

POST MODERNISM

UNIT I

Postmodernism And Modern Philosophy

Postmodernism, also spelled post-modernism, in [Western philosophy](#), a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad [skepticism](#), subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of [reason](#); and an [acute](#) sensitivity to the role of [ideology](#) in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.

Postmodernism is largely a reaction against the [intellectual](#) assumptions and values of the modern period in the [history](#) of Western philosophy (roughly, the 17th through the 19th century). Indeed, many of the doctrines characteristically associated with postmodernism can fairly be described as the straightforward denial of general philosophical viewpoints that were taken for granted during the 18th-century [Enlightenment](#), though they were not unique to that period. The most important of these viewpoints are the following.

1. There is an objective natural reality, a reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings—of their minds, their societies, their social practices, or their investigative techniques. Postmodernists dismiss this idea as a kind of naive [realism](#). Such reality as there is, according to postmodernists, is a [conceptual](#) construct, an [artifact](#) of scientific practice and [language](#). This point also applies to the investigation of past events by historians and to the description of social institutions, structures, or practices by social scientists.

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2. The descriptive and explanatory statements of scientists and historians can, in principle, be objectively true or false. The postmodern denial of this viewpoint—which follows from the rejection of an objective natural reality—is sometimes expressed by saying that there is no such thing as Truth.

3. Through the use of reason and [logic](#), and with the more specialized tools provided by [science](#) and [technology](#), human beings are likely to change themselves and their societies for the better. It is reasonable to expect that future societies will be more humane, more just, more [enlightened](#), and more prosperous than they are now. Postmodernists deny this Enlightenment faith in science and technology as instruments of human progress. Indeed, many postmodernists hold that the misguided (or unguided) pursuit of scientific and technological knowledge led to the development of technologies for killing on a massive scale in [World War II](#). Some go so far as to say that science and technology—and even reason and logic—are inherently destructive and oppressive, because they have been used by evil people, especially during the 20th century, to destroy and oppress others.

4. Reason and logic are universally valid—i.e., their laws are the same for, or apply equally to, any thinker and any domain of knowledge. For postmodernists, reason and logic too are merely conceptual constructs and are therefore valid only within the established intellectual traditions in which they are used.

5. There is such a thing as human nature; it consists of faculties, aptitudes, or dispositions that are in some sense present in human beings at birth rather than learned or instilled through social forces. Postmodernists insist that all, or nearly all, aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined.

6. Language refers to and represents a reality outside itself. According to postmodernists, language is not such a “mirror of nature,” as the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty characterized the Enlightenment view. Inspired by the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, postmodernists claim that language is semantically self-contained, or self-referential: the meaning of a word is not a static thing in the world or even an idea in the mind but rather a range of contrasts and differences with the meanings of other words. Because meanings are in this sense functions of other meanings—which themselves are functions of other meanings, and so on—they are never fully “present” to the speaker or hearer but are endlessly “deferred.” Self-reference characterizes not only natural languages but also the more specialized “discourses” of particular communities or traditions; such discourses are embedded in social practices and reflect the conceptual schemes and moral and intellectual values of the community or tradition in which they are used. The postmodern view of language and discourse is due largely to the French philosopher and literary theorist Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), the originator and leading practitioner of deconstruction.

7. Human beings can acquire knowledge about natural reality, and this knowledge can be justified ultimately on the basis of evidence or principles that are, or can be, known immediately, intuitively, or otherwise with certainty. Postmodernists reject philosophical foundationalism—the attempt, perhaps best exemplified by the 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes’s dictum cogito, ergo sum (“I think, therefore I am”), to identify a foundation of certainty on which to build the edifice of empirical (including scientific) knowledge.

8. It is possible, at least in principle, to construct general theories that explain many aspects of the natural or social world within a given domain of knowledge—e.g., a general theory of human history, such as dialectical materialism. Furthermore, it should be a goal of scientific and historical research to construct such theories, even if they are never perfectly attainable in practice. Postmodernists dismiss this notion as a pipe dream and indeed as symptomatic of an unhealthy tendency within Enlightenment discourses to adopt “totalizing” systems of thought (as the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas called them) or grand “metanarratives” of human biological, historical, and social development (as the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard claimed). These theories are pernicious not merely because they are false but because they effectively impose conformity on other perspectives or discourses, thereby oppressing, marginalizing, or silencing them. Derrida himself equated the theoretical tendency toward totality with totalitarianism.

