'm sure you can identify with this conversation. You've probably run into some "Mo Joes" before. For those of us who were undergraduates during those years, it is easy to think at first that on university campuses today little has changed about basic outlooks on life and the world. But a closer look at academia and, more broadly, at popular culture shows that there has been a major shift in the way many people see the world. That different approach is the postmodern point of view, and our second imaginary conversation illustrates it.

Imagine that this conversation takes place at a secular university somewhere between 1995 and 2002. It involves a Christian—again, let us call him Joe Christian, or Joe C for short—and a nonbeliever. Let's call the nonbe-

liever Postmodern Joe, or Pomo Joe for short. They meet one afternoon and the following conversation ensues:

JOE C: Hi, Pomo Joe. I'm glad we could sit down and talk together. I've been wanting to talk with you about your spiritual life.

POMO JOE: My spiritual life? Cool! Have you found a good way to channel into the spirit world? Or do you just know a really good psychic? I've been trying to contact my grandparents who died a few years ago, but I'm having some trouble. I don't know whether I'm just not good at making the connection or whether they've been reincarnated again as someone or something else. Maybe you could shed some light on that.

JOE C: Well, not exactly. I had something else in mind. I wanted to talk with you about Christ and Christianity.

POMO JOE: Fine, but what's to talk about? I'm already a Christian, and I'm a Muslim, a Buddhist, and a Hindu. You know, all religions are really saying the same thing. It's all one.

JOE C: Not quite. There are some differences. But we'll get to that in a bit. I just wanted to share with you something of how much Christianity means to me and to tell you about what is called the four spiritual laws.

POMO JOE: Very interesting, Joe C. Whatever works for you. But each of us has to find our own truth wherever we can. Now about these spiritual laws. I thought religion was a personal matter between you and your God. Are you saying our government is making this a matter of public policy by passing laws? That violates the separation of church and state guaranteed by the US Constitution! That's just so-o-o-o politically incorrect!

JOE C: No, no, Pomo Joe. No one would dare ignore the separation of church and state. These laws are just principles that cover the spiritual realm. I can see you're confused a bit, so why don't I just tell you the first law. That will illustrate my point. The first law says God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

POMO JOE: Oh, so that's what you're getting at. Well, of course, she loves me! I see her and feel her all around me. She's

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present in the baby's smile, in a sunset, in a gentle breeze, and I see her in the faces of all my friends. God's in all of us, you know. So, I can agree with what you say, but I didn't know that was what you meant by a spiritual law.

JOE C: Pomo, I'm afraid we're talking about two different things. I must not be making myself clear. I'm referring to the Judeo-Christian God. He created all things, he's moral governor of the universe, he knows we are all sinners, and he sent Christ to die to save us from our sins. All of these truths fit together very logically, and they show us a God of great grace.

POMO JOE: Oh, now I see where you're coming from. Logical, huh? Whose logic are you talking about? Western Aristotelian logic? Man, don't you know that such a way of thinking controls Western thought forms and institutions? But there's no reason that we should believe that's the right way to think. Not everything works by reason and logic. And anyway, reason and logic aren't even close to infallible. I don't trust either; I've found that it's better to go with my heart! Oh, and by the way, the God you're describing—there's a whole history of horrible things that have been done in his name. Why, the very way your Bible is written discriminates against women, the poor, and other minorities! The Christian outlook on things has really controlled many societies, including ours, for the last two thousand years, but it's not the only way to look at things. In fact, we need to examine all of our concepts and all of our institutions and get rid of things that incorporate prejudices against people. In other words, we really need to reconstruct a whole new picture of reality. Don't you know that belief in your God is totally out of touch with current times?

JOE C: I think the Judeo-Christian God is very relevant to our day. And, as I was saying, he loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

POMO JOE: Does he also love gays and lesbians, or does he exclude certain groups from the dialogue table?

JOE C: God loves everybody. That doesn't mean he's always happy about everything we do. But he does love us all.

And he showed that love by sending Christ to die for our sins.

POMO JOE: What sins? The only sin I can see is being a bigot and discriminating against people because of things they have no control over. Besides, I think Christ was a very loving person, but I don't get why you think he's so important. There are many roads to God. Each one of us is traveling down our own road, but we'll all get there.

JOE C: Christ is more than you suggest. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me."

POMO JOE: Are you sure Christ said that? Man, I didn't know he was so narrow in his thinking! So, Christ thinks he's the truth, does he?

JOE C: He is the truth. I know that for a fact.

POMO JOE: Joe C, you're amazing. How can anyone know something like that for a fact? All of us view things from our own perspective. Our subjectivity makes it impossible to know exactly what's true. All we can do is get together and share experiences with one another. You know, talk about what feels right and works for us. But what works for you may not work for me. You know, everyone has an element of truth in their belief system, even if we don't know *which* beliefs are true.

JOE C: Pomo, I hate to tell you this, but you just contradicted yourself. If we can't know which of our beliefs are true and which aren't, how can you be sure that your belief that everyone's beliefs contain some truth is true itself? Do you see the problem?

POMO JOE: There you go again, Joe C, with your Western logic-chopping! Who's to say what's contradictory? And, why is it a problem to be contradictory unless you worship Aristotelian logic? Surely that's not the only way to think. One thing more, Joe C. Did your God have to take a logic course from Aristotle in order to figure out how we humans think so he could talk to us?

JOE C: Of course not. God knows everything.

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POMO JOE: But, then, why do you think God restricts herself only to Western logical thought forms? We need to see that God is bound to no culture or mind-set. Incidentally, I'm troubled by something else you said. Did you mean that Christ is the only way to God?

JOE C: That's what Christ said, and I believe it.

POMO JOE: Let me say this very clearly. You arrogant, bigoted snob! Where do you come off acting as though you have a corner on the market of truth? Who do you think you are, saying there's only one way to God? I suppose you also believe that all people of other religions and of times before Christ are just going to hell if they don't see things your way. Well, if that's so, at least we won't have to put up with people like you. You can have your so-called heaven. You and your redneck bigoted friends are not welcome at the dialogue table. There's no room at the table for those who think their views are absolute truth. There isn't any such thing, or if there is, none of us is in a position to know what it is! Anyway, who wants to believe in a God who would torment people forever just because they didn't think Christ was someone special? You know, your God doesn't have a very good track record. You say he's all-loving and all-powerful, but he didn't stop the Holocaust. And now you want me to believe that there will be an eternal holocaust for those who aren't Christians? No, thanks. Boy, are you out of step with the times!

JOE C: I'm sorry you feel this way. There are reasonable, convincing answers to your questions, if you'd let me tell you. But let me just say, I'm telling you these things because I care about you, not because I want to exclude you and see you punished.

POMO JOE: But what you're telling me is just your opinion—one among many. You've got to learn to be more tolerant of other people and their ideas. And you really have a problem with pride—thinking that you, of all people, know what's true, and you don't even realize that it makes sense only if you buy into your Western logic-chopping mind-set. No, Joe C. I like you—I even sense God's presence in you—but until you come down off your high horse, there's really nothing for us to talk about and no basis for us to

have a relationship. You don't want dialogue. You want to instruct me. Thanks, but no thanks.

JOE C: But, Pomo, this isn't just my opinion. If it were, you'd be right that I'm just too arrogant. No, Pomo, I'm telling you what God himself says.

POMO JOE: Whoa, Joe C! When did God ever say that about herself? Where are you getting this stuff?

JOE C: I'm just telling you what Jesus said. It's recorded in the Bible.

POMO JOE: The Bible??!!! Oh, brother! Don't you know that people have made the Bible say anything they want it to say? Yeah, the key thing when I read any book, including the Bible (though I haven't read it), is to see what it says to me. But, then, that's just my take on it. Yours may be different. Besides, why should we listen to your holy book, instead of the Koran or other religious books? You know, Joe C, I think I see your problem. You are treating the Bible as if it's God's Word. You think it sets down God's marching orders for the world—orders that must be followed or we're in trouble. That's not what the Bible is. It's just a human attempt to express mythologically the sense that there's a cosmic force out there to which all of us can attune ourselves. But you'd find the same stuff in any other religion's holy book.

JOE C: Well, Pomo, I can see that we really have many disagreements. I'd sure like to talk to you further about which views are right and which are wrong.

POMO JOE: Well, nobody's views are right or wrong—absolutely. Each person just works out what feels right from his or her perspective, and goes with that until something that works better comes along. I'm happy to talk with you about things that work for you, so long as you get rid of this idea that your views are absolute truth and you can prove them right. Your views are just a product of your social context. You know, life experiences you've had. You're just like everyone else in that respect. So, we can continue to dialogue, if it's a real discussion. But if you're going to preach at me, forget it! OK?

JOE C: Well, at least you're willing to talk. I'll see you later.

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Even brief reflection on these two conversations should convince anyone that some significant things have changed. In upcoming chapters, I plan to describe and interact more fully with the perspectives of modern and postmodern epistemology, but even now we can note some basic things about each.

Mo Joe is fairly clearly an atheist. As the discussion proceeds, it is also evident that his idea of God is that of the traditional Judeo-Christian God. However, it is also obvious that he believes *that* God doesn't exist. In addition, for Mo Joe, even if God did exist, it is dubious that he does or even could act in the world. Of course, lack of evidence of God acting is only part of the evidentially impoverished case for God. The existence of evil in our world and Mo Joe's assessment that history in general and his life in particular are meaningless and going nowhere are further signs that there is no God.

None of this seems terribly troublesome to Mo Joe, because even without God he can know the world around him. Mo Joe trusts human reason, sense experience, and logic to tell him what is true and believable. Hence, he is adamant that no one should accept any belief without sufficient evidence. Though he doesn't describe what would count as sufficient evidence, he is certain that there isn't enough evidence to support belief in God's existence. Mo Joe's reliance on reason is evident throughout this conversation. He analyzes everything Joe C says (see, for example, his handling of the meaning of Joe C's first spiritual law), demands that Joe C define his terms, and refuses to believe anything for which he is certain there isn't enough evidence.

What we have in Mo Joe is a young man who is intellectually rigorous about everything, and that rigor leads him to conclude several important things. One is that the world operates in accord with natural laws and is explainable in naturalistic terms. Thus, he sees no need to appeal to the supernatural to explain anything. He also believes there is a world external to the mind, and he believes that humans can know that world. So, there is truth for all of us; whether Mo Joe thinks it is absolute truth is unclear, but he definitely believes there is truth. One can also assume that he thinks of truth in terms of a correspondence of our words to our world, and he also believes that it is possible to gain objective knowledge of the world around us. One also senses that he puts a lot of trust in science's ability to explain

our world, and that that is so because science deals objectively with the tangible, physical universe.

In sum, Mo Joe is typical of modernity's trust in reason, logic, and sense experience to help us understand our world. Since this intellectual equipment works so well, in his judgment, he won't believe anything that fails to meet reason's demands for sufficient proof. In his judgment, a naturalistic worldview is more than adequate for understanding the world, so there is no need to invoke God to explain anything. Hence, Mo Joe has little or no use for religion and God, and doesn't find that unsettling at all. Of course, without God there can be no direction or meaning to history other than the meaning each of us gives our personal history, but Mo Joe is more than willing to accept the human condition.

In contrast, Pomo Joe distrusts reason and is quite negative toward logic and Western ways of thinking in general. This is so not just because Western thought forms have been used to discriminate against minorities and those out of power. His basic objection to reason and traditional ways of knowing is that they assume that humans can and do know objective truth about our world. Pomo strongly disagrees, because each of us has his own way of thinking, which has arisen from our past experiences and the linguistic communities in which we were raised. Moreover, given human finitude, it is impossible to know enough to be sure that "we really know." It is better to admit that our finitude and subjectivity make it impossible for anyone to do any more than offer his or her perspective on the world. Of course, no one has an absolute perspective (nor can there be absolute truth), so the proper response to other ways of thinking is to listen to them, dialogue with and learn from them, and be tolerant of them. It also goes without saying that truth, in the sense of our language corresponding to states of affairs in the world, is not possible. Hence, it is wisest to follow paths that have "worked" for us or for others, and to follow our heart rather than our head.

We might think that such skepticism about knowledge would make it harder for Pomo Joe to believe in God than for Mo Joe to do so. However, just the opposite is the case. Since there is no longer a requirement that there must be sufficient evidence to warrant belief in anything, and since there is no absolute knowledge but rather a plethora of views from varying perspectives, who is to say that there is no God? Some have found such

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an idea useful and so they have believed. Pomo probably adopts Mo Joe's basic naturalistic viewpoint, but clearly that isn't the whole story. Pomo does believe in God; of course, it's little like the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Though it is not true of all postmoderns who believe in God, Pomo sounds like he's adopted a conception of God in tune with New Age and radical feminist thinking. Moreover, it is clear that he would be offended by any attempt to evangelize him (or anyone else) to believe in a more traditional God, because he believes that all religions are basically the same. He is especially scornful of religious exclusivists who believe not only that theirs is the only right religion but also that any dissenters will spend eternity in hell. How intolerant and discriminatory such views are!

In sum, Pomo Joe is not a rigorous, disciplined thinker, and that is fine with him because logic and reason (and faith in them) are misguided and only lead us back to the perspective we held in the first place. The most that any of us can know is how we see things from our own perspective, but everyone's perspective is shaped by countless experiences and presuppositions that make objective, absolute knowledge impossible. The best we can do is share our views with others and learn from what has worked for them. Since traditional ways of thinking have been discriminatory and have marginalized those who aren't already in power, we must be suspicious of any accounts of reality that empower a few and discard the many. Rather, we must be tolerant of all people and all viewpoints, for who among us can say with certainty that any single approach to reality is "correct?"

Clearly, these are two significantly different approaches to knowledge, reason, and living in our world. As we shall see, it is hard to imagine someone committed to postmodern values living in a way that is consistent with his or her views. That might lead us to believe that postmodernism (at least as it relates to epistemology, the area of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge and belief) is and will be a short-lived phenomenon. Whether or not that is so, many readers can affirm that many postmodern themes and attitudes are well entrenched in contemporary society. But there are still many whose understanding of knowledge and rationality are much closer to the central epistemological tenets of modernity. Hence, we must fashion an apologetic that appeals to as many people as possible, regardless of their allegiance to modernity, postmodernity, or a combination of both.

So, how should we proceed, and what is this book mostly about? First

and foremost, this is a book about truth. Truth continues to be under attack in our day, seemingly from every quarter, and I haven't found particularly satisfying the responses I read and hear. So, before we address anything else, we must address the issue of truth. In the first section of the book I begin with a chapter describing modern and postmodern epistemology. Both approaches cast doubt about Christianity as true, and both offer their own reasons for being skeptical about absolute truth of any sort. After describing these different epistemologies, I then turn to address postmodern skepticism, and then modern skepticism. I follow this order, because postmodern skepticism is the most radical, and if its concerns cannot be met, then there is little reason to bother with modern skepticism. But I argue in chapters 3–6 that both forms of skepticism can be answered, and I present what I find to be the most cogent answers.

In chapter 3, on postmodern skepticism, I address the basic question of why anyone has to be logical, beginning with a description of the many different issues that question can raise, and then I answer each objection. Chapter 4 contains a substantial discussion of whether objectivity in intellectual (or nonintellectual) pursuits is possible or whether we are all doomed to hold nothing we haven't already learned and held. I also address perspectivism, part of the concern about objectivity and subjectivity, but not exactly identical to it.

Chapters 5 and 6 address concerns raised by modern skepticism. Of course, moderns may ask some of the same questions as postmoderns, and hence the issues and answers offered in chapters 3 and 4 are relevant to moderns as well. But, specifically, moderns still believe in reason and truth, and so it is worth asking how one might go about proving something to be true. In chapter 6 I also discuss the relation of truth to certainty and evidence, and one of the underlying concerns is how, if one were to marshal evidence for a belief, one would know if the defense was successful.

My conclusion from the first major portion of the book is that there is truth, we can demonstrate that something is true, and we can be certain that we have done so. In other words, both postmodern and modern skeptical concerns can be answered. Hence, there is reason to do apologetics (and any other intellectual enterprise that aims to find truth), and reason for the book to continue. In the second major part of this book I turn to several ways of defending Christian truth. In particular, I focus on three that have been the

most prominent and influential over the last century or so. Chapters address Reformed Epistemology, presuppositionalism, and Christian evidentialism. While my own approach is a variety of evidentialism, the nature of my approach is such that it takes things of value from the other approaches.

From my description so far of what I intend to do in this book, readers can easily see that it is not a book devoted to presenting Christian evidences for every tenet of the faith. The first two sections of the book, dealing with various methodological issues, primarily address theoretical issues and suggest how I might defend the faith. But amidst the theory there is nothing quite like concrete illustrations of how my method of defending any belief or system of beliefs works, in order for readers to see the answers to theoretical questions (from parts 1 and 2) in action.

Because I am most concerned to make the points about truth that you will read in the upcoming pages, and because coverage of evidences for every major tenet of the Christian faith would result in a text much too long, I have chosen to offer a defense of only four key issues. Some may find it odd that one of those issues is not the existence of God. However, I don't hold a methodology that requires one to prove God's existence before anything else can be addressed. In addition, in our era it has again become fashionable for many people to believe in some sort of God, so I'm not sure that rehearsing the traditional arguments for God's existence would be of great value. For those who don't believe in God, it would be of some value to offer those arguments, but as I have explained elsewhere,⁷ I don't find any of them to be lock-sure proofs. For those who would like to pursue this issue further, I suggest that Alvin Plantinga's and William Lane Craig's coverage of the traditional arguments are most capable resources.⁸ Also greatly impressive is Craig's chapter in *Reasonable Faith* on the futility of life without God.⁹

The topics for which I do present evidences are crucial to defending Christianity. The problem of evil is one of the strongest objections to belief in anything like the Christian God, and we must have answers to it. Then, since the greatest source of evidence for Christianity is Scripture, early in one's defense of the faith there needs to be a defense of Scripture's reliability. Specifically, I address the reliability of the Gospels, four independent accounts of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ. Of course, at some point in defending Christianity, the resurrection of Christ must be established as true. If Christ has not been raised, it seems pointless to argue

for much else that Christianity claims about God and his relation to human beings. Finally, we live in a time of great intellectual, moral, and spiritual relativism. As a result, it is taken as supremely narrow-minded to think that only one religion is the way to God. All religions are thought to be adequate vehicles to a relationship with God, and anyone who says otherwise is thought to be fully out of touch with the reality of our times. Hence, my final chapter of “evidences” addresses religious pluralism.

In each portion of this book, an underlying theme is that truth matters. Even more, there is truth and it can be known. While it can be quite comfortable to argue that no one can know the truth, but only what is true for them, this is actually a very dangerous thing to believe. It is dangerous because all of us have to live in the real world. Thinking that everyone’s version of reality is fine may sound attractive, but there is a real God with real demands on our life. Ignoring him and his demands may “work” for a while, but sooner or later we must leave our fantasy world, abandon all of our clever intellectual doctrines that allow us to do just exactly whatever makes us feel good while believing there is no accountability for anything we do, and face reality.

And then all of us, sooner than we might suspect, have to face eternity! In our day, it is very fashionable for people to believe that a loving God would never judge anyone for eternity with anything like hell. Others find it comforting to believe that physical death ends everything—there is no afterlife, so regardless of what we have done in this life, we needn’t worry about some eternal punishment.

These two stories are only some of the many ways our contemporaries have deluded themselves into thinking that they can think and do whatever they want and never be held accountable. But truth does matter! And in a day when so many seem so sure that there is no absolute truth, it is right to ask how, then, they can be so sure that their “story” about eternity is correct! If you make a mistake on some of your beliefs, the consequences will be minimal. But if your beliefs about eternity are wrong, that is a mistake that will last forever and can never be undone! Truth matters, so you’d better find a truth you can believe in. The aim of this book is to help you see how to find and know truth, in hopes that you will also see that there is no hope for time or eternity outside of Jesus Christ. He is the most important truth, and he is definitely truth you can trust!

Chapter 2

Modernity and Postmodernity

In chapter 1, I briefly introduced both modernity and postmodernity. In this chapter my concern is to describe in more detail the elements of each which are especially significant for philosophy of religion and apologetics. While it is tempting to describe modern and postmodern themes in “neat, unrelated, and distinct packages,” we must remember that history seldom fits our characterizations in which each thing clearly belongs to one era but not another. Describing things so that everything fits in tidy self-contained packages may be helpful conceptually to understand the major thrusts of a given movement, but intellectual history is often much messier. That is, though for the sake of conceptual clarity we may want to distinguish certain trends as modern and others as postmodern, the truth is that over the last five to six hundred years in Western thought, various “modern” and “postmodern” emphases have been present to one degree or another. For example, there have always been epistemological skeptics, and on the contemporary scene there are still many who do not have the distrust in reason that is so frequently associated with postmodernity.

While keeping what has just been said in mind, I still believe it is helpful to describe major themes which, even if present at various times during the last six hundred years, are typically associated with the conceptual model of either modernity or postmodernity. Though modernity and postmodernity have been used as labels for a series of diverse items which conjointly offer a basic intellectual and cultural outlook on reality, my focus is the epistemologies of each.¹

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Though there is room for debate,² broadly speaking, the modern era in a significant sense began with René Descartes (1596–1650) in philosophy and with Galileo and Isaac Newton in science. The period continued into the nineteenth-century rationalism and scientism that still influence our own times.³ But many different intellectual trends have been present during the modern era. For example, modernity is sometimes equated with the Enlightenment, but the two are not identical. Though modernity is often dated as starting in the 1600s, the historical Enlightenment was at its apex during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During Descartes’s lifetime, the great empiricist philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) were also alive. They, like other empiricists, rejected Cartesian rationalism. In addition, rationalism was not embraced by many key Enlightenment thinkers. It is also worth noting that from a mere historical standpoint the life of David Hume (1711–1776) coincided with the French Enlightenment. Hume, though known for both his empiricism and his skepticism, is considered by some to be the prototypical Enlightenment figure.⁴

Even so, it is possible to describe basic epistemological themes associated with modernity, but I begin with a general description of modernity as a whole. One writer characterizes modernity as a “belief in reason and progress.”⁵ Thomas Jovanovski adds that modernity is committed to foundationalism, essentialism, and realism, and also tends to see Western culture as the norm or ideal for what other cultures should strive to be.⁶ Clinton Collins cites an article by Vaclav Havel (then president of Czechoslovakia) that appeared in March 1992 in *The New York Times*. Collins notes that Havel “called for a change of attitudes, away from the arrogance of typically modern beliefs in a humanism that dominates the natural universe, a scientific method that generates objective knowledge and assures unlimited progress, and advancing technology that can overcome the problems that are the byproduct of earlier technologies.”⁷ And Jared Hiebert characterizes the key themes of modernity as objectivity, metanarratives, the independent human, and absolute truth.⁸

THEMES IN MODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Modern epistemology addresses a variety of issues, and not all modern thinkers have agreed on those key issues. Nonetheless, I propose that the

place to begin is with René Descartes and his search for a secure foundation for knowledge.

Human Consciousness and Certain Knowledge

Many affirm that the modern period (at least philosophically) began with Descartes. The premodern era before Descartes was one of tradition and authority. Various ideas were deemed correct, and working within the tradition of those ideas, one held them. Moreover, governmentally and ecclesiastically, it was also an age of authority. Descartes was born on the eve of the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church fundamentally told people what was correct to believe, and if one was a Christian, one followed that without question. Governments were absolutist, and common people had little choice but to do what leaders demanded.

Philosophers working within the Western tradition were often also theologians. The point of philosophy was not primarily to prove God's existence (though we find a lot of that in thinkers like Anselm and Aquinas), but to understand one's faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding," Anselm's motto). Within Western cultures committed to the basics of the Judeo-Christian worldview, God was, so to speak, the starting point of philosophy. If proofs were to be offered for his existence, that was one of the first things done in philosophical and theological writings (see, for example, Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*). Of course there were skeptics, but it was unwise to voice such sentiments if one wished to remain alive.

During the modern era and into the postmodern era, skepticism has increased. That is, even if the percentage of a given population that is skeptical about God has remained relatively constant (and that is debatable), at very least, skeptics have become increasingly vocal about disbelief in God and in absolute knowledge and truth.

Surely Descartes, who seems to have been a devout Roman Catholic, did not espouse religious skepticism, and it would be unfair to blame him as "the cause" of growing skepticism about God and knowledge that we find in both the modern and postmodern eras. Even so, epistemology took a significant turn with Descartes. Like others of his day, he had believed many things without questioning their truthfulness. But what if these beliefs were false, or at least questionable? Descartes reasoned that one's beliefs must be based on far firmer ground than on beliefs that had always been assumed

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as true but never demonstrated to be so. Hence, he concluded that he must call into question everything he believed so as to see whether it could be supported by evidence and argument. But support with some evidence that made a belief's truthfulness less than certain wasn't sufficient. Descartes reasoned that he had a right to hold only those beliefs which could not reasonably be doubted because they were supported by conclusive arguments and evidence. So, Descartes set out to ascertain whether there was anything he claimed to know that could not reasonably be doubted. If there was something of this sort, it would serve as the basis or foundation upon which to build everything else he knew.

This must not be misunderstood. Descartes's search for certainty did not mean he had rejected belief in God or in divine revelation. Rather, he wanted to see what reason, unaided by revelation, could derive as a foundation to secure whatever he believed. Descartes's search for certainty eventually led him to conclude that only one thing could not reasonably be doubted. It made no sense to doubt his own existence as a thinking thing, for in the moment that he doubted it, he proved its truth. Nonexistent things do nothing at all, including doubting their own existence. Of course, this indubitable "I" did not include his body, for one could always be deceived about whether one was actually embodied. But the immaterial part of human nature, with its ability to think, could not be doubted.

As a result, Descartes deemed the *cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") the one indubitable truth from which to build knowledge in any and every field. Of course, the *cogito* is true for each person only in reference to herself or himself. So, Descartes was still troubled about how to justify all other beliefs he held. He eventually came to a rationalistic conclusion that if he had a clear and distinct idea of something, this idea must be true of the world. But how could one be sure that when one thought one was having a clear and distinct idea of something, that was really so? This question led Descartes to formulate his version of the ontological argument for God's existence. If God exists, Descartes reasoned, he would ensure that whenever I think I am having a clear and distinct idea of something, I really am. Hence, not only the foundation but also the superstructure of knowledge would be secure.

The details of Descartes's ontological argument needn't detain us, but two points should be clear. First, Descartes's "intellectual project" can

hardly be seen as a rejection of belief in God or in revelation. Indeed, without the existence of God as a certainty, Descartes believed that his other beliefs could not be sustained.

But a second point is also crucial. With Descartes, epistemology moved front and center in philosophy. No longer could beliefs just be accepted on religious authority, tradition, or any other authority. There had to be indubitable evidence for what one believed. And, of course, human consciousness plays a crucial role in structuring and certifying whatever is true.

For Descartes, one's knowledge of the world grew through clear and distinct ideas of things. For empiricists like Locke and Hume, appeal to sense data from ordinary experience was the key. But in both cases, attaining knowledge involves a subject-object relation; i.e., human consciousness is the subject, the knower, which attempts to ascertain what is true of the world (the object). The two are distinct, and hence the subject can with disinterested objectivity "read off" things that are true of the world (the object). Human consciousness takes the role of sitting in judgment of what is true in regard to reality.

This emphasis on human consciousness only became heightened with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Prior to Kant, the mind was deemed as fundamentally passive in the knowing process. Sense data from the external world came to it through the sensory organs. Those organs might distort the data, and that was thought to explain why, for example, two people looking at the same thing might report seeing things differently, but this account still portrayed the mind as basically passive. The mind was viewed, to use contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty's metaphor, as the mirror of nature. Kant disagreed about the mind being totally passive, and argued that not only does the world act upon the mind (through the senses), but the mind, in virtue of various concepts inherent in it (the Kantian categories), is also active. The mind structures the sense data and then makes a judgment about what is perceived. In light of this two-way process, Kant proposed his famous distinction between things-in-themselves and things-as-they-appear-to-us. He argued that while things really exist outside of our mind, no one can experience them as they are in themselves. Things which are not objects of our knowledge (including things-in-themselves) Kant labeled noumena. Things as they appear to us he called phenomena.⁹

Despite Kant's claim that the mind is active in the knowing process,

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one doesn't sense in Kant's writings that this meant that he thought we couldn't know about things in the world outside the mind. Though no one could know noumena, neither Kant nor other thinkers of his time thought that humans have little hope of knowing phenomena and of agreeing with others about what they were experiencing. Hence, even with the Kantian position that mind and object are active in relation to each other, the basic view seemed to be that the data of the world come into the mind basically unmediated, and hence the mind can still be seen to function basically as the mirror of nature.

Hence, with Kant, the trend begun by Descartes of structuring the world from one's own consciousness continued. Human consciousness as active, not passive, becomes even more important. After Kant, philosophers have increasingly emphasized the mind's action in understanding reality. In addition, Kant, like other modern philosophers, was concerned to ground knowledge ultimately in certain foundational beliefs, but unlike Descartes, the key for him was empirical data.¹⁰ Throughout the rest of the modern era, the emphasis on empirical data as the key to knowledge remains. This is true for contemporary theology and also in philosophical critiques of theology.

In sum, the notion that our understanding of the world stems from human consciousness's structuring of the world is crucial to the modern era. Of course, with the role given human consciousness, if either human reason or sensory organs malfunction, human beings are in serious trouble in respect to knowing and living in their world. During the modern era, many thinkers were quite optimistic about the mind's ability to "get things right" in its search for knowledge. As we shall see later, many postmoderns significantly disagree.

Foundationalism, Metanarratives, and Truth

Because human minds can misinterpret and misrepresent data, we might think that the emphasis on the subject's role in the acquisition of knowledge would only make it more difficult to secure a certain foundation for knowledge, but the modern mentality said otherwise. Reason was deemed capable of grasping and interacting correctly with the world, and it was held that this was true for all people. Just as Descartes wanted to find an indubitable foundation on which to base his knowledge, so others after him thought

this was both necessary and possible. A universal perspective on reality was possible through reason, and belief in everyone's ability to find the truth made it possible in every discipline of study to know truth and error and to convince others, if one thought their views were wrong.

The picture of knowledge and rationality just described normally incorporated a theory of knowledge known as foundationalism. However, there are two distinct senses in which the term foundationalism is used by both moderns and postmoderns. The first refers to epistemological foundationalism, and there are various versions of it. In general, according to this theory of knowledge, beliefs are justified in terms of other beliefs, which ultimately are supported by beliefs that need no justification, because they are self-evidently true (such foundational beliefs are called basic beliefs; beliefs that need support from other beliefs are called non-basic beliefs). Because of modernity's belief in reason's ability to support and confirm beliefs as true or false, thinkers claimed that it is rational to hold a belief only if one does so on the basis of sufficient evidence, arguments, or reasons for the belief.¹¹ Descartes's concern to believe only what cannot reasonably be doubted is clearly incorporated in this notion.

Of course, the next question is what counts as sufficient evidence, argument, or reasons for belief? How does one know that one has a right to hold a given belief? Foundationalism provides the answer. As Laurence Bonjour explains, there are at least three basic kinds of foundationalism: strong foundationalism, moderate foundationalism, and weak foundationalism. Only the first claims that basic beliefs are indubitable and absolutely certain. To one degree or another, the other forms of foundationalism do not hold that basic beliefs are indubitable and absolutely certain.¹² Strong or classical foundationalism (which has been the predominant theory of knowledge within the modern era) claims that a belief has sufficient support if it is supported by evidences and arguments that are ultimately supported by (inferred from) beliefs that are properly basic. A properly basic belief is a belief that is either self-evident (like "all bachelors are unmarried men"), evident to the senses (e.g., one has an experience of a red object), or incorrigible, i.e., something that it would make no sense to doubt (like the *cogito*).¹³

Whereas for Descartes, the ultimate foundation was something rational, the empiricists emphasized sense impressions as the source of the most basic beliefs that form the foundations of our knowledge. Kant combined

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both rational (the mind's categories that allow it to structure reality) and empirical (data from observation) as foundational. For Kant the only truths about the world that are deemed objects of knowledge are truths that can be known through the senses. Despite the mind's activity in interacting with the world, there was great optimism about an individual's ability to know rightly what is true or false. As David Griffin explains, the basic epistemological doctrine of the modern world is sensate empiricism, according to which knowledge of the world beyond ourselves comes exclusively through sense perception.¹⁴ Moderns have generally held that the data that come into the mind do so directly, either unmediated or mediated by something that does not so distort the data as to result in the person misjudging what is being perceived.

But what if a belief is not about a matter of pure reason (e.g., "round squares do not exist") nor is open to sense perception? Kant said that things-in-themselves are not objects of sense perception, but neither are values and moral judgments, the world as a whole, nor God. All of these are noumena, not phenomena, and as such, they are not objects of knowledge. As a result, Kant claimed to put an end to metaphysics, for the subjects normally discussed in that discipline are beyond empirical investigation.¹⁵ However, this didn't mean for Kant that there is no God. Kant believed it necessary to posit the existence of God, but he did so as a grounding for morality. So God exists, according to Kant, but his existence is not a matter of knowledge; it is a postulate of practical reason.

If the only beliefs that qualify as knowledge are ones supported ultimately by foundational beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, it seemed to many moderns that the beliefs most capable of being justified are the beliefs of science. In fact, among the logical atomists and logical positivists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (and many others who followed their general empiricist emphasis), there was a desire to purify language, insofar as possible, of talk that is not empirically verifiable. If this were done, then our language would be basically the language of science, i.e., whatever is open to verification by empirical observation. The logical positivists, however, were more negative than Kant toward things he called noumena. For the positivists, if an assertion isn't in principle verifiable by empirical means (for it to be in principle verifiable, one would have to be able to state verification procedures), the claim is deemed

nonsense, and that of which it speaks is considered nonexistent. This meant that talk of morals and of God is nonsense, and they do not exist.¹⁶

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was a contemporary of the logical positivists. His early philosophy as set forth in his *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* presented a portrait of the world and language that was not unlike that of the logical positivists. Though the positivists appreciated Wittgenstein's work, he did not deem himself one of them. Nonetheless, he did hold that unless language pictures objects and states of affairs in the world, it is meaningless. If language is about something unobservable in the world, it should not be spoken. Unlike the positivists, however, Wittgenstein didn't conclude that things that were unsayable (because incapable of empirical verification) did not exist. Rather, such things are not objects of knowledge, and so should not be spoken of at all.¹⁷

There is a second sense of foundationalism that also applies to modern thinking. In various discussions, foundationalism refers to some set of beliefs that is deemed the ultimate reference point for everything else one believes. As such, they have a privileged status in a person's conceptual grid (i.e., his or her overall worldview). While other individual ideas and even other worldviews are open to and frequently subject to critique and revision, a particular set of ideas that is foundational for a given individual (or even a whole society) is not open to critique and revision, nor does the one who holds them sense any need to offer evidential support that these views are correct. For example, the Judeo-Christian perspective and the Bible itself have been the very foundation of Western societies and cultures. Though there have always been skeptics about the biblical worldview, for much of the last two thousand years the biblical perspective has been, so to speak, the presupposition of Western cultures. It goes without saying as well that a worldview that is foundational in this second sense tells the story of how to understand reality and how to structure societies. As such, it legitimizes certain groups of people as those who ought to have power and control in society, and excludes others. This sort of foundationalism is, for postmoderns, anathema!

This second kind of foundationalism goes together with what is called a metanarrative. A narrative (as used in this discussion) is a story that tells a given group of people or a culture how things are and how they should be done. A metanarrative is a larger story (i.e., it encompasses more aspects of

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reality) that undergirds and supports individual narratives. And then there are grand metanarratives, which present a whole worldview. That grand metanarrative is deemed the ultimate reference point against which any particular idea or set of ideas, particular practice or set of practices, is to be judged. I can illustrate these different types of narratives and metanarratives easily enough. For example, evangelical Christians typically believe in heaven and hell. Depending on one's response and relation to Christ, one will wind up either in heaven or in hell when he dies. Evangelicals, therefore, reject the ideas that at death humans will be totally annihilated, that at death only those who know Christ as personal Savior will be given immortality while the rest are annihilated, or that at death all will be given heaven because a loving God could never punish any of his creatures forever.

These beliefs about heaven and hell, however, presuppose a larger story. That story involves beliefs that humans are sinners, Christ is the God-man, Christ died on Calvary to pay for our sins, and those who by faith turn from their sin and accept Christ as personal Savior will have a personal relationship with him. These beliefs form the metanarrative out of which the particular Christian narrative about heaven and hell comes. But we can also identify a grand metanarrative out of which beliefs about Christ, sin, and salvation grow. It is the story of our universe as created and sustained by the God of the Scriptures. As sovereign, he also has the right to institute a system of moral governance in this universe and to demand that his creatures be subject to his moral standards. This grand metanarrative of ours as a theistic universe with God as moral governor undergirds both Judaism and Christianity. From this most fundamental narrative, Christians move to the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ as the God-man. Christians further add biblical teaching about the relation of human beings to God as moral judge. Typically, they appeal to the fall of the human race into sin and our continued sinfulness as the basis of our need for a redeemer. At that point in Christian thinking, the Christian story about God, Christ, and humanity in its sinfulness can be linked together to present the Christian doctrine of salvation. Part of the plan of salvation involves each person's eternal destiny, and that, of course, is the signal for Christians to offer their teaching on heaven and hell.

The preceding description is just an example of various narratives and metanarratives and their relation to one another; there are many other

metanarratives. My reason for introducing this should now be clear. A set of ideas or a worldview that is foundational (in the second sense of foundationalism) to one's thinking and action is clearly a metanarrative—perhaps even a grand metanarrative. Moderns in general have little aversion to any type of foundationalism, including those types which employ metanarratives. As we shall see, however, postmoderns reject all forms of foundationalism and are incredulous about all metanarratives.¹⁸

Realism, Objectivity, and Truth

How can moderns be so sanguine about reason's ability to know the world aright? And how can they be sure that sense perception actually allows us to have contact with the world outside the mind? These are questions not only about the intellectual and sensory equipment with which humans are born, but also about whether there is a real world outside our minds and whether humans, with our "equipment," can get at the actual world, assuming that there is one external to the mind.

In reply, I note initially that moderns are invariably realists. A realist is "someone who thinks that there is an *objective, mind-independent reality* to be known, and that the beliefs that we come to hold about the world represent (or fail to represent) the world 'as it is'."¹⁹ Thus, with respect to persons and objects, insofar as such persons and objects exist, they do so independently of our thought, language, and experience.²⁰ An anti-realist holds just the opposite view.

In spite of believing in realism, and even if realism is correct, what hope is there that we can know how things actually are in the world? Won't our conceptual grid with its presuppositions and preferences get in the way of our seeing things correctly? Moderns reply that it is possible to connect to the world around us and to know it accurately because the mind can function objectively.²¹ We must be careful, however, to understand what this does and does not mean. It does not mean that we can know the world as a thing-in-itself. To know some object without at least some involvement of the knower is impossible. Nor does it mean that we must revert to a pre-Kantian epistemology that sees the mind as a passive mirror. We can grant with Kant that both subject and object are active in the knowing process. Nor does objectivity mean that humans' presuppositions, preferences, and experiences cannot get in the way of their seeing the world aright.

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Sometimes we do allow those preferences to guide our observations and rational reflections so that we misidentify what we are seeing or hearing and misunderstand the concepts we are handling. What moderns mean by saying that objective knowledge is possible is that it is possible to identify and set aside our biases and preferences so that when we observe the world or reflect on concepts and arguments, we can know them aright. The fact that our mind with its conceptual grid is involved does not make it inevitable that we treat data unfairly or that we make intellectual judgments about matters of fact arbitrarily or based solely on emotion rather than reason.

Moderns believe that there are brute facts which are not theory-laden by our preferences and theories. There is the “given” world about us, that is, the world as it is apart from anything we think or sense about it. So the nature of the world won’t “get in the way” of our attaining accurate knowledge of it. Moreover, despite our past experiences and the cultures and contexts in which we were raised, it is still possible to set presuppositions aside, observe the world around us, and without bias intruding, make accurate judgments about what we are seeing. So, human minds need not “get in the way” of attaining accurate knowledge. Moreover, these mental capacities belong to all humans, not to just a few, and the world is observable by all. Hence, if someone misidentifies an object or event in the world or is mistaken in what he or she believes, enough evidence for or against a viewpoint is available to all, so that we can correct our mistakes with the help of others.

For moderns, then, objectivity is possible, and is most clearly seen in science. The fact that science works with data of the tangible world and uses an observational method that everyone can use to confirm or disconfirm scientific conclusions seems to guarantee objectivity. Of course, errors are still possible, and given the demand to justify beliefs ultimately by beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, it was granted that some might hold beliefs that are not justifiable by such criteria. But the predominant mood through much of the modern period has been that it is possible to be objective in our handling of data and to know what is true of our world.

With these beliefs about knowledge, it follows that moderns believe there is truth, and for them the predominant theory of truth is the correspondence theory. According to this theory, propositional truth is a rela-

tion between language and our world. What we say about the world is said to correspond to or match what is true of the world. Moreover, moderns believe it is possible to know what is true by means of our rational and sensory faculties, and this is so for all people.

Any human being can use his or her intellectual faculties to reach a correct conclusion about our world. And what is correct in one person's judgment will be correct according to others. We don't need to think of truth as relative to each person's perspective, for we all can know the same truth. Hence, it makes sense to talk about absolute truth, i.e., propositions that are true for all people at all times. This is not to say that we are absolutely certain about everything we know, but only that absolute truth is possible and that many of us do know things that are absolutely true. Of course, to hold that there is absolute truth and that we can know it must be understood against the backdrop of a foundationalist theory of knowledge. That is, if there are many propositions that are true in a correspondence sense of truth, that also means that those claims we deem true must and do meet foundationalist criteria for proper basicity. Hence, many things we believe about our world are either basic beliefs or are non-basic beliefs which are ultimately supported by basic beliefs.

Theory of Meaning and Essentialism

Nancey Murphy and James McClendon argue that a further characteristic of modern epistemology is its emphasis on a representational or referential theory of language. According to such theories, words and sentences (or for some theories, the proposition a sentence is about²²) refer to objects, actions, and events. Their meaning is what they refer to. For example, the meaning of the word 'Parthenon' (i.e., what the word refers to) is the building, known as the Parthenon, which is situated atop the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. Typically, the referential theory in question considers that meaning invariant. Hence, it is possible to talk about the "essence" of the meaning of a given word, and one can draw clear boundaries between the meanings of different words. As Murphy and McClendon show, this sort of theory also fits very nicely with a theory of knowledge that says beliefs are to be justified in terms of more basic beliefs. Beliefs can be shown true by seeing that the things they refer to are true of the world.

But what happens with this sort of theory if a sentence doesn't name

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or picture something empirically observable? Does the sentence have any meaning? While theories like the logical positivists' verification theory of meaning concluded that such sentences are meaningless, not every theory agreed. Some philosophers of language argued that those sentences do have meaning, but not a meaning that refers to some object or state of affairs in the world. Rather, these sentences express either the speaker's emotional reaction or intentions to act in a certain way.²³ For example, "God is love" does not refer to anything that can be verified by empirical observation, but it is still meaningful. On an emotivist account of language it might mean nothing more than "I like God" or "I think God is nice." Another "expressivist" theory of language is what R. B. Braithwaite calls a conative theory. In this case, the sentence expresses the utterer's intention to act a certain way. Thus, "God is love" might mean that the speaker intends to act in a loving, agapeistic way.²⁴

The main point for our purposes, however, is that for many moderns, their theory of meaning was referential in nature. Such a theory fits with modern views about our ability to connect to the world, treat data objectively, and determine what is invariably true for all people at all times.

THEMES IN POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

While many moderns trust reason and believe in absolute truth that is discoverable by objective reflection on data from sense perception as well as from *a priori* reasoning, some postmoderns also espouse some of these views. However, postmodern epistemology in its most well-known forms offers a different perspective on knowledge. Actually, the term 'postmodernity' has been attached to many different trends in various fields like art and architecture,²⁵ literary criticism and interpretation, epistemology, politics, etc. It goes without saying that in each of these fields there are varieties of postmodern viewpoints. When it comes to postmodern epistemology in its more radical forms, perhaps a good place to begin is Jean-François Lyotard's claim about postmodernity in general that "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."²⁶ David Griffin's characterization of some major philosophical themes of the most negative forms of postmodernism is also helpful. He writes,

Philosophical postmodernism is inspired variously by pragmatism, physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida

and other recent French thinkers. By the use of terms that arise out of particular segments of this movement, it can be called *deconstructive* or *eliminative postmodernism*. It overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence. While motivated in some cases by the ethical concern to forestall totalitarian systems, this type of postmodern thought issues in relativism, even nihilism. It could also be called *ultramodernism*, in that its eliminations result from carrying modern premises to their logical conclusions.²⁷

This description is most apt for deconstructive postmodernism, but it hints at several themes that are broadly true of the postmodern mood. These statements by Lyotard and Griffin are very helpful, but we must say more.²⁸ Of course between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries there were many epistemological skeptics, and while skeptics and relativists have become more vocal in the late twentieth century and the new millennium, it would be wrong to think such epistemological trends stem only from the middle of the twentieth century onward. As noted in introducing modernity, intellectual trends and labels don't always fit into neatly defined historical eras. Even so, we can distinguish various trends in postmodern epistemology. While some in our day are still ensconced in a modern epistemological mind-set, and while some more moderate postmoderns seem very much like moderns in their epistemology, we can still distinguish certain themes in postmodern epistemology in some of its more radical forms.

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Skepticism about Reason

As we saw when discussing modern epistemology, Descartes searched for an indubitable truth upon which to build knowledge. He believed that the *cogito* is that one certain truth, and proceeded from that foundational truth to structure a worldview of propositions he believed were certainly true. Postmoderns roundly reject Descartes's claims to certain knowledge, but they go even further. Postmoderns are in general very skeptical about reason. On the one hand, they doubt that humans are in a position to know what is true of reality outside the mind. Kant distinguished between things-in-themselves and things-for-us, that is, things as they appear to us, but at

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least he and many after him believed that we can know things as they appear to us, and that the way they appear to us gives an accurate reflection of the world external to the mind. Postmoderns agree that we can't know things-in-themselves, but further believe that we should be skeptical about whether our knowledge claims accurately reflect the world around us. As we shall see, there is reason to doubt that sense perception is accurate. On the other hand, even if one thinks humans can get in touch with the world outside their minds, that in no way guarantees the correct handling of the information that floods into their minds through the senses. We might misidentify what we think we are seeing, or we might rationally infer from information that comes to us things about reality that just aren't warranted or true.²⁹

Anti-Realism

So, postmoderns are skeptical about whether our mental and sensory equipment function properly. But this is not the only reason postmoderns are suspicious of claims to know how things “really are” in the world. Even if humans were much less inclined to mishandle data that the mind collects, that still wouldn't allow us to know the world as it is, for it is dubious that any of us has contact with the world as it is independent of our minds. That is, postmoderns are typically anti-realists. To repeat Michael Murray's description, a realist is “someone who thinks that there is an *objective, mind-independent reality* to be known, and that the beliefs that we come to hold about the world represent (or fail to represent) the world ‘as it is’.”³⁰ An anti-realist, then, is someone who holds just the opposite. That is, as Keith Yandell says about anti-realism with respect to persons and objects, such anti-realism is “the view that insofar as there are persons and physical objects, there [sic; should be “they”] are dependent on our experience, thought and language.”³¹ Though one might be a realist or anti-realist in regard to some things but not all, “contemporary anti-realists typically are anti-realists about everything.”³² This is certainly the case for many postmoderns.³³

Language as Constitutive of Reality

But why should there be so much skepticism about human ability to know the world around us? And why, in particular, would postmoderns think that we have so little, if any, contact with the world outside of our minds? And what do such views mean about our understanding of what truth is,

whether we can know it, and whether there is any such thing as absolute truth? The answers to all of these and like questions take us in a dramatically different direction from that taken by modern epistemology.

To begin to answer these questions, we must remind ourselves of what has happened in Western philosophy over the last three hundred or so years. For a long time Western philosophers viewed the mind as relatively passive in the acquisition of knowledge of persons, objects, and states of affairs in the world outside the mind. Sensory data were thought to flood into the mind through the senses and were represented on the mind much as a mirror reflects the images before it. Gradually, philosophers grew to recognize that sense perception wasn't infallible. For example, if two people looked at a stick that was standing in a lake or river, both might see it as a bent stick, both might perceive it as straight, or each might see it differently than the other did. Even if both agreed, once the stick was removed from the water, they might discover that neither of them was correct in identifying what they saw. Despite these facts about sense perception, philosophers still held a rather positive view of the mind's ability to grasp reality aright as it was "mirrored" on the mind.

With the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, a major shift occurred in our understanding of the mind's interaction with the world. Kant argued that the acquisition of knowledge was not merely a matter of the object being mirrored on the passive mind. Rather, both subject and object are active in the knowing process. As data enter the mind through the senses, the mind, in virtue of various transcendental categories inherent in it, makes judgments about what the person sees. It decides what sort of thing presents itself to the knower, what its size and shape are, how many objects are before it, and whether and how the various objects causally interact with one another and even with the knower. Kant argued that though everyone is born with these transcendental (i.e., not in the empirical world itself but inherent to each person's mind) categories, one must still use one's intellectual equipment to learn various concepts, and once a concept is learned, it can be used to identify a specific object the person perceives.

The point is easy enough to illustrate. No one is born with the concepts of a dog, a cat, a cow, a horse, a chair, etc., imprinted on their minds. Instead, using the intellectual and perceptual equipment we all have, we are ready to interact with the world. As we interact, we see many things we

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don't understand. Typically, a family member will point to a family pet and say, "That's a dog." When the child plays with the neighborhood children, some of those children will have a cat. The first child, using the concept of a dog that he has learned, may point to the neighbor's cat and call it a dog. Undoubtedly, those who hear this will correct the child and point out some key differences between dogs and cats.

In this way, any given individual acquires concepts of any number of objects, events, actions, etc. Those concepts become parts of the person's noetic structure. Given this conceptual grid, the person, in virtue both of the Kantian categories and of the acquired concepts of various things, is now ready to confront the world and make judgments about what she experiences. Because she has the concepts of dogs, cats, and many other things, when she encounters a cat she has never seen before, she identifies it as a cat, not a dog, a rabbit, a rodent, or a goldfish (she knows those concepts, too).³⁴

Kant also distinguished between things-in-themselves and things as they appear to us. We can never know things as they are in themselves, but only as they appear to us. Now, given Kantian doctrines about how subject and object relate and function in the knowing process, plus his avowal that we can know things only as they appear to us, one might be inclined to think that Kant and his followers were quite skeptical about the mind's ability to know, learn, and persuade others that reality matches what they perceive it to be. However, this was not the case initially.

Many Western philosophers after Kant, though agreeing that both mind and object are active in the knowing relation, were still rather optimistic about the mind's ability to know the world aright. The picture of the mind as the mirror of nature was so ingrained in philosophical thinking that it was very hard to jettison. But it was only a matter of time until philosophers really began to take seriously the implications of Kantian epistemology.

Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was a very influential book in moving philosophers to embrace the implications of the mind's not passively being the mirror of nature. Rorty argued that for several hundred years after Descartes, philosophy has been held captive by this picture of knowledge that holds that various ideas are represented on that mirror (the mind), and then the individual compares those ideas with the world outside the mind. By these empirical and rational processes, one can ultimately support one's beliefs and so provide a foundation for knowledge.

But Rorty argues that this is just not how the mind works. He explains the thesis of his work as follows:

It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and Kant—getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror, so to speak—would not have made sense.³⁵

It is this picture, according to Rorty, that must be rejected. But what does one put in its place? If the world isn't just "given" to each of us in its pristine objectivity and then mirrored upon our minds, how do we contact reality outside our minds, and construct an accurate view of the world around us? Postmodern skepticism answers that we don't touch the world around us unmediated by anything between our minds and the world. Rather, it is through our language that we construct our understanding of the world. And we do not first contact the world and then apply our language to it. Rather, we bring our language with us whenever we confront the world. As noted above, without concepts of some things already formed, we couldn't identify particular instances of the thing designated by the concept when we encounter one of them. But if that is so, then we bring our language with us on every occasion of interacting with the world. Of course, it is crucial to remember that our concepts and the very language we use to convey them are embedded in our social context. That is, we are all members of some linguistic community, and each community has not only its own language but also its own culture, etc. Moreover, in addition to having lived in a given linguistic community, each of us has had our own specific experiences as we grew up and then went about our business as adults. Our linguistic community, our conceptual grid, and our past experiences influence how we understand our world and interact with things around us. And, according to postmoderns, it is impossible for us to set aside all of our presuppositions, preferences, etc., and just see the world as it is. In essence, it is our language that constitutes our view of the world.

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Of course, there are many different languages in our world today, and each construction of reality will incorporate the nuances of the language and culture that are specific to each language, but not to all.³⁶

In our day, it is truly disconcerting to see how widespread is the notion that we construct through our language the world as we know it. Perhaps you have seen the motion picture *The Matrix*. This is an overtly postmodern movie, one that is immensely popular among many of our contemporaries. Those who have seen it will undoubtedly remember what the matrix is. Early in the film we see video footage of various contemporary American cities. We are familiar with these photos, so we believe that the video just pictures things as they are. However, we are then told that the matrix is in fact humans' construction of the world and reality around us as we know it. The message is clear: what we are seeing in the film is not objective reality but rather a certain portrait of contemporary life constructed by human beings. We aren't told that the matrix is not the same as how things really are, but throughout the film that is the repeated impression we are given, especially by the video sequences that show the characters in burned out buildings and land that is laid waste, sequences that make it clear that such portraits aren't portraits of the matrix. If that is so, and if the matrix is the world as we have mentally constructed it, the implication seems clear enough that the scenes of demolished and ruined cities and landscapes are what is actually real.

One might wonder, however, why anyone would understand language in this way. In addition to what has already been said about the role of the mind and its conceptual grid (which of course involves language), the answer also involves a particular theory of *how* words and sentences mean, i.e., a theory of meaning. As we saw when discussing modernity, many moderns basically hold the view Rorty calls the mind as the mirror of nature, and they believe that it is possible to contact and know what is happening in the world outside the mind. We noted as well that typical of modernity is some theory of meaning that is heavily, if not exclusively, referential in nature. And that makes sense, because if we are able to contact objective reality and know what is true of it, we should be able to represent in our language what is mirrored on our mind about the world. Hence, individual words attach to various objects, events, and actions in our world, and those things in the world are the meaning of our words. Sentences typically de-

scribe states of affairs in our world, and those states of affairs, as referents to our various sentences about the world, are the meaning of those sentences. With such a theory of meaning, the meaning of individual words and sentences is deemed to be invariant. Hence, it is possible to state “the essence,” so to speak, of a word’s meaning.

Postmoderns have a decidedly different account of meaning. Many of them take their cue from the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, it is safe to say that what they have done with Wittgenstein’s doctrines goes beyond what he said and likely held as his own view. In his earlier work (represented by the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*), Wittgenstein held a strongly referential theory of meaning. However, he later came to see that language is much more complex than any referential theory would suggest. In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argued that words (and even sentences) are used in so many different ways in various contexts that it is impossible to state *the* meaning of a given term. Rather, what a word, phrase, or sentence means depends on how it is used in a given situation.

Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning, as incorporated and defended in his later works, involves two main things. First, he saw language as a complex of language-games. A language-game is a complete way of doing one kind of activity or another. As such it involves both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior. A given language-game covers a particular way people use language to do one thing or another; hence a language-game is a “form of life” (a way that humans do a given activity).³⁷ Hence, we can talk about the language-games of science, philosophy, literature, theology, and religious expression. Each language-game is governed by its own rules and has its own criteria and test for truth (if truth is a matter at issue in a given language-game). For Wittgenstein these language-games are logically independent of one another, so, for example, the test for truth in one language-game (as well as the procedures for discovering truth in that game) is not necessarily the same as in another language-game.³⁸ For example, criteria of truth and procedures for determining true or false propositions in the language-game of mathematics are significantly different from those used in a physical science like biology or botany. While various language-games may have a “family” resemblance to other games, each is logically distinct.

As to how many language-games there are, Wittgenstein claimed that they are innumerable, and their number is not constant, for there are always

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new ways that language can be used in one context or another to communicate.³⁹ In light of this notion of language as a complex of language-games, a purely referential theory of meaning seems inadequate. Indeed, Wittgenstein saw things that way and hence proposed a use theory of meaning. According to this theory, the meaning of any word or sentence is a function of its use in a language-game. Words are to be compared to tools in a toolbox, and any given tool can be used to do a number of different things. Similarly, words have this multiple function.⁴⁰ Given the flexibility of what words may mean, there can be no talk of the “essence” of a word’s meaning, as though the word referred only and always to one thing alone. Wittgenstein also granted that how a word is used may change from time to time. Certain uses may come into existence, while others go out of use. It is purely a matter of social convention as to which uses of a word will be acceptable at a given time and in a specific culture. Think, for example, of the phenomenon of slang. Uses of language in slang go in and out of style; moreover, the linguistic community over time learns which uses of a term are intended as slang and which are not. To illustrate this point, consider the many uses of the English word ‘head’ in the following sentences: “Go to the head of the class and write your answer on the chalkboard”; “Sally was named valedictorian, because she was the head of her graduating class”; “If you’re ever in a jam, count on Jim for help, because he will always keep a cool head under fire”; “My head hurts from trying to read my book without enough light on it”; “You should meet my friend Joe; I’m sure you’d like him, because he’s a real cool head.” I could go further, but I think the point is clear enough. There are many ways to use language, and some of these uses of the word ‘head’ are in vogue now and others aren’t. Language’s meaning is not invariant.

Now, it is very interesting to see how many postmoderns have picked up ideas from Wittgenstein’s views on meaning and applied them to their own use. Postmoderns, rejecting any referential theory of meaning according to which words represent things in our world, have adopted a use theory of meaning but have taken it to mean that words point only to other words, not to the world. They also affirm that word meaning is a product of the conventions of the linguistic community involved and hence can be changed at the whim and wish of the community. Some postmoderns have even concluded that how a community uses words and sentences is a matter of arbitrary choice.

In adopting such a stance, postmoderns have gone beyond what Wittgenstein actually held. It is true that the way language is used in various circumstances is largely a matter of societal conventions, but Wittgenstein never said that because of this, the choice of which words to use to say one thing or another is totally arbitrary. More importantly, however, he never rejected the referential element of language. Though he claimed that words and sentences could be used in various language-games to mean different things, still in each instance a word, phrase, or sentence did refer to something in the world beyond our language. It's just that the word, phrase, or sentence didn't forever have to refer to one and only one thing. Such a theory is clearly a use theory of meaning, but even a use theory says more than that language refers only to other language and never gets us to the world. Nonetheless, many postmoderns have thought that a use theory of meaning had to remove entirely any reference and representation beyond language.

As to Wittgenstein's concept of language as a complex of language-games, postmoderns have adopted much of what Wittgenstein held, but even here they have somewhat gone beyond him. Postmoderns have especially focused on the logical independence of each language-game and the claim that each language-game has its own rules and procedures. Accordingly, some language-games might talk about truth, but it is truth according to the kind of language-game involved, and hence not necessarily truth in the sense of language matching our world. Moreover, the nature of some language-games is such that they don't involve truth at all. For example, Wittgenstein held that religious language-games are not games in which one makes assertions of facts that are testable in one way or another. Hence, it cannot be legitimate to ask whether a religion's doctrines are true or not (in a correspondence sense), or to ask which religion is "the true religion." Religious claims can be used to state one's preference for a certain kind of activity (e.g., "It's a sin to steal" doesn't assert that stealing something is actually morally wrong; it just shows that the one who makes such a claim doesn't like stealing—or more to the point, being robbed), one's intentions to act in a certain way, or even one's sense of being at peace and feeling safe in the world because of one's picture of the world as run by an all-loving God (having such a feeling of security doesn't arise, however, because of constructing an evidential case which proves that one's theistic worldview matches what is true of our world).⁴¹

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Postmoderns find especially attractive the notion that each language-game has its own rules and procedures, and defines truth in its own way. They have moved beyond such claims, however, to argue that these Wittgensteinian doctrines support their claim that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Rather, what is true and how truth is even defined varies from person to person and from language-game to language-game. Moreover, there just isn't some "super" language-game which governs all other language-games and defines a sense of truth that applies to all language-games. There is only a multiplicity of language-games, and truth is relative to each game. Though it might seem that such a conclusion about truth is an inevitable result of Wittgenstein's teachings about language-games, I think this is an instance where postmoderns have gone beyond Wittgenstein. If asked, Wittgenstein might have agreed with the way postmoderns use his notion of language-games, but he certainly doesn't say in his *Philosophical Investigations* that his views make truth entirely relative. There are places in the *Investigations* where he talks about certainty and notes that one can have certainty both in the language-games of math and logic as well as in other language-games that deal more directly with empirical reality.⁴² Moreover, while language-games that deal with matters of empirical reality such as science do have their own procedures and criteria for truth, Wittgenstein nowhere suggests that we should be skeptical about most scientific or historical propositions taken to be true, just because they are part of one language-game and not of all or even of many. In both the *Investigations* and his *On Certainty*, there is plenty of evidence that he believed that there are many propositions that are certainly true and make no sense to doubt. And he held that this was so not just for some people at one time and place in history, but for all. Yes, such propositions come from a particular language-game which is distinct from others, but in cases where the language-game allows one to make assertions about reality (i.e., statements about matters of fact), Wittgenstein never says that such claims are not or cannot be true in a correspondence sense of truth or that only people from one linguistic community should think such claims are true. So, in taking Wittgenstein's concept of language as a complex of language-games as evidence for the complete relativity of truth, I think postmoderns have gone well beyond the views presented in Wittgenstein's writings.

Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Truth

In light of what postmoderns say about the mind's construction of reality and the other doctrines discussed in the previous section, it comes as no surprise that postmoderns thoroughly reject the claim that one can know the world objectively and hence as it truly is. In fact, one of the complications that makes it dubious that there can be any objective knowledge about the world is the likelihood that humans cannot "get to that world," that is, see the world apart from our presuppositions and preferences which we all bring to our observation of the world. The point here is not simply Kant's claim that we cannot know things-in-themselves. Rather, even granting that we must know things as they appear to us, the postmodern claim is that our conceptual grid, which incorporates all our past experiences, presuppositions, and preferences, guarantees that we are distanced too far from the world to know whether the way we are seeing it has any similarity to the way it is. Kant believed that even though we could know things only as they appeared to us, the way they appeared was not likely so markedly different from the way they actually are that our knowledge claims are typically wrong. Postmoderns are far more pessimistic about this than Kant and other moderns.

Willard Van Orman Quine helps us to understand why postmoderns are so skeptical about our mind's and sensory organs' abilities to have contact with the world around us (and hence skeptical that our language can really match the way things are in the world). In his groundbreaking "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine rejected the idea that all meaningful discourse can be translated or reduced into language about immediate experience. This cannot be done with individual words or even whole sentences. Instead, the whole fabric of our knowledge confronts "the tribunal of experience." This does not mean, however, we have the ability to compare our beliefs objectively with experience to see if they match. Rather, Quine, as quoted in chapter 1 of this book, wrote that "The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, *is a man-made fabric* which impinges on experience only along the edges. . . . *No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field*, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole"⁴³ (italics mine).

If all our language is man-made, then the world is not simply mirrored

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on our minds, allowing us objectively to read off the results. Nor do our observations and reasoning “see things as they are.” What we claim to know is actually an interconnected web of beliefs that touch reality, experience, only at the borders of that web. But, our knowledge is underdetermined by experience. That is, experience and our contact with it are such that there simply isn’t enough evidence from experience for us to know which beliefs are true or false or whether our whole perspective on the world is right or wrong.

Quine very clearly rejects the “myth of the given,” the idea that the world is just there for us as a set of brute, theory-neutral facts which we can objectively know. Instead, what we see is our structuring of reality from the perspective of our own conceptual grid. Regardless of how distant or close the world is relative to our minds, postmoderns agree that we cannot know it objectively. As Jared Hiebert explains,

Knowledge and reality are not absolute, ordered and objective but are constructed. We create the world in which we live by forming our own concepts of reality, truth and knowledge. Nothing is fixed and definitively identifiable because we do not have an anchor point from which we can objectively view our world and by which we can structure our world. We can only view our world from the structures that we have brought to it.⁴⁴

John Macquarrie contends that this lack of objectivity is especially evident in disciplines such as history. He thinks the quest for the historical Jesus is a good example of this. Despite the nineteenth century and later, and the late-twentieth-century quest for facts about the historical Jesus, Macquarrie affirms that “the ‘objective facts’ can never be fully established. . . . In fact we can never get beyond reports, and even the earliest gospel (Mark) was written more than thirty years after the crucifixion, and must itself have had its origin in earlier reports, most or even all of them unwritten. So we must ask, ‘Is there anything except interpretation of interpretations . . . ?’”⁴⁵

While MacQuarrie fears that matters of historical fact can’t be objectively known, he doubts that many postmoderns hold views (like those of George Berkeley) in regard to the natural sciences that material things are in fact only ideas in our minds (Berkeley’s claim was “to be is to be perceived”).⁴⁶ MacQuarrie is probably correct, but we must not misunderstand the point. While postmoderns are not likely to adopt Berkeley’s form

of idealism, that doesn't mean that they think science is still dedicated to objectivity and is the one discipline that achieves it. In fact, one of the important elements in getting philosophers and other academicians (as well as ordinary people) to discard modern epistemology in favor of postmodern epistemology is the attack during the twentieth century on the objectivity of science. Today, many philosophers of science, for example, contend that science is just as fraught with theory-ladenness and subjectivity as anything else we purport to know.

One of the important elements in the attack on science's objectivity came from philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He argued that despite the widely held belief that science (of all disciplines) operates with pristine objectivity and no bias in handling data, that is not so. According to Kuhn, there are no theory-neutral observations and no brute facts in our world that await our objective inspection. Instead, scientists' observations are colored by their conceptual framework, a framework that comes from their life situation, training as scientists, and knowledge of current scientific theory. No matter how hard a scientist tries to put presuppositions aside, it is impossible to do so. Inevitably, observations of data are shaped by the scientist's language, concepts, training, and experience.⁴⁷

Kuhn distinguished what he called normal science and revolutionary science. Once a scientific paradigm like Newtonian physics is accepted, scientists work within that paradigm to explain the phenomena and data of the world. Their observations and conclusions are governed by the reigning theory. This sort of science is normal science. On the other hand, as scientists work within a paradigm, they notice certain data and concepts that don't quite fit the prevailing theory. At some point, anomalies with the current paradigm become so hard to overcome that it is scrapped in favor of a new paradigm. The switch, Kuhn argued, does not come from a long-reasoned process that deductively or inductively yields the new view, but instead comes suddenly, almost like a conversion experience. This is revolutionary science, and once the revolution ends, normal science works within the new paradigm.⁴⁸

In early years after Kuhn's proposal appeared, there were many critics,⁴⁹ but in recent decades, despite lingering criticism, Kuhn's basic claim that all observation and reasoning are theory-laden has been widely accepted.

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The implications of such views are devastating to the notion of objective knowledge. If even science cannot know or be trusted to tell us the truth about the world, what hope is there of finding truth (let alone convincing anyone of it) in more abstract disciplines?⁵⁰

From what I have already described in this and previous sections, post-moderns' understanding of truth likely comes as no surprise. The correspondence theory of truth has been the predominant notion of truth throughout the history of Western philosophy. According to this view, truth or falsity is a property of sentences that assert something about the world. If what the speaker or writer says about the world matches the way things are in the world, then the sentence is true in that it corresponds to the world. If what the sentence affirms does not match what we find in the world, the sentence is false. All of this makes an abundant amount of sense, and upon minimal reflection it seems clear that ordinary language presupposes the correspondence theory of truth. That is, what we attempt to do in our daily verbal interactions with others is say things that match what has happened or is true of the world.

All of this likely seems rather obvious, so it may at first seem a bit puzzling to hear that postmoderns typically reject the correspondence theory of truth. However, when we hear the reasons for doing so, their rejection becomes more understandable. Postmoderns reject the correspondence theory of truth for a variety of reasons. For one thing, all of us bring our conceptual grid with all of its presuppositions and preferences to the acquisition of knowledge. Those preferences are shaped by our experiences and by the linguistic community(ies) in which we were raised and have lived. As we learned from Kant, the mind is not passive in the knowing process. Given each person's background and conceptual grid, it is understandable that each will have his or her own perspective on any given topic, with no way to decide which perspective actually matches the way things in our world are. Douglas Groothuis describes the situation as postmoderns see it: "Our access to the territory of reality is through our language, which acts as a map. But we cannot check the map against the territory, since we can know nothing outside our language. Thus, language becomes a kind of prison of signifiers that can never connect with the signified outside of itself."⁵¹

Reading this, one might respond that this makes sense when dealing with abstract concepts, but not when dealing with claims about the mate-

rial, tangible world. Don't we, when reporting what we see, hear, touch, etc., come directly in contact with the world and, hence, experience it as it really is? If so, then why can't we talk about our language as corresponding to reality? James Danaher explains why the suppositions embodied in these questions are wrong. He explains that while it is true that each person has both intellectual and sensory equipment, "such equipment allows us to form language and ideas that reflect the perspectival nature of our experience."⁵²

But don't the brute facts of material reality confront each person equally? That is, aren't the brute facts universally available to all? Danaher replies that while they are universally available, that doesn't mean that all of us will understand them in the same way. Each of us has his or her own perspective, and that impacts how we judge what we experience in the world around us.⁵³ If this is so in relation to our judgments about what we experience in the physical world, how much more is there room for misunderstanding when we reflect upon abstract concepts!

Put a bit differently, the correspondence theory of truth seems to necessitate that the knower's mind has direct contact with the world outside the mind and doesn't distort anything it perceives. But, for that to be true, the mind would have to function as a passive mirror upon which sensory data are directly imprinted, unmediated by any conceptual framework with its presuppositions and preferences. But Kant taught us that the mind is not passive in the knowing process. Moreover, we can further see that our intellectual equipment allows us freedom to make judgments about what we experience and gives us the ability to make alternate concepts. It is that freedom of judgment and ability to create alternate concepts that "accounts for the different perspectival, historical, and cultural conceptualization of our experience."⁵⁴ Once and for all, the metaphor of the mind as passive mirror must be discarded. Danaher summarizes the situation as follows:

although there might be the possibility of a correspondence (inexact as it may be) between our ideas and the brute facts of the physical world, once those ideas of the brute facts are conceptualized, and organized into an understanding, there is no longer anything for them to correspond to. The physical world of raw experience only contains individual facts and no concepts to which our concepts might correspond. Thus, today the truth of our conceptual reality is often established on the basis of how well a

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certain conceptualization of the world offers a coherent picture of the world and/or how well a particular conceptualization yields the pragmatic consequences we value.⁵⁵

In light of these considerations, what do postmoderns believe about truth? From the preceding description, it is very clear that for them there can be no such thing as absolute truth, or if there is, no one is in a position to know what it is. Rather, each of us is left to his or her perspective, and we have no way to tell whose perspective is closer to or further from what is actually the case in our world. There just isn't any "God's-eye" perspective that allows us to judge, among finite perspectives, which one is closest to the truth. It would be wonderful if we could judge which of our claims match our world and which don't, but truth as correspondence simply is unavailable to us.

As a result, postmoderns typically adopt some form of the coherence theory of truth, the pragmatic theory of truth, or a combination of both. According to the former, what is true is the set of sentences that fit together without contradicting one another (think here of Quine's picture of an interconnected web of beliefs that may require readjusting some of its components for sake of logical consistency). According to the latter, what is true is what offers the most workable results when believed. Earlier pragmatists held that truth as correspondence was possible, but thought that for something to be true it should do more than just tell us that; it should guide us to beliefs and actions that have the most desirable results.⁵⁶ Postmodern pragmatists disagree about the matter of correspondence, for we cannot know what matches the world. The best each of us can do is choose beliefs that seem to work for him or her.⁵⁷

Anti-foundationalism, Rejection of Grand Metanarratives, and Perspectivism

One of the hallmarks of postmodern thinking is its rejection of foundationalism. In fact much of what I have described in the previous sections presupposes a rejection of foundationalism. Foundationalism is to be abandoned in at least two distinct respects. First, there is the rejection of epistemological foundationalism. Here Brian Trainor is very helpful in explaining why a foundation for knowledge was deemed necessary. Prior to Descartes's methodological doubt with a view to finding an indubitable truth from

which to build knowledge, medieval thinking saw a connectedness between “Reason” and “Nature.” “‘Nature’ was understood or experienced as an ordering, enveloping, unifying process which assigned to each species, including the human, its proper place in the natural or divine—but, at any rate intelligible—scheme of things.”⁵⁸ Reasoning was typically understood as a way to participate in the “life” of an all-encompassing “Nature.” With Descartes reason became disconnected, unhinged from the cosmic order, which order is no longer seen as intrinsically rational.⁵⁹ Trainor explains the result as follows:

The medieval view is decisively rejected: the modernist attitude is to regard the view that Divine Reason percolates through the entire cosmic order, (including the reasoning of man* as an integral part of that order) as unscientific and unsustainable, as no more indeed than a relic of medieval anthropomorphism that deserves to perish in an age of scientific enlightenment. The cost is high, however, for the ‘real’ cosmic order of medieval thought, an order of interconnected essences and real kinds, becomes replaced under the banner of enlightenment and scientific progress with the modernist mathematical universe of matter-in-motion inhabited by Galileo, Descartes and Hobbes. At any rate, from its inception, when it set ‘reason’ adrift in the universe, a virtually constant feature of modernity has been its attempt to find some kind of secure foundation for human thought, or to somehow come to grips with its declared absence.⁶⁰

In describing modernity, I presented the basic notion of foundationalism. Epistemological foundationalism, especially in its classical form, has come under increasing attack over the last thirty to forty years. A major complaint is that if classical foundationalism’s criteria for proper basicity are accepted, then foundationalism should be rejected. Classical foundationalism held that beliefs must be supportable ultimately by beliefs that are either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. But none of these three criteria is either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, nor are they supported by other more basic beliefs that meet those requirements. Hence, no one should adopt foundationalism.

In place of foundationalism, postmoderns most typically adopt a coherentist theory of knowledge. Whereas foundationalism portrays knowledge as a building or a pyramid which ultimately rests on indubitable foundations, according to coherentism, beliefs still must be justified by other beliefs, but

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no beliefs are more basic than any other. Nor are any beliefs directly in touch with experience outside the mind in a way that would confirm them as self-evident or indubitable. This is especially so if one agrees with Quine's claim that no particular experiences are linked with *any particular statements* (beliefs) within the web of our beliefs. Hence, we are free to reevaluate any statement we like and make adjustments in other statements for the sake of logical consistency in the "overall story" we tell, but that does not mean we are in a position to know or prove that the whole story (or even individual statements within it) match(es) the world. Instead of portraying knowledge as a building, knowledge is now described as a web or net of interconnected beliefs. Such a view is often called a "holistic" theory of knowledge.⁶¹

Postmoderns also reject foundationalism in a second sense. The term 'foundationalism' is often used to refer to any belief, set of beliefs, or worldview which is taken to be beyond critique. A foundational set of beliefs (in this sense) is typically assumed true and not necessarily demonstrated as such, but all other beliefs are judged in light of their conformity or lack thereof to the foundational viewpoint. As noted in the previous section, all human knowledge is deemed as time- and culture-bounded. No one has a "God's-eye" view of the nature of reality. Moreover, if it is really impossible to contact the external world unmediated by our conceptual grid with its presuppositions, it stands to reason that none of us is in a position to show that her or his view is the "correct" one. And if that is the case, then no viewpoint can be foundational in the second sense defined in this paragraph. No viewpoint can be beyond critique or have privileged status. This is so whether we are talking about a whole worldview or specific elements within a given position.

If one rejects foundationalism in this second sense, one implicitly agrees that no religion, no worldview, and no concept is better than any other in telling us the nature of the world around us. Individual ideas or whole systems of thought can be judged only as to how well they fit or don't fit with the basic understanding of reality a given person holds. If all of this is so, then the only reasonable approach to life is to be tolerant of all people and all points of view. There is no point in trying to defend one's religion as better than others, nor is there any need to try to convert others to a given religion. All that we can talk about is how our religion has met our own needs, if it has, but then everyone else can offer a similar testimony, regard-

less of which religion they espouse. No religion or worldview has privileged status as exempt from critique and as governing everything else we think.

Rejecting foundationalism in this second sense seems to make witnessing for Christ and defending the Christian faith inappropriate, unwelcome, and useless. It also seems to lead to nihilism, where anything or nothing can be believed. Many trace such a rejection of foundationalism back to Nietzsche, and fear that if we agree we will fall prey to the nihilism that many believe is central to Nietzsche's philosophy. While it is appropriate to trace anti-foundationalism in this second sense to Nietzsche, and while he does speak of nihilism, some have argued that Nietzsche didn't embrace nihilism himself. Rather, he used the fear of nihilism as grounds for the "Overman" to make his own rules and impose his own point of view on reality. Ken Gemes is helpful in relation to these issues; he writes,

Now Nietzsche, as postmodernists rightly observe, is a destroyer of all kinds of foundationalisms. They are right to interpret this as the force behind Nietzsche's madman's proclamation of the death of God. . . . It is not simply the Christian world-view that is at stake here but all notions of an external authority that might provide some ultimate guarantor of beliefs. But postmodernists are wrong to take this rejection of the notion of an external, transcendent authority as a rejection of all authority. The postmodern rejection of all authority, all principle of order among the competing modes of representation, presents the very Nihilism that Nietzsche predicts, and warns against, as a natural result of the defeat of dogmatism. For Nietzsche there is still room for an immanent authority, an authority that comes from within.⁶²

Regardless of one's views about Nietzsche's philosophy, the point is rather clear. No viewpoint is "the" legitimizing viewpoint which isn't open to review and critique. The implications of this point are quite significant, for societies throughout history have taken some worldview as the most basic understanding of reality and have structured the various aspects of life as a society governed by this fundamental viewpoint. Now we are told by postmoderns that there is no place for such grand, overarching "stories" around which society should be lived. As quoted from Lyotard at the outset of our discussion on postmodernity, "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."⁶³ A metanarrative is a story about reality that is used to legitimize a particular way of thinking

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and acting. Lyotard argues that in premodern societies there were conventions about who would tell the story and who must listen. Of course, this allowed those in power to repeat the account of reality that kept them in power. In the modern era, there are still narratives, but they must be legitimized. For moderns, science legitimizes and verifies the account of reality offered. This seems to free people from the authoritarian oppression of the premodern, but what actually happens is that science depends on a narrative of its own, a certain story about how we attain, verify, and falsify beliefs. Lyotard argues that this metanarrative, too, is authoritarian, and must be rejected. What takes its place? Lyotard answers that there is no grand narrative, no big picture that makes sense of everything. There are only our individual narratives, our individual perceptions of reality as we see it.⁶⁴

Clearly, each language-game and each society has its own metanarratives. In fact it is normal and to be expected that any society will “tell its story” of why social, political, religious, etc., aspects of life are structured the way they are in that particular society. Postmoderns, therefore, do not reject metanarratives completely. Rather, they reject any grand narrative, a story that attempts to give an account of all of reality and to legitimize that account as correct. And, they also reject any lesser metanarrative that anyone or any group would treat as foundational (and hence uncontested) to the way some aspect of life is carried out in a particular society.

In light of what has been said about anti-realism, anti-objectivity, the notion of truth, etc., the rejection of grand narratives and of lesser narratives that are given a privileged position should surprise no one. Moreover, it fits extremely well with the perspectivism that typifies postmodern thinking. That is, since none of us has access to absolute truth (assuming that there is such a thing), we are necessarily left to hold our particular perspective on the world. And, of course, that perspective is simply one of many different “takes” on reality. No individual perspective is “the” correct one; at most we can say that a given perspective fits better or worse with what we have found to be the best way to conduct our lives in this world. As such it is “true” for us, but not true absolutely!⁶⁵

Relativism, Hermeneutics of Suspicion, and Deconstruction

From what I have already described, it should be very clear that postmodernism involves a commitment to relativism (or as Henriksen calls it,

“plurality”). Henriksen agrees with German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch that plurality or relativism is the key issue in postmodernity. It stems from the recognition that “there is no neutral, commonly valid or acceptable description of the world.”⁶⁶ These are all familiar themes, and relativism does logically follow from postmodern acceptance of such themes as anti-realism; anti-foundationalism; rampant subjectivity without the possibility of objective, absolute truth; and the construction of one’s worldview on the basis of one’s conceptual grid as formed by his or her language community, life experiences, and presuppositions.

Henriksen offers two points of elaboration from Welsch and adds a third himself. First, Welsch distinguishes plurality at the surface and “the deep and basic plurality that is rooted in what he calls *basic differences*.”⁶⁷ The point is that some things that appear to be different at first glance, at a closer look turn out to be variations on the same thing. An example would be various Christian denominations and churches which have some surface differences, but at root have more in common than not. On the other hand, while there are some similarities between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (all three are monotheistic religions), at a deeper level there are some basic differences that would make unity between any or all of them impossible. Views which are at root genuinely different engender what Welsch calls hard pluralism. Of this type of pluralism, Henriksen explains that it “is the pluralism that has no hope of being reconciled, a pluralism that, if you try to overcome it, will imply the violation of the identity of that which you try to reconcile.”⁶⁸

Welsch’s second point in elaborating the results of this relativism or plurality is that since there are many different ways of understanding our world and various perspectives from which to understand it, each person should resist the temptation to stick with only one way of making sense of reality. Instead, we should “constantly try to overcome, criticise, make more complete and transcend what is given, by moving towards something new. The past and the given have no inherent and final normativity, nothing that *secures* its authority in the contemporary cultural situation.”⁶⁹

Henriksen thinks Welsch’s definition of postmodernity is fine as far as it goes, but Henriksen thinks something further should be added. There is another side to plurality which Henriksen identifies with the following thesis:

All cultural expressions contribute to the articulation—and thereby the construction—of those parts of reality that only exist due to our

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understanding, i.e., the cultural sphere. Hence, the articulation of culture (in the wide sense of the word) constitutes the reality that is articulated. *The cultural reality appears as a construction by humans.*⁷⁰

Henriksen notes that an implication of this added thesis leads us to see that “none of our expressions of self-understanding need to be what they are, and that they could be otherwise. . . . As long as we can construct otherwise, we will have plurality.”⁷¹ When one combines Welsch’s and Henriksen’s insights, Henriksen believes it becomes easier to understand some key postmodern themes. He shows the relation to six key postmodern notions.

First, postmodernism’s rejection of a common human rationality fits with the insight that “we reconstruct different forms of rationality according to specific interests, needs and concerns.”⁷² It is just impossible to get beyond the fact that each of us lives in and is conditioned by his or her own culture, which has its own way of interpreting things and communicating about the world. Second, the previous point also implies “that contingency and contextuality are a corollary of the lack of common rationality.”⁷³ From one society to the next, nothing has to be the way it is; social understanding and conventions could be different than they are at any given time and place. Third, the contextual nature of our understanding of reality also implies perspectivism. As Henriksen explains, “since we have different concerns, interests, etc., these also give us the perspectives by which we construct our pictures of the world and the patterns of meaning we need.”⁷⁴

Points one through three above lead to the realization that we must accept relativism, even when and if it yields conflicting, disturbing, and contradicting viewpoints. Since all viewpoints are contingent and don’t encompass everything, it follows that each needs to be supplemented by other constructions of reality.⁷⁵ Henriksen adds a fifth point, to the effect that the constructive nature of reason and understanding “leads to a reflexivity that affirms how nothing can be taken at face value, but must be seen also as a part of a larger cultural current of which it is a part.”⁷⁶ Finally, when we recognize that our cultures are our own constructions, we realize as well that we also have the possibility, if we so choose, “to reconstruct patterns, constructions, rationalities in the light of other insights, thereby not only contributing to the multiplicity of constructions . . . , but also amplifying the experience of plurality and contingency.”⁷⁷ Hence, relativism should not be feared or rejected, but rather embraced. Given our limited perspec-

tives, we really have no other choice, but it is a path we should gladly accept rather than decrying the possibility that, with relativism, no one really knows what line of thought or action is correct (if “correct” means absolutely true for all people at all times and places).⁷⁸

If relativism is the order of the day, then any institution, any document, any system of thought that claims to be (or to be founded on) absolute truth must be suspect. For example, postmoderns who are feminists often remind us that Western cultures have been built on the foundation of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Those Scriptures present a world order in which men are in charge and women are excluded from power. Since the Bible claims to be divinely inspired, it is often argued that putting men in positions of power in the home, society, and the church is the expressed will of God in Scripture, and hence societies can be constructed to please God only when they are centered on male supremacy.

But if postmoderns are right about every culture at all times constructing their societies from their own perspective, then no society can claim to have absolute truth. Moreover, the various books of the Bible are to be seen merely as expressing the perspectives of the writers who wrote them and the cultures that formed those writers. Hence, the biblical perspective has no more right to be preeminent than the views of any other culture at any other time.

If all of this is so, then not only is Scripture not the inspired Word of God, but it needs to be read with a healthy dose of suspicion. Using what is called the hermeneutics of suspicion, we cannot take things in Scripture at face value. When reading the various commands of Scripture, for example, with each injunction we must always ask *cui bono*—to whose good or benefit was this written?⁷⁹ When we use the hermeneutics of suspicion in reading Scripture or any other formative document of a culture (e.g., the United States Constitution or the Declaration of Independence), we see that these documents are not so benign as they may seem. Rather, they have been constructed so as to empower certain members of society and exclude others. And they should be read as such, rather than being treated as divine revelation or anything else that would exempt them from critique and revision. The suspicion we should bring to the reading of any text should also be applied to our understanding of social institutions and structures. Someone or some group put these institutions and structures together so

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as to legitimize the empowerment that some members of society have and the discrimination that excludes others who are different from having any power or say.

None of this should surprise anyone, especially in light of postmodernism's anti-foundationalist rejection of any viewpoint as exempt from critique because of its alleged absolute authority. And, if relativism and perspectivism are the proper approaches to life in our day, then we must be suspicious about any written or oral statement, as well as any institution, that claims to offer the "correct" account of how societies and cultures should be organized. But how exactly should we exercise the hermeneutics of suspicion? Should we doubt and reject everything, ultimately embracing nihilism and anarchy? Postmoderns answer that we should use the hermeneutics of suspicion as part of an overall process called deconstruction.

The name most associated with deconstructionism is Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), a French philosopher. The term 'deconstruction' seems odd at first glance, but that is because it is actually the combination of two terms, 'destruction' and 'construction.' Derrida and his followers urge us to deconstruct all texts, all narratives, and all institutions. That is, analyze them by "taking them apart" to see the motivation behind the particular form in which we find them. When you do so, you will see that while these texts, etc. reveal a certain order of things, at the same time they hide that which is different or other. In so hiding the other, they exclude it. Hence, the question noted above, *cui bono*—to whose benefit?—is a helpful tool to bring to the interpretation of texts, narratives, etc. It presupposes that something has been hidden and excluded as well as that which is stated more plainly in the text.

Taking a text apart, however, is only half the "assignment." We need to reconstruct the text and its meaning in a way that takes seriously those excluded and includes them. Hence, deconstruction involves both a tearing down and a building up (destruction and construction). And since the viewpoint apparent on the surface of the text is only one of potentially limitless perspectives on the issues with which the text deals, it is good that we don't absolutize one reading of the text, but rather seek for other ways to understand the text.

Hearing this, you may be troubled by a key question hermeneutists should and do discuss. How can we look for alternate readings of a text when

whoever wrote the text intended to say one specific thing? Mustn't we give the author(s) his, her, or their due? A key postmodern theme is that authors must be detached from the texts they have written. It is dubious that we can know what an author intended to say. Even if he states his intentions in the text, that statement, as part of the text, must itself be interpreted, and is open to a variety of interpretations. We simply aren't in a position to know what he intended to say. Perhaps even he did not fully understand everything he had in mind when he wrote it, spoke it, etc. Moreover, any text is ambiguous and capable of various interpretations that depend on the exegete's interaction with the text, an interaction that can never be objective and so see things as they really are.⁸⁰ To offer only one interpretation as "the" meaning of the text is to miss the point about ambiguity, but it is also to adopt the same foundationalist, objectivist, absolutist notions of knowledge and truth that postmoderns believe they have already discredited. When such absolutist readings of texts, institutions, etc., are adopted, they empower some and exclude others from power. Hence, even the way we treat certain ideas, institutions, texts, etc., involves a kind of violence that excludes the "other." Language is powerful; properly handling it allows us to open ourselves and our societies to the excluded, the others, and thereby to produce a more just society. Hence, all ideas, theories, texts, institutions, etc., need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed so as to give ear to the different possible ways of seeing things.

John MacQuarrie offers a helpful summary of these ideas as he discusses the meaning of two of Derrida's key terms, 'deconstruction' and '*differance*.' He writes,

According to Derrida, descriptions, histories, theories etc. need to be taken apart, because language is riddled by ambiguities. The logical analyst's plea that each word should have only one meaning is impossible to obey. As Derrida says more than once, we live after the Tower of Babel. Every text has a plurality of meanings as soon as it is put into words, and from that point on there are different interpretations. But if that is the negative side of deconstruction, it points to an affirmative task. The work of deconstruction prevents closure, and room is left for new interpretations. Our language never quite coincides with what is talked about. The language overflows, it has an excess of meanings and connotations. Its failure to coincide with what is talked about is called *differance*, a neologism which combines two distinguishable meanings of the French verb

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differer, ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’. Every text calls for re-writing, and this goes on indefinitely, always with *differance*. . . . Deconstruction forbids closure and there will always be new deferrals.⁸¹

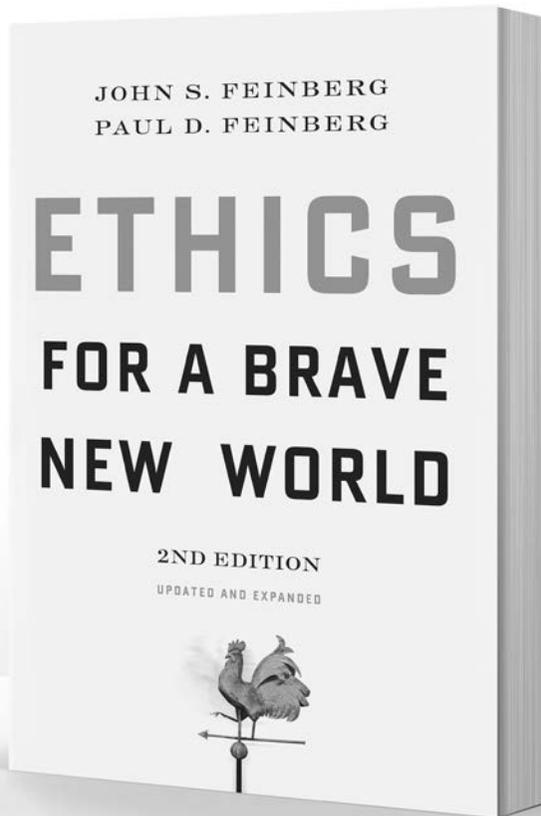
If one encounters someone committed to these most extreme forms of postmodern thinking on truth and knowledge, is any attempt to convince them of the accuracy of the Christian worldview futile? Those of us who went to college when modern epistemology reigned supreme on university campuses know how difficult it was for Christianity to get a hearing. Christian beliefs were dismissed as hopelessly naive, at least in part because nonbelievers were convinced there was no way to support such beliefs with adequate evidence.

As a postmodern mind-set has been adopted by many, Christians find it a bit easier to be heard by nonbelievers. After all, if no one can know absolute truth and can only tell their own story about how their beliefs have helped them live life, then perhaps even a Christian perspective can be helpful to some struggling to find their way in this world. But Christians should take little comfort in being heard, because if they even remotely intimate that Christianity is truth for all, they will be dismissed as intolerant and naive, just as their forebears were when they attempted to convince moderns that there is sufficient evidence to warrant belief in Christianity.

So, how should a Christian address a non-Christian (modern or postmodern)? Is traditional apologetics dead? Should we forget about truth, acknowledge some form of modern or postmodern skepticism, and resort to nothing more than telling our personal narratives and hope that what we say will “resonate” with our listeners? Sadly, there are some in our day who seem to think this is the only way forward in attempting to reach a nonbelieving world.

But I disagree. In the next chapters I address the various issues raised by postmodern and modern forms of skepticism. As readers will see, I believe there are answers to both, even as I believe there is truth and a way to find it. I do not believe the appropriate response to skepticism is to lay down our apologetic ammunition and merely regale nonbelievers with our stories. Not all will agree with what I offer, but before you reject my answers to postmodern and modern skepticism, at the very least let me sit at the “dialogue table,” and listen (as open-mindedly as you can) to what I say!

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APOLOGETICS