

GIMME THAT OLD-TIME ENLIGHTENMENT META-NARRATIVE

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Mark Weinstein argues that “totalizing” or “exclusionary”¹ cognitive frameworks are epistemologically suspect because of their moral failings; that their *moral* defects constitute *epistemological* defects as well. He urges, further, that this insight resolves the apparently problematic tension between Postmodernism’s rejection of meta-narrative and its advocacy of progressive social and educational change.

I will suggest that, despite the several important points he makes, his discussion manifests difficulties which defeat the sort of Postmodernist stance that he embraces; and that the moral and political imperatives it espouses — which I endorse — require for their justification the sort of Modernist, Enlightenment epistemological (and ethical) presuppositions which Weinstein and other self-described Postmodernists are reluctant to embrace.

1. Moral Critique of Discourse Frames. I agree with Weinstein that discourse frames are rightly criticized on moral grounds: a frame in which it is impossible to notice genuine injustice is properly criticized by pointing out that impossibility; it can be justifiably deemed inadequate if it excludes, silences, marginalizes, or otherwise supports “blatant injustice.” These are *moral* failings. To silence or marginalize is to deprive people from full participation in social life. It is unjustifiably to presume that their perspectives are inferior or without value. It is to sin against them *procedurally*. When frames silence or marginalize, they fail to treat potential participants in dialogue justly.

Is this failure a(n epistemologically) *substantive* one as well? Not necessarily. A dialogue in which all have full access, and in which all are treated equally, with respect, may nevertheless result in agreement on beliefs which are false or unjustified; similarly, a dialogue to which certain groups are excluded may nevertheless result in beliefs which are true or justified. So procedural justice is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for substantive rationality (or epistemic worthiness more generally). If so, then the moral objections to exclusionary discourse frames which Weinstein so ably articulates do not constitute epistemological objections — i.e., objections which necessarily tarnish the epistemic credentials of the outcomes of dialogue which take place within them — to those frames as well.

Of course the moral failure of exclusion *may* result in epistemological failure: the excluded could have better insight, or more justified beliefs, or less distorted perspectives, than the included.² But whether such a failure does so result is a question which must be addressed independently; it can’t be read off from the establishment of morally objectionable exclusion itself. It is thus a mistake to think that an ethical objection to a frame automatically translates into an epistemological one: “the true” *cannot* “be defined in terms of the good,” for the former is independent of the latter.

2. Postmodernist Rejection of “Meta-Narrative.” One hallmark of Postmodernism is its distrust of “master narratives”, i.e., of “totalizing meta-narratives” according to which differences among people and groups are rendered invisible or deemed insignificant, and in which all non-privileged people are evaluated as inferior to those who are privileged. All who have unjustly suffered under totalizing efforts to view the world and everything in it in terms of privileged European white men

are surely justified in objecting to such dehumanizing and difference-denying treatment. But the significance of this moral and social/political insight is not what Weinstein thinks.

Note first that the key Postmodernist concept of “meta-narrative” is ambiguous. It can refer to (1) a story in which all *people* (or groups) are regarded as equivalent, and differences among them ignored or denied. It can also refer to (2) a fully general *philosophical theory*, concerning (e.g.) all knowledge-claims; all justificatory strategies; all moral values, rights, and obligations; all instances of injustice; etc. Weinstein, perhaps like other Postmodernists, I think conflates these, with unhappy consequences. The rejection of the first sort of meta-narrative is more plausible than the rejection of the second sort, but neither is without difficulty.

The rejection of the first sort of meta-narrative is plausible for all the reasons Weinstein mentions. People and groups are not all alike; regarding them as such, and so marginalizing or rendering differences invisible, can easily result in injustice to those who are marginalized, made invisible, or silenced. If so, and if injustice is bad, then surely such injustice-causing meta-narratives are to be viewed with suspicion.

But will injustice always so result? Surely scenarios can be envisioned — for example, educational scenarios in which the perspectives of young or immature students are denied or devalued — in which no injustice results.³ If so, such meta-narratives cannot be rejected for this reason.

Moreover: is injustice always bad? Is it always morally wrong to exclude, marginalize, silence or oppress? My own answer is affirmative: injustice and oppression are always to be deplored.⁴ But this judgment is underwritten by my acceptance of a meta-narrative of the second sort concerning morality, according to which some ways of treating people — whoever they are — are wrong. This meta-narrative ignores difference. It needn't deny it, but it does deem it irrelevant to the moral question at issue. It is always wrong to torture, rape, marginalize, silence, exclude, or oppress — whoever the victim(s) might be. Can the Postmodernist avoid this sort of meta-narrative? I don't see how she can, if she continues to harbor “the hope of supporting progressive educational change in a non-arbitrary manner.”

Can she avoid a similar meta-narrative of the second sort concerning matters epistemological? For Weinstein and Giroux, “the most essential reasons are those that social injustice and marginalization bring to the fore.” Any such claim as this is intelligible only as a claim about all reasons; to affirm it is to affirm an epistemological perspective as privileged, even with respect to people and groups with incompatible epistemological predilections.

I am not myself suggesting that such epistemological meta-narratives are necessarily problematic. I am suggesting rather that Weinstein is committed to one such meta-narrative, and so cannot simultaneously be committed, in proper Postmodernist spirit, to the avoidance of them all. He can't, if he wants also to continue to stand for non-arbitrarily grounded progressive social and educational change.

Conclusion. In a longer version of this paper,⁵ I develop these objections at more length. I also argue that the expression “discourse frame” is ambiguous, between (1) sets of *principles, criteria, norms*, and the like, in accordance with which discourse is ideally to be conducted, and the results of discourse assessed; and (2) sets of linguistic and other *practices*. Postmodernists often suggest that their criticisms are of Modernist principles, but in fact they are plausible only when construed as criticisms of Modernist practices — i.e., as Modernist failures to live up to their own Modernist principles — because the fundamental Modernist epistemological principle emphasizes that all such principles are themselves criticizable and improvable in the light of experience and rational analysis.

Moreover, according to Postmodernism, these critical and evaluative tasks can never be finally completed. For frames and perspectives, on that view, are *inevitably* partial and distorting. Consequently, *no* frame, however Postmodernist in aspiration, can completely protect itself from the

criticism that it fails in practice to live up to its own principles. If so, then criticism of Patriarchal, racist, classist, and heterosexist Modernist frames does not constitute a criticism of Modernism itself — conceived as a particular sort of discourse frame — any more than it does of Postmodernism, similarly conceived.

Postmodernism has made, and no doubt will continue to make, important criticisms, and expose heretofore undiscovered defects in our principles, practices, and discourse frames. These criticisms do not undermine Modernism, but rather advance its own project.

So if Weinstein is correct in holding, with Postmodernism, that “[r]ight reason does not yield the true, for right reason is corrupted by interest,” this can only be because it is *true* that “right reason” so fails because it is so corrupted. And of course it is “right reason” itself which reveals that truth. And therein lies the rub: Postmodernism, or any other perspective which seriously endorses progressive social and educational change, requires an epistemology which endorses truth and justification as viable epistemological notions. That is to say: Postmodern advocacy of radical pedagogies (and politics) requires Old-Fashioned Epistemology (and a good deal of Old-Fashioned Moral Theory as well). As a Postmodernist, Weinstein rejects the possibility of a frame adequate “for rational, universal, and cosmopolitan inquiry.” In so doing, he is caught in the arbitrariness he has struggled valiantly to overcome.

¹ All citations are from Mark Weinstein, “Rationalist Hopes and Utopian Visions,” *Philosophy of Education*, 1993, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994).

² Weinstein is thus correct to insist that “intuitions of injustice” must always be respected in dialogical interaction. Much discussion of the so-called “epistemic privilege of the oppressed” rightly suggests as much — although it is problematic in other respects. As Susan Haack suggests, for example, the oppressed are in some

³ Weinstein in effect grants this possibility when he allows that excluded perspectives are not “necessarily correct.”

⁴ But it will sometimes be unclear whether a purported instance of the devaluation of perspectives — like the sort of educational case imagined just above — is rightly regarded as an instance of silencing, marginalization, or exclusion — and so of injustice.

⁵ To be published in the Proceedings of the 1992 Montclair State College Conference on “Critical Thinking As an Educational Ideal”(in press).