

Deconstruction

By Daniel Ray

Concept Attribution: As a formal philosophical system, “deconstruction” is a term used by the French postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida. As a social media phenomenon of people leaving Christianity, the first use of the term may have come from former Evangelical pastor-turned-agnostic atheist David Hayward, who self-admittedly borrowed the term from Derrida to describe his own deconversion experience.

Dates: 1967 (Derrida), 2012 (Hayward)

INTRODUCTION

Scrolling through Tik Tok or YouTube, you run across a warm and engaging older gentleman with a white beard and dark-rimmed glasses holding his smart phone at arm’s length. The video is only 89 seconds, so you momentarily stop scrolling and listen. With a sincere, inviting tone and gentle demeanour, the gentleman, ex-pastor David Hayward, who goes by “Naked Pastor” on YouTube, begins recounting how he started using the term “deconstruction” as a way to describe his exodus from the pastorate and ultimately from Christianity.

He explains that at a pastor’s conference in 2009, he was introduced to Jacques Derrida’s philosophical deconstructionism. He says, “They intended for us to be turned against deconstruction, but I actually became a convert. I love the word because it described...my spirituality, [how] I was experiencing it. And that was questioning everything.”¹ Hayward said he eventually tore up everything about his faith from “the roots.”

On YouTube alone, there are a multitude of videos like Hayward’s that can be found under various hashtags like “#deconstruction,” “#exvangelical,” and “#emptythepews.” One such video features a self-proclaimed ex-Christian Kristi Burke, who filmed a half-hour long video of herself sitting on a couch with a cup of tea or coffee in her hand, casually criticizing pastor John MacArthur’s biblical expose’ of the popular deconstruction movement. In the video Burke claims that the reason people are leaving the church “is because, according to Pew research, they just stop believing. They don’t believe any more, it’s not believable. You don’t have compelling enough evidence for people to want to stay.”²

That is but one reason among a host of others posted under the various deconstruction hashtags by those who are leaving the church. Many deconstructionists publicly blame their apostasy on the political choices of other Christians, that Christians in general are racist, homophobic, and hypocritical; that the church has a long and unjustifiable track record of violence, greed, oppression, and abuse. Many will also frequently declare that the Bible is riddled with irreconcilable contradictions and examples of God condoning slavery, genocide, and immorality. Some deconstructionists claim that if God does exist, He is a “moral monster.” As Burke dismissively opines about Christianity, “it’s all non-sensical.”

DEFINING DECONSTRUCTION

At the outset, it is important to clarify that the philosophy of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction is not the sort of acerbically antagonistic anti-theism one sees in social media today from those who once claimed to be Christians. Also, Derrida’s deconstruction is not a formal argument for atheism but one of hermeneutics, that is, how to read and understand texts. The association of his philosophy with the current popular trend of apostasy is loosely subjective, though there do remain some important similarities as will be examined below. Many people who claim to be a part of the popular atheist deconstruction phenomenon likely don’t know much if anything about Derrida’s academic work, yet the term “deconstruction” does nevertheless seem to provide an intellectual weight and authority to the experiences and arguments of some who are leaving the church.

Derrida himself claimed that his concept of deconstruction is easily and often misunderstood. He said in 1994 that “Deconstruction is not a method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside. Deconstruction is something which happens and which happens inside.”³ In this regard, most popular social-media deconstructionists unknowingly have some common ground with Derrida here, as the entire premise of deconstruction as a deconversion experience is centered upon the experiences of the inner self. Each individual puts God and Christianity on trial and finds them both wanting. The standards for making such judgments subjectively emanate from *inside* the individual (see Mark 7:21-23).

Derrida’s formal philosophy also calls into question the inherent meaning of foundational assumptions we make about texts we read. This too is something online deconstructionists loosely have in common with Derrida. For example, that statement that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” would be an axiom both Derrida’s deconstruction and popular #deconstruction would attempt to pick apart to the point where we cannot be certain that it means anything at all. As philosopher John Caputo notes of Derrida’s deconstruction,

Whenever it runs up against a limit, deconstruction presses against it. Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell – a secure axiom or a pithy maxim – the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility. Indeed, it is a good rule of thumb in deconstruction. *That* is what deconstruction is all about, its very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction *is*. In a nutshell.⁴

What is the reason for disturbing the tranquility of foundational truths? What does that finally mean? How would we know we ever found the true meaning of what we read? How far do we go in picking apart basic axioms? Derrida offers no summary assistance. As allegedly “deconstruction is too complicated to summarize...because it is, in principle, opposed to the very idea of a nutshell and bends all its efforts to *cracking* nutshells.”⁵ Deconstruction then is a kind of unrelenting hermeneutical suspicion of texts. Like postmodern philosophy⁶ which it has continually informed and inspired, it creates a dizzying and unresolvable epistemic aporia for its adherents. If one cracks and breaks apart everything we take as epistemically axiomatic (all men are mortal, God exists, polar bears live in the Arctic), what then remains? Nothing really, except a continual and unsustainable hyper-skepticism and suspicion toward anything that claims to be objectively true.

Derrida would sometimes say that the “least bad” way to define deconstruction is to say it is the “experience of the impossible.”⁷ Indeed, skepticism as a foundational axiom of deconstruction is impossible, for it is at once both contrary to Derrida’s foundational deconstruction principles and epistemologically untenable. For if Derrida desires to be consistent in his own ideas, he must be skeptical of deconstruction and deconstruct deconstructionism and skepticism themselves. An impossible task. This doesn’t seem to deter Derrida, however. As Caputo observes, it is this very impossibility that fuels Derrida’s paradigm. “Deconstruction is the relentless pursuit of *the* impossible, which means, of things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility, of things which, instead of being wiped out by their impossibility, are actually nourished and fed by it.”⁸

It is not, however, that Derrida himself believed that language or texts were ultimately meaningless, rather, as philosopher Christopher Watkin notes, Derrida believed the meanings of language are transient, malleable, and fluid.

[They] are open in the sense that we cannot today close down the meaning of any word or sign, such that we have exhaustively explored its context and can be utterly confident it can’t possibly mean anything but what we think it means, nor can we be sure it will not accrue new primary meanings in the future...the context of an utterance can never be completely exhausted...I can never be sure that some new piece of contextual information will not arise that radically alters the way in which we understand [texts].⁹

In short, Derrida’s philosophy calls into question not only the texts, but the very contexts themselves in which the texts have been created. The tragic implication of Derrida’s hermeneutical and contextual agnosticism is that we cannot be confident about any kind of ultimate meaning. Though again, not formally carried over by online #deconstruction apostates, Derrida’s calling into question these basic foundational assumptions finds its way into the minds of those who desire to call into question the Bible and the cultural contexts in which it was written.

Yet it is quite clear both Derrida and #deconstruction apostates believe that we can at least know and be certain about the meaning of *their* words. Derrida’s philosophy, then, while not formally adhered to within the popular on-line phenomenon, does nevertheless provide the contextual air many #deconstructionists are currently breathing as they exit the church, whether they are aware of it or not. For example, David Hayward’s borrowing from Derrida’s “deconstruction”

in 2012 seems to be the catalyst for how the movement and the word came to be defined and utilized by other #deconstructionists. Hayward mentions in a short blog post that he personally liked the term and what he understood to be Derrida's suspicion of ultimate meaning.

I decided to use the word deconstruction to describe the often-terrifying process of questioning certainty and accepted truth. It's the erosion of the beliefs we inherited and adopted. It questions our religious conditioning. It's the crumbling of the foundation and structure of our spiritual lives.¹⁰

Note Hayward makes it clear he's loosely defining the word deconstruction *on his own terms*. He is not formally following Derrida's thought, just modifying it for his own ends and to lend intellectual authority to his own apostasy. His own interpretation of Derrida's thought shows how he sees the continuity between his own deconversion, the popular on-line phenomenon, and Derrida's ideas.

Deconstruction is a philosophical theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about what is certain and what is true. It claims that words can only refer to other words, and that when we interpret them we immediately subvert their meaning.¹¹

Therein is the heart of popular atheist #deconstruction – influenced by Derrida, but not in strict accordance with his formal philosophy. One wonders, however, if by reading Hayward's definition we have unintentionally subverted his intended meaning. In another related post, Hayward defines popular deconstruction as “the process in which who people follow a religion rethink their faith or previously held beliefs.”¹² Again, Derrida, but not quite Derrida. And does Hayward expect us to be certain about what deconstruction means or have we subverted his definition by claiming we understand it? This is the frustratingly contrary nature of both kinds of deconstruction. In short, it is the individual deconstructionist who defines his own meanings and definitions. At the heart of it all is the autonomous self. In addition, any attempt to critique the claims and definitions of deconstructionists will usually result in the critic being told he does not understand deconstruction.

CRITIQUE OF DECONSTRUCTION

Long before Derrida or the Internet, in his prescient 1947 book *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis seems to have seen through the guise of the deconstruction phenomenon. At some point, Lewis notes, the insatiable attempts by secular scientists and thinkers to “see through” the physical world or our most basic axioms will eventually lead to the dissolution of truth itself.

[F]or we cannot go on “explaining away” forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on “seeing through” things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden, too? It is no use trying to “see through” first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To “see through” all things is the same as not to see.¹³

Deconstruction as a popular deconversion trend is nothing new. Unbelief entered the human race when Adam and Eve were first tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden to acquire forbidden knowledge. Eve's self-rationalizing transgressing God's commandment is something inherently ingrained in each one of us and has found its recycled expression in a multitude of anti-theist and anti-Christian worldviews over the centuries. Consider that Hayward's experience of leaving the pastorate is similar to that of the famed former pastor and father of American Transcendentalism Ralph Waldo Emerson, who left the pulpit in 1832 and completely repudiated “the authority of the Bible, liturgical tradition, and the church.”¹⁴ Roger Lundin observes that Emerson believed in the inherent power, imagination, and creativity of the self. “In casting off the shackles of dogmatic belief, Emerson believed that he was freeing the expansive self to do its innocent works of power.”¹⁵

Not but a few decades later, Emerson's optimism of the unshackled self was crushed in the blood-soaked fields of Antietam and Gettysburg. As noted above, deconstruction, whether it be Derrida or deconversion, is replete with irresolvable contradictions. The very act of defining what deconstruction is, for example, betrays its core principle that we cannot know with any certainty what language or texts actually mean. And yet, one thing upon which all Internet deconstructionists would insist is knowable, certain, and true is that Christianity is false. One can only assume that in the videos mentioned above Hayward and Burke actually intend for us to understand the language and definitions they are using. But if the deconstructionists wish to be consistent in their philosophy, they should not only deconstruct their assumptions about why they think Christianity is false, they must also deconstruct deconstructionism itself.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE¹⁶

At the heart of both Derrida's and Hayward's concepts of deconstruction is the autonomous self. The Emersonian self is the same self behind Hayward's ironic but apropos moniker of "Naked Pastor." This is precisely the same self-centred sin of Adam and Even in Eden. The self as the measure of all things, despite its abysmal historical and cultural track record, nevertheless continually finds appeal within every new generation. It is easy to see why as Lundin notes, "Left to its own devices, the self is free to construct its own systems of belief, to find satisfactions for its own desires, and to conceive of whatever ends it can imagine for human life."¹⁷

This, however, is a false freedom. As was the case in the time of the book of Judges, societal chaos and divine judgment soon followed in the wake of individuals doing whatever they deemed to be right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Yet it is also important to remember that when we are engaging people who are caught up in the deconstruction phenomenon that it is not an us-versus-them. It is not flesh and blood with which we wrestle (Eph. 6:12) but with principalities and powers in heavenly places. These powers arrayed against us are bent on deception and turning people away from the truth of God in Christ. There is no one who seeks God. All of us have gone astray and are in need of the saving mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Truth is indeed knowable and can be known, for God has revealed it to us; through what He has made (Genesis 1-2; Ps. 8; 19:1-4; 111:2; Romans 1:18ff), through the Person of His Son (Matthew 3:17; 2 Peter 1:17), through the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:23), and through His word (Psalm 19:1-14; 119:105; Luke. 24:27). Jesus tells us that He alone is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In His prayer to the Father, Jesus proclaims "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17). Psalm 119:160 declares that "The sum of Thy word is truth, and every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting."

Deconstruction posits man as the judge of God and finds Him either wanting or non-existent. But as the Apostle Paul rhetorically asks the Roman Christians, who are we before a holy, just, and all-powerful, all-knowing God to question Him with a defiant and rebellious posture? "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" (Rom. 9:20).

Jesus says that "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). Though many who leave the Christian faith attest that they feel free, it is merely a temporal feeling, and feelings are no guarantee that one is in possession of the truth, nor can feelings be the basis for truth. As Christians we should gently "disturb the tranquillity" of the deconstructionist's false peace with good questions, with solid biblical responses, and above all with Christ's love, embodying the exhortation of 1 Peter 3:15, "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." Serving the self is a fruitless and miserable form of enslavement which only leads to despair and death. Only in being known of Christ and serving Him are our souls truly free (John 8:36).

Notes

- 1 David Hayward - Naked Pastor, *Why I started using the word deconstruction and still do*, <https://youtu.be/9-1y2DUEU98?si=Xkut-VL1bDcTmdTN>, accessed February 9, 2024.
- 2 Kristi Burke, *John MacArthur is Wrong About Deconstruction – Ex Christian Responds*, <https://youtu.be/KjFtPoYqQW0?si=-mA4vig1Wn6zRSEj>, accessed February 9, 2004.
- 3 Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell – A Conversation With Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 9.
- 4 Derrida and Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 32.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 6 A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Aaron Shamp, "Postmodernism," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2024). A complete collection of Profiles (over 660 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/files/ProfilePostmodernism.pdf>.
- 7 Derrida and Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 32.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 9 Christopher Watkin, *Jacques Derrida* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2017), 4-5.
- 10 David Hayward, "What is Deconstruction?", <https://nakedpastor.com/blogs/news/what-is-deconstruction>, accessed February 9, 2024.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 David Hayward – Naked Pastor, "Deconstruction", <https://nakedpastor.com/pages/deconstruction>, accessed February 9, 2024.
- 13 C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 86-87.
- 14 Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation – Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 125-126.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 See our January-February 2024 Apologetics Profile Podcast interview with Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett about their book *The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Part One - https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/jwalker55293/episodes/2024-01-28T23_00_00-08_00 and Part Two - https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/jwalker55293/episodes/2024-02-04T23_00_00-08_00
- 17 Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation*, 128.



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