



TYPE: Article

Title: From Deconstruction to Re-Enchantment: Postmodernism, Metamodernism, and the Re-Emergence of Wonder

Author(s): D.A. Shane

Source: Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (JCRT)

Published by: Whitestone Publications

Stable URL: <https://jcrt.org/archives/25.2/shane/>

Copyright © held by the author(s). All rights reserved. This text may be used and shared in accordance with the fair-use provisions of U.S. copyright law. Any use of this text in other ways requires the consent of the author and the publisher, the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, and must cite publication in this journal. <https://jcrt.org/copyright/>



Author Bio

D.A. Shane is an urban planner and writer in Middle Tennessee. He studied philosophy at the Pontifical College Josephinum and holds a master's degree in city and regional planning. His writing explores the intersection of philosophy, religion, culture, mythology, and the built environment, with a particular interest in the recovery of place and memory after modernity. He is the author of *The Watchtower and the Cross*, and his work on urbanism and architecture has appeared in the *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* and at Strong Towns.

Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between postmodernism, metamodernism, and the contemporary re-emergence of openness to spiritual and enchanted understandings of reality. It argues that postmodernism, rather than merely producing relativism and nihilism, performed a necessary deconstructive work by exposing the unacknowledged metaphysical assumptions underlying the Enlightenment project of "instrumental reason." Drawing particularly on Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty, the essay traces how this critique destabilized the autonomous, supposedly objective modern subject. It then considers metamodernism as an emerging reconstruction: an epistemological posture that accepts contingency, embeddedness, and the limits of human knowledge while nevertheless permitting provisional commitments to truth and meaning. This reconstructed subject, capable of holding multiple levels of reality in creative tension, reopens intellectual space for transcendence and the supernatural. The essay ultimately proposes a metamodern "hermeneutic of credulity" – a critical but receptive approach to premodern religious, mythological, and supernatural claims – as a possible path from postmodern deconstruction toward re-enchantment.

Keywords: metamodernism, postmodernism, re-enchantment, disenchantment, deconstruction, religion, epistemology, subject, hermeneutics, transcendence, mythology

In the wake of Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God," religious faith in the West has rapidly and steadily declined for much of the past century.¹ The arrival of the "New Atheist" movement in the early 2000s appeared to signal a further decline in supernatural belief as an aggressive materialism gained cultural prominence.² Yet statisticians and cultural observers are now noticing a counter trend. Among younger people (Generation Z men in particular), identification with Christianity has been increasing.³ Adjacent to this, there is an growing chorus of

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage, 1974), book 3, sec. 125 ("The Madman"), 181–82.

2. James E. Taylor, "The New Atheists," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>.

3. Ed Stetzer, "Not just at Easter: Gen Z is returning to Christianity. Data proves it," *USA Today*, April 20, 2025, Opinion section, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2025/04/20/easter-church-christian-gen-z-men/83138618007/>.

authors and podcasters, such as Justin Brierly, who are cataloguing a dramatic shift in the attitudes of thought leaders and intellectuals towards openness to Christianity and the supernatural in general.⁴

This shift is affecting both sides of the political spectrum: witness the emergence of the “spiritual but not religious,” those who may disagree with the rules and strictures of traditional religion yet still embrace an opening to the spiritual world.⁵ Straddling this divide somewhat are the “crunchy cons(ervatives),” public intellectuals like Rod Dreher and Jonathan Pageau. Following in the footsteps of fellow Eastern Orthodox Christian thinker David Bentley Hart, whose 2013 book *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* took aim at the New Atheists and argued for a reality suffused with divinity,⁶ Dreher’s latest book, *Living in Wonder* (2024), explores the phenomenon of “re-enchantment,” or the idea that the world around us intrinsically includes order, mystery, meaning, miracles, sacred spaces, and redemption.⁷ Adjacent to Dreher is Jonathan Pageau, a Canadian artist, philosopher, and Orthodox Christian whose Symbolic World YouTube videos explore what it means to live in a mind-directed universe that is charged with meaning.⁸ Outside of the Christian sphere, scholars such as Dr. John Vervaeke have gained international followings by promoting the wisdom found within traditional religious faiths.⁹ Finally and somewhat controversially, Jordan Peterson’s Jungian Biblical interpretations have formed the basis of a broad movement toward traditional ways of thinking in general.¹⁰

What does it mean to pursue or at least recognize “re-enchantment”? That question has many answers because re-enchantment has many definitions.¹¹ The word has been employed to encompass concepts ranging from integrative psychology,¹² to the collective experience of

4. Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers Are Considering Christianity Again* (Tyndale House Publishers/Tyndale Elevate, 2023); Luke Bretherton, “The Conversion of Public Intellectuals: Two Pathways,” *Comment*, September 5, 2024, <https://comment.org/the-conversion-of-public-intellectuals/>.

5. Michel Clasquin-Johnson, “Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): a4491, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4491>; *Becoming Truly Human*, directed by Nathan Andrew Jacobs (BTH Productions/Ancient Faith Films/Freestyle Digital Media, 2017), documentary, 85 min.; Carly Mallenbaum, “Spiritual, but not religious? You’re not alone,” *Axios*, March 5, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/05/religion-americans-spiritual-survey>.

6. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 2013).

7. Rod Dreher, *Living in Wonder: Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age* (Zondervan, 2024), 13.

8. “What Is the Meaning of Meaning,” featuring Jonathan Pageau in conversation with Eric Metaxas, *Socrates in the City*, YouTube video, 1:15:17, published January 8, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esWtHWSHt4>.

9. John Vervaeke, “Awakening from the Meaning Crisis,” *John Vervaeke*, website, accessed August 4, 2025, <https://johnvervaeke.com/>.

10. David Dennen, “Politics and Prophecy: Jordan Peterson’s Antidote to Modernity,” *American Studies Journal* 66 (2019), <http://www.asjournal.org/66-2019/politics-and-prophecy/>.

11. Jason Crawford, “The Trouble with Re-Enchantment,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 7, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-trouble-with-re-enchantment/>; John Whittaker, “Review of *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers Are Considering Christianity Again*, by Justin Brierley,” *RENEW.org*, August 28, 2024, <https://renew.org/review-of-the-surprising-rebirth-of-belief-in-god-by-justin-brierley/>.

12. Joel Blackstock, “Frederic Jameson: The Metamodern for Therapy,” *Taproot Therapy*, November 4, 2024, <https://gettherapybirmingham.com/metamodernism-post-spirituality-and-depth-psychology-navigating-trauma-in-the-contemporary-era/>; “The Metamodern Turn of Christopher Partridge: Spirituality, Depth Psychology and Healing Trauma in a Post-Postmodern World,” *Taproot Therapy*, November 4, 2024, <https://gettherapybirmingham.com/metamodern-turn-spirituality-depth-psychology-healing-trauma/>.

nostalgia,¹³ to even the rise of handcrafts as an alternative to mass production.¹⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I define re-enchantment as the re-emergence in the modern world of the full-throated belief in unseen spirit forces that control or at least influence the material universe, including human consciousness. I will highlight the development in philosophy that has allowed such a startling belief to become thinkable again: the rise of metamodernism. Further, I will explore in depth exactly how the preceding paradigm of postmodernism exploded the Enlightenment program of “instrumental reason”¹⁵ and thus defined the possibilities that have crystallized as metamodernism.

Metamodernism is variously described as a paradigm, a worldview, an episteme, or a “structure of feeling” that attempts to navigate between a modernist enthusiasm, reductionism, and certainty, on the one hand, and a postmodernist apathy, pluralism, and skepticism, on the other. Jonathan Rowson describes it as a grappling with the between-ness of our current moment: between hope and despair, between the various crises of the “meta-crisis,” between the spiritual and material exhaustion that modernism and postmodernism have trapped us into and the romantic yearning we feel that convinces us something different must be possible.¹⁶ It’s comfortable with paradox and optimistic about the possibility of meaningful knowledge, yet cautious enough to endorse pragmatism and a humble acceptance of limits. Importantly, though, by authorizing an epistemology capable of tolerating multiple, layered realities in creative tension, it provides the philosophical justification for re-enchantment.

A note about my methodology: this essay occupies a space somewhere between philosophical analysis, cultural history, and phenomenological description. It proceeds genealogically and comparatively in its attempt to uncover the conditions under which renewed openness to transcendence has become culturally and intellectually plausible.

The Passing of the Premodern Enchanted World

The premodern world is commonly understood to have been “enchanted.” Though this “cultural code,” as Lene Rachel Andersen terms it, was not monolithic across the globe, it featured a fairly stable constellation of characteristics that cut across different religions, cultures, peoples, and eras. These features included cohesive, hierarchical societies organized around belief in supernatural entities that both inhabited and ordered nature and the events of the world.¹⁷ In the Western context, this was instantiated as Christendom, the medieval Roman Catholic civilization that had inherited the mantle of Greco-Roman culture. In England, this

13. Benjamin J. Hartmann and Katja H. Brunk, “Nostalgia Marketing and (Re-)Enchantment,” *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 36, no. 4 (2019): 669–86, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2019.05.002>.

14. Roy Suddaby, Max Ganzin, and Alison Minkus, “Craft, Magic and the Re-enchantment of the World,” *European Management Journal* 35, no. 3 (2017): 285–96, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2017.03.009>.

15. Jürgen Habermas, “An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centered Reason” (originally published 1988), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence E. Cahoon (Blackwell, 1996), 589–616, 606.

16. Jonathan Rowson, “Metamodernism and the Perception of Context: The Cultural Between, the Political After and the Mystic Beyond,” *Perspectiva*, May 26, 2021, <https://systems-souls-society.com/metamodernism-and-the-perception-of-context-the-cultural-between-the-political-after-and-the-mystic-beyond/>.

17. Lene Rachel Andersen, *Metamodernity* (Nordic Bildung, March 10, 2020), https://usercontent.one/wp/www.nordicbildung.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Metamodernity_paper_Nordic_Bildung.pdf?media=1663080550.

synthesis persisted until the Protestant Reformation, which, as Taylor describes in *A Secular Age*, was an engine of disenchantment.¹⁸

A chief object of the Reformers was the destruction of the “incantatory” aspect of Christianity, which is to say its sacramental aspect.¹⁹ Spiritual powers or effects conveyed by actions, formulas, objects, or places were redefined as superstition, leaving rational cognition as the only appropriate venue or mechanism for spiritual experience. Only the mind mattered, and physical things like statues and sacraments were merely “didactic and symbolic rather than apotropaic.”²⁰ It wasn’t that the Reformers disbelieved in magic and spiritual power; it was just that the world outside the mind now had no causal relationship to holiness and salvation.²¹ The field of legitimate preternatural reality had been shrunk, in effect. This understanding, which was followed by Descartes’ dissection of the world into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, helped consolidate the understanding of the “buffered self,” as Taylor terms – a self no longer “open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers” – which represented a new, modern anthropology.²²

Susan Bordo explains that this sundering of man from the world was legitimized as a new “adulthood” of objectivity, purportedly a more sober and realistic reading of reality, but one that required new self-protective rationalizations due to the alienation it produced.²³ Knowing truth was no longer reserved to those who, through asceticism and self-denial, cleansed their faculties of perception, but to the human subject as such: “I think, therefore I am.”²⁴ This newfound autonomy for the subject from its physical, cultural, and relational context authorized the instrumentalization of a now “otherized” external world. This other was progressively reduced to its constituent parts and bent to conform to the mechanistic principle, until even the mystery of the human mind itself was considered no different, in principle, from the movements of a billiard ball upon a pool table.²⁵

Such an account of the progressive evacuation of spiritual meaning from all corners of the universe seems beyond dispute, though some argue that modernism has always had an enchanted underbelly, and that it even requires such.²⁶ Regardless of such nuances or potential clarifications, it seems fairly clear that the sealing away of “magic” (for lack of a better word)

18. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 77.

19. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (Yale University Press, 1992), 411.

20. *Ibid.*, 394.

21. Robert Landau Ames, “Review of *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, by Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm,” *Reading Religion*, June 12, 2018, <https://readingreligion.org/9780226403366/the-myth-of-disenchantment/>.

22. Dreher, *Living in Wonder*, 119; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

23. Susan Bordo, “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought” (originally published 1987), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 638–64, 638–39, 641–42.

24. Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” interview by Paul Rabinow, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Pantheon, 1984), 340–372, 370.

25. David Ray Griffin, from *The Reenchantment of Science* (1988), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 665–686, 666–67.

26. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017); Ames, “Review of *The Myth of Disenchantment*”; Richard Jenkins, “Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium,” *Max Weber Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000): 11–32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24579711>; Nicholas Paige, “Permanent Re-Enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics,” in *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, eds. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford University Press, 2009), 159–80; Alessandro Testa, “Re-thinking the Concept of Re-enchantment in Central-Eastern Europe,” *Religio* 31, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-1-7>.

from the daily lives of modern people was all but totally accomplished by the end of the second millennium. Despite this, challenges to cognitive-instrumental reason (as Habermas calls it²⁷) have gained increasing currency since the middle of the twentieth century, coalescing into something called postmodernism.

Edmund Husserl pointed out on the eve of the Second World War that, while the individual sciences had flourished and provided amazing explanatory power in specific fields of knowledge, the project of universal human reason itself, upon which these sciences were supposedly based, was still basically foundation-less because of its rejection of metaphysics, which are ultimately necessary to ground any theory.²⁸

Instead, empiricism – the idea that all knowledge is from experience without reference to a priori truths deduced through logic and thought – had become dominant. It was “the dream of a purely heterological thought at its source. A pure thought of pure difference”: abstract exactitude untainted by myth, prejudice, or faith.²⁹ In the wake of the Second World War’s carnage, critical theory cast the blame on the Enlightenment’s enthronement of subjective rationality, castigating this as an instrumentalized “reason” that couldn’t resist the perversion of its own principles via fascism because it had no metaphysical basis.³⁰ After all, it was “flamboyant” rationality that “proved” scientific racism at the turn of the twentieth century, which fed into National Socialism.³¹

Modernism had contented itself with delusions of grandeur: a god’s-eye-view of “the facts” that reduced all the power of nature “to mere indiscriminate resistance to the abstract power of the subject.”³² The corresponding drive to cut off “unreason” successively sundered many societal bonds:³³ chiefly, non-consensual ones such as family, region, and nationality.³⁴ These are the irrational customs that Descartes and Hobbes said obscured man’s true nature and were obstacles to stability. Waiting beyond the shearing of these “accidents” from man and the shelving of the ancient Stoic and Christian ideas of acceptance of reality and limits was the potential for limitless human control over nature and politics.³⁵ Ethics could then be based on sovereign choice: as John Stuart Mill defines it, to be human is to choose. The overthrowing of “custom” represents the triumph of the “rational will.”³⁶

Whether this picture is a caricature or not, the blind spots inherent in the “scientific” worldview have become clear from within science itself. Thomas Kuhn showed convincingly that scientific

27. Habermas, “An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject,” 606.

28. Edmund Husserl, from *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (originally published 1936), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 226–242, 232–33, 239–40.

29. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” (originally published 1964), in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153, 151.

30. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (originally published 1944), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 243–58, 257.

31. Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, 239–56, 249.

32. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 254.

33. Ihab Hassan, “POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography” (originally published 1982), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 382–400, 391.

34. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), 18–19.

35. *Ibid.*, 26.

36. *Ibid.*, 144–145.

paradigms shift not because of rational progress within a structure according to the accepted rules, but because individuals consciously step outside those existing structures and propose new ones.³⁷ Whether old paradigms are overthrown or merely “relativized,” the effect is the same, with the project of universal reason, including a “theory of everything,” looking ever more unattainable.³⁸

Postmodernism's Deconstruction of Instrumental Reason

Even before these critiques, the ground under the Enlightenment project had been eroding. Marx's dialectical materialism,³⁹ Dewey's pragmatism,⁴⁰ and Sartre's existentialism⁴¹ all treated knowledge, science, and truth as being socially embedded, contextual, and provisional, thus weakening their supposed universal foundations. Famously, the basis on which modernist assumptions rested was put to the test through a Nietzschean genealogical method perfected by French philosopher Michel Foucault. His excavation into the roots of many modernist sureties so disillusioned him that he was brought to question many of the core concepts of Western philosophy.

Foucault exposes the teleological bias that modernism shares with the worldviews it supplanted. Despite claiming to reveal a world of inert matter governed by physics alone, the Enlightenment's social assumptions of ever-increasing justice, equality, and freedom – not to mention profits – smuggle in a teleology that seeks history's soul “in the distant ideality of the origin.”⁴² If the universe has an “arc,” it was set by someone. Foucault instead argues that there is no pure origin; that even to seek one presumes the existence of “immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession.”⁴³ He lambasts the Enlightenment historian who pretends to practice an objective science, who, “having curbed the demands of his individual will . . . will disclose the form of an eternal will in his object of study.”⁴⁴ This is not the divine will, though, since modernism supposedly rejected such notions. Foucault exposes this inconsistency.

Our society's “truth,” according to Foucault, “is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.”⁴⁵ This inversion topples the Enlightenment's dream of a powerless truth, or one supposedly denuded of the corrupting effects of power, by demonstrating that it's possible to change around the hegemonies to which truth is linked.⁴⁶ As the rise of the various ideologies of the

37. Thomas Kuhn, “The Nature and Necessity of Scientific Revolutions” (originally published 1970), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 309–24, 311.

38. Ibid., 316; Foucault, “Truth and Power,” from *Power/Knowledge* (originally published 1980), in *The Foucault Reader*, 51–75, 54; Tereza Pultarova, “The Theory of Everything: Searching for the Universal Rules of Physics,” *Space.com*, last updated December 18, 2022, <https://www.space.com/theory-of-everything-definition.html>.

39. Mariano Fazio and Francisco Fernández Labastida, *A History of Contemporary Philosophy: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (University of the Holy Cross, 2011), 93.

40. Ibid., 151–52.

41. Ibid., 286–88.

42. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (originally published 1971), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 360–79, 364.

43. Ibid., 362.

44. Ibid., 372–74.

45. Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 74.

46. Ibid., 75.

modern era has demonstrated, traditional religious intolerance has proved unnecessary for this type of information control.⁴⁷

Foucault's genealogies expose in detail how Enlightenment rationality masked power structures, for example, in the treatment of madness and poverty. What appeared as neutral science was in fact moralized domination. In his excavations, Foucault sees an antidote to the hubris of modernist history, which claims for itself a "transcendental" rationality capable of dispassionately cataloguing "the facts": the ugly vicissitudes of history (and historiography).⁴⁸ In the final analysis, the unity of a suprahistorical metaphysical view of history is only possible from a religious and dogmatic viewpoint—which, Foucault demonstrates, modernism is.⁴⁹

French Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, one of the most notorious of the philosophers that would come to be known as the postmodernists, was a student of Foucault's and is also famous for exploring modernism's lack of a foundation. Part of the "post" in postmodernism refers to post-structuralism. Structuralism, the theory that "structures" of relation undergird behavior, culture, and linguistics,⁵⁰ was a prime target of Derrida's critique. Structuralism reduces a work of art, for example, to "a case" of some essential structure that becomes the true point of the work.⁵¹ Derrida points out that hidden universal rules and forms—whether they be supposed constants across cultures or supposed archetypes in great works of literature—presuppose a very specific matrix of beliefs that can ultimately be traced to Christianity and Platonism.⁵² Positing a universal, non-material architecture to the universe is a form of idealism, even when the stated intention is secular.⁵³ Derrida goes further, though, and shows that most of our presuppositions rest on an unexamined (and arbitrary) privileging of one side of a dialectic.⁵⁴ The opposition of "signified" and "signifier" in the Western tradition that modernism has inherited is premised on the actuality and reality of the ideal signified and the falling short of the derivative signifier.⁵⁵ Derrida demonstrates why an opposite privileging can make as much sense—if not more, in some cases.⁵⁶ What justifies the side traditionally privileged, then? Christianity has an answer—God, or the nature of the universe, arrived at by a faith aided by reason. The Enlightenment has no answer. Its conclusions rest on an unacknowledged faith in the observational capabilities of finite minds attempting to make sense of infinite sense data.

In the West, writing has been the non-present interpreter or translator of an original fundamental presence.⁵⁷ But according to Derrida, writing and language, rather than being simply the form that signifiers (i.e., words) take as they refer straightforwardly to an objective

47. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon, 1988).

48. Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power" (originally published 1982), in *The Foucault Reader*, 239–56, 250.

49. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 369.

50. Hassan, "POSTmodernISM," 393.

51. Derrida, "La Parole Soufflée" (originally published 1965), in *Writing and Difference*, 169–95, 170.

52. Derrida, "Force and Signification" (originally published 1963), in *Writing and Difference*, 1–35, 24.

53. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

54. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

55. Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing" (originally published 1967), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 336–59, 343.

56. Derrida, "Force and Signification," 12–13.

57. Derrida, "The End of the Book," 338.

reality,⁵⁸ are instead the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier. Meaning is both *different* between signifiers, yet also constantly *deferring* between them – they defer meaning to other signifiers because they only get their individual meanings from their relative position within the overall web.⁵⁹ Thus, *différance* – Derrida’s famous play on the French similarity between the words for defer and differ. So, with the structuralists and other late modernists, Derrida agrees that meaning is relative within a system, but, carrying their program to its logical conclusion, he further finds that the structures that undergird meaning are also not fixed. Every meaning depends on every other meaning, and so there’s no ultimate unchanging foundation. There is no “there” there – exile, not fixity, is the basis of reality on this view.⁶⁰

Meaning also overflows with every new reader.⁶¹ The signifiers always overflow and supplement the signified because each hearing or reading is a little bit different – even the same hearer hears something different at a different point in time.⁶² This excess is what provides the raw material for what Derrida calls slippage and play,⁶³ and at the extreme limit, misunderstanding and incomprehensibility.⁶⁴ Even repetition always contains an imperceptible difference because an uncontaminated, perfect repetition is clearly impossible.⁶⁵ This excess, present at every speech act, is the building block of the “historical potentialization of meaning,” the openness of history that allows for the growth and mutation of meaning.⁶⁶ Further, meanings are derived as much from what is not there as from what is – the voids around a letter, for instance, are as vital to its constitution as the lines themselves.⁶⁷ If our purely natural reality is so intrinsically volatile, then, where is the basis for modernism’s belief in any kind of underlying permanence?

This arbitrary privileging of “logos” that the Enlightenment uncritically inherited – or, the primacy of presence, of speech, of immutability – Derrida argues is destructive to life because life for him is change, is the trace left by absence, is the written word that takes flight from the creator’s intention. Searching for essence obscures the actual essence of things: that essences are anything but fixed, and therefore not really essences.⁶⁸ Schizophrenia, on the postmodern view, is the “essential reality of man and nature” because it is a process rather than a settled end state. The fragmented human subject is not a stable unity, not a solitary “I,” but a crossroads of

58. Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 12.

59. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

60. Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness” (originally published 1963), in *Writing and Difference*, 31–63, 54; “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” (originally published 1964), in *Writing and Difference*, 64–78, 66, 71; “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” (originally published 1966), in *Writing and Difference*, 196–231, 203; “Ellipsis” (originally published 1968), in *Writing and Difference*, 294–300, 297.

61. Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (originally published 1966), in *Writing and Difference*, 351–70, 287–89.

62. Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 12; “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology” (originally published 1959), in *Writing and Difference*, 154–68, 166; “Ellipsis,” 295.

63. *Ibid.*, 290.

64. Derrida, “Edmond Jabès,” 65, 68–69.

65. Derrida, “Ellipsis,” 295.

66. Derrida, “La Parole Soufflée,” 178–79.

67. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 147–48; “La Parole Soufflée,” 194; “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” 201; “From Restricted to General Economy” (originally published 1967), in *Writing and Difference*, 251–77, 257, 275–76.

68. Derrida, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” (originally published 1966), in *Writing and Difference*, 232–50, 246.

incongruous and competing impulses.⁶⁹ Admitting the only evidence that modernism admits – the bloody, chaotic, and accidental world of the purely material – would seem to support this picture of reality.

With such philosophical critiques gaining widespread currency, Francois Lyotard announced in 1984 that we were living in the “postmodern condition.” The chief fact of this condition is incredulity toward metanarratives, or the overarching stories that purport to explain all of reality and legitimate our value systems.⁷⁰ He demonstrates this by showing that the supposed justifications for the Enlightenment’s metanarrative, 1) the pursuit of truth, and 2) the fight for justice, also known as 1) “knowledge for its own sake,” and 2) usefulness, have been shown in late modernity to have no intrinsic connection.⁷¹ Perhaps this is clearest with Marxism: it was supposed to be both scientifically true that history would end with world revolution and the destruction of the class system, and also morally right and beneficial to man that such a thing should happen.⁷²

If, then, we cannot scientifically arrive at both truth and justice, as Lyotard claims and the twentieth century seemingly proves – if the “rules” for determining whether something is scientifically true are not the same “rules” for determining whether something is morally right, as the Enlightenment had hoped for – then suddenly society finds itself without a universally recognized moral compass anymore.⁷³ And, even granting this shrunken sphere of authority for science, it’s undeniable that its pursuit of “truth” requires time, attention, finely tuned instruments, justifications for studying “this” and not “that” in a world of infinite complexity. What sorts its priorities? Funding. Money.⁷⁴ And so again, the impartial oracle that was to replace throne and altar is exposed as a very human endeavor after all.

What irks modernists is “this admission that we are just the historical moment that we are, not representatives of something ahistorical,” as Richard Rorty, a contemporaneous postmodernist, demonstrates; to wit: trying to justify knowledge and our limited perspective using knowledge and our limited perspective is like trying to build a ship out of the ship you’re already on while out at sea.⁷⁵ Those seeking to defend the Enlightenment’s legitimacy (“realists,” as Rorty calls them) usually accuse postmodernists of being “relativists.” Relativism in this sense means an assertion that “truth” is relative, that it changes, with the realist then pointing out that this is an oxymoron. True. But postmodernists, again, are not making that statement. Rorty, and those like him, are saying we have no choice but to judge against our own ethnocentric criteria, and to attempt to do otherwise is dishonest.⁷⁶ Modernists think that everyone, deep down inside, *must* want detachment from their limited group perspectives. They think a denial of this desire is either an ironic, sneering attempt at faux sophistication or radical egalitarianism. But the fault of the pragmatists could only be that they become too ethnocentric, too solely focused

69. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, from *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (originally published 1972), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 401–22, 404–5, 420.

70. Jean-François Lyotard, from *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (originally published 1979), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 481–513, 482.

71. *Ibid.*, 486.

72. *Ibid.*, 488.

73. *Ibid.*, 491–93.

74. *Ibid.*, 495–96.

75. Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” (originally published 1985), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 573–88, 582.

76. *Ibid.*

on their own group perspectives – not that they are philosophically incoherent regarding the nature of truth.⁷⁷

If our unquestionable moral framework – science and liberal individualism – is not the universal, the “true” ethics, then the modern West has lost its messianic mission to mankind.⁷⁸ For the Enlightenment, this brings about a crisis moment: a despondent nihilism that manifests as what Frederic Jameson describes as a certain hazy “derealization” of reality, a moment of stupor and incomprehensibility that breaks concepts.⁷⁹ Yet postmodernism should not be reduced to nihilism alone. Pragmatists such as Rorty regarded contingency not as a source of despair but as a liberation from impossible epistemic demands that could strengthen and purify human solidarity.⁸⁰ Likewise, Gianni Vattimo’s “weak thought” allowed space for plurality, contingency, and democracy rather than mere destruction.⁸¹

But a more common view now is that postmodernism, while having proved adept at dismantling modernism, has built very fragile societies and people. Without an “objective” collective belief system, emotions and highly idiosyncratic constructed identities form the entire “truth” stratum for people, causing constant friction and psychological dislocation.⁸² And the hedonistic, “third way” centrism of the Clinton and later presidencies, with its end-of-history endless-growth consumerism, has similarly failed to satisfy.⁸³

Metamodernism and the Reconstructed Subject

Metamodernism, based on the account of its most well-known expositors, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, is a “structure of feeling” that oscillates between modernist sincerity and postmodern irony.⁸⁴ The enthusiasm of modernism, which fed much of its hubris, is tempered by the skepticism of postmodernism, which drew that paradigm down into nihilism. But amidst the continual metamodern movement between these two poles, meaning re-emerges. How? Raoul Eshelman describes it as “the willful self-deceit to believe in – or identify with, or solve – something in spite of itself.”⁸⁵ It’s hope against hope – a willful optimism pursued in defiance of the threatening absurdity that waits in the wake of the Enlightenment’s shattered credibility. Postmodern despair came from accepting the terms of modernism’s requisite of absolute knowledge. One of the foremost theorists of philosophical metamodernism, Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, points toward the way out: “Many skepticisms can be avoided if we become skeptical of the presumed link between knowledge and unshakeable conviction.”⁸⁶

77. Ibid., 582–83.

78. Ibid., 583–84.

79. Fredric Jameson, from “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (originally published 1984), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 556–72, 562.

80. Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” 584.

81. Fazio and Labastida, *A History of Contemporary Philosophy*, 321–26.

82. Andersen, “Metamodernity.”

83. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, introduction to *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 13.

84. Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010): 5677, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>.

85. Ibid.

86. Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 216.

This, then, is the metamodern move, its “secret” for moving philosophy past the impasse of postmodern oblivion: if radical skepticism is to be truly radical, it must finish “by doubting itself, rendering *provisional knowledge* possible.”⁸⁷ This provisional knowledge is admittedly humble and incomplete but really progressing.⁸⁸

This metamodern insight was forming from within postmodernism itself from the beginning. Derrida, anticipating the pragmatism that would come with metamodernism, buries this prescription within his deconstructive discourse: he begins by admitting that one cannot contradict the principle of noncontradiction.⁸⁹ There’s no way to challenge the primacy of the metaphysics of presence (what he calls logocentrism) except from within that very metaphysics. To open one’s mouth at all, to utter one syllable, which cuts and divides the silence, the before and after, and the “this and not that,” is to submit to logic, to intelligibility, and, to Derrida’s mind, to violence (the objectifying, limiting, categorizing activity of the ego⁹⁰).⁹¹ Thus the postmodern predicament, and the spur to nihilism. Acknowledging this, Derrida takes an important step, which is the metamodern move in embryo: he willfully chooses to do violence to overcome violence. Discourse is violence, but it’s also nonviolence because it’s the only thing that “opens up relation to the other.”⁹² It’s the classic Derridean both-and, and it ends in an exasperated but ultimately optimistic “choice at the precipice” that charts the way forward. Destructing discourses “must inhabit the structures they demolish.”⁹³

This leads to confusion, though: upon what ethical basis do liberation movements, for instance, ground themselves, then? Foucault proposes a “*techne* of the self.”⁹⁴ This is the humility of a discourse that recognizes it is inextricably submerged in history and has no pretensions to an ahistorical neutrality.⁹⁵ Something like the subjective a priori, originally recognized by phenomenology, is the only way “to check the totalitarianism of the neutral, the impersonal ‘absolute logic’ of the Enlightenment,” its “eschatology without dialogue.”⁹⁶

In parallel, Lyotard’s solution is another idea that begins in postmodernism but inevitably ends in a metamodern solution: admit the existence of multiple, incommensurable contexts that can have their own rules and logics. Release the need to force these various “games” to fit within one imperialistic metanarrative, at least in the way such narratives functioned within modernism. Smaller, local groupings are more workable on a practical level.⁹⁷ Postmodernism sees this cynically and somewhat despairingly, but metamodernism accepts it optimistically and builds upon it.

87. Brendan Graham Dempsey, *Metamodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Cultural Logics* (Arc Press, 2023), 114.

88. Storm, *Metamodernism*, 234–35.

89. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 91.

90. *Ibid.*, 116–17.

91. Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” 60–62; “Edmond Jabès,” 74; “Violence and Metaphysics,” 82, 106, 110, 125; “La Parole Soufflée,” 194.

92. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 128–29.

93. Derrida, “La Parole Soufflée,” 194.

94. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 348.

95. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 116–17, 141.

96. *Ibid.*, 132.

97. Lyotard, from *The Postmodern Condition*, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 504.

Charles Jencks also presages metamodernism in his prediction that postmodernism won't lapse into total relativism and skepticism but will instead "support relative absolutism, or fragmental holism, which insists on the developing and jumping nature of scientific growth, and the fact that all propositions of truth are time- and context-sensitive."⁹⁸ One cannot be a postmodernist, truly, for long.

Just this realization is picked up by metamodernist Dina Stoev,⁹⁹ who argues that postmodernism did happen, but barely. It was more like the dying gasp of modernism as something new – metamodernism – was being born. To Stoev's point, postmodernism *did* pose another one of Lyotard's grand narratives: namely, that there were no grand narratives, which was quite a grand statement.¹⁰⁰ True relativism, of course, is impossible, as even postmodernist Rorty explained.¹⁰¹ Incipient metamodernism, then, was present from the beginning in postmodernist discourse. Stoev traces it from Kafka, to Camus, and finally to Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, who coined the term in 1975.¹⁰²

What foundation does metamodernism give to philosophy? The answer relates to oscillation, or metamodernism's ability to step back from one paradigm and embrace another. Doubting postmodern doubt, for example, is a move of *decentration* from the postmodern paradigm. Decentration, or decentering, is when that which was subject becomes object on the part of a new coordinating subject, according to Robert Kegan.¹⁰³ Brendan Graham Dempsey, another of the foremost metamodern theorists, asserts this process has been central all along to the historical journey of philosophy. The premoderns said there was a universal abstraction behind the physical world we see. They extrapolated this absolute from their observation of the world, and their answers varied across cultures – not everyone arrived at the same "universal" truth. So modernism *decenters* from that perspective and says that the truly universal is universally verifiable, which leaves only empiricism as the way to this universal knowledge.¹⁰⁴ But then postmodernism decenters from that and exposes how "universal" verification is anything but, and that attempting to escape from one's subjective context is a futile quest. We are universally bound to our particular subjectivities, and so universal knowledge is impossible.¹⁰⁵ But postmodernism embarrassingly asserts this as a universal truth, implying a new value hierarchy, while claiming value hierarchies are oppressive.¹⁰⁶

At each stage, decentration occurs. Decentering from postmodernism – going "meta" on it, or stepping outside and above it and viewing it like an object – gives us the possibility of rising above its "unmoored fragmentation" and glimpsing instead an "integrated pluralism."¹⁰⁷ Decentering, then, allows the vantage point from which oscillation between the modern and the postmodern is possible. Premodern "cultural codes" are not excluded, either: each one,

98. Charles Jencks, "The Death of Modern Architecture," from *What is Post-Modernism?* (originally published 1980), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 469–80, 478.

99. Dina Stoev, "Metamodernism or Metamodernity," *Arts* 11 (2022): 91, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11050091>.

100. *Ibid.*

101. Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" 582.

102. Stoev, "Metamodernism or Metamodernity."

103. Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, 78n7.

104. *Ibid.*, 82–84.

105. *Ibid.*, 85

106. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

107. *Ibid.*, 8, 88.

including the “indigenous” (hunter-gather) and “pre-modern” (e.g., Christendom) has valuable, enriching and/or emancipatory elements (alongside what Andersen says are degrading or oppressive elements).¹⁰⁸ Andersen says metamodernism is “the *integration* of all of the previous codes, the cultural logic in which cultural logics become consciously related and deployed according to context.”¹⁰⁹ This amounts to “different kinds of knowledge in different places for different purposes.”¹¹⁰

Postmodernism trapped us within our subjectivity and even deconstructed that very subjectivity. But as demonstrated in the writings of the theorists themselves, even they understood that such a situation couldn’t actually exist: from the moment it’s announced, it ceases to be, its very enunciation refuting its claims. Human reality is such that something is always already being done, believed, or asserted, just by the very fact of existing. So Derrida’s willful Dionysian “violence against violence” becomes, with a bit more detachment and acceptance, MacDowell’s willful “refusal of the requirements of despair.”¹¹¹ Albeit, this is against the backdrop of a “horizon that is ever receding”;¹¹² nevertheless, our knowledge can map “more or less effectively to enduring property clusters in the world”¹¹³ despite our ability to know being subject as it is to our own frailties.

Metamodernism’s chief insight is not something entirely new, even from the standpoint of those who kept believing in the modernist project. Habermas arrived at something like it when his “communicative reason” grounded rationality in dialogue and intersubjective verification rather than the abstract subject.¹¹⁴ “Reflexive” modernism also sought to recontextualize what was possible for limited human beings navigating an increasingly unwieldy and fragmented modernity while maintaining a “realist” ontology.¹¹⁵ These late adaptations of modernism share many of the goals, and some of the conclusions, that have been reinvigorated with metamodernism. Metamodernism represents the coalescence of these threads into something both culturally observable and theoretically consistent.

To summarize: if modernism has finally deconstructed itself – i.e., if its autonomous, god-like subject is just as much an object of faith as the traditional faiths it sought to supplant – and if the fragmented subject and the radical relativism this results in can themselves be relativized; then, ultimately, our only choice is to *willfully* reconstruct a different kind of subject as the “site” of meaning making. This metamodern subject differs from the Cartesian subject in an important way: it’s definitionally, self-consciously, and inextricably embedded. This is because after postmodernism, the neutral, disembodied, objectifying subject has been exposed as a myth. The senses, the body, and the external world (physical, cultural, and spiritual) are inseparable from cognition. The buffered subject is punctured.

108. Andersen, “Metamodernity”; Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, 39–41.

109. Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, 90.

110. *Ibid.*, 91–92.

111. James MacDowell, “The Metamodern, the Quirky and Film Criticism,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, 25–40, 36.

112. Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism.”

113. Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, 148.

114. Habermas, “An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject,” 604–6.

115. Manuel Franco-Torres, “The Path to the New Urban Water Paradigm – From Modernity to Metamodernism,” *Water Alternatives* 14, no. 3 (2021): 820–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10643389.2020.1803686>.

Metamodernism forces us to acknowledge Kierkegaard's "leap" as the only path to knowledge that there is.¹¹⁶ Modernist certainty is based on a reductionism that is no longer tenable. The Information Age knowledge-scape presents itself to our limited minds as a paradox: a whole that can only be grasped by holding seemingly incommensurable truths together in tension in one's mind. This, according to Kierkegaard, is faith, and so it's faith, then, all the way down. We arrive again at the necessity of some ultimate epistemic trust – what earlier thinkers grounded theologically (Descartes' "good God,"¹¹⁷) and what metamodernism reframes phenomenologically. Metamodernism wants us to be honest about that and yet persevere in pursuing knowledge, values, and even wisdom. That limited, biased, fractured, and yet cohering subject, via its transcendental capacity for "recursive reflection," is the only vehicle available we can ride to that higher "degree of coordinational complexity" that finally makes sense of our world.¹¹⁸

The embeddedness of the metamodern subject, which limits but also grounds him, finds resonances with Pope St. John Paul II's conception of the subject as one who encounters objective truth internally: "Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil, but a capacity to discern the truth which is objective and universal."¹¹⁹ This speaks to the subject's encounter with truth – not as an arbiter, nor as an agnostic, but as a participant. While certainly not identical, metamodernism's search for this balance closely parallels Catholic accounts of subjective responsibility, without requiring assent to the same theological premises.

Within the popular discourse, metamodernism has sparked debate. Critics sometimes characterize it as a sophisticated modernist psychological "cope" that is ultimately still thwarted by postmodern deconstruction: an attempt to have the postmodernist cake of smug unassailable knowingness and yet still eat the comforting modernist cakes of meaning and purpose.¹²⁰ Earlier formulations have been faulted from within the scholarly discourse for functioning more as descriptions of an emerging cultural sensibility than as a fully articulated philosophical framework – a deficiency Storm's monograph explicitly seeks to remedy through a more systematic philosophical exposition.¹²¹ Others have avoided the philosophical label and pointed beyond philosophy for the solution to philosophy's conundrums: Johannes Hoff, for instance, warns that modernity, with its ubiquitous technological mediation, cannot be overcome by conceptual innovation alone but that only a *sacramental* realism, via practices of prayer and praise, can possibly lead to a more fully embodied identity.¹²² Properly understood, then, metamodernism is best viewed not as a completed philosophical system but as an

116. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1846; reprint, Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.

117. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Meditation IV, trans. Jonathan Bennett, Marxists Internet Archive, n.d., <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/descartes/1639/meditations.htm>.

118. Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, 180.

119. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* § 60, Vatican, August 6, 1993, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

120. Philosophics, "Metamodernism: A Postmodern Critique," February 24, 2025, <https://philosophics.blog/2025/02/24/metamodernism-a-postmodern-critique/>.

121. Storm, *Metamodernism*, 5.

122. Matthew Moser, "The Analogical Turn... to What?" in *The Analogical Turn, Syndicate Theology Symposium*, convened by Kenneth Oakes, May 4, 2015, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-analogical-turn/>.

emerging framework whose chief achievement is reopening intellectual space for questions that modernity had prematurely foreclosed.

A Hermeneutic of Credulity: Metamodern Spirituality

It's clear that metamodernism has implications for spirituality. The impulse to reintegrate feeling, mystery, and teleology without losing critical awareness might be said to be best represented by the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon mentioned at the outset. Clasquin-Johnson describes this as arising from "deep reserves of traditional spirituality" being balanced with "radical personal freedom," something only made possible by metamodernism's comfortability with paradox.¹²³ This tolerance for paradox, however, also opens it up to practices and concepts that have always had a home in religion: "altered states of consciousness, the creative use of paradox, the provisional reconciliation of false dualisms," etc. Metamodernism accepts not always understanding how all these vistas precisely relate to the modern world or postmodern society. The subject's experience of them in certain contexts and situations is proof enough of their validity and existence.

John Vervaeke, Gregg Henriques, and Brendan Graham Dempsey, in this vein, propose a metamodern religion that is not a religion but rather "ecologies of practice that aid in wisdom accumulation" – something like a perennialist meta-religion that surveys the various world religions and intuitively discerns their intrinsic features and structures.¹²⁴

Though something like this is the dominant consensus currently among those discussing metamodernism's implications for spirituality,¹²⁵ there's no reason to suppose that this is the only possibility. The recursively reflective subject's vantage point, again, includes all forms of knowledge. Recall that the Enlightenment's place in this buffet of "cultural codes"¹²⁶ is no longer privileged. That means that its bedrock assumptions, including materialism and empiricism, no longer control or "police" the other cultural codes. Carlos Eire's *They Flew*¹²⁷ exposes how this policing works relative to the phenomenon of well-attested miracles in the early modern period. People saw saints fly, among other things – they saw events that, if taken seriously, shatter the fragile rules that materialism sets for itself. He doesn't conclude that every report of the miraculous must be believed, but rather that the sheer volume and consistency of the testimony almost certainly point to something real. This doesn't stop the Enlightenment's rules from applying in other contexts, of course – a laboratory, for example, or a courtroom. Spiritual things follow spiritual laws, though: will, intention, choice, love. Those things aren't predictable empirically because their inputs ultimately aren't physical. And denying this possibility categorically is arbitrary because doing so assumes the premises of empiricism. In the wake of postmodernism, we see this now as the discriminatory power move that it is.

For the metamodern subject – coordinating as it must the project of living in hopeful yet knowing sincerity – the task shifts from explaining these sources of knowledge away based on

123. Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion."

124. Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, 165–66.

125. Matthew David Segall, "Christ After Christianity: Metamodern Reconstructions of Religion" (dialogue with Brendan Graham Dempsey), *Footnotes2Plato*, December 23, 2024, <https://footnotes2plato.com/2024/12/23/christ-after-christianity-metamodern-reconstructions-of-religion-dialogue-with-brendan-graham-dempsey/>.

126. Andersen, "Metamodernity."

127. Carlos M. N. Eire, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* (Yale University Press, 2023).

an unexamined modernist prejudice to integrating them into an understanding of life that resonates with lived experience and the overwhelming testimony of history. A “hermeneutic of credulity” toward premodern stories accords better with how these stories present themselves: according to Dr. John Senior, the late professor of classics at the University of Kansas, most of the time, they don’t hold themselves forward as obviously fanciful.¹²⁸ In fact, it could be argued that they so often include “fantastical” elements precisely because such things were considered unusual events that were worth remembering and telling.

If ancient and medieval epics, hagiographies, folklore, travelogues, etc., seem to hold themselves forth as true, it’s worth rethinking within a metamodern framework how we receive these sources. We can start by acknowledging something as worthy of belief (i.e., true as far as we’re concerned¹²⁹) even if it’s not provable beyond a shadow of a doubt. Christians, for example, would assert the resurrection of Jesus as such an event: we believe that it’s much more likely that it happened than not, yet there are no instruments we could use to test or measure its effects and prove it scientifically.

If metamodern seekers are ready to extend the type of common courtesy to ancient sources of knowledge that they extend to contemporary ones (which, in the era of propaganda, official coverups, and AI deepfakes, offer scant better assurance), they’ll be able to accept the possibility that these stories are not only metaphorically true, but even literally true. Metamodernism legitimizes believing both realities simultaneously. The conventional wisdom that reflexively separates them reflects instead the lingering Cartesian cleavage between mind and matter: i.e., that there are objective facts in the physical world of *res extensa* and there are subjective phantasms or states in the mental world of *res cogitans*. Starting rather from the traditional faith assumption that this universe is the universe of mind, meaning, and providential care would rather lead one to conclude that meaning and matter are *always* linked, whether that’s readily apparent to us or not. An account like the *Iliad*, then, becomes even truer, in a sense, than the “realism” in modern entertainment because it attempts to describe the spiritual warfare and unseen forces that shape human consciousness and history. Whether you deny this link between mind and matter, as atheism does, or you assert it, as nearly every traditional belief system does, you do so by means of a Kierkegaardian leap: a suprarational movement of the heart. Metamodernism, therefore, can embolden people of faith who have taken this leap.

Re-enchantment comes naturally to the metamodern standpoint. When a sudden gust twirls the leaves about in the air, is that the fairies (the belief of the deeply Catholic Irish peasantry, as reported by W.B. Yeats¹³⁰), or only matter responding to differences in atmospheric pressure? Understanding that different types of knowledge apply at different levels of reality and in different contexts would suggest that the answer is simply, yes. “All things are full of gods”¹³¹ — suffragan agents of an omniscient Mind — and a metamodern perspective allows one to see and integrate all of reality. Maybe the “rules” of physics are tended by these ordering entities, who only show themselves (i.e., break the laws of physics) in extraordinary circumstances?

128. *Good Reading for Children 4*, interview of John Senior, IHP Recordings, YouTube video, October 6, 2023, 57:00–1:19:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHZbOeAE-2E>.

129. Andersen, “Metamodernity.”

130. W. B. Yeats, *Irish Folk and Fairy Tales* (Chartwell Books, 2024), 23.

131. Hart, *All Things Are Full of Gods* (Yale University Press, 2024).

The metamodern “as far as concerns me” standpoint also frees us to understand these entities in terms of human perception, without the anxiety of whether this “accurately” reflects the ontological “reality.” Do angels have wings and devils, horns? Yes, in that these representations reveal something fundamental about these realities *as they concern me*, and so while at some deeper level of reality that I’m unable to probe, their “true” being is something¹³² incomprehensible, the images we use to understand them (and which they reportedly employ in their dealings with us) are not “wrong.” In fact, they’re the only means we have of approximating them at all, so they’re actually very true, from our standpoint.

A hermeneutic of credulity should not be confused with gullibility. Credulity is appropriate only within a broader epistemic framework that includes historical criticism, communal discernment, moral reasoning, and empirical investigation where appropriate. The proposal is not to dismiss science or common sense but to resist the modern tendency to subject different levels of reality and meaning to the same flat materialistic standard. The vantage points possible that result from careful modern observation and fact-finding, along with those derived from wary postmodern suspicion, should indisputably retain their place in the panoply of investigative tools. The issue of conspiracy theories, for instance, provides an example of why a metamodern hermeneutic of credulity cannot be an excuse for uncritical acceptance of any and all information.

That being said, many questions arise: did Fujiwara no Hidesato really bring down the giant centipede (ōmukade) of Mount Mikami with a saliva-tipped arrow?¹³³ Did St. Columba really rebuke the Loch Ness monster in AD 565?¹³⁴ Was John Bell really supernaturally tormented by the sadistic Bell Witch in nineteenth century Adams, Tennessee?¹³⁵ A metamodern hermeneutic of credulity renders such accounts epistemically credible within the appropriate register (which, I would assert, never precludes the physical dimension but also does not require it). Hanzi Freinacht, another leading voice of metamodernism, explains the spirit in which certainty about such questions can now be approached: “So after ‘deconstructing’ and picking apart the many tricks played upon us, we can now ‘reconstruct’ new tricks for the sake of magic and direction in our lives, and in the world around us. We can ... deliberately run the machinery of our own illusions, re-enchanting reality.”¹³⁶ I would not call these tactics tricks or illusions. They are rather the reconstructed links between the visible and invisible worlds that are implicit in all traditional faiths. Freinacht’s statement, though, does evince the cavalier attitude metamodern believers would do well to cultivate as they break free of modernism’s reductionistic straitjacket.

There is now an open, optimistic, incremental path to faith and wonder. The subject, reconstructed by the will and guaranteed in faith, becomes a higher order organizing principle, ironically discovering itself as the vantage point from which the Enlightenment’s totalizing subject can be checked.

132.

133. “Ōmukade,” *Yokai.com*, https://yokai.com/oomukade/?srsltid=AfmBOopBTKQmq3nm3sltGQN_8VBULRFkAxpAKIPYTGDNToQgBR5xOILi.

134. Angelo Stagnaro, “St. Columba and the Loch Ness Monster,” *National Catholic Register* (blog), November 25, 2018, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/st-columba-and-the-loch-ness-monster>.

135. “History and Legend,” *Historic Bell Witch Cave*, <https://www.bellwitchcave.com/bell-witch-legend/>.

136. Hanzi Freinacht, “When Irony Saves the Faithful,” *Metamoderna*, April 10, 2022, <https://metamoderna.org/when-irony-saves-the-faithful/>.

The trajectory outlined here reopens conceptual space long occupied by premodern metaphysics, including those articulated by Augustine and Aquinas, without presuming their theological commitments. With them, it can again affirm that the knower is a participant enmeshed in a larger chain of being (physical and spiritual) from which, mercifully, it is impossible to be extricated. However, like everything in metamodernism—or, what we might call “metatraditionalism” in this case—it’s the *having gone through it* that makes all the difference and that increases our understanding and joy. It reminds me of the Christian concept of salvation itself, as exemplified in the Easter exclamation: “O felix culpa!” Whether such an embodied and participatory metamodern epistemology will ultimately support renewed religious faith or some other form of transcendence remains to be seen, but the philosophical space for such possibilities has unmistakably reopened.