

# Indoctrination v. Education

*Max Hocutt*

## Introduction

How does education differ from indoctrination? This is a boring—even a philosophical—question. Yet disputes now raging in academia make it unavoidable. In the view of many observers, universities have increasingly replaced education in the social sciences and humanities with indoctrination in the shibboleths of political correctness and leftist dogma. To this charge, it is replied that indoctrinating students in the evils of racial discrimination, economic disadvantage, and sexual repression constitutes better education than “privileging” teachings that buttress white male hegemony, colonial oppression, or capitalist exploitation. The charge presumes that there is a definable difference between indoctrination and education; the reply denies this presumption. In this dispute, I am on the side of those who believe in a difference. Perhaps, then, it is time to say what it is.

## Means and Ends

Despite claims to the contrary, it is usually not hard to distinguish education from indoctrination. In practice, the difference between them is evident in the means they use. You were indoctrinated if you were told only one side of the story, or told that believing another side would not be an error but an evil. You were indoctrinated if no evidence was cited, or if the evidence was tendentiously selected while contrary evidence was ignored, suppressed, or distorted by misleading or charged terminology. You were indoctrinated if you were made to feel not that the proposition at issue merited belief on its own account but that doubting it would expose you to the disfavor of your fellows, the government, or the deity. In short, you were indoctrinated if the appeal was emotional rather than rational, or if your agreement was secured by threat of force or by fraud rather than by citation of fact. By contrast, you were educated if the issue was presented objectively and dispassionately, if you heard alternative views, and if you were encouraged to believe only what the evi-

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dence supported and only to the degree to which it supported it; never mind the opinions of other people, including the instructor, the rest of the students, the college censor, the government, or God.

Methods differ because ends do, and the disparate ends served by the disparate means just mentioned are brought forth by the following definitions.

*Indoctrinate v.* (1) to instruct in a body of doctrine; (2) to teach to accept a system of thought uncritically.

*Educate v.* to provide with knowledge or training, especially through formal schooling; teach.

As these formulations from *The American Heritage Dictionary* indicate, indoctrination resembles education in being a form of instruction, but it differs by seeking to inculcate *belief* or *conviction* while education seeks to provide *knowledge* or *training*. Training in skill is important, but to simplify matters I shall focus on knowledge; and the first task will be to distinguish it from belief by reminding you of some ancient platitudes.

The big difference between knowledge and belief is *truth*. There is belief, but there is no knowledge, without it. At one time, everybody believed that the earth was flat; they had no doubt of it. They thought it constituted knowledge, but they were mistaken. Their conviction, though firm, did not suffice to guarantee its correctness. Although they *thought they knew*, it should not be said that they *knew*. You can believe, but you cannot know, what is not so; and that the earth is flat was never so. If something is *known*, it's not just *believed*; it is also *true*.

But although truth is necessary, it too is insufficient. Also needed for knowledge is *proof*, decisive evidence of truth. Nowadays, most people believe that the sun is a star and that Venus is not a star but a planet. If, however, they have never studied astronomy, they have no good idea why they should believe it; it is just what they have always been told. Such people do not really understand what they believe, much less know, what makes it true. Though it *is* true, their belief in its truth is little better than prejudice. If this prejudice is called knowledge, the title is conferred only by courtesy and only because other people have the necessary credentials. If, however, nobody could prove it, then nobody would have the right to claim it as knowledge.

In sum: Education seeks to inculcate knowledge, belief in proven truth, while indoctrination seeks only to inculcate belief, which may or may not be true. That is the difference between them.

### Why the Distinction Matters

Why should anybody care about this difference? Because knowledge has definite advantages over mere belief. As Charles Peirce, the nineteenth-cen-

ture scientist and founder of pragmatism, liked to point out, people act on the basis of what they believe; and their actions are more likely to succeed if their beliefs are true, which is more likely to be the case if these beliefs have been proved. A true belief fits reality; a false belief does not. The man who must deal with reality is therefore better off if he is equipped not just with beliefs but also with proof that his beliefs are apt for the realities with which he must cope. Unproved belief has none of these advantages. In the absence of proof, a belief is at least as likely to be false as true, and a false belief is more likely than a true one to get its believer into trouble. Thus, a man who contracts pneumonia would do better to listen to his doctors and take antibiotic drugs than to rely on the ministrations of a “New Age” healer.

We must ask, then, why anybody would prefer indoctrination, which inculcates mere belief, to education, which transmits knowledge. There are two reasons. First, people who engage in indoctrination are usually convinced that what they are teaching is true; they would not teach it if they did not believe it themselves. The trouble is that, if they lack proof, their assurance of truth is not only misplaced; it is also of little value. Worse, it is a block in the path of inquiry. Ancient conviction of the earth’s flatness did nothing to insure its truth; but, because of this conviction, exploration of the earth’s seas was held up until Christopher Columbus (who may have read Aristotle’s two-millennia-old proofs that the earth is round) showed that sailors who ventured far from port would not fall off the edge.

Second, although education transmits knowledge useful to the individual, indoctrination has another, decidedly different, aim—*promoting loyalty to the group*. Thus, education in engineering helps the student prosper, while indoctrination in a false ideology helps only the ideology to prosper. It is true that knowledge of engineering will enable an individual to contribute to his group’s welfare as well as promote his own; but while indoctrination obviously serves the group, it does not so obviously help the pupil, who may, in fact, be called on to sacrifice himself for the group’s benefit. The martyr will have been told that he will reap his own reward in heaven; but if he believed it, the promise was one he had to take on faith. So far as anybody else can tell, he merely got to die.

Given the perils that attend potentially false belief, why would anyone accept what nobody can prove, merely because some group expects it? The answer is that we human beings are tribal animals strongly disposed to try to get along with those with whom we have most in common, because in evolutionary time they were the people with whom we were most likely to be living and because group cohesion was necessary for survival. The easiest way to get along with others is to show them that you are willing to go along with what they say and do what they wish, especially when you have no independent reason to believe their claims or any expectation of benefiting personally from complying with their desires. Hence, most people are not only loathe to doubt but

also eager to believe what others in their group aver. Never mind whether it is true or false. The point is to conform, not to get it right.

### **Multiculturalism as Tribalism**

This tendency to conform helps to understand why “multiculturalism” has become orthodoxy in today’s universities, institutions purportedly committed to independence of mind but in fact all too often bastions of intellectual monoculture. By telling us that membership in the group determines our “identity,” the multiculturalist appeals to our very primitive instinct to believe that tribal loyalty should take precedence over everything else. Thus, women are expected to be feminists, blacks to be proponents of affirmative action, the poor to be for governmentally supported welfare, and homosexuals to approve unconventional “lifestyles.” When confronted with this tribalist expectation, most people readily comply, especially since all who resist are soon ostracized as unreliable, or branded as traitors. White males, now a much-derided minority, are forbidden to yield to their tribal instincts, but other groups are encouraged to promote theirs.

In support of this imperative, multiculturalists sometimes argue that, since truth, evidence, and proof are always relative to some group’s “perspective,” only women should teach about women, only blacks about blacks, only homosexuals about homosexuals, and so on. This doctrine, which now governs hiring in university departments of humanities and social science everywhere, is sometimes rationalized on the grounds that expertise about a group is necessarily lacking in those who, belonging to a different group, have a different “perspective.” But it is obvious from multiculturalist dismissal of the ideas of truth and proof that concern for expertise is not the issue. Someone outside a group can easily speak with knowledge *about it*. What he cannot do is speak with authority *for it*, and what multiculturalists want is not people to educate us about women, blacks, or homosexuals but partisans for their cause. The multiculturalist’s interest is not impartial scholarship but self-interested advocacy.<sup>1</sup>

It is surprising how readily the university, formerly a center of scholarship, has acceded to this demand for whole departments of pseudo-scholarly apologists for special interests. But professors are tribal animals too, and in today’s universities the pressures to conform to multiculturalist dogma are enormous. That dogma serves the interests of administrators eager to cater to as varied a clientele as possible and to placate organized groups seeking preferences. So, although there is less education in contemporary universities, anybody familiar with the scene knows that there is a great deal more of the sort of thing that the Chinese communists used to call re-education—of both reluctant students and recalcitrant members of the faculty.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, despite the epistemic shortcomings of indoctrination and the epistemic advantages of education, the latter has increasingly given way to the former.

### The Incoherence of Relativistic Nihilism

To justify this substitution of indoctrination for education, multiculturalists have undertaken a sustained and wide-ranging campaign against the concepts of truth, proof, and reality.<sup>3</sup> For decades now, the amateur epistemologists who populate departments of English literature and worship at the shrine of French Marxism have assured us that reality is a “social construction,” which can be made of whole cloth, that “truth” is a name for one’s own opinion, which is never worse than anybody else’s, and that “proof” is mere rhetoric, the value of which is in the eye of the beholder. In short, to defend their tribalism, multiculturalists have endorsed *relativistic nihilism*, the belief that since truth and reality vary with opinions, they do not really exist.

To see what this fashionable doctrine entails when it is taken literally and carried out to its logical conclusion, consider the following simple case: Suppose A believes that frogs cause warts, while B doubts it. Then, it may be held, A’s belief will count as true in A’s opinion and B’s as true in B’s, but neither opinion will count as true; and the fact that benighted professors in the Department of Biology adamantly continue to insist that they can prove the truth of B’s belief and the falsity of A’s will go to show only how ignorant they are of more enlightened modes of thought. They should forget those laboratory studies of viruses and read Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Paul de Man on the cultural relativity of diverse “rhetorics.” (I exaggerate, but only a little.)

Although this silly doctrine has become orthodoxy in many departments of humanities and some departments of social science, it is repudiated by most physical scientists and philosophers. The scientists’ reason for rejecting it is that they actually know a thing or two; and, if called upon to do so, can prove it. We philosophers cannot match the scientists’ claims to knowledge, but most of us also reject relativistic nihilism, because it is incoherent. Anyone who says that there is no truth must be understood to mean, “Here is a truth: there is no truth,” a claim that wears its own refutation on its sleeve.

The relativistic nihilist will reply that he does not say, “It is true that there is no truth”; he says, “In my opinion, there is no truth,” which does not so obviously take away with the right hand what was given with the left. But this verbal difference makes no real difference. If it is the nihilist’s opinion that there is no truth, then it is his opinion that this opinion is true. So, he is still talking out of both sides of his mouth, denying with one side what he affirms with the other. He might as well declare, “What I am now saying is false.” As philosophers have noted since Epimenides the Cretan first pointed it out, if that statement is true, it is false; so it is not true. In fact, as the logician Alfred Tarski observed, it is meaningless. Furthermore, the relativist knows this. It is why he protests so mightily when people come to campus to criticize his multiculturalist views. If he really believed that opposing opinions were as good as his, he would welcome his critics. That he does the contrary is proof that his relativism is not only ill-considered but also insincere and insecure.

Once this is understood, there is no need to refute the bad arguments that are usually offered in support of relativistic nihilism.<sup>4</sup> Given the self-evident absurdity and hypocrisy of the doctrine, it will be obvious in advance that all arguments for it must be unsound.<sup>5</sup> The problem then becomes that of understanding how anyone could ever have been tempted to believe otherwise.

### **Is Relativism Just Fallibilism and Tolerance?**

Part of the explanation may be that people unused to philosophical analysis have confused relativistic nihilism with more defensible, because vaguer, doctrines.

Two such doctrines come to mind. One is the attitude that the aforementioned Peirce called *fallibilism*, meaning belief that, however strong one's conviction may be, it can always be mistaken. Unlike relativistic nihilism, this attitude is far from self-refuting; yet its normal verbal expression differs only slightly. Instead of saying "P is true in my opinion, but no opinion, including mine, is ever true," the fallibilist says "P is true in my opinion, but that is just my opinion; for all I know, it might be mistaken." Because the difference in phrasing is slight, the two claims are easily confused with each other; but the chasm between their meanings is enormous. For reasons just spelled out, the former statement is never appropriate; but the latter is in order whenever its speaker is unable to back up his opinion with proof, or when his opinion is not shared by others equally well informed. You cannot believe that what you believe is false. If you believe it, you also believe that it is true; but that does not mean you cannot admit the possibility you are in error.

As this shows, believers in the absoluteness (i.e., non-relativity) of truth need not yield to dogmatism, the delusion that they are infallibly right. By the same token, acknowledgment of the possibility of error need not give way to denial of the possibility of knowledge. To the contrary, admitting with the fallibilist that you might have the thing wrong is assuming with the absolutist that there could be such a thing as getting it right. The relativistic nihilist can acknowledge no such truth; for he holds that (1) since every person's opinion is true in his opinion, nobody ever gets anything wrong and (2) since every person's opinion is false in some other person's opinion, nobody ever gets anything right. Therefore, relativistic nihilism, which is not defensible and could not be true, ought not to be confused with fallibilism, which is both.

Nor should relativistic nihilism be confused either with tolerance for opposing opinions or with open-minded willingness to entertain them. Being tolerant merely entails acknowledging that the other person has a right to his opinion, which is worlds away from admitting that the other person's opinion is right. Of course, you can do that too, but only if you change your mind first. What you cannot do without refuting yourself is agree that someone else is right, if you think that he has opinions contrary to yours. Thinking the other person mistaken is part of what it means to say that you and he disagree. If you

are reasonable, you can entertain the possibility that it is not he but you who is in error; and if you are open-minded, you can be induced to change your opinion, provided he has better arguments for his. But so long as you retain the opinion with which you think he disagrees, you cannot—logically cannot—embrace the proposition that he is right, for that would mean you are wrong.

Tolerance for disagreement and open-mindedness to opposing arguments are virtues, but they presuppose belief that truth is absolute, not relative to opinion.

### **Relativism and Perspectivism**

Another doctrine sometimes confused with relativistic nihilism is *pluralism*, or *perspectivism*, belief that there are many ways of viewing the world, each with the potential of yielding pictures that reveal some part of the truth about it. Thus, the discoveries of science need not preclude the insights of religion, and the validity of mathematics need not imply the fallaciousness of poesy.

When it is duly restricted and qualified, this line of thought has merit. Consider the various sciences. The physicist's way of talking and thinking not only differs from that of the biologist but also resists translation into his vocabulary. The economist's way of describing human beings likewise differs from that of the anthropologist. Yet all four disciplines make valuable contributions to our understanding, each in its own way. This is so because each deals with a different segment, or a different aspect, of reality. Thus, biology has to do with life, physics with motion, economics with means to ends, anthropology with culture, and so on. Furthermore, each discipline has its own methods and standards of proof. Like different powers of resolution in binoculars, these yield different information. But the information gained using one of them does not compete with, it supplements, that from the other. Therefore, accepting the insights of the biologist or economist need not require rejecting the discoveries of the physicist or anthropologist. You can embrace them all, and you should.

Talk of perspectives also has merit in other comparisons. Suppose that you think the snake beautiful while I think it dangerous. Since in that case we might both be right; there is no reason for us to disagree. Here again, different "perspectives" yield not contrary but complementary judgments. The example is trivial, but there are more important illustrations. Grant that talk of artistic or religious "truth" is so figurative that it is not clear what is meant. The fact remains: poets and novelists have been among the most perceptive observers of human conduct, and the greatest of them have been better psychologists and sociologists than some who have made these a profession. As for the arts and religion, the best and the worst in human beings has found expression in them. Therefore, careful attention to them could hardly fail to enlighten us; and I am pleased to report that this sort of attention is on display in the best literary scholarship and art criticism.

Unfortunately, the metaphor of perspectives goes awry when used by the multiculturalist to maintain not just that *different* opinions but also that *contrary* opinions might be equally sound. To see the absurdity of this claim, consider that same snake again. Grant that it is both *beautiful* and *dangerous*; it cannot be both a *snake* and a *stick*. So, if you think it one and I think it the other, then one of us must be mistaken; and declaring that each of us is right in his opinion won't suffice to alter that elementary truth of logic. Furthermore, this logic does not change when we shift to the opinions of diverse groups. If "black truth" contradicts "white truth," then either blacks or whites must have things wrong. If "socialist truth" contradicts "capitalist truth," then either the socialist or the capitalist must be in error.

It will, of course, not always be obvious just who has made the mistake. In the social sciences and humanities, dispute is common but proof rare, because the facts do not always decisively favor one opinion over its rivals. Indeed, what is to count as fact may itself be a subject of dispute; never mind its causes and meaning, which are virtually always debatable. When this is so, it may justly be claimed that the issue is "a matter of opinion," meaning that it is still open for discussion. But saying so is a far cry from embracing the absurdity that all opinions, including those that contradict each other, are equally good. The right conclusion is that, since no opinion on the matter at issue is sufficiently well founded to be preferred over the others, nobody is yet entitled to assert his opinion with confidence, much less with certainty. But this is no cause for epistemic despair. Even when the evidence does not settle the issue, it may favor some hypotheses and rule out others; and if what is known today does not resolve dispute, perhaps what is learned tomorrow will. Truth loves to hide, but sometimes we find her anyhow.

Grant, then, that different sciences teach different truths. Grant even that literature and religion teach different truths than the sciences. Grant, finally, that we should not only be more tolerant of disagreement but also more open-minded. The first proposition cannot justify, or even make intelligible, the claim that what is true in chemistry might be false in physics, or that what is false in microbiology might be true in English literature; and the second and third propositions cannot give sense to the claim that what is true in sociology might be false in religion. In short, none of these propositions can justify relativist nihilism, the mainstay of multiculturalism.

## Conclusion

Open-minded tolerance for diversity of opinion is indisputably a good thing, and so is recognition of the value of different "perspectives," scientific and humanist. The fact remains: nihilistic relativism is self-serving nonsense, which is taken seriously only because it seems to excuse an otherwise inexcusable practice—the substitution of indoctrination for education. Not only is there a



difference between the two, but attempts to deny it are both self-refuting and hypocritical.

### Notes:

1. For a more detailed criticism of multiculturalism, see my "Black Teachers for Black Studies? A Philosophical Critique of Multiculturalist Pedagogy," *The Independent Review*, Vol. IX, No. 1, (Summer 2004): 127–135.
2. I have in mind such practices as restrictive speech codes and compulsory participation in workshops in "cultural diversity" and racial or gender "sensitivity," mainstays of multiculturalism on most campuses these days.
3. This campaign has been directed mainly at the social sciences and humanities, but see Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). Harding, who clearly knows nothing about physics, claims that it is a plot to perpetuate patriarchy. To bolster this cant she cites likeminded feminists, apparently on the theory that if all the chickens say the sky is falling it is beyond dispute. For dispute, see Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
4. One popular argument invokes Einstein's theory of relativity, but the relativity to which Einstein refers is an objective fact about the nature of space and time, and it has been experimentally demonstrated. It has nothing to do with opinions or subjectivity. So, the argument is bogus, as are similar invocations of Heisenberg's famous indeterminacy principle, which applies to sub-atomic particles but confers no sanctity on anybody's beliefs.
5. Nevertheless, philosophers have long found work and amusement in refuting these arguments. For examples, see my "Reconstructing Truth," *The Tulane College Review*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Spring 2001): 12–24; "Some Truths about Truth: An Editorial," *Behavior and Philosophy*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1994): 1–5; "Truth, Knowledge, and Belief: A reply to Markham," *Behavior and Philosophy*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1995): 79–80. Like the present treatment, all of these articles are attempts to state in terms comprehensible to the general reader findings set forth in more rigorous and technical language by such of my betters as Alfred Tarski, J.L. Austin, Willard Quine, and Donald Davidson.

**Not just women's studies, but also journalism, Asian studies, many other departments, and even the business school at the University of Oregon have been including the following language in their employment ads:**

We invite applications from qualified candidates who share our commitment to diversity.

**The NAS member who drew our attention to this development wonders if that wording discourages applications from those who oppose racial preferences in hiring and admissions.**