

Postmodern fallacies: A response to Merold Westphal

by [Douglas Groothuis](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

In a provocative and erudite essay, Merold Westphal argues that postmodern philosophy contributes to a Christian understanding of the implications of finitude and original sin with respect to knowledge ([Blind spots: Christianity and postmodern philosophy](#), June 14). Despite the atheism of leading postmodernists, Westphal maintains, Christians can find wisdom in their work and not fall prey to their errors.

I argue that the errors of postmodernism outweigh whatever wisdom it possesses. Instead of finding intellectual encouragement for Christian doctrines in the work of postmodernists, I discern an attack on the Christian worldview in the areas of textual meaning, truth and knowledge.

Westphal criticizes the “Enlightenment project” for its philosophical hubris in assuming that human reason can transcend its enmeshment in culture in order to ascertain a “God’s-eye” perspective. We should reject “the autonomy of the human knower” and the quest for objectivity. Instead, we should realize that all our knowledge is from a certain cultural perspective and that we have blind spots, given our finitude and sinfulness.

This depiction of the “Enlightenment project” is a bit of a caricature. Few Enlightenment figures were so grandiose or naïve. Kant denied knowledge of objective reality entirely and limited knowledge to the preset categories of our minds. He thus served as a precursor to postmodernism, which further relativized knowledge with respect to culture and language. The empiricists Locke and (even more so) Hume were circumspect in their claims about reality, given the bounds of perception. Westphal’s description of the “Enlightenment project” may loosely fit Descartes, but few others. Postmodernists, it seems, attempt to legitimize themselves by reacting to an overblown stereotype.

Westphal celebrates “the death of the author,” hailed by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as dethroning the sovereignty of the author over the meaning of texts as

well as the received methods of exegesis. When the author has vanished, deconstruction may begin, which is taken as an exposé of hidden factors impinging on the author. Westphal even appreciates “the death of the subject,” which he takes to be the termination of the “autonomous subject,” but not all subjects. One wonders. Foucault and other postmodernists announce the death of the subject qua person with a human nature, not just the author or the autonomous self. To all those “who still ask themselves question about what man is in his essence,” Foucault writes in *The Order of Things*, “we can answer only with a philosophical laugh.”

Postmodernists deconstruct texts precisely because they deconstruct persons. Instead of taking the human subject to be an irreducible and substantial locus of significance, deconstruction dissolves the subject into cultural contingencies. As Jacques Lacan confessed, “I am a poem, not a poet.”

Christians should bristle at this belief. Scripture states that humans possess a nature; we are created in God’s image, however culturally embedded we may be (Gen. 1:26). To make authorial intent the final word on the meaning of any text honors the author’s created nature as a knower and communicative agent. Although not omniscient, humans are determinative of the meaning of their texts. They do not determine the truth or rationality of their texts, since humans east of Eden often err. Others may show them to be wrong. A reader may discern logical implications as well as stylistic elements not originally known by the author. Nevertheless, the author’s intended meaning determines what the text directly communicates. When Derrida criticized philosopher John Searle for his misinterpretation of Derrida’s intended meaning in his writing, he was within his rights; he was, however, contradicting his own philosophy.

We could never assess the truth or rationality of a text without first determining its meaning. Gibberish or terminal ambiguity cannot be either true or false. If we fail to isolate the author’s intended meaning (and we may fail), we are cast adrift without any methodological anchor for interpretation, as E. D. Hirsch ably argued in *Validity in Interpretation*. The death of the author implies the death of any author-ity for sacred scripture as well, since it would then lack any fixed and ascertainable meaning.

It is highly significant that postmodernists deny the correspondence concept of truth, which states that a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to reality. That is, there is a real world outside the self that is partially knowable through language. The vast majority (if not the entirety) of postmodernists are nonrealists

who deny the correspondence view. Besides making meaning indeterminate, they make “truth” dependent on social constructions, largely based on language. Westphal notwithstanding, this does not engender epistemological humility such that we are induced to be especially careful to remember our blind spots. Rather, it shrouds the whole landscape in impenetrable darkness, since there is nothing external to the subject (who isn’t really there) that can be known. This account renders knowing objective truth impossible, not merely difficult. It also renders postmodernist “truth” simple: Just believe the social constructions in which you find yourself.

Besides being subject to numerous philosophical objections (typically problems of self-reference), nonrealism is incompatible with a Christian worldview. The Bible claims to reveal objective truth that is knowable despite our limitations as finite and fallible beings (2 Tim. 3:15-17). As Paul announced, if Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:13-19). Westphal himself rightly appeals to biblical revelation as a check on our presumptuousness. But in so doing, he must reject postmodernist nonrealism.

Lastly, what should we make of Westphal’s rejection of “absolute knowledge” and his criticisms of Christian “apologetics”? Classically, knowledge is defined as justified, true belief. One may hold justified beliefs about absolute truths, such as “torturing the innocent for pleasure is wrong.” Moreover, if Christian apologetics does its job, one may believe with justification absolute theological truths, such as “Jesus is the Son of God.”

Christians can and should give evidence and arguments for such propositions in public forums before unbelievers, because apologetics is a biblical command (1 Pet. 3:15). Paul practiced it in Acts 17. Apologetic engagement, Westphal to the contrary, need not indulge the “autonomous self” or discount the effects of sin. Rather, the apologist attempts to confirm biblical revelation through historical and logical warrants. Absolute certainty is not required for successful apologetic arguments, since many other beliefs may be justified without that rarified cognitive state.

These, I believe, are Westphal’s blind spots.

[Merold Westphal's article on postmodernism](#)

[Westphal's reply](#)