

POPPER AND POSTMODERNISM:
SIMILAR TARGETS, DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS

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Popper rejects the justification aims of classical rationalism. Likewise, postmodernism rejects the legitimization claims of modern logocentrism. Both, classical rationalism and logocentrism view reason as a foundational concept whose mission is to justify/legitimate scientific theories, philosophical discourses, social ideals or conceptual hierarchies. Both, Popper and postmodernism unmask this false, self-proclaimed authority of reason and warn against its dangerous implications, such as dogmatism, oppression and even tyranny. However, Popper and postmodernism differ hugely in their solutions. While postmodernism undermines the supreme status of reason that has been formative of the Western world since the Greeks, Popper offers a challenging new model of rationalism.

For postmodernism, rational inquiry — including science — is one discourse among many that cannot legitimate its own privileges. All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, we can kibitz, tell stories. Truth becomes a result of various language games, relative to an archive, lexicon, conceptual framework or other discursive formation. In the area of science, the PM stance is expressed by Kuhn: objective progress is a tale, normative methodology is denied in favour of history and sociology of science. In social philosophy, PM announces the end of a critical theory of society.

Popper's criticism of classical rationalism is directed solely against justification, not against the authority of reason. Popper exposes any 'rationalism' resorting to justification as a fake. Instead, he introduces a negative concept of reason whose powers lie solely in undermining the products of our spontaneous intellectual activity. The nature of reason is destructive, not 'deconstructive': in the search for falsehoods we never arrive at any mythical First Proof that could initiate a turn of the rational inquiry from the destabilizing to the consolidating direction. The endless chain of conjectures and refutations operates within the 'ocean' of cognitive uncertainties without any foundations. Yet, this is not a pessimistic message but a key to a new definition of reason. Popper unites the respect for reason with a non-authoritarian conception of reason, thus eliminating from it the element of tyranny. Moreover, the imperative of falsification boosts the critical 'dissident' attitude that is disrespectful of any given, established ('sacred') truths, and encourages the unrestricted creativity of our minds.