

A Pre-Modern Reflection Upon the Modernist Foundations of Postmodernism

St. Augustine's book *The City of God* (written c. 413-426 A.D.) opens by contrasting the city 'of God' (i.e. the kingdom of God) and the city of 'the world' (in the Pauline sense of 'the world'). Augustine proceeds to analyze history in terms of the *kulturkampf* (or 'culture-war') between the cities 'of God' and of 'the world':

two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self... The one delights in its own strength... the other says to its God, 'I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength.' And therefore the wise men of the one city, living according to man, have sought for profit to their own bodies or souls, or both... But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, 'that God may be all in all.'ⁱ

For Augustine (354-430 A.D.), there are two basic ways of viewing the world, two basic ways of being human and two consequent basic modes of human culture: either looking towards God in adoration and worship, or turning away from God in idolatry (for to turn away from God is inevitably to turn toward something created by God). One might say that the citizens of Augustine's two 'cities' are living within different 'spiritualities', where a spirituality is a way of relating to reality *via worldview beliefs, concomitant attitudes and subsequent behaviour*.ⁱⁱ Spiritualities are intended to furnish us with *integrative* ways of life that make us more whole or flourishing people. How integrative or disintegrative a spirituality is in practice depends in part upon how coherently its practices flow from its attitudes and how coherently its attitudes flow from its worldview. A spirituality in which dissonance is engendered by an incoherence within or between any or all of the three elements of spirituality (i.e. beliefs, attitudes and behaviour) will be *disintegrative*. According to Augustine, to turn away from the God who will be 'all in all' is necessarily to embrace a disintegrative (and thus a dehumanizing) spirituality. Indeed, in describing his own life as a non-Christian, Augustine confesses: 'But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in him but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Since the opposing spiritualities of Augustine's two cities are both shared by people in common social space, they are corporate spiritualities and are constitutive of cultures. A culture can be defined as *a shared spirituality together with its characteristic artistic tradition/s*.^{iv} Since spiritualities can be more or less integrative, it follows that cultures can likewise be more or less integrative. My thesis here is that the modernist rejection of God and his 'City' is inherently unstable, such that the more consistently one follows through the consequences of excluding God from one's worldview, the more contradictions one comes to embrace and the deeper one falls into a disintegrative, postmodern spirituality and culture.

To borrow an analogy from postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty, we can liken having a worldview to looking into a mirror that reflects our image of reality back to us. Of course, whether or not our worldview reflects *reality* to us depends upon whether or not our worldview is *true*; and being true is a matter of *telling it like it is*. Amongst those with a postmodern worldview this would be a controversial claim, for as J.P. Moreland explains:

Postmodernism is primarily a reinterpretation of what knowledge is and what counts as knowledge. More broadly, it represents a form of cultural relativism about such things as reality, truth, reason, value, linguistic meaning, the self, and other notions. On a postmodern view, there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason, and so-forth. All these are social constructions, creations of linguistic practices, and as such are relative... to social groups that share a narrative... For the postmodernist, if one claims to have the truth in the correspondence sense, this assertion is a power move that victimizes those judged not to have the truth.^v

However, when the postmodernist says they deny the correspondence concept of truth and that to affirm truth in the correspondence sense is nothing but a power move, *they are themselves making claims about the way things really are* (claims that, ironically, constitute a power move); and the way they claim things are is that truth is *not* a correspondence between claim and reality. But, of course, by claiming that this is the *truth* of the situation, they are actually using the correspondence concept of truth in the very attempt to deny it. So, you can't deny the correspondence view of truth without contradicting yourself and engaging in a fallacy of self-exception.

Today's worldly 'City' is sub-divided into several overlapping cultures. Foremost amongst these overlapping cultures, at least in the Western world, are a) the modernist worldview culture and b) the postmodernist worldview culture. The modernist worldview culture turns away from God by denying the pre-modern claim that the statement 'God exists' is true. For the modernist, the statement 'God exists' is *not true* (being either meaningless *a la* A.J. Ayer, or false). The postmodern worldview culture turns away from God by rejecting the claim, shared by modernists and pre-modernists, that language can be used to make statements that are either true or false. For the postmodernist, the statement 'God exists' isn't true 'for them' even though they affirm that it is true 'for you'. This internicene 'culture war', which boils down to a disagreement over how to avoid affirming the existence of God, is an ongoing source of disintegration within the City of the world. Nicholas Wolterstoff summarises the modern-postmodern dispute:

There is a dispute raging today between those who see the Enlightenment project of governing our existence by reason as an unfinished project, promising liberation, on which we should all continue to work; and those who see in that project little but the tyranny of Reason. The first party says that if we do not continue to govern our lives by Reason we can only expect more of the terrors of irrationalism. The second party says that if we do continue to govern our lives by Reason we can only expect more of the terrors of rationalism. That, in brief, is the dispute between the defenders of modernism and the defenders of postmodernism...^{vi}

Although these two spiritual cultures are mutually antagonistic, they are, nevertheless, deeply united by their common rejection of the City of God (as well as by other overlapping elements of their spiritualities).^{vii}

In so far as the modernistic worldview culture rejects the postmodernist's spiritually disintegrative rejection of truth, it makes common cause with the truth-affirming pre-modern worldview of the City of God. However, pre-modernists *shouldn't chose sides in this worldly battle*. Rather, the pre-modernist should prophetically address the two populations of the city of the world: 'Actually, both sides of this dispute have got something right, but both of them are fundamentally wrong because they are both part of the city of the world rather than the City of God and so the distinction between

modernism and postmodernism is far from being the secure line of demarcation the modernist likes to think it is...'

Once Upon a Time

Once upon the time we had a premodern worldview (Christian theism). Our premodern worldview led us to build buildings like Salisbury Cathedral in England. And under the premodern way of looking at things we looked into our premodern worldview mirror and we asked the famous question asked by the Queen in the pre-modern story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*:

Mirror mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?

And in answer our worldview mirror said something along these lines:

God is the fairest of them all, the most beautiful being there can be. God freely created this Cosmos, this ordered beauty around us, including humanity, which he made in His image, only little lower than the angels.

On this view God is at the very foundation and/or apex of our view of reality.

The pre-modern (Christian) view of God puts the divine image at the foundation of understanding who we are. The divine image in humanity includes capacities for religious, moral, aesthetic and scientific forms of knowledge (cf. Genesis 1-3). And this understanding of human nature is actually a view that many historians, philosophers and scientists have noted was important to the birth of scientific thinking. If God is a rational person who created this ordered beauty of the Cosmos and created people in His image, then people can expect, not to comprehend God, but at least to understand something about God in whose image they are made; and also to understand something about the way in which the world (the Cosmos that God had made) works. You could expect the rationality encoded in nature and the way the human mind happens to work to fit together because they both come from the same rational source; a source who you can expect to do things in a rational way but whom you can also expect to exercise his creative freedom as a person, and therefore (unlike the ancient Greeks) you can't just sit back in your armchair and think: '*How must planets move? I suppose they must go in perfect circles because that is how I would do it.*' Instead, you can think: 'Well, however planets move it must be rationally understandable by us, but God has got freedom to do it however He likes, so we had better go and get the telescope and have a look and see how He did it.' And the more we investigate that reality - that Cosmos, that ordered beauty - the greater will our awe and respect and love for God become. Thus Alvin Plantinga says: 'Modern science rose within the bosom of christian theism, it is a shiny example of the powers of reason with which God haws created us; it is a spectacular display of the image of God in human beings. So Christians are committed to taking science with the utmost seriousness.'^{viii}

Reflecting Upon The Modernist Mirror

And then someday, some people looked in the modernist mirror, and they asked:

Mirror mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?

And in reply, the modernist mirror said something along these lines:

According to science, which is the only (or at least best) way to know anything, man is the fairest of them all (although an unverifiable value term like 'fair' is nothing but an expression of emotion). Still, man is the most rational being to have arisen via the mindless, blind watchmaker of Darwinian evolution, a child of mother nature who is finally come of age and rejected those childish and sexually repressive superstitions about religion.

Ideas have consequences. Having looked into the modernist mirror, we started building modernist buildings (think of the skyline of Toronto or Tokyo). On the one hand it's very impressive. It's artistically vibrant and colorful. It's life going on 24 hours a day because we've got electricity and so we can tire ourselves out all day and all night. But it's also very impersonal; everybody lives in their little cube next to the other person living in their little cube, and we go to the office working in our little cube and maybe we might bump into the person in the next cube when we go to the watercooler.

From a pre-modern perspective there are facts about values, but from a modernist perspective there aren't:

The strict separation of facts from values is the key to unlocking the history of the modern western mind. Of course people have always known that there is a distinction between 'is' and 'ought', between what you are and what you should be, between descriptive statements and normative statements. In earlier ages however, people for the both type of statements dealt with questions of truth. If you made a moral statement about what someone ought to do 'you ought to love your children, you ought not to torture more children just for fun' that kind of statement was either true or false.^{ix}

Indeed this is the only view of values that allows you to be humble about values, because it's the only view of values which allows you to say things like: 'I think this is the right thing to do, but I might be wrong about that and so I have to be humble. I have to listen to other people, I have to be open to changing my mind.' If there's a distinction between facts and values, such that there are no facts about values, it follows that I could never be wrong about ethics. Why put much effort into thinking about it if you can never be wrong about it? And so on the modernistic view of things we have the public world of facts (and this is objective and universal and discovered by naturalistic scientific means) and we have the private world of values which it is all subjective and relative and nothing to do with truth or facts. For the modernist culture, religion is at best something factually and publically false that can be tolerated as long as it remains within the subjective domain of personal opinion and private hobbies. Thus, for example, neo-atheist philosopher A.C. Grayling affirms the need to 'return religious commitment to the private sphere...'^x

The modernist fact-value distinction has been supported in two different ways within modernism. First, by the idea that talk about values (and other metaphysical notions) is literally meaningless; second, by the idea that talk about values is meaningful but always false. Let's look at the first idea, which is associated with the logical positivism movement of the early 20th century. In Britain this was made famous by A.J. Ayer at Oxford University via his 1936 book *Language, Truth and Logic*. The positivists thought that language only means something if it is true by definition - like '2+2=4' or 'you will never meet a married bachelor' - or if you could use your senses, use science in some way, to verify it or to check it out, at least potentially. So, even before we'd gone to the other side of the moon it made sense to say 'the far side of moon is made of cheese.' It might be a silly thing to

say, but is a meaningful thing to say. You can understand it, you could debate it, you could say: 'I know what you mean and that's stupid'; whereas if it wasn't a meaningful claim you couldn't even say 'Well that is a stupid thing to say', because you wouldn't know what they'd said. So the idea was that a claim like 'the far side of moon is made of cheese' was meaningful and not gibberish because (at least in principle) *if* you were to find yourself on the far side of the moon you could try eating it, thereby empirically testing that claim.

Now this kind of verification principle had some awkward effects, including of course that any value statement of ethics or aesthetics is nonsense. To say 'torturing small children for fun is wrong' is just gibberish. To say 'rainbows are beautiful' is just gibberish. Which in itself might give you pause for thought! If there's a philosophical theory the consequence of which is that it isn't true to say 'torturing small children for fun is wrong' (because its not even meaningful and therefore can't be true) then one might well think: 'Well, so much for that philosophical theory; that is a lot less plausible than my moral knowledge'. Nevertheless, Ayer said:

'God' is a metaphysical term. And if 'God' is a metaphysical term, then it cannot even be probable that a god exists. For to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false... If a putative proposition fails to satisfy [the verification] principle, and is not a tautology, then... it is metaphysical, and... being metaphysical, it is neither true nor false but literally senseless.^{xi}

To a positivist, then, being an atheist is just as meaningless as being a theist or being an agnostic (indeed, the positivist should likewise reject that claim that materialism is true as meaningless). Positivism just completely shoves that whole conversation off the table. However, as I've indicated, we do know some things that are meaningful but that don't fit the verification criteria. It seems obvious that the statement 'torturing small children for fun is wrong' is true, and therefore obvious that it is a meaningful claim. But it's also obviously not meaningful *because it is true by definition*, and it's obviously not meaningful *because we can do some experiments that would prove it* (since, in principle, we cannot conduct any such experiments). Well, so much for verificationism!

Religious claims, which were really the target here (this was the worldly motivation behind logical positivism), actually *can* fit the verification criterion. Christianity is a historical revelation claim that you can empirically investigate by doing archeology or talking about the historical evidence for the resurrection. Or, as John Hick pointed out, supposing you die and you find yourself in what is clearly the Christian picture of heaven, wouldn't that empirical experience - '*Oh, here I am in my new resurrected body before the pearly gates shaking hands with saint Paul*' - wouldn't that verify the truth of Christianity? So the truth of Christianity is verifiable in principle, which is all the verification criteria required.

And what about the verification criterion itself? Is it true by definition that any sentence that doesn't pass the verification criterion is not meaningful? What empirical observation could you make to prove that the verification criterion is true? None! It's just a philosophical assertion. It doesn't pass its own standard. Like trying to deny that truth is correspondence to reality, it just contradicts itself! And so in the middle half of the 20th century the whole logical positivism school died a death. (For example, in the preface of Bruce Reichenbach's 1972 book *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment*, he says: 'The era is past when all metaphysical statements or arguments can simply be dismissed as silly or senseless since they do not meet a pre-established criteria in verifiability.'^{xii})

Ayer himself abandoned verificationism and said that it was full of mistakes. Modernism moved away from that meaningless root and said ‘Ok, let’s not use science and so on as a way of telling meaning from meaninglessness, but let’s use it as the only way of knowing true from false. Let’s not talk about meaning but truth, and let’s say science is the only way to get the truth’. Thus British atheist Peter Atkins, in his recent book *On Being*, says: ‘The scientific method is the only means of discovering the nature of reality, the only way for acquiring reliable knowledge’.^{xiii} Again, this is self-contradictory. The scientific method cannot be used to show that the scientific method is the only way of acquiring reliable knowledge. Indeed, science itself must assume that we have reliable knowledge that isn’t acquired via the scientific method.^{xiv}

Reflecting Upon The Post-Modern Mirror

And then some people - who were understandably annoyed of this kind of imperialistic, modernistic, impersonal, depersonalizing, ‘science is the only way to know anything’ or even ‘to talk about ethics and beauty is just meaningless’ modernistic viewpoint - wanted to get a different view of themselves and reality. But the crucial thing here is that many of these people didn’t go back to the pre-modern way of viewing things. Rather, they looked into the postmodern worldview mirror and asked:

Mirror mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?

And the postmodern mirror said something along these lines (and this summary includes several quotations from postmodernists):

Although words only mean whatever they mean to you, I’d say that if I can get my colleagues to let me get away with saying ‘I’m the fairest of them all’ then I am the fairest of them all. After all, values are merely subjective concepts programmed into the human animal by the mindless, blind watchmaker of evolution, which only cares about what works and which doesn’t care about truth any more than it cares about goodness or beauty. Why should we care about truth? We must keep faith with Darwin and admit we know that all we can know is the subjective meaning of our own words.

As Charles Taylor writes: ‘It is the claim of a certain trendy “post-modernism” that the age of Grand Narratives is over, that we cannot believe in these any more.’^{xv} For example, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard famously characterized postmodern thinking as: ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’.^{xvi} This means being skeptical about there being an overall story to life that makes sense. Of course that is *his* meta-narrative. Nobody lives without a worldview. Once again we find the rejection of God leading to self-contradiction and hence spiritual disintegration.

On the basis of postmodernism people build buildings like the Wexner Center of the Performing Arts. Ravi Zacharias tells a fascinating story about visiting America and seeing this building:

Postmodernism tells us there’s no such thing as truth; no such thing as meaning; no such thing as certainty. I remember lecturing at Ohio State University, one of the largest universities in this country. I was minutes away from beginning my lecture, and my host was driving me past a new building called the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts. He said, ‘This is America’s first postmodern building.’ I was startled for a moment and I said, ‘What is a postmodern building?’ He said, ‘Well, the architect said that he designed this building with no design in mind. When the architect was asked, ‘Why?’ he said, ‘If life itself is

capricious, why should our buildings have any design and any meaning?’ So he has pillars that have no purpose. He has stairways that go nowhere. He has a senseless building built and somebody has paid for it.’ I said, ‘So his argument was that if life has no purpose and design, why should the building have any design?’ He said, ‘That is correct.’ I said, ‘Did he do the same with the foundation?’ All of a sudden there was silence. You see, you and I can fool with the infrastructure as much as we would like, but we dare not fool with the foundation because it will call our bluff in a hurry.^{xvii}

David Cook explains that ‘the postmodern move in literature is towards what is called “deconstructivism”. This movement stems from a belief that we can never reach a direct grasp of reality. Language can never manage to communicate what is actually there or what the writer actually intends or means.’^{xviii} Hence ‘What we readers need to do, is to deconstruct the piece of literature and to make sense of it on our own terms.’^{xix} However, Deconstructivists who try to use language to communicate their theory are of course contradicting their theory. The postmodern culture tends towards individualism (indeed, towards solipsism) and thus towards cultural disintegration.

From Shallow Postmodernism to Deep Postmodernism

According to William Lane Craig: ‘The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth.’^{xx} For one thing, ‘a postmodern culture is an impossibility, it would be utterly unlivable.’^{xxi} Certainly, the harder somebody tries to really live out a postmodern spirituality the worse the effects on their life and culture is going to be; the more consistent they are to that system, as Francis A. Schaeffer might have put it, the more disintegrative will their spirituality and culture become. That’s one reason why the Christian attitude of love for people comes in here. This isn’t only about being right; this is about loving people who need the God of love.

Again, Craig writes: ‘People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic... in matters of religion and ethics. But, of course, that’s not postmodernism; that’s modernism! That’s just old-line verificationism... We live in a culture that remains deeply modernist.’^{xxii} Nobody reads the instructions on the aspirin bottle in a deconstructionist, reader response, ‘texts only mean whatever they mean to you’, kind of a way; because they know if they do that they might end up dead! In other words, postmodernism is concerned with the privatised, subjective world of values rather than the communal world of objective, scientific facts.

Craig has a point, but only up to a point. J.P. Moreland distinguishes between four different levels or depths of postmodernism^{xxiii}:

§ *Ontic* (reality denying)

§ *Alethic* (truth denying)

§ *Epistemic* (knowledge denying)

§ *Axiological* (value denying)

We start out at the bottom with ‘value denying’ postmodernism, which is ‘shallow postmodernism’, which is really just modernism, as Craig rightly points out. And perhaps most people in the city of the world are ‘shallow postmodernists’. But we move deeper into postmodernism as we move up this list. First there is a sceptical, knowledge denying postmodernism; then truth denying postmodernism (not only don’t we know the truth, we can’t know the truth because there isn’t even any truth to be known, which is a deeper doubt to have). And then the deepest postmodernism is a reality denying postmodernism. Not only is there no truth, there’s no reality about which there could be any truth!

The pre-modern worldview is big on God, big on science (these go together nicely), big on objective values, truth, goodness and beauty, on wisdom and reason and objective meaning and purpose; and then modernism comes along and says:

We don’t really want this God stuff thank you very much. We’ve outgrown all of that. But we would like to keep hold of reason and science. We like science. And truth, of course, because science is about truth. And reality, because science is about truth about reality. But we will do without some fluffy meaning and values and so on. Because we are modernistic about science and truth we are shallowly postmodern when it comes to values, because we accept a fact value divide.

But then the postmodernist comes along and says:

There’s a deeper postmodernism where we are rejecting reason and objective truth even about things that aren’t values, where we put ‘facts’ into the same subjective category as values.

Of course, Craig is right to say that no one can live consistently with deep postmodernism (no more than they can live consistently with the shallow postmodernism of modernism), but some people do *assert* these self-contradictory postmodern views. There is here a process of analogue decay from a pre-modern viewpoint. Hence Douglas Groothuis says: ‘Postmodernism is so often presented as a radical departure from modernism that it is easy to miss the insight that postmodernism is, in many ways, modernism gone to seed, carried to its logical conclusion and inevitable demise.’^{xxiv}

And when we get into a deeper postmodernism, what’s the difference between postmodernism and nihilism? As Taylor comments, postmodernism threatens us with ‘the spectre of meaninglessness... a view of human life which is empty, cannot inspire commitment, offers nothing really worth while, cannot answer the craving for goals we can dedicate ourselves to.’^{xxv} The inherent instability of modernism explains why, as Taylor observes: ‘the issue about meaning is a central preoccupation of our age, and its threatened lack fragilizes all the narratives of modernity by which we live.’^{xxvi}

Friedrich Nietzsche may have been the first nihilist (sometimes you can read him as warning against nihilism, sometimes as embracing nihilism). Nietzsche said that ‘Nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals’^{xxvii}, particularly *the rejection of God*. His parable of the mad man proclaimed the consequences of ‘the death of God’:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ - As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got

lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another... The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We have killed him* - you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? ...Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us - for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.' Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. 'I have come too early,' he said... 'This tremendous event is still on its way... the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars - *and yet they have done it themselves*. It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: 'What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?''^{xxviii}

See how Nietzsche goes from 'God is dead' to 'we've unchained our reality from its sun' (i.e. no standard of judgment, not just about values but about anything). Nietzsche said that 'when one gives up the Christian faith one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet.'^{xxix} He criticized ethical philosophers who wanted to do away with God whilst retaining traditional values:

The greatest recent event – that 'God is dead,' that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe... For the few at least, whose eyes – the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned to doubt... how much must collapse now that this faith has been under-mined because it was built on this faith... for example, the whole of our European morality.^{xxx}

If you want one sentence summary of postmodernism I don't think you can do much better than 'Trust has been turned into doubt.' David Cook describes the pervasive spiritual and hence cultural effects of postmodern doubt:

There is a loss of certainty, and in its place there are a scepticism and cynicism about life, each other and the future... a relativism which locates truth in the individual self... We are deeply hesitant to commit ourselves to ideas or people... There is no big picture of life or ultimate meaning in the universe. We are an instant generation looking for what works... We want the good things in life and we want them here and now. Our needs are at the centre of

our existence. Appearance is reality; so what matters is style and image... The ultimate evil is being bored.^{xxx1}

It's fascinating to see postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty doubting human trust in knowledge and reason on very modernist sounding grounds. It was Rorty who talked about 'keeping faith with Darwin' (another example of how modernism and postmodernism share worldview roots). He also said:

The idea that one species of organism is unlike all the others, oriented not just towards its own increased propensity but towards Truth with a capital T is as un-Darwinian as the idea that every human being has a built in moral compass.^{xxxii}

When one gets rid of God it's not only objective moral values that vanish, but 'Truth with the capital T' as well. As Nietzsche concluded: 'The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating.'^{xxxiii} In other words, the values of truth and honesty do not easily cohere with a worldview limited to the naturalistic struggle for the survival of the fittest. Atheist John Gray makes a similar point:

To think of science as the search for truth is to renew a mystical faith, the faith of Plato and Augustine, that truth rules the world, that truth is divine... Modern humanism is the faith that through science humankind can know the truth – and so be set free. But if Darwin's theory of natural selection is true this is impossible. The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth. To think otherwise is to resurrect the pre-Darwinian error that humans are different from all other animals... Darwinian theory tells us that an interest in truth is not needed for survival or reproduction... Truth has no systematic evolutionary advantage over error.^{xxxiv}

Truth 'has no systematic evolutionary advantage over error', and so the modernistic, naturalistic way of looking at the world undermines the fact that it wants to hold on to truth and rationality and science whilst getting rid of God and objective values. As Conor Cunningham explains:

There is a complete disconnect between truth and survival in Darwinism, while the normative, indeed the rational, is a wine beyond the purse of naturalism's ontology... In short, truth is evacuated of all content as it becomes wedded to function, and it is only the function that matters.^{xxxv}

Thus neo-atheist Sam Harris admits that: 'Our logical, mathematical, and physical intuitions have not been designed by natural selection to track the Truth.'^{xxxvi} Atheist and noted philosopher of mind Jerry Fodor writes that: 'Evolution is neutral as to whether most of our beliefs are true. Like Rhett Butler in the movies, it just doesn't give a damn.'^{xxxvii} Likewise, according to atheist philosopher of mind Patricia Churchland: 'The principal chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive... Truth... definitely takes the hindmost.'^{xxxviii} However, if truth 'takes the hindmost' on naturalism, such that the commitment to naturalism undermines our commitment to knowledge, how can the naturalist be rationally committed to the *truth* of naturalism? As atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel concludes in his book *Mind & Cosmos*: 'Evolutionary naturalism provides an account of our capacities that undermines their reliability, and in doing so undermines itself.'^{xxxix}

The city of the world claims to desire knowledge of the truth, but its desire for an idolatrous, godless creation myth, for a *naturalistic* evolution, is so strong that it trumps and thus erodes the desire for truth, sucking modernism beyond shallow postmodernism and deeper into the mire of nihilistic doubt. As Nietzsche asked: ‘Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?... Why insist on the truth?’^{xi} Assuming a modernistic fact/value divide, there’s no objective truth about values and it isn’t objectively true to say: ‘We ought to value truth.’

‘What is the truth?’, asked Nietzsche, ‘Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions...’^{xli} Nietzsche concluded that we would ‘never get rid of God so long as we still believe even grammar.’^{xlii} If we believe language reflects our access not just to our language, but to the truth about reality, that act of rational trust should lead us to reflect deeply upon the pre-modern picture of ourselves as creatures made in the image of God.^{xliii}

Conclusion

Having turned its back upon God, a significant portion of the worldly city finds itself torn between the disintegrative spiritualities of modernism and postmodernism. However, there’s an inherent instability within the modernist worldview, such that the more consistently one lives out that worldview, the more one is driven beyond the shallow postmodernism of the modernistic fact-value divide towards a deeper postmodernism where trust turns into doubt and culture forfeits its God-given grasp upon goodness, beauty, trust, truth, rationality and science.

This paper is based on a talk given at Eastern Bible College in Romania, May 2012.

A video of the talk upon which this paper is based can be found at <http://youtu.be/Mhf6-H6l2K4>

Audio of a more recent talk on the same theme can be found @

http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/mf/feed/4kzb72/rf_2014_mod_post.mp3

ⁱ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIV Chap. 28 - Of The Nature Of The Two Cities, The Earthly And The Heavenly. cf. www.historyofphilosophy.net/augustine-city-of-god

ⁱⁱ cf. Peter S. Williams, ‘Apologetics in 3D: Persuading Across Spiritualities with the Apostle Paul’, *Theofilos* (2012: 1), 3-24. Accessed 10th April 2014. www.bethinking.org/apologetics/apologetics-in-3d

ⁱⁱⁱ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Barnes & Noble), 20.

^{iv} cf. www.unesco.org/education/imld_2002/unversal_decla.shtml

^v J.P. Moreland, ‘Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn’ in *Whatever Happened to Truth?*, ed. Andreas Kosterberger (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2005), 79.

^{vi} Nicholas Wolterstoff, *Educating for Shalom* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 109.

^{vii} For a critique of the ‘eastern’ pantheism, including how pantheism entails the self-contradictory claim that language cannot convey truth about reality, cf. Peter S. Williams, ‘Truth, Faith and Hope in Life of Pi – A Philosophical Review’ www.bethinking.org/truth/truth-faith-and-hope-in-life-of-pi

^{viii} Alvin Plantinga, ‘Evolution and Design’ in *For Faith and Clarity* ed. James K. Beilby (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2006), 212.

^{ix} Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H, 2010), 25 & 27.

^x A.C. Grayling, *Against All Gods* (Oberon, 2007), 47.

^{xi} A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 115.

^{xii} Bruce Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1972).

^{xiii} Peter Atkins, *On Being* (Oxford, 2011), xiii.

^{xiv} cf. Peter S. Williams, ‘Can Science Solve Every Mystery?’ <http://youtu.be/1SaOYVZLtk>

^{xv} Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 717.

^{xvi} Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xxiv-xxv.

^{xvii} Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1994), 64.

^{xviii} David Cook, *Blind Alley Beliefs* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 14.

^{xix} Ibid.

^{xx} William Lane Craig, 'God Is Not Dead Yet' Accessed 6th February 2014. www.reasonablefaith.org/god-is-not-dead-yet

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} J.P. Moreland, 'Four Degrees of Postmodernism' in *Come Let Us Reason: New Essays in Christian Apologetics*, ed. Paul Copan & William Lane Craig (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2012), 17-34.

^{xxiv} Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 40.

^{xxv} Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 717.

^{xxvi} Ibid, 718.

^{xxvii} Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Preface. Accessed 18th March 2014.

http://nietzsche.holtof.com/Nietzsche_the_will_to_power/the_will_to_power_book_I.htm

^{xxviii} Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*; ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-82.

^{xxix} Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 79-80.

^{xxx} Ibid.

^{xxxi} Cook, *Blind Alley Beliefs*, p. 12-13. cf. Thomas Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from the Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Baylor University Press, 2012) & Richard Winter, *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion & Wonder* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002).

^{xxxii} Richard Rorty, 'Untruth and Consequences' in *The New Republic*, 31 July 1995, 36.

^{xxxiii} Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 1; section 4. Accessed 18th March 2014. www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/back_issues/rjp4_carlisle.pdf

^{xxxiv} John Gray, *Straw Gods: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002), 20 & 26-27.

^{xxxv} Conor Cunningham, 'Dawkins the Neanderthal and Darwin's Pious Idea' in John Hughes (ed.), *The Unknown God: Responses to the New Atheism* (London: SCM, 2013), 36. cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford, 2011) & Peter S. Williams, *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013).

^{xxxvi} Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape* (London: Bantam, 2010), 66.

^{xxxvii} Jerry Fodor, 'Is Science Biologically Possible?' in James Beilby (ed.), *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 42.

^{xxxviii} Patricia Churchland quoted by Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford, 2011), 315.

^{xxxix} Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos* (Oxford, 2013), 27.

^{xl} Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 1; section 16. Accessed 18th March 2014. www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/back_issues/rjp4_carlisle.pdf

^{xli} Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Perspectives of Nietzsche'. Accessed 6th February 2014.

www.theperspectivesofnietzsche.com/nietzsche/ntruth.html

^{xlii} Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*. Accessed 6th February 2014. <http://praxeology.net/twilight.htm>

^{xliii} cf. Ian Markham, *Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).