

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 211

SO 021 738

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 TITLE A Restorationist Views the Modernist/Post Modernist Debate. (Presidential Address).  
 PUB DATE 90  
 NOTE 15p.; Speech delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Far Western Philosophy of Education Meeting (39th, Salt Lake, UT, December 7-8, 1990).  
 PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Christianity; Educational Change; \*Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Intellectual History; \*Modernism; \*Philosophy; \*Religion; Religious Cultural Groups  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Mormons; \*Postmodernism; \*Restoration

ABSTRACT

The nation's schools and society in general face serious problems that are largely rooted in moral and spiritual issues. Modern philosophy has led to a secular culture in which the existence of a divine God has been rejected, and man has become his own God, his own standard of measurement. These issues are addressed from the point of view of a philosopher who is also a Mormon and who believes in the literal restoration of God's plan of salvation as it was taught to Adam and Eve and later proclaimed by Jesus Christ and the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith. Restorationist claims are applied to education, and discussed in terms of the philosopher's own personal beliefs. (DB)

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# A Restorationist Views the Modernist/Postmodernist Debate

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(Presidential Address 1990)

by

Neil J. Flinders

Delivered at the 39th Annual Meeting of the  
Far Western Philosophy of Education Society

Howard Johnson Hotel

7-8 December, 1990

Salt Lake City, Utah

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## A Restorationist Views the Modernist/Post Modernist Debate

Neil J. Flinders

Article I, Section 2 of the FWPEs By-Laws lists six purposes of our organization. Among these, is the goal to "promote clarification of agreements and differences among the several philosophies of education" by giving opportunity for individual expression at annual meetings. The intent of this address is to initiate and endorse such personal expression in this conference. I will call attention to the Modernist/Postmodernist debate and share my basic response to this debate as I view it through the philosophy underlying my religious education. To set the stage, I request your indulgence in a brief review of material with which we are all familiar.

A growing mass of evidence issuing from the presses that feed our intellect suggests the educational enterprise in western culture may be mortally wounded. Some critics go further and portray both public and higher education as a cadaver in the early stages of decay or at best a quivering carcass. This may seem like a grim description, but the pronouncements are abundant.

The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education appointed in 1981, which declared "Our nation is at risk,"<sup>1</sup> has fueled a cacophony of criticism of American education. John I. Goodlad's prominent report, *A Place Called School*, begins with the sober declaration: "American schools are in trouble. . . . It is possible that our entire public education system is nearing collapse."<sup>2</sup> A less sympathetic Alston Chase contends "Learning in America hovers somewhere between the lousy and the catastrophic. On a scale of one to 10, U. S. Schools score minus 100."<sup>3</sup> Similar displeasure is expressed in the title of a *Time Magazine* essay, "Education: Doing Bad and Feeling Good" (Feb. 5, 1990. p. 78), which attacks current curriculum.

The call of the critics reaches beyond an invitation to line up and view an inert and lifeless body. Overall, the scenario is more reminiscent of a kill on the African veldt. The various studies read like investigative probes to determine "who did it?" Was it the lions in the grass, the circling vultures, the laughing hyenas, drought, old age, disease, or what? There is a sharp focus on the dynamic activity of various organisms feeding on the cadaver--professionals jockeying for position,

political lobbyists staking claims, and a public that is snapping and yapping for its fair share. How has all this come to be?

I am not astute enough to settle the question. In fact, I am not so sure the feeding that is taking place is on a lifeless body. I do feel the evidence is deeply disturbing if not compelling. Education is in trouble. The critter is apparently not in a healthy, vital, or fully functioning condition. It seems either naive or dishonest to say all is well.

### Consider a Small Sample of the Evidence

Paul Johnson's study *Intellectuals* is one form of evidence. His report is emotionally disturbing and spiritually depressing.<sup>4</sup> Johnson lines up an illustrious collection of academic heroes--venerated personalities that are heralded as the brightest stars--our disciplinary models. Then he turns the spotlight on their moral character and reveals a cesspool of hate, hypocrisy, selfishness, and personal dissolution. The record, if true, is a pathetic testimony in behalf of abused parents, spouses, children, and friends. The reader is left with the quandry of the New Testament question: "Can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit?" (Mt. 7:18).

James Turner's *Without God, Without Creed* is less distressing to the emotions but more disturbing to the intellect.<sup>5</sup> Turner's stated quest is to carefully document the history of ideas and events that made it possible for Americans to cease to believe in God. The picture is clear, but disquieting. How did humans knowingly decide to make less of themselves than what they are, to trade their heart and their soul, as C. S. Lewis described it, in exchange for the illusion of "objectivity?"<sup>6</sup> Little wonder that we have a flurry of effort by individuals documenting the transaction in which we seem to have sold our spiritual inheritance for a mess of pottage.

Parker J. Palmer's *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* illustrates the point.<sup>7</sup> Palmer, a Quaker, punctuates an account of his own early professional self-deception by

quoting the recent Carnegie Commission survey that reveals the educational system has convinced American undergraduates they can "win" while everyone around them is losing (pp. 4-5).

Competition can be a ruthless regulator.

Or consider Page Smith's *The Killing of the Spirit*, a book that argues that the abode of the moral sense has been demolished.<sup>8</sup> Smith is persuasive because his indictment is such an embarrassing confirmation of our own personal experience. What thinking and honest academics cannot replicate from their own observations and experiences the very conditions Smith describes? Ostrich-like, we may stick our heads in the sands of personal immediacy, but that does not remove the larger reality that surrounds us. There are formidable cracks in the foundation notwithstanding the defense of the modern university by Harvard's Henry Rosovsky.<sup>9</sup>

Witnesses that Smith calls on to testify clearly indicate that the current disciplines of academia do function more like echo chambers than birthing rooms. Isn't it chilling to face the question: Would most undergraduates who take their minds off making money or seeking certification candidly admit that their education, by and large, is simply a farcical experience? Is Smith right when he suggests this condition exists because today's students are simply invited guests feasting on the twitching remains of a carcass devoid of spirit? Is it true, as he suggests, that modern man must develop a new consciousness in order to survive?

I do not have space or time to detail more of the evidence, but I can share a summary paragraph of one liners. E. D. Hirsch suggests our educational machinery is manufacturing cultural illiterates.<sup>10</sup> Allan Bloom claims this is happening because our minds have been systematically closed.<sup>11</sup> It is our hearts, Ronald Nash counters, not our minds that the schools have slammed shut.<sup>12</sup> Paul Vitz points to a startling censorship in our children's public school textbooks.<sup>13</sup> Bruce Wilshire announces the moral collapse of the university.<sup>14</sup> This has caused a moral and spiritual crises in education, David E. Purpel says.<sup>15</sup> In a shrill voice, C. J. Sykes, calls the culprit *Profscam*.<sup>16</sup> Richard Mitchell simply pronounces a dirge over *The Graves of Academe*.<sup>17</sup>

## Philosophical Roots of the Problem

These documents and a litany of others are pouring into the public domain. What has ignited all this criticism? I believe it is the impact of *post modernism*. It is a consequence of the war between positivism and post positivism. This conflict has essentially neutralized philosophy as a practical discipline and made it irrelevant in the eyes of many to the practice of education. For example, the "social sciences" are currently locked in a fierce and perhaps deadly controversy over whether or not knowledge produced by science is independent of the power structure or social order that produces it. The menu for the day in intellectual circles is, Can "objective" realism be successfully defended in the post modern era? It is obvious that this spectre would cast shadows over American education at every level. At bottom the fear is, What will happen if the post modern argument exposes fatal flaws in our educational system and offers nothing as an alternative?

I recognize that everyone does not accept the terms modernism and post-modernism in the same way. John Silber, President of Boston University, defends his conservative point of view by arguing that modernism did not begin with Descartes, but with irrationalists such as Kierkegaard, Marx, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche. Silber wants to keep the "objective" nature of reality intact. He refuses to admit that "fact and argument" can be grounded in anything but objective logic. His defense of moral imperatives and his shield against the forces of relativism is built on this posture.

Parenthetically, it is significant to me that Silber joins other conservative intellectuals who desire to use the concept of "God," but who are quick to move themselves away from faith in divine revelation to a second perimeter of defense--solitary reason. The premise of a personal living God that speaks to man is set aside. For example, Silber argues

In refuting Protagoras, who held that man is the measure of all things, Plato made no appeal to God. . . . In *The Republic* as in *Gorgias*, Socrates outlines the way in which objective knowledge can be obtained through dialogue rather than through divine revelation. . . . Other great philosophers have pointed out the independence of the true and the good from belief in the divine. Immanuel Kant was reared in Pietism, but, departing from the religion of his childhood, he went on to develop the foundations of morality in independence of divine

authority. . . . Neither Plato nor Kant find it necessary, even in the absence of God, to abandon the search for truth or to accept a simplistic relativism.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding Dr. Silber and his argument in behalf of the conservatives, I believe there is a postmodernist impact on the "objectivism" of modernism. The battle is more than a mirage; it is philosophically significant. The axial thrust of the postmodernist movement is the way it has scrambled the traditional pattern of the conventional philosophical categories. Consider two examples.

### The Postmodern Mind

Huston Smith, formerly of M. I. T. and now at Syracuse, is symbolic of American philosophers of education who resisted what he has called "the Modern Western Mind-set" that developed during the seventeenth-through-nineteenth centuries.<sup>19</sup> Smith's experience at M. I. T., he says, made clear the modern position. *Modernism* was characterized as *secular* and *scientific*. In the final analysis there was little or no room for *traditional, religious, or humanistic* concerns. The intent was to quantify anything and everything in order to get power and control. In his view, the Modern Western Mind-set rejected tradition which stressed quality and participation rather than quantity and control. The ultimate flaw he says is "An epistemology that aims relentlessly at control rules out the possibility of transcendence in principle" (p. 134). Or, as Carl Sagan put it in *The Dragons of Eden*, "[The] fundamental premise about the brain is that its workings--what we sometimes call 'mind'-- are a consequence of its anatomy and physiology *and nothing more.*" (p.136)

Smith sees modernism as reductionist and delimiting. Sociology must reduce to psychology, psychology to biology, biology to chemistry, and chemistry to physics. He emphasizes the consequences of modernism by expressing his disappointment in its offspring--the Postmodern Mind of the twentieth century. Modernity has spawned a flat and shapeless view of reality.

"As a whole the Postmodern Mind lacks form and definition" (p. xii). Further, it sponsors a divisive pluralism that is incapable of saying anything serious about values and existential meanings. Some, like Heidegger and Nietzsche, saw the problem of modernism but offered no solution--only an expose of its flaws. People are left to fend for themselves in these important areas Smith argues. The result is a paralyzing squabble that destroys the consensus necessary to sustain a full and meaningful life. Hence, Smith's appeal for us to look up, reach out, and think *Beyond the Postmodern Mind*.

Smith scrambles the philosophic categories by arguing that *being* is ultimately defined by motivations. Above all else, he maintains, we are creatures that want. These wants give rise to epistemologies. Epistemologies in turn produce ontologies--or world views. And finally, ontologies generate anthropologies. Smith claims that to deny the reality of a supernatural world and adopt a naturalistic world view produces a humanistic view of man, "humanistic" applied as an adjective, not for the humanities but for a specific doctrine that makes embodied man the measure of man. In his words, we have ventured so far ". . . down the road to this Promethean epistemology, naturalistic ontology, and humanistic anthropology that it is virtually impossible for us to see how arbitrary the entire outlook is--how like a barren moonscape it would have appeared to our ancestors and continues to appear to everyone but ourselves" (p.103). We have created an illusion for ourselves that leaves us stranded in what Morris Berman called a "disenchanted" world.<sup>20</sup>

Smith is not alone in his critique of Modernity. Emmanuel Levinas also strikes a blow against the modern position.<sup>21</sup> He rejects the basic format of traditional Western philosophy and does so in a manner and method that rejects conventional atheistic, secular perspectives. Born in Lithuania in 1906, Levinas grew up in the Russia of world war, revolution and civil war. He emigrated to France in 1923 and began his study of philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. He studied phenomenology under Hering, Husserl, and Heidegger, and first became known for his efforts to go beyond Heideggerian philosophy and establish his own philosophy of transcendence.

Ultimately his work led to a radical reversal of traditional philosophical procedures.

Emmanuel Levinas separates ontology from what he terms "metaphysics" and removes from ontology its privileged role as the determiner of metaphysics. Further, he grounds metaphysics in ethics, arguing that there is a transcendent *Other* that cannot be reduced to or controlled by the I. Hence, the way the I responds to or relates with others in the face of the *Other* is the proper foundation of philosophical thought. And this responding or relating, he maintains, is ethics. Rather than constructing an ethic upon preestablished metaphysical foundations, Levinas claims that metaphysics are the consequence of ethics. In his case, infinity, not totality, is the birthplace of reality.

The case might be stated in less abstract terms as: Rather than assuming that because this is the way things are, therefore this is what we value, Levinas maintains that because we value such and such, this is the way things are. He simply stands conventional Western thought on its head.

Because Levinas reconstructs metaphysics upon ethical foundations, moral responsibility is considered coexistent with Being; hence, morality cannot be avoided. For Levinas, our personal being is constituted by our relationship with others. Our primary interaction is with these "others," and this interaction occurs in the face of the transcendent *Other*, which is God, to which we are inescapably accountable. The focus for Levinas, however, is more humanistic than theistic compared to Karl Barth, for example. The acknowledgement of the pervasive but impersonal Other is a constant, but the field of action is between the I and *others*, not between the I and the *Other*.

### Summary of the Contemporary Scene

Now, in a sentence or two what have I said? First, there is increasing evidence that many in the West are rapidly losing confidence in the philosophical structure that created and sustains our secular society. The traditional Greek pattern of thought that has characterized Western society is

being called into question. Second, little if anything is being offered to take its place. Critics are successfully attacking the consequences of modernism in our social and educational institutions. They are reconstructing the philosophical foundations--akin to the movement in contemporary physics where science is being redefined and theorists are seeking to find order in Chaos, as James Gleick's bestseller reports.<sup>22</sup> But confusion is more apparent than viable alternatives; divisiveness more dominant than consensus. Consequently, turmoil characterizes contemporary education.

### A Restorationist Response

How do I respond to this debate? I agree with the critics in their basic conclusion, but not necessarily with their analysis. Our world is in trouble. I believe it is in trouble because we have lost a balanced vision of who we are and what we should be about. Two major philosophical moves have contributed to this impaired vision: (1) The academic intellect of the West rejected the reality of a supernatural domain and the existence of a divine God with whom man can develop a personal relationship. (2) It substituted a blind consumption of Aristotelian reductionist thought; man became his own God, his own standard of measurement. My response to the debate must be understood in terms of my religious commitments. I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (a Mormon)--who believes in a literal restoration of divinely revealed knowledge and practice. You could call me a Restorationist. This position shapes my response to the debate?

I recognize that postmodernists reject the reductionism I describe, but they offer little or nothing to take its place. For me, reductionism is useful as a tool but not as an ontology. Consequently, I believe the critical issue transcends the current debate between soft positivism and hermeneutics.<sup>23</sup> Simply rearranging or modifying tools, even tools that have been transformed into philosophies, does not resolve life's larger questions.

The world consists of more than man making use of nature; it has a spiritual as well as a temporal dimension. Man is more than an evolving physiological organism; each individual has a

destiny beyond the mortal domain. My rejection of both the modernist and post modernist world view, however, does not mean I would revert to the Platonic based views of medieval Christianity or embrace some form of existentialism. As a Restorationist, I have another option.

A Restorationist is a Christian, holding a view that emphasizes Adam and Eve were real people, literal parents of the human race, who were taught a Plan of Salvation that applied to them and all of their offspring. This plan was the same doctrine Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed and that was rejected by the people soon after his death. It offers clear and simple answers to mans basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? and After death what? I believe the fulness of this knowledge was restored through the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith. It brought Brigham Young to these valleys, and now informs the world view of what is commonly termed Mormonism.

I recognize that Restorationist premises are in some ways unique, but they are also legitimate notions that pertain to philosophical thought. Restorationist ideas can be of great interest to philosophers, especially philosophers of education. They are certainly as intriguing as the premises underlying the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger, Huston Smith, or Emmanuel Levinas. I offer two current examples where Restorationist ideas have attracted social interest with intellectual implications.

A group of Soviet journalists recently visited Salt Lake City for the purpose of writing articles for their *Literary Gazette* and making a TV documentary on Mormonism. Vladimir Mukusev, host of the most popular show on Soviet television, said the reason for filming the documentary was to drive home the point that religion is needed in the Soviet Union. "One of the biggest mistakes Russia made was destroying religion and Christian principles," he said. He described the situation in his homeland as "dangerous . . . entering civil war" and felt that the right kind of religion could soften people and help them settle their differences.<sup>24</sup> This was an intellectual judgment. It was the uniqueness of the Mormon perspective, more pointedly it was the Restorationist concept of *personal freedom*, that impressed these Soviet citizens and brought them to Salt Lake City.

A second example is framed in the visit of a professor (Milowit Kuninski) from Krakow, Poland who visited our campus this past summer. One of his lectures was entitled "The Fall of Communist Education." The striking message of his report was a list of policies that led to the failure of Communist education in Poland. These policies read like a list of the solutions we are now proposing to correct the education problems in the U. S. and Canada. Included on the list were items such as more comprehensive mass education, stronger central control, expanding mandated curriculum, increased financial support, and others.

Professor Kuninski's data base, was built around seven functions: socialization, ideology, politics, economics, organization, cognition, and public citizenship. His research clearly revealed that the policies invoked by Poland's Marxist educational experts were unsuccessful. The professor's conclusion was that these mandates created value conflicts rooted in the family, nationalist, and religious traditions. These latent traditions, he demonstrated, were more powerful than the programs and procedures recommended and implemented by the state and its professional representatives. He insightfully noted that people of the Mormon persuasion should be able to appreciate this. Again the bottom line focus was *personal freedom--moral agency*.

### Restorationist Claims

This personal freedom, moral agency, is the point I wish to press. During the past two years I have expended most of my professional energies writing a book on education for my sub-culture, the Latter-day Saint community and others who might be interested in such a perspective. The major theme of this work is expressed in its title: *Teach the Children: An Agency Approach to Education*. In this book, based on Restorationist principles, I argue that personal freedom, moral agency, must undergird all successful education. I also contend this is not the primary influence governing modern education. The philosophy of schooling today is based more on conforming to someone else's choices than it is on determining one's own choices. In general, it is characterized by a methodical socialization of the young generation to a non-sacred secular world-view.

Based on Restorationist perceptions of God, man, and nature, I maintain that educators must focus on the individual more than the group. This means I disagree with current educational policy that places the generic and changing interests of the group above the moral agency of the individual and that imposes the arbitrary will of the group onto the individual. This does not mean I favor unrestrained individual autonomy or the adoption of personal relativism; quite the contrary. I favor recognizing and subjecting myself to principles that are divinely provided, personally embraced, and that are implemented in harmony with revealed stewardships. But this choice cannot be made if these principles are not taught or worse, if it is illegal to include them in the curriculum.

I do not believe science can save me, nor can I of myself save myself. I am responsible to use the spiritual power within my eternal nature to seek the divine influences God has offered to obtain a lasting solution to my problems. This process involves learning by both faith and study--by revelation and reason. This dual approach helps me resolve the ominous difficulties displayed in the debate between modernists and postmodernists. The faithful cues available from revelation guide my reason and clarify the acceptable and nonacceptable propositions I encounter.

For example, contrary to a central tenet of Greek philosophy, the Restorationist recognizes that *man is not the proper measure of man*; the Creator is. God can and does speak to his children. My Restorationist perception is that I am literally a spirit child of perfect heavenly parents. I was created in their image and their likeness, as the Genesis account records. Life and death are essential events in the divine plan, though to mortals they are mysteries. As a child of God, I believe I am responsible to exercise my faith in matters within and beyond the realm of reason and to use my rational capacities to build upon and to extend the application of this faith. Furthermore, I believe these personal and social goals cannot be continuously or optimally pursued without the stabilizing influence of the family unit, which is the primary human social structure. Such ideas are, for philosophers, as rich in potential as they may be disturbing.

In all of this endeavor (and here is the glitch) I am free--free to choose from the pervading

oppositions that surround me. I can seek and accept truth. I can also reject truth and substitute error. However, I am convinced that I live in an orderly universe, not an evolving experiment. I am participating in an experience with a beginning and a pre-planned end--an experience under the control of a competent Manager. In this ordered estate, my decisions result in confrontations with an orderly universe characterized by rewards and punishments. I am rewarded for compliance and suffer from ignorance and willful violation of the order in this universe. There is a single exception to this justice. A principle of mercy exists as well as a principle of justice. The Restorationist holds the view that as an individual I can be redeemed of my follies and foibles if I choose to do so. I have access to a Redeemer that can invoke mercy in my behalf. He is empowered to intervene for my benefit, if I choose to comply with his conditions. He is the source of ultimate hope. This knowledge can be personally confirmed with moral certainty--beyond doubt.

Optimism characterizes the Restorationist view of life. Reality can be painful because of the personal freedom. But freedom with potential pain is better than determinism with illusory security. Determinism does not dominate personal existence; it functions in the form of a consequence, and not as an initiating or controlling factor in human affairs. Causes and consequences do exist, but causes are self-induced in matters that pertain to man's eternal welfare. *Ultimately*, I am accountable only for circumstances created by my choices.

I believe that truth is manifest through personality. Personality is eternal. Great is the worth of the human soul. All organization, educational and political, should be keyed to this value. As a personality I have at my disposal (a) Religious revelation, (b) philosophic speculation, and (c) scientific confirmation. Like concentric circles, each of these resources are potential contributors to my growth and personal development.

It is my desire that we use this conference to exercise these gifts for our mutual benefit.

## Endnotes

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