Two Strategies in Biblical Interpretation

THOR MADSEN
Associate Professor of New Testament,
Ethics and Philosophy of Religion
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, MO 64118
tmadsen@mbts.edu

This essay explores two strategies for biblical interpretation, one old and one new. The old approach (call it "originalism") accepts four propositions concerning any text: (a) The text means now what it meant to its target-audience; (b) We can establish what the text meant to its target-audience by discovering that audience's history and language; (c) What the text meant to its target-audience is what we should assume that the author intended to say; and (d) What the author intended to say is the normative meaning of any text. Therefore, on the originalist model, a text can never mean what the author never meant; and while several *interpretations* of any text might be defensible, only one interpretation could be correct. The new approach (call it "postmodernism") rejects the four claims given above and offers these alternatives: (e) All interpretations are subjective; (f) There is no "right" way to read a text; and (g) The text becomes meaningful only when someone reads it. Thus, we face an either/or: choose originalism or postmodernism. One cannot choose both.

Of course, originalism gets the vote of common sense. Suppose, for example, that Mary runs a stop sign on her way to English 101 and gets pulled over. The officer asks for her license, but Mary says, "Not so fast." She remembers now what the English department has said about use of texts, even simple ones like S-T-O-P. "I don't deserve a ticket, because I read the sign differently. You see an order from the state police. I see the whole sign as a work of art, like Warhol's soup can; and my reading is no worse off than yours." But Mary loses the argument, as well she should. Her methods are gimmicks adopted to avoid unwelcome

consequences. Yet many scholars would argue that we must accept her excuse, as judged from a pure, philosophical standpoint. Objectivity has collapsed, leaving behind only perspectives. Consider the following two lines of argument.

I. THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROUTE TO POSTMODERNISM

Ever since Socrates (ca. 470–399 BC), philosophers have sought to define the concepts of knowledge, rationality, and intellectual duty. What is the difference between knowledge and opinion? On what basis can we say that someone is rational or irrational? Do we have *intellectual* duties, along with standard ones like "being just" or "being honest"? If so, what are they?[1] Plato (ca. 428–348 BC) answered such questions with his Theory of Ideas or Forms. Knowledge applies only to unchanging, abstract objects—as seen with the mind's eye—and not to the hyperactive stream of 5-sense experience.[2] Aristotle (384–322 BC) grounded knowledge in experience, but he held its claims to a high standard. To know an object X is to explain X on four levels, i.e., what X is made of, what forces constructed X, what the essence of X is, and also what the niche of X might be in the grand scheme of things. Plato said, "Look up at the forms." Aristotle replied, "No, look down at the world of experience, but look very carefully"; and their disagreement continues to this day, more or less, in the struggle between the rationalist and empiricist traditions.[3] But as time went on, the concerns of philosophy changed, and this shift prepared the way for postmodernism.

Plato and Aristotle searched for the correct objects of knowledge—either the *abstracta* or the natural world. But in 1637, Rene Descartes published *Discourse on the Method*, which changed epistemology's basic question. Instead of asking *what* we can know, Descartes asked *how* we can know, which translates into two subordinate questions. First, would

---

[1] These questions belong to the branch of philosophy called "epistemology," i.e., the theory of knowledge. We will have occasion to use this term later in the essay.

[2] Cf. Plato, *Republic*, Book 6; A. H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1981 [1947]), 37; Samuel E. Stumpf and James Fieser, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy* (8th ed.; New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 45–52.

[3] Perhaps their differences are ones of emphasis more than absolute distinction—we need not say, either way (cf. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greece and Rome* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993 [1946], 275). For Aristotle's causes, see the "Metaphysics," book 1, chapter 3, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (ed. Richard McKeon; New York, NY: Random House, 1941), 693.

any of our beliefs resist all conceivable doubt? Secondly, could someone construct an absolutely secure philosophical system based on those indubitable, basic beliefs? Descartes answered "yes" to both questions, and thus resolved, in the first instance,

> never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it.

With those basic beliefs established, Descartes would then construct upon them whatever else he knows with mathematically secure deduction. The second step of his process would be,

> to direct my thoughts in an orderly manner, by beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little, step by step, to knowledge of the most complex….

Ultimately, Descartes' program rested on an optimistic hunch, inspired by his progress in analytical geometry:

> Those long chains composed of very simple and easy reasonings, which geometers customarily use to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, had given me occasion to suppose that all the things which can fall under human knowledge are interconnected in the same way.[4]

In particular, Descartes' based all knowledge on the *cogito*: "I think" is certain; and I think implies "I am."[5] The first statement, in his view, would survive all skeptical hypotheses, because it is *incorrigible*. It forces itself upon anyone who considers it, excluding all possible doubt.[6]

---

[4] Rene Descartes, "Discourse on the Method," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vol. 1; trans. John Cottingham, et al; Cambridge: University Press, 1985), 120. Most readers of this essay will have become familiar with Descartes through his development of the "Cartesian Coordinate System," studied in high school mathematics.

[5] Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vol. 2; trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch; Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 16–17. Meditation II is cited here, though RD repeats the same argument subsequently.

[6] Cf. Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 83; Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (ed. by Alvin Plan-

"I am" then follows directly from "I think," and the metaphysical journey is under way. Descartes starts to think about God and finds this concept too grand for human invention. So it comes from without—from God himself, necessarily—and if God exists, he would underwrite the deliverances of 5-sense experience. What we see is what we get.[7]

By using this new method, Descartes sought to transcend the esoteric debates of medieval philosophy. Rather than building upon insecure foundations, he would doubt every claim that one could possibly doubt, using various skeptical hypotheses, until he reached a proposition that survives not just all reasonable doubt, but even all conceivable doubt. Then he would admit additional beliefs only if they could be justified as inferences from that foundation. But notice where his own systematic doubt leads us. I can get from "I think" to "I am" only if I assume that my own powers of reason are reliable; and why should the radical skeptic give Descartes even that much? Why should we presuppose, without argument, that human reason can safely connect these dots? What allows the individual to do so? If we follow Descartes's method to the end, we find ourselves unable to trust even the deliverances of pure reason; and thus his own theory of knowledge raises questions that it leaves unresolved.

The Cartesian challenge is to overcome skepticism through proper mental hygiene. Each of us has to protect his own thought-life by flossing and brushing daily, following the protocols of the *Discourse*. In practice, however, this regime takes us further into skepticism, rather than out of it. Now we have to treat not only our sense experience as guilty until proven innocent, but pure reason itself. Consider the case of insanity, which illustrates the problem of rational self-vindication. How do we prove to ourselves that we are not insane or, if you will, not systematically deceived in our perceptions and thoughts? Insane people process information not just atypically, but also pathologically. Or so we neurotypicals say; but the shoe *could* be on the other foot, after all. It is conceivable that all of us have gone insane, and that the lunatics see things as they really are. How do we prove otherwise? One answer goes this way: Perhaps we can end the stalemate by exposing the mechanics of pure reason. Maybe we can vindicate human reason by observing *how* we think in

---

tinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 58.

[7] The inference to God's existence occurs in Meditation III of the same volume, p. 31; the inference from (i) *I derive my faculties of perception from God* and then (ii) *God would not allow these faculties to deceive me,* to the conclusion, (iii) *My experience of the external world tends to be veridical*, occurs in Meditation IV, pp. 37–38.

order to set limits on what we *can* think. This project began in earnest with the work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

Suppose that Schizophrenic Sally discovers that her mind plays tricks on her constantly. Suppose further that she eventually notices patterns in the way it misleads her. When jets fly overhead, she always thinks that the authorities are spying on her; and she knows that her mind will form this belief, regardless of what the jets are doing. She tends to avoid men carrying briefcases, because she thinks that they are assassins sent to kill her. B ut one day, Sally has a breakthrough. It dawns on her that she would fear such men in any case, regardless of how they actually treat her. If she discovers what her own mind does with ordinary experience, she may one day recover. She has become self-critical in a healthy sense and is no longer doomed to act out in destructive ways. She can say to herself, “Here comes a man holding a briefcase, and I tend to fear men with briefcases. But I know that this fear arises from my own mind, not from some actual danger.” Instead of thinking, “The world is a dangerous place, populated by sinister men,” she now tends to think, “I make the world a dangerous place, populated by sinister men.” She knows what to expect when she confronts the world each day and what the parameters of her experience will be, because she now understands her own rational and perceptual tendencies. Likewise, the defense of human reason may consist in our becoming self-aware and thus self-critical. We can examine our own thoughts and perceptions and discover how they affect belief-formation.

Something like this move appears to have been made by Kant in his attempt to justify scientific knowledge. Suppose that all human knowledge had to come from experience alone. In that case, Kant reasoned, we could have no scientific knowledge, since we have no external guarantees—out there in the world—that the past will be like the present and that the reality confronted by us will have a certain, consistent structure.[8] Everything could change from moment to moment. Each day could be brand new across the board, since past experience guarantees no future results. In fact, experience alone cannot even tell us whether our streams of consciousness—e.g., of this table in front of me, of that bird chirping outside—are occasioned by external causes acting upon an enduring self. But we do have scientific knowledge. Matters usually go as our theories predict that they will, and the idea of causation turns out to be useful. So, Kant asks, how can these things be so? How can we have scientific knowledge about the world of experience, when the world of experience itself provides no ground for its own structural consistency? How can we employ the idea of causation, when we do not observe causation itself,

---

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn; London: Bohn, 1855), 3.

but rather only the succession of events, one followed consistently by another?

His answer constitutes what he calls a "Copernican Revolution" in epistemology.[9] Everyone else had assumed that the mind must conform to the objects of experience. But if all knowledge arises from experience, scientific knowledge would be impossible. After all, science is the attempt to do more than reconstruct natural history. We want more from our theories than summaries to the effect, "Thus far, the world has operated as such." We want to know how things work as a matter of natural law. But experience itself cannot take us all the way there. On the contrary, Kant argues, experience alone can justify natural history, but not natural law. We can say how things have happened, but not how they *must* happen. For the latter, we need to grasp how the human mind contributes to the synthesis of reason and experience that we call "knowledge."[10] The challenge for Kant, therefore, is not to establish that we do have scientific knowledge. We do.[11] Rather, the present task is to justify philosophically what everyone knows. We have scientific knowledge; and its defense will consist in discovering how our minds work or how they play tricks on us.

Describing the details of Kant's theory would take us far afield, but we can summarize how it inclines toward postmodernism. Kant's theory puts glasses in front of our eyes and insists that we cannot remove them. We have to see the world humanly or else not at all. Nevertheless, he tries to make this fact work for us, so that we use it to escape skepticism. If I know what human beings like me do with sense-perception, I can know how the world will behave. Likewise, if I understand how we think, I would know what human beings actually can figure out with pure reason. Such, at any rate, is the promise made by Kantian epistemology. But Kant's theory separates us from reality itself by denying us the ability to see things objectively or from the outside looking in. He gives us "the way things are for us," when we really wanted "the way things are," if we can get to it.

In fact, Kant *intensifies* the problem of skepticism in two ways, if not more. First, Kant throws pure empiricism out the front door, only to let it slip back in through a basement window.[12] He says that experience alone

[9] Kant, *Critique*, xxix.

[10] Ibid., 14.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Empiricism is the view that traces all knowledge back to 5-sense experience, one summary of which is, "Nothing is in the mind which was not first in the senses." A pure empiricism, therefore, would not merely emphasize the im-

cannot justify all knowledge. We need a synthesis of sense-perception and something else added to it. But Kant's own search for that other "something" is self-defeating. To get airborne, he must rely on unstructured experience or just assume that everyone else thinks the way he does; and in that case, pure skepticism results. You have your point of view; I have mine, and who can judge between us? One person insists that we must see the world *humanly*, if at all; but nothing would stop his successor from moving down the scale to "Americanly," "Islamically," "Smithly," or "Mondayly." To be sure, we do not find ourselves worrying much about this danger: we tend to think that our cognitive faculties are reliable. But this whole debate started when someone asked whether we could ward off skeptical attacks upon common sense.

Kant's theory encourages skepticism in a second, related way. The problem here is partly exegetical, now referring to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Every beginner in philosophy learns that Kant distinguished the "world-for-us" from the "world-in-itself." After that, the novice discovers what Kant said about the world-in-itself: we cannot know anything about it, save for the fact that it causes the world as it is for us.[13] But this distinction is almost too pedestrian for Kant's own good. He is supposed to be the greatest philosopher since Aristotle; but even *we* can see that experience is shaped by preconceived ideas. Pure objectivity is beyond anyone's reach. We already knew that, even if we had not seen how much this concession implies. Therefore, we suspect, Kant must have said something more explosive and challenging than, say, "Beauty (and everything else) is in the eye of the beholder." He is the Colossus of modern philosophy, and he describes the *Critique* as marking a Copernican revolution in philosophy.[14] We need something more here.

Perhaps Kant's theory postulates two actual worlds, with the one causing the other to exist for us; and if so, the earthquake strikes at last. Only now, Kant's theory has become implausible; for it rests on two incompatible claims, viz., (i) the *noumenal* world is out there, but (ii) the only thing that we can know about it is that it causes the *phenomenal* world to exist for us. Yet the stopping point implied by (ii) is arbitrary. What keeps us from simplifying the two-worlds picture by embracing pure idealism? Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753) argued long before Kant that we can do without a mind-independent, physical world. And if we cannot locate the ideal world in the mind of God, at the very least, complete skepticism follows as to what is really "out there."

---

portance of experience, but also the rootedness of all knowledge in experience, including (say) mathematical necessities.

[13] Cf. Kant, *Critique*, xxxiv, 40.

[14] Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10–13.

This result is essentially what postmodernism not only concedes but celebrates. From now on, we must suspect all "metanarratives" which describe how the world works and our place in it.[15] Truth itself becomes socially constructed, so that it really means "what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying."[16] Instead of searching for an ideal language or the exact words to picture or "mirror" reality, we would now content ourselves with the study of "language-games" that are bounded by specific "forms of life."[17] Friedrich Nietzsche outlines the basic argument that leads to postmodern "perspectivism." There are many kinds of eyes and thus many kinds of truth; but where many kinds of truth exist, the truth (as an objective idea) no longer exists.[18] What replaces it, therefore, will be determined by the winners, understood as those who sovereignly construct human reality.[19] But then, if we cannot know *anything* objectively, we cannot know what any text means objectively. The one conclusion implies the other. So that is one way of becoming a postmodern reader of Scripture, if the latter's content remains (somehow) of interest. However, one can reach postmodernist conclusions by another route, this one related to the elusiveness of texts and their authors.

II. THE HERMENEUTICAL ROUTE TO POSTMODERNIST

"Writer's block" happens when our ideas are unclear. We do not know exactly what we want to say, and thus we search for words before we have hammered out their assigned duties. In this sense, the blocked writer knows—or seems to know—more than he can say; and he gets frustrated. A vague worry surfaces, and he resists it far longer than he should: alas, he has to get his thoughts organized. But sometimes we know more than we can say for reasons beyond anyone's control. No

---

[15] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiv.

[16] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 175.

[17] This shift from a "picture-theory" of language to an emphasis upon social uses of language and constructions of reality marks the transition from the "early Wittgenstein" of the *Tractatus* to the "later Wittgenstein" of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (trans. D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 [1922]), 3, 74, and *passim*; and *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; New York: Macmillan, 1958), 19, 88.

[18] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (ed. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Vintage, 1967), 291.

[19] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 136–139.

amount of work would solve the problem, because language itself cannot do the whole job. Consider, for example, the taste of coffee. We can try to communicate this idea to other people who have not tasted coffee, but the correct words escape us because they actually do not exist. We go with "slightly bitter" and "nutty"—as opposed to "round" and "electrochemical"—but words alone fail to transmit the sensation. In fact, it gets worse.

Someone could press the matter and ask, "Well, what do you mean by 'bitter' and 'nutty'?" And off we go again, searching for more words to fill the holes left by the original ones. Finally, we have to resort to non-verbal communication, but even that expedient cannot deliver us. We give someone coffee to drink; but he experiences not the dark, wonderful goodness that coffee aficionados do, but rather a nasty, bitter, oily fluid that makes him ill. Thus, when both of us say "coffee," we mean different things. Thus, an infinite regress has begun, each word defining and then begging for definition; and we get nothing but definitions, all the way down. In this sense, the postmodernist could argue that texts have to mean what their readers say they do, because they always get the last word anyway. When the writer or speaker has done his work, the rest of us take over.[20]

If we have problems with single words, whole sentences should give us even more trouble; and they do. Consider the debacle of Senator Gaffe, who has stumbled again. At a campaign stop, he says something "incorrect" because he is tired and speaking extemporaneously. He makes a joke, referring to a protected subgroup; but it fails, and now he must do penance. Never mind his purity of heart and professed love for *every single voter*. The press wants an offering, so Gaffe sends up this blemished lamb: "If I have offended anyone, I'm deeply sorry." And suddenly, all is well, at least for most of the citizens, who thought they heard Gaffe apologize. But a few of them missed the part where he said, "I said an offensive thing." What they heard was, "My words shouldn't have been hurtful to anyone, really; but now that someone has chosen to be hurt by them, I regret saying what I did." So they keep after Senator Gaffe; and he eventually gets schooled on a familiar lesson. What we say objectively and what we intend sometimes differ, and we cannot control the fallout of our words.

We struggle to communicate, and words forsake their authors, once they go out in public. But in that case, the reader must increase, and the author must decrease. As the postmodernist sees it, we have no choice here. To insist on the sovereignty of the author over his words, once he

[20] This worry appears to underlie Jacques Derrida's maxim that one cannot get outside of a text, because there is no "outside." Cf. *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 158.

has released them into cultures, is to ask for the impossible; and doubly so, if the author himself is dead and gone. He cannot clarify his own words now: we must decipher them on our own. Thus, one could challenge the entire originalist project by suggesting that it attempts to do what no one can do, given these unpleasant facts. When the reader interprets, he creates yet another text needing interpretation, and we cannot see his own intentions directly. We can see what he presents, as a phenomenon, but never what he means.[21]

If we cannot recover the author's own intent, or if we may legitimately pursue other ends, what should those ends be? Perhaps the following analogy will show us what value this reader-response approach might have. In 1921, a Swiss psychiatrist presented a new measurement tool for psychoanalysis, another way to X-ray people's minds, especially troubled ones. The test required clients to interpret ten images shown in sequence, moving from black-and-white to color, and from simple to more complex. Herman Rorschach (1884–1922) created his cards with a two-step process. That is, he dripped ink on one side of a white card and then quickly folded the card in half, thus producing a bilaterally symmetrical image. Rorschach thought that we could learn a lot about people from what they see in these pictures, even about the societies in which they live. We know this test today as the Rorschach Psychodiagnostic Inkblot Test, and its reputation precedes it.[22] If the average person knows *anything* about psychology, he knows about Rorschach and his inkblots.

Before Rorschach, *Klecksographie* (= making inkblots) was just a children's pastime. People would play games with these images, and one can see why. Any answer could be taken to reveal someone's deepest secrets and oddities; and one can hardly err in reading an inkblot: the reader gets out of it exactly what he puts into it.[23] Because these images form randomly—having no arranged symbols or letters—they demand nothing of the viewer and convey no meanings. On the contrary, the viewer himself becomes the 'text' in the children's game; and likewise

---

[21] So, e.g., Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13.

[22] Cf., Test Developer Profiles, "Hermann Rorschach, M.D.," *The McGraw-Hill Companies*, 2001, www.mhhe.com/mayfieldpub/psychtesting/profiles/ rorschach.htm; Ronald Jay Cohen and Mark E. Swerdlik, *Psychological Testing and Assessment* (5th ed.; New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 368–372; and Raymond J. Corsini and Anthony J. Marsella, *Personality Theories, Research, and Assessment* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock, 1983), 159.

[23] Of course, as the images change, each viewer's response will change, but none of them come with a prescribed interpretation written on the back.

for the uses of these images in Rorschachian diagnosis. We investigate the perceiver himself based on his responses. Eisegesis leads to personal exegesis, which counts for something, if the process works as advertised.[24] And the same principle might apply to a different set of images, i.e., letters.

Suppose that we were to put all *texts* on a level with inkblots, thus ignoring the author's designs and letting the reader see in them what he will. Or we could do the same thing with interpretive communities, so that "good interpretations" turn out to be ones that our colleagues will let us get away with saying. In that case, we would measure the value of any interpretation by different standards than the originalist. The virtue of an originalist reading would be its power to recapture what the author meant to say to his target-audience, no more and no less. The postmodernist would look for virtues like "being thought-provoking," "tending to reveal the interpreter's own agendas," "tending to unmask the author's prejudices," or perhaps, "tending to repristinate an old, neglected text." If one recalls the objectives of an inkblot test, such analogies come easily to mind. But what should a Christian say about such a change?

III. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO POSTMODERNISM

In the first instance, we can admit that our preachers operate as postmodernists all the time, even as they decry the loss of expository preaching. They use Scripture rather than trying to explain it. They read ideas into the biblical text, rather than trying to discover what the author himself attempted to say to his target-audience. The questions brought to the text are modern questions, reflecting secondary and tertiary concerns. The preacher takes from Scripture what he has brought to it, not what the author himself presents. Certainly this technique works for the busy pastor, and he may have his own excuses for it. Perhaps he lacks the desire or ability to recapture what the author meant to say. He does not know how to analyze a text and ask the right questions. But he is good at seeing how established doctrines apply to everyday life, and he can speak fluently to the public about them. So he avoids the challenge of real exegesis.

On the other hand, he may think that what he has to share about theology and ethics is actually more important than anything the biblical writers said to their own people, in dead languages, thousands of years

---

[24] Exegesis is the attempt to discover what a text means objectively, i.e., to "read out" what the author intended to say. Thus, *eisegesis* is the error of reading ideas into a text that deviate from the author's intent. In the case of inkblots, however, the only kind of reading one can do is eisegetical since—for all practical purposes—they have no "author" in the formal sense.

ago. Perhaps he only thinks that there is—after all and in general—so much that we do not know. Why risk bold statements about what the text says for 30 minutes on Sunday, when we cannot solve lesser puzzles? If his own heart is in the right place, all is well and all is forgiven. In any case, we get the same result: he decapitates the biblical authors and replaces their judgments with his own regarding God's word for us today. But if we admit this procedure in our own circles, if we let ourselves put alien constructs on Scripture—giving Moses or John a good "reading" every Sunday—we can hardly censure feminists or socialists for doing likewise. Or we cannot censure them quite as strongly. In the end, however, postmodernist theory suffers from grave defects. Against it, one might advance the following 4 propositions.

a. Postmodernist theory cannot last

When I was a child, I once tried to play table-tennis undogmatically, tolerating my own creative shots as well as my neighbor's. The latter had received a table for Christmas, and I had come over to try it out for the first time. We were incompetent, of course. Neither of us could keep the ball in play, and one of us tried to "fix" the problem by removing the net. Now we could not go wrong as often, and that change was a relief to us beginners. But then again, we soon quit playing; and every reader of this article knows why. Without the concept of success and failure, the activity itself becomes uninteresting. We stopped even trying to keep the ball in play, as we once defined "being in play," before the revolution. Likewise, we cannot reject the correspondence theory of truth without ceasing to do philosophy. We cannot reject a search for the original meaning of texts without ceasing to be interpreters. If "true" does not mean "how things really are," and if "correct" exegesis does not recover "what the text first meant," then "true" and "correct" mean nothing of interest. We will soon give up thinking and reading. Therefore, we can expect postmodernism—as a synthetic, trendy phase—will take care of itself soon enough anyway, even if we do not give it the polite shoves that are coming next.

b. Postmodernist theory is self-referentially absurd

Postmodernism reduces to an enlightened skepticism regarding the nature of the world and the meaning of texts, but that skepticism quickly backfires. Their theory puts lenses in front of everyone else's eyes and implies that we all suffer from devastating subjectivity. But who says A must say B: if *we* suffer from incurable subjectivity, so do they. No

flights of objectivity are allowed. Thus, the postmodernist cannot know the truth about us—as if he has seen our *noumenal* minds themselves—if none of us can see the unvarnished truth about anything or even approximate objective knowledge. This critique of skepticism goes back a long way in philosophical history, and we wonder why postmodernists (as skeptics) do not regard it as touching their own theory. Then again, perhaps they see well enough how this debate must end (i.e., badly for them) but have amplified their claims for theatrical effect. After all, milder forms of skepticism are not half as interesting; and no one would show up for a seminar to discuss a proverb like, "Let us all be careful not to overindulge the modernist impulse." In any case, the double-standard at work here dooms their theory from the outset.

c. Postmodernist theory separates human beings further from God

If God does not exist, everything is hermeneutically permitted. We may interpret as we please or follow present conventions of reason and interpretation, but the so-called "right way" of doing anything would essentially disappear. This conclusion follows from the fact that without God, nothing is objectively sacred. There are just material objects left behind, and any value that one attaches to an object would be entirely subjective. We prefer to save human lives and do justice to human beings; but we could as easily favor eagles and tulips in the same way. Likewise, if God does not exist, and if nothing is sacred, none of us enjoys the right to a fair hearing. The author can expect nothing of his readers, and the perceiver has no epistemic duties. The "correct" way to form beliefs and retain them has no place to land. Positive law merely acclaims and denounces: it binds no one apart from sheer coercion. And if God does not exist, even these results do not finally matter. Postmodernism is no worse off, in this case, than pushpin or poetry.

But if God exists, postmodern games must end. We can no longer afford them, since this God will get through to us one way or another, and whether we like it or not. In that day, it will make no difference at all how cleverly Foucault or Derrida have defended their skepticism. It will make no difference whether one can make freshman undergraduates doubt whether they have a text in their class. The God's eye-view of things will be the way things are, and our skeptical hypotheses will cease. More specifically yet, if the Bible is the word of God, we had better start caring what the Apostles and Prophets meant to say to their target-audiences, notwithstanding our own trendy theories. For in this universe, you can still "do things" with the words of Scripture. No one will stop you. But if the Son of Man should return in power and glory, we

will discover together—as a worldwide interpretive community—just how unfashionable he really is.