



## Postmodernism and the question of Identity

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Do you really know who you are? Can anyone? One of the most fascinating stories in contemporary cultural history is how the social conditions of the modern (and postmodern) world and postmodern philosophy have conspired to destabilize our sense of self. Do we as Christians have a solution? Do we have a perspective that answers the legitimate concerns of these postmodern thinkers, while at the same time challenges their unbelief? I believe that Christians are uniquely positioned to provide the kinds of answers that rootless postmoderns are seeking . . . if we can articulate these answers in a language they can understand. In this workshop, we'll do three things: 1. I'll review a brief history of the self from the modern, stable self to the postmodern, fragmented, shifting self. Along the way, we'll pay special attention to how certain postmodern thinkers (such as Lacan, Foucault and Ricoeur) view the self as a linguistic construction. 2. I'll present an apologetical response to those postmodern thinkers, noting the insights and problems inherent in their perspectives. 3. Finally, I'll present a brief understanding of identity from a biblical perspective, how Christianity sees the self as both a stable given and as an on-going project.

### The New You Review: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity

**Introduction:** In today's world, identity is no longer a given, but an open question. This sense of rootlessness and instability is due to a number of factors: postmodern philosophies, and the conditions of late modernity and postmodernity. We need to be able to give a persuasive answer to

the question of identity from a Christian perspective.

### I. A Short, Short History of the Self in the (Post)Modern West

A. A note on terms:

-ism = ideology/philosophy (e.g. modernism, Marxism)

-ity = social conditions (e.g. postmodernity)

-ization = social transitions (e.g. secularization)

B. The stable self of modernism: "*Cogito Ergo Sum.*"

C. Modernity's corrosion of identity (especially associated with the Industrial Revolution):

1. Urbanization undermined traditional community in which identity was formed. Community was replaced by fluid sets of relationships.
2. Changes in work patterns resulted in a change in family structure, a split between the private (home) world and the public, (work) world.
3. Shift in public values: at the workplace, traditional ethics (a source of the self) was replaced by the value of efficiency and technique.
4. The result of these changes (secularization) was a draining of meaning from public life (privatization). Meaning and identity (including religion) now became a private, leisure time activity.
5. Formerly "secular" activities took on a sacred, identity-forming character.

D. Enter the "Masters of Suspicion":

1. **Marx:** Identity (sense of self) = social/economic location (class).

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness." (From *Preface and Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy*).

2. **Freud:** Identity is not stable or rational, but a ever-conflicted tension between id and ego, conscious and subconscious mind.

3. **Nietzsche:** There is no Truth, only interpretations of the truth. The ethical self must be shown through “genealogy” to be a historical construction. The self is a Dionysian “will to power.”

4. The Masters of Suspicion “decentered” identity and provided a critical foundation upon which postmodern thinkers built and refined.

E. As modernity has progressed into postmodernity, identity has become even more unstable, even more a question without a definite answer. According to David Lyon, the postmodern social condition is dominated by two realities:

1. The **rise of new media technologies.** These new media messages have two effects:

a. They question and problematize traditional authorities (how can any one perspective claim absolute Truth?).

b. The messages provide “frames” for organizing experiencing, giving a sense of reality (while also blurring the line between the real and the image). These messages shape identity, which is now not seen as fixed, but as fragmentary and fluid.

2. The **dominance of consumerism** in society. We tend to define ourselves as consumer rather than producers (e.g. the emphasis on image). The new consumer-oriented identity has two aspects:

a. The “plastic self,” make identity as flexible as possible to experience as much as possible, and

b. The “expressive self” that seeks authenticity and completion of the inner-narrative.

3. The combination of these two dynamics cause identity to come to the foreground as a question that has no final answer. This is both a source of exhilaration (we are free to construct ourselves) and anxiety (we really don’t know who we are at the deepest level).

E. The Postmodern “Linguistic Turn”: The self comes to be seen as a construction of language.

1. Structuralism (Saussure): The language structure (*langue*) precedes the speaker and mediates reality as a closed, oppositional system. Our identity is given by language.

2. Poststructuralism questions even the stability of the language system, further destabilizing the sense of self.

a. **Foucault:** Identity is a creature of power-knowledge (the way the circulations of power created discursive fields which construct identity).

“[P]ower produces knowledge . . . power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” *Discipline and Punish*, p. 27.

“[T]ruth isn’t outside of power, or lacking power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” *Power/Knowledge*, p. 131.

b. **Lacan:** The self, born vulnerable, forms identity through identifying with “images” on a doomed quest for a unified, stable sense of self.

c. **Ricoeur:** The self is essentially a fiction through which we understand our lives as coherent stories (“narrative identity”). We are the stories we inhabit and tell about ourselves.

## II. An Apologetic Response

A. It is insufficient simply to condemn – we must

engage their position, noting insights and errors:

1. Insight: Identity is not static. They fear a false (modernist) autonomy.

2. Error:

A. From where do we choose or resist what culture gives us?

B. Identity is a monological creativity, and replaces modernist autonomy with one far more radical.

### III. A Biblical Understanding of the Self as Given and an Ongoing Project

A. Creatural identity: Being created in God's image is a relational dynamic. As uniquely "other responsive" creatures, our identity is both given in the image and an on-going relational project.

B. Fallen identity: Under sin, those relations fragment and distort our project.

C. Redeemed/Redemptive Identity: But God substantially heals that fragmentation and gives us a new identity that is both:

1. Stable/given, in light of the unchangeable facts of the cross and resurrection, and God's adoption of me,

2. An on-going project as I try to bring the healing presence of the Kingdom to bear on those around me.

### Conclusion

In this way, the Christian understanding of identity is uniquely equipped to offer a challenging response to those caught in postmodernism and addicted to the flux. The identity it presents is neither naïve nor sovereign, but a realistic and healing contribution to the rootlessness and isolation of postmodernity.

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