

What is Truth?

Changing with the changed

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Ideas Explored:

1. The premodern idea that god is truth
2. The modern idea that reason judges what is true
3. The postmodern idea of truth as an event, where neither God nor reason hold pride of place.

The best way to think of postmodern thought is as a style, rather than as a body of doctrines; it is an inflection or alteration that continues the 'project' of modernity, but by other means. Where modernity thinks there are pure rules and a rigorous method, postmodernity thinks that these borders are porous, and that each side bleeds into the other. Where modernists look for the one big story that covers all phenomena – like all of human history – postmodernists express what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-98) called 'incredulity toward metanarratives', which became the most familiar definition of postmodernism. In essence, this means a refusal to be taken in by big, overarching accounts, as if there was only one story to tell about human behavior (sex, power, God, etc.).

Where modernity favours the universal, postmodernists savour the singular and idiosyncratic. Modernists do not welcome expectations to their rules' postmodernists think that the exception is the engine of creativity and the occasion on which the system can reinvent itself. Where modernists seek certitude, postmodernists see the salutary effects of a healthy skepticism.

If you ask postmodernists, 'What is the truth?' they are likely to squint and say, 'It depends.' Postmodernists tend to be a bit incredulous that there is just one thing called truth which is always and everywhere the same, and are more inclined to think

there are a lot of different truths, depending on who and where you are; they are inclined to play it loose.

Herein lies the problem...

Playing it too loose with truth is called *relativism*. Relativism means there is no truth, just a lot of competing truths, depending on your language, culture, gender, religion, needs, tastes, etc., and one is as good as another. Who can say what is true? Who has the authority to pronounce on that?

In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche (one of postmodernism's patron saints) said Truth was an ensemble of fictions and metaphors. The postmodern situation is to be de-situated, uprooted, on the go. Every time we take a ride on a train, or an aeroplane, or make a virtual visit to some far-off place on a computer, we set off a crisis in truth.

Relativism is the main threat to truth that is posed by postmodernists, just as absolutism is the main threat posed by modernism. There are problems with both modes of thinking.