2014

Truth, Justice or the American Way?

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Recommended Citation

ABSTRACT

A review of current philosophy, research, and practice regarding the teaching of *social justice* reveals an unsettling paradox: While there has been a significant movement among educators to infuse and promote ideals of social justice within their curricula, this movement has been largely operating within a postmodern framework which, at its foundation, cannot sustain a unified theory of justice. Within such a postmodern framework, social justice pedagogy may be, at best, a well-intentioned but terribly fragmented social experiment, and at its worst, an unsettling prosecution of political hegemony. This paper will investigate the philosophical roots of this disconnect between theory and practice and the problems that it poses to public and higher education. As a corrective, we must explore the critical relationship between concepts of justice and concepts of truth, realizing that without a proper conception of truth, one cannot pursue (and therefore, presumably, teach) a proper view of justice. An outline of the biblical conception of truth and justice will be presented for the Christian educator who would take seriously—in theory and in practice—the call to promote justice within his/her sphere of influence as an integral part of Christian discipleship.

INTRODUCTION: TWO PROBLEMATIC TENDENCIES WITHIN SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

A cursory review of current educational philosophy and research reveals a deep concern for social justice, both in the United States and globally. Indeed, there is nothing short of "an established research agenda whose focus is on practicing teachers" (Hernandez & McKenzie, 2010, p. 50) to promote the idea of social justice within educational leadership programs afoot here in the United States. However, despite the ubiquity of social justice language, there is anything but consensus for what, precisely, constitutes and qualifies as social justice. Entire essays and books have been written on the subject without asserting any kind of definition or set of criteria (Novak, 2000). Though it could be argued that the term evokes a concept that is so universally familiar that no definition is necessary, in many cases there is actually a reluctance to give any set of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for what would count as social justice education (Johnson, Oppenheim, & Suh, 2009).

This is not to say that social justice education is *never* explicitly defined, as Miller and Engel (2011) offer the following: "Social justice, broadly defined, refers to a condition whereby all people are afforded fair opportunities to enjoy the benefits of society" (quoted in Miller, 2008, p. 821). Hernandez & McKenzie (2010) define social justice as "an interdisciplinary field committed to . . . equality and freedom. Its function is to enhance our understanding of education through a critical examination of the unequal power dynamics in society and offers alternatives to the status quo" (p. 54). However, when one notes the wide variety of working definitions in current use under the broad aegis of social justice education, a grim picture emerges for advocates of social justice education: philosophically, social justice education faces two problems/tendencies that have dire consequences for practice. The first is the tendency to define social justice education too loosely, and thus, fail to advocate anything distinctive. The second tendency is to constrain social justice education within a definition that is too narrow, and in so doing, perpetuate political favoritism towards various special-interest groups.

THE PROBLEM OF A LOOSE DEFINITION

Many social justice theorists seem reluctant to use any sort of normative terminology when describing social justice pedagogy:

> … the more we see people invoking the idea of social justice, the less clear it becomes what people mean, and if it is meaningful at all. When an idea can refer to almost anything, it loses its critical purchase, especially an idea that clearly has such significant political dimensions (Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p. 8).

For this reason, Hytten and Bettez (2011), have attempted to consolidate the vast body of work that represents social justice theory. Though they identify five general strands (philosophical/ conceptual, practical, ethnographic/narrative, theoretically specific, and democratically grounded) they conclude that "there is both confusion and conceptual looseness in the social justice literature"

(p. 10). Indeed, the majority of current theory reports "little consensus on how social justice ought to be defined" (Funge, 2011, p. 74), let alone put into practice (North, 2006; Dewhurst, 2010).

A case study published by Johnson, Oppenheim, and Suh (2009) illustrates this first definitional problem. Johnson, et al. studied five different teachers who sought to bring a strong social justice component into their curriculum. While they took great pains to question each teacher regarding his/her own values, assumptions, and conceptions of social justice, and while they assert that it is "both possible and essential for new educators to enact social justice curricula in their classrooms in a variety of ways" (p. 294), Johnson et al. ironically do not once offer any kind of definition to the term social justice. Though they seek to "argue that all of the disparate forms of social justice curricula that we observed were compelling and vital," they offer no unifying definition to govern them. And yet, having not defined what is meant by social justice in the first place, they "hope to expand the definition of social justice," contending that "a broad and contextually contingent definition of social justice curriculum is one that will best support and encourage burgeoning social justice educators" (p. 294). They advocate that teachers enact a "constellation of curriculum enactments to develop a working vision of social justice teaching in practice" (p. 307) because "it is precisely action and motion that make a definition 'work'" (p. 308). As we shall see a little later, this has clear echoes of the pragmatist philosophies of James and Dewey, where "truth happens to an idea" (James, 2001, p. 213), but whereas neither James nor Dewey denied the existence of an objective and knowable body of truth, today's educational landscape has become quite ambiguous on this score.

To see how such ambiguity is detrimental to the application of a coherent, meaningful practice of social justice, one need look no further than the case study itself. In the same sentence, they cite a teacher who "used poetry to promote nonthreatening dialogue" and an elementary school teacher who "challenged students to consider how everyday choices like buying ice cream at lunch time marginalized classmates" (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 299). This pairing of examples is somewhat ironic, since one could reasonably ask how teaching children to ethically second-guess themselves when they enjoy an ice cream cone being sold on campus in the cafeteria does not constitute an antithesis to "nonthreatening dialogue," and yet, the writers conclude by saying that "the function of a working definition of social justice is not to decide which enactment is more worthy or laudable. Rather, it is to demonstrate that social justice is an active and malleable concept" (p. 309). So malleable, apparently, that these writers would countenance, perhaps even approve of, the ethical interrogation of first graders regarding their ice cream consumption. The fact that the writers of this study could not even raise the question as to the age-appropriateness of the teacher's decision to initiate this discussion is distressing. The title of their article, "Would That Be Social Justice?" is therefore an ironic one, since an attentive reader would expect that there is an explicit, affirmative answer forthcoming, when, in fact, there is not. In the end, it does not seem to matter how and whether or not what these new teachers are teaching actually is socially just, as long as each teacher is doing something that she feels or believes is socially just.

But how can any meaningful concept of social justice flourish in schools if educators find themselves unable to make value judgments between various kinds of actions, or alternatively, able to make any kind of value judgment they wish? If anything, social justice must include the idea of rightness and fairness, but it would be impossible to do so if we do not allow ourselves to judge, reasonably, between courses of action—even between the decisions of well-meaning teachers. In opposition to the anything goes approach to social justice education, Christman (2010) has argued that "developing a critical consciousness still requires continuity and consistency. Too often, developing a critical consciousness in our students is sporadic among their coursework and often depends on who teaches the course" and that "developing a critical consciousness is too important to leave to serendipity" (p. 109). Echoing the language of Derrida and others, Christman (2010) advocates "introducing students to the language of critique and the language of possibility" (p. 107ff).

THE PROBLEM OF A NARROW DEFINITION

Out of the "wide variety of priorities and visions" (Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p. 10), however, such zeal has led many social justice advocates to construct/practice a definition of social justice that is too narrow. Zeichner (2011) asserts that social justice education has focused almost exclusively on the way teachers teach students of color who live in poverty "instead of the goal of preparing all teachers to teach all students" (p. 17). Similarly, many social justice education advocates seem to limit their conception of social justice to a very myopic end of the political spectrum. The example, above, of the elementary school teacher who extended her own conception of social justice to her first-graders' ice cream buying serves as an example here, as well (Goss, 2005). Elsewhere in her

own article, this teacher (who teaches in a poor Chicago neighborhood) admitted to using the movie *A Bug's Life* for what she took to be its clear Marxist undertones (which she apparently favors). Her initiation of the ice cream discussion was to survey her students who had purchased ice cream from the cafeteria and who had not and how those who didn't have any ice cream felt. She especially (even proudly) highlighted the responses of students who thought that it was unfair that some kids could afford to spend 50 cents on ice cream when others could not, and that they should actually stage a boycott in front of the cafeteria. While she paid dutiful regard to those students who thought (against the majority) that they should be free to purchase and enjoy ice cream if they had the means, she reserved her most glowing adjectives for those students who decided they would not buy ice cream anymore, but then added somewhat ruefully that, the next day, many of these children were found enjoying ice cream again anyway, despite their initial resolve.

With this example, we see that the veneer of social justice education can often hide a more radical program. Christman's otherwise irenic and uncontroversial essay just referenced, above itself provides a hint at just how insidious this narrow conception of social justice education is becoming: among her works cited, one finds titles such as *Foundation stones: The construction of gender in early childhood* (Alloway, 1995) and *Rethinking gender in early childhood education* (MacNaughton, 2000). Within social justice education, there is growing advocacy for the "queering" of schools, especially at the elementary level (Letts IV & Sears, 1999), ostensibly to prevent violence against those in the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered community, but laboring on the presumption that (1) it is the job of public education to teach specific sexual ethics; (2) traditional sexual ethics represent an outmoded and bigoted heterosexism; (3) gender is a socially-constructed idea that people are free to define and explore however they choose. Though many practitioners like Christman may (for now) keep the philosophical influence of these voices somewhat muted, there is no denying their influence. As Christman (2010) quotes approvingly from one social justice educator:

> I create a lot of tension on purpose, especially initially. Most of the resistance [to social justice education] seems to come from students who identify as strong Christians. These students have a really hard time with not being homophobic…I think they would like to think we live in a classless society. (p. 119)

Ignoring for a moment the unsubstantiated and undefined use of the word homophobic, as well as the apparent confusion of sexual orientation with social class, what is particularly striking here is how some advocates of social justice education are more blatantly pushing the envelope past questions of fairness and rendering to each his/her due. Rather, the social justice label has been misappropriated as part of an agenda that seeks to uncover and supplant traditional, religiously- informed beliefs about human nature with a more radical ideology, one that would (ironically) demand a suspension of moral judgment in the classroom. That is, it expects traditionalists to forgo moral judgments; imposing its moral judgments (i.e., approval of more radical/loose views of human sexuality) is taken to be a justified, perhaps even necessary component to the education of our youngest and most impressionable youngsters.

In a qualitative study done by Reed and Johnson (2010), one high school administrator's own Christian religious convictions were critically evaluated and correlated to her attitudes towards her lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students. Though her remarkable achievements as an administrator in the promotion of equality within the school were duly noted (and even attributed to her deep religious convictions) she was nevertheless criticized for the limitations that her religious faith put on her capacity to enact social justice for her LGBT students, as shown in the contradiction between her own spiritual beliefs and practices and her ignorance or lack of knowledge concerning the LGBT community. Several examples were given from the principal's beliefs and practices as evidence. For one, she was criticized for her reluctance/refusal to refer to a boy who wanted to be identified as a girl as *she,* even on the grounds she gave, namely, that the boy clearly did not look like a girl, and that his own grandmother (and legal guardian) referred to him by his given name and in masculine terms. This principal was also criticized for personally regarding homosexuality as a sin from a biblical perspective, since she had, after all, decided for herself that the Bible did not really forbid women to wear pants, and so why could not she do the same with passages that allegedly forbid homosexuality? And finally, she was criticized for not having, nor planning to initiate, a Gay-Straight Alliance club on campus (p. 401).

It is a rather disconcerting picture of social justice advocacy where an administrator's religious beliefs become targets for deconstruction by theorists who reason and believe from outside that religious system. For one, the comparison of the question of whether or not the Bible teaches that women may not wear pants to the question of whether or not the Bible teaches that homosexuality is sin would be laughable to any serious theologian or student of the Bible, if it did not come laden with such

aggressive, even threatening, sociopolitical undertones. But secondly, we must not miss the subtle hypocrisy at work here: an educator's beliefs and practices are being judged by those outside her belief-system for (allegedly) judging the beliefs and practices of students who fall outside her belief-system. This case represents a rather crass attempt to deconstruct a woman's religious convictions and re-tool them to suit a political/ ideological agenda. Indeed, it has become a standard practice for social justice advocates to leverage religious ideology and institutions, especially those embedded within the community, not for any intrinsic spiritual wisdom and/or truth that they offer, but simply because "they are highly populated and influential" (Miller & Engel, 2011, p. 29). It would seem that a truly tolerant social justice would want to resist such commandeering of the religious by the secular: treating a community of faith as merely a means to some political end (no matter how noble) is to show disrespect to the inherent value of that religious tradition by failing to accept it on its own terms.

Sadly, this example is neither an aberration nor an accident, and it illustrates well how such narrowly conceived strands of educational philosophy are working themselves out in our schools. As we have seen above, there are profound contradictions within current applications of critical theory that threaten the very essence of social justice: a movement which ostensibly exists to challenge stereotypes itself tends to stereotype those who are white, male, affluent, religious, and/or espouse traditional views of gender, marriage, and family; a movement which prides itself in practicing tolerance for all views actively seeks to suppress voices that challenge the hegemony of left-wing ideology in higher academia; a movement which views morality as a socially-constructed (and therefore, ever-changing and malleable) set of values presumes to impose a universal ethic of cultural and moral relativism onto the public sphere; a movement that seeks to cast aspersions on power structures and utterly deconstruct the idea of authority is often blind to its own imposition of power and willingness to become authoritarian. As Freire (1998), an early advocate of social justice education warned, "Knowing has everything to do with growing. But the knowing of dominant minorities absolutely must not prohibit, must not asphyxiate, must not castrate the growing of the immense dominated majorities" (p. 95). The consequences of this second tendency are, perhaps, the more ironic: in fixating exclusively on the marginalizing of minorities (and sometimes only particular minorities), some social justice education advocates of this stripe perpetuate their own brand of social injustice when they minimize, ignore, or even silence/disparage viewpoints that do not align with their ideology.

THE INFLUENCE OF PRAGMATISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND CRITICAL THEORY ON SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

We must turn now towards a philosophical explanation of these two extremes we have surveyed—both the loose and the narrow. At base, each is rooted in the philosophies of pragmatism, postmodernism, and critical theory, and most fundamentally, the theories of truth they began to espouse and embrace. Within the last century, these three intellectual currents have effectively eroded what was once the more widely held correspondence theory of truth and, in turn, left a theoretical and ethical lacunae that cannot sustain any kind of meaningful theory (or practice) of social justice.

John Dewey is, of course, recognized as one of the chief architects of American public education in the 20th century. His philosophy of pragmatism is rooted in the work of William James. Though unintentionally by both James and Dewey, pragmatism deflated the classical, commonsense notion of truth as that which corresponds to reality and turned it into an activity: truth, as James (2001) put it, "happens to an idea" (p. 213). West (1989) summarizes, "[Dewey] rejects Reality as the ultimate court of appeal in adjudicating between conflicting theories—and subsequently any correspondence theory of truth or realist ontology" (p. 99). Under pragmatism, the traditional, metaphysical notion of truth as an "inert static relation" (James, 2001, p. 212) was supplanted by the idea that truth must be useful if it is to be dignified with the title. But since what is useful begs the questions, "for what?" and "for whom?", this re-conceptualization allowed various intellectual and social movements the liberty to enlist truth in whatever way was advantageous to its own agenda. Thus, pragmatism caused the notion of truth to be relativized and up for grabs.

One such manifestation of this progressive notion of truth was postmodernism, which can be characterized by the conviction that there is no trustworthy, over-arching metanarrative or privileged perspective on the world (Ingraffia, 1995). Groothius (2000) elaborates:

> The postmodernist . . . takes truth to be something other than correspondence with reality. Truth is seen as having no reference outside of language itself; it is reducible to power relationships and other cultural dynamics, and cannot be extricated from conflicting perspectives (p. 271).

Illustrative of this view, and bridging the pragmatism of Dewey with the spirit of postmodernism is Richard Rorty, who has sought in the latter part of the 20th century to revive Dewey's pragmatism (West, 1989). In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he states: "Truth cannot be out there" (Rorty, 1989, p. 5), meaning outside the human mind—only sentences are bearers of truth, and sentences are an invention of human beings.

Since every historian, philosopher, educator, and scientist tends to look at the world through the lens of his or her own experience, culture, beliefs, assumptions, and even, language, postmodernism concludes that there is no common, absolute, reference point we can call "truth." Postmodernism, applied in education as "critical theory," is a deconstructive but equalizing movement in so far as it attempts to lay bare all assumptions, prejudices, and preconceptions, asking the student to become more aware of his or her own bias for the purpose of greater liberation. Since justice is minimally conceived of as fairness (Rawls, 1971), and fairness requires the laying aside of bias, many, like Usher and Edwards (1994), have embraced the postmodern turn as a boon to social justice education. Citing the contribution of Francis Lyotard to postmodern theory and the impetus it gave to social justice education, Usher and Edwards? assert "justice can only be built around the recognition of the variety that exists in language games…" (p. 183). And: "Lyotard's arguments have been used to articulate the need for spaces, including educational spaces for the…little narratives of excluded others (p. 183)". These "localized strategies" are designed, politically, to "provoke questions rather than certainties" and thus, "provide the basis for resistance" (p. 183). As philosopher Gert J. J. Biesta (2001) summarizes, "the relationship between deconstruction, justice, and education is… anything but accidental" (p. 50).

Critical theory also followed the pragmatists' tendency to conflate truth with knowledge—truth is conceived epistemologically as fluid activity, rather than metaphysically as static correspondence-with-reality. Furthermore, critical theory seeks "more questions than certainties" (Usher & Edwards, p. 182), promotes the "democratization of learning" in favor of traditional, "authoritarian" pedagogical models (Freire, 1972), and works to dismantle the social structures that promote inequality and injustice, especially what Foucault (2001) called "regimes of truth" (p. 318). According to Foucault, "'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" and it is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it" (p. 318). Thus, when we encounter a text, a speech, an event, an idea, or a policy, we must deconstruct it by asking what kinds of power struggle it represents. Language about what is and what is not the truth has become regarded by those in the academy with not mere incredulity, but with a kind of moral suspicion as well—that truth-claims are "power-plays" in disguise, designed by those in power to oppress those in some minority/marginalized group, especially under the mechanisms of capitalism. Jurgen Habermaas and Michael Apple, two of the leading educational philosophers/theorists who have promoted social justice education theory, have advocated this view (Morrison, 2001; Torre, 2001).

MINIMAL CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND WHY POSTMODERNISM IS BELIEVED TO SUPPORT IT

In constructing his famous theory of justice, John Rawls (1971) begins with a minimal conception of justice as simply fairness. North (2006) asserts that "all scholars seem to agree on one thing: the liberal belief in citizens as free and equal persons" and that this state of affairs "merits protection" (p. 516). Social justice, then, would seem to require at least three things: (1) fairness/equality of treatment/lack of favoritism; (2) a willingness to hear all sides of the story; and (3) liberation of the oppressed from those who oppress them. Postmodern thought would seem to satisfy these desiderata correspondingly through (1) the rejection of hierarchy and the celebration of equality; (2) an acceptance of local narratives and diverse voices/perspectives as equally valid as more broad, universal, or traditional narratives; and (3) a critique/deconstruction of unequal power structures. And clearly, this seems to encapsulate the application of critical theory into social justice pedagogy, as well. According to Giroux (1991), the postmodern educator's skepticism towards "master-narratives" or the fictitious standard of "universal reason" allows a critique of inequality within the educational system (p. 467). In defense of critical theory as the driving force behind social justice education, North (2006) reflects the postmodern outlook in urging that educators for social justice be both hopeful and "able to accept the impossibility of a utopia free of contradictions and strife," adding that "such a view can help us accept, even desire, the inevitability of contradictions in social life and, in turn, loosen our investments in unproductive orthodoxies and ultimate truths" (p. 526).

However, it seems clear that neither postmodernism nor critical theory can actually sustain a rigorous or even practicable social justice. For one, if truth is not objective, knowable, or communicable, then justice is impossible because justice requires truth telling about the world. We feel righteous indignation when the guilty go free or the innocent are unjustly punished precisely because we know that the truth about what really happened in the world has been suppressed. But in postmodernism, there is a strong

skeptical undercurrent that assumes that there is nothing but biased perspective, and hence, it is irrational to seek any kind of objective truth, let alone justice. As Carr (1998) asserts regarding the impact of postmodern theory on educational philosophy:

…whilst it may well be that the various philosophies of postmodernism contain important insights…it is nevertheless more than likely that these insights have suffered some distortion by association with forms of skepticism about the very possibility of objective knowledge…there can be no doubt that these new forms of skepticism have at least partly contributed to a radical decline of interest in theorizing about knowledge and truth—particularly in relation to questions of learning and pedagogy. (p. xi-xii)

And though they are devotees of postmodernism, Usher and Edwards (1994) acknowledge the tension that exists between postmodern theory and the practice of social justice: "Given the proliferation of language games…it is therefore somewhat problematic that [Lyotard] espouses a particular position as one which could encompass a 'respect for justice'" (p. 184). Wimmer (2001) concurs: ". . .in every single case, the question [of justice] has to be posed anew in its fundamental undecidability. The individual has no choice but to make judgments and decisions without reference to any pre-given criteriology" (153).

A second problem is that social justice seems to require the existence of moral facts, but postmodernism, critical theory, and social justice education have tended to embrace cultural/ ethical relativism. The absence of moral facts leaves a conceptual vacuum in which social justice education would suffocate, as the fight for social justice cannot be satisfied by resistance-for-resistance's-sake— true justice requires an aim and a purpose, namely, a right outcome that is truly righteous. At some point in our quest for justice, questions must cease and certainties must be embraced if we are to pursue an outcome that is truly fair, and not just a reversal of some individual's or group's fortunes. If truth is relative to individual/cultural beliefs/opinions/ practices, then there can be no moral imperative for teachers and students to celebrate diversity, treat others equally, tolerate the expression of minority opinions, or fight injustice—in ourselves, the classroom, society, or in the world at large. While Giroux (1991) laudably urges that "teachers use their authority to establish classroom conditions" where "racist ideologies and practices…can be called into account" and not treated as merely "the expression of individual views or feelings," he cripples his own admonition with the astonishing, self-refuting pronouncement that "this is not a form of authority based on an appeal to universal truths" (p. 484). On the contrary, as Callan (1998) has succinctly noted: "Non-judgmental pluralism is a way of giving up on moral reason" (p. 153).

Against the moral skepticism that characterizes postmodernism, Wiggins (1988) has defended the view we are able to make meaningful moral judgments because "what valuational predicates [e.g., 'just,' 'fair,' 'good,' 'evil'] stand for are properties in the world"; they are "objectively discriminable and can impinge upon practical appreciation and judgment," and thus, "that practical questions sometimes have more than one answer, and that there is not always an ordering of better or worse answers, is no reason to conclude that good and bad answers cannot be argumentatively distinguished" (p. 160).

CORRECTING SOME UNTRUTHS ABOUT TRUTH

To correct our view of social justice, then, we must have a correct view of truth. There is a tendency within secular educational settings—if it defines truth at all—to conceive of truth as an epistemological and/or psychological construct, rather than a metaphysical presupposition. That is, truth is conceived as somehow conditioned by how the knower is situated in the world, how the knower perceives the world, how the knower feels, and/or what the knower believes. But this is an egregious mistake. First of all, truth is an essential component of knowledge, and not the other way around—there are truths that are not yet known, but nothing can be known that is not true. To say otherwise is to conflate knowledge or truth with belief, but there is surely a meaningful distinction between belief (a psychological state) and a true state of affairs. This is because a state of affairs is what it is independently of whatever I believe about it: Caesar was the emperor of Rome, whether I believe it or not; rocks do not magically turn into unicorns just because I believe with all my heart that they do (or should).

Second, truth is logically prior to knowledge. This is because the acquisition of knowledge involves the discovery of something that is already there, waiting to be discovered. If truth were anterior to knowledge, then one should wonder how it would be possible to discover anything, (e.g., that lead is heavier than aluminum or that the Pythagorean Theorem governs all right triangles). This would require one to see truth as something that is constructed or invented. But it is surpassingly strange to encourage students to pursue knowledge if, in fact, there is no body of truth (external to them) that is waiting to be discovered. A proper view of truth drives us outside of ourselves and into the world that is out there.

Here, we might caution in the other direction, as well: in our zeal for truth, we must not confuse truth with certainty, or even certainty with epistemic justification. We can think of many cases (perhaps within our own teaching) when we have felt certain about a belief we took as fact which, upon closer inspection, we discovered to be false. As Freire (1998) wisely admonished, the educator must "avoid being entrenched in the circuit of [her] own truth" by nurturing the virtue of humility (p. 40). We can and certainly should acknowledge our fallibility to our students and colleagues. But we must come back to this point: humility cannot *flourish as a virtue* without presupposing the existence of a theoretical, objective body of truth that is external to and quite independent of one's beliefs about it. The reflective educator cannot content herself with the thought that "well, I have my truth" meaning merely that she has her own belief; rather, she must teach with the conviction that there exists what Francis Schaeffer (1968) often felt the need to distinguish as "True truth." It is the presumption that there is real truth out there—which we can and do encounter with our minds—that points us and our students to something higher and more ultimate than ourselves, making justice possible in both letter and spirit.

Unfortunately, insofar as social justice education theorists and practitioners accept a postmodern view of truth, they should not regard their own quest for social justice as anything more than just another power play. Of course, those within postmodernism and critical theory might see this as logically coherent, perhaps even virtuously self-consistent: critical theory itself ought to play by its own rules and be subject to the language of critique. Foucault (2001) seems to suggest as much when he wrote, "'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" and that it is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it" (p. 318). But such theoretic coherence is meaningless if one does not ultimately believe that the statements generated by one's system are grounded in or refer to anything in objective reality—if social justice is simply a socially constructed notion that is free to evolve with culture, then there would be nothing essentially or inherently unjust about defunding and dismantling what we now label as the entire social justice enterprise and replacing it with authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or even theocracy. Without truth, social justice education would be just another arbitrary authority structure that we impose on others for any reason we choose. So it is not merely power/authority structures that cause oppression and injustice: rather, it is an underlying attitude of intellectual and moral relativism that has justified and perpetuated the oppression of those with unequal power for the sake of utility and expediency. As Os Guinness states (2010), "without truth there is only manipulation" (p. 47).

Fortunately, there is good reason to reject the postmodern attitude that conflates power and authority of any kind (either epistemological or moral) with abuse and oppression. As philosopher Shirley Pendlebury (1998) has asserted: "Authority of some sort is among the enabling conditions for teaching to accomplish its ends and sustain its goods" (pp. 183-184). Even the desire to promote more subjective ends required by a holistic social justice (e.g., the ethics of caring that feminism and by extension, multiculturalism offer) must be grounded in something objective if we can prescribe it as normative. Far from dividing reason from our passions and sentiments, "a strong objectivity requires us to take subjectivity seriously" (p. 186). Ethicist Christina Hoff Sommers (1993) puts it more pointedly:

> How can we hope to equip students to face the challenge of moral responsibility…if we studiously avoid telling them what is right and what is wrong?…To pretend we know nothing about basic decency, about human rights, about vice and virtue, is fatuous or disingenuous. Of course we know that gratuitous cruelty and political repression are wrong, that kindness and political freedom are right and good. Why should we be the first society in history that finds itself hamstrung in the vital task of passing along its moral tradition to the next generation? (p. 178)

SOME CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING TRUTH AND JUSTICE

In light of all this, Christian educators who would teach and practice social justice ought to be on guard against the two definitional problems that have come to characterize much of social justice education today, starting with an affirmation of objective truth. We must resist the kind of moral relativism that is lamented in Judges 21:25, lest we become like Israel when the people merely did "what was right in their own eyes." All too often, we bend truth to suit our own private agenda. Recall Solomon's famous rendering of justice to the two women who were disputing about the baby (I Kings 3:16-28): in a scene blurred by hearsay and emotional tragedy (what could evoke more sympathy than a woman whose infant has been kidnapped, except perhaps a woman whose infant has died tragically!), Solomon's wisdom to administer justice lay in obtaining the truth—that is, which woman's story was the one that corresponded to reality. As the passage concludes, "When all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had handed down,

they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice" (vs. 28). This example should offer encouragement to the Christian educator: while much of American culture is hostile towards the idea of intellectual and moral authority, over and against this decaying postmodern philosophy we must affirm with conviction that there is such a thing as legitimate authority. Otherwise, the pursuit of justice will be ultimately meaningless and ineffectual. In the face of conflicting narratives, a postmodern Solomon would be forced to split the baby after all.

On the contrary, this narrative teaches us that, while determining what is true (and therefore just) is often difficult, it is not impossible when we seek the LORD as the giver of wisdom just as Solomon did. Christian educators must heed the wisdom of Solomon: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). And though we may be tempted to see Solomon as a special case of God's visitation and empowering, we too are invited to seek wisdom, as James admonishes with a promise to be appropriated in faith: "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (3:5). Christians stand on God's Word as their moral authority, and it gives solid, wise, objective truth as we seek to emulate God's just character. It is for this reason that Jesus invoked our Father: "Sanctify them in truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

By following the truth of God's Word as our ultimate guide for what actually constitutes justice, we will also avoid the opposite peril of practicing a justice that is too narrow/exclusive. As Leviticus 19:15 commands: "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people." Social psychology confirms that we are more easily persuaded to throw our support/allegiance towards those whom we perceive to be most like us—the liking of others is, in a sense, a manifestation of self-approval (Cialdini, 2007)—but the Bible gives clear and frequent warnings against favoritism of any kind: whether it is a bias towards the rich because of the status, power, and influence their wealth affords them, or whether it is a bias towards the poor because of the pathos that poverty evokes. America today suffers both tendencies: on the one hand, the cultural mainstream broadcasts and embraces a conspicuous materialism/consumerism, and it is clear that wealth and power hold undue sway both in law and in the court of public opinion. On the other hand, there is also the tendency to regard poverty (or even economic inequality) as social injustice simpliciter, and as this latter misconception has become a dominant theme in the more narrow strands of social justice education, a few further remarks are in order. There are many reasons for this. One is the undeniable influence of Marxism on the critical theory that gave birth to social justice education. Rawls (1971) has also helped validate the idea that justice warrants a state-imposed redistribution of wealth. And finally, the field of education in general leans towards the progressive end of the political spectrum, and though a considerable percentage of educators are politically conservative, the most politically dominant organizations that represent teachers (like the NEA) unilaterally endorse and fund the politics of the left.

First of all, this idea misappropriates the word justice because it contradicts the biblical injunction to render justice independently of a person's economic (and by extension, social) status. It also seems to rest on at least two questionable assumptions: (1) that economic inequality is always the result of oppression, and that therefore (2) justice requires an equality of result, rather than opportunity. While the reigning paradigm among social justice advocates is to view economic inequalities as the result of a wider context of unequal and oppressive social and economic structures that are often beyond the control of the oppressed (North, 2006), the Christian views such phenomena (alternatively or additionally) through a theological context: while Christians believe that both material prosperity and poverty is, ultimately, under God's control, this conviction should not engender a fatalistic attitude, as there are clear scriptural injunctions to Christians to work towards the easing of poverty and suffering (Leviticus 25:35; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Isaiah 58:6-7; Zechariah 7:10; James 1:27). And while it is true that economic prosperity/poverty can be the result of individual and/or corporate lawlessness, from a biblical perspective, neither economic inequality nor poverty is in itself a moral evil, any more than the capacity to earn/retain material prosperity is, in and of itself, a moral virtue. Indeed, the Bible (as well as common sense) presumes that varying levels of economic prosperity may be the result of factors that are under the control of the individual, e.g., willingness to work, in which case poverty may often be a natural consequence to the moral vice of sloth, rather than material injustice (Proverbs 6:6; 13:4; 20:4; II Thessalonians 3:10).

But finally, we should note that the injunction in Leviticus 19 is followed closely with the command not to slander those in the community: that is, we must not spread untruths about others in order to ruin their reputation and thereby gain an advantage for our own agenda. Telling the truth about one's neighbors within the community at large is essential to justice, and unfortunately, the

political landscape in the United States, from left to right, is awash in slander, often designed to pit one special interest group against another. Christian educators must resist getting swept into the kind of political mudslinging that characterizes our discourse about important issues, and we must help our students discern truth from error in all forms of public communication.

The book of James asks, "Why are there fights and quarrels among you?" and immediately gives the theological answer: "from lust and envy" (4:1). At the root of all injustice is the sin that resides in the human heart and tempts us to pursue more than our fair share of good out of selfish desire—the unjust person is what Aristotle calls an "overreacher" (Book V, Ch. I, 9; p. 68). In this way, the poor are just as susceptible to the sin of envy and greed as the rich, and many politicians exploit this human sin to their advantage by fomenting an envious hatred and slander of the greedy rich among the poor and middle class. Likewise, identity politics often trades on the insular, myopic interests of minority or special-interest groups in a way that engenders, rather than eliminates, an us-versus-them mentality. Neither end of the political spectrum is immune from criticism here: injustice persists in the United States and in the world at large because all of us tend to view our own interests as of primary importance. In so doing, we blind ourselves to what is true about our situation, and this self-blinding knows no racial, cultural, religious, socioeconomic, sexual, or physical barriers.

Throughout my time of researching and writing this paper, the United States has continued to watch the unfolding of the case involving the tragic shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in a Florida suburb in February 2012. What began months ago as a firestorm of outrage from a public that was led to believe the incident was a case of unmitigated and unprovoked stalking and racial-profiling of a black teenager has now cooled to reflect a new public-majority opinion that Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, shot Martin in self-defense. My point in relating this tragic story is not to take sides. Rather, it is to illustrate how easily we take sides on questions of social justice before all of the facts come to light. It is clear through the media coverage of this story that many special interest groups sought to use this tragedy merely to promote their own agendas on various issues, ranging from racism to gun rights. Often, we are quick to cry "injustice!" on behalf of ourselves or the group with which we would like to identify, only to admit later that no injustice has actually occurred, and so it is clear that there is a difference between feeling wronged and actually being wronged.

Ten Elshof (2009) identifies several epistemic mechanisms/psychological strategies by which we typically (and quite effectively) suppress our knowledge of truth and thereby deceive ourselves: attention-management, procrastination, perspective switching, rationalization, resentment, and groupthink. While a full treatment of each of these phenomena falls beyond the scope of this present paper, I believe they bear further study and application to our discussion here: no doubt they describe in finer detail the means by which the human heart not only perverts justice, but also justifies doing so. In brief: we must be on guard against self-deception (willfully blinding ourselves to truths we know and/or find uncomfortable) and groupthink (allowing others to help us avoid truth/reason and thereby excuse ourselves, ethically) when it comes to advocating for and teaching about social justice.

Clearly then, Christians should not accept the notion that social justice education is a panacea to all society's injustices. Neither can we accept Rousseau's idea that man is basically good and it is only society that corrupts him (1762) nor Plato's idea that we fail to choose "the Good" out of mere ignorance (c380 BX). The optimism of these philosophers towards human nature has fostered a high view of formalized education, an optimism that is shared by many educators today and drives much of social justice education. But the Christian educator should be wary of seeing social justice education alone as ultimately transformative, either here in the United States or anywhere else in the world. We must take seriously the fact that the unregenerate mind has a tendency to twist whatever it is taught for its own selfish ends. Sin—both by our inheritance and by our own initiative—corrupts even our best intentions. In the end, we face a rather interesting prospect: social justice education offers the possibility of bringing the ideas of sin and evil back to the level of social consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Despite the grim picture painted here, I believe the Christian educator emerges with a unique hope. It is only through a consciousness of our total inability—on our own—to act justly in the world that we begin to understand our deepest needs (Romans 3:20), and if the problem *is* ourselves, then the solution must be beyond ourselves. Writing at a time when social justice education was still a relatively new movement, Catholic scholar/theologian Russell Butkus (1983) offered Christian educators this vision:

Like Freire's pedagogy, education for justice must be utopian in nature. That is, we must be empowered by our vision of the Kingdom of God. If doing justice is going to be perceived as "good news," then it must be proclaimed in relation to the "good news" of God's reign. Hope can be great motivation. As Christians it is the hope of God's Kingdom that infuses our lives with meaning and purpose. It is that hope that is truly realizable when we hunger for, work for, and educate for justice. (p. 155)

Social justice, education, and Christianity are all characterized by the hope of something better. I believe the word for this something better is *grace,* a concept that we in the United States, often confuse with justice because of our pernicious attitude of entitlement. We think God, or society as a whole, owes us something. Nothing could be further from the truth. Justice only demands that we get what we deserve—that which we have by right. Grace and mercy extend to us what we do not deserve, but what we do in fact need, given our depraved condition. And in turn, we seek to promote grace, mercy, and justice to those who most need it because of what Christ has done for us in laying down his own life on our behalf, "the just for the unjust" (I Peter 3:18). In this way, we who have been justified in Christ ought to lay down our own lives for the students we serve.

As a Christian educator teaching literature and philosophy in a public high school, I walk a tenuous line: I want my students to learn to think truthfully, critically, objectively, and justly. I want to inspire them to be more kind, generous, patient, peaceful, honest, and virtuous citizens. But I also know—because both my theology and my experience tell me—that the intellectual tools I am giving my students will not be used in a neutral fashion. In the end, they will either use the tools of logic, critical thinking, literary analysis, and philosophy to construct, defend, and live out a worldview in which truth and justice reign, or a worldview characterized by falsehood and injustice. In our instruction, in our educational policies, and in ourselves, we must acknowledge and be wary of our penchant for truth-suppression. In the interest of securing justice for all people, we should help our students become more sensitive to this human tendency and instead become truth-tellers. But we must begin with ourselves. As it says in Psalm 51:6: "Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom."

May we desire truth, and may we know justice in our time.

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