The important issues raised by the postmodernists deserve to be critically considered and dealt with honestly.

Educational Discourse in the Postmodern World

Leon McKenzie

Postmodernism as an idea was crystallized, according to Steven Connor, with the publication of a book by Jean--Francois Lyotard in 1979. Lyotard was concerned with the legitimation of scientific discourse and emphasized the principle of performativity, that is, science has less to do with the discovery of verifiable facts and more to do with "increasing the performance and operational output of the system of scientific knowledge"[1] Lyotard observed the diminishing influence of the modern paradigm or, in terms of Thomas Kuhn's idea of scientific revolutions,[2] Lyotard detected a "shift" in the cultural paradigm.

While Connor's suggestion is not invalid at its face value, any number of dates could be assigned as benchmarks for the beginning of postmodernism. Postmodernism has been emerging for decades and has involved many different thinkers. Postmodernism is burdened with a variety of connotations especially in respect to philosophy and theoretical discourse. The meaning and significance of postmodernism can be delineated most appropriately, it is suggested, in reference to the idea of modernism in philosophy. The place to begin is with Rene Descartes.

Descartes (1596–1650) lived at a time when assurances of stability, order, and permanence were becoming increasingly challenged. The conventional knowledge of the world was under attack because of the discoveries of explorers. Revolutionary developments in religion, politics, and cosmological theory made the world appear less than secure. New ideas and discoveries were broadcast in what must have seemed an unceasing explosive outpouring of publications thanks to the invention of moveable type in the 15th century. Faced with challenges to his intellectual security, Descartes developed a philosophy that was to earn him in the appellation "Father of Modern Philosophy."

In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes grounded philosophical certainty in the operations of his own mind: I think, therefore I am. He claimed to have discovered a method that would establish certain knowledge and deliver philoso-

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phers from fundamental doubt. The passion for pure, objective, and indisputably certain knowledge, an almost neurotic passion, began in earnest with Descartes. Subsequent philosophers who shared this craving for objective certainty, during and after the Enlightenment, stressed Francis Bacon's thesis anent the need for direct observation and inductive reasoning, Auguste Comte's trust in the "Scientific method," and a restrictive definition of rationality itself. It became a regnant dogma in the 19th century that certitude was available only in terms of the laws of science and under the conditions set forth by the positivist philosophy, a philosophy that based all legitimate knowledge on empirically validated data.

For scientific discourse to be possible, it was necessary that language be used precisely to convey clear and distinct ideas. Logical positivism set forth the arguments that all propositions required empirical verification and that philosophy itself is reducible to "philosophical analysis," the clarification of meaning through the use of logic and scientific method.

While there is not a small hazard in capsulating a span of intellectual history, albeit to serve brevity in a journal article, the two foregoing paragraphs establish a basis for the development of the meaning of postmodernism.

Language, Hermeneutics, and Tradition

In its response to Cartesian, Positivist, and selected Enlightenment philosophical themes, postmodern philosophical reflection highlights: 1) the study of the nature of language, 2) philosophical hermeneutics, and 3) the place of tradition in the development of human understanding. Each of these central concerns of postmodernism is considered here as preliminary to a discussion of the relevance of these concerns for educational discourse.

Language

Language comes into play not only in communications among human beings but also in the fundamental processes of thinking. In a recent insightful article, Robert Walsh observed that according to Martin Heidegger we can never stand outside of the process of language and examine it with sterile objectivity. According to Heidegger we exist as human beings in the very speaking of language. As Wash explains Heidegger's thought he notes that any questioning of language is also a questioning of the person who asks the question. Language is radically mysterious. Those who believe that language is merely a tool used by rational beings have mistakenly estimated language as an instrument of human rationality. However, it is not " . . . Aristotelian rationality but *language* that distinguishes humans from other creatures.[3] *Dasein,* Heidegger's word for the being of being-human, is the kind of being for whom its own being is an issue and, at the same time, language becomes an issue because of its essential connection to *Dasein.*

Language is not only mysterious, it is inherently ambiguous. Here is an experiment that illustrates this point. Take the famous sentiment penned by Blaise Pascal: *Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connait pas.* The usual translation is "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." According to the Italian adage, of course, all translators are traitors. The complete meaning of something in one language cannot be brought over to another language. Strictly speaking "*le coeur a ses raisons*" means "*le coeur a ses raisons,*" nothing more and nothing less.

Several other interpretations of Pascal's truth are legitimately available. Here are some candidates: 1) The soul has a logic transcendent to the conventional definition of rationality. 2) The spirit owns a kind of judgment that defies

logic. 3) The inner self claims a sense of reality different from what reality may seem to those who lack discernment. 4) The arguments that issue from the center of human experience put to flight the cognitive claims of those who are led by the spirit of their times. 5) Profound intuitional prompts are at times as adequate as criteria of rationality as the canons of scientific problem solving.

Each of the above interpretations is compatible, to one extent or another, with Pascal's insight. Only if one defines the process of translation as a literal substitution of words from a French to an English dictionary (whatever literal may mean!) are the above interpretations improper. No doubt a more complete interpretive translation can be made on the basis of a further study of Pascal, his work, and his times, but if we mastered all of Pascal's writings and understood as completely as humanly possible all of the influential factors in his life, we would not be able to translate his famous aphorism with complete accuracy.

The above thought experiment makes the point that it is impossible to interpret meanings perfectly when translating from one language to another. The experiment can be extended to include interpretations of meaning within the bounds of a single language. Had Pascal written in English "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing," several meanings would continue to be available to the reader-interpreter. To read something, as noted more fully below, implies the simultaneous *taking* of the author's meaning and the *projecting* of the reader's meaning into the text.

Two comments about the ambiguity of language need to be made. Firstly, language is ambiguous, but not absolutely so. The relative ambiguity of language does not utterly mask the meanings intended by the author of the language. The radical deconstructionist interpretation, of course, is annulled by a direct appeal to our shared experience in the *Lebenswelt:* Love letters carry the meanings intended by lovers; we buy the morning paper to read the meanings intended by reporters; grocery lists carry the meanings of the individual who wrote the lists. Deconstruction as a technique for the analysis of literary and philosophical texts, however, a technique that treats texts independent of author-intended meanings, can uncover subtle textual nuances and is a legitimate analytic tool. Language carries: 1) an author's meanings, and for the interpreter, 2) the meanings that attach to any text as cultural residue together with 3) additional meanings projected into the text by the reader/listener. But deconstructive techniques can be applied in the workaday world only at the risk of massive breakdowns in communications. The coinage minted in the philosopher's shop cannot always be spent in the marketplace.

Secondly, it is not altogether problematic that language is fundamentally ambiguous. Kant, according to Hannah Arendt, thought it was not unusual for readers of a text sometimes to understand the meaning of the text better than the author. Arendt goes on to say that such understanding took place in respect to Kant's own writing. Others, who had perspectives not possessed by Kant, were able to recognize important implications of Kant's philosophy that he failed to grasp.[4]

From another point of view it may be said that because of the ambiguity of any text, the reader actively interprets the text in the very act of reading and "inserts" new insights into the text that make the author's original writing fuller and more complete. A text seldom "says" something complete, objective, and strictly denotative, especially in matters of theoretical discourse. What any text really "says" includes what is present in the intentionality of the reader as well as what was in the intentionality of the writer. Both intentionalities, it must be added, are reflective to some extent of the cultural conditions in which the text was created by the writer and read by the interpreter.

To interpret requires the interpreter to reach into the intent of the writer, and also through the colorations each word may have as a result of the cultural milieu or intertext, in order to retrieve the writer's meaning. To interpret also supposes the reader projects personal meanings into the text in the very act of interpretation.

To read something means to engage in a process of interpretive reconstruction wherein the assumptions of the reader are written "between the lines." In reading something an understanding occurs in the juncture between the writer's intended meanings and the meanings projected into the text by reader, meanings that are projected precisely when the writer's meanings are addressed in terms of the *reader's* frame of reference. If reading ever became the mere mechanical registering of purely objective fact-objects, theoretical discourse itself would become a mechanical exchange of denotations; the connotative dimension of words would cease to exist. Progress is possible only because readers enter into dialogues with writers, only because readers "fill in" the blanks that are present due to the ambiguity of language. The relative ambiguity of language, it seems, serves us better than would a system of communication in which nothing is ambiguous.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is taken from the Greek *hermeneuein* which in English is usually rendered "to interpret." Etymologically the word refers to the priestess-interpreter who tended the oracle at Delphi and honored Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Hermes, the Roman Mercury, took something that was shrouded, beyond human ken, and made it intelligible. In the hermeneutic process, according to Richard Palmer "something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensive; something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow 'brought to understanding'—is interpreted."[5]

Hermeneutics was originally referable to the interpretation of divine messages such as those reputed to be available at Delphi or in various sacred groves. Later, hermeneutics was applied to the interpretation of Biblical texts, then to the interpretation of literature, art, and symbols. When the world in which we live is construed as a text-analogue, hermeneutics becomes philosophical hermeneutics—the interpretation of the world and what has been thought about the world. When participants in a theoretical conversation entertain the insight that what they say about the subject matter is stated precisely as interpretation and not as definitive proposition, it would seem the nature of the dialogue would change considerably.

David Tracy observes that every time "we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret . . . Interpretation is thus a question as unavoidable, finally, as experience, understanding, deliberation, judgment, decision and action."[6] It might be added that interpretation is as unavoidable to the human being as language.

All human understanding is interpretive understanding. To understand is to arrive at some insight that is achieved through the interpretive process. Interpretive understanding is reached through the use of language, in all of its ambiguity, thereby making understanding itself a *social* achievement since language is also a *social* achievement. Whether our inquiries concern the ultimate meaning of the

cosmos, the arguments of a colleague in a journal article, the meaning of research findings, or the nature of interpretation itself, we are involved in a striving for intelligibility that relies on hermeneutical thinking. Hermeneutical thinking endeavors to organize knowledge—justified beliefs—in such a way that the kind of insight we call understanding "comes to mind."

Postmodernists, at least the kind of postmodernists described here, because they recognize the limitations of the language that is employed for thinking and communicating, do not offer their truth claims as purely objective, certain beyond all questioning, and proven apodictically as the result of a rigorous scientific method. On the contrary, they realize human insight is not perfectly clear, and that while indeed we are capable of seeing, we see in a glass darkly. Thinking processes are mediated and abetted by language, either spoken or written language. Language is not perfect with the result that any person's thinking will fall short of perfection. So also will communication fall short of perfection because language of some kind is implicated in communication.

Postmodernists who make use of philosophical hermeneutics approach inquiry not as something that must be carried out according to a definite "scientific" method but as a collaborative enterprise that must accommodate other individuals and the paradigms of inquiry they bring with them. Postmodernists hope to unveil the truth of things through an ongoing conversation carried on within a community of interpreters. "Hermeneutics," writes Richard Rorty, "sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts."[7]

Rorty seems to be saying, within the context of his celebrated book noted above, that this conversation carried on by the community of interpreters is constitutive of truth, that if the community of interpreters reaches consensus about anything, it is true. This position does not take into account that the world outside one's subjectivity is not dependent on the mind of any individual person or any community of persons for its being.

What is apposite here is the traditional distinction between ontological and logical truth. What is, is ontologically true; what is known, if it is known correctly, is logically true. Ontological truth is the truth *of* beings; logical truth is the truth *about* beings. Ontological truth is attributed to any existent because of its being, because it is. Logical truth is attributed to a theoretical proposition because the proposition is commensurate with what is. Something is logically true because there is a correspondence between a knower's mind and the reality outside the knower's mind (correspondence theory of truth), because all of the elements of the stated position are internally consistent (coherence theory of truth), or because the position leads to efficacious action (pragmatic theory of truth).

Reliance on the distinction between ontological and logical truth, to keep from falling into the mistake of making something dependent for its truth solely on the beliefs of those who talk about it, requires further exploration and interpretation. None of the major theories of truth, it seems, is without flaw. The distinction between ontological and logical truth, nonetheless, is appropriate and useful even when existing theories of truth are not completely satisfying. This raises the point that whenever multiple explanatory theories abound it is fair to infer that language, thinking, and understanding fall particularly short of coming to terms with that which is being explained. In those instances where multiple theories or interpretive understandings compete strenuously, further conversation is require of the community of interpreters to find ways of finding a coherent confluence of the theories.

Tradition

The notion of tradition, long under attack by those who had fallen under the influence of the Enlightenment's romantic fixation on novelty, has been rehabilitated in the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. At this writing (1991) Gadamer, who was born in 1900, is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Heidelberg University. Widely acclaimed as a principal originator of philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer has set forth his ideas primarily in *Truth and Method.*[8]

Many sophisticated persons today share the bias that what speaks to us out of tradition is wrong. Whatever hearkens to the past is faulted, by some, for not meeting the criterion of modernity. When we think of tradition we tend to imagine a body of dusty rules and out-of-date norms. For some educationists tradition is largely referable to the "dead hand of the pst."

According to Gadamer, living within a tradition has nothing to do with blind adherence to something authoritatively given. To stand within a tradition means, for example, sharing a language, and having a common ground for raising issues in a conversation. While Gadamer never defines tradition exactly (perhaps in an effort not to reduce tradition to something extrinsic to human existence), a tradition not only inclines us to provide particular answers to questions but also leads us to ask some questions instead of others. That is, tradition forestructures a person's understanding. A tradition is never completed. Errors in a tradition are found out and repudiated as the tradition renews itself through the thinking and communication of those who live within the tradition.

People "argue" with elements of their respective traditions. Obscure meaning are retrieved from the tradition and clarified. The tradition acts upon us and we act upon the tradition. Every tradition is reconstructed and refreshed by the new experiences of those within the tradition who come into contact with other traditions. In conversation the perspectives sanctioned by one tradition become fused with the horizons available in other traditions. Tradition is a dynamic reality.

No one can outrun tradition. That you cannot go home again may be true. It is also true that you can never leave home. The events in each person's life are touched by the tradition that shaped the persons' life. Tradition is a kind of canonical experience in terms of which we tend to interpret the world and ourselves. The tradition each person received "prejudices" that person, not in the pejorative sense used by Enlightenment philosophers, but in the original sense of a provisional judgment or inclination. "Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous," avers Gadamer, "so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience."[9]

Everyone comes to the hermeneutic conversation—everyone arrives at the point of interpreting during theoretical discourse—out of a particular philosophical tradition. No one interprets out of a values vacuum. Even when someone is unaware of being touched by a prevailing tradition or plays the hubristic modernist game of speaking "scientifically, certainly, and objectively" about disputed theoretical matters, some kind of tradition is present in the language

and thinking of this person. For tradition, although never defined by Gadamer, it not like an ideological livery worn by a person or something extrinsic to the character of the individual. The complexus of predominant thoughts, values, ideals, images, and experiences we call tradition is to the person what water is to the fish.

Theoretical Discourse in Education

What is the bearing of the foregoing reflections on educational discourse in the postmodern world? It is suggested that three directions for further reflection are appropriate. Firstly, given postmodern understandings of the mystery and ambiguity of language, the language of discourse needs to be evaluated more diligently by participants in the discourse. Secondly, the style and tone of discourse requires that participants in continuing conversations become more cognizant of the modest weight of all cognitive claims. That is, the style and tone of discourse that presents itself in books, articles, papers, speeches at conferences, and so forth, greater attention must be paid to the tradition out of which an interpreter speaks or writes; the hidden assumptions underlying theoretical expressions and asseverations need to be unveiled with more criticalness by those who participate in continuing professional discourse.

The Language of Discourse

A doctoral student once announced his intent to develop a dissertation theme around the concept of experiential learning. "What kind of learning is at all possible," the student was asked, "that is not experiential?" The question baffled the student because he had come to associate a single meaning with the notion of experiential learning: the kind of learning that takes place in "real world" contexts, the kind of learning that results from "doing" something instead of talking about it in a classroom.

To reduce the idea of experience to meet the requirements of experimentalism, of course, debases the concept of experience and, in effect, postulates that the kind of learning which occurs in classrooms is somehow inferior. Some discussions about the meaning of words, even a word as vital to educational discourse as experience (as John Dewey recognized over 50 years ago),[10] may seem picky and slight, but these discussions must take place to prevent education discourse from sliding into the realm of vaporous jargon. The notion of experience as the "doing of an experiment" is valid, but so also are other senses of experience. The connotative wealth and variety of words crucial to educational discourse must be taken into account.

Two examples of the analysis of the concept of experience, taken from the writer's area of specialization—the field of adult education—illustrate the kind of analysis of key concepts that should be encouraged. Peter Jarvis, in a critique of a model of experiential learning proposed by David Kolb, observed that the progression in Kolb's cyclic model from 1) Experience to 2) Reflection and Observation to 3) Active Experimentation and finally back to 1) Experience suggests that experience is limited to what is concrete and limited to the senses. Jarvis argued that reflection, observation, and experimentation are also forms of experience. In pursuing this argument Jarvis made the notion of experience more inclusive of different kinds of experience. What is important about the Jarvis critique has less to do with the critique of Kolb's model and more to do with the enrichment of the concept of experience.[11]

This particular strand in the discourse conducted by adult education theorists was followed by an article authored by Robin Usher. Jarvis proposed that adult experi-

ences are either meaningful or meaningless and that meaning is brought to experience by the stock of knowledge or subjectivity of the person who is experiencing something. Usher observed that Jarvis, like other writers since Dewey evaluates experience as something that is mute and needing transformation to serve as a foundation for learning. Usher offered an alternative interpretation of experience and in so doing enriched the discourse about experience. Usher claims that the attribution of meaning does not originate in the unique subjectivity of diverse individuals since such an origination does not account for shared meanings in the social milieu.

The suggestion is made that the source of meaning attribution is located in language. "As human beings, we are inscribed within language. As individuals, language both pre- and post-dates us and therefore regulates our experience through constituting the means by which we interpret and give meaning to our experience. Experience is made intelligible through language."[12]

Without taking sides in the argument (both Jarvis and Usher provide keen insights) it can be concluded that Jarvis and Usher have provided new ways of thinking about the nature of human experience because of their concern for language. It is this kind of discourse which examines the language of discourse itself closely and seriously that promotes richer understandings of what is considered in the continuing discourse of theorists.

The Weight of Cognitive Claims

Some academicians who are actively involved in theoretical discourse tend to overstate the authority of their cognitive claims. This is not surprising. One of the occupational hazards of being a professor, and having students address the academician deferentially as "professor" or "doctor," is that the professor may begin to experience an inflated sense of self. One cannot not attend many conferences of professional educators without forming the opinion that some of those who present papers pretend to a certainty, objectivity, and authority beyond the power of human interpretive understanding.

Controverted issues about national education policy, the political ramifications of educational decisions, questions of ethics and education, and the meaning of research findings are sometimes argued with such force that listeners can be forgiven for concluding some speakers must think of themselves as possessing a God's-eye view of reality.

All of us are limited beings. We have been born into a particular culture and at a particular time in history. We have been exposed to a particular value system in our family of origin. We have been influenced in our view of the world by a particular set of friends and associates, and authors who's books we have read. Each of us has a single, narrow perspective on the world and on the issues we address professionally. The vistas of some individuals may be wider than others, but all individual horizons are finite. Human beings are not solely the products of their times, cultures, and upbringing, but these particular conditions have exerted, and continue to exert, influences on their variable capacities for free choice.

Since we are beings of limited understanding, and since in most complex matters of discourse ranging from our constructions of research findings to our conclusions about education and public policy, we must realize that what we say is said by way of interpretation. Further, we must realize that our interpretations are not perfect; our interpretations are not purely objective and absolutely certain. Our interpretive understandings should be open to

change in the light of new evidences that may be presented to us.

Does this imply an easy relativism that holds all interpretations of controverted issues as possessing equal value? Not by any means. There is a truth of *what has been,* historical truth. There is a truth of *what is,* ontological truth, and logical truth, the truth of *the propositional form of what is.* But some truth issues are so large, complex, and impenetrable that only a God's eye view is able to disclose the truth in its totality. Some persons' interpretive understandings may come closer to seizing complex truths than others, but all interpretive understandings fall short of exhausting the full meaning of what is interpretively understood.

There are also truths of *what should be.* One kind of these truths is pragmatic truth. Given a number of alternative designs gauged to foster a just society, a society wherein equal opportunities are available for all citizens, which of these designs should be selected? Obviously this question is not amenable to a simple unqualified answer grounded on the interpretive understanding of an individual or narrow interest group as to what constitutes an effective educational design for the future.

While the *efficacy* of an educational design for a just society, for example, relates to pragmatic truth, another kind of truth of *what should be* is ethical truth. This kind of truth refers to the moral character of the design. To develop and implement any design without reference to ethics simply sacrifices morality for expedience. What works, it is suggested, is not always morally right. Again, when we enter the domain of ethics we are confronted by different moral standards and diverse criteria of moral judgment. Complex problems cannot be solved by reliance on the interpretive understanding of an individual or narrow interest group.

Decisions about the means to secure ends with which everyone agrees—decisions about pragmatic and ethical truth issues—are almost always based on understandings that are incomplete. This knowledge must lead us to exercise a degree of humility when we advance positions on controverted and complex issues. The style and tone of presentations, whether oral or written, need to be moderate and modest. The weight of our cognitive claims should not be exaggerated. The foregoing considerations should also move us to remain upon to the interpretive understandings of others and to attempt to accommodate within our own positions the views of others that seem to clash with our own.

Identifying an Interpreter's Tradition

Suppose someone offers an interpretation of a controverted issue. In order to interpret and understand the meaning of the other's interpretation it is fruitful, and sometimes necessary, to identify the ideological tradition that served as framework for the other's interpretation. It is likely the other's interpretive understanding of any issue becomes more intelligible to the reader/listener when it is located in terms of its development in intellectual history.

Take, for example, the current discourse in the field of adult education regarding the appropriate role of teachers as instigators of political and social change. Ideas about the transformative function of education in regard to society are not new nor limited by any means to the field of adult education. References to the literature of adult education it is again noted, are offered because of the writer's familiarity with this body of literature.

Phyllis Cunningham averred that adult educators who claim to be apolitical in the classroom make a political statement, in effect, by their neutrality (her word). To be neutral signifies that "one is quite satisfied with the present or-

ganization of societal relationships and the distribution of resources in our society." Educators have invented such ideas as scientific objectivity "to sanitize our basic desires to maintain inequality, racism, sexism and classism since we are satisfied, on balance, with our 'share of the pie' ."[13]

Out of what particular philosophical tradition does the position articulated by Cunningham arise? Some might argue that it emerges not out of an intellectual tradition but simply out of the opportunism. So-called victims of an oppressive sociopolitical system stand to gain access to special entitlements once they have been officially designated as victims. At the same time these opportunists suppress dissent by stereotyping persons of a different theoretical outlooks as racist, sexist, and classist.

When special advocacy is employed by teachers, they are wont to use their classrooms as platforms for the declamation of political statements. What they cannot achieve at the ballot box they attempt to gain by invading and colonizing the minds of their students. Education becomes, for them, not a process wherein learners grow and develop, thereby transforming society through the development of individual citizens, but instead an instrument of social engineering. The social engineering, of course, is to be undertaken following the blueprint of the teacher or a special interest group.

The authentic issue, it seems is not one of neutrality on the part of the teacher but impartiality. No one can feel neutral about political, social, and economic arrangements as long as some persons are not treated fairly. On the other hand, it seems a matter of plain ethical principle that teachers remain politically impartial and do not turn the educational process into a campaign to advance particular political agendas.

While some who politicize classrooms through special advocacy may be opportunists caught up in "politically correct" rhetoric, this does not necessarily mean the substance of their discourse is unrelated to a definite philosophical antecedents. Not to understand these antecedents is to fail to understand the substance of discourse.

Once an interpreter's intellectual frame of reference has been identified (even if the interpreter does not fully understand the significance his or her discourse), once the assumptions of that frame of reference are disclosed, it becomes easier to understand the discourse and respond to it appropriately.

Noting that many American professors share the "belief in the virtue of using education for sociopolitical progress rather than for imparting mere knowledge and rational thought . . . " Dario Fernandez–Morera locates this belief in the philosophy of "late Marxism." According to Marxist philosophy politics should exercise a hegemony over all other disciplines and fields of study. "Thus instead of examining materialist political discourse from the point of view of, say, aesthetics, or religion, or psychology, or the sexual practices of Marx—as Philosophy, or Religion, or Psychology, or Sexology might want—one is supposed to examine these subjects from the point of view of materialist political discourse."[14]

In the present examination of Cunningham's discourse, the underlying assumptions of her position could be understood to include: 1) the principle that politics and ideology should take precedence over the manifest content of an instructional situation and 2) the axiom that political *ad hominem* rhetoric which attributes base motives to opposing views (racism, sexism, classism) is an appropriate tactic for suppressing dissent.

Since Cunningham has more recently clarified her po-

sition to a considerable extent, it would be incorrect to locate her discourse in the Marxist tradition.[15] In any conversation within the community of interpreters participants are free to change their views or, as Cunningham has done, expand meanings, refine points of emphasis and clarify aims. The purpose of locating discourse within a particular tradition, it must be strongly urged, is not to find a label with which to stigmatize an "opponent" in a scholarly conversation. Within the community of interpreters the only opponents should be ignorance, error, and malevolence.

The argument that teachers should explicitly advocate political causes in the classroom can be associated with liberal philosophy, liberal in the contemporary and not classical sense of the term. No inference should be made, however, that conservative ideologists are without fault when the classroom is turned into a forum for the pleading of their special causes. In all cases education should not be trivialized as a mere tool for the attainment political leverage. Whether the teacher is liberal or conservative is irrelevant: political impartiality should be the norm that governs all teachers, especially in publicly-funded schools and universities. The full range of alternative responses to issues should be available to all students.

Conclusion

As the originator of analytic geometry Rene Descartes provided humankind with an invaluable instrument. His large mistake, however, was to attempt to reduce philosophy to a single method that would assure certainty and objectivity. Descartes' model of rationality initiated the modernist movement in intellectual history and set the stage for the positivism celebrated in the discourse of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Modernism, however, always contained the seeds of its own critique. Postmodernism has ushered in a new way of looking at theoretical discourse.

No doubt postmodernism contains within itself the seeds of its own critique. We advance from century to century taking turns to speak in the ongoing conversation of humankind. Perhaps educational discourse during the postmodern period will prove more efficacious than it has been in the past. A recognition of the centrality of language in discourse, the nature of interpretive understanding, and the formative role of tradition can serve us well as we continue sharing our understandings with one another.

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