

Crisis of Meaning

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (June 2023)



A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie, Albert Bierstadt, 1866

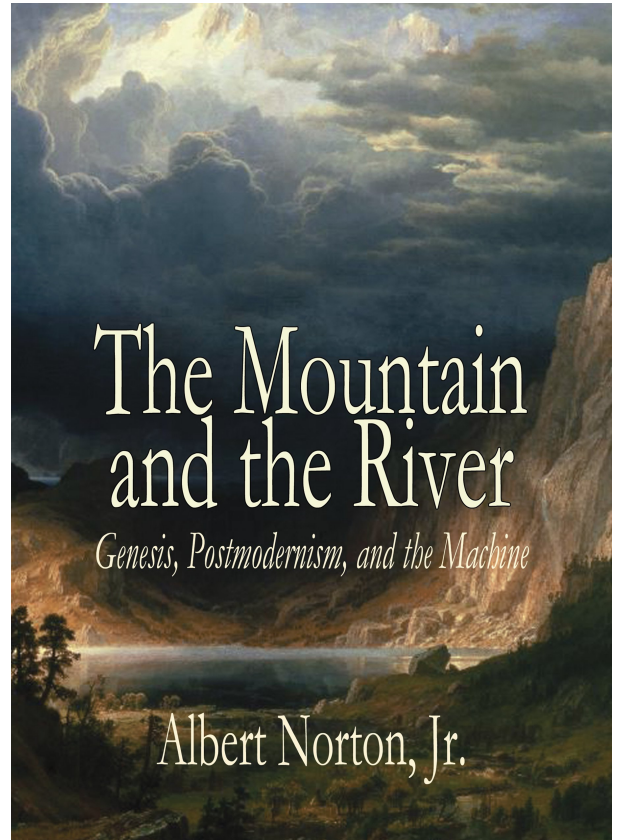
Adapted from Chapter 1 of The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine, published by New English Review Press, June, 2023.

We all feel the need for a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. We seek it out, sometimes in obvious and external ways, and sometimes only in the subjective consciousness. We can analogize this seeking to the desire for the mountain: stern, mastering, eternal, unchanging, immoveable, and resolute. The answer to our desire for meaning may seem heavy or even

oppressive, as when the absoluteness of a demanding God seems more than we can bear. So we have a countervailing desire for the (analogous) river: frivolous, undemanding, temporal, fleeting, moving, and mutable.

Either extreme experienced in a sustained way can seem unbearable. We each live alone in little houses of consciousness, alive to social interaction or lack thereof, confronted in every moment with moral choice, simultaneously feeling lonely and desiring solitude. We desire meaning, but not just in the sense of having the world become more comprehensible. We desire meaning in the sense of finding purpose in our lives. Inside each of us is a burbling conviction of our own significance in a larger drama that yet remains invisible to us. That intuition of significance can be beaten down by circumstance, or drained away by ideologies which change the way we conceive ourselves as human beings. This draining away is happening to us now. It is the crisis of meaning of the postmodern age.

The mountain symbolizes hierarchy of value, and structure derived from forms imposing order on thought and actions, and incidental to that, our physical environment. It is the product of active agentic execution: the formation of a goal and active purposeful movement toward it. It refers to the concentrated attention we (and God, if He exists) bring to the formation of structure, including physical things we build, but also mental constructs: whole architectures of meaning.



This urge to build is an individual psychological disposition, but it also manifests socially. The figurative mountain is the result of mankind's search for meaning.

The river symbolizes fluid subjectivity and flat particularity. It is a flow of intuition and inference; of pre-creation potentiality. We can think of it as a contemplative and fecund precursor to action; the germ from which an idea grows; subjectivity, intuition, and a night-time dream-like state in contrast to the high noon of the mountain. It represents rest, creativity, anticipation. And yet it is the seething roil from which the mountain emerges.

Western societies have evolved so that many reflexively reject God, the Source of ultimate meaning. When and how did this happen? Weren't people generally more pious at some point, more concerned with what an active Maker thought of them? Yes, of course. Were they happier then compared to us now? Well how do we define "happiness"? Surely not by the state of our technology. We might imagine our forbears' existence to have been oppressive, their social limitations unduly constraining compared to ours. But were they actually better or worse off subjectively? Did our ancestors thrive better with a fear of the Lord? Are we better off than they were, accounting for the wholeness of a person rather than superficial differences like relative material prosperity, or modern conveniences?

When genuinely felt religion was on its way out, even skeptics worried over the consequences. This was the subject of Matthew Arnold's famous poem *Dover Beach* (1867), for example, but it has been addressed more prosaically by many philosophers, most notably Friedrich Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century. All of postmodern philosophy is about finding meaning if God as the source of ultimate meaning does not exist.

The phrase "disenchantment" is sometimes used to explain this problem. It is traceable to Friedrich Schiller, but is more famously associated with Max Weber, who contrasted

rationalistic post-religious societies with previously religious, traditional ones in which “the world remains a great enchanted garden.” Disenchantment is the sense of loss that craters into a crisis of meaning. Postmodern philosophy is in large part an unsuccessful effort at re-enchantment without God. Hartmut Rosa, a contemporary German sociologist (b. 1965) uses “resonance” in a similar way, to describe the sense of living in a world for which there is objective meaning. Our obsession with control, he writes, means that we encounter the world as “points of aggression,” against which we feel we have “to know, attain, conquer, master, or exploit.” This is suggestive of Iain McGilchrist’s thesis in his 2021 *The Matter with Things* that the left hemisphere of the brain exerts this sort of controlling feature of attention, which is necessary but must be “emissary” to the “master” of the right hemisphere, which enables a more fully integrated vision of reality that accommodates intuition and mystery. McGilchrist would hold that culturally we have allowed the left hemisphere perspective to dominate, crowding out our ability to live with a larger sense of purpose and meaning.

Disenchantment goes beyond the loss of a sense of mystery that necessarily accompanies belief in God. It means our mastering, controlling instincts take over and dominate, not just individually but socially. We become disconnected from the fuller meaning of life, lost in one narrow materialist aspect of it: the perception of self as controlling, with the result that on a social level we are controlled. Disorder, chaos, and irresolution exist in ourselves and in our environment. We can’t and don’t control everything, individually or socially. It is important that we recognize the elusive and mysterious as features of our existence. If we would live more fully we must have a disposition toward the sacred, that entire otherness which we can never ourselves encompass. If we question the materialist premise that everything we know just is; *somethingness* as brute fact, we mentally truncate a vast arena

of reality necessary to making us whole. Being does not explain itself. Some additional approach to reality is necessary, like anti-matter to matter; nothing to something; disorder to order. McGilchrist suggests we need an “un-word” not defined by reference to anything else, and suggests that words of religious traditions like tao, logos, Brahman, and God point to this ultimate ground of being, this “place for a power that underwrites the existence of everything.”

A tipping point for loss of belief in God in the United States can reasonably be pegged to about the turn of the twentieth century; earlier in Europe. One could certainly argue for a little earlier or later, it's not the kind of thing one can pinpoint on a calendar. This tipping point marks commencement of the postmodern era, during which philosophy moved forward with what amounted to an effort to rake back meaning after it was ceded to bankrupt ideologies like fascism, Marxism, humanism, misguided nationalism, and other variations of materialism. For postmodernists, God is dead and objectivity and hierarchy must be replaced with another ontology more congenial to human flourishing.

Truth, goodness, and beauty are often referred to as irreducible transcendentals. But if these transcendent values originate in the singularity of God, what is good is also true and what is true is also beautiful. In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis wrote of their combination in the *Tao*, his referent (like one of McGilchrist's) for the ground of all being: objectivity in values and truth. In an essay based on works of Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, N.S. Lyons wrote:

[A]ny conceivable ordered reality—physical or rational or moral—is only possible through unchanging laws; that which is good must conform to this Tao, and so that which is good must by definition first be that which is true. To pervert or obscure the truth of words, or anything which is true,

*is to attack the Truth writ large; i.e., the Tao, and thus begin to melt away all solid ground from which any stand at all can be mounted against the encroach of total meaninglessness and total disorder. In the end, no conception of human value—or any fixed truth—can then withstand this assault, and so we abolish ourselves along with our perception of reality, inhumanity triumphs over man, and the void devours.**

The quest for an individual sense of meaning took on new urgency after the mid-twentieth-century wars. It was heightened by the ideologies that drove those hot wars and the ensuing Cold War. Hence a variety of philosophical trends, some to deconstruct social attitudes thought to contribute to the conflicts; some to address the pointless anomie of crass consumerism; some to re-enchant with substitutes for transcendence in various process philosophies.

Process philosophies presuppose there is no God, and that ideals, values, meaning, and purpose are socially generated. Postmodernism consists principally in varieties of process philosophy to replace transcendence with the watered-down form of immanence: a presumption that ideals, value, meaning, and purpose are self-contained within this physical life in the body, an “immanent frame” excluding a spiritual component of reality. Process philosophy operates in opposition to philosophy based in transcendence. Process philosophy is to postmodernism as transcendence is to religion. Process philosophies have several threads in common, enabling us to group them under the label “postmodernism.”

The postmodern impulse arises upon rejection of God. God is at the pinnacle of the hierarchies of value represented by the mountain, but they emanate from Him; He's not a figurehead for our conception of the hierarchy. God is positionally at the pinnacle, but also functionally. He holds it up and sustains

it. There is no hierarchy at all if there is no real basis upon which it comes into existence. God must be real, in other words, to serve as the ultimate value to which all subordinate values attach. If we imagine God out of existence, we truncate the structural support for the hierarchy of values altogether, and it collapses. The resulting network of values becomes relatively flattened, like Christmas tree lights strewn about the floor once removed from the tree which held them up. We can imagine them all interconnected but not vertically hierarchical, if we adopt the thinking of postmodernists.

The Christmas tree analogy illuminates the mountain analogy. The mountain is awesome, and represents a stepped-up hierarchy with a clear pinnacle at the morally highest positions, and more numerous but less consequential value and moral distinctions as one descends the mountain. The river, by contrast, is characterized by flow. It may be awesome, too, but in its own way: its ever-changing dynamism. It seeks the level, in contrast to the mountain. If it is the analogy for our understanding of value formation, we must grasp that it presents a levelled array of values, to be arranged by us according to the push and pull of social forces, changing in time as the river flows, each perception of value informed by those around it dynamically, and so relative to time and place and context, moment to moment. The river would yield process-formed truth and ethics. This is the direction of the process philosophy of postmodernism.

Postmodernism is collectivist in perspective. Or "socialist," to contrast more neatly with the relevant opposition of "individualist." The river as a whole analogizes escape from hierarchical value formation. As the river flows, the moment-by-moment changing relation of values organically and of its own yields our understanding of right and wrong, and of truth and falsity. But this is entirely a collective undertaking. That is, the river is society. A river is a river because it is all the drops of water collectively. Surface tension binds

them, in the same way intersubjectivity of consciousness binds human beings. But the river as a river is irreducible.

The social element of our being, however, is not the totality of our being. In the Genesis model, the indivisible and irreducible element of moral accountability is the individual. Unquestionably, there are society-wide effects of individual moral decision-making, and the reverse also is true: socially held values unquestionably affect how we individually address moral or truth questions. The picture of the river roiling and changing with the landscape is a picture of what society does, not what an individual exercising his moral agency does, if he or she aspires to the objective and transcendent truth and goodness of God. The river is a collectivist picture, in other words. In the postmodern imagination, the collective is presented as the aspirational totality of our vision: value formation does not exist apart from us, like with the mountain as a third point of reference in interactions among individuals. Values are instead understood as a social product.

The mountain relates to the tendencies toward building and order and hierarchy, and these are served by individualist linear rationality which in mankind can become untethered from objective principle. Unbalanced, this tendency can lead to dogmatism and authoritarianism. The river relates to tendencies toward relationship-building and emotional sensitivity and collectivism, and these are served by relativizing principle. Unbalanced, this tendency, too, can lead to dogmatism and authoritarianism, if from a different direction. The imbalance results from rejection of God, so that we either lose connection to first principles, or lose the principles themselves in an acid bath of relativism. In the current age, the dominance of the river disposition is more dangerous. The desire to preserve a Genesis understanding of reality is taken as mounting authoritarianism, but totalitarianism from the other direction is presented as the

cure.

In this day, the degeneration of meaningfulness is for most people not really visible at ground level, so to speak. It is enervating rather than oppressive, so there's no rising up against it. We find ourselves too weary to think of fighting it. We may perceive in others, if not ourselves, a general sense that even if we have more material prosperity and opportunity, there is more despair, hopelessness, isolation, suspicion, and fear. The lightness of being hoped-for in a move to the river does not bring with it contentment or a feeling of real freedom. There is clearly a crisis of meaning, in the postmodern world, and it has all kinds of ill effects on us, individually and collectively. We tend to perceive the heavy weight of the mountain, and run from it, without perceiving the countervailing meaninglessness of the roiling river to which we run.

God is believed absent from reality, in our post-Christian world, but an eroded hierarchy of values based on Christian understanding remains. Postmodern philosophy and praxis generally reject hierarchies. Still, we intuit the need for hierarchy even as we reject it, and so we attempt to re-create it on our own. The mountain-substitute we build is a tower of hierarchy. Its values are human-derived, instead of God-provided. The tower of Babel story in Genesis (chapter 11) warns us about this. Technological advances in an advanced prosperous society enable the scenario of frustration which will follow. There is a shift to collectivist perspective, which entails automation and loss of individual agency. Ceding agency to the collective means heightened individual insecurity and concern for safety. Without God and without self, society becomes our only refuge and source of identity. Increasing anxiety attends this shift, and it becomes unsustainable. The safety and security we seek in the herd is short-lived, and the system collapses. Instead of achieving oneness with the collective we become splintered and

antagonistic, speaking past each other, perhaps speaking the same sounds but with entirely different or even opposite meanings. Language fails. Our desire for unity, without God as the unifying principle, results in tribalism and strife.

This should sound familiar to anyone living in the West in the twenty-first century. We cannot self-create a world of meaning, and if we attempt it we fail disastrously. In this age the tower of Babel story is played out in extreme ideologies of the right and left, both departing from transcendence, objectivity of truth, and universality of principle. Technological innovation drives greater interdependence. Greater interdependence means decreasing self-sufficiency. Decreasing self-sufficiency erodes personal agency. There is no God to look to, we think, so we're left with diminished agency, diminished confidence, and anxiety about what the world can now do to us. As in the city of Babel, our collectives splinter into irreconcilable factions, each muttering syllables of hate in language unintelligible to the other.

If truth is not objective, public discourse shifts away from appeal to principle, and toward power negotiation. This takes place in words, the meaning-making medium between and among us. But words can be used to redescribe concepts, to distort meaning, to deliberately present half-truth or ambiguity, and to build false narrative to replace objective truth and morality. The power paradigm distorts language. Fraud and deceit corrupt the meanings of words. Language is deceitfully employed to advance ideology, for example by using strategic ambiguity in word meanings. We may use some of the same words, like the English words "tolerance," "love," "freedom," and so on, but find we mean something completely different by them. The philosophy of many of the postmodernists is in significant part about deliberate confusion of language. The result is that we speak different languages, and so our efforts to communicate fail. We can't make ourselves understood to each

other, just like with the people who built the city and tower of Babel.

The confusion of language at Babel is often interpreted as having been undone at Pentecost, when different language-speakers with the Holy Spirit gained mutual intelligibility. Pentecost underscores the principle that common deference to objectivity of truth and value is the only cure against descent into mutual unintelligibility, and resulting mutual suspicion. We build to futility if we misperceive the way human beings are, and the way the world is. Genesis presents reality.

Postmodernism rejects the Genesis worldview. The objectivity of truth and falsity is rejected, as is the objectivity of right and wrong. In the postmodern vision these are not transferred entirely to a subjective plane, however, in which we all live and move independently according to our self-constructed visions. Subjectivism in concepts and values is cast back onto an objective structure, because we can't help it, this is the way of the world, however it came into being. What we do is create new and artificial hierarchical structures of meaning, ideologies, and regard these as socially operative. What begins as individual subjective wishful thinking becomes collective objective mandate. Again, a tower of Babel doomed to destruction because it is out of phase with the reality of God-created human nature. We will have a mountain, one way or the other. We build towers of Babel upon rejecting God because we must; because by unimagining God we don't thereby erase His creation. The tower rises because there is a value hierarchy in reality and in mankind. If we don't perceive it correctly, we build our own, but in doing so we build to futility.

For many thinkers, this was the lesson of the mid-twentieth-century wars, in which hierarchies of meaning built around metanarratives collapsed into ruinous chaos at the expense of millions upon millions of lives, and destitution and despair

all around. The thought was that perhaps we're better off eradicating mountain-building. But inevitably, we build new artificial mountains of ideology.

The Babel towers se because God, the author of the real mountain, and the river too, was imagined dead. Postmodernism is in part a reaction to the mid-century disasters, but the groundwork for it had been in place for decades, particularly in the toxic philosophies of Marxism, existentialism and pragmatism. Post-war thinkers wanted to dismantle ideologies, but just replaced the existing ideologies with new ones. They are legion, like the demons ousted by Jesus, but there are common elements, and by those common elements can be grouped together as "postmodernism."

[*] Lyons, N.S., *A Prophecy of Evil: Tolkien, Lewis, and Technocratic Nihilism*, The Upheaval (theupheaval@substack.com) November 15, 2022.

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Albert Norton, Jr is a writer and attorney working in the American South. His most recent book is [Dangerous God: A Defense of Transcendent Truth](#) (2021) concerning formation of truth and values in a postmodern age; and *Intuition of Significance*, a 2020 work weighing the merits of theism against materialism. He is also the author of several award-winning short stories, and two novels: *Another Like Me* (2015) and *Rough Water Baptism* (2017), on themes of navigating reality in a post-Christian world.

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