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To cite this article: Iddo Landau (2018) After postmodernism: meaning of life and education, Educational Philosophy and Theory, 50:14, 1552-1553, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2018.1461389](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1461389)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1461389>



Published online: 25 Nov 2018.



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After postmodernism: meaning of life and education

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The decline of postmodernism does not result only from changes in intellectual fashion (indeed, if this were the whole explanation it would say something quite bad about intellectuals). Following Viktor Frankl's claim that people have an inherent urge for meaningfulness in life, I suggest that another part of the explanation is that postmodernism challenged much of what many associate with meaningfulness (Frankl, 1985). Meaningfulness has to do with experiencing some aspects of one's life as of high *value*. But postmodernism destabilizes much of what is often taken to be of value. It is highly critical, more so than many others movements. Its criticism is pervasive; it is difficult to find anything we commonly do and think that postmodernism does not criticize and present as less valuable than commonly considered. The postmodernist critique also goes deeper than many others; it criticizes not the superficial but rather the essential aspects of its subject matter (including the very notions of *essence* and of *distinction* that I just employed). Finally, the postmodernist critique is harsh; it presents the criticized not as acceptable yet slightly problematic but, rather, as requiring thorough transformation.

Further, the postmodernist critique targets and undermines much of what many see as meaningful. Many understand meaningfulness as having to do with coherence; stability; an integrated self; progressing linearly toward a goal; dependability; seriousness; and connecting with what is 'true' or 'real.' But postmodernism destabilizes coherence; presents a fragmentary self; rejects linearity; questions what is considered dependable; celebrates playful irony and self-irony; rejects traditional notions of truth; and sees reality as intertwined with texts. A person who experiences life as meaningless would typically not find solace in postmodernism. Hence, it may also be inadvisable to educate high-school students – going through their tortured, confused, and fragmented teenaged years – to immerse themselves in postmodernism.

Admittedly, although highly critical and self-critical, postmodernism also espouses some notions as valuable. Some people – even if a minority, almost exclusively composed of sophisticated, clever, and cultured intellectuals – do find meaningfulness in postmodernist activity. Nevertheless, for most, postmodernism has been too radical and too difficult to comprehend.

As far as meaningfulness is concerned, post-postmodernism may improve on postmodernism. I agree with Edward Doxc that postmodernism will continue to have an effect in the future, but that the effect will be moderated and mixed with the effects of other movements (Doxc, 2011). I foresee this as a good development in discussions related to meaningfulness. When moderated and mixed with other positions, what postmodernism has to offer to meaningfulness in terms of, e.g. playfulness, irony, and pluralism, will become more palatable and accessible. And traditional meaning of life discourse will become more flexible and pluralistic. One can already see movement in this direction in Schmidt's discussion of the meanings (in plural) of life, the popularity of Nagel's suggestion that we cope with the absurd by adopting an ironical stance, and Suzan Wolf's non-perfectionism (Schmidt, 2001; Nagel, 1971; Wolf, 1997). Moderated in this way, post-postmodernist discourse may well be a very helpful element in the educational system as well as in life in general.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Iddo Landau is a professor of Philosophy at the University of Haifa, Israel. He has published extensively on the meaning of life. His most recent publication is *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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