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Truth Considered & Applied

An Interview between Joseph E. Gorra and Stewart E. Kelly

Stewart Kelly's latest book is a timely and discerning account of what Christians can come to understand about the opportunities and weaknesses of modernism and postmodernism. With a careful, analytic philosophy eye *and* an appreciation for the historical context of ideas, Kelly's treatment will be fruitful for professors and students alike. In this interview, we discuss some of the salient features of his book's contribution, including how it reflects his way of instructing in the classroom.

How did your book come about?

Seven or eight years ago I was preparing a paper for EPS on Postmodernism. I wanted to present a 12-14 page overview! Needless to say, the paper blew up and out, and ended up at 65 pages or so. I later sent that version to Paul Copan, who was gracious enough to both read over it and recommend me to Bob Stewart, who was planning a multi-volume series on apologetics with Broadman and Holman. Bob contacted me to see if I was interested in writing a book for the series, and the result was the 2011 *Truth Considered and Applied: Examining Postmodernism, History and Christian Faith*.

Can you tell us more about this series edited by Bob Stewart and how your book contributes in light of the other current and foreseeable titles?

When Bob envisioned the series there were going to be a number of books, with mine being the first one in the series. I know Craig Blomberg is doing one on the reliability of the New Testament and Jeremy Evans has one coming out soon on the problem of evil. Beyond that I'm unsure as to how many total books will be in this series.

There seem to be three main issues of focus in *Truth Considered and Applied*: How are we to assess postmodernism, how are we to think about truth, and what are we to make of historical knowledge given the epistemological critique of postmodernism. Why these three issues?

For openers, 300 pages or so on the concept of truth is doable, but it would also cure the insomnia of many of the book's readers. So I thought about including sections on some key issues that are relevant today and intersect with the idea of truth. New Testament scholars are historians, and their academic pursuits hinge on the possibility of genuine historical knowledge. So I thought it helpful to investigate what can be called "historical epistemology" – the search for genuine (objective) knowledge of the past. One of the other topics, namely Postmodernism, leapt off the page as something worth writing about. Whatever Postmodernism is, it is widely influential, widely misunderstood, and Christian scholars have ranged from openly embracing it to rejecting it out of hand. All that of course leaves a vast middle ground which I seek to explore in the book. And there is still the idea of truth (or theories of truth), and even in 65 pages or so (the length of my treatment of it in the book) there is much ground to be covered. What I say there can be viewed as an introduction to the leading contenders for a theory of truth.

Bethel University Professor Paul Eddy rightly observes that your book moves "deftly from popular culture to analytic philosophy, from contemporary historiography to sociology of knowledge." I think this is an important point, since many Christian philosophy critiques of postmodernism tend to be mostly focused on straight analysis of concepts. Why did you take the approach that you did in this book?

I wanted to begin where Postmodernism is most influential, and that is at the intersection of popular culture and what might be called popular scholarship. A few key points need to be made here: 1) Postmodernism takes what has been called the sociology of knowledge seriously (too seriously at times), and to address the sociology of knowledge (roughly how our culture(s) shape and influence how we think about the world) is to take Postmodernism seriously; 2) If we hold to an Enlightenment sort of confidence in human reason (following Descartes and many others) then the sociology of knowledge is our mortal enemy. But if we pursue a more chastened/modest view of knowledge (e.g., a modest Foundationalism or a Plantinga-style reliabilism), then Christians have nothing to fear from the sociology of knowledge properly understood; 3) Philosophical concepts never appear in a historical void, but rather in a particular socio-historical context, so I attempt to address both the concepts and the issue of their context.

It seems that “postmodernist” vs. “modernist” epistemology assumes different anthropological presuppositions. If so, how do you see their different epistemologies informing their epistemologies?

Underlying Modernist epistemologies is what Thomas Nagel has called “the view from nowhere.” This is the Enlightenment view (held by Descartes, Locke, and many others) that we can grasp reality as it is, without a mediating lens (influenced by culture, temperament, etc.) involving culture, gender, and other factors.

Postmodernist epistemologies begin with the recognition that our cultural and historical setting plays a genuine and significant role in how we see the world. For example, an Evangelical Christian growing up in North Dakota will see the world a bit differently than one from northern California (San Francisco, for

example) or the East Coast, where I grew up. None of this requires us to do away with the ideas of objectivity and truth, though it does show how Cartesian and Enlightenment views of epistemology are far too confident of our reasoning abilities.

John Searle and Alvin Goldman, for example, are two big names in modern philosophy, both seek to give the idea of our situatedness its due without giving up the idea of epistemology as a truth-seeking (or veritistic) enterprise.

Your book offers some stimulating discussion regarding questions of truth and history. It also seeks to maintain a tension between affirming that we can know the past and that we are also historical beings. How might this shape both our epistemology and how we approach Christianity as a “historical faith.”

First, Evangelical New Testament scholars (such as Wright, Bock, Carson, and others) all recognize that the Gospel authors wrote in a particular historical context, and that understanding this context is important for understanding the message of the Gospels. Second, I would say that since one context is not more privileged in its quest for truth than another one, this promotes intellectual humility and the idea that many of our claims are subject to error and a limited human perspective. Third, we Evangelicals can affirm the importance on context for understanding the Scriptures, yet also affirm that the Holy Spirit guided/superintended the writing process and guaranteed the truth of what was written. Fourth, so here we see both the importance of context and the possibility of knowing the truth about the past. It's a both/and matter, rather than an either/or one.

In the first part of the book, you address “the challenge of postmodernism” and whether it should be viewed as a “friend” or “foe.” What do you take to be some of the best vs. worst ways to assess modernism?

This is a difficult question. To oversimplify matters, the following points need to be made: First, Modernism is not a monolithic or homogeneous group of thinkers; Second, and on the Enlightenment, there is no such thing as THE Enlightenment, but rather a British Enlightenment, a Dutch Enlightenment (and French and German also). And each of these four countries can be profitably divided in to radical, moderate, and conservative Enlightenments. So it's more helpful to speak of something like twelve Enlightenments rather than one overarching one. So for example, the moderate British Enlightenment focuses on Newton, Locke, and others, while the radical French Enlightenment might focus on Diderot, d'Holbach, and others. And as Jonathan Israel argues, one cannot fully appreciate the broad Enlightenment without giving Spinoza his due.

Continuing with the focus of the above question, what do you take to be the best vs. worst ways to assess postmodernism.

Postmodernism is also a heterogeneous/diverse movement. It can be seen as a broad spectrum with broadly common concerns. A few brief points here: First, Very few Postmoderns are genuine Relativists with respect to truth. Nietzsche clearly thinks some perspectives are better than others, and Foucault definitely thinks power often leads to exploitation and oppression. Also, Derrida is clearly committed to a host of substantive (non-Relativist) views in his spirited defense of Paul de Man (famous literary deconstructionist); Second, we need to practice the Principle of Charity when we read the Postmoderns, and enable them to put their best foot forward. Even Rorty did not deny the existence of facts, and

the very skeptical Hayden White eventually conceded that facticity of the Holocaust. They may be wrong about a number of important matters, but they are not (with rare exceptions) Relativists. I argue that Postmodernism has much to offer and much worthy of rejection. Ultimately, Postmodern claims answer to the revealed truth of Scripture just as any other worldview does.

How are “religious” and “moral” belief construed in modernism in view of their relationship to knowledge?

I'll begin here by noting the common dichotomy between faith and reason found in many Modernist thinkers (Kant leaps to mind here). Hume and others reduce ethics to something close to established social customs, which is biblically untenable. Christians need to see faith and reason as allies. Further Christians are committed to some version of Ethical Objectivism being true.

What do you find to be the most serious criticisms against modernism?

Modernists are mistaken about a wide variety of matters. Here I will only mention three: First, the rejection of original sin. Many central Enlightenment figures found this idea repugnant. Locke is one such example. Evangelical Christians believe that some version of original sin is correct; Second, most Modernists are Meliorists – they are decidedly optimistic about the human condition. Given all the wars and millions of deaths in the past 200 years, such a view is hard to take seriously, let alone endorse; Third, they are overly confident about human reason. Human reason is not a coolly objective and dispassionate tool for achieving truth (the language is from Plantinga here). Augustine, Pascal, and others properly taught that the heart is more important here; The Hume-inspired rejection of miracles still rises like a stench in the

nostrils of the modern Evangelical. The amazing (miraculous?) thing is that Hume's arguments are seriously flawed and eminently worthy of our rejection.

What do you find to be the most serious criticisms against postmodernism?

Again, I will be very brief here: First, contrary to what many Postmoderns claim, MetaNarratives (broad, overarching worldviews) are not inherently oppressive; Second, they don't take the idea of self-referentiality seriously enough. They are too often like the person who claims "I don't speak a word of English," all the while saying so in the English language; Third, the fact that all humans are situated in a particular culture(s) does not entail the loss of all objectivity. There is a certain givenness to the world/reality that resists our best efforts to shape it as we please; Fourth, some MetaNarratives, Christianity in particular, are positively liberating, and meet a number of our most important human needs.

To my recollection, your single volume offers the most complete survey I've seen of arguments for and against modernism and postmodernism. This seems to me to be indicative of how you study and teach. Can you let us in on how you teach, perhaps with some acquaintance of how you conceive of this vocation?

Well, I'm trained in the Analytic tradition, so what I emphasize in my teaching are clarity, accuracy, and fairness (giving various sides a hearing). A few other points are in order here: I am a philosopher, but first and foremost I am a Christian. Moreover, I think it's important to treat all students with respect. They are image-bearers of God. So, I try, by God's grace, to be a good role model. If I don't model kindness and decency, then it won't matter much if I argue for God's existence or that belief in miracles is rationally justified. I see

all truth as unified – I’m not going to find a genuine truth in one discipline that contradicts any genuine truth in another discipline. Finally, I seek to use humor along the way. If students enjoy being in my class they are more likely to listen more closely, learn more, and realize that learning philosophy can be more exciting than watching snails race or paint drying.

Stewart E. Kelly is professor of Philosophy at Minot State University in Minot, North Dakota. He holds degrees from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, and Notre Dame University (Ph.D.), and a former member of the executive committee of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, and author of *Thinking Well: An Introduction to Critical Thinking* (McGraw-Hill).