

Postmodernism and the Pharisee

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Buzzwords like “Postmodernism” and “Critical Theory” have floated around academia for a long time, but now these concepts have burst into the broader culture, often with substantial confusion and controversy. Blowback against these concepts has been quite sharp, sometimes resulting in frustration at academic faculty who are perceived as partisan agents. Ohio Senate candidate and famed author J.D. Vance recently vilified academia, saying, “The professors are the enemy,” based on his concerns about postmodern indoctrination.

So what are these ideas that have sparked so much anger? Broadly, postmodernism emphasizes the following concepts:

1. We should always be skeptical toward “metanarratives” (worldviews, religions) about what’s true and right for all people and all cultures.
2. Metanarratives are inherently arrogant.
3. Metanarratives are exclusionary: They always create an in-group of acceptable people and an out-group of unacceptable people.
4. Metanarratives serve to help one group grab power over another. [This is the main focus of critical theory.]

How should we respond? The obvious reaction is to point out that **these claims are incoherent and self-defeating**. A sentence like “Universal knowledge claims are impossible” contradicts itself, like a person cutting off the branch that they’re sitting on. The statement “It’s wrong to make normative ethical claims” is itself an ethical claim. And of course, those who pose these critiques have proven remarkably adept at creating and enabling “in groups” that assert power over “out groups.”

However, such a response overlooks the very real concerns that postmodernism raises: Universal knowledge claims do seem kind of arrogant, and there are many examples in history of big worldview/religious systems being used to exclude and oppress others. Instead of just trying to “win the debate” over postmodernism by pointing out its inconsistencies, it is more valuable and persuasive to listen to these concerns and see if we can come up with a better answer than the one that postmodern academic culture has supplied.

My faith tradition has a beautiful story that may provide such an answer: Jesus tells of two men who pray at the temple. The first man is an elite religious leader – a Pharisee who is puffed up with pride in his ability to do everything right and thanks God that he is better than other men. The second man is a tax collector, hated and despised by his surrounding culture; he is unable to even turn his eyes toward heaven, and he quietly asks for forgiveness. Jesus shocks his audience by saying that it is the second man who went home justified in God’s eyes.

This Pharisee actually captures much of what animates postmodernism: The idea of religious certainty, self-righteousness, superiority, and hierarchy, all resulting in cruelty, power, and a lack of empathy. But Jesus tells us that **the answer to Religious Pharisees is not Postmodern Pharisees**, with their own flavor of certainty, self-righteousness, and superiority. Instead, Jesus commends the tax collector who affirms what's true and right in a posture of humility and gratitude.

I know many people are frustrated at academia and the perceived continuous stream of postmodern critique and deconstruction. However, the answer is not to tell your postmodern professor that they are wrong or that they are "an enemy." Instead, we can answer, "Postmodernism lacks the resources to answer its own accusations about arrogance and exclusion. Only a worldview marked by humility and grace can do that."