

What Happened to Truth?

Part 3: Postmodernism and the Abandonment of Truth

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Postmodernism and the Abandonment of Truth

Critical Theory Moves toward Postmodernism

Habermas & Communication

Critical Legal Studies

Critical Race Theory

Identity Politics

Postmodernism Arrives

Lyotard & Language Games

Foucault & Knowledge as Power

Derrida & Deconstruction

Baudrillard & Media Culture

Rorty & the Post-Truth Age

Habermas & Communication

Critical Legal Studies and **Critical Race Theory** can be seen as outgrowths of Frankfurt School critical theory, to the extent that they are **influenced by Jürgen Habermas**, a second-generation member of the school.

Habermas sharply disagreed with the denial of rational grounds for law of some CLS proponents. But he anticipated CLS by advocating a procedurally-oriented approach to legal theory.

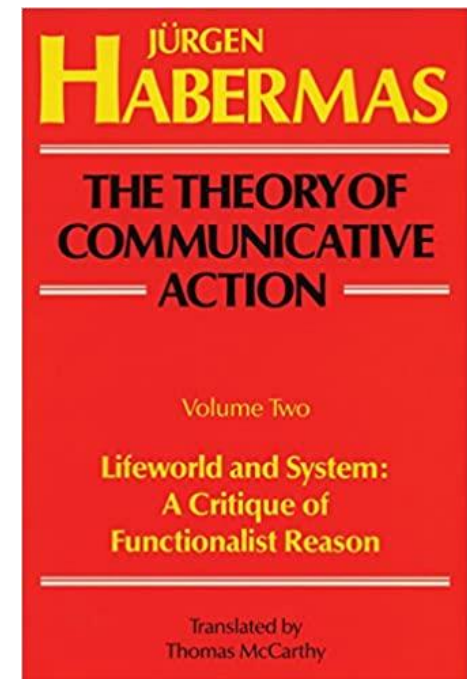
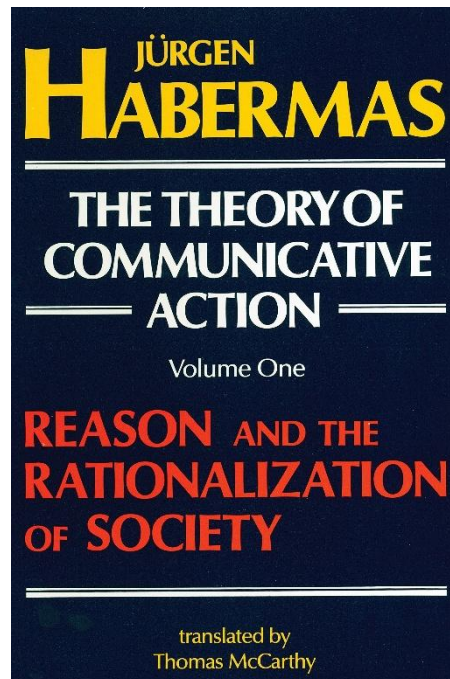


Jürgen Habermas
1929-2026

Habermas & Communication

Habermas rejected the positivist claim that statements of values and ethics have no cognitive meaning and therefore no rational ground. He argued that **rational consensus is a necessary condition for the very possibility of communication** among free individuals.

Even positivists
rely on rational
discourse to
defend their
philosophical
claims.



Critical Legal Studies

For Habermas, a legal system should be based on **dialog among all those affected**, not a top-down theory. This means minority groups should be included in the formation of law.

Habermas concluded from this that the government can legitimately use coercion* only if it improves the lot of **all affected groups**.

CLS examined existing laws and found that **many violate this principle**.

*Practically all laws use coercion in some form.



Duncan Kennedy, 1942-
One of the founders of CLS

Critical Legal Studies

Roberto Unger argues that traditional Lockean rights prevent a government from **correcting social problems** such as income inequality, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, access to healthcare, etc.

For example, property rights perpetuate income equality.
Contractual rights of corporations perpetuate inadequate access to healthcare.

Do these arguments show that Lockean rights are **incorrectly applied**, or are **fundamentally unjustified** (i.e., rejection of Enlightenment values)?



Roberto Unger
1947-

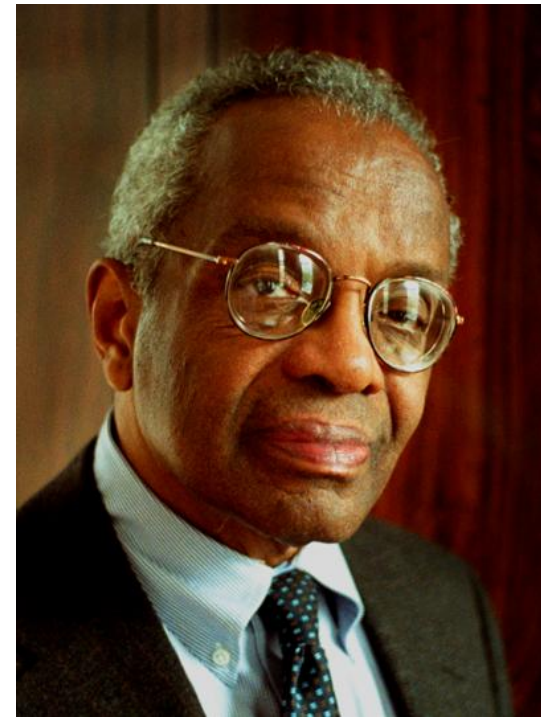
Critical Race Theory

A CLS focus on race led to **critical race theory**. Derrick Bell* argued that a racially blind legal system is unable to address historical racial divides in housing, wages, and education.

Bell asserted that the civil rights legal reforms of the 1960s left racism entrenched.

Does this show that government cannot **implement** egalitarian Enlightenment values due to Burkean traditionalism, or that those values are **illegitimate**?

*Bell was from Pittsburgh and educated at Duquesne & Pitt.



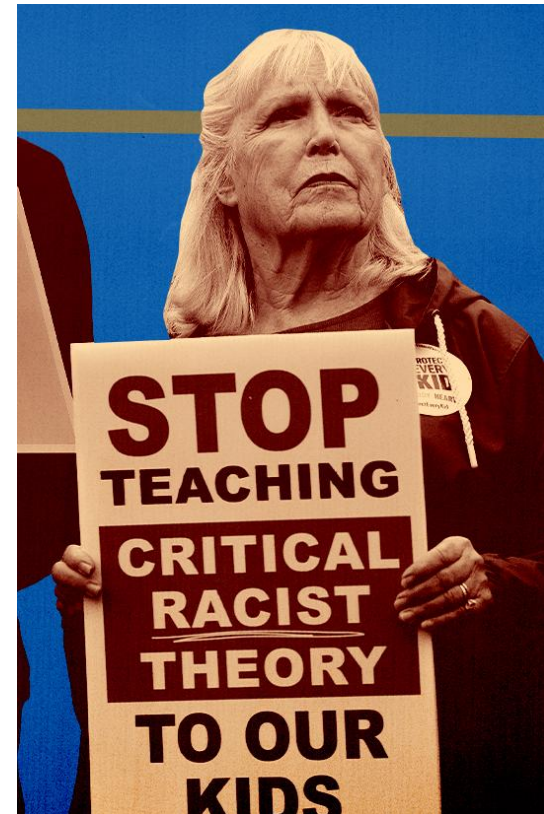
Derrick Bell
1930-2011

Critical Race Theory

Misinformation about critical race theory is itself an example of Enlightenment decline and truth decay.

Elementary schools with DEI initiatives (whatever their merits or lack of them) were **falsely accused** of “teaching CRT,” as a way of discrediting DEI.

More broadly, the Burkean resurgence of culture is evident in a push toward private schools, or public schools aligned with particular cultural traditions.

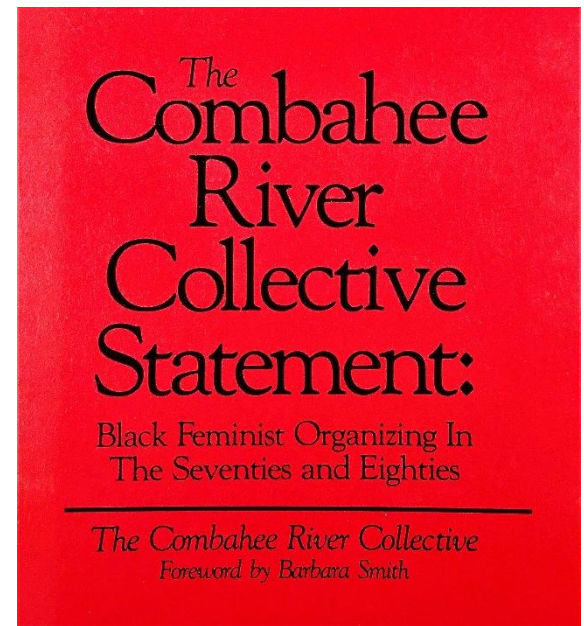


Identity Politics

CRT can be seen as providing a justification for **identity politics**, which rejects “identity blind” public policies.

For example, **affirmative action** might be supported by CRT’s critique of meritocracy as appearing fair on the surface, but defining “merit” in a way that favors privileged groups.

A somewhat lower test score may indicate **less merit**, or **greater merit** due to the effort and intelligence necessary to overcome historical discrimination and achieve the score.



Origin of the terms
“identity politics” and
“intersectionality”
(1977)

Identity Politics

Iris Marion Young applied ideas from Critical Legal Studies to feminist issues, arguing that the equal-treatment doctrine of liberal republicanism **masks injustice**.

The distributive justice principles of John Rawls* and other classical liberals fail to acknowledge **structural** injustice in society.

At the very least, justice requires **affirmative action** to enfranchise women so that their viewpoint is reflected in socio-political discourse, and consequently, policy.



Iris Marion Young
1949-2006

*Rawls argued that wealth inequality is justified only when it is necessary to improve the lot of the worst-off.

Identity Politics

Susan Moller Okin rejected the **private/public distinction** of classical republicanism because it denies women the protection of laws within the home.

For example, the denial of alimony in **no-fault divorce** conforms to classical liberal principles but ignores women's role in child care.

While the private/public distinction was assumed by classical republicanism, one can debate whether it an essential part of Enlightenment values.*

*Consider protection from abuse laws.



Susan Moller Okin
1946-2004

Identity Politics

Carol Gilligan argued that the ethical systems of classical liberalism reflect a male perspective, and that women operate on a relationship-based **ethics of care**.*

Liberal republicanism therefore represses the feminine perspective, in Gilligan's view.

An ethics of care is practiced in much of the world, often in patriarchal cultures. It is a **clear departure** from the universalist ethics of classical liberalism and tends to be connected with specific cultural values.



Carol Gilligan
1936-

*Based on her work in moral development.

Identity Politics

A **central question** raised by identity politics is whether failures of “identity blind” policies are due to

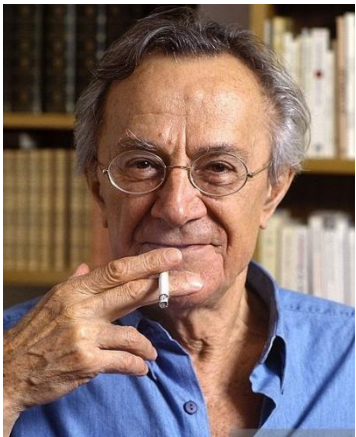
(a) inadequate **practical implementations** that fail to anticipate the discriminatory effects of a simplistic emphasis on equality, or

(b) a **fundamental inadequacy** of Enlightenment-inspired liberal republican values.

Postmodernism opts for answer (b).

Postmodernism

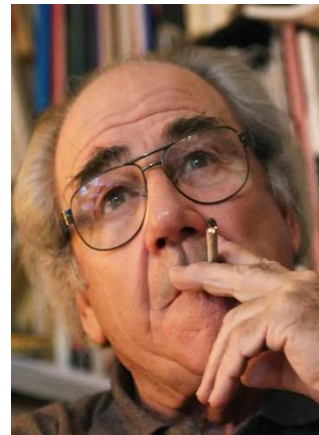
Postmodernism is a late 20th century movement that **rejects objective truth** and **universal principles**, in favor of socially & linguistically constructed reality and culturally relative norms.



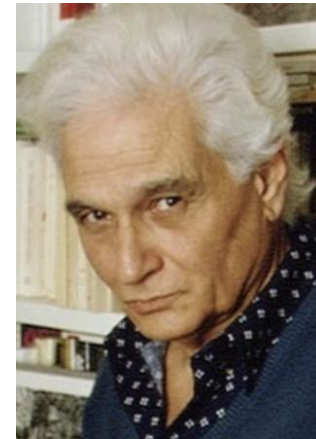
Jean-François
Lyotard
1924-1996



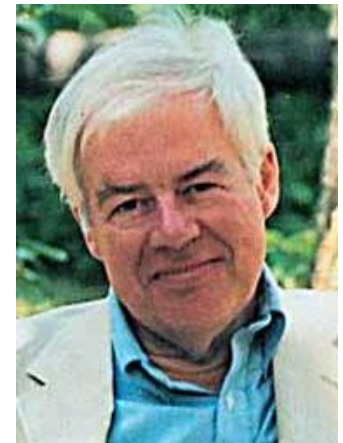
Michel Foucault
1926-1984



Jean
Baudrillard
1929-2007



Jacques Derrida
1930-2004



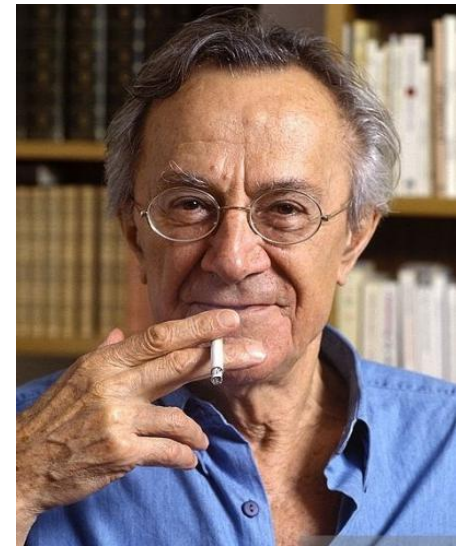
Richard
Rorty
1931-2007

Lyotard & Language Games

Poststructuralists Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard claimed that meaning is determined by the relations between “signs” (words, etc.) and not by the relations between signs and things.

Jean-François Lyotard, taking a cue from Wittgenstein, saw society as fragmented into **language games** (work, school, religion, academic seminars, etc.) that have their **own internal norms** and cannot be translated one to another. Even **science** is fragmented.

Wittgenstein, by contrast, saw language games as connected to the world.



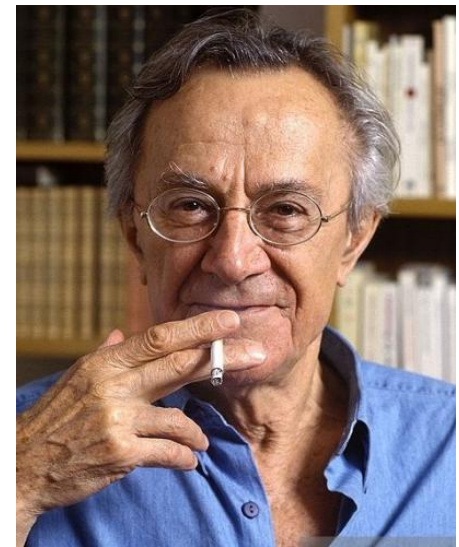
Jean-François Lyotard
1924-1996

Lyotard & Language Games

Lyotard denied the existence of any standard of **objective truth or rationality**, even in science. This is not only inevitable but desirable, because one can achieve individuality and freedom by moving from one language game to another.

Lyotard therefore rejected, with relish, the Enlightenment goal of a unified rational perspective.

Wittgenstein agreed with the incommensurability of language games but never went so far as to reject objective truth..

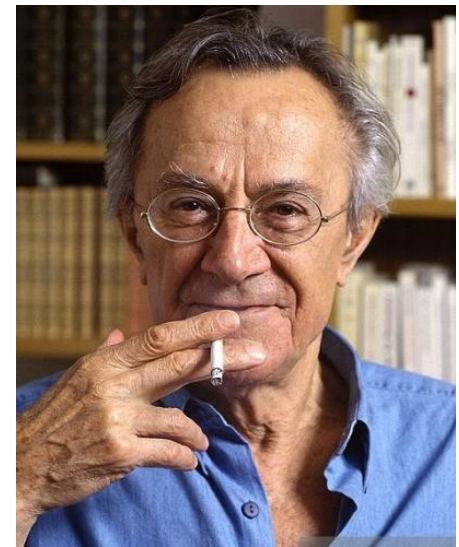


Jean-François Lyotard
1924-1996

Lyotard & Language Games

Political discourse is just another language game. It consists of “talking points” that serve a purpose, much as recipes serve as purpose in cooking, or liturgies serve a purpose in religion.

“Fact checking” is not a means of identifying truth but another move in the game.



Jean-François Lyotard
1924-1996

Lyotard & Language Games

Large language models (LLMs) are a perfect example of postmodernism. They see their purpose as generating the verbiage you need for a given occasion, with no regard to truth or falsehood.

LLMs don't even know what truth is (aside from being able to parrot what people say about it), since they are not designed to distinguish true training data from false data.



Foucault & Knowledge as Power

Michel Foucault is the most influential of the postmodernists. On his view, knowledge is a **tool of power**. There are no objective truths or universal norms. Rather, power structures in society decide what counts as “true” in a given context.

Foucault argued that **insanity** is a **social construct** devised by a power structure that wishes to suppress inconvenient points of view by calling them “irrational” or “deranged.”*

Individuals diagnosed as “schizophrenic” in Western society might be seen as shamans or clairvoyants in other cultures.



Michel Foucault
1926-1984

*His first book was *History of Madness* (1961).

Foucault & Knowledge as Power

Foucault turns Habermas' theory of communication on its head. **Power** (not rational consensus) is a **necessary precondition for the very possibility of communication.**

In any kind of discourse, someone **decides** what is acceptable and what is out of order. Without this type of control, any attempt at discourse would descend into chaos.

Those who have the power to exercise control determine what is "known."



Michel Foucault
1926-1984

Foucault & Knowledge as Power

Habermas responded by claiming that Foucault's position has a **performative inconsistency**.

It is like uttering, "I cannot speak," or claiming "there is no truth" (in which case the claim isn't true).

Foucault wants us to believe that his theory of knowledge and power is actually true, and not simply a statement he is allowed to make in a philosophy seminar.

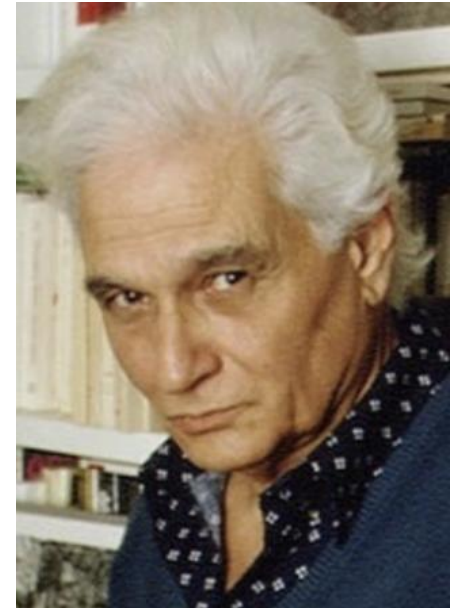


Derrida & Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida expanded the scope of hermeneutics by arguing that **all text** can be taken apart and interpreted in different ways, none of which represents the “true” meaning.

Derrida's writing is notoriously obscure and open to many interpretations. For Derrida, this is fine.

Despite its obscurity, or perhaps because of it, Derrida's work attracted a huge following, as well as many critics.



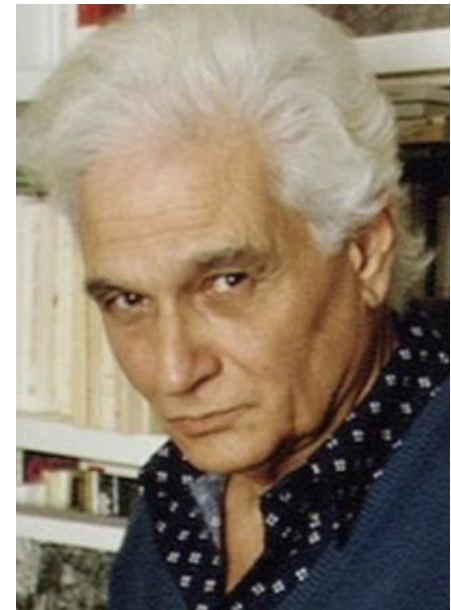
Jacques Derrida
1930-2004

Derrida & Deconstruction

For Derrida, the meaning of words is **never fully present** but created through their “*différance*” from other words in a given context. It makes no sense to ask what is the writer’s “intended” meaning.

Différance (deliberate misspelling of *différence*) is not itself a concept but is “the possibility of conceptuality.”

Since text has no determinate meaning, it has **no determinate truth value.**

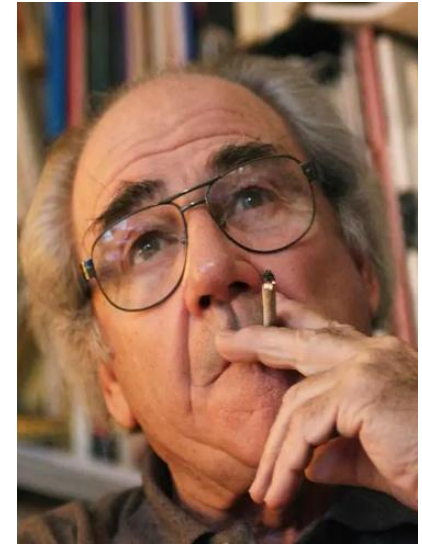


Jacques Derrida
1930-2004

Baudrillard & Media Culture

Baudrillard's views on meaning are similar to those of other poststructuralists. His observations of postmodern life may help explain **why** their views struck a chord in our era.

In postmodern society, reality has become “hyperreal” (something that floats above reality). Our lives are so saturated with media content that it **becomes our reality**. Our discourse becomes **self-referential**: its meaning cannot be understood in reference to underlying reality, but only in relation to itself. This creates a pastiche of shifting contexts in which “truth” and meaning constantly shift.

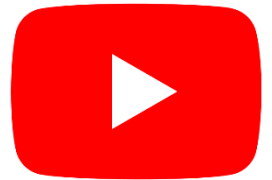


Jean
Baudrillard
1929-2007

Baudrillard & Media Culture

Baudrillard's account strikingly foresaw today's **online world**.

The **online world has become our reality**. It is a patchwork of echo chambers in which conspiracy theories can flourish, because we have no connection with an underlying reality to check them against. In other words, discourse is self-referential. Nobody cares whether a claim is “really true,” because there is no possibility of objective truth in a media-constituted world.

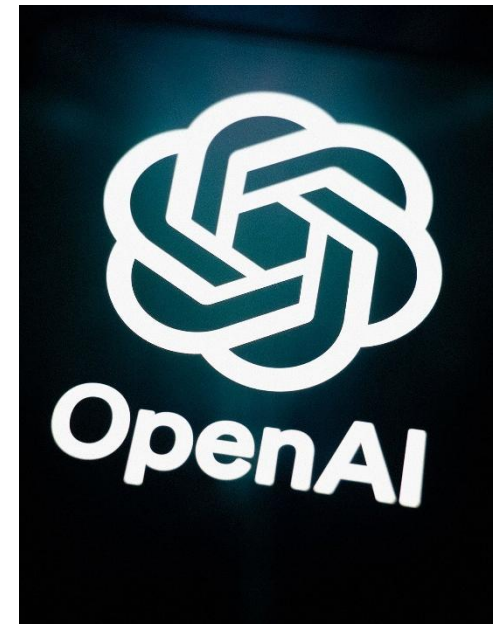


Baudrillard & Media Culture

Again, **LLMs** provide an example, this time an example of Baudrillard's self-referentiality.

LLMs are trained on existing material scraped from the web and elsewhere. Their output consists of bits of verbiage that occur in this material alongside words in the user's prompts.

Increasingly, the training data itself consists of AI-generated material. The resulting feedback gradually builds a self-referential world in which **AI creates its own reality.**

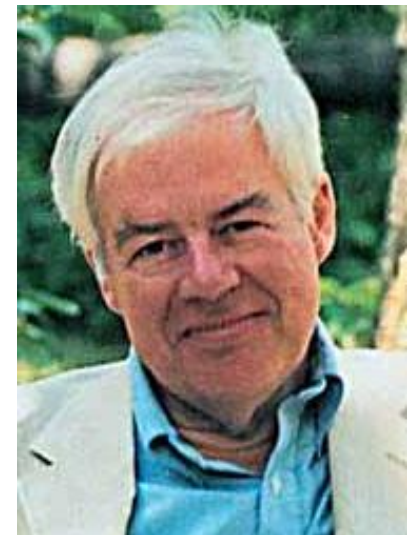


Rorty & the Post-Truth Age

Richard Rorty contributed an **American perspective** to the postmodernist rejection of objective truth.

Rorty began in analytical and linguistic philosophy and became famous for his way with words and ironic quips. He capped off this segment of his career with his popular anthology *The Linguistic Turn* (1967).

He then reinvented himself as a postmodernist with roots in American pragmatic philosophy (Dewey, Quine, Sellars, etc.)



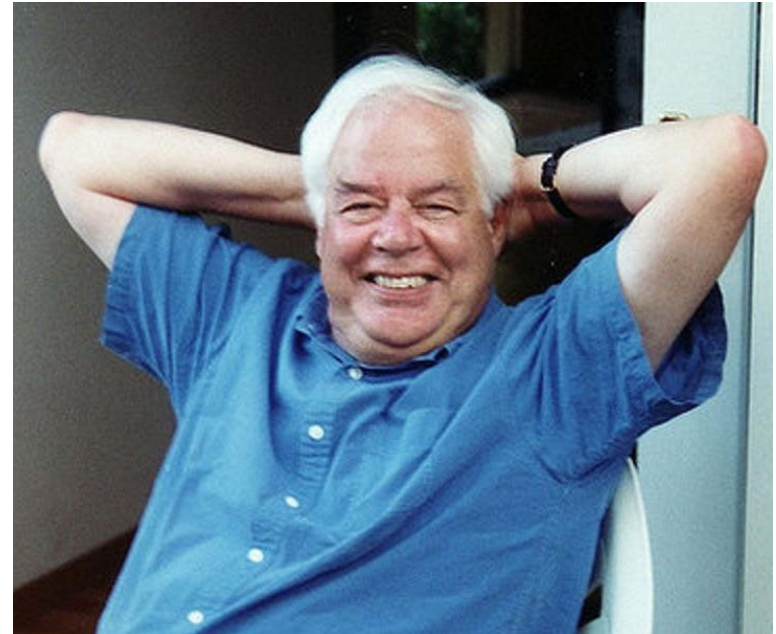
Richard Rorty
1931-2007

Rorty & the Post-Truth Age

According to Rorty, “Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.”*

“We [pragmatists] see knowledge as a matter of conversation and social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature.”
-- *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)

“[There is] no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible.”
-- *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989)



Rorty & the Post-Truth Age

Rorty attracted **enormous attention** among philosophers, both positive and negative.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the postmodernists is the extent to which they attracted attention from people who **recognized our age** in their writings.

“Rorty was paramount among those thinkers who advance their own opinion as immune to criticism, by pretending that it is not truth but consensus that counts, while defining the consensus in terms of people like themselves.”

-- Roger Scruton, “Richard Rorty’s Legacy”
(2007)

Next: Epilogue

Can we climb out of the postmodernist hole?



What Happened to Truth?

Epilogue: A Return to Enlightenment?

John Hooker

Carnegie Mellon University

CMU Osher Course, April 2026

A Return to Enlightenment?

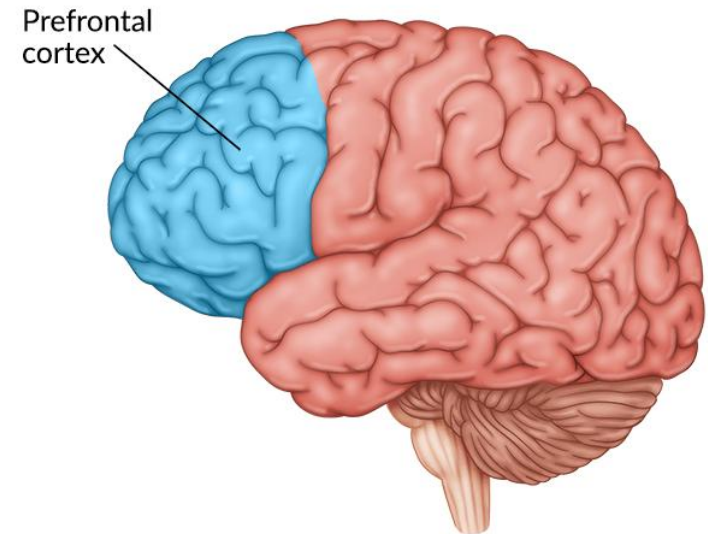
No final answers. Only some thoughts.

**To Be Human Is to Be Rational
Enlightenment vs Positivism
Enlightenment & Ethics
Enlightenment & Religion
Enlightenment vs Media Culture
An Updated Enlightenment?
The American Experiment**

To Be Human Is to Be Rational

A rational approach to life did not begin with the Enlightenment. It began with the appearance of *homo sapiens* (= “smart human”).

Humans evolved a massive prefrontal cortex because of the **survival advantage of reasoning power** in a period of rapid climate change in East Africa, when biological evolution was too slow to adapt.



To Be Human Is to Be Rational

The human species has survived and prospered because it has applied **reason**, and paid attention to **truth**, over eons.

Hunter-gatherer societies survived by absorbing encyclopedic knowledge of plant species and animal behavior.

Development of **agriculture** and **civilization** rested on incomplete but genuine knowledge of biology, chemistry, and engineering.

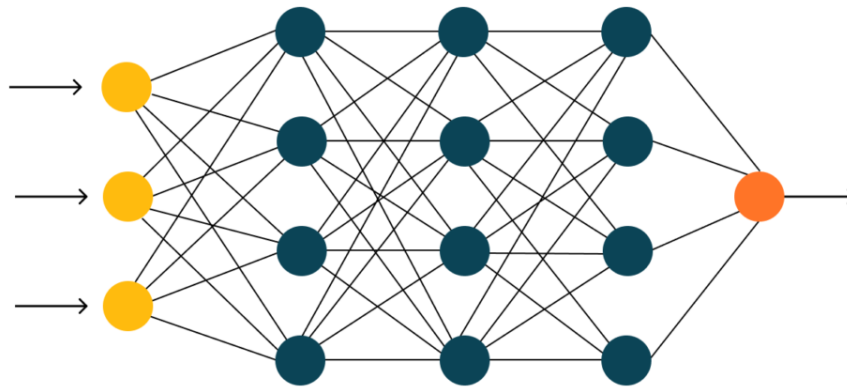


To Be Human Is to Be Rational

The brain does not come with factory-installed knowledge. Like any **neural network**, it must be **trained**.

Irrational behavior does not prove that humans are irrational by nature. It reminds us that we must **learn**.

Fortunately, we have evolved to be **very good** at learning, and to **enjoy it**.



To Be Human Is to Be Rational

The **Enlightenment** represented an application of innate reason to the rapidly changing social environment of the 18th century.

Our question: How can Enlightenment values be **updated** to deal with today's rapidly changing environment?

In particular, what are the prospects for a **nation** founded on Enlightenment principles?




To Be Human Is to Be Rational

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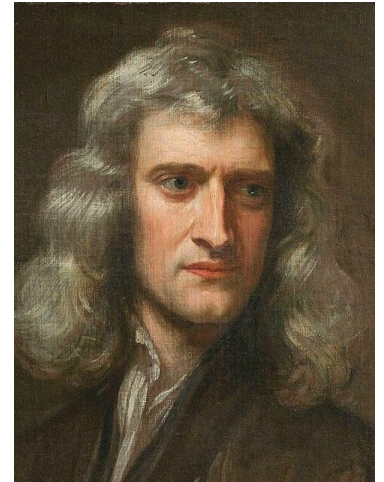
Not by discarding reason and truth, which have always been the basis for survival!

Enlightenment vs Positivism

Nothing in Enlightenment thinking presupposes the positivism of the 19th and early 20th centuries, least of all a verificationist theory of meaning that holds ethics & religion to be meaningless.

The period recognized knowledge based on **reason** as well as empirical observation.

Newton and Leibniz believed that even the laws of **physics** are ultimately deducible by reason.

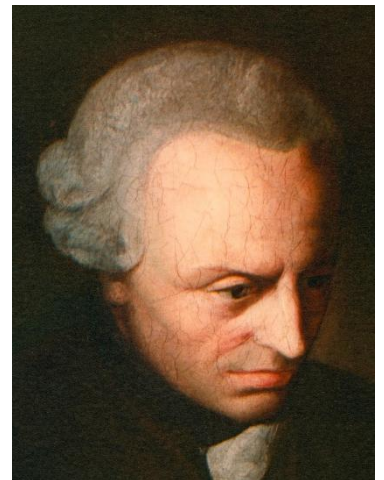


Enlightenment vs Positivism

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Spinoza and Kant, among others, believed that **ethics** can be rationally grounded, and set out to do it.

Some believed the same is true for **religion**.



Enlightenment & Ethics

Positivism pushed ethics into **metaethics**, which takes the “linguistic turn” and makes ethics part of philosophy (as conceived today) by studying the function and justification of ethical statements that lack cognitive meaning.

But philosophy is all about disputation, and so there is little agreement in the ethics literature. This creates the impression (which many share today) that ethical issues **cannot be resolved** in an objective fashion.

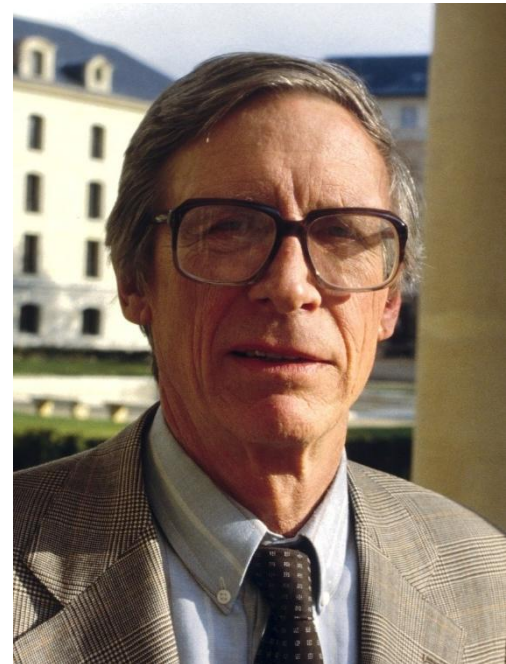
METAETHICS

NORMATIVE ETHICS

Enlightenment & Ethics

John Rawls re-ignited interest in **normative ethics** but triggered an avalanche of philosophical papers defending and attacking his views.

Rawls' Kantian-inspired social contract theory says that a just society is one that on which rational agents can agree if they hold a "constitution convention" behind a veil of ignorance as to what position they will hold in that society.



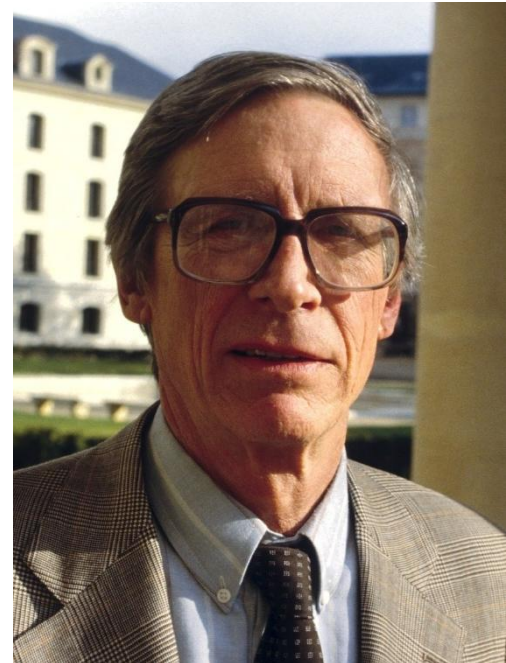
John Rawls, author of *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

Enlightenment & Ethics

The literature in normative ethics is based primarily on **reflective equilibrium**, recommended by Rawls himself. This again results in endless controversy and gives the impression that ethical issues are beyond objective resolution.

Reflective equilibrium is the idea that we alternate between general principles and their implications for concrete ethical dilemmas on which we have **moral intuitions**, in an attempt to find principles that seem reasonable while doing minimum violence to intuitions.

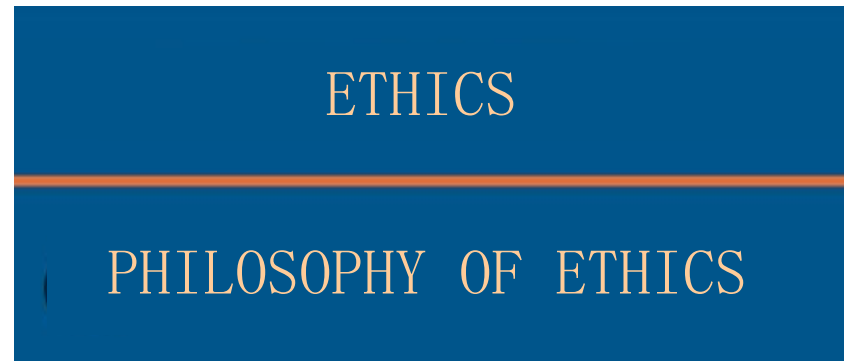
John Rawls, author of
A Theory of Justice (1971)



Enlightenment & Ethics

A possible way out of this trap is to distinguish ethics from philosophy of ethics, as we distinguish mathematics from philosophy of mathematics, and focus on the former.

Mathematics **rejects intuition** as a proof method and deduces the consequences of mathematical models. Perhaps ethics can **reject reflective equilibrium** and pick up where Kant left off by deducing consequences of models of autonomous agency.



Enlightenment & Religion

Enlightenment values lead to scientific discoveries that may seem to challenge religion. But the **awe** and **mystery** that inspire religion are still here, perhaps more than ever.

Nothing is more **awesome** than the universe described by science.

A vast field of galaxies, including spiral, elliptical, and irregular shapes, scattered across a dark cosmic background. The galaxies vary in size, color, and orientation, representing a wide range of galactic types and ages.

Hubble Ultra Deep Field

When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers...

When I
consider your
heavens, the
work of your
fingers...
--Psalm 8:3

Enlightenment & Religion

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The Hubble Ultra Deep Field, perhaps the most iconic image of our age, depicts >10,000 galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars.

There are an estimated 2 trillion galaxies in the observable universe.

Enlightenment & Religion

Enlightenment values lead to scientific discoveries that may seem to challenge religion. But the **awe** and **mystery** that inspire religion are still here, perhaps more than ever.

Nothing is more **mysterious** than the universe described by science.

The universe is 26% dark matter, about which very little is known.

It is 69% dark energy, about which nothing is known.

Known physical science applies to only 5% of the universe.

Enlightenment & Religion

Far from rejecting religion, the rational mind **leads us to it.**

“As the island of knowledge grows larger,
the shores of mystery grow longer.”

John Archibald Wheeler
1911-2008



Enlightenment & Religion

Empirical science can (and must) be part of religion, as has been recognized since antiquity.

The Romans maintained a team of 15 officials (*quindecim viri sacris faciundis*) who kept careful records of what happened after the appearance of omens and portents, so they could foresee future actions by the gods.

They paid particular attention to *auspices* (Latin for bird watching)



Their science is outdated, of course, but it was nonetheless part of religion.

Enlightenment vs Media Culture

We live in a world of social media that spreads **lies** 6.5 times more rapidly than truth, with little apparent concern for which is which.

Anthropologists tell us that **rumors** have always been a key element of society, as a means of transmitting information vital to survival.

But traditional peoples normally spread information about their immediate surroundings, where it could be verified.



Enlightenment vs Media Culture

We live in a world of social media that spreads **lies** 6.5 times more rapidly than truth, with little apparent concern for which is which.

Our self-referential media world floats above reality, and there no way of verifying claims about far-away events or abstract scientific claims. Nonetheless they feed the rumor mill.

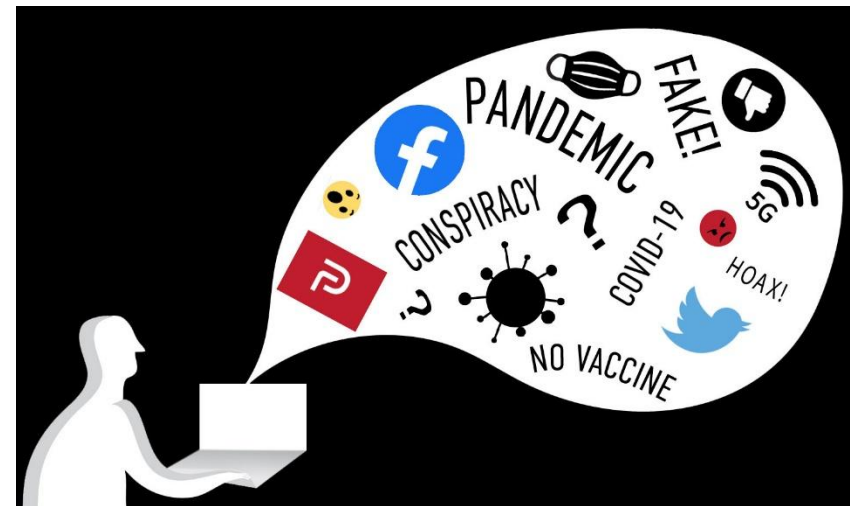


Enlightenment vs Media Culture

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Traditional peoples filled gaps in their knowledge with **superstition**, which spread along with other rumors.

Today, superstition takes the form of unverified claims and conspiracy theories that spread through a much more powerful rumor machine.



Enlightenment vs Media Culture

How do we bring the media world back into the real world?

Think about how we control rumors.

- **Drown them out with facts.** Saturate social and mainstream media with evidence-based discourse.
- **Reduce the influence of rumor mongers.** Tame the algorithms that make it so easy to spread lies.
- **Stop listening to them.** Spend less time on social media.



An Updated Enlightenment?

Science has already moved into an updated version of the Enlightenment that avoids 18th century naivete.

The Enlightenment's tidy laws of science are replaced by complex mathematical models that approximate reality.*

$$\begin{aligned}
 M \left(\frac{1}{c_w} Z_\mu^\nu \partial_\mu \phi^\nu + W_\mu^+ \partial_\mu \phi^- + W_\mu^- \partial_\mu \phi^+ \right) - i g \frac{s_w}{c_w} M Z_\mu^\nu (W_\mu^+ \phi^- - W_\mu^- \phi^+) + i g s_w M A_\mu (W_\mu^+ \phi^- - \\
 W_\mu^- \phi^+) - i g \frac{1-2c_w^2}{2c_w} Z_\mu^0 (\phi^+ \partial_\mu \phi^- - \phi^- \partial_\mu \phi^+) + i g s_w A_\mu (\phi^+ \partial_\mu \phi^- - \phi^- \partial_\mu \phi^+) - \\
 \frac{1}{4} g^2 W_\mu^+ W_\mu^- (H^2 + (\phi^0)^2 + 2\phi^+ \phi^-) - \frac{1}{8} g^2 \frac{1}{c_w} Z_\mu^0 Z_\mu^0 (H^2 + (\phi^0)^2 + 2(2s_w^2 - 1)^2 \phi^+ \phi^-) - \\
 \frac{1}{2} g^2 \frac{s_w^2}{c_w} Z_\mu^0 \phi^0 (W_\mu^+ \phi^- + W_\mu^- \phi^+) - \frac{1}{2} i g^2 \frac{s_w^2}{c_w} Z_\mu^0 H (W_\mu^+ \phi^- - W_\mu^- \phi^+) + \frac{1}{2} g^2 s_w A_\mu \phi^0 (W_\mu^+ \phi^- + \\
 W_\mu^- \phi^+) + \frac{1}{2} i g^2 s_w A_\mu H (W_\mu^+ \phi^- - W_\mu^- \phi^+) - g^2 \frac{s_w}{c_w} (2c_w^2 - 1) Z_\mu^0 A_\mu \phi^+ \phi^- - \\
 g^2 s_w^2 A_\mu A_\mu \phi^+ \phi^- + \frac{1}{2} i g s_w \lambda_{ij}^a (\bar{q}_i^\sigma \gamma^\mu q_j^\sigma) g_\mu^a - \bar{e}^\lambda (\gamma \partial + m_e^\lambda) e^\lambda - \bar{\nu}^\lambda (\gamma \partial + m_\nu^\lambda) \nu^\lambda - \bar{u}_j^\lambda (\gamma \partial + \\
 m_u^\lambda) u_j^\lambda - \bar{d}_j^\lambda (\gamma \partial + m_d^\lambda) d_j^\lambda + i g s_w A_\mu (-\bar{e}^\lambda \gamma^\mu e^\lambda) + \frac{2}{3} (\bar{u}_j^\lambda \gamma^\mu u_j^\lambda) - \frac{1}{3} (\bar{d}_j^\lambda \gamma^\mu d_j^\lambda) + \\
 \frac{i g}{4c_w} Z_\mu^0 \{ (\bar{\nu}^\lambda \gamma^\mu (1 + \gamma^5) \nu^\lambda) + (\bar{e}^\lambda \gamma^\mu (4s_w^2 - 1 - \gamma^5) e^\lambda) + (\bar{d}_j^\lambda \gamma^\mu (\frac{4}{3}s_w^2 - 1 - \gamma^5) d_j^\lambda) + \\
 (\bar{u}_j^\lambda \gamma^\mu (1 - \frac{8}{3}s_w^2 + \gamma^5) u_j^\lambda) \} + \frac{i g}{2\sqrt{2}} W_\mu^+ ((\bar{\nu}^\lambda \gamma^\mu (1 + \gamma^5) U^{lep}_{\lambda\kappa} e^\kappa) + (\bar{u}_j^\lambda \gamma^\mu (1 + \gamma^5) C_{\lambda\kappa} d_j^\kappa)) + \\
 \frac{i g}{2\sqrt{2}} W_\mu^- ((\bar{e}^\kappa U^{lep}_{\kappa\lambda} \gamma^\mu (1 + \gamma^5) \nu^\lambda) + (\bar{d}_j^\kappa C_{\kappa\lambda} \gamma^\mu (1 + \gamma^5) u_j^\lambda)) + \\
 \frac{i g}{2M\sqrt{2}} \phi^+ (-m_e^\kappa (\bar{\nu}^\lambda U^{lep}_{\lambda\kappa} (1 - \gamma^5) e^\kappa) + m_\nu^\lambda (\bar{\nu}^\lambda U^{lep}_{\lambda\kappa} (1 + \gamma^5) e^\kappa) + \\
 \frac{i g}{2M\sqrt{2}} \phi^- (m_e^\lambda (\bar{e}^\lambda U^{lep}_{\lambda\kappa} (1 + \gamma^5) \nu^\kappa) - m_\nu^\kappa (\bar{e}^\lambda U^{lep}_{\lambda\kappa} (1 - \gamma^5) \nu^\kappa) - \frac{g}{2} \frac{m_\lambda^2}{M} H (\bar{\nu}^\lambda \nu^\lambda) - \\
 \frac{g}{2} \frac{m_\lambda^2}{M} H (\bar{e}^\lambda e^\lambda) + \frac{i g}{2} \frac{m_\lambda^2}{M} \phi^0 (\bar{\nu}^\lambda \gamma^5 \nu^\lambda) - \frac{i g}{2} \frac{m_\lambda^2}{M} \phi^0 (\bar{e}^\lambda \gamma^5 e^\lambda) - \frac{1}{4} \bar{\nu}_\lambda M_{\lambda\kappa}^R (1 - \gamma_5) \hat{\nu}_\kappa -
 \end{aligned}$$

“Standard model” of particle physics

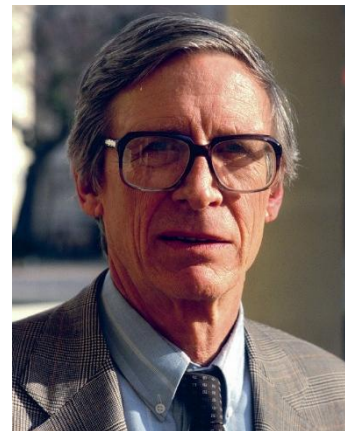
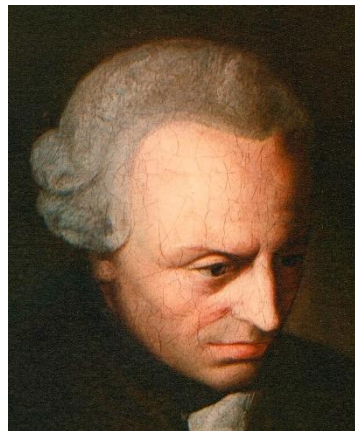
*The “standard model” of quantum physics recognizes 61 elementary particles, meteorology deals with chaotic phenomena, epigenetics is horribly complex, etc.

An Updated Enlightenment?

Ethics and **political philosophy** may be able to follow a similar path.

Normative ethics: based on deduction from models of autonomous agency.

Political philosophy: based on deduction from cultural models of human society (individualist, collectivist, etc.)



The American Experiment



How does a government founded on Enlightenment principles respond to Edmund Burke's warning that it will **revert to traditional culture** – an ominous prospect in a multicultural society.

Burke made two claims.

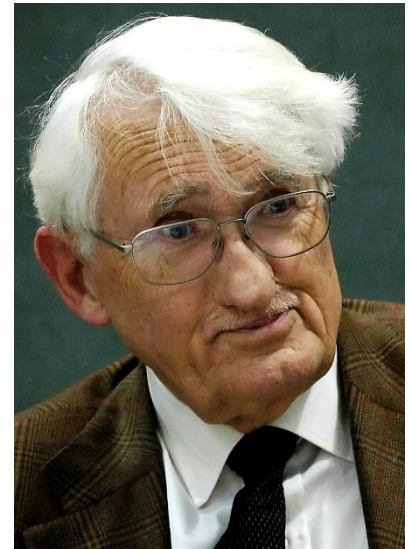
1. **Theoretical claim.** One cannot design a society on rational grounds because there can be no rational justification for its guiding principles in the first place.
2. **Empirical claim.** One cannot design a society on rational grounds because people are guided by unquestioned cultural assumptions, not by reason.

The American Experiment

1. **Theoretical claim.** One cannot design a society on rational grounds because there can be no rational justification for its guiding principles in the first place.

This has not been demonstrated.

- Enlightenment principles **do not reject** the meaningfulness of ethical and religious discourse.
- Postmodernist rejection of truth is **incoherent** due to performative inconsistency.
- We can return to the Enlightenment project of **deducing** ethical and political principles with the same vigor we apply to empirical science.



The American Experiment

2. **Empirical claim.** One cannot design a society on rational grounds because people are guided by unquestioned cultural assumptions, not by reason.

The jury is still out.

- Even if we grant that the claim has merit, the U.S. may have the **cultural** resources to sustain liberal republicanism.
- The country **began** with British republican traditions.
- U.S. culture seems to have **internalized** Lockean rights and liberty to a great extent.*

*Although rights claims are often claims about **my** rights, and concern about liberty is often concern about **my** liberty.



The American Experiment

Remember: humans are very good at learning, and we enjoy it. We can **learn** to make our society work.

Education has an obvious role. This includes...

The American Experiment

Remember: humans are very good at learning, and we enjoy it. We can **learn** to make our society work.

Education has an obvious role. This includes...

Osher classes!

