

The epistemology of the anointed

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This article is a philosophical critique of the foundations of postmodernism, the contemporary disciplines that derive from it, and by extension share its philosophical roots, as well as of the scholarly activism it has given rise to. Moralism, postmodernism and political activism – I argue that they are intrinsically linked, all too present in some areas of the social sciences and humanities of today, and that together they form one of the greatest barriers against the search for truth that universities are currently facing. This barrier counteracts rational thinking, obstructs critical argument and debate and promotes ideological and group thinking. Originating from a desire to do good, conspicuously so, it justifies the placing of activistic ambitions ahead of truth and objectively verifiable conditions of reality – the continued discovery of which was the very basis upon which academia was founded. Universities are either unwavering champions of the pursuit of truth and the betterment of knowledge, or activistic institutions furthering particular social agendas. In theory, either alternative is legitimate. They do not, however, appear mutually compatible, and I do

not think a university can fulfill both aspirations simultaneously. One will inevitably demand the abdication of the other. In this article I defend what historically has been, and in my view needs to remain, the highest of all university values – the pursuit of truth.

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Introduction

This article is a philosophical critique of the foundations of postmodernism and the contemporary offspring disciplines that have spawned from it, as well as of the morally driven activist scholarship they have given rise to. Times are such that I feel I must preface by stating that while my intention by no means is to offend, I fear that the risk of causing offence, however regrettable, might be a necessary consequence of what I aim to do in this article. That is, to point out forthrightly and problematize uncompromisingly what I perceive to be deeply rooted problems that are harming the universities and working against what was, and should be, their principal and above all else prioritized goal.

The doctrine of goodness

Nietzsche forewarned of it, 140 years ago – the corrosive potential of that most ancient of human proclivities, that of moralism. He remains among the few to ever truly peer through the veil, to reveal a deeper truth hidden behind this institutionalization of emotion. Intensely feeling what is right and what is wrong, and the even more profound subconscious feeling of wanting to be seen as possessing this feeling ever so intensely, and, ultimately, the unwavering certainty that what one is feeling is “correct” – nothing has hindered man more in his search for truth. Nietzsche commences *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886/2014) thus:

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of – namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography; and moreover that the moral (or immoral) purpose in every philosophy has constituted the true vital germ out of which the entire plant has always grown (1:6).

Or as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2013) concludes after extensive research on the subject of moral psychology: morality binds and blinds.

There is a value higher than the value of truth, that supersedes truth. Originating in that part of us that we generally cannot control, the true existence of which we deny precisely by claiming the very opposite; our self-subjugation before the demands of sociality. That higher value is morality, in whose name human beings are often all too compelled to act – acts which in an everyday sense can arguably only be deemed as such when they are *seen* as such (by others). But as Nietzsche (1886/2014, 4:108) notes, “There

is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena”. Interpretation requires taking on faith, in the absence of evidence, what we believe to be true. “Belief”, writes Nietzsche (1895/2008, 52), “means not-wanting-to-know what is true”. Belief comes from, is necessitated by, uncertainty, and resides where truth otherwise would. This will no doubt lead us to construct “truths”, which are, *in truth*, born out of falsehood, since they are born out of our prejudices and from our will to deceive both ourselves and others. This is not to say that there is no truth whatsoever, only that we may be prevented from seeing it clearly, which I believe is the essence of the Nietzschean relativism. Reality itself has no center, in relation to which everything has a fixed position, since it is not spatial in that sense. Rather, the center is determined by the observer and is dependent on the focus in question of the observer, who will always be predisposed in one way or another, due to his own relations and seemingly fixed points of universality; his veil. And no veil has been thicker than the veil of the baseless moralism.

Moralism and the emotionally justified moral worldview itself says nothing of truth, and because of the strong belief that it is prone to promote, it can even place itself and its champions in stark opposition to truth. If we want to know truth we must strive for philosophical clarity, unaffected by the arbitrary struggle between “for” and “against” – we must go beyond good and evil. Moralizing is a form of taking sides and is therefore disruptive of truth. How can we seek truth if we are prisoners of a narrow and fickle morality, when perhaps truth itself is not moral? Perhaps it does not conform to our narrow conceptions of good and evil. We are, however, unfortunately endowed with a certain tendency for moral rationalizing, for spontaneously creating justifications for the conclusions we want to support. And the conclusions we want to support follow in large part from our internal *sociometer* (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, 2005), the purpose of which is to make sure we are seen as attractive within our group by conforming to the views it has sanctioned and which it views as correct, regardless of whether they are true or not in a wider sense, thereby obscuring truth and the facts that might otherwise lead us to it. Only by transgressing these constraints might we achieve the philosophical lucidity necessary to seek truth in any meaningful sense. Few things, however, are held dearer than our most fundamental beliefs, and few things are harder to surrender. But such is the power of influence that morality and the emotionally justified moral worldview wields over us. To say and do what is the agreed upon “good” in every situation (never mind its inherent relativism), and to be perceived as

the upholder of that “good”, and to value it above all else, no matter what must be sacrificed in the process – that is the doctrine of goodness, and, to borrow a phrase from the prolific economist Thomas Sowell (2010), the “vision of the anointed”.

What is postmodernism?

Although postmodernism can be difficult to narrow down into one cohesive thing, and many of its originators themselves sometimes found it a troublesome label, it has nonetheless developed into its own clearly separable entity, and its ripples within the world of academia cannot be understated. It is, fundamentally, a philosophy underlined by a moral imperative, which itself fits neatly also as a definition of ideology. As all intellectual movements, according to philosopher Stephen Hicks (2011), postmodernism is defined by its fundamental philosophical premises, although these might be less commonly known or referred to today, especially among proponents of its many modern offshoot disciplines (for example: gender theory, queer theory, radical feminism, critical race theory – the latter of which is an evolved continuation of the Marxist critical theory originally developed by the Frankfurt school). It adopts a particular epistemology, one which all claims made in the postmodern tradition must necessarily evoke, whether knowingly or not. They in turn stand upon the legacy of centuries of philosophy, and it can be pertinent to reexamine what is thereby implied, and what kind of philosophical grounds make up the roots of such claims. But first, postmodernism itself demands expanding on.

A change in human thought, a long time in the making, occurred in the 1960's, which at its heart constitutes a radical worldview that later came to be known as postmodernism. Hicks (2011) describes it as the initiation of a new intellectual age. As is implied in the name, postmodernism contrasts with modernism and the enlightenment ideals of that era. It is a reaction to and rejection of modernism, and an important transition away from the modernist dichotomy between the objective universal and the subjective individual. The result of which was the erasure of the boundary between the objectively true, that which exists exterior to subjective interpretation, and the subjectively experienced (Kvale, 1996), which consequently came to take its place. Postmodernism demands the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020): that is, the otherwise universally held position that the world is rationally intelligible to us, and

that truth claims can be made based on that intelligence that corresponds with how reality actually is. Instead, following from Foucault, arguably the most prominent of the progenitors of postmodernism, sociopolitical power is what ultimately determines what is true, not correspondence with reality. That way, knowledge is viewed as situated within certain paradigms of power that give it meaning, making knowledge circumstantial, linguistically constructed, subjective to those with the power to produce it as such, and intrinsically political. In other words: politics decide knowledge, not the other way around.

The academy has for a long time predominantly leaned left on the political spectrum (Lambert, 2018; Noah, 2017; Sowell, 2010, 2002; Hicks, 2011). While in the natural sciences the imbalance is not as dramatic, within the social sciences this is a clear and well-documented fact – or, one could say, particularly among those whose business is the production of ideas and theory, rather than more practically applicable knowledge and skills. In a nation-wide survey of US colleges, Lambert (2018) found an extreme skewedness towards left political affiliation in the social sciences and humanities, and the more ideologically rooted the field, the more unanimous the results, reaching as far as 100% in some cases and close to it in many others. Similar results were also found in the UK (Noah, 2017). This in itself might not necessarily be that problematic, although more intellectual diversity would undoubtedly be preferable. It is, nonetheless, noteworthy. Either this intellectual elite of the social sciences are somehow able to gain the right knowledge necessary, by virtue of their intellectual expertise, to “correctly” situate themselves on the political spectrum, which then happens to be on the left, or in general left-leaning individuals have been predominantly drawn to the academy, or there is something about academic left thinking which creates the necessary circumstances for the political consensus to be established there. What is interesting about postmodernism and its originators is that they were all outspokenly far-left politically, many of them actively so. Foucault, for example, was a member of the French Communist Party during the 1950’s, at the same time as Pol Pot. In 1968 he declared himself a Maoist (Hicks, 2011). Lyotard meanwhile spent twelve years working for the radical left group called *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (“Socialism or Barbarism”). This is reflective of all the founding members of the intellectual movement of postmodernism, and they were all intellectually rooted in the philosophy of Marx, evolving it by resituating the locus of power and domination away from economic systems and class and into language and culture.

Why is this significant? If the pillars of postmodernism were purely philosophical, if they were based merely in its epistemological and metaphysical foundations, in a deep skepticism about reason and the consequent emphasis on subjectivism, wouldn't one expect to find a more diverse set of political views among its founders, since far-left values and politics would in no way be a prerequisite for the philosophy? This, however, seems not to be the case, and the same political unanimity persists to this day within the postmodern disciplines providing currently dominant views in the humanities and social sciences (Lambert, 2018; Noah, 2017). Can anyone really argue that politics has nothing to do with it? On the contrary, Mark Lilla writes: "The history of French philosophy in the three decades following the Second World War can be summed up in a phrase: politics dictated and philosophy wrote" (2001, p. 161). Perhaps it has everything to do with it, in which case I cannot see how its integrity as a credible and independent philosophical system would not be severely damaged when exposed as such. Herein lies what can be regarded as my main argument of this article, that man's propensity for self-deception and moral conformity is very much at play here. That it explains more than what is generally proposed, and that it actually puts into question the very credibility of the movement and its claim to truth (ironically), or, at the very least, its claim to moral superiority which it uses to position itself as the one correct perspective with which to view the world. As Nietzsche (1895/2008, 55) writes: "The commonest falsehood is that by which one deceives one's self".

The postmodern principles

Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) identify two core principles of postmodernism: the epistemological principle and the political principle. Both are foundational to its origin and subsequent development in current times. Epistemologically, postmodernism is defined by an anti-rationalist, radical skepticism towards the notion of objective knowledge or truth, which it views as unobtainable. If one views this in the context of all its implications it is in fact a quite radical position to hold, and when applied systematically and universally, which it of course must be lest its internal consistency collapses, this total anti-rationalism has radical consequences. One such consequence, according to the philosopher Karl Popper (1945/2011), is that it slowly opens the door to authoritarianism. While rationalism, he notes, is an attitude of humility towards any critical arguments and facts, consider-

ing the merit of arguments rather than the person arguing, anti-rationalism denotes the limits of debate over which no transgression can be made in accordance with predetermined notions of who is allowed to speak, and what topics can and cannot be debated. Another necessary consequence, influencing the first, is a complete commitment to cultural and social constructivism, demanding a rejection of the notion of objective knowledge. However, the Achilles heel of the anti-rationalist argument can of course not help but expose itself here: to claim that nothing can be objectively known, or true, is itself simply another way to state a fact which claims to be true. Then what is in fact anti-rationalism if not merely a different kind of rationalism, and moreover quite a cynical one, that attacks nothing but its own blind spot? This paradox even reveals itself in postmodernisms political principle, the obvious exception to its own rule, in that the conception of the social world as made up of systems of power and privilege that discursively construct knowledge is assumed to be objectively true and intrinsically tied to social constructions of identity (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). (It should be noted here that although Nietzsche, too, was famously critical of absolute rationalism, it has falsely connected him to anti-rationalism. He ought rather to be described as the first *transrationalist*).

From this, we can also extract a postmodern metaphysics, which holds that we cannot speak meaningfully of an objective reality, since it either does not exist or is otherwise not accessible to us. Instead, the only thing we can and should concern ourselves with is a social-linguistic, constructionist reality, since it is the only one that we can obtain knowledge of. In replacing objective reality with social-linguistic constructs, postmodern epistemology naturally denies reason as being able to come to any conclusions of universal truth, instead emphasizing the subjective, relativistic and collectivistic nature of knowledge, where no account of it holds superiority over another (except, of course, for the postmodern view holding superiority over all others). This view positions reason as an arbitrarily man-made mental construct, with properties which, given different circumstances (as in the case argued for by *standpoint epistemology*, to be discussed later), might have been entirely different. However, the legitimacy and nature of truth and, indeed, reason, according to philosopher Thomas Nagel (2001), are de facto not negotiable. Against their conceptual arbitrariness, Nagel states that the very fact of making the case for or against them implicitly presupposes a commitment to reason. This is a Cartesian argument. As in the *Cogito* where the act of questioning one's own existence for Descartes means one must exist, so the act of examining rationality proves one is committed to it. It

invokes the preconditions for its own existence. We do not have faith in reason, nor do we *believe* in it – we use it. It might not be all that we need, nor an infallible tool in the search for truth (see Haidt’s (2013) endorsement of Hume’s view of reason), but it is there whether we want it or not. Therefore, when questioning reason, it too is done through the use of reason, by its very nature negating the purpose. Like criticizing the use of language through the use of language, attempting to convince an audience of something, even of the futility of reason, must simultaneously necessarily rely on it.

The postmodern view of human nature, as of knowledge, is also collectivistic, maintaining that it is not innate and that “individuals’ identities are constructed by their social-linguistic group affiliation” and that those groups “vary radically across dimensions of sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth” (Hicks, 2011, p. 6), forming the parameters to which their “knowledge” then becomes relative, making identity politics crucial. Politics is prone to becoming interwoven with morality, as politics is ultimately the debate over how best to conduct society, over which societal vision best reflects our own personal views of the world. Views that often, to varying degrees, have moral dimensions to them – forming ideologies. Being ideologically possessed then means holding a *belief*, of the order and nature of things, informed by a moral imperative. The postmodern view of truth and knowledge, its epistemology, construes them as susceptible to be influenced much in the same way, varying contingently based on the predispositions of whoever currently lays claim on it. Knowledge evolves into something to be suspicious of, because it has been produced discursively within the power structures of the privileged few who have made it their right to do so. If power allows one to decide true from false, right from wrong, then one possesses the ability to construct reality according to ones will. And the will of the powerful, it should always be taken for granted, in the spirit of Marxism (Derrida, 1994), is exercised at the expense of the less powerful and the less fortunate.

Naturally, what follows as the academic objective, the only moral thing to do, is to *act* against these oppressive power structures wherever possible, because they are intrinsically bad. But if knowledge is a construct of power, dependent on, and relative to each individual and their group identity, then there is nothing preventing the activistically inclined researcher from disregarding all facts and evidence that do not correspond with their pre-conceived notions and longed-for conclusions, provided for them by theory, by simply dismissing them as perpetrators of the oppressive system against which they fight, as evidence to their cause even, and instead continue unchallenged to perpetuate their own narrative ad infinitum. Activistic

scholarship, however incompatible with traditional ideals of research and intellectually honest knowledge production, has become a common occurrence, even an encouraged one, within the modern iterative disciplines of postmodernism. But being fundamental to everything we cherish, as Popper (1945/2011) writes, intellectual honesty is abandoned at our peril, for its opposite, intellectual dishonesty, though granted in good faith to those with whom one's ambitions might align today, will inevitably be used for more nefarious ends by someone with whom they do not tomorrow.

Right the words, right the wrongs

This troubling attitude is even expressed by Jean-François Lyotard himself, in *The Postmodern Condition*: “Our hypotheses, therefore, should not be accorded predictive value in relation to reality, but strategic value in relation to questions raised” (1991, p. 7). To be factually accurate is not the point, but to be strategically useful, so as to further the postmodern agenda. Likewise, according to Frank Lentricchia, postmodernism “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change” (1983, p. 12). And finally, Stanley Fish proclaims, the postmodern technique of deconstruction “relieves me of the obligation to be right [...] and demands only that I be interesting” (1982, p. 180). In a subjective world order right and wrong do not exist, only interesting and mundane interpretations – and that which is interesting to the postmodernist is of course that which falls in line with the postmodern agenda, in all its moral virtuousness. Moreover, if power functions linguistically, and knowledge is a product of that power, then knowledge can be changed by adapting our linguistics, by controlling discourse – thereby reshaping reality according to “the vision of the anointed”. The contemporary edict to focus on language control through the enforcing of political correctness, following a postmodern view of the constitutive power and harmful potential of language, is the natural next step then, by problematizing and banning any use of language that, according to the vision, is deemed theoretically harmful or ideologically incongruent. Since there is no one true way to interpret a text or statement (see for instance Derrida, 1997), meaning lies not with the intent of the sender, but with the chosen interpretation of the receiver, essentially making any statement attributable to power and dominance, and potentially “harmful”.

The rejection of the idea of language being able to refer to objective conditions of reality rests on the notion that there is no ontological link between

language and reality. But is not the same ontological link then presupposed in the notion that language constitutes the reality of which it speaks, only in reverse? Because of the social-linguistic reality having replaced the objective one, descriptions of reality effectively replace reality itself. Words are equatable to violence, viewed as upholding the socially constructed structures of power through which certain groups of people are subjugated, in both a physical and metaphysical sense, and made victims of various kinds of social injustices. Undesirable language must then be suppressed in order to prevent certain uses of language from constituting and perpetuating oppressive realities for those of whom they speak, and whom they therefore exclude and hurt. It is an admirable sentiment to be sure, and if sincere, good intended in origin. But it is also one that commands too large a price and one that will in time end up doing more harm than good, as truth will inevitably become altered and obstructed. At that point there is cause for caution, for that which is not true, is a lie. Though well-meant at the point of conception, it is unsustainable in the long run. Because a lie, however convenient and sweet to the ear, will remain a lie. And one such act of omission, however well-intentioned, breeds the need for more, as one self-deceptive action fuels a need to protect this conviction we have deceived ourselves into believing through even more self-deceit. Before long we find ourselves stuck in a web of lies so tightly woven that we are unable to move, unable to think.

The freedom to speak freely is the freedom to think critically, and nowhere is this truer or more important than in academia. The ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Socrates knew this. And while forgotten for centuries it was picked up again by the twelfth century Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, known in the Latin west as Averroës, who through his commentaries on Aristotle revived for the philosophically dormant west a scholarly interest in ancient Greek philosophy (Hillier, 2016). Averroës, an Aristotelian and avid proponent of reason, made the case in his *Decisive Treatise* (2001) for the unrestricting of speech in the pursuit of truth (arguably the proper ultimate goal of any scholar), urging instead the citation of the views of one's opponents – because, in silencing them, one inadvertently admits to the weakness of one's own position, thereby undermining it. This is the same argument which later appeared in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859/2001, p. 19). But alas, the wisdom of centuries past fade, and these views are no longer tenable when the arguments of your dissenters not only appear inaccurate, but also dangerous, constitutive of the very conditions that oppress you, and even explicitly violent, both against you and all who share your particular group identity. At that point, the relinquishing of truth ceases to

appear to be such a terrible sacrifice – to the extent one even cares about it anymore. For what is truth now but your dominance over me?

What once was an ideal, famously expressed in the biography of Voltaire as “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it” (Hall, 1906, p. 198), is no longer tenable when this position is accepted. (Socrates, the fool, could have escaped execution, had he only realized the tyranny of his “free speech”, renouncing it instead of giving his life for it.) It all amounts to a position which also bases itself on the premise that by erasing certain language, we effectively erase the corresponding reality to which it refers, in service of which it is used. In congruence with the social relativist and constructionist nature of reality, that which we do not speak of ceases to be. Common sense and experience, on the other hand, tells us that this simply is not the case. A fact of reality, whether oppressive or liberating, will persist no matter the words that do or do not refer to it. Poignantly pointed out by Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020), and agreed upon by many others, myself included, this creeping infringement through speech restrictions, when applied within the context of academia constitute an attitude which, at best, dampens and reduces the culture of free expression so vital to the very founding of universities, to the development and maintaining of critical thinking, science and even the liberal democracies that we enjoy today. It does this by fostering self-censoring through fear of reprobation and limiting the avenues of thought as well as of legitimate research, thus limiting the potential for knowledge. At worst, drawing again on Popper’s (1945/2011) repudiation of anti-rationalism, it is a form of authoritarianism masked with noble ideals, outright censoring the views and ideas that are currently fashionably deemed “wrong” (who is worthy enough to be the omnipotent judge, one might ask). As Sowell (2002) warns, freedom is unlikely to be lost all at once, ringing true for academic freedom and freedom of expression and of critical inquiry as well. It will slowly be eroded away, amid glittering promises of compassion and the moral exhibitionism of the anointed.

Postmodernism is thus rooted in, and remains permeated by, overly left-wing ideas of power structures which constrain humanity. To say nothing of the validity of these theories (and this is still, lest we forget, very much merely theoretical) they could very well be useful as descriptive theories. But inseparable from these theorized structures of power is the view of them as oppressive, enslaving and exclusive to some members of society, and therefore as creations of evil standing in opposition to the doctrine of goodness espoused by the anointed. Coming from a will to do good and an urge

to show solidarity with and conform to the moral ideals of the group, this results, as Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) frame it, in the moral imperative to deconstruct and resist all ways of thinking and speaking that support these structures of power, embedding into the theories an immanent value system, which robs them of any and all neutrality.

Postmodernism's philosophical heritage

Hicks (2011) traces thoroughly the philosophical roots of postmodernism through the pioneering intellectual work by some of the last centuries most prominent names in philosophy. Postmodernism is a fusion of the implications of some of the dominant philosophical trends set in motion by these thinkers. When married with Nietzsche's insights into the nature of philosophical activity itself, quoted in the introduction, a picture emerges which I believe puts certain things into perspective. For the sake of brevity let me simply say that at the start of the 18th century many German intellectuals in particular had begun worrying deeply about the implications of the enlightenment on such core pillars of the social order as religion, morality and politics (Hicks, 2011). As the prestige and intellectual force of the enlightenment and its ideals grew in England and France, there grew in the German states a similarly forceful movement of counter enlightenment. Along came Immanuel Kant.

Nietzsche claims to have sensed in the great philosophies of his predecessors their own unwitting auto-biographical confessions – attempts by exceptional minds to justify to themselves and to others their particular ways of seeing the world, and what drives and motivates the moral assumptions and prejudices on which they are formed. This is, truly, a profound insight. I would never be so presumptuous as to use this as a way to claim to deny any great philosophy its credibility. Yet in my opinion Hicks' (2011) reading and analysis of some of the old tomes does reveal the potential for a great deal of validity to be found in this explanation. And so, Kant actually discloses his motives for creating his epoch-defining *Critique of Pure Reason*, the aftermath of which are still being felt today – postmodernism is the end result of the counter-enlightenment attack on reason that began right here. As one of the Germans deeply troubled by what the enlightenment was doing to religion and morality he realized that religion could not be justified by reason. One could be true, but both could not. Faced with a choice of where to put his faith Kant chose religion: "I here therefore found it necessary to deny

knowledge in order to make room for faith”, he wrote in the second preface to the first *Critique* (Kant, 1781/1929, Bxxx). Must this not necessarily impact the way one views the philosophy of Kant, in light of what has been discussed thus far? Putting aside any pretense of critiquing his reasoning, simply identifying it as being driven by such a strong *belief*, or desire, as the preservation of religion already implies the abandonment of the search for truth in favor of *the justification to himself and to others of his particular way of seeing the world*. Among Kantian philosophy’s key features is indeed a skeptical and subjectivist epistemology. Truth is an epistemological concept. But as we can know nothing of things as they really are – the noumenal – then our minds are in principle locked out of reality, meaning that to speak of truth as something objective outside of our own perceptions – the phenomenal – is pointless. Reason does have its merits, according to Kant, and its thoughtful application will be of great benefit to mankind, but it, and therefore science, must apply to experience and the phenomenal only. Truth is reduced to an internal relationship of consistency (Hicks, 2011). Hence, science can say nothing of reality itself and can therefore never hope to say anything meaningful of the existence of God, leading Kant to exclaim in his *Critique* that “all objections to morality and religion will be forever silenced [...] by the clearest proof of the ignorance of the objectors” (Kant, 1781/1929, Bxxxix).

In a similar spirit Kierkegaard (2005) later claimed that faith requires the crucifixion of reason, which he argued in favor of. These and similar views of reason and the inaccessibility of objective reality were also held by big names in the years to come such as Hegel, Fichte, Herder and Heidegger. They are the views which form the philosophical foundations on which postmodernism arose. Arguably, then, the anti-rationalist, subjectivist philosophy of postmodernism inherits a foundational self-deception, a “leap of faith” taken in the service of maintaining a *belief* unable to sustain itself against the encroaching ideals of the modernist enlightenment perspectives.

Modern Postmodernism

Contrary to an erroneous belief held by many that postmodernism died out during the early 1990’s and is now obsolete, it has in fact rather become so pervasive as to pass largely unnoticed, even spilling out into society at large, cementing itself almost as part of common knowledge, thereby rendering itself invisible (McHale, 2015). Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) have

examined in detail the core tenets of the movement and have described what became of it. The authors refer to the specific theorizing which has emerged from postmodernism simply as *Theory* (capital T). Theory morphed into a number of new theories, such as intersectional feminism – “I consider intersectionality a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244) – gender and postcolonial theory, and more recently disability and fat studies, eventually giving rise to academic fields of their own. These, and other variations underpinned by the same philosophical foundations and political aspirations, constitute what Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) call applied postmodernism. The new theorists of applied postmodernism transformed the more abstract, original theories that were aimed primarily at deconstructing and playfully reexamining knowledge and societal structures, into more applicable theories able to be put to work in the world for the explicit purpose of fighting against social injustices, leading to the emergence of the highly questionable practice of activist scholarship. When science becomes motivated, not by truth, but by personal and political agendas, it sacrifices truth (possibly the scientific element itself) in pursuit of a higher vision. Truth is made malleable by Theory, but the vision remains firm, so truth can be adapted to fit the vision – or what remains of truth, now reduced only to a hollow shell bereft of its content. This has the effect of making the more easily graspable, morally seductive theoretical conclusions more disseminable than before into the world outside of academia, contributing to their cementation as part of common thought.

To a greater extent than earlier iterations, applied postmodernism expresses its own metanarrative, despite the refuting of which was supposedly one of the movements original aims (Lyotard, 1984; Hicks, 2011), in that it explains exactly how the world is and what must be done to improve it – with the goal of effectively reconstructing society in the image of an ideology and its very particular vision of social justice. Obviously very few people, certainly in academia, actually oppose the idea of justice and to claim otherwise would border on the absurd, so that is beside the point here. But holding a view such as the one just described, which so clearly defines its own metanarrative and truths from which all thought and action must originate, while simultaneously embedded in the accompanying philosophical framework, seems impossible without being highly selective in one’s application of the epistemological skepticism so integral to the whole project of postmodernism. And if one is allowed to selectively pick and choose what to subject to one’s epistemology, while simultaneously being ideologically

driven, i.e. driven by *belief*, then where will ones conclusions end up but inevitably exactly where one envisioned?

What these developments amount to are the fostering of politically ideologized, moral echo-chambers within universities and within the general academic and intellectual interchange of the social sciences. Nota bene, it is not the element of political leftism per se that I am arguing against here, but the very intrusion of the political element itself, and the disruptive moralism which ensues. The irresistible allure of moral exaltation is ever-present, ever-corrupting and ever-deceitful, even among scholars, and especially among those who *believe*. Both formal and informal theorizing must start somewhere, with a suspicion or an intuition of some sort – a vision of causal connections. Systematically formulating the implications of that vision can produce a theory, which can then be tested against empirical evidence whereupon it is either strengthened or discarded (Sowell, 2010). However, if your epistemology and metaphysics allow it, and you are possessed by a deep ideological vision of the way of things, and you *feel* morally exalted by this (emotion is placed at the center of postmodern epistemology), then facts to the contrary, no matter how empirically provable, will do little to make you deviate from your vision. The vision of the anointed extends beyond a particular issue or cause and includes a vision of the anointed visionaries themselves (Sowell, 2010). The question, then, is what comes first – epistemology or ideology? What is foundational and what is consequential? Normally, for an epistemology to be credible, one would assume that any personally held belief would have to conform to the overarching philosophical system of thought rather than the system of thought being formulated specifically to accommodate that belief. But, as has already been observed with Kant, this does not appear to be the case with applied postmodernism.

Why is it that applied postmodernism has had such a profound influence on the social sciences and humanities, but next to none in the natural sciences? For one, it is highly doubtful that mankind would have been able to send machines to Mars if generations of scientists would have been operating according to their own subjective, yet equally valid, truths. Or is the subjectivist nature of epistemology and reality conveniently applicable only in selected areas, so chosen by Theorists? The epistemological and metaphysical foundations underpinning the natural sciences – reason, objectivism and realism (postmodernism: anti-reason, social subjectivism and anti-realism) – have proven themselves time and time again capable of corresponding to reality allowing science to make tremendous advances for the convenience, wealth and wellbeing of the people of the world. The philosophical foun-

dition of the social constructionist Theory of applied postmodernism in the social sciences, meanwhile, allow it to blatantly disregard whatever comes out of the natural sciences if it does not correspond to its moral vision and ideology of social justice, explicitly emphasizing activist ambitions ahead of empirical reality and truth (see for example Rubin, 1993, p. 7). This results in puzzling occurrences such as queer, gender and other variations on Theory, for example, advocating for a denial of well documented and irrefutable evidence of the biological differences between the sexes (see Butler, 1990, p. 7), on grounds which are purely subjective and theoretical (and ideological), because such is the nature of Theory as it has been shaped and formulated that it allows for such “leaps of faith”.

Renowned cognitive psychology researcher Steven Pinker (2019) writes about how the fallacy of the idea of human beings being born as mere blank slates constitutes a denial of human nature, in clear opposition to substantiated, empirically provable evidence. Equally renowned social psychologist Jonathan Haidt similarly describes the idea that we are born into this world as blank slates as the worst idea in psychology (2013). Such findings and consequent statements about them, conveniently interpreted by Theorists as expressions of personal (and political) views rather than reflections of empirical reality, are not popular, and have in some circles almost become secular taboos. It opposes the idea of social constructivism and dares to propose the existence of a universal human nature (a concept generally rejected by queer theory, since it leads to the “queer-non-compatible” notion of universality (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020)) and that there are innate differences between people. This, of course, would mean that perhaps the world in its natural state, with regards to its material and immaterial resources, is not perfectly symmetrically distributed after all, lessening the impetus for any observable variation in social outcome to be reduced to and necessarily explained by the sole variable of oppression or discrimination. Luckily, in applied postmodernism and for those anointed with a higher vision, theory trumps evidence, meaning one need not concern oneself with such banalities. An explanation which gives us villains to abhor and heroes to glorify is far more emotionally satisfying, and therefore truer, in accordance with the postmodern knowledge principle (even though truth was supposed to be an impossible and irrelevant concept). Morality binds and blinds (Haidt, 2013).

The-many-epistemologies epistemology

Even the idea of rationality and value-free empirical evidence itself – and the product of their combined systematic application: the scientific method – have been deemed constructs of the western, white and male-dominated power play (see for example Maldonado-Torres et al., 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018). They are seen as simply “one way of knowing”, tyrannically subjugating all other cultures and races and enforcing these constructs upon them through the power of discourse. Since there is an infinite number of possible interpretations to a given phenomenon and none of them are canonical, the so-called hegemony of any particular view can be attributable solely to power, and the dominance of those in power over those subjected to it (example: “white” mathematics is oppressing minorities – Battey & Leyva, 2016). Thus, in applied postmodernism we find the virtuous insistence on the promotion of “indigenous” and “black knowledge” (see for example Andrews, 2018) as something substantially different from, yet equally valid as, science and reason, which is viewed as oppressive and in need of redressing, though without arguing for its demerits or failure to meet the criteria for reliable knowledge production. Its premise is what is called standpoint epistemology (Lorber, 2006), a thoroughly postmodern concept that, in my view, devalues the very value of knowledge and its function as a universally viable means of understanding and interacting with the world. Instead, what we are left with are, for instance, western (generally male) epistemology, contrasted with and unfairly dominating other epistemologies such as black, indigenous and feminist epistemology, and so on – the list could essentially be made endless across the infinite dimensions of possible identity constellations. But is it really epistemology in the true meaning of term that is intended here, i.e. fundamentally different theories of knowledge, contrasting views on the nature of it and how one goes about acquiring it? Or is it the intentional casting aside of certain facets of an empirically established and reliable knowledge base in favor of giving room to other factually unverified, yet lamented for having been hitherto devalued, opinions on phenomena (or on the established knowledge itself) to take its place? As already mentioned, one finds no reasoned arguments as to their epistemological meritocratic superiority, only goals of arbitrarily equalizing access to the defining of knowledge, and in so doing changing nothing of the underlying epistemology except for the elevation of opinion to the status of fact. This then becomes the only characteristic differentiating all the “other” epistemologies from the traditional one, thereby negating the very supposition of

the various epistemologies' inherent differences and, ultimately, the *raison d'être* for any one of them in particular.

Influential black-feminism (as its own field, not black intended as adjective) scholar Kristie Dotson (2014) claims that for knowledge to be regarded as such, it needs to include *experience-based* (i.e. subjective) knowledge of minorities, which is then assumed to always be epistemologically different than “dominant” forms of knowledge because of taken-for-granted power dynamics and oppression. Identity is collective and knowledge subjective to the collective, making it accessible only from within the group. This devalues the individual, depriving her of agency and severely undermining faith in her critical faculties and capacity for rationality, instead assuming the skin color and various other superficial characteristics of group identity to have critical effect on one's perception of facts and knowledge. Who you are determines the epistemological structuring of your worldview and it is out of your hands. In an unfortunate turn of events, it now appears in the view of Theorists that it is *not* the content of your character that defines you, but the color of your skin – or the nature of your sexuality, or the continent of your birth, or even the numbers on your bathroom scale (see, for instance, the alarming and science-denying writings, motivated by political aspirations and moral expressions of compassion, by Coveney & Booth (2019, p. 18).

These and a host of other similar views originating from within applied postmodernism have today become what Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) call “known-knowns”. They are taken for granted as true, because they are known to be true. Hence, complex philosophical theory has ceased to be just that when it is diffused in the vernacular, through which it has in fact lost its meaning. What do we mean today when we, for example, demand for gender theory to be applied when conducting research across all fields of social science? What is implied? Without speaking to its utility, retracing its philosophical origin, it is an indisputable fact that it is the unwitting enforcing of a very particular and radical set of philosophical axioms, infused heavily by politics, those in turn originating in a particular radical worldview. It is unwitting because of “known-knowns”. Only the end product is transmitted, morally elevated and easily marketable as inclusive, compassionate and just, while the deeper philosophical issues can be safely left alone, precisely because they are known and no longer demand attention. Why waste time verifying earth's orbit around the sun? It is known! Why waste time questioning the notion of society as dominated by oppressive power structures, enforced through language, where one's group identity determines one's access to knowledge and what “truths” one will subscribe to? It is known!

Then, in a circular, self-justifying argument, Theory insists that we need Theory (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). At first, theories were proposed as ways to explain the world. Later the theoretical explanations get stated with the confidence of objective reality, becoming conflated with truth. Then, the continued existence and practical application of the theories are justified as solutions to problems originating as “truths” within the theories themselves. Where, one cannot help but ask, is the intellectual consistency? Well, incoherence is apparently a “constituent characteristic” of applied postmodernism, according to queer theorist Annamarie Jagose (1996, p. 1), so if it is intellectual consistency one seeks, one had better seek it elsewhere (see also Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Conveniently enough, this secures for Theorists a position from which all criticism can be avoided. Because, as Popper (1945/2011, p. 422) notes, “if incoherence and contradictions need not be avoided then any criticism and any discussion becomes impossible, since criticism always consists in pointing out contradictions, either within the theory to be criticized or between it and some facts of experience”. If this is the case, are we still, then, even speaking of scientific matters at all, or have we in fact moved on to something else entirely?

The gospel of applied postmodernism

The notion proposed here that scholars and institutions alike fall prey to the allure of moral conformity with moralistic ideas and theories and the promise of purification that they bring, walking confidently into the perceived light of righteousness wherever it may lead, should not, although it might initially appear beneath the intellectual resilience of the academic mind, be all too readily dismissed. One look back at the history of the twentieth century reveals the veracity of the general principle of it, as legions of western intellectuals, attracted by its utopian promise and the “humaneness” and alleged moral supremacy on which it was formulated, continued for decades to argue in support of the communist ideology (Sowell, 2010), the most murderous ideology in history (Solzhenitsyn, 2018) – some still do. Ergo, the misplaced will to do good (or to be seen doing it), to show solidarity and belonging to the exclusive fellowship of the moral elite, has led the intellectual horribly astray before. It can do so again.

As proposed by Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020), applied postmodernism and its conclusions have created an intellectual organ whose primary aim is the advocating of a very particular *what should be*, rather than striving for

a more subjectively detached *what is*. This is an attitude one would rather see reserved for churches, and not universities, resulting in profoundly unscientific practices such as “research justice”. Research justice foregoes the search for truth or improvement of knowledge entirely in its quest for what it perceives as justice, through the equalization of power (Jolivéte, 2015). It strives for the devaluing of dominant, rational forms of knowledge production in research because it is seen as oppressive, no matter its validity or merits, in exchange for the promotion of “the ways of knowing” of minority groups and those deemed to be oppressed, again without arguing for their merits or supposed superiority. The quest for truth is capitulated in the service of the arbitrary, perceived moral good. The identity of the researcher is made more important than the research itself, the *what should be* is made elevated above all else. Truth matters not – justice according to Theory is all that does. Because Theory has acquired the mantle of upholder of moral virtue, against the forces of (d)evil, it has become untouchable, unchallengeable, and beyond appealing for everyone wishing to bask in the light of its moral exaltation. It has been all too well documented, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, that challenges to the orthodoxy of Theory is often met by harsh moral condemnation, silencing and even exclusion from the academic conversation. Accounts of certain research topics and perspectives becoming taboo abound – a deplorable development, seeing as it is precisely this kind of heterodoxy and intellectual diversity which ensures that knowledge and truth prevails.

Modernity and the enlightenment involved reason’s triumph over superstition. Are we regressing in that regard? Casting aside epistemological coherence and consistency, once again instead relying on superstition, regarding supposedly negative words as powerful incantations, placing fickle emotions ahead of empirical facts and preaching about hidden forces acting throughout society that cannot be seen except by those anointed with “*critical consciousness*” (see Styslinger et al., 2019), while denying anything that doesn’t support the vision and which threatens the moral purity of its believers? Scholasticism and enforced viewpoint homogeneity returns in the guise of the morally just. And when beliefs are legitimized, opposition becomes heresy, by which token these words are most assuredly sacrilege. How come the non-empirical disciplines and theories cemented in the collective consciousness, put forth by Theorists of applied postmodernism, have enjoyed such sweeping appropriation, becoming “known-knowns”, while empirical findings like those made by Pinker, Haidt and many others have not, at least in the humanities? Certainly, there is wisdom to be gathered on both sides.

But why has one become common knowledge – subjective, theoretical and anti-rationalist as it is at its core (and proudly so) – disregarding the fact that it repeatedly contradicts the rigorously empirical, reproducible scientific findings of the other? It requires faith, inflamed by the sense of moral vanity that it arouses. It requires *belief* – “not-wanting-to-know what is true” (Nietzsche, 1895/2008, 52) – the comforting warmth of illusions, at the expense of the cold and threatening desire for truth. Morality binds and blinds (Haidt, 2013).

What can satirically, though not unfittingly, be described as a secular gospel has taken root, originating in the far corners of the universities and slowly emerging into society at large. Popper (1945/2011) remarked upon it already in 1945 – a twentieth century intellectualism characterized by a disillusionment and despair of reason, and of a retreat into religious mysticism. Championing the doctrine of goodness, it now soldiers forth in its holy crusade to rid paradise of snakes, untroubled by the eventuality that truth just might be among them. And the gospel reads: *Once more mankind has been assigned original sin, by the grace of intersectional gender theory, and we shall call it white and male privilege. Once more we must punish those who blaspheme against the gospel of the anointed and dissuade them from their sinful ways, and we shall call it political correctness. And as the holy men once did to Galileo, once more we shall forbid the asking of the wrong questions, the searching for the wrong truths – for the right truth, our truth, is already known and so it shall remain.*

Nietzsche knew, when he proclaimed the death of God, that mankind would need to either rise above him and embrace its own exalted potential, or succumb once more to novel superstitious beliefs and fatalistic nihilism. Have we chosen our path?

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