

# SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH POSTMODERN EYES

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**In our postmodern world, the idea of  
absolute truth is fast becoming outdated.**

**I**n his book *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*, Walter Truett Anderson tells of standing one day on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. In the surf far below, a sea otter floated on its back, holding an abalone in its forepaws and cracking the abalone's shell with a rock. Waves washed in, and the otter rocked gently about on the surface, seemingly paying no attention to this movement as it concentrated on its task.

"I thought, how different from mine its experience of life must be," Anderson says, "living in a medium in such flux and so unlike the hard

ground on which I stood. But as I thought about it further, I realized that the medium in which I live is far more turbulent than anything the sea otter could ever conceive of—because as a human being, I bob about in a sea of symbols, an ocean of words."<sup>1</sup>

Words communicate ideas. They shape perceptions of reality. An ocean of words in our postmodern world is creating crosscurrents of diverse values and beliefs in which

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eternal correctness of certain beliefs and values is no longer accepted, and the idea of absolute truth is fast becoming outdated.

Five fundamental changes characterize the postmodern worldview of reality as evidenced by the actions people are taking in relation to politics, religion, ethics, and culture. These interrelated changes include:

1. *Changes in thinking about thinking.* There is a growing awareness of the multidimensional, relativistic quality of human experience and the mind's ability to see itself—and to see itself seeing itself and step outside of reality constructs to examine them. This opens the way for the idea that all explanations of reality are themselves constructions—human, and useful, but not perfect.

2. *Changes in identity and boundaries.* This is an age of fading boundaries, the twilight of a mindset that structured reality with sharp lines. The boundaries between nations, races, classes, cultures, religions, and

moral systems, have all become less distinct. With this confusion comes the loss of one-dimensional social identities. Multiple identity has become a common feature of postmodern life.

3. *Changes in learning and the purpose of learning.* The kind of learning that becomes necessary for survival in the postmodern age is that of discovery, which includes an ongoing process of reality-construction.

4. *Changes in morals, ethics, and values.* In postmodernism, morality is not merely handed down, but learned and created and re-created out of experience and in dialogue with others. The morals of today are not the morals of yesterday, and they will not be the morals of tomorrow.

5. *Changes in relationship to traditions, customs, and institutions.* Changes in thinking and about thinking affect ethics and values. And changes in identity and boundaries affect relationships to traditions, customs, and institutions. But ethics and values are the bottom line

of how all these changes truly touch human life. Because of this, ethics and values are, in fact, the driving force behind all other changes. People are pursuing certain values and desire an ethic that facilitates those values.

### **Morality in Postmodern Perspective**

The postmodern approach to morality is all too often associated with the celebration of the supposed emancipation from moral standards and the disavowal of moral responsibility. We are witnessing, some assert, “the demise of the ethical” and the transition to an era in which we are placed beyond moral duty. Morality is seen as having reached the end of the line. Such fashionable pronouncements cascade from the scientific and academic community, the arts, as well as the entertainment and news media, saturating our society's view of ethics and morality so that the average GenXer believes there are no rules, no right, no wrong, no meaning, and no absolute truth.

Generation X is the first generation to see the world through postmodern eyes. This generation truly thinks differently, perceives differently, believes differently, and processes truth differently from any previous generation. It is leading the way toward relativism. According to Barna, adults in this generation reject absolute truth by a staggering 78 percent.

The significance of this lies in Eugene Peterson's observation that there was a time when ideas and living styles were initiated in the adult world and filtered down to youth. Now the movement has been reversed: Lifestyles are generated at the youth level and pushed upward. Dress fashions, hairstyles, music, and morals adopted by youth are evangelistically pushed on an adult world, which in turn seems eager to be converted.

But the collapse of belief taking place in postmodern society does not, it turns out, result in a collapse of morality. Quite the opposite. According to Anderson: “The early postmodern years are bringing, instead of collapse of morality, a renaissance of searching for principles of life that we variously call morals, ethics, values. And this is not merely a single shift of values but a continual dynamic process of moral discourse and discovery.”<sup>22</sup>

For the eminent sociologist and postmodern theorist Zygmunt Bauman, the great issues of ethics have not lost their importance at all: They simply need to be approached in a wholly new way. He sees our postmodern era as presenting a dawning, rather than a twilight, for ethics. Postmodernism does not bring an end to morality or ethics, but an end to morality or ethics as modernism has framed it in ethical theories that began looking like blind alleys.

According to Bauman, postmodernism presents an apparent absence of any universalizing authority. This rules out, then, the setting of binding norms that moral agents must obey. It places moral responsibility wholly upon the moral agent, who must face point-blank the consequences of his or her actions. In the postmodern context, moral agents are constantly faced with moral issues and obliged to choose between ethical precepts. The choice always assumes responsibility, and for this reason bears the character of a moral act. "It requires us not only to make moral choices," Bauman says, "but also to add to our life-making responsibilities the task of creating and re-creating our ideas of what morality is."<sup>3</sup> He terms this situation the "ethical paradox of post-modernity":

"The ethical paradox of the post-modern condition is that it restored to agents the fulness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfill them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice. . . . In a cacophony of moral voices, none of which is likely to silence the others, the individuals are thrown back on their own subjectivity as the only

ultimate ethical authority. At the same time, however, they are told repeatedly about the irreparable relativism of any moral code."<sup>4</sup>

The postmodern mindset contrasts sharply with the optimistic cultural forecasts of modernism in terms of inevitable human progress through human reason, values, and abilities. Modernism was the attempt to bring structure and order to human existence, to order society toward certainty, orderliness, and homogeneity. Because modernism appears to have failed to deliver, postmodernity brings with it an existential insecurity—a pessimism about personal and global survival.

Adding to this angst is a very practical dilemma: Our consciences naturally yearn to have our moral choices affirmed. That requires some objective truth principle outside our own thinking, something that postmodernism denies. A person can never be entirely sure that he or she has acted in the right manner. "The moral self is a self always haunted by the fact that it is not moral enough."<sup>5</sup> It is moral, nonetheless, when it has set itself standards it cannot reach or placated itself with self-assurances that the standards have been reached.

Bauman also contrasts moral responsibility with ethical theories or rules. Ethics provides the tools for moral life—the code of moral behavior, the assembly of the rules of

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thumb we follow. In the postmodern perspective, however, previously followed ethical theories have not done a very good job of outlining appropriate moral life. Modernism's ethical theories and the ethical rules have finally proved to be lacking. The ethical theories, not the moral concerns of modern times, have come to look like so many blind alleys. The postmodern perspective shows the relativity of ethical theories but not the relativity of morality itself.

In addition, Bauman suggests that the plethora of ethical theories have robbed the individual moral agent of moral responsibility and depersonalized morality. The failure of modernism's ethical theory enables postmodernism to focus again on "the mystery of morality inside me" rather than outside of me. Hence, postmodernism becomes morality without external ethical code. The notion of no universal standards does not release us

from moral responsibility: It only increases it. It brings moral responsibility home to where it should be: inside the moral agent.

Finally, Bauman speaks of post-modernism as bringing the "re-enchantment of the world."<sup>6</sup> The postmodern mindset represents an abandonment of the rationalist belief system. The postmodern framework allows for the existence of realities that science cannot measure: the supernatural, the transrational, the spiritual, the paradoxical, the numinous, and the mysterious. Postmodernism thus opens up the ability to deal with aspects of morality that modernism often struggled against. We learn again to accept contingency and respect ambiguity, to feel regard for human emotions, to appreciate actions without purpose and calculable rewards. There is the ability to live with events and acts that are not only not-yet-explained, but inexplicable.

Postmodernism elevates feeling to a level on par with—or superior

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to—rational thought. The postmodern worldview places intuition and emotion at its center, not intellect. The first question asked by a postmodernist is not “What do you think?” but “How do you feel?” Subjective experience supersedes logic and objective facts. Postmodernism creates a generation accustomed to paradoxes and processes truth relationally rather than propositionally. Moral reflection and action follows accordingly. Such moral reflection and action is ambiguous, paradoxical, and often processed relationally.

Postmodern ethics includes the following: pluralism of authority, centrality of choice, existential angst, re-personalizing morality, ethical systems discredited while morality is affirmed, and the re-enchantment of the world.

#### **Reality Check the Emergent Fiction**

One may take issue with Bauman's position on the issues he out-

lines, but his description of morality from a postmodern perspective is fair. He correctly asserts that moral responsibility touches the heart of who I am as a person. He is correct, too, in noting that “we are not moral thanks to society (we are only ethical or law-abiding thanks to it), we *are* society, thanks to being moral. At the heart of sociality is the loneliness of the moral person.”<sup>7</sup> Our question is whether or not postmodern ethics as he has described it fits moral reality, whether or not it fits what ought to be in terms of human moral theory and practice.

As Bauman describes postmodern ethics, it shares some of the same assumptions about human nature and the contingency of moral/social order that modernism has projected. Scott H. Moore describes “postmodernity as a ‘turn’ rather than as an epoch or an era. Postmodernity is a modern problem and a modern phenomenon.”<sup>8</sup> Moore says that “postmodernity is not what comes

after modernity falls away, but it is that turn in which modernity's assumptions have been problematized and the continuity of our confidence has been called into question.”<sup>9</sup>

Modernism and postmodernism share some fundamental presuppositions, then, when it comes to ethics, human nature, and human ability. Modernism celebrated human reason, human values, and the ability of human beings to bring social/moral structure to personal life as well as to the world. At bottom, postmodernism does the very same in that it celebrates the human moral capacity and human nature's ability to rise to challenging moral exigencies of contemporary society. Modernism and postmodernism are both essentially humanistic.

Though postmodern ethics correctly faults previous ethical systems as failures and asserts that ethical theories and rules—not morality itself—are being called into question, it nevertheless throws the baby out with the bath water. The real problem is not with ethical theories per se, but with ethical systems that don't deliver. It denies the possibility that there might be an adequate moral theory yet to be embraced for moral formation and reflection. It also assumes an unnatural dichotomy between moral responsibility and ethical theory.

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ethical systems does not necessarily mean there are no valid systems at all. The apparent plurality of equally well-founded (or equally unfounded) moral authorities does not negate this, either. In fact, it increases moral responsibility or choice, because the moral agent must become informed enough on the issues to be morally discriminating if he or she is to make the right moral choice.

In addition, the reality of human nature and the age-long phenomenon of enduring human problems points to the existence of moral structure corresponding to human nature. When Mortimer Adler was once asked by an interviewer, “How do you know there is a real, tangible world outside our minds?” Adler said, “It's no mystery. The world outside my mind never lets me forget it is there. When I run into a wall, reality abruptly stops me. When I throw cold water on my face, reality wakes me up. If I stub my toe or burn myself, reality brings me a taste of pain. If I ever think the external world is not there, reality finds a way to slap some sense into me. The external world is there. I have the bruises to prove it.”<sup>10</sup>

How could our postmodern society know for sure that there is moral structure in human nature and human relationships? The real moral world outside all this great-sounding postmodern idea of the relativity of ethical theories and

rules never lets us forget it. People on their own are stubbing their moral toes. People on their own are getting beat up and hurt. And so with societies. The question of ethics can never be pluralistic because the moral issues our world faces are very much human and transcend time and culture.

Human beings need an external moral compass (ethical theory) to be morally responsible. The famed and beautiful Cliffs of More in western Ireland demonstrate something about rules and the centrality of human choice. These cliffs rise 700 feet from the Atlantic Ocean, and large open meadows roll right up to the edges. Over the years, miles of stone wall have been erected with warning signs. Some of those signs read “People are falling” rather than “People have fallen.” Despite warnings and barriers and slippery slopes and loose rocks, people continue to fall because they disregard the signs and get close and look down because they are confident of their ability to judge the situation. Yet people keep falling and dying.

Ethical theory works within three interrelated levels—theological and philosophical bases, universal principles, and rules for action in specific areas of life. When it is asserted that the moral agent needs no moral framework to work within, we are basically assuming too much of our fallen human nature and are over-

looking how very much we need guidance in making moral choices.

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William D. Watkins comments on whether or not relativism really rules conscience: Do we truly live as if right and wrong, truth and error, are up for grabs? Are we really operating without any sense of objective values? Watkins states: “The answers lie not so much in stated belief as in actual behavior. That difference makes all the difference in the world.”<sup>11</sup> No one ever truly functions without a worldview or system of absolutes. The postmodern meta-narrative is simply that there are no metanarratives except one’s own.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon has something to say that pertains to postmodern ethics and about post-modernity’s ocean of words with their competing visions of moral and spiritual reality. “In many dreams and in many words there is emptiness” (Eccl. 5:7, NASB). “The fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen” (10:14, NASB). Solomon’s point is that words can cause moral and spiritual confusion. Words are very powerful. They shape our perception of reality. They create reality for others as well as ourselves.

God creates reality by what He says (Ecclesiastes, I suggest, was written with Genesis in hand, as evidenced by its themes). God spoke and it was done. He commanded

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and it stood fast. His word is truth. In a lesser way, we create reality by what we say, whether verbally or in our minds.

In fact, Solomon himself did a little reality-creating. Referring to his writing of Ecclesiastes, he says, “The Preacher sought to find delightful words” (12:10, NASB). Solomon was a master preacher, an orator who knew the power of words to create reality, a writer who understood what words can do. So he chose beautiful words. Creative words. Words that would catch attention, convince, persuade.

Besides, Solomon says, “Beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body” (vs. 12, NASB). He understood the existential angst and soul-wearing pain that comes with wading through all possible roads to find the meaning of life or to know how one should live morally. He knew the existential angst that comes with creating one’s own reality, one’s own

morality. Solomon tried it all. His been-there-done-that-now-what experience makes him very postmodern: “I set my mind to seek and explore. . . . It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with” (1:13, NASB). “In much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain” (vs. 18, NASB).

It is astonishing that Solomon would write this when books were rare. His thoughts apply to our post-modern time as if the book were written only yesterday and suggest that the postmodern condition is not all that different from any other age, except that it might be more sophisticated, radical, and all-encompassing in terms of its influence and grip on contemporary culture.

Ecclesiastes outlines the whole aspect of our postmodern world and its perspective on morality—the bobbing like an otter in an ocean of beliefs and values and ideas. It includes the plurality of authority in

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which we are pressed with the centrality of personal choice and feel the angst that goes with it. For sure, there is the philosophical and practical emptiness of all the explored ethical theories.

We find, too, Solomon's rational attempt to disenchant his world by leaving God out of the equation. A Danish philosopher tells the story of a spider who dropped a single strand down from the top rafter of an old barn and began to weave his web. Days, weeks, and months went by, and the web expanded. It regularly provided food as small insects were caught in its maze. One day the spider was traversing its beautifully woven web and noticed a single strand going up into the darkness of the rafters. *I wonder why this is here?* it thought. *It doesn't serve to catch me any dinner.* The spider climbed as high as it could and severed the single strand that was its central support. The entire web tumbled to the floor, taking the spider with it.

This is what happened to Solomon. "Somewhere along the

way . . . Solomon clipped the strand that united him with God above the sun and decided to find meaning and satisfaction in a life lived strictly under the sun. In other words, he chose a life lived on his own terms, in a natural dimension with no reference to the divine."<sup>12</sup>

Reading Ecclesiastes, we can sense how Solomon systematically critiqued the ethical systems of his day and concluded that personal moral responsibility could never be escaped from. In the end, Solomon calls for a reality check. Like postmoderns, he accepts the need to re-personalize morality. He re-enchants his world and goes the next step to accept the reality that God has something to say, that in this ocean of words, there is a word from the Lord, that there are right and truthful words.

Notice how he ends Ecclesiastes: "The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly" (12:10, NASB). He wanted to find creative, captivating words. Convincing words. Per-

suasive words. But he wanted to write words of truth. And he wanted to put these true words together correctly. The NIV says it this way: "what he wrote was upright and true."

In effect, Solomon is pitting God's word against the ocean of words in his world. He is pitting God's word against our words. He affirms an ultimate reality. An ultimate authority. "The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails" (verse 11, NASB). There are nails of certainty on which to hang our perceptions of moral reality.

It all comes down to this: "Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (vss. 13, 14, NASB). Human ethical systems discredited while morality is still affirmed? Yes! Centrality of choice? Yes! Re-personalized morality? Yes! Re-enchantment of the world? Yes! Plurality of authorities? *No!* Existential angst? Only if you don't fear God or accept His pattern for moral life.

Like the otter, we can survive in a world of flux and movement because of some very fundamental moral/spiritual principles that exist for all human beings, no matter how much movement of ideas there may be around him or her. □

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