

Living in a Postmodern World

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (June 2021)



We hear about postmodernism all the time, but what is it, really? It is common to see this or that idea described as postmodern, but what makes it postmodern, rather than modern or pre-modern or something else? What is the through-line that makes postmodernism a self-contained set of philosophical precepts distinguishable from modernism? It might mean more than just something-bad-that-follows-modernism.

You can read as many books as you want *about* postmodernism, but it probably won't get you far, because the various authors identified as postmodern are fissiparous in their subjects and methods of critique. It's not an easy task to pull together the strands into a unified whole, to say *postmodernism is x*. A good many works by smart people hit all around it, but in this author's humble opinion, another needed writing. The result is [*Dangerous God, A Defense of Transcendent Truth*](#), recently published by New English Review Press.

I don't know about you, but when I read an author using words susceptible to slippery definition, I want to know precisely what definition is in play. This really matters in the postmodern world. Postmodernism is, as set forth in *Dangerous God*, "an extension of pragmatism and of existentialism. As such, it constitutes a means of finding truth alternative to assuming an objective reality of truth in the cosmos."

Here's how we get there. For most of history, people have understood "truth" to be that which corresponds to the way the world is. Truth refers to facts about reality. It was understood to be an "out there" feature of the cosmos around us; a thing to be discovered, as opposed to created. It was objective. This was the dominant way of thinking in the West

from the ancients down through medieval times, and then forward into the modern era, embracing the emphasis on empiricism. This understanding of the nature of truth is critical to science.

Postmodernism represents an erosion of this simple idea. How? The two pillars of postmodernism, existentialism and pragmatism, are enabled upon repudiation of God, as the Author of truth, standing at the apex of hierarchical ideals. They then take us to rejection of objective truth altogether, if we are not wary. These two intellectual trends coincided through the first half of the twentieth century, more or less, such that each informed the other. But let's separate them out to understand what they do to our conception of truth and falsity (and by extension, other ineradicable oppositions like right and wrong; beauty and ugliness).

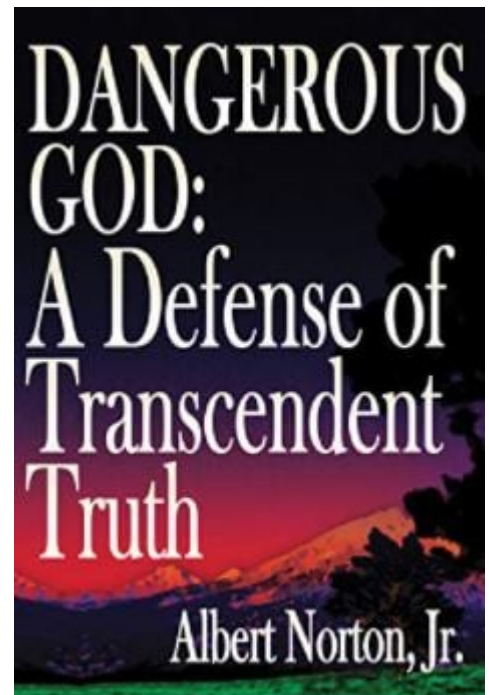
Studies of existentialism usually commence with Soren Kierkegaard. At the risk of oversimplifying, he thought the process of genuinely seeking God proceeded first by reason, through the tension between "aesthetics" and "ethics;" and second by faith, through the tension between "ethics" and "religion." That is, one must push past the rational reasoning that makes one a good churchgoer, and then make an irrational leap to the higher realm of "religion" to appreciate the fullness of God-infused reality. In nineteenth-century Denmark, this had some appeal, no doubt, but what are we to make of it today? Why make the faith move at all? Without a Christian society around us pointing to its object, what's the point?

It's fair to say that Kierkegaard's angst centered upon meaning premised on God's existence, and how it is that we, individually and subjectively, might find our way to accepting it. Later existentialist philosophers repudiated God, but their concern was likewise with meaning. The project of atheist existentialists would be to find self-made meaning in a reality rendered meaningless because the rumored God

turned out not to exist, by their lights. It is therefore fair to say that existentialism is—for both theists and atheists—really about God.

The flaw in the existentialist way of thinking is that we are not plastic, inchoate, incomplete beings, and if we were, we would be in no position to provide meaning for ourselves. Meaning originates outside ourselves, or not at all. To express this same concept applied to beauty: beauty is not merely in the eye of the beholder, but in the thing or idea itself. Right and wrong is imprinted on the conscience, but does not originate there, self-customized. Ultimately, existentialism leads to despair. If there is no God and we are mere atoms bouncing off each other, what is the point of living? Of striving? Of caring what happens to our fellow human beings? There was, and is, a crisis of meaning once we suppose truth to be subjective, rather than objective.

Pragmatism is another means of re-locating truth formation upon imagining God out of existence. Starting with the God question again, William James thought one takes a first step toward belief upon adopting a “will to believe.” Likewise, disbelief requires first a will to disbelieve. This sets up a kind of participation between the erstwhile believer and the proposition. Propositions of truth are therefore not entirely objective. Truth is formed in action—as in the will to believe—and if that action is collective, to bring about a better world, then truth is socially, rather than individually, located. Truth is, in this way, subjugated to some other goal; it is not an end unto itself.



James was followed by John Dewey who made pragmatism

practical, so to speak. All through the first half of the twentieth century, Dewey and his acolytes fostered a militant secularism to break through what they perceived to be an entrenched, but baseless, belief in God, and perforce, transcendent truth. Truth is what works, according to the pragmatists. But "works" for what? "Progress" is the vague answer. But as always, the question that really matters is: who decides what progress is? The goal would be, invariably, leftist and collectivist social goals. And they are unassailable if they represent truth rather than arguable propositions. This goes a long way toward explaining the indignation of your friends on the left, if you resist what they regard as self-evidently true.

A half-century or more of existentialism and pragmatism served to erode confidence in truth as an end unto itself; as something objective and real regardless what we think about it. It became possible to think of truth as something generated by us, rather than discovered by us. This is the real root and signal feature of postmodernism: truth is not objective, but rather a product of social interaction.

As such, in minds prepared through precepts of existentialism and pragmatism, it became possible to think of texts or other cultural representations as material to be interrogated and deconstructed to find and root out hidden inequities formed to protect accumulations of power. "Metanarratives" based on claims of objective truth are suspect. These include religion, of course, but also political and economic systems deemed to serve the already-powerful at the expense of those destined to a life of subsistence toil or cannon fodder or oppression. It is a set of assumptions about the nature of truth-formation that is superimposed on the culture to tease out its injustices. Postmodernism advances a particular set of ideologies in the power struggle that ensues upon ushering God out of our mental image of reality. It isn't merely an aid to our analytical thinking about subordinated

people groups or ideologies. It is about power. Postmodernism amounts to polemics hidden inside process, and it accomplishes this by playing upon Christian-originated moral concern for the lesser-advantaged "other."

Postmodernism does not represent a coherent philosophy that can be accepted or rejected in its entirety, unfortunately, as one might have done with existentialism back in the day. Instead its assumptions about reality are ineluctable in the culture. It is Protean in its corrosive effects on the concept of objective truth, and objective right and wrong. How can we recognize it for what it is, and how ought we respond? Here are a few suggestions.

First, remember that words matter. We ascribe to words an objective meaning, of course. How could we communicate otherwise? And yet words and phrases may be injected into discourse with deliberate ambiguity. This may be strategic, and so we should be on the look-out for it.

Now it is true that words have always been mangled or abused in order to deliberately confuse or mislead. Here's John Locke circa 1689:

Another abuse of words is an affected Obscurity, by either applying old Words, to new and unusual significations, or introducing new and ambiguous Terms, without defining either; or else putting them so together, as may confound their ordinary meaning.
—*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III-X-6.

We all know the flim-flam element of words in advertising, for example, so thoroughly that we effortlessly screen ad verbiage for veracity. Likewise with political advertising that promises a chicken in every pot.

These are relatively more mundane instances of word abuse, however. You know that a communicator is employing a postmodernist technique when words are used with deliberate

and strategic ambiguity to cloud the interests at stake. Rather than engaging directly on a proposition, the technique is to re-direct and re-define, vesting words and phrases with subtle shifts in meaning, until the new meaning is accepted uncritically in place of the old, to the effect of advancing leftist or transgressive goals. Seemingly straightforward words like "racism," "discrimination," "tolerance," "justice," "spirituality," and many others become so elastic as to diminish their helpfulness in public discourse. Who would be against "equality," for example? One could substitute "equity" because it seems synonymous, but then we've shifted from equality of opportunity, to equality of outcome, a radically distinct concept.

This sounds underhanded, but remember that in a postmodern way of thinking we're no longer talking about what is objectively true, but rather about truth formation. Truth is socially formed and malleable, so it's not thought underhanded to mold and shape truth through this kind of dialogue. It's just necessary to play the game. There is no point getting angry and upset with someone in this mindset. In their worldview, truth is formed in social narrative, it is not out there to be discovered. If you hold to objective truth, it may seem the new paradigm inevitably invites unending disputation and ideological clash. Indeed it does. But stand firm. Live in truth, and not by lies. That is my second suggestion for living in a postmodern world.

The third: be wary of "the narrative." Doesn't it seem this phrase is ubiquitous now? We have some general idea that this means a story; a string of facts and inferences that comprise one's understanding on a subject. There is nothing wrong with that, as far as it goes. The Bible is a narrative, after all, revealing the character of God and His relationship to His people. Likewise, we have narratives of significant events in history which, though perhaps tinged with patriotic bias, more or less accurately inform our understanding of how

we've arrived at the present moment. But employing "the narrative" can be for more sinister purposes. It's one thing to assemble facts to form a story. It's quite another to form a story and then selectively assemble and spin facts and inferences to support it. Speaking of narrative may be a means of advancing a story to be embraced as truth instead of analyzing facts to develop as objectively accurate a story as one can.

Fourth: consider the origin of the conviction that truth is an objective, "out-there" phenomenon. Why does it seem so hard-wired into us? We are rational creatures. The objectivity of truth is necessary to rational thought. It is what logically links thought to thought. This is so fundamental that even postmodernist advocacy depends on it. Logocentrism is not an enemy to be deconstructed or otherwise defeated, as postmodernists generally believe. It is the air we breathe; the medium in which we live and move and have our being.

And, fifth: I've used the phrase "objective truth," but the subtitle of *Dangerous God* refers to "transcendent" truth. Truth, and hierarchical values, and beauty are objective, certainly, but they are so because they originate in the mind of God.

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Albert Norton, Jr is a writer and attorney working in the American South. His most recent book is [Dangerous God: A Defense of Transcendent Truth](#) (2021) concerning formation of truth and values in a postmodern age; and *Intuition of Significance*, a

2020 work weighing the merits of theism against materialism. He is also the author of several award-winning short stories, and two novels: *Another Like Me* (2015) and *Rough Water Baptism* (2017), on themes of navigating reality in a post-Christian world.

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