Postmodernism's moral low ground

We must all join the battle against nihilism and oppression

STEPHEN R. C. HICKS

Are we fighting postmodernists with one hand tied behind our backs? Intellectual battles are the cognitive lifeblood of a healthy society. Life is complicated and the stakes are high, so thoughtful and passionate people have lots of arguments. Only by argument can we sort out complicated matters. Only by putting our ideas to the evidence test and being willing to change our minds can we make progress.

Intellectual fighting is better than setting our differences by physical fighting. The advantage of being an intelligent species, noted Austrian philosopher Karl Popper, is that we let our theories die in our place. But productive argument needs principles of civility to guide it. And we need our leading institutions – especially universities dedicated to truth-seeking – to make those principles explicit and instil them in the next generation.

Postmodernists don’t fight by the same rules we do. When everything is subject to narrative, subversion goes all the way down. Our classic rules are: Approach discussion with benevolence and give the initial benefit of the doubt. The goal is the mutual advancement of understanding. Hear out both sides. Be civil in giving and receiving criticism. Don’t make stuff up. Believe that truth matters.

But postmodernists cast a jaded eye upon ‘truth’ and see words as weapons in a battle between adversarial groups. In that battle, only power matters and ‘truth’ is merely the most ruthless survivor. American postmodernist Richard Rorty put it this way: ‘Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.’ Rorty’s fellow-travelers, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others work the same deconstructive territory.

Our code of ethics also includes moral rules: Be respectful of legitimate differences. Tolerate an expansive range of beliefs and practices, unless physical force is initiated. Don’t name-call or hurl insults easily. Be respectful of others’ accomplishments and proud of one’s own. Admit mistakes; strive to correct them.

On that latter point about responsibility: cultural improvement is a trial-and-error process, and while we have made great progress against poverty, slavery, racism, sexism, and incivilities, our historical record is imperfect. Hence the appropriateness of our intense debates, for example, over affirmative action. Can we make up for past sins? If so, how can we apportion blame and desert fairly? Hard questions, but morally responsible people take their history seriously.

Here again Rorty represents the postmoderns. Asked directly about the Left’s ‘truth’ and justice and that we take pride in our leading institutions – especially universities dedicated to truth-seeking – to make those principles explicit and instil them in the next generation.

Postmodernists don’t fight by the same rules we do. When everything is subject to narrative, subversion goes all the way down. Our classic rules are: Approach discussion with benevolence and give the initial benefit of the doubt. The goal is the mutual advancement of understanding. Hear out both sides. Be civil in giving and receiving criticism. Don’t make stuff up. Believe that truth matters.

But postmodernists cast a jaded eye upon ‘truth’ and see words as weapons in a battle between adversarial groups. In that battle, only power matters and ‘truth’ is merely the most ruthless survivor. American postmodernist Richard Rorty put it this way: ‘Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.’ Rorty’s fellow-travelers, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others work the same deconstructive territory.

Our code of ethics also includes moral rules: Be respectful of legitimate differences. Tolerate an expansive range of beliefs and practices, unless physical force is initiated. Don’t name-call or hurl insults easily. Be respectful of others’ accomplishments and proud of one’s own. Admit mistakes; strive to correct them.

On that latter point about responsibility: cultural improvement is a trial-and-error process, and while we have made great progress against poverty, slavery, racism, sexism, and incivilities, our historical record is imperfect. Hence the appropriateness of our intense debates, for example, over affirmative action. Can we make up for past sins? If so, how can we apportion blame and desert fairly? Hard questions, but morally responsible people take their history seriously.

Here again Rorty represents the postmoderns. Asked directly about the Left’s ‘truth’ and justice and that we take pride in our leading institutions – especially universities dedicated to truth-seeking – to make those principles explicit and instil them in the next generation.

Postmodernists don’t fight by the same rules we do. When everything is subject to narrative, subversion goes all the way down. Our classic rules are: Approach discussion with benevolence and give the initial benefit of the doubt. The goal is the mutual advancement of understanding. Hear out both sides. Be civil in giving and receiving criticism. Don’t make stuff up. Believe that truth matters.

But postmodernists cast a jaded eye upon ‘truth’ and see words as weapons in a battle between adversarial groups. In that battle, only power matters and ‘truth’ is merely the most ruthless survivor. American postmodernist Richard Rorty put it this way: ‘Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.’ Rorty’s fellow-travelers, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others work the same deconstructive territory.

Our code of ethics also includes moral rules: Be respectful of legitimate differences. Tolerate an expansive range of beliefs and practices, unless physical force is initiated. Don’t name-call or hurl insults easily. Be respectful of others’ accomplishments and proud of one’s own. Admit mistakes; strive to correct them.

On that latter point about responsibility: cultural improvement is a trial-and-error process, and while we have made great progress against poverty, slavery, racism, sexism, and incivilities, our historical record is imperfect. Hence the appropriateness of our intense debates, for example, over affirmative action. Can we make up for past sins? If so, how can we apportion blame and desert fairly? Hard questions, but morally responsible people take their history seriously.

Here again Rorty represents the postmoderns. Asked directly about the Left’s ‘truth’ and justice and that we take pride in our leading institutions – especially universities dedicated to truth-seeking – to make those principles explicit and instil them in the next generation.

Postmodernists don’t fight by the same rules we do. When everything is subject to narrative, subversion goes all the way down. Our classic rules are: Approach discussion with benevolence and give the initial benefit of the doubt. The goal is the mutual advancement of understanding. Hear out both sides. Be civil in giving and receiving criticism. Don’t make stuff up. Believe that truth matters.

But postmodernists cast a jaded eye upon ‘truth’ and see words as weapons in a battle between adversarial groups. In that battle, only power matters and ‘truth’ is merely the most ruthless survivor. American postmodernist Richard Rorty put it this way: ‘Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.’ Rorty’s fellow-travelers, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others work the same deconstructive territory.

Our code of ethics also includes moral rules: Be respectful of legitimate differences. Tolerate an expansive range of beliefs and practices, unless physical force is initiated. Don’t name-call or hurl insults easily. Be respectful of others’ accomplishments and proud of one’s own. Admit mistakes; strive to correct them.