

Steps to the Futures

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I want to tell some stories of ends and transformations in the relation of the past to the future. These stories have implications for education and enlightenment. They are stories in which modernity is seen as an end and a beginning. Modernity is the end of tradition, or oppression, or superstition, or other restrictive conditions. It is the beginning of true self-consciousness and rational human history. But there are also stories about an end of modernity. There are stories about postmodernity. These ends don't depend on talk of the millenium, nor are they apocalyptic or cultic, but they do suggest that we live in a time of transition.

In this conference we have heard about cyclic and linear patterns of time. I would like to discuss a different pattern, one which is distinctively modern. This pattern involves a decisive break, a break that cuts history into two phases. In this way of encountering history, the move from traditional to modern society and consciousness is seen as unsurpassable. Any move back to the premodern would be a degeneration, or a regression.

There is an obvious objection to what I will be saying about modernity as a special age that follows upon a break in history. Doesn't every age think of itself as special and unique? As a matter of fact, no. There are many ages, many ways of looking at history and that tell a story about their current age as nothing special, uniform and average.

Such stories are not modern, but in history they are probably more common. For example, Plato and Aristotle offer pictures of the world and history in which on average nothing ever changes very much. Individual people and individual cities might have their childhood, adulthood, and decline, but history as a whole is not going anywhere. Nature too remains on average the same. The world is goverened by unchanging patterns built into nature. We should get to know those non-historical essences of things. Education aims at learning how to find guidance from those essential patterns of human nature and society. There are no universal or ultimate beginnings or endings or transitions; there are only universal natures and local stories.

For instance, Aristotle in his *Politics* analyzes various forms of constitutions that can be operative in city-states. He judges some of these forms to be better than others. He discusses the transitions when the different forms of government change into each other. He argues that some forms are better than others. But he never suggests that there

is any overall history or pattern to these transitions, that progress toward better forms is anything but a local event, later to be undone by other transitions. Education in politics will teach us to strive for the better forms and to try and preserve them. But there is not any historical tide moving in that direction. This is not a cyclic view but it does share with cyclic views the feeling that history and nature stay on average more or less the same at all times.

Another kind of story that gives no special role to the present would be found in Buddhism and Hinduism, and analogous non-semitic religious movements. The historical Buddha is not envisioned as a unique figure, but as one in a long line of enlightened beings who deliver and redeliver the true liberating insights. There is a privileged knowledge which is accessible from anywhere and anywhen. We might picture this knowledge as floating above history, available when people erect the appropriate ladders that enable them to reach the higher knowledge. Those ladders can be planted anywhere. Though some contingent historical circumstances may be more favorable to building or finding those ladders, there is no large-scale story to be told about history in relation to that knowledge, except perhaps the cyclic story of decline: the knowledge is delivered, gradually lost, then redelivered. There is indeed a "break" in people's personal lives: the time of enlightenment. But this does not translate into a decisive break in the historical sequence of cities and nations. Nor is there any end to the story, except on the personal level, when one finally escapes samsara and the cycle of rebirth. The story combines an overall cyclic view of nature and human society with a more linear view of the individual's personal trajectory, which is superficially cyclic through its reincarnations, but whose line ultimately ascends to the break of enlightenment and release.

In such a story education is the planting or finding of that ladder to the ahistorical truth. This process of seeking the truth is itself a new way of living and a new direction for personal development.

I suspect that many people in the west envision the relation of natural science to human history as something like this model of a heaven of truth to which we build ladders out of contingent circumstances.

There are other kinds of non-modern stories we could consider, such as the Confucian privileging of the past as an exemplar for the present. But I want to turn to more specifically modern forms of relating past, present, and future. These are stories that awarded a special privilege to our time. Of course, "our time" is defined somewhat

broadly. In some of these stories modern times begin with the Reformation, and the scientific revolution, and the religious wars. Modernity then grows more complete with the French and American revolutions and the economic and industrial changes of the nineteenth century. In other stories true modernity might be envisioned as a late nineteenth and twentieth century phenomenon. No matter how it is located, modernity is conceived as qualitatively different from earlier ages. It is not different as, say, the Roman Empire was different from the medieval period. It is not just another historical period; it is a new kind of historical period. It is so different that any loss of modernity's distinctive features would be a regression or a degeneration, not just a change. This is a strong claim, and we need to understand what it implies and how it might be supported, as well as what tensions and dilemmas it might lead us into.

There are many competing theories and stories about modernity, but most of them share the view that modernity's distinctive character comes from its new modes of social and individual self-awareness, connected to new modes of institutional life. Both the self-awareness and the institutions involve reflectivity, openness, and an emphasis on form over content. The stories also speak of a decisive widening of the sphere of possibilities open to individuals and to society. This involves not just more possibilities but new kinds of possibilities, especially possibilities for self-creation on the individual and social level.

The most famous (and these days the most attacked) of these stories is the Enlightenment view that we see in figures such as Voltaire and Hume. According to this story humankind wandered for ages in superstition and ignorance, and then in a relatively short period has made the great ascent from darkness to light. Now our eyes are opened to nature's laws; now we understand the principles of human nature and a liberal society. Now is the end of our aimless subjection to tyrannical superstition and idols, and the rule of tyrannical kings and scheming priests. Our prehistory is over; now our real history begins, when we can direct our lives self-consciously with our eye on the patterns available in nature. Critical intellect and science will make real progress possible.

The exact details and arguments for such an "Enlightenment view" are much debated today, but all agree that they include a firm confidence in reason, a secular basis for morality and society, a theory of universal rights together with a strong conception of rational individuality. In this story the role of education is to bring people into that light of nature, bringing them from childish subjection to dreams and idols into the light of nature's law, making them rational and critical and, capable of living in a society that is

self-directed and self-critical.

In the standard Enlightenment story, the ages that came before modernity do not themselves line up in any significant historical narrative. During those ages, we humans wandered in all directions, led by this or that error or superstition or king. Finally we found the step that would lift us out of the prior blindness. Now we have gotten ourselves together and our self-awareness of our new position makes a decisive difference.

There is a more recent family of stories about modernity that see more structure in premodern history. They agree that ours is an age that has achieved a decisive self-consciousness about human nature and society, and a new level of critical thinking. But they also see a long period of preparation, a long sequence of steps leading to the present. Earlier ages in history are preparation and growth toward modernity, not just error. In different stories of this type those preparatory steps toward modernity might be technological, or intellectual, or religious, or institutional, or all of these together. In these stories, education will be the process of urging people up those steps. We must come to see where we are and who we are, and see how we have achieved our self-consciousness. In fact, seeing who we are and seeing how we have achieved that self-consciousness are the same endeavor, because to be modern, to be who we are, is to be those who can understand the structure of human nature well enough to tell that story about the past.

These more historically detailed stories of modernity describe the present time as the culmination of a long process of development. Our form of life actualizes and fulfills possibilities that were inherent from the beginning and that were gradually asserting themselves. We now have the retrospective vision that enables us to tell the story of that development. Part of what it means to be at the end of the development is that we now can understand that there was a development. We can know the story. We have become self-conscious about the story and we can now understand the "motor" of that development.

There are many versions of these more historically detailed stories of modernity. The historical progression varies, depending on what the story takes to be the "motor" of development. There are Hegelian stories about how the human spirit has come to know the pattern and movement of its own action and development, and to live with institutions that embody all the aspects of that movement. There are Marxist stories about how the human community has finally understood the patterns of production

and distribution and how to make labor productive and unalienated, and so is at last on the way to creating free institutions. There are stories common to many of the social sciences, telling how we have gradually come to be and to create a self-conscious society that studies its own laws and its own development and measures them by the criteria of efficiency and maximization. In all these stories there is a historical development that has some inevitability about it. We now are able understand the law of that development. Because we have arrived at that understanding we can now take our development into our own hands.

This kind of modern story has been compared with the Jewish and Christian "history of salvation" that describes God's plan working throughout history and its culmination in a revelation of God's design at the end of history. But the modernist story does not require a prior plan made by a prior designer; it describes history as the working out of a goal implicit in human nature -- because human nature is precisely the process toward its own self-consciousness and self-dynamic self-creation in history. In this sense these stories are quite different from the religious histories that put the planner outside the story.

The modernist stories affirm that the modern ideas, modern art, and modern political and social structures all fulfill deep potentialities and in doing so they bring humankind to a newer and fuller actualization. Or, said differently, now humankind has gotten itself together enough, with its self-knowledge complete enough and its social arrangements adequate enough to actualize itself in a new self-conscious history. This completion leaves possibilities open for individual and group action on lower levels of generality, but the modern structures themselves offer a particular institutional and intellectual form of life.

Usually this story suggests that while our institutions may not be perfect, they do embody certain basic patterns that cannot be lost without that change being a degeneration and a step backward. For Hegel those patterns are a version of the liberal, capitalist state; for Marx they involve a revolution which will put us in a position where labor and human creativity become truly free. For recent proclaimers of the end of history, such as Francis Fukuyama, the decisive structures are representative democracy and capitalism. (See a 1989 pair of articles by Francis Fukuyama in Nation's Interest.)

In all such these stories, education has the task of helping students learn where we are, sensing the difference that makes us unique, appreciating the story and moving along it, achieving its self-consciousness and accepting its results as justified.

These modern stories that see our time as the result of a long-development generally praise the development, but such stories can also be told in less optimistic terms. We find such stories in Heidegger and in some of his descendants. For them, our age does bring to a completion the long trajectory of western metaphysical culture. We are indeed the culmination of a long process. Our age has indeed achieved a finality within the decisive structures of modern self-conscious processes. But that finality is experienced as a prison rather than as a liberation. There will be nothing new. Henceforth, what develops will be more of the same, remaining within a now closed and exhausted range of possibilities.

Heidegger calls this final age the age of technology. By that he means not that we use lots of machines, but that we view everything as material for manipulation. Nature is just stuff for use. Even ourselves are just as material for manipulation, "human resources" to be maximized for efficiency or replanned by biotechnology. Most frightening of all, this manipulation has no goal or purpose except its own ever ascending efficiency and smoothness. Nature and self have no depth, pointless power is all; meaning and human richness disappear, and are replaced by manufactured substitutes.

Another prophet of a pessimistic modernism is the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who argues that we have come into a time when reality is being exchanged for simulacra. More and more we are caught in the flow of signs and images and ultimately meaningless items whose only function is to be exchanged for more items. Imitations take the place of originals and no longer need to refer to them. Instead of persons that stand on their own, we become empty way stations in a great circulation; we are nodes on a net that receive and pass on tokens of a reality that we can no longer touch. There is also Michel Foucault, for whom our time is dominated by the extension of power into all the details of our bodies and our lives. Neither Baudrillard nor Foucault tell a story of continuous development into the modern condition, but their characterizations of the modern world share the pessimism found in Heidegger and see our future as circumscribed within a narrow range of possibilities, unless some unpredictable radical break could put us into a new story.

Both the pessimistic and the optimistic stories about our age see one unique feature of our time as the unblocking of circulation. Much of what makes our time unique is that historical developments have removed barriers that restricted the movement of something whose flow creates society and shapes the landscape of our lives. What it is

that thus flows depends on the particular story -- in most of these stories what flows is some combination of self-affirmation, social recognition, financial capital, technology and information, or power.

This unblocking can be celebrated optimistically; in the enlightenment thinkers it is our reason and technical prowess that are now free to circulate and grow, no longer blocked by superstition or by jealous kings and priests. In Marx old restrictions are being removed that have blocked the circulation of communal self-affirmation and resources.¹ In Hans Blumenberg's theory of modernity is our self-affirmation that is now free and unburdened. In Habermas it is our dialog with one another that no longer is burdened by the presupposition that given social arrangements are natural and unchanging, so we have entered the era of free communal will and culture formation. For many of these optimistic authors the unblocking has been decisive, but it is far from complete; our task is to finish removing the hindrances to the flow.

The unblocking of circulation can also be thought in a bleaker way. For Heidegger, we are caught in the circulation of the will and power. Our final epoch of metaphysics has no one special institutional form, but all the possibilities open to us maximize the sweep of a circulation that makes us and our institutions its way-stations as it undercuts all resistance to the movement of usage and manipulation. In Baudrillard the circulation of capital and simulacra becomes free and open yet it prisons us within its world of unreal surfaces. Foucault sees the circulation and the reach of micropower ever more extensive and unstoppable.

These more pessimistic stories see the modern unblocking of circulation as a threat, not a liberation. Facing this threat, they offer modernist solutions. Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari hope for another, still deeper unblocking of the body and desire. Heidegger hopes for yet more self-consciousness; he hopes for us to realize how we are caught up in this circulation, and understand how we contribute to its manifestation, and so realize that we are not totally defined by it. Only Baudrillard turns away from

¹ . Unlike Hegel, Marx does not describe the structure of the final society in any detail; the future self-determining community should establish its own structures. Such communal voluntarism is anti-Hegelian. Habermas could also be seen as discussing the unblocking of circulation. While he doesn't believe that this is the end of history, he does share the view that in our age it is possible to remove barriers to fuller communal will-formation and self-determination. He differs from the earlier views of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin, for whom history has become at least stalled, if not ended, in our protean system of domination.

modernity by urging a stone-like resistance to the circulation.

In all these cases, education can be seen as helping people to understand and realize what openness is possible, and enabling them to act upon that understanding, optimistically or pessimistically. In the optimistic stories education leads to actions that further the circulation, usually by political action or political acceptance. In the pessimistic story, education leads to resisting the circulation, often again by political action or social change, if that is possible. In deeply pessimistic stories such as Heidegger's or Baudrillard's education might lead to watchful withdrawal.

All these stories of a history leading up to modern times have talked about immanent patterns or teleologies, but there is another kind of story, where a sudden ending or an unexpected meaning breaks in from outside history and alters what seemed the natural course of events. This sudden break-in could however be the revelation of a secret story or secret intention that was working all along. This would be an uncovering; in Greek: an apocalypse. The wholly other, the outside, turns out to have been involved all along, but we could not know until now when it has been vouchsafed for us to receive an understanding we could not attain on our own. Such apocalyptic stories are anti-modern because our self-consciousness does not develop within ourselves, but as a gift from the other. Apocalyptic literature was highly developed during the Jewish persecutions just before the beginning of the Common Era. It reappears from time to time and is doing so today, not just in its Christian and Jewish forms, but in stories of space aliens or other hidden forces. In such stories now is a special time, but not because of any immanent development. Rather now is a time knowable by signs and portents (religious or secular), a time when other forces will break the seeming continuity of history. In such stories education must be the imparting of the secret, learning to read the signs of the times and act accordingly, with confidence in the secret meaning of a bad situation.

The stories about the special nature of modern times all include tasks for education. Their visions for education all involve more than just delivering information. Modern education is to give people a new way to relate to their possibilities for action. One of the major advantages most stories claim for the modern age is that it increases human freedom. Modernity widens the field of human possibility, because it removes the constraints of narrow beliefs and superstitions, or because it lets us understand our true nature, or because it helps us see where our development has been heading. But there is a question here that we have to pose. Is modern education supposed to help people to discern and accept an already established wider field of modern possibilities, so that

they can roam free within the enlarged boundaries provided by its procedural institutions? Or is modern education about encouraging people to change the possibilities they face, forever enlarging the field, inventing new institutions? Is modern education about enlightened acceptance or is it about the active creation of the new? Is modernity a wonderful large new house educators lead people into? Or is it a process of construction educators try to get people to join? Some of the rhetoric about education suggests that modern political structures and values and cultural trends are there waiting to be joined; people just need to accept certain fundamental modern values and institutions. Other rhetoric stresses the active creation of new possibilities and new institutions and new values. Are we living in a period that has achieved a relatively fixed structure of modern possibility for life, or is it our task to foment permanent revolution?

If we look at those stories that want to move beyond modernity, those postmodern stories stress the second option of constant creativity, even if only as a kind of cynical resistance to modern institutions and values the postmodern stories find confining even in their formal openness.

Do we have to choose acceptance or creativity? One obvious way to avoid this choice would be to distinguish levels, and say that a general acceptance of modern institutions and values creates a framework within which we can have creative novelty in more particular matters. For instance, we might say that the institutions and values of modern art, once accepted, lead the artist to create new styles and innovations. The same might be true for modern politics or education itself.

But that split-level model is too simplistic. The institutions of modern art -- the museum, the art critic, the gallery system, the art schools, the tradition of continual novelty, the idea of the artistic genius -- are themselves unstable, self-critical, always splintering, always being reinvented, redefined. Museums, for instance, have greatly changed their nature in the past few decades. There is no level of accepted general principles and institutions in the current art world, except perhaps the value of artistic freedom and self-awareness, but these bring with them no clear prescriptions for an agreed-upon institutional framework for artistic productivity.

The same might be said for other areas of modern life. If there is general agreement it seems to be on the value of seeking greater freedom and self-awareness, but no very detailed institutional framework arises from these, although Americans often confuse these general values with the specifically American ways of embodying them. In the

name of those general values there may be no agreement about how to live those values. Should we then worry that education into modern values may lead to a splintering of the consensus that makes modern society possible? What is modern education trying to accomplish?

Part of what makes this question of acceptance versus creativity seem odd is that one alternative asks us to conceive of education as an ordinary process leading to accepting accepted fixed framework, whereas the other suggests that education is a special drama directed against "business as usual." Many debates about education today involve this split. One side wants us to bring people to inhabit the space of modern possibilities and to accept the modern self. The other wants us to teach people to enlarge that space and change its contours by new technology, new institutions, new artistic movements. Their job is not to be modern selves but to remake the modern self.

As I said, we can try to escape the tension by making a distinction of levels: what gets accepted are very general principles, while the details should be constantly recreated. The problem is that the very general principles themselves keep getting redefined through the detailed changes. In the end, what needs to be preserved is not a set of fixed principles but a special self-awareness of the distinctive process of modernity.

What is that process? Descriptions vary, of course, in the different stories of modernity and postmodernity. But I venture to suggest one feature that should be common. We and tradition live together; we are formed by our birth into a world we did not create, and we are constantly weaving and reweaving our traditions and our meanings. Education should bring people to take up the task of that reweaving. This doesn't mean that they must create new spaces of possibility, but whether they know it or not they will be mutating that space.

Some stories about modernity exaggerate the fixity of the past traditions. There is no way a tradition can be preserved unchanged. Traditions exist by being reinterpreted. Meaning and value are passed along and are constantly reread, reinterpreted in new contexts. Traditions are not inert stones passed from one person to another; they are patterns of habit and event and language and action. Those patterns are maintained by being constantly reaffirmed in new contexts. Oral cultures usually claim that they are passing down unaltered values and ways of life, but anthropological research has shown that oral traditions can change rapidly while maintaining the appearance of fixity, since their descriptions of the past get respoken. Writing and print give meanings and ways of life a more solid base, but even there change happens. Think of the many

ways in which the Christian Bible has been read and reread over the centuries. There are many continuities provided by the text, and certain core affirmations, but as the intellectual and historical context has changed the core affirmations get reread, so that even those who insist on literal interpretation of the Bible are not reading it the same way as earlier literal interpreters. Sometimes these changes are hidden by apparent continuities of language; often the changes are not radical, but changes there always are. Consciously or not, self-consciously or not, traditions change. That's how they endure.

Stories about modernity have rightly pointed to something unique about modern times. Modernity is good at self-awareness of its own processes. Such self-consciousness is not absolutely new; throughout history you can find individuals, artists and seers, who show something like a modern awareness of the process of knowing and changing traditions. But what is new, what is modern, is that such self-awareness has been institutionalized. We have ways of living and being together that are explicitly structured around such self-awareness and work to inculcate it and make it real. Modern education is one of those institutions.

Throughout this essay I have been stressing the form of the stories I have touched upon. I have tried to talk about how they relate the past to the present and the future. Just now I have spoken about the form of the process by which traditions hand themselves along. In doing this I have been exercising modern self-awareness: being aware of the form of the process through which we become ourselves and keep ourselves in history.

That modern self-awareness can make us feel very isolated, above all content of symbols and ways of life. But that isolation is to a large extent due to insufficient self-awareness of what it means to be in time, in tradition. Is education to be a self-creation that rises above content and gets to the high, perhaps ironic, point of view from which all historical content is seen as contingent and passing in contrast to the permanent truth of the process itself? Or is education making students aware of their rootedness in the content of a tradition while also bringing them to understand that the tradition lives through its process of change and reinterpretation? Clearly I favor the second alternative, but I want to argue that the alternatives are not so distinct or opposed. There is no pure self-making. We are all born somewhere. We speak a native language that we were taught. We have historical roots that we did not choose and that we cannot will away. On the other hand, we are not totally determined by those roots. Not that we can just say goodbye to them, as in the American dream of starting a new Edenic world from scratch -- either by emigrating from old Europe -- but they brought European ideals and ways of life with them -- or by that individual emigration, the "I'm outta

here" that Americans fantasize so readily and try too often to enact.

Despite our fantasies, we are not caught inside an unchanging tradition. We are in the middle, making and made. Despite the modern stories, there is no escape from history. Nonetheless, we are modern; we are in a new situation: we are self-aware of the process of our being-in-tradition and of our being-in-history, self-aware of that process in a new and institutionalized way. There is no going back from that self-awareness. There is no going back from the task of an education that increases and balances our participation in that process.