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Conversations

A Forum for Authentic Transformation

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Mysticism and Divine Awareness

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Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation provides spiritual accompaniment and honest dialogue for those who long for radical transformation in Christ. It stimulates hunger and illuminates the path by drawing on classical wisdom and practice, exploring the vital role of community, and illustrating the journey with realism and hope.

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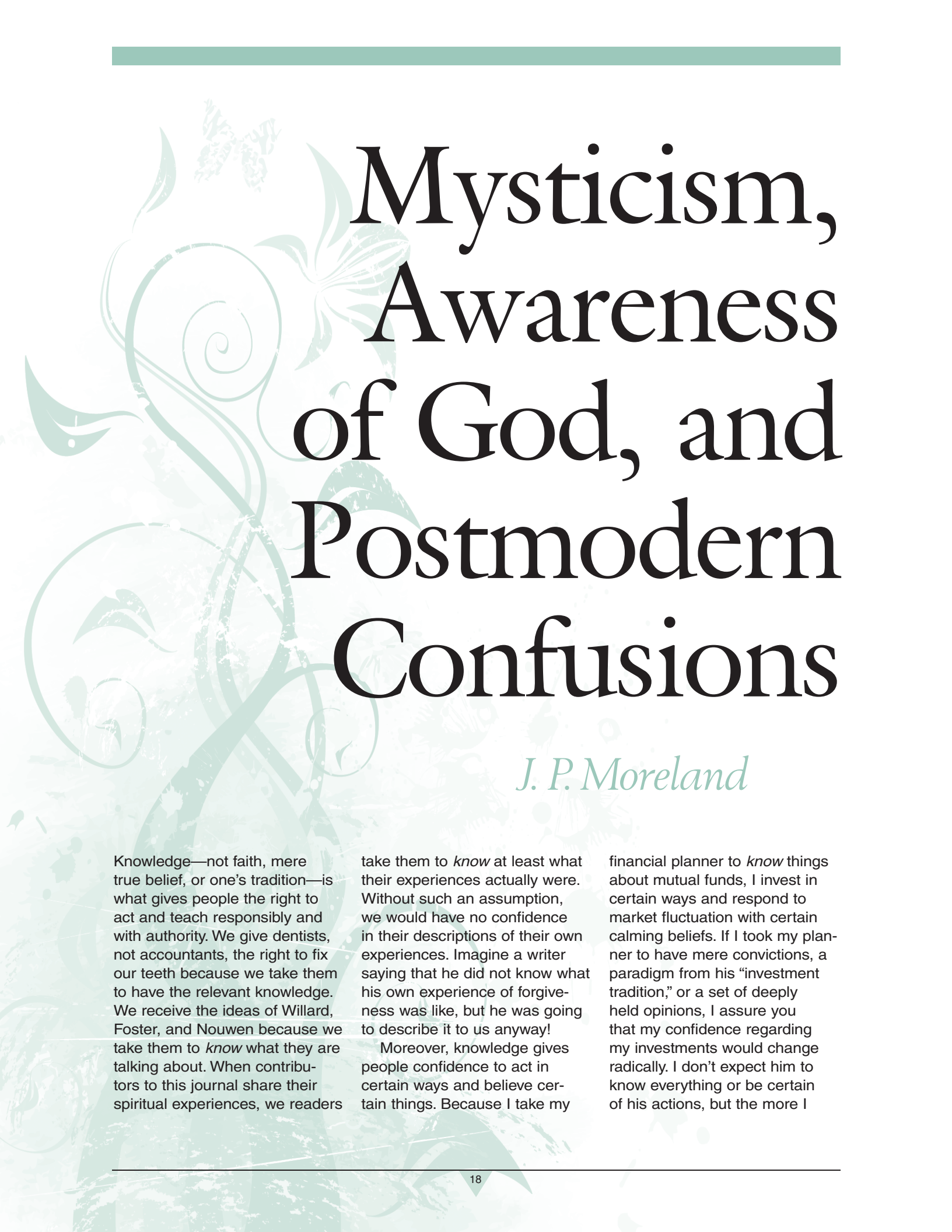
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Mysticism, Awareness of God, and Postmodern Confusions

J. P. Moreland

Knowledge—not faith, mere true belief, or one’s tradition—is what gives people the right to act and teach responsibly and with authority. We give dentists, not accountants, the right to fix our teeth because we take them to have the relevant knowledge. We receive the ideas of Willard, Foster, and Nouwen because we take them to *know* what they are talking about. When contributors to this journal share their spiritual experiences, we readers

take them to *know* at least what their experiences actually were. Without such an assumption, we would have no confidence in their descriptions of their own experiences. Imagine a writer saying that he did not know what his own experience of forgiveness was like, but he was going to describe it to us anyway!

Moreover, knowledge gives people confidence to act in certain ways and believe certain things. Because I take my

financial planner to *know* things about mutual funds, I invest in certain ways and respond to market fluctuation with certain calming beliefs. If I took my planner to have mere convictions, a paradigm from his “investment tradition,” or a set of deeply held opinions, I assure you that my confidence regarding my investments would change radically. I don’t expect him to know everything or be certain of his actions, but the more I

(correctly or incorrectly) take him to know, the more it shapes my actions and attitudes.

To be sure, Paul says that knowledge puffs up. But for two reasons, this is not a rejection of the value of spiritual knowledge. First, we actually know the principle itself, viz., that knowledge puffs up. Second, Paul is rejecting the abuse of knowledge, not its proper use. The correct response to his teaching is humility, not ignorance.

As Dallas Willard correctly notes, one of the pressing questions for today is this: Are the followers of Jesus in possession of a body of knowledge about various key topics, or are they not?¹ If someone wants to learn about what forgiveness, love, prayer, and discerning God's voice are and how they work, do the Bible and the great history of the best of Christian literature on these subjects provide genuine knowledge about them? Clearly and importantly, the answer is yes.

But many today do not believe the answer is yes. In fact, those associated with a movement called postmodernism render knowledge of God, the meaning and truth of biblical texts, spiritual growth, and a host of other important items impossible. Thus, advocates of postmodernism undermine our confidence in our Christian heritage of mystical encounter with and contemplative awareness of God, a confidence rooted in knowledge and required to make progress in one's pilgrimage. Postmodernists often confuse a proper concern to affirm the Bible's inerrancy with an anxious quest for certainty, with a desire to control the Bible rather than let the Bible read us, or with a failure to acknowledge the human aspects of the Bible. Such assertions are deeply sad to me and reflect

an inadequate knowledge of the relevant literature, and they really miss the point: What did Jesus believe about the Bible, and how do I follow him in this?

I believe the damage done by postmodernism and its advocates is unintentional and rooted in serious confusion about knowledge, truth, and related themes. Because knowledge is so important, much is at stake in this confusion, so in what follows, I shall do three things: (1) describe knowledge and clear up some confusions regarding it, (2) show how postmodern thought makes mystical experience of God impossible, and (3) correct three postmodern confusions that undermine knowledge of God.

The Nature of Knowledge

Here's a simple definition of knowledge: It is *to represent reality in thought or experience the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds*. To know something (the nature of cancer, forgiveness, God) is to think of or experience it as it really is, on a solid basis of evidence, experience, intuition, and so forth. Little can be said in general about what counts as "adequate grounds." The best one can do is to start with specific cases of knowledge and its absence in art, chemistry, memory, mystical experience, scripture, and logic, and formulate helpful descriptions of "adequate grounds" accordingly.

Please note three important things. First, *knowledge has nothing to do with certainty or an anxious quest for it*. One can know something without being certain about it and in the

presence of doubt or the admission that one might be wrong. Recently, I know that God spoke to me about a specific matter, but I admit it is possible I am wrong about this (though, so far, I have no good reason to think I am wrong). When Paul says, "This you know with

If someone wants to learn about what forgiveness, love, prayer, and discerning God's voice are and how they work, do the Bible and the great history of the best of Christian literature on these subjects provide genuine knowledge about them? Clearly and importantly, the answer is yes.

certainty" (Ephesians 5:5), he clearly implies that one can know *without* certainty; otherwise, the statement would be redundant. Why? If I say, "Give me a burger with pickles on it," I imply that it is possible to have a burger without pickles.

If, contrary to fact, pickles were simply essential ingredients of burgers, it would be redundant to ask for a burger with pickles. The parallel to “knowledge with certainty” should be easy to see.

Second, *one can know something without knowing how one knows it*. If one always has to know how one knows something before one can know it, then one would also have to know how one knows how one knows something, and so on to infinity. Life is too short for such lengthy regresses, and thankfully, we often just know things without having any idea how we do.

Thus, a person could know he or she has experienced union with God without being able to tell a skeptic how he or she knows this.

Finally, *one can know without knowing that one*

knows. Consider Joe, an insecure yet dedicated high school student, who is about to take his history final. He has studied thoroughly and knows the material, but when a friend asks him if he is prepared for the test, he says, “No.” In this case, Joe actually knows the material, but he doesn’t know he knows it. Thus, he lacks confidence. In general, confidence in the spiritual or mystical life does not come simply from knowledge, but from knowing one has it. This “second-order” knowledge (knowledge about having knowledge) is especially important for those who would teach about spiritual life and be

spiritual directors. As we shall see, postmodernism denies the possibility of having knowledge—even of what the Bible teaches—and thus, it robs people of the confidence, authority, and skill needed to make progress in the way of Jesus and lead others in that way.

In addition to these three observations about knowledge, there are three different kinds of knowledge: knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and know-how.

One can also be directly aware of one’s own soul and inner states of thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and so forth by introspective awareness of one’s inner life. One can be directly aware of God and his presence in mystical experience, of his speaking to one in guidance, of the Spirit’s testimony to various things, and so forth.

1. **Knowledge by acquaintance** happens when we are directly aware of something; e.g., when I see an apple directly before me or pay attention to my inner feelings, I know these things by acquaintance. One does not need a concept of an apple or knowledge of how to use the word *apple* in English to have knowledge by acquaintance with an apple. A baby can see an apple without having the relevant concept or linguistic skills. *Knowledge by acquaintance is sometimes called “simple seeing,” being directly aware of something.*

2. **Propositional knowledge** is knowledge that an entire

proposition is true. For example, knowledge that “the object there is an apple” requires having a concept of an apple and knowing that the object under consideration satisfies the concept. *Propositional knowledge is justified true belief; it is believing something that is true on the basis of adequate grounds.*

3. **Know-how** is the ability to do certain things, e.g., to use apples for certain purposes. We may distinguish *mere know-how* from *genuine know-how* or *skill*.

The latter is know-how based on knowledge and insight and is characteristic of skilled practitioners in some field. Mere know-how is the ability to engage in the correct behavioral movements, say, by following the steps

in a manual with little or no knowledge of why one is performing these movements.

Because this is so important, let me elaborate on these three kinds of knowledge. The first sort of knowledge is knowledge by simple seeing—by directly experiencing something. One can think of a tree, of God, or of whether one is angry, but these are all different from being directly aware of the tree, God, or one’s inner state of anger. Knowledge by acquaintance is an important foundation for all knowledge, and in an important sense, experience or direct awareness of reality is the basis for everything we know.

Experience is more basic than ultimate worldview presuppositions, and in fact, the evidence of experience provides data for evaluating rival worldviews or interpretations of some event.

One should not limit what one can see or be directly aware of to the five senses. One can also be directly aware of one's own soul and inner states of thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and so forth by introspective awareness of one's inner life. One can be directly aware of God and his presence in mystical experience, of his speaking to one in guidance, of the Spirit's testimony to various things, and so forth. From Plato to the present, many philosophers have believed—correctly, in my view—in what is called *rational awareness*, the soul's ability to be directly aware of aesthetic and moral values, numbers and the laws of mathematics, the laws of logic, and various abstract objects such as humanness, wisdom, and so forth. *The important thing to note is that we humans have the power to “see,” to be directly aware of, to experience a wide range of things directly, many of which are not subject to sensory awareness with the five senses.*

To **simply** see an apple (or experience God in contemplative prayer) is to be directly aware of it. To *see something as* an apple (or God) requires that one have acquired the concept of being an apple (perhaps from repeated exposure to simply seeing apples) and applied it to the object before one. To *see that* an object is an apple (or God), one must have the entire thought in one's mind, “The object before me is an apple,” and judge that the object genuinely corresponds to that thought. All three have

The important thing to note is that we humans have the power to “see,” to be directly aware of, to experience a wide range of things directly, many of which are not subject to sensory awareness with the five senses.

relevance to mystical experience and awareness of God.

Given the reality and nature of knowledge by acquaintance, it follows that knowledge does not begin with presuppositions, language, concepts, one's cultural standpoint, worldview, or anything else. It starts with awareness of reality. *Seeing as* and *seeing that* do require that one have presuppositions, concepts, and so forth. One's presuppositions and so forth will *influence* how one sees things **as** such and such, e.g., as a healing from God; and one's worldview will *influence* one's seeing **that** or judging **that** such and such, e.g., seeing or judging that this event is a miraculous healing. But one's worldview does not *determine* the way we see or judge things. That's far too strong. Influence is one thing; determination is another. Failure to make this distinction has contributed to confusions I will address later.

And because we have direct acquaintance with the world itself prior to *seeing as* (applying a concept to something) or *seeing that* (judging that an entire proposition is true), we can compare the way we see things or judge things with the things themselves, and thereby we can adjust our worldview. For example, because we actually see the person get well, we can verify or disconfirm

that we are right to see the event as, or judge that, it was a miracle from God. Knowledge by acquaintance gives us direct access to reality as it is in itself, and we actually know this to be the case in our daily lives.

Postmodernism, Mystical Experience, and Spiritual Formation

From a philosophical standpoint, 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. From a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason, and meaning to life. All these are social constructions, creations of linguistic practices, and as such are relative not to individuals, but to social groups that share a narrative (roughly, a broad paradigm, e.g., a worldview, that is expressed in the form of a story).

According to postmodernism, there is no such thing as simple seeing knowledge by acquaintance, no direct awareness of God, of one's own self and the movements that take place within it, no ability to be directly aware of the meaning of a scriptural passage, no ability to see that the Bible teaches its own inerrancy, no experiential knowledge whatsoever. Why? Because according to postmodernism, all "experience" is interpretation in light of one's social context, viewpoint, worldview, linguistic community, or tradition, all of which stand between us and "reality."

For our purposes, the important thing is this: According to postmodernism, there is no such thing as simple seeing, knowledge by acquaintance, no direct awareness of God, of one's own self and the movements that take place within it, no ability to be directly aware of the meaning of a scriptural passage, no ability to see that the Bible teaches its own inerrancy, no experiential knowledge whatsoever. Why? Because according to postmodernism, all "experience" is interpretation in light of one's social context, viewpoint, worldview, linguistic community, or tradition, all of which stand between us and "reality." Thus, regarding the direct awareness of reality—including God, the Bible, and one's own soul—postmodernist James K. A. Smith rejects such awareness because "everything is interpretation."²

The implications of this claim are disastrous for spiritual formation. It implies that one can never correct one's beliefs by a more accurate awareness of reality, and it is a gross overstatement of the role worldviews

and "interpretations" play in acts of knowing. While a worldview affects what one sees, it is a mistake to compare a worldview with a set of glasses such that (1) the worldview stands between reality and us, and we see *through* it, so that (2) knowledge by acquaintance with or direct awareness of reality does not take place. Glasses stand between a person and the external world such that a person's access to reality is mediated *through* the glasses. One does not have direct access to reality itself. However, it is wrong to place things such as one's worldview between knowing and experiencing subjects and the real world. One troublesome implication of such a model is that people can never correct their beliefs by comparing them through direct experience with things themselves. Thus, a mystical encounter with God as he really is could never correct and transform one's distorted view of God due, say, to a harsh father figure. Yet people, including little children, do this all the time. A better way to describe the role

of a worldview in seeing reality is to depict it as a habituated way of directing our attention or inattention, as the case may be.

Let me explain. One day a missionary spoke in our seminary chapel, and without telling us where the pictures were taken, he showed a set of slides from a culture he had visited. He asked us to list on paper everything we saw. After we were finished, he spoke a while, and then put the slides up again and asked us to start with a fresh sheet of paper and list everything we saw this time. Interestingly, people's second list was virtually identical to their first one. Why? Because people tend to look to confirm what they already see and believe rather than adopt a fresh perspective and launch out from scratch. Over time, people fall into ruts and adopt ways of seeing things according to which certain features are noticed and others are neglected.

I'm not claiming this is a good or bad thing. I'm simply noting that it happens. I suggest that a worldview functions as a set of

habit-forming background beliefs that direct our acts of noticing or failing to notice various features of reality. Depending on various factors, this worldview function may yield accurate or inaccurate experiences and beliefs. It's not that we cannot see reality itself. In fact, through effort we can look at things from a different perspective and further confirm or disconfirm our previous viewpoint. Habit-forming beliefs do not stand between a person and reality as glasses do. Rather, they habituate ways of seeing and thinking that, through effort, can be changed or retained, hopefully on the basis of comparing them with reality itself.

Three Postmodern Confusions

I want to close with a brief correction of three postmodern confusions, misunderstandings that need to be set aside if further dialogue on this topic is to be fruitful.

The first postmodern confusion involves *metaphysical* vs. *epistemic* notions of absolute truth. In the metaphysical (and correct) sense, absolute truth is the same thing as objective truth—a thought, belief, or assertion that matches with reality. Thus, if a lizard is in the house, the statement “a lizard is in the house” is an absolute truth—it corresponds to reality. On this view, people discover truth; they do not create it, as some postmodernists opine, and a claim is made true or false in some way or another by reality itself, totally independently of whether the claim is accepted by anyone.

By contrast with the metaphysical notion, postmodernists claim that a commitment to absolute truth is rooted in Cartesian anxiety—a nervous, obsessive quest for absolute certainty. Thus, one postmodernist recently proposed that commitment to objective truth and the correspondence theory is merely “an epistemic project [that] is funded by ‘Cartesian anxiety,’ a product of methodological doubt.”³ But a claim to have absolute truth has nothing at all to do with how certain one is about the claim. In fact one could have an absolute truth in one’s mind (the thought that Joe has cancer) that the person did not even believe, yet if it matched reality, it would be an absolute truth.

Second, postmodernists are confused and, in fact, conflate two very different notions of “objectivity.” Postmodernists reject the notion that reason is objective on the grounds that no one approaches life in a totally objective way, without bias. Thus, objectivity is impossible, and observations, beliefs, and entire narratives are theory-laden. There is no neutral standpoint from which to approach the world. Therefore, observations, beliefs, and so forth are perspectival constructions that reflect the viewpoint implicit in one’s own web of beliefs. For example, the late Stanley Grenz claimed that postmodernism rejects the alleged modernist view of reason, which “entails a claim to dispassionate knowledge, a person’s ability to view reality not as a conditioned participant but as an unconditioned observer—to peer at the world from a vantage point outside the flux of history.”⁴

These claims confuse *psychological* objectivity—a

dispassionate absence of bias or leaning either way on an issue—with *rational* objectivity—the ability to discern the difference between a good and bad argument or piece of evidence for a conclusion. We have all had the experience of being committed to a belief and later hearing a good argument (or a bad one) against (or for) what we already believe. Thus, a lack of psychological objectivity does not rule out rational objectivity, and the latter is what matters, not the former, as many postmodernists mistakenly seem to imply. Think of it this way: When you read an article in this journal, don’t you try to discern the author’s reasons for, say, why we

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objectivity permits us
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in general, based
upon our rational
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revealed word of God.*

experience the dark night of the soul, and don't you try to assess whether you think the author has provided some solid, trustworthy advice on the matter? And don't you think you make these assessments successfully from time to time? I think (and hope) your answer to these questions will be yes. If so, you are implying that your degree of psychological commitment to certain views about the subject matter does not render your rational objectivity impossible. By way of application, our rational objectivity permits us to have confidence in our mystical experience of the presence of God or the reality of the spiritual world in general, based upon our rational confidence in such things as the inerrant revealed word of God.

Third, postmodernists are often confused about *foundationalism per se* and an especially extreme *Cartesian form of foundationalism*. As a result, they mistakenly think that because Cartesian foundationalism should be rejected, foundationalism *per se* is problematic. And versions of modest foundationalism are simply not taken into consideration. But this makes as much sense as saying that because I don't like the New York Yankees, I don't like Major League baseball. Cartesian foundationalism is the quest for completely certain foundations for knowledge, and it is the regular target of postmodernists. But today, almost no foundationalist embraces this form of foundationalism, and postmodernists rail against a straw man.

Foundationalism is the idea that some of our beliefs (Smith caused the accident) are justified by other beliefs (I believe Joe is honest, and he told me about the accident), but we have some (basic) beliefs (I am in

pain, I see a tree, I had breakfast this morning, $2+2=4$, God is present to me now in love) that are sensible to accept without the need for further beliefs to justify them. These basic beliefs are not brute faith-positions because they are grounded in experiences (I feel the pain, see the tree, intuit $2+2=4$, am aware of God and experience his love). And while they can be mistaken, these basic beliefs form the basis of many other things I believe. None of this has anything to do with the need for certainty. Properly basic beliefs provide confidence, but they do not need certainty to do so.

At the end of the day, scripture, mystical experience, and the best of our literature in spiritual formation provide us with *knowledge* of God, the nature of love, the way the human soul can be nurtured, and a host of other topics. Given this self-understanding of what it means for us to be students and teachers about these matters, we are in a position to understand the importance, authority, and power of the relevant ideas in this area of human experience and reflection. We are also in a position to see how careful we must be in providing knowledge to those under our care.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dallas Willard, Foreword to *Kingdom Triangle* by J. P. Moreland. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007. See also Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2005.

² James A. K. Smith, "Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: A Response to the 'Biola School,'" *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*. Edited by Myron Penner. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005, 218.

³ Philip Kennison, "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too," *Christian Apologetics in*

the Postmodern World. Edited by Timothy Philips and Dennis Okholm. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995, 157.

⁴ Stanley Grenz, *Revisiting Evangelical Theology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 15.

About the Author



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With degrees in chemistry, theology, and philosophy, Moreland has published or contributed to over thirty-five books, including *Kingdom Triangle* (Zondervan), *The Lost Virtue of Happiness* (NavPress), and *The God Conversation* (InterVarsity). He has written over one hundred articles in popular magazines and newspapers and over sixty in academic journals. He and his wife, Hope, have two married daughters and two grandchildren.