

POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Understanding Our Changing Culture

What is Epistemology?

"The theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge."

—Webster's Dictionary

"The branch of philosophy that is concerned with the theory of knowledge. It is an inquiry into the nature and source of knowledge, the bounds of knowledge, and the justification of claims to knowledge."

—Paul Feinberg

Walter A. Elwell ed., "Epistemology" in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 382.

Key Terms

Relativism:	The belief that all truth is relative, being determined by some group.
Subjectivism:	The belief that all truth is subjective, being defined by the perspective of the individual.
Skepticism:	The belief that truth cannot be known with certainty.
Perspectivism:	The belief that truth is found in the combined perspectives of many.

Pragmatism:	The belief that truth is ultimately defined by that which works to accomplish the best outcome. “The end justifies the means.”
Objectivism:	The belief that truth is an objective reality that exist whether someone believes it or not.

Which best describes our culture today?

1. Relativism
2. Subjectivism
3. Skepticism
4. Perspectivism
5. Pragmatism
6. Objectivism

What is Postmodernism?

“Christian’s today cannot work with the same assumptions that we did just 20 years ago. At that time, people would join you in your search for absolute truth. It is different now. Today, before we begin to lead people to the truth of Jesus Christ, we may have to lead them to the truth of truth. Common ground must be created before the Gospel can be proclaimed”

"Apologetically, the question which arises in the postmodern context is the following. How can Christianity's claims to truth be taken seriously, when there are so many rival alternatives, and when 'truth' itself has become a devalued notion? No-one can lay claim to possession of truth. It is all a question of perspective. The conclusion of this line of thought is as simple as it is devastating: 'the truth is that there is no truth'"

—Alister McGrath

A Passion for Truth (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 188

Conversation Between Protagoras and Socrates (4th B.C.)

Protagoras: Truth is relative. It is only a matter of opinion.

Socrates: *You mean that truth is mere subjective opinion?*

Protagoras: Exactly. What is true for you is true for you, and what is true for me is true for me. Truth is subjective.

Socrates: *Do you really mean that? That my opinion is true by virtue of its being my opinion?*

Protagoras: Indeed I do.

Socrates: *My opinion is: Truth is absolute, not opinion, and that you, Mr. Protagoras, are absolutely in error. Since this is my opinion, you must grant that it is true according to your philosophy.*

Protagoras: You are quite correct, Socrates.

Self-defeating Statements

“I cannot speak a word in English.”

“My wife has never been married.”

“We cannot know anything about God.”

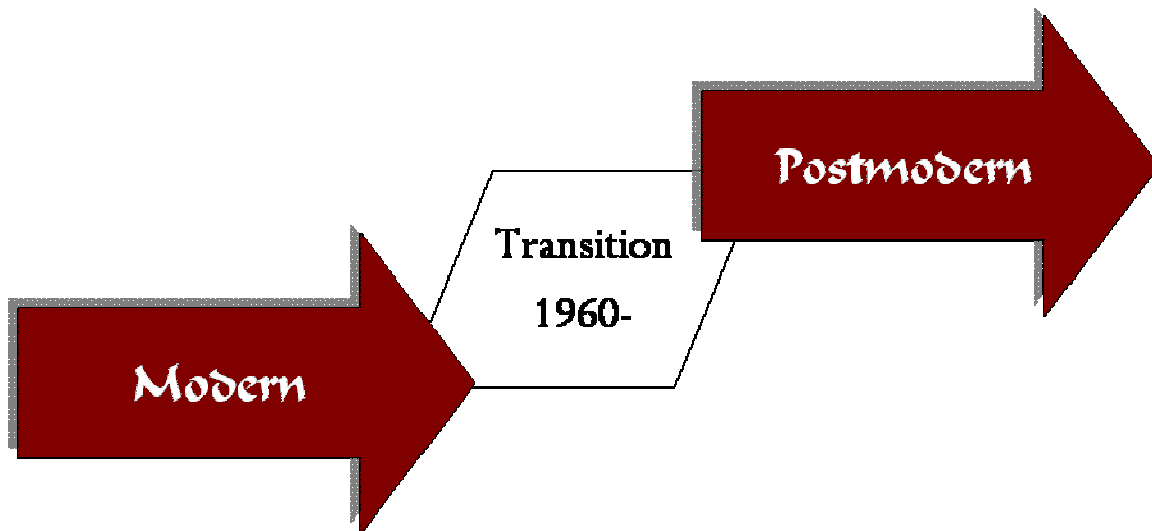
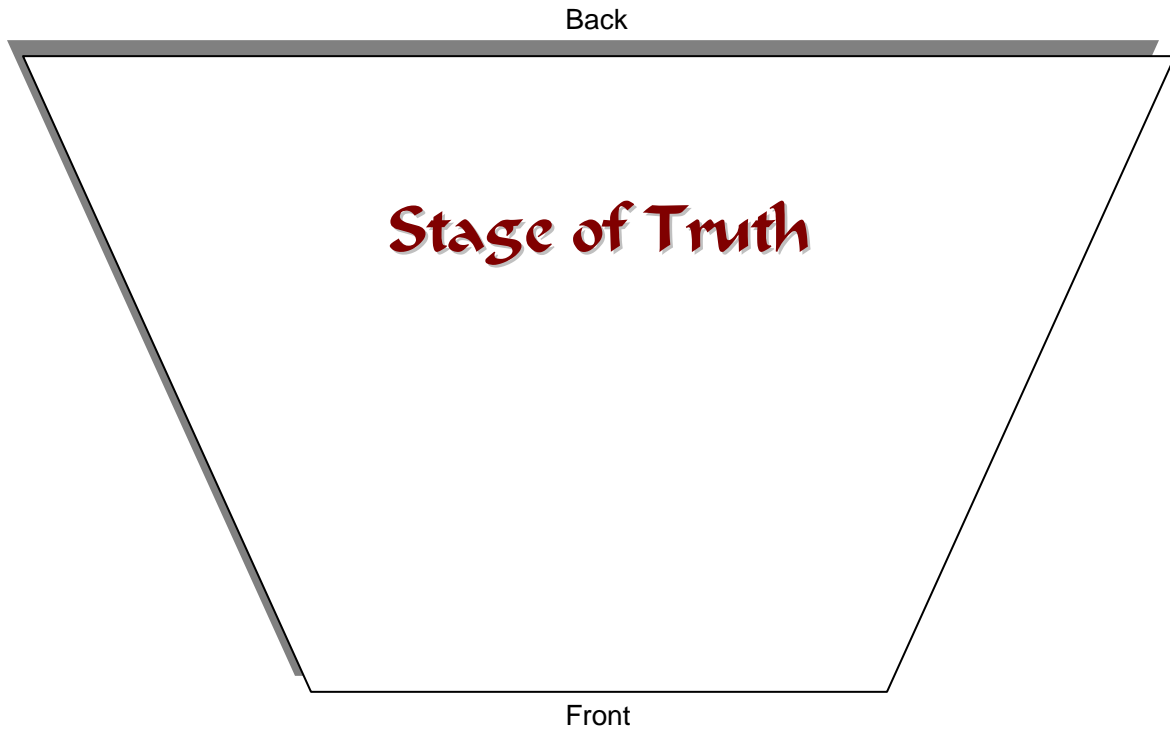
“There is no such thing as truth.”

“Truth cannot be known with certainty.”

A short history of western civilization**Three periods:**

1. Premodern (400-1600 A.D.)
2. Modern (1600-1900 A.D.)
3. Postmodern (1960-present)





Modern Generation

- Preboomers
- Boomers



43%

Postmodern Generation

- Busters (Gen X)
- Bridgers (Gen Y)



57%

Modernism	Postmodernism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual • Reason • Optimism • Hope for the future • Objectivism • Exclusivism • Science method • Man is evolving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-intellectual • Feeling • Pessimism • Despair for the present • Subjectivism/relativism • Pluralism/inclusivism • Distrust in science • Man is devolving

The Ideal Modern Man:²**Mr. Spock**

- Spock is always logical and objective.
- Never acts upon feeling, because that would be “illogical.”

“Physical laws simply cannot be ignored. Existence cannot be without them.”

“Pain is a thing of the mind. The mind can be controlled.”

**The Ideal Modern Man Mocked:****Data**

- Data is the “perfect” modern human.
- Despite his “perfection,” Data . . .
 - Wants to be human.
 - Rebels against logic.
 - Attempts to develop emotions and feelings.

² The illustration of Spock and Data is adapted from Stanley Grenz *Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 1-10.

- **Premodern:** “There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call them as they are.”
- **Modern:** “There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call them as I see them.”
- **Postmodern:** “They ain’t nothing ‘til I call ‘em.”



“In Postmodernism, there is no objective, universal truth; there is only the perspective of the group. . . . In postmodernism, all viewpoints, all lifestyles, all beliefs and behaviors are regarded as equally valid. . . . Tolerance has become so important that no exception is tolerated.”

—Charles Colson

How Now Shall We Live? (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999), 23

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss the contact you have had with the postmodern mindset.
2. Some argue that those who say they believe that all truth is relative don't actually live this way. Explain why it is virtually impossible to live out a relativistic worldview.
3. Discuss the validity of this statement: "People are only relativistic when it comes to the issues of morals and metaphysics (God, spiritual things, etc.). They are not relativistic when it comes to the mundane."

4. Do you still see modernism's overly optimistic worldview in our society today? Give examples.
5. Empathize with people's despair caused by the failed claims of modernism.
6. Which way of thinking do you identify with most: Modernism or Postmodernism? How?

7. Why do you think that postmoderns are described as people who are in despair? How have you observed this?
8. In what ways would having a subjective or relative worldview cause you despair?
9. How was your thinking *most* challenged by the lesson? Explain.

