

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Deconstructing: Musing on Some Modern Problems About Words

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A quarter of a century has now passed since Jean-François Lyotard's book, *La conditione postmoderne* (published in French in 1979 and the English translation in 1984). Not on your bookshelf? That's not surprising since by all accounts it is a pretty dull read. Still, it was something of a bombshell in the world of the *literati*, since (and I cite the great man himself) he coined the sentence, "I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives."

What is he saying? That he doesn't agree that there are unifying ideas or constructs of the world in which we live. He's not only attacking a Christian worldview, which sees coherence in a doctrine of creation and therefore everything makes sense and has definable meaning because God made it all and holds it all together; Lyotard is also attacking every other view which attempts to understand the world as a unified system - Marxist utopia, or Freudian psychoanalysis for example or (what was all the rage in the 1960s and 1970s) the confidence in science, otherwise known as logical positivism based as it was on the early work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Have I lost you? Persevere!

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Let me put it in a simpler way: Lyotard is (or more precisely, "was" since he died in 1988) opposed to any *single* explanation of reality, as for example, is given in the Constitution of the United States, by the Founding Fathers, along with its legislative enactments. But he's French, you say, meaning "Surprise! Surprise!"

But there's more to it than ethnic bias. I, too, am against many metanarratives - explanations of the world based on egg-head assumptions like trees are more important than human embryos, for example. One of the immediate casualties to the postmodern assault was history. Re-writing history is now so commonplace that recent news coverage of a presidential candidates account of snipers on a visit to Bosnia was in itself worthy, based as it was on the assumption that "facts" are not only identifiable, but *do* matter when relating the past.

Then along came Deconstructors who took things further. Philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida ("more Frenchmen" I hear you exclaim, but Derrida was technically born in Algeria). Derrida's point is (well, "was" since he is also dead—in 2004) that even the very words themselves employed to describe such a view are themselves an impossibility since words have no stable relationship to reality. Nothing new here, in fact: Wittgenstein had been saying this for quite some time and Lewis Carroll has that memorable passage in *Alice in Wonderland* (written in 1865!) in which Humpty Dumpty says to Alice, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." For Derrideans, all words are relative and insisting on *one interpretation* is a futile, naïve thing to claim.

Where does this skepticism come from? The answer is—unbelief! If people cease to believe in God, then "meaning" becomes problematic. Underneath the postmodern loss of confidence in meaning is a loss of the sense of God's transcendence and presence.

And how do I know that words have real, definable meaning? Because God spoke in words! And Jesus—God-incarnate—spoke in words, which men remembered and wrote down in Scripture. The WORD was made flesh (John 1:14) and in being made flesh he spoke... words, with real, definable meaning that provide a metanarratives for all reality. It's all about Jesus in the end.

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