

Poststructuralism and Its Influence on Unitarianism

October 22,2023

Good morning! Thanks for coming! Given the title of today's message, I expected to see an audience of no one! But, as Yogi Berra once said, "If the people don't wanna' come out to the UU on a Sunday, there ain't no way you're gonna' stop 'em!"

Thank you to the fellowship for having me today. It is always an honor and a privilege to speak here. Thank you, Brother Bob, for being my service leader, and for your kind introduction. You are a true friend and I might add, a great cook! (O.K., that's an inside joke!) Thank you, Beth, for your always wonderful musical artistry, and particularly for selecting and playing Susan Leeder's favorites today.

Yesterday would have been Susan's 69th birthday. And I want to take a moment to honor her memory before turning to today's message. Susan and I had many conversations over the years, trying to resolve "all things UU!" But our most important conversations were after she was ill, having the "kitchen table talk" as she called it, about death. *We could not resolve that one.* Susan was service leader for me a number of times. She raised service leadership to an art, always "peppering," (O.K., "salting"), her remarks with great wit and humor! So, I thought it fitting today to hear from another woman of great wit and humor...someone else who could joke about Unitarians! I refer, of course, to Dorothy Parker who, reportedly, said the following!

- “Never ask a room full of Unitarians...’What fresh hell is this?!’ ”
- “If you don’t have anything nice to say, come sit here by me...at the UUFDC!”
- “Unitarians believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person...except for those who wear socks with sandals!”, and, finally,
- “Why did the Unitarian cross the road?...To get to *the middle...the middle ground!*”

O.K., to today’s message! What is Poststructuralism? Why is it important to talk about it?

And how does it relate to Unitarianism?

Poststructuralism is a philosophical, literary and social movement, started in Europe in the 1960s and 70s. It is sometimes referred to as “Postmodernism,” but I’ll stick with “Poststructuralism” for today. The principle idea of Poststructuralism is that everything is *culturally based* and, thereby, *culturally biased*. Its philosophical roots can be traced to Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous 19th century German philosopher. But the key contemporary figures were two 20th century intellectuals in France: Jacques Derrida (DEH + REE + DUH) (originally from Algeria) and Michel Foucault (FOO + KOH) (a native Frenchman). It is important to talk about Poststructuralism because it represents a formidable challenge to the idea of objective truth, one that has unleashed a *wave of relativism*, infiltrating society at every level, and one that needs to be answered. It relates to Unitarianism because, intentionally or not, Unitarianism has endorsed Poststructuralism in its practice, and this is

problematic. I will now develop these points in detail, from a non-culturally biased perspective, of course!

As noted, Poststructuralism claims that everything is *culturally related* and thus, by default, *culturally biased*. As it pertains to truth, the theory is that there can be no objective truth because all truth is “tainted” (including the idea of *truth* itself), and thus, truth is just another cultural norm, with no standard for universal application, and having no primacy. While this is not a complete rejection of the concept of objective truth, (i.e., the theory that “There is no such thing as truth,” which, if true, is false!),...Poststructuralism is a relativist version of truth that needs to be reckoned with. That reckoning will, of course, be charged with cultural bias by Poststructuralists! The claim being that: both the idea and the process of criticism are themselves culturally based and biased. This is a serious challenge to the search for truth that has framed intellectual investigation in Western culture for 3,000 years, since the pre-Socratics.

Here is how Poststructuralists develop their view. Any proposed truth is *understood to be true* only because it has: 1st) been *subjected to rules of evidence*; but 2nd) those rules are *culturally developed*; and 3rd) that development is *controlled by authorizing and validating power structures*. It is then claimed that although all authorizing and validating power structures have blind spots and thus shortcomings, *this doesn't mean they are all equally problematic, just differently problematic*. However, there is no theory about what makes them

problematic, nor is there a theory about choosing among and between competing authorizing and validating structures.

So, for example, what has enabled Donald Trump *isn't* just the pervasiveness of the idea that truth is relative, but more important, it is the *fluid power structures* that proclaim which things are true, and Trump just stepped into this *void*, powerfully shaping the truth as he liked. And Poststructuralists say that this *void* was created by the cultural failure of others to grasp the lesson that all truth depends on cultural rules of evidence controlled by dominant power structures! So, ...it's all your fault, Unitarians! How is one to combat this?

Some critics have suggested that the key to combating this cultural relativism is to study and ascertain what rules obtain in different circumstances where someone claims something to be true or to be a fact. And further, to study what could be the potential shortcomings of those rules, as well as how other rules might have different outcomes. This seems like a reasonable approach. But, how is one to do this? If by developing standards for when rules obtain in various circumstances, that will be charged with cultural bias by Poststructuralists! And any determination of rule shortcomings will be deemed biased as well! In short, *Poststructuralists do not believe in objective standards for theory development nor for criticism*. And, they believe that all "facts" are questionable. This is nothing short of intellectual anarchy!

Now, to be fair, there are no Poststructuralists who would claim that the sun doesn't exist!

They would not question this basic fact. Their claim is much more nuanced. They would point

out that what our sun “is” has changed over time, as different *cultural rules of evidence* for what our sun is have shifted (e.g., the Copernican revolution changed the rules of evidence about what our sun is, moving our sun, as opposed to the earth, to the center of the then observable universe). Poststructuralists would also point out how there are *multiple* words for “sun” in many languages (for example, in many Indigenous American languages), whereas we have just one word in English, and it’s because in English, any question about what our sun is, has already “stacked the rules of evidence” in favor of regarding “*the sun*” as something uniform in nature that needs only one name. And the Poststructuralist claim is that adopting one of these frameworks over the other clearly exemplifies *bias*. What are we to make of this? This idea of reality changing because of changing rules of evidence over time?; facts changing because of how we talk about them?

While Poststructuralism as a theory is a version of relativism, it is a version that needs serious critique because it incorporates an important “trump” card (no pun intended!), ... namely that “any attempt to refute it, seems to exemplify it,” because all such attempts are culturally based, and *refutation* itself is deemed a culturally based and biased concept and process.

You have to give these people credit, but their approach does not get us closer to the truth, in fact, it does just the opposite. First, because they don’t believe in *objective truth*, and thus they do not believe in its pursuit. (We’ll talk more about that in the talkback!) But second, and more important, their view *cannot explain why not*...that is, they cannot explain why there

is no objective truth, nor why its pursuit is unimportant. They cannot do this without either begging the question or contradicting their own position! Talk about truth requires establishing standards for discussing truth...even if the grounds for that discussion are culturally based and biased. That said, I think Poststructuralism is irrational. So, in what follows I will develop in more detail my philosophical case against it; then I will turn to what I see as its influence on Unitarian practice and why I deem that problematic.

Poststructuralists claim that there are different kinds of truth based on rules of evidence, which rules are validated by respective power structures. So, there is historical truth, scientific truth, philosophical truth, legal truth, religious truth, political truth, personal truth,...you name it! *No one knows how many different kinds, perhaps an infinite number!* And each is culturally based and biased. But that's precisely the problem! The presupposition that there are multiple kinds of truth is not a given. If anything, it is itself a culturally based and biased idea! Moreover, the view that there are different kinds of truth is implicitly part of a broader theory of truth, *whether Poststructuralists acknowledge it or not,...*which must then explain which kind of truth it is that makes the theory of different kinds of truth, true. Which "biased" perspective is primary? Which kind of truth authorizes the theory of a plurality of kinds of truth?

Poststructuralists do not have an answer to these questions. In fact, they can't have...if they are to meet their own standards. Poststructuralism requires a "true" meta-level theory of

kinds of truth to support the claim that there are kinds of truth. It also requires a theory about whether or not truth, of any kind, is worth pursuing. *It has neither.*

I suspect that Poststructuralists will deem these criticisms as “just more cultural bias,” setting standards that they do not have to meet. But, this response falls short, because Poststructuralists must also have *a theory of bias* to get their program off the ground, a theory declaring why something is biased in the first place, otherwise there is no basis for identifying anything as *culturally* biased or any reason to do so. One wants to ask, ...can there be bias against cultural bias? If so, on what grounds? Only cultural?... That begs the question! Non-cultural?... That is a refutation of their theory!

If Poststructuralism is true, we have no basis for rational discussion...no reason for asking questions, no reason for developing theories, no reason for evaluating critical responses to theories, no reason for serious discourse... Because *nothing* counts as reasonable discourse or acceptable criticism,...and because there are no acceptable standards for either. But, of course, if this is true, it would then mean that there is one very important standard, namely:

That there are no such standards!

Poststructuralism runs deep. At first it was language philosophy and the idea that all language is fundamentally metaphorical and therefore interpretive; consequently, there is no such thing as a true *statement* that isn't already an interpretation of some kind. As Poststructuralists proclaim: *The moment you put a truth into words, it's not strictly "true" anymore! It is*

impossible that something is true once it is articulated! How or why, would or could, anyone respond to this?! We can object, but if what we say *cannot* be true, there is no basis nor reason for discussion. It gets worse!

Here is how Poststructuralist literary theorists incorporate the view. *Everything written is contextual, and open to infinite interpretation. Authors themselves don't even know what they mean! They have no privileged access to, nor interpretation of, what they themselves have written!* But, if this is the case, it would then be a *profound truth*...about contextualism and literary interpretation! Regrettably, academic literary theory programs, worldwide, have bought into this! Bottom line, if there are no objective standards, no standard interpretations, then one can be neither correct nor mistaken about what anything means! That is, of course, total nonsense! ... Unless I am mistaken!

Poststructuralism is an insidious theory. Its practice is dangerous... **The mantra...** *I have my way of knowing, you have your way of knowing; there are multiple kinds of truth, and multiple ways of arriving at them; everything is open to interpretation...including interpretation itself; and you can believe whatever you want...is a recipe for disaster!* If practiced, truth becomes irrelevant! Everything becomes irrelevant!

So, why keep talking about it? Well, because the Poststructuralist philosophical, literary and social movement has become pervasive. It has crept into all arenas. It is the camel in every tent. And, it is a deceptive philosophy. It tries to establish standards, while at the same time

denying that there are standards! It theorizes about the inability to theorize! The sooner we can eradicate it, the better! So, again, why not just stop talking about it? Why waste your time, in this, your house of worship? *Well...because, ... Poststructuralism has found its way into Unitarianism!*

Modern Unitarianism has adopted it in its practice, even if unintentionally. Unitarians hold among their central beliefs the importance of the search for truth. Unitarians believe that the search for truth is fundamental to finding meaning and direction in life. So far, so good! But the *practice* does not match the *principle*. The Unitarian Unison Affirmation: “We gather together to seek knowledge and wisdom,” affirms the principle, but provides no guidance about how to achieve it. And an examination of the practice shows that Unitarians have drifted into Poststructuralism in their quest!

Unitarian practice has gone far afield in the search for truth. It has adopted the view that all opinions are equally worthy (or at least worth hearing), that there are multiple paths to truth, all equally valid, and accessible through multiple mediums. *This is Poststructuralism embodied!* Unitarians have adopted a practice of saying “yes” to everything! Endorsing every form of expression. The result is a practice that contradicts principle!

This is serious criticism. It goes to the heart of how Unitarians support and practice their beliefs. *And I do not stand alone in making it.* In 2007 Rik Warch challenged Unitarians in general, and this fellowship in particular, in a *powerful* message entitled “Oh Lighten Up and

Other Modern Truths,” because of the Unitarian failure to explain how it has found “those truths, ancient and modern, that give meaning and direction to our lives.” This was a serious challenge on Rik’s part. *It is not just what important truths Unitarians claim to know, but how you came to know them? Not which ones give meaning and direction to your lives,...but why?* Some will, of course, dismiss this challenge. After all, the truths of Unitarianism are obvious they’ll say. For example, Unitarians proclaim that everyone should be treated equally, and Unitarians also proclaim the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals...to cite just two important UU principles. These do indeed embody important dictums, but, the question is: *How did you come by them?*

I, too, question “we gather together to seek knowledge and wisdom”... *not the importance of doing so*, but questioning that somehow Unitarians have identified “*the way*” (or “*any way*”) to gain knowledge and wisdom! Despite the fact that Unitarians do so gather for this purpose, and always in a gracious and welcoming manner, Unitarians do not have a corner on seeking knowledge or truth. By accepting that there are multiple paths to truth, all equally valid, Unitarians have uncritically bought into Poststructuralism! Unitarians need to become more critical about *this practice of acceptance*. You cannot defend multiple, equally valid, paths to truth without adopting a primary path to demonstrate it! And, if you can do that, you don’t need the other paths!

There is much more to be said here, but let me provide one other example of Poststructuralism in Unitarian practice to further illustrate my point, the *practice* surrounding the *principle* of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” i.e., the *practice* which says, “Everyone is welcome at the UU.” *The principle is an important moral imperative.* The question is, what does it mean in *practice*? Do UUs welcome Fascists? Racists? Radical Extremists? Some Unitarians I have spoken with have said, well, we welcome them so we can talk to them, encompass them, *show them the way to love!* *But this misses the point!* Those people don’t want to talk to *you!* They care nothing about *you* and *your inherent worth and dignity!* So, why should they be welcome, ... here or anywhere else? You should welcome those who endorse, at the very least, basic principles of civility...people whose response is not wanting to blow your brains out!

And I do not stand alone in thinking this. The Reverend Dr. Tony Larsen, a well-known and respected Unitarian minister, who has spoken here many times, made this same important point in his *powerful* message entitled, “Why You Should Not Be A Unitarian Universalist”:

(and I quote)

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you support the Nazis or the KKK or any other group that believes in oppressing people. *We may be open in this church - but we're not that open. We are closed to things like closure.* That is, we are closed to movements or groups that close people off. And when we say our church has freedom of belief, we mean that in a limited way. You are free to believe whatever you want here - *but only as long as it helps you live a caring and humane life* - or at least doesn't prevent you from (*doing so*). (My italics.)

O.K., enough! I cannot conclude this now perhaps too long diatribe without pointing out what is right,...so right, about Unitarianism and its practice. *It is this:* ... in no other pulpit could one stand up and say of that religion and its practice that “the emperor has no clothes!” (Or, at least needs a change of underwear!) In any other religion that would be heresy,...warrant for excommunication,...even death, historically. The beauty of Unitarianism is allowing *dissent...both endorsing the right to it, and offering a welcoming place to practice it.* That is what ultimately distinguishes Unitarianism as an important religion and forum for getting closer to the truth... *Do not forsake that...* But recognize the implicit Poststructuralism in your practices. Give up the idea that there are multiple paths to truth,...there are not! That anything and everything can give meaning and direction to your lives,...it cannot! That believing in the inherent worth and dignity of everyone requires unlimited welcoming,...it does not!

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today...Thank you for listening... This was not your typical Sunday message! I suspect that “uplifting” is not the adjective that immediately comes to mind! More likely, it is “distressing!” But that is, after all, the role of the philosopher...to cause discomfort! I look forward to the talkback...assuming you can overcome your cultural bias to not show up!
