

Postmodern fallacies: Merold Westphal replies

by [Merold Westphal](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

I thank Douglas Groothuis for his response, but I cannot agree that the “Enlightenment project” as described by postmodernism is a “caricature” that “may loosely fit Descartes, but few others.” It is essential to the rationalist philosophers Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz; and in his own utterly unique way Hegel also holds that philosophy can be a presuppositionless science, transcending all particular and contingent perspectives. In yet another distinctive manner, Husserl presents phenomenology as the method that will enable philosophy to be rigorous, presuppositionless science.

It is true that Kant and the empiricists place limits on the extent of our knowledge, but that’s not the point. For Kant, the forms of intuition and categories of understanding that give us phenomenal knowledge structure human understanding at all times and in all places and are without any “enmeshment in culture.” Moreover, when it comes to ethics and religion, pure practical reason is at once universal and devoid of any restriction to mere appearances.

It is as important for Locke as for Descartes to free thought from any dependence on tradition. Following him and Francis Bacon, the empiricist tradition turns to sense experience and scientific method as the means to render knowledge free from historically particular contexts. This is true of Hume, of John Stuart Mill, of both 19th- and 20th-century positivism; and in spite of numerous 20th-century critiques from a wide variety of philosophical perspectives (not exclusively “postmodern,” as I noted in my essay), empiricist scientism is alive and well in much contemporary philosophy. We are not talking about an “overblown stereotype.”

With regard to the “death of the author” and the related “death of the subject,” I note the following:

1) It is not every author who vanishes, but only the author whose supposed sovereignty over the text is total. The question is not whether human authors are

omniscient, as Groothuis suggests, but whether they are omnipotent in relation to their texts as God is in relation to creation such that all and only what they intend can be found in their texts.

2) Similarly, it is not every subject who dies, but only the autonomous subject who is the measure of absolute truth. Those who have read Locke, Kant or Hegel on religion know how deeply biblical revelation is distorted when autonomous human reason is made its measure. Biblical faith need not come to the aid of such a subject.

3) Foucault indeed denies that humans have a nature or essence. But that is a corollary of his atheism, and I nowhere suggest that Christians appropriate that part of his thought. On the contrary, my project is to sort out those features of postmodernism that are conceptually tied to its atheism from those features which are not; and I find neither its critique of the absolutely sovereign author nor its critique of the epistemically and ethically autonomous subject to be tied to that atheism. Like Groothuis, I believe we are created in the image of God, but I see no reason in that belief not to welcome these analyses of human finitude. It simply doesn't follow from my being created in the image of God that I have absolute sovereignty over my text.

4) When Derrida criticized Searle it was not for misinterpreting his intentions but for misreading the text in front of him. Derrida regularly and consistently holds that while there is much indeterminacy in texts, they are sufficiently determinate to exclude some readings. It would be hard to find a more careful close reader of texts than Derrida.

5) Hirsch's hermeneutics, in which there is a fully determinate object (the intended meaning) and a context-free method for identifying it, is an instance of the "Enlightenment project" which shows that the postmodern critique is not based on a "caricature" and a "stereotype." Do we not hear the voice of Cartesian and empiricist modernity in Groothuis's anxiety that we may be "cast adrift without any methodological anchor for interpretation"? Do Word and Spirit need to be supplemented by Methodology? Does the authority of scripture rely on the sovereignty of the human author?

On the question of truth and realism, Groothuis again tries to discredit what I do say by referring to themes I do not discuss. Kant is the paradigmatic antirealist. He holds 1) that reality is and is what it is independent of our knowledge, which is what the "thing in itself" is all about; 2) that the way things truly are is precisely the way God

knows them to be; and 3) that since our thoughts are not God's thoughts but differ qualitatively and not merely quantitatively, we do not know things as they truly are. It seems to me that all Christians—indeed, all theists—should be antirealists in this sense. This means that while correspondence remains the meaning of Truth, we acknowledge that our “knowledge” never reaches this ideal and that our “truth” is at best an approximation.

One can affirm, as I do, that biblical revelation tells us what we should believe and is the source of the best “truth” available to us without claiming that by this means God puts our knowledge on a par with divine knowledge. In teaching the incomprehensibility of God, the church has been virtually unanimous in teaching that our knowledge of God does not correspond to, does not perfectly mirror, its intended referent.

Finally, I don't know where Groothuis finds my “criticisms” of apologetics. What I did say was 1) that the Christian meganarrative is not a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense because it is already a first-order discourse, kerygma rather than apologetics, and 2) that there is a perennial danger that apologetics will end up defending the faith by trying to show that it accords with some version of worldly wisdom, forgetting the Pauline insistence that the word of the cross and the wisdom of the world are foolishness in each other's eyes (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

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

[Douglas Groothuis's response](#)