PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 1993

POSTMODERNISM, PEDAGOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, philosophers of education have been paying a great deal of attention to trends within philosophy which may be loosely referred to as "postmodernist." In this paper, I wish to examine some of these trends and note some implications they have both for pedagogy in schools and for teaching and research in philosophy of education.

It may be presumptuous of me to talk on this vast topic. But I wish to assure you that I am not doing so just because, as PES President for the year, I have a captive audience. I would have been this presumptuous even if my paper had been refereed! But then, of course, it probably would not have been accepted. Today, then, you are seeing academic freedom at work. I hope the results are better than they often are when academics are given freedom.

I should say at the outset that I am not an "expert" on postmodernism. However, postmodernist doctrines and practices kept intruding into my life — especially as an attender of PES conferences and a reader of graduate student theses and course papers — to the point where I could no longer ignore them. Also, from my little "site" in the academic world — some might call it a hind-site but I prefer to see it as a fore-sight — I see enough problems with postmodernism, and enough misplaced criticisms of it, that I am inclined to say "to heck with the experts" and just wade in, a response which postmodernists officially at least must accept, given their avowed rejection of the concept of an expert.

In discussing postmodernism I will, as a non-expert, focus especially on secondary sources, the literature which for me is the most accessible and with which I have been able to become most familiar. I will also give a large amount of attention to one writer, namely Richard Rorty, mainly because among self-proclaimed postmodernists he is one of the more theoretical, which suits my purposes in this paper. Some might say that Rorty's theoretical approach means that he is less of a postmodernist; but to me it means that he is a more open postmodernist, willing to talk about his methodological and substantive assumptions.

Philosophical postmodernism is a development of which one might say that, like many other things, it has done more good than harm and it has done an awful lot of harm! As with most philosophical movements, it is perhaps best viewed as a rich quarry in which we can go searching for gems of insight while not feeling obliged to take home all the rubble. In this paper I will be concentrating mainly on the gems, looking at the positive side of postmodernism. This should not be interpreted as indicating that I *am* a postmodernist; however, given the trenchant criticisms of modernism developed by postmodernism, I would equally not wish to be seen as a modernist.

WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

Postmodernism is not just a philosophical movement: it is found also, for example, in architecture, the graphic arts, dance, music, literature, and literary theory.[1] As a general cultural phenomenon, it

has such features as the challenging of convention, the mixing of styles, tolerance of ambiguity, emphasis on diversity, acceptance (indeed celebration) of innovation and change, and stress on the constructedness of reality.

Philosophical postmodernism, in turn, does not represent a single point of view. There are progressive postmodernists and conservative ones,[2] postmodernists of “resistance” and postmodernists of “reaction,”[3] strongly reform-minded postmodernists and others who concentrate on pricking bubbles. There are bleeding hearts and loose cannons. There is constant debate among so-called postmodernists about how a true postmodernist should approach life and inquiry and hence what qualifies as postmodernism.

The names most often associated with postmodernism are those of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty. Theoretical approaches most commonly seen as postmodernist are deconstruction(ism), poststructuralism, and neopragmatism.[4] However, a case could be made for adding other names, e.g., Nietzsche, the later Wittgenstein, Winch, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Kuhn; and other theoretical approaches, e.g., perspectivalism, postanalytic philosophy, and hermeneutics. Even the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas, with its affinity with hermeneutics and its communicative ethics, has clear postmodern elements, despite Habermas’s insistence that he is furthering the project of modernity rather than rejecting it. I mention all these names and movements not to impress or confuse, but to show the great overlap between different schools of thought and the pervasiveness of the postmodernist outlook. I feel that in discussing postmodernism we have often spent too much time searching for a neat central core. What is needed rather is to expose ourselves to and respond to a whole family of related outlooks and approaches.

Overlap can be found not only between contemporary theoretical approaches but also between these and ones of earlier historical periods. This is the view of Lyotard who, according to John McGowan, holds that “postmodern and modern cannot be distinguished from each other temporally…they exist simultaneously, referring to two different responses to modernity.”[5] Rorty takes a similar position, questioning whether the shifts associated with postmodernism “are more than the latest moments of a historicization of philosophy which has been going on continuously since Hegel.”[6] Further, Rorty thinks that these changes were “pretty well complete in Dewey.”[7] He does not see Foucault, for example, as any more radical in the postmodern manner than Dewey. He says: “I do not see any difference between Dewey and Foucault on narrowly philosophical grounds. The only difference I see between them is the presence or lack of social hope which they display.”[8]

There is of course something odd about seeing Hegel, Nietzsche, or even Dewey as *post*modernists, given that they wrote within the modern era and in many ways expressed its spirit. Some writers prefer a more chronologically correct definition of postmodernism. John McGowan, for example, sides with Frederic Jameson in expressing the view that “postmodernism as a temporal term designates a (very recent) historical period that is to be identified by a set of characteristics that operate across the whole historical terrain.”[9] However, despite the awkwardness, I prefer to interpret postmodernism as embracing many approaches and insights which were around before the last few decades and even before the present century. Personally, I feel I have been something of a postmodernist most of my life, even before my exposure to postmodernist writings (I can show you chapter and verse if you wish). And in terms of the history of philosophy, I think the notion that these are entirely new developments exaggerates the extent to which human thought and behavior change, and leaves us wondering how people in earlier centuries could have been so dense as to be completely taken in by the ideas of Plato, Descartes, and Kant. Indeed, it is a good question whether these gentlemen were completely taken in by them themselves: as we know, philosophers often get carried away, and then feel compelled to defend what they have said.

For these various reasons, then, the view of postmodernism I am employing in this paper is a rather broad one. In opting for breadth, however, I am not alone. Some general philosophers, such as Rorty

(as we have seen) and Richard Bernstein, take a similar tack, as do many educational theorists — for example, Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, and William Doll.[10]

AN OUTLOOK INFLUENCED BY POSTMODERNISM

Accounts of postmodernism abound today in the literature of both general philosophy and educational theory.[11] Accordingly, I will not here provide a general exposition of postmodernism but rather, after the brief statement of a particular theme, will go straight to an integration of it (usually in a modified form) into my own proposed approach. I hope, however, that such a treatment will, incidentally, help clarify the nature of postmodernism.

The understanding of postmodernism I will assume here is a rough composite of ideas from Rorty (especially) and Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault. It should be stressed, however, that many of these ideas have appeared in other schools of thought, both historical and contemporary, e.g., Marxism, feminism, critical pedagogy. I have chosen to focus on these particular writers because they provide a convenient point of departure; and also because discussing them helps us come to terms with the dominant philosophical tradition, which we have some responsibility to try to influence.

I have called what I am presenting here an “outlook,” but that term is rather too cognitive in its connotations. The word “attitude” is sometimes seen as more appropriate for what postmodernists are talking about. The issues in question also have a strong methodological component: they have to do with an “approach” to inquiry and life in general. One might almost say that what we are concerned with here is a *way of life*, which includes cognitive, affective, and methodological components.

Reality

Postmodernists have helped us see that reality is more complex than we had imagined. It does not exist objectively, “out there,” simply to be mirrored by our thoughts. Rather, it is in part a human creation. We mold reality in accordance with our needs, interests, prejudices, and cultural traditions.

But reality is not *entirely* a human construction, “made by us, not given to us,”[12] as postmodernists have claimed. Knowledge is the product of an *interaction* between our ideas about the world and our experience of the world. As E.T. Gendlin says, “the assumption is overstated, that concepts and social forms entirely determine…experience…. [W]hat the forms work-*in*, talks back.”[13] Of course, all experience is influenced by our concepts: we “see” things — even physical things — through cultural lenses. But this influence is not all-controlling; again and again reality surprises us (as modern science has shown) in ways that compel us to modify our ideas.[14] We thought the world was flat, for example, but were obliged eventually to change our minds.

This view may appear dangerously close to Kant’s notion that knowledge is a product of interaction between mental structures and sense data. However, whereas Kant’s mental structures were innate and universal and his sense data natural and pure, I see culture and experience as already deeply infected by each other. They are interdependent, and differ only in degree of determination by human agency.

A corollary of this interactive view of reality is that there is no sharp fact-value distinction. All factual statements reflect the values they serve, and all value beliefs are conditioned by factual assumptions. There is again a difference of *degree* which enables us to talk of “facts” and “values.” But what we call facts are only somewhat *less* value-determined: they are not independent of values. This ties in with Foucault’s postmodernist notion that knowledge and power cannot be separated, since knowledge embodies the values of those who are powerful enough to create and disseminate it.[15] Foucault has perhaps an overly conspiratorial view of knowledge, but the link with people’s interests which he identifies cannot be denied.

Change and Difference

Because reality is in part culture dependent, it changes over time, as cultures do, and varies from community to community. Knowledge is neither eternal nor universal. Once again, however, we should not exaggerate this point, as postmodernists have done. There are "enduring interests" (Dewey) and "tentative frameworks" (Charles Taylor) which point to a *degree* of continuity; and there are *some* commonalities (again qualified) from culture to culture and probably across the whole human race.

To deny continuity and commonality where it in fact exists, as postmodernists tend to do, is just as irrational and unpragmatic as to see knowledge as eternal and universal. It betrays an absolutist attachment to such values as innovation, originality, and diversity. Furthermore, it can have unfortunate practical consequences, since it leaves people without an adequate basis for daily living. It is one thing to reject the idea of a fixed, universal foundation to reality, quite another to claim that no useful guidelines can ever be identified.

Taking note of the postmodernists' cautions, however, we should be careful with generalizations: they can be deceptive. Behind a general formulation such as "all humans are rational" or "people pursue pleasure" there is usually a great diversity of realities and interpretations. We should try to become more aware of this, and also more often explicitly qualify claims with words such as "some," "many," "most," "sometimes," "often." But even qualified generalizations are of great value in everyday life.

Metaphysics

Postmodernism is often seen by its proponents as bringing an end to metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and so forth, on the ground that these types of discourse assume a fixed, universal reality and method of inquiry. However, in my view it is better to shift to a modified conception of these fields rather than do away with them completely. Precisely because we live in a changing, fragmented, "postmodern" world, we need whatever stability we can find. And inquiry into general intellectual, moral, and other patterns — limited and tentative though they may be — is a legitimate form of "metaphysics."

An irony of the postmodernist movement is that, despite itself, it is centrally concerned with what we can say of a general nature about reality. I would even say that it has led to a massive (and salutary) revival of metaphysics. Postmodernists believe they have put an end to metaphysics and have thrown the ladder away after reaching their foundationless perch. But in fact their writings are full of general assumptions about culture, human nature, values, inquiry. As Landon Beyer and Daniel Liston observe, postmodernist analyses are paradoxical, containing "standpoints without footings" and "talking about nothing."[16] Not that postmodernists always deny that this is what they do — Derrida happily admits that he "crosses out" his own claims; but to admit a fault is different from overcoming it.

The Self

Postmodernism has rightly questioned the idea of a universal, unchanging, unified self or "subject" which has full knowledge of and control over what it thinks, says, and does. It has shown that the self is strongly influenced by its surrounding culture, changes with that culture, and is fragmented like that culture. To a degree, it is not we who think, speak, and act but the culture which thinks, speaks, and acts through us. In many ways Rorty is correct when he describes "the moral self" as "a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it…constantly reweaving itself…not by reference to general criteria…but in the hit-or-miss way in which cells readjust themselves to meet the pressures of the environment."[17]

It is an exaggeration, however, to maintain that because the self is limited, conditioned, and contingent in this way it has no significance, identity, or capacities. Individuals may be no more important than cultures, but neither are they less so. Individuals are just as unified and characterizable as communities, and they have considerable (though not unlimited) capacity for self-knowledge, self-expression, and self-regulation. There is no basis for emphasizing culture or community to the neglect of individuals.

And the same may be said for specific groups within a larger culture: ethnic groups, gender categories, socio-economic classes, and so on. There is a tendency among postmodernists to emphasize these categories to the neglect of individuals. But in fact two individuals of the same national background, ethnicity, gender, religion, or the like may differ greatly. And two individuals who differ in all these respects may turn out to be “kindred spirits” who can have a close friendship, even a good marriage, and agree on most major matters. Individuals are only *in part* identifiable in terms of the various categories to which they belong.

Inquiry

Postmodernist insights require a major shift in our conception of inquiry. No longer should we see ourselves as seeking to uncover a pre-existing reality; rather, we are involved in an interactive process of knowledge *creation*. We are developing a “working understanding” of reality and life, one which suits our purposes. And because purposes and context vary from individual to individual and from group to group, what we arrive at is in part autobiographical; it reflects our “personal narrative,” our particular “site” in the world.

To some extent, then, we must question the notion of expertise. In particular fields, some people do know more than others; but the difference, insofar as it exists, is usually one of degree. So-called “experts” are often heavily dependent on “non-experts” for input if they are to arrive at sound insights; and since each individual or group’s needs and circumstances are different, “expert knowledge” cannot be simply *applied*; it must be greatly modified for a particular case. The interaction between expert and non-expert, teacher and taught, is often best seen as a dialogue or “conversation” (to use Rorty’s term), in which there is mutual influence rather than simple transmission from one to the other.

The knowledge arrived at, too, is more ambiguous and unstable than we had previously thought. It refers to probabilities rather than certainties, average effects, better rather than *the best*; and it is constantly changing as each individual or group gives a particular interpretation to it, reflecting distinctive needs and experiences. And as postmodernists have pointed out, language is well adapted to this constant “play” of interpretation. Words are not tied to fixed concepts or referents; they depend for their meaning on a whole system of words within which they are embedded, a system which changes over time and varies from one speech community or language user to another.

Inquiry must also be approached “pragmatically.”[18] We should not *insist* that reality, including human nature, take a certain form but rather accept what emerges. If altruism, for example, has to be based in part on feelings of group solidarity, then we must acknowledge that: there is no point clinging to a rationalistic view of moral motivation that cannot work.

Once again, however, we should be careful not to exaggerate these points. Postmodernists have often attacked notions of reason, means-end thinking, theory, teaching. But in fact there is a place for them, in a modified form. We must employ reason *as well as* feelings, intuitions, direct social influence, and so forth. We must think in means-end terms to some extent if we are to know what we want in life and how to achieve it. Theory, understood as a loose interconnection of qualified generalizations, is crucial for daily living. Teaching, so long as it is largely dialogical, is both possible and necessary. And so on. All of these can cause problems if they are understood too strictly and taken too seriously; but without them we would quite literally be lost.

We must also qualify the notion of a "pragmatic" approach to inquiry. While there is no external foundation to reality, no "traditional Kantian backup," as Rorty says, there *are* internal continuities which serve as important reference points. It is possible and necessary, then, to develop "theory" which explains particular phenomena in terms of these continuities. Postmodernists often display an "easy pragmatism" which, while claiming to be open and tolerant, is merely superficial, since it fails to develop and use theory of this kind; its doctrines thus become dogmatic assertions, without explanation or justification.

Forms of Scholarship

One of the slogans of postmodernism is that "there is no center," and in particular there is no central tradition of scholarship (namely Eurocentric, middle- class, predominantly male) of which other traditions — Native American, Afro-American, Islamic, feminist, working class, for example — are mere colonies. Insofar as we study traditional Western scholarship, we should be wary of its white, middle-class, male bias; and we should (if we belong to one or more other categories) approach it as equals, expecting to contribute as much as we learn. This is in line with the view of knowledge and inquiry noted earlier.

With this approach I am in agreement, but as you might expect I have some provisos. To begin with, we should not exaggerate the extent of the bias (great though it undoubtedly is) in traditional Western scholarship. There is much we can learn from such scholarship (although also much we must reject). This is because the writers in question, though white, middle- or upper-class, and male, were also *human beings*, struggling with basic issues of how humans are to survive, flourish, and find meaning in life. The bias in favor of particular ethnic, class, and gender interests is only part of the picture. Terms such as "Eurocentric" and "patriarchal" are bandied about too much, as though they described *everything* that an individual or group does, and as if every error that is made is due to the bias in question. As noted earlier, people of different races, genders, religions, or whatever may have a great deal in common. There is enormous scope for people of different categories to learn from each other's scholarship.

None of this means, however, that we should regard the Western scholarly tradition as the central one to which others merely contribute or add footnotes. Rather, white, middle-class males should just contribute along with everyone else, and any new, common tradition should be pluralistic scholarship, not simply a modification of the "mainstream."

A key point, in line with my earlier remarks about "the self," is that in addition to anti-racist, feminist, anti-agist, etc. scholarship we need *individual* scholarship: Jane Doe scholarship, José Sanchez scholarship, Shiu Chun Leung scholarship, etc. We have not taken the personal quest of individuals seriously enough: every human being is constantly questioning, observing, theorizing, trying to understand life and make the most of it in his or her own very distinctive situation. The radical democracy of postmodernism leads in this direction, but it gets waylaid because of its excessive preoccupation with cultures and speech communities. Every individual should be seen as the center of *a* scholarship — her or his own — comparing notes on equal terms with other individuals, groups, and traditions.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

There are many implications of the foregoing for educational practice, but space permits me only to outline a few of the main ones. To begin with, students in schools from an early age should be helped to see how ideas and institutions are tailored to suit people's values and interests: how, for example, a picture book or novel expresses the distinctive needs and background of the author; or how TV programming promotes life-styles which benefit commercial enterprises; or how the health professions tend to favor males over females; or how the school curriculum reflects the values of certain sectors of society. This need not involve use of technical language, or be particularly confrontational: such study can be a rather straightforward and enjoyable aspect of the school day.

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But unless we foster this kind of cultural-political understanding, we are supporting our students' continued perception of the world as value-neutral, unproblematic, and unchangeable.

Surprisingly, Rorty questions engaging in this kind of problem posing in schools. He maintains that "lower education" (primary and secondary) "is mostly a matter of socialization, of trying to inculcate a sense of citizenship." It "should aim primarily at communicating enough of what is *held to be* true by the society to which the children belong so that they can function as citizens of that society. Whether it is true or not is none of the educator's business, in his or her professional capacity."[19] However, to me this is an extraordinary and inexplicable betrayal of the main thrust of postmodernism. How can a society succeed in constantly "breaking the crust of convention," as Rorty advocates,[20] when all its school teachers and all its young people up to the age of eighteen are involved in single-minded reinforcement of convention? And how will this affect the self-image and well-being of young people who, as every parent knows, begin systematically to question our conventions from about the age of two? I agree that schools should teach students about social conventions and institutions, probably more than they do at present; but integral to that teaching should be fundamental evaluation and critique.

At the same time as we encourage the questioning of accepted "realities," however, we must help students find "foundations" for their lives, if of a less permanent kind. Lack of a sense of stability and direction is one of the major problems of contemporary culture and is a factor in today's reactionary trends in religion, politics, education, and other spheres. If we do not acknowledge this need, our anti-foundationalist teaching may backfire and at any rate may cause students (and parents) considerable distress. We should work *with* students (and parents, as far as possible) in a dialogical manner, identifying outlooks which are an appropriate combination of old and new elements. Students need to find enduring values (e.g., relational, aesthetic, occupational) and ideals (e.g., pluralistic, global, ecological) which do not contradict their experience of reality but at the same time provide an adequate basis for everyday living.

One way of putting this point is to say, as I did in Part III, that "metaphysics" is important. Schools must encourage and assist students to engage in general theorizing about reality and life. The postmodernist emphasis on concrete, local concerns is important and should be applied in education: school studies are often too abstract and of little apparent relevance. But learning should combine both the concrete and the general. The learning of isolated facts and skills can be equally boring and meaningless. It is often through the drawing of broader connections between phenomena and the exploration of their value implications that learning comes alive. And study of this more "theoretical" kind is necessary if students are to build up a comprehensive worldview and way of life that will give them the security, direction, and meaning they need.

Another set of implications for schooling has to do with the democratic and dialogical emphasis of postmodernism, its questioning of the motives of authorities and its downplaying of the role of experts. We must think increasingly in terms of "teachers and students learning together," rather than the one telling the other how to live in a "top-down" manner. This is necessary both so that the values and interests of students are taken into account, and so that the wealth of their everyday experience is made available to fellow students *and to the teacher*.

Of course, the extent to which the teacher may be regarded as an expert varies from subject to subject. In science and mathematics, for example, a teacher may well know considerably more than most of the students in the class, while in values and family life this is less obviously the case; and with respect to a particular values topic, e.g., bullying in the school yard, a student may well know more than the teacher. But even where the teacher does have greater knowledge, we should question excessive use of a teacher dominated method. Lyotard has pointed out the extent to which students today at the postsecondary level can learn from computerized data banks, which he calls "the Encyclopedia of tomorrow;"[21] and the same point could be made with respect to the elementary and secondary levels. Increasingly, teachers must help students "learn how to learn," using such

technology. One great advantage of self-directed inquiry is that through it students are more actively involved in determining what they learn and why, and thus are able to give expression to their distinctive interests and needs.

However, while I support a democratic, dialogical approach in schools, I believe that Lyotard (like another education critic, Ivan Illich, before him) underestimates the importance of the teacher in *motivating* and *facilitating* learning. The activity of teachers in structuring school studies and making learning materials available at appropriate points results in students learning a great many things *they would not otherwise learn*. It is not enough simply to give students learning skills and set them loose: most young people need ongoing encouragement and help in order to learn what they need for life in today's world. Perhaps this is simply due to a shortcoming of contemporary culture: it has made young people too dependent on adult help. Or perhaps it is the result of more basic features of human nature. But whatever the reason, so long as students need external help in order to learn, we are hiding our heads in the sand if we do not provide it. (We, on the other hand, also need help from our students in order to learn).

In democratizing education, then, we should not simply dismantle all structures and hope that something happens, but rather try to create structures that give students the support they need and allow them to make a significant input and have optimal control over their learning. While schooling should as far as possible be dialogical, it should not be a mere pooling of ignorance. To be effective, dialogue requires strong input of many kinds: information, examples, stories, feelings, ideas, theories, worldviews, and so on. The point about a democratic approach is not that structure and content are unnecessary, but that students (and teachers) should have a major say in how their learning is structured and what content is made available to them.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

There are many implications of what we have been discussing for philosophy of education, but once again I must be selective. To begin with, students of education, like school students, should be helped to see that knowledge is value dependent, culture dependent, and changeable — that we are not searching for a fixed, universal philosophy of life and education. At the same time, however, they should be helped to identify continuities and commonalities that give some stability and direction to their lives and to the practice of teaching.

One way of achieving the twofold goal of combating foundationalism and yet helping students develop modest "foundations" for life and education is to study various "forms of scholarship" — e.g., anti-racist, feminist, individual, and so on — as advocated in Part III, above. In this way students will see that theory is necessarily tailored to suit diverse group and individual needs. As I have argued, however, this does not involve denying substantial overlap between different forms of scholarship. Indeed, the exploration of what different categories of people have in common should be a major aspect of educational studies.

The philosophy of education classroom, like the school classroom, should also be strongly democratic and dialogical. In this way the energies of students will be engaged, their values respected, and their insights made available to fellow students and to professors. It is surprising how often professors of education advocate democracy for schools and yet do not practice it with their own students. If we believe in a democratic approach to inquiry we should model it ourselves, so that our students understand what we mean and are given the opportunity to develop a democratic pedagogy which they can in turn employ in schools.

Adopting a genuinely democratic and dialogical approach involves a fundamental re-thinking of the nature of philosophy — and of intellectual work in general — and of our role as professors. We should not view our research into educational theory as something that can be carried on separately — in the mind or in the study — and then used as a key to unlock the secrets of education and life. As Rorty says:

> …the intellectual…is just a special case — just somebody who does with marks and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possessions they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play and watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work.[22]

Philosophers are simply living life like everyone else, working on the same problems as everyone else, but using a distinctive language (often more distinctive than need be). We should "compare notes" with others, including our students, not impose our solutions on them.

In this respect, the postmodernist attitude is the same as the hermeneutic attitude, on Gadamer's interpretation. As Dieter Misgeld expounds Gadamer's position:

> Hermeneutics…is a mode of inquiry that refuses to legitimate any disposition on the side of those inquiring to exempt *themselves* from what is topical in the inquiry…. [I]f inquiry is itself a situated activity, just as much as what one studies, the conduct of life of those inquiring comes to be an issue as does the relation of inquiry to their lives.[23]

This is not to downplay the importance of theory, as many postmodernists have done. Rather it is to recognize that everyone is constantly theorizing about life — trying to make sense of it — including the academically "least able" student in our class. Our task as professors is not to blind students with our knowledge of the history of philosophy and our command of technical jargon but rather to help them see that they are grappling with the same issues as we are — and have been all their lives — and to enable them to get into conversation with philosophers, ancient and modern, and other theorists, largely as equals.

However, while our educational theory will always be somewhat self-referential in this way, the broader our base of experience the more others (including our students) will gain from our theory. We education professors must as much as possible go out into society, homes, schools. As noted earlier, philosophy is not a theoretical key that unlocks practice. Theory must be fundamentally rooted in practical experience if it is to be of value. The common professorial disclaimer that we are "not equipped" to talk about practical matters appears humble but is in fact arrogant; and it betrays a lack of understanding of theory. *If we are not equipped to talk about practice, we are not equipped to talk about theory*. We must as far as possible address both theory and practice. That is the most effective way to contribute to education, which is our responsibility. People who specialize mainly in theory or mainly in practice can make a contribution, but normally they would contribute more *even in their area of specialization* if they did both (in accordance with Buckminster Fuller's principle of synergy). Far from doing a better job by specializing in theory, we almost inevitably do a worse job.

Finally, just as we should encourage our students to dialogue with us and other theorists rather than "drinking it in," so we ourselves should be more critical — or dialogical — in relation to so-called "pure" philosophers. I feel that, in general, philosophers of education over the past few decades have shown too much deference to pure philosophy. We have tended to quote people such as Austin, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Habermas, Foucault, Rorty, and so on rather than "interrogating" them. As you can see from this paper, I believe in taking pure philosophers seriously; but they, like us, make enormous errors. I feel that, in good postmodernist spirit, we who are in education should develop a positive image of ourselves as sensitive, knowledgeable people, working away in our particular "site," interacting with other scholars and learning from them, but having as much to offer as to gain, and as in no way merely "applying" the "findings" of pure philosophy.

In closing, I would like to pose a question: Am *I* here today engaging in genuine dialogue (and do I with my students back home?) or am I preaching, imposing, controlling, and so forth, in the manner criticized by postmodernists and by myself in this paper? That is something I want to reflect on more. But part of the answer, I think, lies in how active *you* are in assessing what I have to say. Part of the key to avoiding authoritarianism and indoctrination in classrooms — of school or university — is *not* to have teachers refrain from saying what they think, but rather to have students feeling

free — and acquiring the skills, emotions, and habits they need — to react strongly and honestly to what teachers say. And the same is true here. I have said my piece as forcefully and clearly as I can. Now it is up to you to assess equally forcefully what I have said from the vantage point of your own experience, culture, ideas, interests, needs, values. I am sure my respondents will do that only too soon!

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[1] On this point see Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1.

[2] See Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Postmodern Education* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 19, 59.

[3] See Carol Nicholson, "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Education: The Need for Solidarity," *Educational Theory* 40, no. 1 (1990): 43.

[4] See Nicholson, 198.

[5] John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 184.

[6] Richard Rorty, "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication — Reply to Arcilla and Nicholson," *Educational Theory* 40, no. 1 (1990): 43.

[7] Rorty, "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication," 43.

[8] Rorty, "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication," 44.

[9] McGowan, 181. My parentheses.

[10] See Aronowitz and Giroux's *Postmodern Education* and William Doll's, *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

[11] Apart from works cited above and below, I would like to mention especially Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

[12] Hutcheon, 2.

[13] E.T. Gendlin, "Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language, and Situations," in *The Presence of Feeling in Thoughts*, ed. B. denOuden and M. Moen (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 29.

[14] This process of interaction is discussed by Northrop Frye in terms of the tension between centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. See his *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 52, 61-62, 217-18; and *Words with Power* (Penguin, 1990), 37-40

[15] See for example Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1990/1976), 11-13.

[16] Landon E. Beyer and Daniel P. Liston, "Discourse or Moral Action? A Critique of Postmodernism," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 4 (1992): 383-87.

[17] Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," in *Hermeneutics and Praxis*, ed. Robert Hollinger (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 217.

[18] For accounts of Rorty's pragmatism, see for example, his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63-77; and Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivity and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 198-207.

[19] Rorty, "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication," 41-42.

[20] Rorty, “The Dangers of Over-Philosophication,” 44.

[21] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984/1979), 51.

[22] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.

[23] Dieter Misgeld, “On Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and Praxis*, ed. Robert Hollinger, 162.

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