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Authority, Tradition and the Postmodern University

Abstract:

The postmodern university is experiencing a legitimation crisis because of a deepening and corrosive mistrust of all forms of authority; even those that are intended to benefit students by enabling them to “think critically”, or to deepen and improve their knowledge and skills. Some of the problem is rooted in prevailing cultural and economic trends, but others inhere in the nature of postmodernism itself; especially the postmodern claim that truth itself is non-existent or simply unattainable or unavailable, even at the best of times. Unlike earlier generations of critical theorists, who believed that “the truth shall make you free”, postmodern theorists, following Nietzsche, claim that the very idea of truth is moot, if not entirely obsolete. But absent a commitment to a search for truth, the entire structure of the university itself begins to crumble.

Keywords:

authority, reason, postmodernism, Erich Fromm, Friedrich Nietzsche

No human being or human institution is fit to be trusted with any temporal authority that is not subject to cancellation by some other authority.

Northrop Frye

There is a legitimacy problem afoot in academia, as universities struggle to adapt to new and emerging economic realities and cultural pressures and expectations. In the following pages, I explore the ways in which Erich Fromm’s ideas illumine the predicament of the “postmodern university,” an institution in which truth is no

longer the common court of appeal and authority is increasingly unmoored. Like his erstwhile colleagues in the Frankfurt School, Fromm offered a non-positivist approach to the concept of reason, providing us with a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of authority, a problem upon which postmodernism founders. My overarching aim is to explore the traditional role of authority in the university, and then to analyze the present crisis of legitimacy more broadly.

Over the course of human history, we have learned to differentiate among different types of authority. Religious (or spiritual) authority, secular (or governmental) authority and scientific authority are the three most common varieties. Ideally, we like to suppose that each type of authority is exercised in the public interest. That being so, in optimal circumstances, one might expect them to co-exist harmoniously. In truth, however, they clash frequently, especially in times of social and political turmoil. Nevertheless, these three different types of authority do have at least one thing in common. All authority relations entail differences in status and power that grant the persons in authority the power to evaluate and punish transgressive behavior.

As a result of this fact, no doubt, *theories* of authority are often rooted in a mood of skepticism, suspicion or outright mistrust. So, for example, some theories stress the necessity of religious and secular authorities to constrain, punish, and perhaps pardon our sinful natures, or our allegedly instinctive tendencies to selfishness, lust, and violence (e.g., Plato, Augustine, Thomas Hobbes, Sigmund Freud). These theories are rooted in a deep mistrust of human nature. By contrast, theories that stress the arbitrary, irrational, repressive and power-seeking aspects of authority (among libertarian and anarchist thinkers, for example) are rooted in mistrust of authority itself. Enlightenment critiques of religious authority were rooted in mistrust of tradition and “revealed truth.” Postmodern critiques of scientific authority are rooted in mistrust of scientific “objectivity”, and so on.

Much as they clashed in the past, religious and scientific authority have traditionally held one crucial thing in common. As Freud’s friend, the Reverend Oskar Pfister (1873–1956) observed, religion and science converge impressively in their conviction that “the truth shall make you free.”¹ Indeed, historically, both religious and scientific authority were predicated on their ability to discern and disseminate the truth. Contrast this state of affairs with the role of secular authority, which is present in all branches of government, law enforcement, the judiciary, and the military. Rather than discerning and disseminating the truth, the primary function of secular authority is to maintain civic order and defend society against (internal or external) threats and enemies – preferably with the consent of the governed, of course. (A partial exception to this state of affairs is the judiciary, which seeks truth to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused for the sake of justice, as well as public safety.)

However, much as science and religion share a belief in the emancipatory power of truth, they clash because their underlying concepts of truth differ greatly, and they have very different methods for ascertaining it. And when religious authorities try to stifle the activities and utterances of scientists, hampering them in their efforts to discover and disseminate the truth according to their own discipline-specific criteria, the resulting backlash can be severe, long-lasting and potentially injurious to religion itself. Why? Because enraged scientists will insist even more stridently that religion’s authority is based entirely on ignorance, credulity, and superstition, fostering an irrational faith rooted in fear or wishful thinking, rather than in sound, sober analysis and patient reasoning.

That being said, religious and secular authority also clash frequently, sometimes with unexpected political outcomes. Consider Pope John Paul II’s successful campaign to end communist rule in Poland. And if secular authorities wage an undeclared “war on science,” as the Bush administration, and now the Trump administration, have done in the United States, erstwhile adversaries may become unexpected allies. Witness the papal

1) Oskar Pfister, “The Illusion of a Future: A Friendly Disagreement with Prof. Sigmund Freud,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74, no.3 (July 1993): 578.

encyclical *Laudato si'*², which affirms the reality of climate change, despite the Trump administration's bizarre and hollow disclaimers. In any case, as history attests, in one way or another, most clashes among different modes of authority in society can broadly be described as *political*.

Whether we regard them as bastions of elitism and “ivory tower” detachment, remote from the realities of everyday life, or as microcosms of the societies that sustain them, universities have been implicated in these matters from their very inception. Historically, faculties in schools of divinity and departments of theology and philosophy pursued spiritual truths, while departments of natural science pursued scientific ones. Administrators oversaw the finances, management, staffing and maintenance of the universities, and punished or expelled transgressors. The arts, humanities, and social sciences – which provide a steadily dwindling proportion of university enrollments, and are increasingly starved for resources, nowadays – played a special role in this arrangement, but were also indirectly animated and informed by a search for truth. Why and how, precisely?

Whereas the natural sciences sought to discern and disseminate the truth about the forces and laws of nature, the nature and origins of our planet, and the cosmos, history and the human sciences sought to discover the truth about human society and culture, past and present. Psychology, a discipline which straddles the natural and social sciences, sought the truth about human nature, human development, and the manifold deformations and disturbances of the individual human psyche. The other human sciences (e.g., anthropology, sociology, political science) borrowed models and methods from the natural sciences in their pursuit of the truth. But they also sought instruction from the arts and humanities, because they hold up a mirror to our souls, and in so doing, to cultural trends and problems that often go unnoticed or unaddressed in collective discourse under normal circumstances. Novels, biographies, plays, music, and the visual arts all capture and express emotional, experiential, and societal “truths” that only intrude obliquely, if at all, on our consciousness at most times, and are therefore invaluable as “data” for the human sciences.

So, let us ask: is there one theory that accounts for all three types of authority? No, obviously, because the ways in which religious, secular, and scientific authority are defined, defended, or undermined depend on the vagaries of history, language, geography, politics, and economics. Nevertheless, there is a useful heuristic that sheds light on the diverse ways in which these different kinds of authority are experienced, interpreted and exercised across different cultures and periods of history, one first suggested by the sociologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900–1980).

In a series of books including *Escape From Freedom*³, *Man For Himself*⁴, and *The Sane Society*⁵, Erich Fromm distinguished among rational, irrational, and anonymous authority. Fromm described rational authority as a relationship between two (or more) people of *unequal* age, experience, or status, where the person in authority (usually a teacher or parent) seeks to abolish those differences eventually, by bringing the student or child up to his or her own level⁶. Or as Northrop Frye, Canada's pre-eminent literary critic, once said: “All personal authority comes from teachers who want to stop being teachers.”⁷

Ideally, rational authority is a relationship based on mutual respect and is completely voluntary. While equality is the ultimate goal, the achievement of that goal requires discipline. In order to master a skill or a body of knowledge, the less experienced or accomplished party must follow the master's example, practicing diligently.

2) Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015).

3) Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Avon Books, 1965).

4) Erich Fromm, *Man For Himself* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier Books, 1947).

5) Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

6) Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 186.

7) Northrop Frye, *The Northrop Frye Quote Book* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2014), 42.

The teacher, meanwhile, derives satisfaction from the student's progress, because it confirms his/her own knowledge and ability. In the event that the student matches or exceeds the master's level of knowledge and proficiency, the friction of competing egos is presumably contained and diffused by a disinterested love of the craft that they both share. Or again, in Frye's words: "Authority is of the subject; this is what equalizes teacher and student."⁸

By contrast with rational authority, which is based on competence, consent and mutual respect, and entails the possibility of equality, *irrational* authority, according to Fromm, is based on fear, and is designed to perpetuate or intensify existing inequalities. It does so through the use of force, or the threat of force, and also deception, secretiveness, and/or the manipulation of interpersonal relationships. Regardless of the ideologies that disguise it as benevolent paternalism or a liberating social force, irrational authority is really motivated by greed, fear, and a sadistic desire to dominate and humiliate others. Instead of promoting justice and equality, it stifles dissent and the rights of those who do not obey. Those who embrace and embody irrational authority are threatened by the prospect of genuine equality, though they often enjoy a kind of sordid intimacy with others – which Fromm called "symbiosis" – to alleviate their loneliness or to consolidate their hold on power. In the process, of course, irrational authority also tends to stifle intellectual independence and sound ethical judgment, though paradoxically, it promotes both stupidity and, in some cases, cunning, or a facile intelligence which is results-oriented but utterly ruthless and conscience-free.

Despite their obvious differences, rational and irrational authority share an important similarity. They engage those affected by them in a highly *personal* manner. As Fromm noted in *Escape from Freedom*:

In external authority is clear that there is an order and who gives it; one can fight against the authority, and in this fight personal independence and moral courage develop. But ... in anonymous authority both command and commander have become invisible. It is like being fired at by an invisible enemy. There is nobody and nothing to fight back against.⁹

So, unlike commonsense conceptions of authority, where differences in power, knowledge or status are freely acknowledged, or rigidly insisted upon, *anonymous* authority manifests as timidity and group-think in groups of nominal equals; it is found among people who, in theory anyway, are not beholden to anyone but themselves and their peers. Anonymous authority is not backed by overt demands, or by threats and coercion, but by participants' fears of being "different" and a pervasive lack and fear of accountability. As a result, it produces bureaucratic "red-tape" and an attitude of slack conformity in groups whose members may share a diffuse identity, but which lack any sense of meaningful connection to each other; what sociologist David Riesman (1909–2002), called "the lonely crowd." Here the fear of being isolated, or merely "different" tends to lower standards and expectations. The consequent reliance on convention and public opinion, rather than on truth or genuine principle, renders those enmeshed in anonymous authority prone to apathy and opportunism.¹⁰ And unlike rational authority, which promotes equality, and irrational authority, which intensifies inequality, anonymous authority promotes a proverbial race to the bottom, while simultaneously fostering an increasingly vapid culture of "celebrity."

The diffuse, impersonal character of anonymous authority renders it different from the other two modes. Another difference, said Fromm, is that it accompanies the rise of consumer culture, noting that this, and not the authoritarian personality, is the "pathology of normalcy" that prevails under capitalism in the postwar era.¹¹

8) *Ibid.*, 41.

9) Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 190.

10) *Ibid.*, chap. 7, "Freedom and Democracy."

11) Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*.

Evidently, Fromm did not anticipate the precipitous decline of the American middle class in the eighties, nineties and the twenty first century, or the ravages of globalization, which have deepened pre-existing inequalities and insecurities, giving renewed impetus to irrational authority, to fascist and authoritarian leaders and to ultra-nationalist movements in the USA and all around the globe.

Meanwhile, what happens when, consciously or unconsciously, most people (both in and out of the university) mistrust religious, secular, *and* scientific authority? And what happens when they are encouraged in that direction by forces within the university itself? In circumstances like these, people tend to gravitate toward those whom they trust the most (or perhaps, more precisely, those they mistrust the least.) In this toxic atmosphere, opinion leaders often derive their “authority” from the fact that tell their loyal followers what they want to hear, or what flatters and confirms their own irrational fears and prejudices. When this happens, rumors, conspiracy theories, and urban myths abound, leaving many people without a moral compass and with a deeply distorted understanding of their actual situation. Indeed, they start to lose touch with reality, and inhabit what Roland David Laing (1927–1989) called “social phantasy systems.”¹² This alarming state of affairs fosters the decline of democratic norms and institutions and promotes the growth of ultra-nationalist and racist movements on the right and authoritarianism on the left.

As history demonstrates, organized religion seldom remains aloof from these alarming trends. On the contrary, it may enter the fray as an ally of (or an alibi for) the angry mob, or act as beacon of sanity and tolerance, a principled and steadfast opponent of prevailing trends and collective delusions of one sort and another. For example, contrast the careers of Father Charles Coughlin (1891–1979), the infamous “radio priest” of the 1930s and 1940s, with that of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (1931–present). In the years leading up to World War II, Father Coughlin, a graduate of the Pontifical Institute at the University of Toronto, used his radio programs to cultivate a vast following, feeding anti-Semitic and fascist sentiments, and discouraging Americans from entering the war against Hitler. By contrast, Desmond Tutu, then Bishop of Johannesburg, led a principled, constructive and visionary non-violent struggle against apartheid in racist South Africa.

Leaving secular and scientific authority aside, for the moment, can Fromm’s theory of authority, specifically his ideas about rational, irrational, and anonymous authority, be applied to religion, especially in our turbulent times? They most certainly can. Remember, Fromm described rational authority as a mode of relatedness to others; one that is based on competence, consent and mutual respect, which fosters equality, and – ideally, at least – is completely voluntary. Moreover, it abjures lies and deception, fostering a love of truth. By contrast, he said, *irrational* authority is based on fear, and is designed to perpetuate or intensify existing inequalities through the use of force, intimidation, secrecy, lies and deception, even when it is disguised as benevolent paternalism or embraces an ideology of radical liberation.

Moreover, and more importantly, please note that Fromm did *not* embrace or endorse the now commonplace tendency to align rational authority with science and irrational authority with religion, as Enlightenment thinkers and their intellectual offspring (like Freud) are inclined to do. On the contrary, his concept of reason, like Oskar Pfister’s, emphasized the integral role that our ethical and emotional lives play in the development of the individual, and was more complex and nuanced than that of the positivists and their followers allow.¹³ As modes of interpersonal relatedness, rather than epistemological or theological perspectives that are adhered to dogmatically, rational and irrational authority are ubiquitous, and found in all domains of human experience and endeavor.

12) Ronald David Laing, *Self and Others* (London: Tavistock 1961).

13) Pfister, “The Illusion of a Future”; Daniel Burston, “Psychoanalysis & Subjectivity in the work of Erich Fromm,” in *Understanding Experience: Psychotherapy and Postmodernism*, ed. Roger Frie (Routledge: London, 2003), 161–179.

So, for example, in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*¹⁴, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament*¹⁵, and *To Have or to Be?*¹⁶, Fromm linked rational authority to the unfolding of personal autonomy and what he called “humanistic conscience”. By contrast, he associated irrational authority with what he termed “authoritarian conscience,” or more simply, authoritarianism. Though he occasionally delved into other faith traditions, Fromm’s analysis focused primarily on Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, arguing that their sacred texts give credence and expression to *both* kinds of authority, albeit in different ways and at different times.

That being so, it follows that some religious leaders interpret their sacred texts to justify bigotry, hatred, inequality, and mistrust. But many others have embraced and embodied rational authority, including (but not limited to) Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Pope Francis, and Maajid Nawaz. Nor is it an accident that their respect for human dignity and human rights had (or has) a political dimension, which brought them into conflict with secular authority (in nonviolent ways), or that Gandhi and King were assassinated for breaking barriers and challenging the status quo.

Fromm also noted the similarity between extreme nationalist fervor and religious intolerance, and was inclined to interpret ultra-nationalist movements and their hollow promises of redemption as contemporary forms of idolatry, or as some religious scholars might prefer to say, as pseudo-religious movements.¹⁷ Fromm deemed the prohibition against idolatry to be central to the Jewish faith and the prophetic temper, and he said that the practice of idolatry (in this admittedly diffuse sense) is utterly incompatible with the spiritual core of Judaism and Christianity. Fromm put the issue succinctly in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, as follows:

The psychoanalyst is in a position to study the human reality behind religion as well as behind non-religious symbol systems. He finds that the question is not whether man returns to religion and believes in God, but whether he lives love and thinks truth. If he does so, the symbol systems he uses are of secondary importance. If he does not, they are of no importance.¹⁸

No doubt, these words resonated deeply with the attitudes of many readers in the mid-twentieth century. But by the end of the twenty century, Fromm’s words would probably have elicited an ironic or even derisive response from many quarters within the university, for whom the concept of truth is moot at best. Why? We could look to the advent of postmodernism.

What is postmodernism? Postmodernism is only one of many trends in contemporary Continental philosophy, including structuralism and poststructuralism, deconstruction, and so on. Nevertheless, in most circles, “postmodernism” is used as an omnibus term that encompasses all of these trends. Jean-François Lyotard famously said, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹⁹ Unlike modernism, which is usually committed to some notion of objective truth, postmodernism adopts a highly skeptical or dismissive attitude toward the concept of truth. Indeed, the “authority” enjoyed by Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, et al., in the

14) Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*.

15) Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier Books, 1966).

16) Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976).

17) Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*; Erich Fromm, “The Prophetic Concept of Peace,” in *The Dogma of Christ, and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

18) Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 9.

19) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

academy today derives, in no small part, from their various claims to the effect that truth (in the modernist sense) does not exist, or that if it does, it cannot be reliably ascertained, by *any* means. For them, the concept of truth is moot at best – a ruse of language or a rhetorical power play.²⁰ In this, they follow Nietzsche, who answered Pilate's question as follows:

What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred and embellished ... Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions – they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins²¹.

So, the question arises: if the different varieties of authority that are constantly (and necessarily) in play in the mission, identity and structure of the university are no longer tethered to (or better yet, rooted in) the pursuit of truth, what *are* the foundations of its authority, if there are any?

The first answer that springs to mind, of course, is power, plain and simple. But can power unconstrained or uninspired by loftier goals and purposes be harnessed in the public interest? The simple answer is “no, not for long.” Indeed, unless it has the capacity to crush all opposition, unconstrained power will always have problems establishing and maintaining its legitimacy, prompting the reflection that the legitimization crisis of the postmodern university is partly a product of postmodernism itself.

And yet, when all is said and done, most people care very little about the pursuit of truth. The purpose of the university, as they see it, is preparing students for careers when they graduate, or perhaps, to “think critically.” But how can people think critically if they cannot differentiate between truth and error, truth and fiction, truth and lies? After all, the concepts of error, fiction, and lies logically require the idea of truth as their necessary precondition, absent which all of our fine rhetoric about teaching students how to “thinking critically” collapses into incoherence or absurdity. So, the concept of truth is not outdated, irrelevant or expendable, unless we wish to swap out sophistry for genuine knowledge and wisdom.

In recent years, increasing numbers of people among faculty and students alike have argued that another purpose of university education is to expose and undo past and present social injustices, to promote equality and diversity in our midst. People seldom ask whether (or to what extent) these two goals – training competent professionals, teachers and entrepreneurs, and rectifying prevailing social ills – are compatible, or likely to clash over time. Even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that they are completely compatible, we are still left with the question: what happens when one of the traditional goals of a university education – the pursuit of truth – has been sidelined or discredited in the humanities and social sciences, where postmodernism has had the deepest impact?

One thing that has happened since the advent of postmodernism is that the humanities and social sciences have waned considerably in their influence, prestige, and power within the university itself. It is impossible (and naïve) to infer a direct causal relationship between these two trends, because other, intervening variables also contributed to this sad state of affairs. Among them are the rise of austere, neoliberal management policies among university administrators, consumerist attitudes and expectations among students, and the advent of multiple screen technologies, resulting in a screen-saturated and increasingly screen-addicted culture where speed and convenience are paramount, and attention spans, civility, and old-fashioned book literacy atrophy steadily.

20) Burston, “Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity”.

21) Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1974), 46–47.

Another consequence of the collective embrace of postmodernism by faculty in the liberal arts is the flight of classical liberals and conservatives from academia. In the United States, the majority of faculty in the humanities and social sciences are left-leaning, despite the capitalist economic policies that govern the financial management of our institutions. Why this happened here is beyond the scope of this paper, really, but one thing is certain. Classical liberals and conservatives still generally cling to modernist notions of objective truth, and still value the search for truth. They feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in contexts where they are constantly mocked or reproached for their opinions. Moreover, faculty have a spontaneous inclination to trust, and therefore to *hire*, like-minded people; they seldom make political diversity a shared hiring goal, much less a matter of departmental policy. And while not all left-wingers are postmodernists – or vice versa, for that matter – the decline in political diversity here in North American universities is striking and worrisome, because it has rendered liberal arts programs vulnerable to the accusation that we are smug, intolerant and elitist, that we are out of touch with the moods, the concerns, and the perspectives of the population at large. And that also explains why, in our increasingly polarized society, the social sciences and humanities are chronically starved for resources by administrators intent on securing external funding for all meaningful and “important” research.

Another (completely unintended) consequence of relinquishing the traditional goal of pursuing the truth is that university faculty are being gradually transformed from respected professionals into service workers and academic coaches – whether they know it or not. Our main job now, in most people’s eyes, is to impart the knowledge and the skills our pupils need to thrive – including, but not limited to “critical thinking” – or failing that, to make a living, in a market economy. The search for truth is expendable, something we might do in our spare time, if we are so inclined. Meanwhile, if our attitudes or utterances run athwart prevailing standards of political correctness, and the expectations of the student body or our fellow faculty, we are called to account and disciplined, sometimes severely, often unfairly.

Finally, though this is difficult to prove, one wonders if the advent of postmodernism has contributed to the general mistrust of *all* forms of authority; religious secular and scientific. For that is our present, postmodern predicament. And if postmodernism is here to stay, at least in our universities, is there a way to counteract prevailing trends and restore trust? Erich Fromm died before postmodernism swept the universities in the Anglo-American world, and therefore never addressed this problem directly. But reflection on his typology suggests that in order to advance this discussion meaningfully, we ought to differentiate between rational, irrational, and anonymous authority, if only because irrational is inherently self-serving and self-interested, while anonymous authority lacks robust principles and ethical integrity. As a result, no matter how popular they are in the short run, both irrational authority and anonymous authority are inherently untrustworthy, and therefore apt to breed further mistrust in the long run.

Of course, there are those who mistrust rational authority as well, because they believe that all authority is inherently self-serving, or because they mistakenly maintain that Fromm’s concept of rational authority is tied to a Cartesian or a positivist concept of reason. But that is not the case. Max Horkheimer, who coined the term “critical theory” was – among other things, of course – a student of Kant, whose categorical imperative stated that we must treat each and every other human being as if he were an end himself, and not merely a means to an end. And it was in this “critical” spirit that Horkheimer differentiated between instrumental reason, which lends itself to the objectification of others, and substantive reason, that in Kant’s spirit, fosters the ethical and intellectual autonomy of individuals. Fromm seldom invoked this distinction in his published work, but on close examination, his concept of reason always adheres to Horkheimer’s definition of substantive reason, rather than instrumental reason.

Moreover, it is instructive to note that when it deviates from this definition, Fromm’s concept of reason does so in a decidedly dialectical and non-positivist direction. For example, take his discussion of reason in

*Psychoanalysis and Religion*²², which anticipates much of his later work. Rather than offering reason up as a panacea for our collective woes, as Freud and his followers were wont to do,²³ Fromm depicted reason as the source of much suffering. Why? Because according to Fromm, reason (and the heightened self-awareness that it brings) makes us humans “the freak of nature”. Not only does it afford us deeper insights into the secrets and forces of nature than other animals are capable of. It also estranges or alienates us from nature, from ourselves and others, obligating us to find new ways to achieve a sense of union or unity with ourselves, with others and the cosmos at large. Indeed, said Fromm, reason is apt to create a state of “internal disequilibrium” that requires ever deeper, more complex answers to the never ending riddles of existence, and a feeling of “existential aloneness” that only a loving orientation toward the world can remedy.

So, when all is said and done, Fromm’s concept of rational authority refers to particular mode of relatedness to others, and does not entail or even imply a Cartesian or a positivist concept of reason to justify it. And if Fromm is right, then only the presence or the practice of rational authority can start to restore trust in authority in a meaningful way. Sadly, however, rational authority, even in the broad sense in which Fromm understands it, is rare – and increasingly, under siege – in postmodern universities, where university administrators often mask the exercise of irrational authority behind a guise of benevolence or concern for the welfare of vulnerable students, when they are actually concerned, first and foremost, with customer satisfaction, maintaining steady revenue streams, and avoiding legal liability. The resulting duplicity leaves teachers in limbo, wondering whether our students are customers, or patients, or clients. Moreover, students’ annual evaluations of faculty “effectiveness” are seldom more than abstract and anonymous measures of a teacher’s popularity, which may have little to do with actual learning. The processes whereby complaints and grievances against faculty are adjudicated are also riddled with hearsay and anonymous authority. So, unless faculty are extremely resourceful and determined, crossing a student – even when one is telling the truth – can dramatically lower the teacher’s teaching evaluation scores. It can even get a teacher fired, or, more commonly, as tenure becomes increasingly rare, non-renewed. Similarly, the lack of realism, civility and personal responsibility among many students who embrace “political correctness” (in one form and another) bears the markers of Fromm’s anonymous authority, and sometimes descends into mob-rule or collectivism gone awry.

Faculty are not blameless, obviously. To a certain extent, we brought this state of affairs on ourselves by embracing of the fashionable irony and clever (if intensely convoluted) relativism of the postmodern stance. Unfortunately, whether they realize it or not, when faculty embrace this kind of “subversive” discourse across the board, they unwittingly undermine their own credibility and *raison d’être*. In a manner of speaking, they are digging their own graves. In a “post-truth” era, when journalists and politicians trade extensively in “alternative facts,” and right-wing versions of postmodernism are on the rise, we should be extremely wary and mistrustful of this kind of sophistry.

Granted, universities should promote gender and racial equality and fight for social justice. But they should do this in a principled and coherent fashion, not in a spineless, sneaky or defensive way which merely accommodates the whims of an angry crowd bent on advancing the agenda of the moment by getting a specific faculty member dismissed. Moreover, while embracing dignity and justice for all, it is essential that faculty not abandon our traditional truth-seeking function, lest universities become little more (and often, indeed, much less) than competent trade or professional schools, diploma mills that crank out confused, disenchanting and/or generally incompetent people desperately seeking employment.

22) Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*.

23) Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. Gregory Richter (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2012).

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