

Articles

The Postmodern Critique of Liberal Education

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1. The Philosophical Mission of Education

The great battles over education have always been philosophical.

As parents and teachers our goal is to develop within the child the knowledge, character, and skills necessary for successful living as an adult human being in the real world. That complicated goal immediately involves us in philosophy, as each of its components requires us to address hard questions.

If education is about *knowledge*, then what counts as knowledge? When does one *know*, in contrast to merely having an *opinion* or entertaining a *hypothesis*? How does one acquire *genuine* knowledge—by observation? Reasoning? Faith? Mystical insight? Or is knowledge impossible? The philosophical questions of Epistemology are central to education's mission.

If education is about *character* and preparation for *successful living*, then what is good character and what is successful living? Which traits are *virtues* and which are *vices*—pride or humility? Perseverance or laziness? Gluttony or moderation? Can those traits be taught, and if so how? Is there even such a thing as character? And what are the *value* components of a successful life—love, wealth,

health, wisdom? The philosophical questions of Ethics are also central to education's mission.

If education is to prepare children for life as *adult human beings*, then what is it to be a fully developed human being? We are *rational*, in principle, but also *emotional*—are those in conflict, or should they be harmonious? We have *physical* needs and capacities, but also *psychological* ones—how do our minds and bodies relate? We are subject to *biological* constraints and *environmental* conditioning—but do we also have a *volitional* capacity that enables us to make our own choices and thereby shape our own lives? The philosophical questions of Human Nature are central to education's mission.

And if education is to prepare children to leave the stylized confines of the nursery, their parents' homes, and formal school in order to go fully into *the real world*, then what is that reality? The real world is made up of humans, other animal species, and human technologies—and beyond that ecosystems and climate systems and solar systems and galaxies. Beyond all of those *natural* systems, is there also a *supernatural* reality inhabited by the gods or a God? And if so, what is our ultimate reality and destiny? The philosophical questions of Metaphysics are also central to education's mission.

Many answers have been given to those many questions. The answers that have most greatly influenced education across history have been given by those who were also the great philosophers in history—Plato, Augustine, Locke, Kant, and others.

The multi-dimensional philosophical battle over education has been played out over centuries by individual thinkers and competing schools of thought. Yet in broad historical strokes, the history of education can be divided into three eras: the *Pre-modern* era, prior to 1500 or so, in which a traditional or classical model of education dominated—the *Modern* era of the last several centuries, in which the ideal of liberal education came to dominate—and now our uncertain *Post-modern* intellectual era of flux and harsh critique that may signal the end of both the traditional and liberal models of education.

Postmodernism fundamentally rejects modernism and premodernism, so let us begin by making the contrast between modern

liberal and premodern traditional education. That will put us in a position to see in clear relief the nature of the postmodern challenge.

2. Modern Liberal Education Versus Premodern Authoritarian Education

In the early modern world, the great battles over education began as a reaction against traditional practices that were often authoritarian in theory and practice and distant from practical concerns. Approved truths were taught and the false was censored. Students dutifully listened and repeated and obediently did what they were told.

The modern revolution in education was multi-dimensional: it stressed worldly practicality, independence of judgment, the priority of experience and reason, free expression and discussion, and play as a key to learning.

Consider Michel de Montaigne's "On the Education of Children" (1575), with its emphasis upon cultivating independence of judgment:

"[I]f he [the student] embraces the opinions of Xenophon and Plato by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs but his. Who follows another follows nothing. He finds nothing, and indeed is seeking nothing. 'We are not under a king; each man should look after himself.' . . . Truth and reason are common to all men, and no more belong to the man who first uttered them than to him that repeated them after him."¹

At the time, Montaigne's independence claim is striking, especially in the context of the long-held view that following the intellectual authority of others—whether captured in Scripture or classical texts or the established institutions—was the proper, deferential attitude.

¹ Michel de Montaigne, "On the Education of Children," in *The Essays: A Selection*, trans. John M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 56, <http://hs.umt.edu/ghr/documents/152MontaigneEducationofChildren.pdf>.

A generation later, in 1597, Francis Bacon delivered his famous aphorism, “Knowledge is *power*.”² Bacon is modern in emphasizing the practicality of knowledge: knowledge is a means to an end, to be used as a tool to improve the human condition here in the natural world. At the time, Bacon’s claims were in striking contrast to long-held views that knowledge is end in itself and that the best knowledge is of other-worldly things and often distant or irrelevant to practical concerns.

In Galileo Galilei’s 1615 widely circulated open letter to the Grand Duchess Christina, we find the modern claim that science and religion are equally worthy and legitimate modes of understanding reality, and that the methods of experience and reason should take precedence over the traditional methods of faith and threats of punishment for those who question or disbelieve.

“In discussions of physical problems we ought to begin not from the authority of scriptural passages but from sense-experiences and necessary demonstrations.”

Galileo continues,

“I do not feel obliged to believe that that same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and intellect has intended us to forego their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them.”³

Galileo’s claim is striking in era of unquestioning piety and intellectual intimidation when, for example, many were afraid to advocate openly Copernicus’ new sun-centered model of the heavens—and when those who have, like Giordano Bruno, have been tortured and executed in part for having done so.

² The fuller line is “*Ipsa scientia potestas est*” (“Knowledge itself is power”). Francis Bacon, *Essays Religious meditations. Places of perswasion and disswasion. Seene and allowed* (EEBO-TCP, 2003), <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/a01255.0001.001> (accessed July 30, 2019).

³ Galileo Galilei, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany,” trans. Paul Halsall (Internet History Sourcebooks Project, 1997), <https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Galileo-LetterDuchessChristina.pdf>.

Another generation bring us to John Milton's 1644 sweeping rejection of censorship in favor of the open publication of ideas.

“[T]hough all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter? . . . She needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious; those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power. Give her but room.”⁴

Open publication and discussion by anyone and everyone—that is a strikingly modern method of advancing learning and discovering new knowledge—especially in the context of the long-held claims that error must be censored and that only authority-approved truths may be allowed into public circulation.⁵

A generation later, all of these trends culminate in John Locke's comprehensive philosophy and are applied to education in his *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. In addition to the above themes, Locke adds that learning is a source of pleasure and should be pursued freely:

“[G]reat care is to be taken, that [education] be never made as a business to him, nor he look on it as a task. We naturally, as I said, even from our cradles, love liberty, and have therefore an aversion to many things, for no other reason, but because they

⁴ John Milton, *Areopagitica* (Project Gutenberg, 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/608/608-h/608-h.htm> (accessed July 30, 2019).

⁵ The philosopher René Descartes in 1633: “I inquired in Leiden and Amsterdam whether Galileo's *World System* was available, for I thought I'd heard that it was published in Italy last year. I was told that it had indeed been published but that all the copies had immediately been burnt at Rome, and that Galileo had been convicted and fined. I was so astonished at this that I almost decided to burn all my papers.” René Descartes, “Letter to Mersenne, late xi.1633,” in *Selected Correspondence of Descartes*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Bennett (Early Modern Texts, 2013), https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1619_1.pdf.

are enjoined us. I have always had a fancy, that learning might be made a play and recreation to children.”⁶

Locke’s remarks are again modern and striking in the context of a long history of seeing education as a painful duty that one must undertake because those in authority have decreed it so.

From Bacon in 1597 to Locke in 1690 is a revolutionary century of modern ideas displacing orthodox ones. The new themes are of independence of judgement, the use of experience and reason to acquire new knowledge, the social shift to open publication and free expression and discussion, the emphasis upon pleasure and freedom as core values in the pursuit of knowledge, with the goal being the empowerment of each individual who chooses to participate.

3. Were the Moderns Fair to the Premoderns?

In revolutionary times, the debates are polarized, tempers run high, and there is always the risk of caricature in presenting the other side’s arguments. So let us consider directly the words of those on the other side, beginning with the most influential philosopher of education in history. In Plato’s works we find many themes of premodern authoritarian education, and we find them given sophisticated philosophical justification.

On the issue of freedom in education. Plato makes use of the myth of Gyges,⁷ about the shepherd boy who found a magical ring that enabled him to become invisible at will—and who then used that power to steal, rape, and murder. The moral of the story is that human nature tends to the bad, and that given the power of freedom humans will naturally abuse it. Consequently, much of education must impose

⁶ John Locke, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” in *The Works*, vol. 8 (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education, Posthumous Works, Familiar Letters*) (The Online Library of Liberty, 2011), sec. 148, http://oll.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/1444/Locke_0128-08_EBk_v6.0.pdf.

⁷ Plato *Republic*, 359a-360d. See also *Phaedrus* 253d-e.

strong discipline and the use of punishment to correct the natural human tendency towards evil.⁸

On the issue of play and pleasure in education. In Plato's famous allegory of the cave in *The Republic*,⁹ Socrates goes out of his way to use the language of compulsion, pain, and duty. The ignorant learners in chains at the bottom of the cave do not initiate the process of learning. Rather, they are *compelled* to stand and *forced* to turn and move toward the otherworldly light, and the entire upward ascent toward enlightenment is *painful* to them.¹⁰

On the issue of open publication and discussion. Also in *The Republic*, Plato makes a systematic case for censorship, especially of literature, music, and the arts. The task of the Platonic philosopher is to take up the "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry"¹¹ and to assert the State-enforced dominance of philosophy. To be well educated, children must be exposed to good material and shielded from bad material. But many tales from Homer and Aristophanes and others portray the gods, great men, and the laws in immoral and ridiculous fashion. Therefore, the State should censor much painting, poetry, theatre, and music.

⁸ In *Phaedrus* Plato also gives us the famous charioteer analogy of the human soul: "In the beginning of this tale I divided each soul into three parts, two of which had the form of horses, the third that of a charioteer. Let us retain this division. Now of the horses we say one is good and the other bad; but we did not define what the goodness of the one and the badness of the other was. That we must now do. The horse that stands at the right hand is upright and has clean limbs; he carries his neck high, has an aquiline nose, is white in color, and has dark eyes; he is a friend of honor joined with temperance and modesty, and a follower of true glory; he needs no whip, but is guided only by the word of command and by reason. The other, however, is crooked, heavy, ill put together, his neck is short and thick, his nose flat, his color dark, his eyes grey and bloodshot; he is the friend of insolence and pride, is shaggy-eared and deaf, hardly obedient to whip and spurs." *Phaedrus*, 253e-c.

⁹ Plato *Republic*, 515c.

¹⁰ In St. Augustine's religious Platonism, the doctrine of Original Sin parallels the Myth of Gyges, and Augustine's famous phrase *Per molestias eruditio* ("True education begins with physical abuse") parallels Plato's points about imposed discipline and pain.

¹¹ Plato *Republic*, 607b, 386a, 401b, and 595a.

On the issue of independence of thought. In Book 7 of *Laws*, Plato's final work, we find an argument for why the State should regulate children's games in order to train them to become adults who will follow the laws obediently and uniformly. The Athenian Stranger says to Clinias the Cretan:

"I assert that there exists in every State a complete ignorance about children's games—how that they are of decisive importance for legislation, as determining whether the laws enacted are to be permanent or not. For when the program of games is prescribed and secures that the same children always play the same games and delight in the same toys in the same way and under the same conditions, it allows the real and serious laws also to remain undisturbed."¹²

The Stranger continues:

"But when these games vary and suffer innovations, amongst other constant alterations the children are always shifting their fancy from one game to another, so that neither in respect of their own bodily gestures nor in respect of their equipment have they any fixed and acknowledged standard of propriety and impropriety; but the man they hold in special honor is he who is always innovating or introducing some novel device in the matter of form or color or something of the sort; whereas it would be perfectly true to say that a State can have no worse pest than a man of that description, since he privily alters the characters of the young, and causes them to condemn what is old and esteem what is new. And I repeat again that there is no greater mischief a State can suffer than such a dictum and doctrine: just listen while I tell you how great an evil it is."

Beware of the independent innovator and the experimenter. He is the State's worst enemy.

To the extent that the Stranger and Socrates speak for Plato, we get a model of education that endorses these top goals: Children must learn (1) rule-following—especially rules made by others, and made in the past—and not to think of changing things. More broadly,

¹² Plato *Laws*, 797a-d.

in the corpus of Plato's works, we get a model of education that stresses (2) imposed discipline, (3) obedience, (4) censorship, and (5) the expectation that learning is a painful duty.

All of these points are suggestive in Plato, and they are often couched in question form and the words put into the mouths of the semi-fictional Socrates and other characters. However, they do indicate a framework that many later educators took and applied more or less consistently, in both religious and secular form, for almost two millennia.¹³

4. A Counter-Liberal Reaction

The modern revolution in education began with the Renaissance and reached its intellectual maturity with the representative figures mentioned above—the western European thinkers Montaigne, Bacon, Galileo, Milton, and Locke in the long seventeenth century.

But the liberal revolution was not decisive for all of Europe, for further to the northeast a counter-revolution in education was initiated in the German states and especially in Prussia.

Immanuel Kant lectured and wrote on education a century after Locke and was well aware of Lockean liberal education. Yet Kant brought his formidable intellect to bear upon attacking its major elements, counter-point for point.

Locke had emphasized children's self-motivation and the freedom to pursue their own interests. Kant disagreed: children must learn to do what they must out of *duty*, not out of *inclination*. From Kant's lectures on education, first delivered in 1776/77:

¹³ In the premodern era, Plato inspired followers who saw themselves as interpreting and transmitting pure Platonism (e.g., Plotinus) and thinkers who effected mergers with pagan (e.g., Porphyry), Jewish (e.g., Philo of Alexandria), Christian (e.g., Augustine), Islamic (e.g., Avicenna) thought and educational practice. Members of the latter group are generally labeled "Neo-Platonic."

“One often hears it said that we should put everything before children in such a way that they shall do it from *inclination*. In some cases, it is true, this is all very well, but there is much besides which we must place before them as *duty*. . . . For in the paying of rates and taxes, in the work of the office, and in many other cases, we must be led, not by inclination, but by duty. Even though a child should not be able to see the reason of a duty, it is nevertheless better that certain things should be prescribed to him in this way.”¹⁴

Locke had argued that human beings are born morally *tabula rasa* and become good or bad by the choices they make. Kant disagreed, re-asserting a version of Original Sin:

“the history of *freedom* begins with badness, for it is *man’s* work.”¹⁵

Since we must strive not to repeat Eve and Adam’s *disobedience* in the Garden of Eden, education must first establish *obedience* within children.

“Above all things, obedience is an essential feature in the character of a child, especially of a school boy or girl.”¹⁶

Kant’s emphasis upon obedience was no doubt influenced by his reading of Johann Georg Sulzer, the leading education theorist in the German states. In his 1748 *An Essay on the Education and Instruction of Children*, Sulzer stated his fundamental thesis this way:

“Obedience is so important that all education is actually nothing other than learning how to obey.”

Sulzer elaborates:

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. Annette Churton (The Online Library of Liberty, 2011), chap. 4, sec. 82, http://oll.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/356/Kant_0235_EBk_v6.0.pdf.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Speculative Beginning of Human History,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 54.

¹⁶ Kant, *On Education*, sec. 80. Note the significance of “*above all things*.”

“It is not very easy, however, to implant obedience in children. It is quite natural for the child’s soul to want to have a will of its own, and things that are not done correctly in the first two years will be difficult to rectify thereafter. One of the advantages of these early years is that then force and compulsion can be used. Over the years, children forget everything that happened to them in early childhood. If their wills can be broken at this time, they will never remember afterwards that they had a will, and for this very reason the severity that is required will not have any serious consequences.”¹⁷

Much of Kant’s writing on education reads like a gloss upon Sulzer’s views. How will the students learn obedience given their natural unruliness and tendency to badness? The solution is that parents and teachers must impose structure upon them. There must be, Kant argues,

“a certain plan, and certain rules, in everything, and these must be strictly adhered to. For instance, they must have set times for sleep, for work, and for pleasure, and these times must be neither shortened nor lengthened.”¹⁸

However, of course, children will be childish and often disobedient. Consequently, punishment is an essential part of education:

“Every transgression in a child is a want of obedience, and this brings punishment with it.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Johann Georg Sulzer, *Versuch von der Erziehung und Unterweisung der Kinder (An Essay on the Education and Instruction of Children)*, quoted in Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 8–14, <http://www.nospank.net/fyog5.htm> (accessed July 30, 2019).

¹⁸ Kant, *On Education*, sec. 83.

¹⁹ Kant, *On Education*, sec. 83. Compare St. Augustine: “It is evident that the free play of curiosity is a more powerful spur to learning these things than is fear-ridden coercion; yet in accordance with your laws, O God, coercion checks the free play of curiosity. By your laws it constrains us, from the beatings meted out by our teachers to the ordeals of the martyrs, for in accord with those laws it prescribes for us bitter draughts of salutary discipline to

Kant then follows with many paragraphs laying out a taxonomy of disobediences and the corresponding appropriate kinds of punishments.

Once again, we have a striking contrast to the new liberal approach, as expressed in Locke's words:

"I am very apt to think, that great severity of punishment does but very little good; nay, great harm in education: and I believe it will be found, that, cæteris paribus, those children who have been most chastised, seldom make the best men."²⁰

But we should not overstate the harshness of Kant's system, as even he recognized the often brutal strictness of the traditional education, and, as a man with one foot in the modern world, he wants to soften its effect to some degree:

"Children should sometimes be released from the narrow constraint of school, otherwise their natural joyousness will soon be quenched."²¹

Yet even the compromise statement gives an indication of Kant's image of what proper school experience will be like: school is a place that quenches any joy one might have.

It is again worth quoting Locke for the contrast:

"I have always had a fancy, that learning might be made a play and recreation to children; and that they might be brought to desire to be taught, if it were proposed to them as a thing of honour, credit, delight, and recreation, or as a reward for doing something else, and if they were never chid or corrected for the neglect of it."²²

recall us from the venomous pleasure which led us away from you." *The Confessions*, ed. David Vincent Meconi, S.J., trans. Maria Boulding (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), bk. 1, chap. 14.

²⁰ Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," sec. 43.

²¹ Kant, *On Education*, sec. 88.

²² Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," sec. 148. A footnote-worthy contrast also is worth making over the place of the arts, including dance and literature. When Locke turns to curricular matters, dance instruction

We thus have so far, at a high level of abstraction, a two-way debate between a premodern authoritarian educational philosophy system—with advocates stretching across the centuries from Plato to Augustine to Kant—and a modern liberal educational philosophy with its roots also ancient thinkers but developed systematically in the generations from Montaigne to Galileo to Locke.

A table captures the essentialized points of contrast.

Premodern authoritarian education	Modern Liberal Education
Obedience	Independence
Elevate the mind and devalue the body	Mind and body equally important
Morally bad and sinful	Morally blank slate
Children naturally opposed to learning	Children naturally curious
Learning as painful	Learning as pleasurable
Duty	Pursuit of happiness
Compulsion	Choice
Imposed discipline	Self-discipline
Punishment regularly applied	Punishment de-emphasized
Censorship	Open publishing and discussion
Emphasis upon theoretical	Emphasize integrating theory and practice

is among the very first items he mentions. Kant, in part due to his Pietist upbringing with its prohibitions upon imagery and morally-suspect physical activities, mentions dance only disapprovingly (sec. 51 and 59) and states that children should not be allowed to read novels (sec. 69).

5. The Postmodern Challenge to Both Premodern and Modern Liberal Education

We now turn to postmodernism, the sprawling intellectual and cultural movement that began in the second half of the twentieth century. Postmodernism is a critical movement based upon a fundamental rejection of *both* the modern and the premodern. Consequently, it casts itself as rejecting *both* traditional authoritarian education *and* liberal education and as calling for a fundamentally distinct third option.

What could a fundamental third option be?

One element is *cognitive*—the debate over whether knowledge is achieved through rational or non-rational methods. But what if knowledge of any sort is impossible and all we have are subjective stories we happen to believe? Another element is *moral*—the debate over whether objective value is found in this life or in an afterlife. But what if no genuine value exists, and all is merely amoral power struggles? Yet another element is about *human identity*—the debate about whether individuals are defined by the possession of a unique God-given soul or by the choices they each make on their own. But what if no individuality actually exists, and humans are constructs of their social environments? And another element is *political*—the debate about whether education should teach one to accept one's place in a feudal hierarchy or prepare one for living a free and self-responsible life. But what if we reject hierarchy and freedom and substitute a radical equality? Most major philosophical debates are three-way affairs, not two-way, and postmodernism represents a consistent third alternative.

Emphasizing the *post-* prefix: postmodernism situates itself historically as *after* the modern world, and it situates itself intellectually as *rejecting* or going *beyond* the intellectual principles that animated the modern world, just as those modern principles were an earlier intellectual rejection of premodernism.

The roots of the postmodern challenge were laid by two counter-modern thinkers who were disturbed deeply by modernity's revolution. Kant's philosophy is both a reactionary defense of traditional faith and duty—and a sophisticated critique of modernism

that lays foundation for postmodernism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is well known in education circles for his *Émile* (1762), but his collectivized and emotionalized philosophy is also significant to the future developments that feed into postmodernism.

That long series of developments from the 1750s to the 1950s includes Karl Marx's strong-versus-weak exploitation theory,²³ Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectival power-politics,²⁴ John Dewey's pragmatic assimilation of the individual to the group,²⁵ and Martin Heidegger and the other Existentialists' emotionalized anxiety, dread, and disquiet.²⁶ (See my *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* for the intellectual history.²⁷)

²³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: "In one word, for exploitation, veiled by [feudalism's] religious and political illusions, it [modernism's capitalism] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 475.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche: "Here one must think profoundly to the very basis and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation". *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), sec. 259.

²⁵ John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) on how individuals become part of the community: "Individuals do not even compose a social group because they all work for a common end. The parts of a machine work with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community." *Democracy and Education* (Project Gutenberg, 2015), chap. 1, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm>.

²⁶ On "the fundamental mood of anxiety" [Angst], see Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" in *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: New American Library, 1975), pp. 242–264.

²⁷ Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, expanded edition (New Berlin, Wisconsin: Scholargy Publishing, 2004).

6. What Postmodernism Rejects

According to modernism, the defining and dominant themes of the world it has created, if boiled down to eight, are these:

There are *objective* truths about the world, and it is possible for us to acquire knowledge of them by observation, reasoning, and, in the difficult cases, a fully sophisticated scientific method.

The fruits of *science* and *technology* can be developed and enjoyed by all, and that great advancements in knowledge and well-being have been made and will continue to be made.

The reason that makes possible knowledge is *universal*: every human has this capacity and we all live in the same world, so through a process of discovery, debate, discussion, and publication, we can come to agreement upon a set of universal truths about the way the world works, including moral and political truths about human values and rights.

The modernists emphasize *individualism*—that individuals have their own lives to live and their own happiness to pursue. So a progressive emancipation of all of the human population is an important goal.

Modernists believe that *justice* is an objective, definable, and universal principle, and that we should be able to develop a democratic-republican political and legal system that consistently achieves justice.

Modernists emphasize *equality*, particularly against the feudalism that divides people into groups and classes based on sexuality, religion, or other dimensions.

Free-market capitalism as an economic system leaves individuals free to run their own lives economically, to control their own property, and as the most successful economic system of the modern world.

Progress is a realistic ideal. Modernists optimistically believe that by taking seriously all of the above—reason, individualism, a commitment to freedom, equality, and justice, and the institutionalizing

them socially—we can solve all of the world’s problems. Humans can progress and achieve happiness in their lives.

The postmodern claim is that the entire modernist narrative is wrong—and that it is a self-congratulatory patting-oneself-on-the-back story that modernists tell to self-justify their system.

Suppose we take, for example, modernism’s political liberalism. The modern world prides itself on its commitment to freedom for individuals, its commitment to extending the franchise, and to eliminating many various arbitrary social barriers. Postmodernist reject this assessment—especially, they will argue, if we look at anybody who is not a white, male, or ethnically Anglo-Saxon. Modern society is still dominated by sexism—males dominating females—by racism, with whites as a group dominating non-whites as a group—and by ethnocentrism, with powerful ethnicities dominating weaker ethnicities, and so forth. As Henry Giroux phrases it,

“Within the discourse of modernity, the Other not only sometimes ceases to be a historical agent, but is often defined within totalizing and universalistic theories that create a transcendental rational white, male, Eurocentric subject that both occupies the centers of power while simultaneously appearing to exist outside time and space.”²⁸

Or take modernism’s economic claim that capitalism has generated huge amounts of wealth and extended liberty and property rights. Certainly, there has been a great deal of wealth generated, but postmodernists argue that Rousseau and Marx were essentially right: we have an economic system that is characterized by a small group of rich people at the top who control of most of society’s wealth and who use it to advantage themselves at the expense of everyone else.

Regarding technology, modernists tell a good-news story about innovative technologies—airplanes, X-ray machines, antibiotics, entertainment devices, and so on. But the postmodern argument is that

²⁸ Henry Giroux, “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity,” in *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*, ed. Henry Giroux (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 220.

technology is in fact damaging human relationships with each other. We have nuclear weapons and other high-tech military devices, and ultimately that means some human beings will exterminate large numbers of other human beings—or that these weapons will be tools that the rich and powerful will use to keep the others under threat. Also these technologies—our ability to drive our own cars, have central heating, fly anywhere in the world—are ultimately ruining the environment. The modern world is self-destroying, but nonetheless it talks a pretty story about environmental beautification and pretending to be green.

Or take the modern scientific institutions: many postmodernists will claim that scientific ways of thinking about the world—with its emphasis on reason, experiment, analysis, mathematics—is merely one way of thinking about the world. Perhaps white males are proficient at science, but there are other ways of thinking about the world, and we should not require all people to think the way that white males do. Consequently, modernism's science is often an intellectual imperialism by making everybody bow down before science and those with scientific credentials. Scientific claims are eclipsing various other ways of human beings trying to come to know the world and themselves. Penny Strange, for example, hopes for

“an escape from the patriarchal science in which the conquest of nature is a projection of sexual dominance.”²⁹

Consider also modern individualism: postmodernists will argue it is a mask for what is really an ongoing group conflict. Human beings are defined by their cultural identities—their economic backgrounds, their learned sexual gender roles, their racial groups, and the technological environments they find themselves. Consequently, humans are not fundamentally individuals but rather are dissolved by the forces of modernity—what Fredric Jameson calls “the death of the subject”³⁰—so modernist rhetoric about being our own selves and thinking independently is a fraud used to cover group conflicts.

²⁹ Penny Strange, “It’ll Make a Man of You,” quoted in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change*, ed. Michael Kaufman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 59.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

Finally, and most fundamentally problematic, the postmodernists will target modernism's emphasis on reason's competence and our ability objectively to come to know the world. The claims of reason have been revealed to be a fraud. In Foucauldian formulation:

“It is meaningless to speak in the name of—or against—Reason, Truth, or Knowledge.”³¹

Postmodernism takes skepticism seriously and reaches relativistically subjectivist conclusions. Reason of course can generate many stories—but they are merely stories. All we have socially is a number of competing narratives, and these narratives are subjective creations—in most cases group-subjective creations. None of them can claim to be the true account of the way the world really is.

Instead, the “truth”—if we can use language of “truth” in postmodernism—is a cynical truth that the world is really governed by power and conflict. Rather than a happy-ever-after story of progress that the modernists want to tell—the world is an ongoing series of zero-sum battles—winners versus losers, this group versus that group, amoral power struggles, and so on without end.

The modernist claims of reason have been shown, by the time we get to twentieth-century philosophy, postmodernists argue, to be fatally flawed—just as the claims of mysticism and faith in the earlier, premodern era were shown to be fatally flawed. We are amidst the next revolution.

7. The Postmodern Philosophical Alternative to Modernism

Consequently, a consistent suspicion about *both* the claims of mystical faith and the claims of reason emerge in postmodernism as a thoroughgoing skepticism. Using the standard postmodern language: all we have are *narratives*. Any society has any number of competing

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 15.

³¹ Todd May, *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 2.

narratives, and every group believes that its particular narrative is “right.” But there is no way to step outside of any of the stories that we have come to believe and to judge them objectively against each other or against any sort of independent world. There is no meta-stance that we can take and no one true meta-narrative, so all we are left with is competing, relative, group-defined narratives. Our narratives are *socially subjective*.

This implies metaphysical *anti-realism*. If we are skeptical about all narratives, then that will include any metaphysical narratives. One of great metaphysical battles historically has been between those who believe in the existence of God and those who are naturalistic. But both of them make the claim that there is a true account of reality. They simply disagree over whether reality, however it is conceived, ultimately is only the natural world or the natural world plus a supernatural world. But as skeptics, the postmodernists argue that there is no such thing as a true account of reality. That is to say, they are *anti-realistic*: no “true” account of reality can be given. Naturalism and supernaturalism are equally subjective narratives. It is meaningless to try to address metaphysical questions and come up with a “true” account of the way the world works.

With respect to human nature, the postmodernists first contrast themselves to the premodernist claims about the nature of mankind, e.g., that there is an inborn guilt that all humans bear. This sin is seen as inhering in individuals, and each individual’s primary responsibility is to choose to form the right kind of relationship with God. By contrast, moderns see individuals as morally *tabula rasa* creatures with independent capacities that they can develop for good or for evil.

But in contrast to both, strongly asserted in postmodernism is the notion that human beings are fundamentally members of groups: racial groups, gender groups, ethnic groups, economic groups, and these group memberships define and determine who one is. Postmodernists are mostly environmental determinists of a collectivist variety—that is, each human is an overlapping and shifting set of racial, sexual, ethnic, and other group identities. Richard Rorty writes

of our socially conditioned “ethnocentric” predicament: “we must, in practice, privilege our own group.”³²

When it comes to the ethics, postmodernism emphasizes conflict and oppression as characteristic of modernity, with stronger groups beating up and taking advantage of the weaker groups. Socially, writes Millicent Bell, “all unions are doomed to be compromises of dominion and submission.”³³ Yet one should have compassion for those groups that have been typically on the losing end of these various conflicts, and use that empathetic compassion to lead to an identification with those groups struggles and fight with them to end their oppression.³⁴

In politics, postmoderns reject modernism’s free-market democratic-republicanism as well as the remnants of premodern feudalism. Replacing that is an emphasis on egalitarianism as an ideal against which we should measure social progress. The modern world is not actually characterized by egalitarianism, but egalitarianism, nonetheless, should be a kind of regulative standard guiding our thinking. All of the major postmodernists are advocates of socialist politics and economics.³⁵

Therefore, the postmodern strategy is to focus its efforts *critically*, that is to say, negatively against modern society. Modern

³² Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 29.

³³ Millicent Bell, “The Bostonian Story,” *Partisan Review* 52, no. 2 (1985): p. 113.

³⁴ Rorty especially urges “empathy” and “sensitivity” to the suffering groups—within the limits of our ethnocentric predicament.

³⁵ Taking Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty as the major representatives. Here is Derrida on the significance of socialism to his deconstruction: “Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*” [italics in the original]. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 115. Foucault was a member of the French Communist Party in the early 1950s and later became a Maoist. Derrida did not join the Communist Party, but he published in journals that were communist-friendly. Lyotard was also worked with Marxist groups. Rorty was not a Marxist but rather a social-democrat who stakes out of position at the far-left end of the social-democratic political spectrum.

society is a multi-dimensional battleground that privileges *some* groups at the expense of other groups. White people are at the top of the heap, and anybody who is non-white is marginalized. Males are increasingly at the top, and females are pushed down the hierarchy. In Western nations and those affected by colonialism, the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant ethnicities have become privileged. Modern society also privileges a heterosexuality, saying that males and females should be in monogamist marital relationships; so various alternative sexualities including homosexuality are marginalized. Moreover, environmentally we humans have privileged ourselves as the most important species, seeing all other species are merely commodities for our use, which leads us to exterminate them, use them, and enslave them however we want.

So as postmodern *critical* theorists, we must oppose the sunny-skies-unlimited-optimism that is characteristic of the modern world. Postmodernism is an intellectual attitude with a tightly integrated emotional attitude that tends strongly toward *pessimism* and *cynicism*.

The modern world tells many good-news stories about itself. It prides itself on certain accomplishments: liberty, equality, progress, and the like. The postmodernist's perspective is that we should see all such stories as rhetorical devices that strong groups use in the power struggle to position themselves and advance their groups at the expense of others. Therefore, our job as postmodernist critical thinkers is to be *suspicious* about the cover story and to *tear off its masks* to expose that it is a rhetorical device. And we should always look for the underlying social reality—the darker story about power conflicts, about groups using any tools, including rhetorical and philosophical tools, to advance their interests at the expense of other groups. That darkness is characteristically the center of gravity for postmodernism.

A table summarizes the contrasts.

Modern themes	Postmodern themes
Objectivity possible	Social subjectivism
Science and technology as universally beneficial	Science as partial narrative

Reason is universal	Reason is socially relative
Individualism	Collectivism
Justice	Power
Equality before the law	Exploitation
Free-market capitalism	Egalitarian socialism
Progress	Cynicism

8. Postmodernism's Revolution in Education

What does this imply for *education*?

The postmodern world of education is a struggle for power, and all participants must enter the fray. In his *Criticism and Social Change*, Frank Lentricchia puts it bluntly: postmodernism “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.”³⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty makes the same point focusing more specifically upon women and Third World peoples: the academy and the classroom are

“political and cultural sites that represent accommodations and contestations over knowledge by differently empowered social constituencies. Thus teachers and students produce, reinforce, recreate, resist, and transform ideas about race, gender, and difference in the classroom.”³⁷

There are many such competing ideas, but none of them can claim truth. As Henry Giroux reminds us in “Border Pedagogy as Postmodernist Resistance,” postmodernism has rejected both premodern-religion-friendly and modern-science-friendly philosophies:

³⁶ Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 12.

³⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s,” in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry A Giroux and Peter McClaren (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 147.

“It does this by refusing forms of knowledge and pedagogy wrapped in the legitimizing discourse of the sacred and the priestly; its rejecting universal reason as a foundation for human affairs; claiming that all narratives are partial; and performing a critical reading on all scientific, cultural, and social texts as historical and political constructions.”³⁸

Yet even though no group’s “knowledge” is truer than any other group’s, some groups dominate the academic world. Especially one group has the central space in education—the “transcendental rational white, male, Eurocentric subject”—and the privileging of that group has meant the diminishing all of the other groups:

“Read against this Eurocentric transcendental subject, the Other is shown to lack any redeeming community traditions, collective voice, or historical weight.”³⁹

Students learn that they must think and be like white-male-Europeans in order to gain acceptance within current education and to be considered worthy of its fruits. But what that really means, Giroux continues, is that

“students who have to disavow their own racial heritage in order to succeed are ... being positioned to accept subject positions that are the source of power for a white, dominant culture.”⁴⁰

Therefore, the postmodernist educator must resist and oppose the tendency of modernism to assimilate everybody to one group’s way of thinking.

This requires a revolution—an institutional restructuring of higher education—with many components.

³⁸ Henry Giroux, “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity” in *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*, ed. Henry Giroux (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 245–246.

³⁹ Giroux, “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy,” p. 220.

⁴⁰ Giroux, “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy,” p. 251.

Under modern liberal education, one expectation has been that all individuals can learn together, no matter what gender, race, or ethnicity, and that a healthy collision of different perspectives helps everyone learn. But, postmodernists argue, the mixing of dominant and minority groups leads to the silencing and the suppression of minority groups. So institutionally it is necessary to create separate academic fields for the disempowered groups—women, blacks, Third-World peoples. Specialized courses, departments, and centers for those groups alone to partake of will, Mohanty urges, support their

“attempts to resist incorporation and appropriation by providing a space for historically silenced peoples to construct knowledge. These knowledges have always been fundamentally oppositional.”⁴¹

That separation will enable those marginalized groups to become empowered and fight back against the dominant powers.

Another component of the restructuring is to emphasize the postmodern rejection of education as a *pursuit of truth* and its replacement with the view that education is primarily about the *training of social and political activists*. Following Lentricchia, the educator’s task is to help students “spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one’s time.”⁴² The teacher’s purpose is first to show students realize that they live in a pathological system that is marked by power struggles in which the weaker are constantly oppressed, exploited, and taken advantage of by strong groups. One’s job as a teacher is next to cultivate the students’ identification with those oppressed and exploited groups—which will then make the students into the revolutionaries who will overcome modern society and bring forth a postmodern one.

That will enable those oppressed Others, in Giroux’s words, “to both reclaim and remake their histories, voices, and visions as part

⁴¹ Mohanty, “On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s,” p. 147.

⁴² Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, p. 12.

of a wider struggle to change those material and social relations that deny radical pluralism.”⁴³

9. Postmodern Teacher Training

Another component of the restructuring focuses on the training of teachers. All of the above means that postmodernism needs the right kind of teachers, which implies that it must first transform the teachers who will be the cultural workers who go into the schools and transform the next generation of students. Therefore, we need to remake the teachers-to-be who are coming into the higher-education teacher-training programs.

Particularly we must take up the challenge of *re-training* teachers-to-be who—by the time they get to us professors of education—have already been raised in modernist society. Having being so raised, they likely have internalized the image of the white-male-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant as the proper way of being. Most teachers in contemporary Western society are themselves white, and most of them have been conditioned to think in terms of liberal capitalism. So they must learn to become self-reflectively critical of their own upbringing and their own identities. They need to be taught not to think of themselves as training people to be cogs in the modern capitalist machine. To the extent that they do so, they will become teachers who are more sensitive to other groups’ ways—non-white ways of thinking about things, non-human-centered ways of thinking about things, non-heterosexual ways of thinking about things, and so on.

As Giroux phrases it,

“This suggests that to the degree that teachers make the construction of their own voices, histories, and ideologies problematic they become more attentive to Otherness as a deeply political and pedagogical issue.”⁴⁴

So postmodernism makes teacher reeducation a priority.

⁴³ Giroux, “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy,” p. 251.

⁴⁴ Giroux, “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy,” p. 253–54.

The University of Minnesota provides an example. Its College of Education and Human Development empowered a Race, Culture, Class, and Gender Task Group. In its report, the task group's contingent of postmodernist professors proposed a requirement that all teachers to be certified by the University of Minnesota agree to a postmodern intellectual framework. Teacher candidates must demonstrate that they reject the language of "The American Dream" and the "myth of meritocracy." That is, they must reject the modernist story—the idea that if we free individuals and treat people as individuals and eliminate legal obstacles—then with encouragement and freedom anybody can achieve his or her own dream, achieve happiness. That is the modern story that America is the land of opportunity open to all. Instead, the report explains:

“aspiring teachers must be able ‘to explain how institutional racism works in schools’” and “the history of demands for assimilation to white, middle-class, Christian meanings and values, [and] history of white racism, with special focus on current colorblind ideology.”⁴⁵

With the establishment of a new postmodern mission and the corresponding re-training of teachers, the rest of educational practice can then be re-cast along postmodern lines:

- (1) Curriculum matters, including decisions about what texts will and will not be read,
- (2) Speech policies within the classroom and on campus, including which views can be expressed and which views cannot,
- (3) Guest speaker invitations and disinvitations,
- (4) Testing and other methods of evaluating student performance, and
- (5) Hiring policies for new teachers and administrators.

⁴⁵ Katherine Kersten, “At U, future teachers may be reeducated. They must denounce exclusionary biases and embrace the vision. (Or else.)” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, December 2, 2009, <http://www.startribune.com/opinion/70662162.html> (accessed April 2, 2015).

10. The Future of Liberal Education

It is a truism to say that education is politicized.

Yet a key purpose of this survey essay is to show that political battles over education are not fundamentally about politics. They are driven by philosophical commitments. The reason why the policy battles are so heated is not only that the practical-implementation stakes are high but that each practical implementation affirms or denies an entire philosophy of life.

Educators are thoughtful and passionate human beings, and they are always sensitive to whether any given particular policy coheres or conflicts with their deep philosophical commitments. Yet often those philosophical commitments are semi-implicit and semi-articulated. So a first recommendation for educators is to make explicit those philosophical issues and becoming informed about them. This would require making the philosophy of education a more significant portion of the formal- and self-education of future teachers.

A second purpose of this essay has been to show that the philosophical battle is a three-way debate on the major issues. To be sure, this essay has presented premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism as idealized types, though I have included major and representative thinkers for each type and let them speak in their own words. And certainly within those idealized types there are variations within each camp and continuing attempts by some to blend them. The adequacy of that categorization itself is part of the ongoing debate. Yet there is a rhetorical tendency by all participants to see their enemy as monolithic—for premoderns to see their foes as those who've fallen from the one true way, for postmoderns to cast all of their enemies as traditionalists, and for moderns to label their opponents as authoritarians.

A third purpose is to address the question of how education should proceed given that (1) the education-policy debates are not settled and are not likely ever to be settled, and (2) the underlying philosophical debates are many, deep, and also unsettled. I will not now present and defend a position on all of those philosophical

debates, so absent a philosophical treatise, I can answer the question only in terms of my own liberal-education commitments.

The purpose of education is to equip a young person for real life. That requires theoretical knowledge conjoined with practicality, book learning integrated with actionable skills, ready content and methods to solve unfamiliar problems, an awareness of the achievements of the past and the forward-looking abilities to discover the new.

And part of real life is a social world with its current intellectual landscape characterized by vigorous and wide-ranging debate about all of the major questions of human significance. That means an educated person needs to know the full range of the debate on all major controversial issues.

In the face of controversy, there is an asymmetry of purpose in the three approaches to education. Premodern education has historically tended to slip into an authoritarian indoctrination. Postmodern education has not been any different, often slipping into “politically-correct” indoctrination. Both easily devolve from education in the full sense to training in the narrow sense of mere followers and mere activists.

For liberal education, the imperative is different.

Liberal education is the education suitable for free individuals in a free society. That requires the development of individual judgment. It requires the developed capacity for self-responsible action that respects the equal right of others to do the same. And all of that requires *informed* judgment on the many great and difficult challenges of life, from matters about love, friendship, and family, to matters economic, religious, political, and aesthetic. Free thinkers must know their own commitments and the arguments for them—but to make those commitments well they must also know the arguments against them, and the arguments for and against the other major positions. There are no shortcuts possible in liberal education.

John Stuart Mill is regularly quoted on this point:

“He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”

Less often attended to are the following sentences, with their implications for hiring policies:

“Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. . . . He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form.”⁴⁶

So a standing policy for education should be to insist upon true *intellectual* diversity in the curriculum and the faculty.

Professors can and should have something to profess. Yet their first responsibility is to ensure that their students are informed and in a position to assess independently what the professor is professing. Any self-respecting teacher will cover all of the major arguments. In addition, any self-respecting education institution will ensure intellectual diversity among its teachers and professors.

Our only method of making progress on matters of controversy is to shun all forms of coercion, all the way from the subtle indoctrination of young minds to the outright physical intimidation of all.

Liberal educators must affirm, in Thomas Jefferson’s words, “the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Project Gutenberg, 2011), chap. 2, pp. 67–68, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm> (accessed April 2, 2015).

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman, Monticello, 24 June 1826, from Library of Congress, *Thomas Jefferson Exhibition*, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/214.html> (accesses July 30, 2019).