POSTMODERNISM (and Modernism) IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE
(Chapter 4: A Third Way)

What a Third Way is, and isn't

In Chapter 2, we discussed Modernism and its effects on the church, many of which I believe are negative. In Chapter 3, we discussed Postmodernism, concluding that it often had a good diagnosis of the ills of Modernism, but in many cases gave a bad prescription. It is natural to ask if we can have the best of both worlds by finding a middle ground – but first we should question whether looking for something in the middle is necessarily the right approach.

Note the chapter title: "A Third Way".[1] You may have heard a similar term, which is the Latin *via media*, meaning "middle way." This was an important concept for the Romans, and later the Anglican church was described as a *via media* between Catholic and Protestant. The idea of the *via media* is that if you have two opposing views you find a middle ground that combines aspects of each. Often it can provide a positive outcome in situations of conflict.

It is tempting to try that with postmodernism, to look for a *via media* that's a little bit modern and a little bit postmodern. But we should stop and think about what the *via media* approach is really saying. It assumes that everything is one-dimensional, that the whole game is being played on a straight line between two extremes. In reality, most things are multidimensional. Sometimes what we need is not some middle between two ends, but to stop playing the game and look at things from a completely different angle.

Imagine two people arguing over how to cross a river. One wants to swim, while the other wants to wade across. A *via media* might be to wade until it reaches a certain depth, then try to swim. A "third way" might be to question the assumption that they must cross at that particular spot, observing that there is a bridge they could use if they are willing to walk a short distance upstream. While sometimes the best approach may really be a *via media* between modernism and postmodernism, those two approaches have some shared assumptions that need to be questioned. We must be willing to think "outside the box," and sometimes both modernism and postmodernism are stuck inside the box.

Third Way Epistemology

Much of postmodernism's divergence from modernism falls in the philosophical category of epistemology, which is the study of how we know things, or how we come to believe that things are true. Modernist epistemology claims to start from a foundation of universally self-evident facts, assuming that our human observations and language directly correspond with objective reality, and uses science and reason to produce universal truth. We saw in Chapter 3 that there are multiple problems with this epistemology. The indubitable foundations demanded by modernism do not actually exist. Humans cannot obtain purely objective facts as required by modernism because none of us directly perceives reality with a God's-eye view. Human truth claims (and the metanarratives in which those claims appear) can sometimes be more about exercising power than about finding genuine truth.

[1] I did not invent this term; it has been used occasionally for years to describe approaches that reject typical one-dimensional frameworks. For example, it has been applied to describe politicians like Tony Blair and Bill Clinton who did not fit neatly into simple liberal/conservative categories.

With this diagnosis of flaws in modernism, some postmodernists essentially reject the idea of truly gaining knowledge. All is opinion and language games and exercises of power, with what passes for truth being merely a social construction. That is, of course, highly problematic from a Christian standpoint. In the following, I will outline some thoughts about approaches that avoid the relativism and rejection of truth of radical postmodernism, without retreating to the discredited epistemology of modernism.

Framework for Epistemology: Critical Realism

A question at the heart of epistemology is how one views "reality." Most people, whether they think about it or not, operate with a view known as realism. Realism asserts the existence of objectively true reality, independent of the prejudices of human observers, and that we can at least in part know the truth of that reality. The view associated with postmodernism is known as social constructivism. In social constructivism (at least in its more radical forms), all of our knowledge is contingent on our particular perspectives and social structures, so that truth claims are merely the product of human social interactions rather than representing an external reality. Realism's assumption that we can directly know reality is subject to the critique of perspectivism (see Chapter 3), which notes that we all lack the God's-eye view needed to see reality with perfect clarity. Must our inability to know reality in the certain way demanded by the Enlightenment lead to a social constructivism that denies the idea of absolute truth, or is there a third way?

A third way starts with recognizing that realism takes two different forms. The modernist approach to knowledge can be called naïve realism. Naïve realism assumes two things about reality: first, that objective reality (absolute truth, independent of human factors) exists, and second, that human minds can know this reality directly and with certainty (i.e., with a God's-eye view). The second assumption, which amounts to a denial of perspectivism, has been rendered untenable with the insights of postmodernism. But the two assumptions need not be coupled; it is possible to hold the first while rejecting the second. This is known as critical realism.

Critical realism can be summarized as *Truth is absolute, but human knowledge never is*. The postmodernists are right that anything we think we know is filtered through our human biases and language and culture. But just because we can't have undistorted knowledge doesn't mean truth is only a matter of opinion, or that we can never know anything in a meaningful sense. Critical realism sees absolute truth (in science, history, theology, or any other field) as something that exists and is worth pursuing, even while recognizing that our pursuit will be distorted by our own biases and those of the cultures in which we are embedded. As the late missiologist Lesslie Newbigen said,[2] *The (true) assertion that all truth claims are culturally and historically embodied does not entail the (false) assertion that none of them makes contact with a reality beyond the human mind*. 1900 years earlier, the Apostle Paul spoke of how our current knowledge was like seeing "dimly in a mirror" (I Cor. 13:12), but he did not use this acknowledged imperfection in our vision as a reason to stop trying to see. Perhaps Paul was the first critical realist.

[2] In his book *Proper Confidence*; see the Bibliography.

The critical realist is like the baseball umpire who says "I call 'em as I see 'em."[3] The umpire knows that balls and strikes are an absolute truth defined by the rules of the game, but he also knows that his judgments come from his personal, imperfect perspective. In spite of his inability to achieve certain truth, he does his best, which is usually good enough for the job. For the critical realist, pursuit of knowledge amounts to doing our best, while trying to recognize our prejudiced perspectives and to the extent possible keeping them from distorting our judgments. Good umpires study film and get help from other umpires with the goal of better representing the truth; similarly the critical realist seeking knowledge should be open to correction and willing to listen to those with other perspectives. The critical realist is willing to seek truth that is absolute and universal, even while recognizing the impossibility of knowing such truths with absolute certainty. This recognition that our knowledge is imperfect requires that we hold our convictions with humility (more on that below).

Recalling the first part of this chapter, we might ask whether critical realism is a *via media*. In one sense it could be, keeping the commitment to absolute truth of naïve realism while accepting the postmodern insight that knowledge is always distorted by our human perspectives. But in another sense it is not, because it rejects an assumption shared by the two extremes, namely that knowledge requires certainty. Modernist naïve realism sees foundational certainty in human observation and reason, and considers this the only reliable knowledge. Social constructivism recognizes that modernist certainty is unattainable in the real world, and in its more extreme forms concludes that therefore reliable knowledge is not possible. Both extremes seem to assume that worthwhile knowledge of any absolute truth requires absolute objective certainty, but critical realists reject that assumption. We will discuss below how we can think about knowing truth without being certain that our knowledge is correct.

Structure of Epistemology: Alternatives to Foundationalism

At its core, the modernist conception of knowledge is foundationalist. It starts with self-evident truths that any rational person should recognize, and builds on that foundation with reason. The foundation may be Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," or some conception of natural law or universal human experience, or the fundamentalist view of the Bible as a perfect and self-authenticating book, but the structure is the same. Scholars of epistemology may not agree on many things, but almost all of them would say that foundationalism is not a viable approach. All supposed foundations crumble under close scrutiny, revealed to be tainted by the perspectives of the particular humans who construct them.

What is the alternative? If we want 100% Enlightenment certainty, there probably isn't one. Nevertheless, the collapse of foundationalism need not lead us to give up on the idea of gaining knowledge that, while it might not satisfy modernist criteria of certainty, is adequate for us to live by. There are at least two nonfoundationalist ways we can envision knowledge.

One nonfoundationalist approach to knowledge is known as coherentism. Rather than a building constructed on a foundation, the structural metaphor is a "web of belief." All of our knowledge (the things we hold to be true) is connected to a greater or lesser extent, and if that web hangs together coherently it gives us confidence (albeit not certainty) that our beliefs are

[3] This illustration is adapted from J.R. Middleton and B.J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*.

true. This is especially the case if our criteria for coherence include how our web makes sense of the world around us and of our experience. Conversely, if we find that our web of belief is becoming incoherent (as for example with medieval cosmology when confronted by the discoveries of Galileo and Kepler), it may be time to rethink some beliefs.

One can carry the analogy a bit farther. If some small strand at the fringe of a web turns out to be incoherent, it can be repaired relatively easily, or perhaps it may simply be ignored. But some points are central to the integrity of the web, and if those fail major reconstruction will be needed. Similarly, webs don't just float around freely – they are typically anchored at several points. A sturdy and coherent belief system needs to have some anchors that ground it in truths that we can treat as dependable.

The alert reader may object that these "anchors" function suspiciously like "foundations." It is a fair point, and it brings us to a second way of envisioning knowledge apart from classic foundationalism: the idea of basic beliefs. In any system of knowledge, some beliefs are more basic than others – a chemist's belief in the reality of atoms and molecules is more basic than her belief in the structure of some newly synthesized compound. This might be thought of as a form of foundationalism, but it differs from the strong foundationalism of modernism in that the basic beliefs are not claimed to be indubitable and evident to any rational thinker. Basic beliefs are not purely objective as the Enlightenment would demand, but instead arise in a personal context, including the context of a person's community (like the chemist's community that trusts in atoms and molecules). For the Christian community, a "basic belief" would be God revealed in Jesus. Basic beliefs cannot be proven with modernist certainty, but individuals and communities may find them trustworthy enough to base their lives on them.

As with critical realism, nonfoundationalist epistemology requires discarding the assumption (shared by both modernists and some postmodernists) that knowing something requires absolute certainty. If we recognize that such certainty is unattainable, we need not give up on the idea of knowing, but it does mean that we should hold our knowledge with humility.

Attitude for Epistemology: Humility, and Commitment without Certainty

Humility about our knowledge is not highly valued in the modern world or the modern church. The Enlightenment conditioned us to devalue anything that can't be proven by its criteria of science and reason, and the church (especially in its Evangelical forms) tends to follow suit in equating the level of certainty with the quality of one's faith. Certainty has become an idol in the modern world, but that idol is crumbling as we realize that the objective certainty of the Enlightenment is a pipe dream. Is there a way to move forward without sinking into a postmodern morass where we despair of knowing anything?

In my opinion,[4] the key is to break the linkage between "knowledge" and "certainty." In real life, our knowledge is never detached and objective and beyond all doubt; instead it involves a personal commitment on our part to affirm something to be true. If we waited for 100% certainty, we would be forever paralyzed by doubt. But in matters large and small, we manage to decide that we are certain enough to commit to a position or a course of action, even at the risk of being wrong.

[4] The idea is not original to me; Lesslie Newbigen's book *Proper Confidence* is a good resource, as is Daniel Taylor's *The Myth of Certainty*.

In addition to knowing without certainty, being human means we must act without certainty. Knowledge is not an end in itself; we know in order to inform our actions so that our lives can reflect what we value and what we believe to be true. It is one thing to commit to an idea, but quite another to commit to a course of action. With action, the risk of commitment is most acute. But even for those of us who are highly risk-averse, there is no escaping such risks. Life in the real world demands that we decide on actions every day (and, as they say, not deciding is itself a decision), so we have to commit ourselves to what is right as best we can discern it despite our lack of certainty. As with knowledge, these personal commitments should be made with humility – but humility is not the same as timidity. Humility should always be a part of our attitude, but it should not stop us from acting boldly if that is what our commitments require.

We might sum up third-way epistemology by saying that *absolute truth exists, but we must humbly recognize our inability to have absolute knowledge of that truth*. That inability need not paralyze us; instead we seek truth and commit ourselves to it, even while recognizing our lack of certainty and being open to correction. Perhaps more important, we choose to act on our (imperfect) knowledge. The radical postmodernist (and the determined modernist for that matter) might say this does not really qualify as "knowledge," but that is a matter of semantics. Whatever we call it, in the real world we have to take risks and commit ourselves to principles and actions even though they are not impervious to doubt.

A Matter of Interpretation

Related to epistemology is the issue of interpretation. In contrast to naïve realism that thinks we see reality directly, it is now recognized that all our perceptions of reality are interpreted through our particular imperfect lenses. There is interpretation both in what we perceive (since each of us has a different perspective on reality) and in how we translate our perceptions into the conclusions we draw about things in the world and their meaning. This is often discussed in the context of reading, where scholars debate the extent (if any) to which a reader can actually receive knowledge from a writer.

Here again, the demands of Enlightenment certainty cannot be met. If I read something you write, neither of us can be certain that what I received was exactly what you meant, nor can we claim that the words perfectly represent external reality. To radical postmodernists, the reaction to this problem is to deny the possibility of accurate communication, leaving only deconstruction (without any reconstruction) and playing with language. Critical realism and related concepts provide a third way here as well. We can recognize that all of our knowledge involves interpretation, but also affirm that *some interpretations are better than others*.

As I write this, I am sitting in front of an object that I bought at Ikea over 20 years ago and managed to assemble. If you ask me, I will tell you that it is a "desk," but that is my interpretation (and that of Ikea as I recall) and not a God-given absolute. Others might see the various things cluttered on it and interpret it as "storage shelving." In certain circumstances, some might interpret it as "firewood." In principle, somebody with a very different perspective could interpret it is "food." Yet, while granting that interpretation of the things around us is necessary, we need not say that all interpretations are equally good. Interpretations can usually be tested to some degree – in this case some testing would reveal that the interpretation of

"food" was a bad interpretation (unless you are a termite). So our interpretations can be tested to some extent against the real world and we can often achieve sufficiently valid interpretations of the world to justify belief and action. Even so, recognizing that we are interpreting when we do this rather than directly perceiving perfect truth should produce some level of humility in our interpretations.

Pluralism and Relativism

Two words often associated with postmodernism are pluralism and relativism, but we must be clear that they are not synonyms. Pluralism refers to the existence of different views on issues and of different overall worldviews. As such, it is simply a description of one aspect of our world, and people might differ on whether or not it is desirable. Relativism, on the other hand, is a philosophical position about the relationships of these plural views to reality. Relativism may take a mild form that merely observes that our different viewpoints inevitably bias what we perceive to be true. However, in its more extreme forms, it may be asserted that no statement about reality can be judged better than another, and that we cannot legitimately claim anything to be true or false for anyone else.

Responses to pluralism and relativism often make the mistake of lumping the two together. A common "conservative" approach is not only to decry relativism but also to try to suppress pluralism, insisting that everybody conform to one particular way of seeing things. This is the sort of abuse of power to impose "truth" that Foucault and others critique in modernism (see Chapter 3). At the other extreme, a characteristic of much postmodern culture is the celebration and promotion of the widest variety of viewpoints (except, in a bit of inconsistency, for viewpoints that do not celebrate pluralism), usually coupled with the assertion that such pluralism means that truth can only be relative.

A third way might begin with accepting pluralism as a fact, without automatically labeling it as good or bad. On questions large and small, from matters of God to arguments over sports, different people hold different beliefs. We can recognize the truth of relativism in its minimal form (which is similar to the concept of perspectivism discussed in Chapter 3) – since nobody has a God's-eye view, each person's beliefs about reality will be biased to some extent. At this point we can invoke the idea of critical realism to say that there is a real world (as opposed to reality being only a social construction) and that we can know things about it, albeit imperfectly. Our interpretations of that world will be affected by our personal situations, including our social settings, but some interpretations are truly better than others. Our recognition that we do not perceive reality in a perfect and unbiased way need not and should not lead to the conclusion of extreme relativism that we are never able to say anything universally true about reality, or that we can never determine with confidence that some beliefs about reality are false.

Is it Really all about Me?

A central feature of the Enlightenment was the transfer of authority from external sources (kings, the church) to the reasoning individual. This is one area where postmodernism is definitely not the opposite of modernism. The postmodern world is still very individualistic, but in a somewhat different way. In the modern paradigm, the individual observes reality objectively and uses reason to determine truth. Additionally, the modern world is centered

around the individual consumer, choosing (supposedly based on reason) not only what to buy, but also what work to do, whom to befriend, and where and how to worship. In postmodernism, the individual consumer is still central, but now he also gets to choose what he believes to be true. For more radical forms of postmodernism, truth becomes a personal choice not unlike those a shopper makes in the cereal aisle.

This situation calls for a third way that rejects the individualism and consumerism shared by modernism and postmodernism. To be human is to be not only a unique individual but also a participant in interactions with others. It is unhealthy for either of those poles to become too dominant – the rampant selfishness and individualism in our world causes many problems, but it is also harmful when the individual is entirely subsumed in the community (as in some cults). A healthy balance is needed, and in a culture like ours that is so focused on the individual this usually means giving greater attention to community. If we see our identities not only as individual consumers but as members of a community, we will think and act in ways that benefit the community instead of our own narrow interests.

The postmodernists would tell us that social factors strongly influence the beliefs and actions of even the most determined individualist, and they would be right. The very attitudes of consumerist individualism that dominate our culture are not chosen by isolated reasoning individuals; they are inculcated by merely being a part of Western society. Even as a third way calls for more emphasis on community, we must recognize that our communities shape us in more ways than we realize. The degree to which we are formed by our communities is simply a consequence of being human. It is therefore important for us (to the extent we can) to choose the right communities, healthy communities where the individuals are respected even as they are encouraged to leave behind their self-centeredness. Ideally, the Christian church should be such a community; we will discuss this further in Chapter 5.

Case Study: Science and Third Ways

Most scientists are critical realists, whether they recognize it or not. The modern stereotype of science is a man in a white lab coat collecting objective facts and synthesizing them into certain truth. This caricature, while not wholly wrong, corresponds to an untenable epistemology of naïve realism. Real scientists know that real science is messier than that.

Like all knowledge, scientific knowledge cannot be proven with absolute certainty. Yet scientists claim (with good reason) that their work refers to real things. Scientific descriptions do not provide a perfect view of reality, but are thought of as approximations to the truth. One does not prove scientific conjectures in the absolute modern sense, but in many cases they can be known "beyond a reasonable doubt." The criteria for such judgments include explanation of the evidence, fruitfulness (whether it leads to additional knowledge), and successful prediction of observations not used to develop the theory. All of this is a human endeavor, and as the postmodernists remind us it therefore involves interpretation (where nature is the "text" being interpreted), but some interpretations are better than others.

We should also recognize the social factors in science. The questions scientists consider important are influenced by their perspectives and those of the scientific community. That same community trains new scientists, passing on skills but also biases. Some biases are good (we should be glad that scientists are biased against conjectures with no supporting evidence),

but sometimes they can obstruct the path to knowledge (as with 20th-Century opposition to the Big Bang by some who disliked the religious implications of a beginning for our universe). As in other areas of knowledge, in science we should try to recognize biases and minimize them to the extent possible. The community plays an important role in this – scientists with different perspectives may uncover a subtle bias. The fact that scientists with widely different religious and philosophical perspectives generally arrive at the same answers for scientific questions is one indication that these social factors, while real, are not crippling.[5]

Finally, we might think about the third-way attitude of "humility." While many scientists go about their work humbly and quietly, self-promotion and exaggerating the impact of findings are not unheard of. Some of this can be attributed to funding systems that encourage self-promotion, and to universities eager for publicity (when a school's press release trumpets that a professor is on the way to curing cancer, you can bet the professor's original draft was more modest). All in all, there is room for improvement on the humility front, but probably no more so than in other professions. Where humility is most needed is not in the scientific claims themselves, but in recognizing the limits of science. Science is great at answering questions about how the natural world works, but it is incapable of answering questions of purpose and meaning. Most scientists recognize this limitation, but a few extrapolate beyond the science to draw metaphysical conclusions that they try to pass off as results of science. Those extrapolations should be rejected.

In keeping with a critical realist framework, humility should not stop scientists from deciding that they know things with sufficient confidence to advocate for what they find to be true. We really can say beyond a reasonable doubt that the Earth revolves around the Sun rather than the other way around, or that smoking increases the risk of cancer. It may not seem humble to stand up against the Catholic Church or the tobacco industry, but if the evidence is sufficient it can be the right action to take.

Third Ways and the Church

I believe much of the church is stuck in modernist ways, responding to postmodernism with either a head-in-the-sand approach or with blanket condemnation. Many preachers and writers hold the same conceptions of knowledge, interpretation, and power that their predecessors did 150 years ago, not recognizing that those views owe at least as much to the Enlightenment as to the Bible. On the other hand, the extreme relativism of radical postmodernism has robbed some churches of any distinctively Christian identity. In the material of this chapter, we should see hints of a third way for the church, which will be the topic of Chapter 5.

[5] Contrary to the claims of bias and conspiracy sometimes made by those who perceive threats in the findings of science – examples include fundamentalist attacks on geological and biological science, attacks on climate science by the fossil fuel industry, and attacks on psychiatry by the Church of Scientology. A notable exception where scientific "truth" really was determined by the ideology of the powerful was the imposition of Lysenko's non-Darwinian views on biological science in the USSR under Stalin, which damaged that field (and Soviet agriculture) for decades.