

C.S. Lewis on Postmodernism

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

Although C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) lived before the full flowering of postmodernism, some of its roots were already present in his day. While Lewis would certainly be an opponent of postmodernists' denial of objective truth and morality, at many points he makes observations similar to postmodern philosophers. Perhaps, then, he can help us see both what is right and what is wrong with postmodernism.



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What is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism has both philosophical and cultural aspects. I can only touch on the former here. Jean-François Lyotard, French postmodern philosopher defines postmodernism as an "incredulity towards metanarratives." In other words, this school of thought is suspicious of any narrative, story, or account of the world that claims to be absolute or all-encompassing—a "meta"-narrative. Postmodernists are suspicious of such claims not only because of the limits of reason, but also because such perspectives have been oppressive. For instance, Nazism and Marxism give a comprehensive account of the world, and both have been extremely oppressive. Consider the atrocities committed by Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao Tse-tung. Christianity also provides a comprehensive story that proceeds from eternity to creation, fall, redemption, the Second Coming of Christ, a new heaven and a new earth, and eternal life. Certainly, there have been times of oppression such as the Crusades and the Inquisition. Could it be that all metanarratives necessarily lead to oppression? This is what postmodernists suggest. Note here that oppression is believed to be objectively evil. They are right. However, on what grounds can postmodernists claim that it is evil?

Other related claims held by a variety of postmodernists:

1. There is no objective view of reality. We are shaped by our culture.
2. Because we are so culturally determined, we cannot judge another culture.
3. There are no facts, only interpretations. (Nietzsche)
4. History is fiction. History is written from the perspective of the culture, race, and gender of the writer. What is "historic" is totally subjective. (Foucault)
5. Knowledge is power. We ought to be suspicious of anyone who claims to give us truth. They are out to further their own (and their group's) vested interests. (Foucault)
6. Ethical claims are mere sentiment. There are no neutral grounds to condemn the Holocaust. (Rorty)
7. Deconstruction is justice. We ought to explore and find the contradictions in every piece of literature so that we can uphold justice and avoid injustice. (Derrida)
8. Whoever "spins" best, wins. Since there is no objective truth, all we have is rhetoric. Whoever plays the game best, wins. Make sure it's you. (Fish)

In an excellent work, *Signs of the Times*, David Lehman gives a clever definition of deconstructionism. You could eliminate the "con" and just call it destructionism. It seeks to destroy any objective truth, morality, history, or even science. Or, you could put the emphasis on the "con" and call any attempt at objectivity a "con" job, which has as its goal the advancement of an individual, group, or cultural agenda. How would C.S. Lewis agree or disagree with the above assertions?

Lewis Agrees

C.S. Lewis would agree with some of these emphases, although not to the degree that present advocates contend. He might maintain that a partial truth taken as the whole truth becomes an untruth. Some points of agreement might go along these lines:

1. There are limits to knowledge. Reason cannot develop a comprehensive knowledge of reality. Lewis held that "reality is very odd" and that "ultimate truth must have the characteristic of strangeness."
2. Your perspective does affect what you see. He would argue that what you see depends a lot on where you stand and the kind of person you are. In an essay titled "Meditation on a Toolshed," he shares the experience of entering a tool shed and observing a shaft of sunlight coming through a hole in the roof. He could see the gradually widening beam of light with specks of dust floating downward. He calls that initial view "looking at" the beam. However, there is another perspective that involves "looking along" the beam. In order to do that, you would need to go to the crack and look outside, seeing the trees, clouds, and sun 90-odd-million miles away. "Looking at" or analyzing has become a preferred means of knowing which can be valid as far as it goes, but there is much more to life. In fact, sometimes it is impossible to do both at the same time. For instance, you cannot both be fully engaged in a romantic relationship and analyze it at the same time. The analysis involves a distancing from the intimate engagement. In any case, your perspective determines what you see, and one perspective does not necessarily exhaust the different ways of viewing something.
3. Our perspective affects the way we view history. In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis discusses the medieval world-view. In his conclusion, he maintains that it is splendid and coherent. The only problem is that it is not true. Historical models may help us to get at what reality is, but they don't exhaustively describe it. Lewis says:

No model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is mere fantasy. ...each reflects the prevalent psychology of an age almost as much as it reflects the state of that age's knowledge. It is not impossible that our own model will die a violent death...a good cross-examiner can do wonders. He will not elicit falsehoods from an honest witness. But in relation to the total truth in the witness's mind, the structure of examination is like a stencil. It determines how much of the total truth will appear and what pattern it will suggest.

In his Cambridge inaugural address, Lewis argued that the Renaissance didn't happen, or if it did happen, it didn't happen in England. Other categories were more helpful in getting at the historical shifts that happened. (This may be true with respect to the term postmodernism as well.) Lewis said:

All lines of demarcation between what we call periods should be subject to constant revision.... Unlike dates, periods are not facts.... Change is never complete and change never ceases. Nothing is ever quite new.... All divisions will falsify material to some extent; the best one can do is to choose those which will falsify it least.

So, the investigation of history is profoundly affected by the perspective of the historian, as has been rightly pointed out by historians of African-American studies and feminism.

4. My ideas of God and reality sometimes need to be smashed so that I can gain a better view of reality. Often, *Your God is Too Small*, as J.B. Phillips maintained in his book by that title. Lewis says, "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great Iconoclast" (idol-smasher).

In fact, Lewis maintains that "all reality is Iconoclastic." We sometimes need to smash our limiting concepts of things so we can think outside our previous box. What I need is not my idea of my wife, but my wife. What I need is not my idea of my boys, but my boys. We need to stretch or smash inadequate or outmoded concepts continually.

5. Culture can blind us to some aspects of who we are. Lewis maintained that we need old books to help correct this blindness. Often, we are guilty of "chronological snobbery," rejecting something because it is old — ancient, medieval, "Victorian," or "Modern." We need to ask, *Was it ever refuted? If so, by whom? Where, and how decisively?* Lewis recommends that we read three old books for every new book, or if that is too much, one old one for every new one. We need to let the "breezes of the centuries" blow through our minds, cleansing us of the culturally induced distortions in our perspective.

Lewis Disagrees

Certainly, C.S. Lewis would disagree with many of the positions postmodernists take, especially that there is no objective knowledge of truth or morality. Here are some things that he might say if he were alive today:

1. Many postmodern contentions are self-refuting. An ancient example of this was the Greek philosopher Gorgias, who maintained that "All statements are false." The problem is that if the statement that "All statements are false" is true, then *it is*

false. Similarly, postmodernism maintains that it is (objectively) true to say that there are no objective truths. It uses reason to deny the validity of reason. If the statement, "all perspectives on reality are culturally determined" is true, then is this statement itself also culturally determined? If all metanarratives are suspect because they lead to oppression, then can it not be equally maintained that postmodernism is itself a metanarrative and equally suspect? If all knowledge claims are a grab for power, then are not postmodernism's contentions equally motivated by a will-to-power?

Lewis argued this kind of thing about Freud and Marx. They were merrily "sawing off the branch that they were sitting on." If, according to Marx, all philosophies are economically motivated, what about Marx's own philosophy? If all belief came out of the non-rational unconscious (Freud), then is this not true of Freud's own views?

2. Suspicion can work both ways. Lewis argues in his essay "Bulverism" that the psychological charge that "Christianity is a crutch" might be answered by the counter-charge that atheism is a crutch. Atheism is an opiate of the conscience. Atheism is a giant Oedipus complex wishing the death of the Heavenly Father. So, we need to ask the postmodernists to suspect their own suspicions.
3. Lewis would point out that a view that maintains there is "no neutral ground" on which we can condemn the Holocaust deserves suspicion. Some radical feminists (not believers) maintain that this radical relativism actually perpetuates oppression and injustice to women because it makes the term "justice" only an emotive statement.
4. Perhaps Lewis would point out that all these claims are partial truths exaggerated into the whole truth. Postmodernists exaggerate the influence of culture, they exaggerate the problem of objectivity, they exaggerate the difficulty of interpretation, they exaggerate the difficulty of cross-cultural communication. He might say that while the claim to absolutes can be oppressive, the denial of absolutes could lead to even greater oppression. In fact, Lewis argues in *The Abolition of Man* that the fruit of history is already clear. He points out that no relativist has ever been given power and used it for "benevolent ends."
5. Above all, Lewis would caution us about tying our methods or theology too closely to a passing mood or trend, like postmodernism. He says, "If you take your stand on the prevalent view, how long do you suppose it will prevail...all you can say about my

taste is that it is old fashioned; yours will soon be the same."

Perhaps in its most innocent form, postmodernism points us to the finitude of our knowledge and can point us to the complexity of reality itself. I think, though, that Lewis would keep reasoning firmly but gently with postmodernists, saying "Does this make sense?" or "How do you see this?" or "Don't you see where this leads?" Perhaps also he would tell stories. Lewis held that "Reason is the natural organ of truth and imagination is the organ of meaning." Perhaps those that are not open to a direct approach of reason may be more open to the indirect approach of the imagination.

At the end of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis says that those who want to debunk or "see through" normal traditional or conventional truth or morality should be cautious. It's good to have a window to see through in order to see the grass, trees, or sky outside. But if you can see through everything, there is nothing left to see.

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