



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on February 20, 2017

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Death by Education

Instead of teaching lessons based on the tried and true — the results of thousands of years of trial and error — schools adhere to the latest whims and fads, damaging youth.

“You must never let schooling interfere with education,” warned 19th-century novelist Grant Allen. Since then, the interference has become profound enough that we could wonder if no formal education is preferable to today’s miseducation. An uninformed person desiring your good health may not treat you; the misinformed physician will mistreat you. In fact, he will violate the Hippocratic Oath with passion, inspired by the conviction that he’s answering a high calling.



By the November 2020 election, approximately 10 million Americans will have died; mostly older, they’re a demographic that generally votes for conservatives. They will be perhaps more than replaced, though, by approximately 16 million young people who will turn 18 between now and then. Yet these new voters won’t fill their elders’ shoes: They’ll disproportionately cast ballots for hardcore statists, perhaps being the most “liberal” group of 18-year-olds in American history.

While much of their malformation is due to popular culture and poor parenting, another factor is something Abraham Lincoln addressed when saying, “The philosophy of the classroom today will be the philosophy of government tomorrow.” Many think of education as being just about the three r’s, which today, lamentably, have become racism, relativism, and revisionism. Yet whatever form the r’s take, education could never be limited to them — man’s nature precludes that.

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As philosopher G.K. Chesterton put it, “In truth, there are only two kinds of people; those who accept dogma and know it, and those who accept dogma and don’t know it.” Man is a creature who *believes* — things. He is a moral being in the sense that, whether he’s an absolutist or relativist, he will adopt certain moral positions as his own. And when they are important enough to him, he will express them, often passionately, and may even try to impose them.

Of course, we all know those lukewarm types who, for their principles, wouldn’t fall on a sword if it were made by Nerf. Yet they’re the benchwarmers. The passionate carry the day even if they be few; they shape social codes, traditions, and laws — and curricula.

Today we don’t much have the imposition of morality, but the imposition of immorality. The symptoms



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are plain and all around us. Proving George Orwell's observation that there "are some ideas so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them," academia now breeds sheer lunacy. "White privilege theory" is all the rage on campuses today, and in 2015 we learned of a course at Arizona State University concerning the "Problem of Whiteness." This almost sounds sane, too, relative to what I described in the 2013 New American essay "Diploma Disaster?" To wit: "As the Young America's Foundation pointed out in 'The Dirty Dozen: America's Most Bizarre and Politically Correct College Courses' (12/9/2006), academia has descended into course offerings such as 'The Phallus,' 'Queer Musicology,' 'Border Crossings, Borderlands: Transnational Feminist Perspectives on Immigration,' 'Whiteness: The Other Side of Racism,' 'Native American Feminisms,' 'Sex Change City: Theorizing History in Genderqueer San Francisco,' and 'Lesbian Pulp Fiction,' just to name a handful. So maybe Johnny can't read, but he's fine with that. He knows that language is a white male homophobic social construct, anyway."

With these institutions of lower learning disgorging our schoolteachers and curriculum models, it's no surprise this has filtered down to primary and secondary education. In 2013, Portland, Oregon, school principal Verenice Gutierrez warned that talking about a peanut butter and jelly sandwich could be a "racist" act because, as she rhetorically asked, "What about Somali or Hispanic students, who might not eat sandwiches?" Then there was the other ridiculous question, "Is white bread more racist than whole wheat?" This, actually, was a quip by *College Fix* editor Nathan Harden, making fun of Gutierrez. Yet this illustrates our cultural decline: It's sometimes hard to distinguish between jokes — and the teaching philosophy of walking, talking embodiments of jokes masquerading as educators.

A less funny but every bit as faddish obsession is the so-called "transgender" movement, which I've dubbed the Made-up Sexual Status (MUSS) agenda. I won't dissect it here soup to nuttiness, partially because I've done it to death on these pages before, but mainly because this essay deals with larger issues of which it's merely a symptom. As you likely know, however — since we've all been bludgeoned with the MUSS agenda these last several years — the idea is that a person can identify as being male, female, or one of scores of other "genders" and dress accordingly, as takes his fancy. And we're not to call him a fancy boy, but are to blithely accept his whims.

Yet there is no good science behind this agenda. There are no physiological markers a doctor can identify to indicate that at work truly is a biological phenomenon and not a purely psychological one, that what needs alteration is the given patient's body and not, as we rubes would assume, his mind. Nonetheless, the agenda has entered schools, with educators sometimes allowing students to use the bathroom of their choice and giving them "sensitivity training" (mis)informing that a MUSS is legitimate.

This is illustrative of something Chesterton quite picturesquely noted in his 1910 book *What's Wrong With the World*:

The trouble in too many of our modern schools is that the State, being controlled so specially by the few, allows cranks and experiments to go straight to the schoolroom when they have never passed through the Parliament, the public house, the private house, the church, or the marketplace. Obviously, it ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people; the assured and experienced truths that are put first to the baby. But in a school to-day the baby has to submit to a system that is younger than himself. The flopping infant of four actually has more experience, and has weathered the world longer, than the dogma to which he is made to submit. Many a school boasts of having the last



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ideas in education, when it has not even the first idea.

Tragically, these “last ideas,” if not rejected, can author our Republic’s last chapter. Moreover, “since the private schools have basically copied the public schools ... only with a higher tuition,” to quote educator and writer Dale Ahlquist, we must ask (and answer) a question: What is the root cause of our schooling problem?

If we were teaching nutrition, we’d relate the laws of the field as best we understood them. Imagine, however, we began falling victim to the notion there essentially were no such rules, that it all was relative. What would then become our yardstick for formulating curriculum?

Of course, if there were no principles behind the matter, there would be nothing to teach. It would then be not like trying to instruct as to why asparagus is better (health-wise) than ice cream, but why one flavor ice cream is better than another; the latter is a matter of taste, not truth, and no one need be schooled in what to like (though tyrants may disagree).

Yet now imagine that, as is typical, people haven’t thought matters through carefully enough to grasp the implications of their nutritional relativism. Moreover, already having established schools of nutrition and instinctively believing the field “should be taught,” they continue plodding along, driven by cultural habit. Again, what would be their yardstick for devising curriculum?

Well, these kitchen relativists might be skeptical of things called the “principles of nutrition,” but one thing they wouldn’t dispute is the existence of their own tastes. And how seductive tastes are. A principle may *sound* good, but it *can’t feel* m’mm-m’mm good like a taste can. So remove the idea that the principle is something objective and transcendent from the equation — convince people it’s just an invention of man — and how can it compete? It’s hard enough getting little Johnny to eat his vegetables when you can passionately claim they’re good for him. How can you do it amidst the notion it’s just another preference? A distasteful fiction can’t compete with a tasty fact.

Now, as nutritional relativism waxed and knowledge of the framework of relevant principles waned, nutrition teachers would gradually cease acting with principle. Preference would hold progressively more sway as the operative guide became “If it tastes good, eat it.” Moreover, since everyone has tastes and, again, no one can rightly say one taste is better than another, this could very well result in devising curriculum based on quota. We might try giving every group a place at the dinner table. Forget about vitamins, minerals, proteins, and carbohydrates; the focus would be Indian cuisine, Chinese, Thai, Turkish, Mexican, Somali, and just about everything else in fashion, as nutritional science, having lost its *raison d’être*, became culinary instruction.

What’s more, an endorsement of junk food might then follow because, hey, a lot of people *like* junk food. In fact, robbed of an objective standard for measuring food’s “goodness” and believing “Who is to say what’s good or bad?” experimentation would become the order of the day. Try it, you may like it. Are you oriented toward this food or that — or do you go both ways? Which do you identify with? Of course, thus proceeding could just mean a bad stomach or poor long-term health. Or it could mean sampling those pretty berries on the tree that the birds gobble down so greedily. One man’s poison is another’s pleasure, you know.

Ridiculous? Fair enough. One thing about what we call the “laws” of the physical world is that violating them has hard-to-ignore physical consequences. Seeing someone dig a grave with a fork and knife or keel over after munching on foxglove is quite convincing. One may fancy he can fly off a tall building,



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but the ensuing “Splat!” deters most observers from calling Newton a fool. Just as significantly, since even the most liberal thinkers (especially them, actually) aren’t usually open-minded about sampling death, there’s generally little personal vested interest in denying the laws governing health.

Then again, there is the occasional person who will rationalize away his binge eating, heavy drinking, or chain smoking, attached as he is to his vices and averse as he is to acknowledging their dangerousness. Note, too, that the likelihood of denial of reality increases as the consequences for violation of a law diminish in immediacy, severity, and obviousness. The would-be Superman’s “Splat!” makes perceiving cause and effect easy; the effects of a terrible diet are less frightening and more distant, yet certainly observable in a scientific sample of gluttons. But what of moral laws, what we may call “Truth”?

Were there a “Splat!” moment upon indulging fornication or adultery, we’d be a pious civilization, indeed (and Bill Clinton would have made quite different, and far briefer, headlines). Yet the consequences of moral law’s violation are generally distant enough to leave miles of rationalization room between cause and effect. It’s perhaps much as with how the common cold’s symptoms are obvious while pancreatic cancer is known as the “silent killer”; immediate bark doesn’t always correspond to ultimate bite. Add to this that moral laws can spoil something that is immediate — fun (e.g., sexual license) — and the appeal of rationalizing them away is apparent.

Yet say what we will about the causes of our age’s philosophical/spiritual malaise — and that’s precisely what moral relativism is — one thing is clear: The West has become a post-Truth civilization. This is evident not just in experience (virtually everyone I’ve broached this topic with over the last 30 years has spouted the predictable relativist lines) but in research, with a Barna Group study showing that only six percent of teenagers in 2002 believed in Truth (absolute by definition) and that Americans are most likely to make “moral” decisions based on *feelings*.

This dislocation from moral reality affects everything, schooling included. “We are plagued by purposelessness. Along with that we have lost the purpose of education,” wrote Dale Ahlquist in 2015. “It is supposed to be ‘truth in the state of transmission,’” he continued, quoting Chesterton, “the process of passing the truth from one generation to another. The school has not only lost the purpose of education, it has lost the truth.”

And thus has it lost its collective mind. What was outlined in my nutrition-curriculum analogy we see in modern miseducation, everywhere. We assign courses based on quota, with offerings such as women’s, “gay and lesbian,” “transgender,” “African-American,” and Latino studies, and there are bizarre classes such as those mentioned earlier. We also have Black History Month, Women’s History Month, Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month, Gay and Lesbian Pride Month, and National Hispanic Heritage Month, all of which may be recognized in schools. The focus is no longer on whether something relates Truth, but on kowtowing to the flavor of the day.

Likewise, criticism isn’t leveled objectively, which would marginalize ideas such as Marxism; instead, our characteristic prejudices govern. Whites are now a favored whipping boy, so colleges teach about “white privilege”; men are considered fatally flawed, hence courses on “toxic masculinity”; and we’re even hearing of “cisgender” privilege, cisgender referring, for example, to a man who actually considers himself, unbelievably, a man.

And those not white, cis, or male can seek refuge in another college provision: “safe spaces.” But “safe” from what?



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Among other things, from *Truth*.

For the Truth could offend — *feelings*.

There was a time when teachers understood that a goal of education was to shatter illusions, not shield them; to be enlightened, not frightened, by Truth. But how can this compare to feelings, those things that, like taste, certainly exist?

Writing at the *Week* last month, Michael Brendan Dougherty lamented, “Students don’t want to learn anymore. They want to teach.” He reported that University of London undergraduates want “to ‘de-colonize’ their institution” by removing “white” philosophers such as Plato and Kant. Of course, philosophy being “the search for Truth,” they should propose removing the discipline altogether. But, hey, it just doesn’t seem like “education” without a philosophy department.

It also would be ridiculous paying money to attend school while implying you know more than the teachers, were college today still about learning and not about obtaining a (supposedly) money-making degree. Yet this accords with the spirit of the age. Writing at the Johns Hopkins School of Education website, Dr. Donalee Markus quotes Muriel Spark’s 1961 novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: “To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil’s soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education. I call it intrusion.” A now popular notion, Chesterton had criticized it a half century earlier already, stating “that certain crazy pedants” have asserted “that education is not instruction at all, does not teach by authority at all. They present the process as coming, not from the outside, from the teacher, but entirely from inside the boy.” He then mentions, as Spark would later, that these pedants say “education” “is the Latin for leading out or drawing out the dormant faculties of each person.” He continued, “Somewhere far down in the dim boyish soul is a primordial yearning to learn Greek accents or to wear clean collars; and the schoolmaster only gently and tenderly liberates this imprisoned purpose.... [Yet] I think it would be about as sane to say that the baby’s milk comes from the baby as to say that the baby’s educational merits do.”

With moderns’ relativism-born focus on feelings, however, this makes perfect sense. After all, a baby isn’t born knowing Truth, but feelings he has quite naturally. And if feelings are to be the arbiters of things, why should his be subordinated to someone else’s? A good teacher could have a superior grasp of Truth, but it’s hard to make the case that he has superior feelings, especially since “superiority” is also a relative concept in our post-Truth universe.

Thus, “Education should be exercise; it has become massage,” observed physician and author Martin H. Fischer. Schools massage students’ feelings and massage their egos as they try to massage some performance out of them. Chesterton mentioned “authority,” which has become a dirty word. Discipline and obedience are not only lacking in today’s schools — whose character often ranges from babysitting center to minimum-security prison — the concepts are actually considered antiquated. Those two things are prerequisites for education, however, for how can someone learn from you unless he is first willing to listen to you? Listening precedes learning.

Yet rebellious youth are to be expected in an age of adults who rebel even against Truth and, of course, its author: God. Moreover, our relativism factors into our permissiveness. For right makes might: Enforcing obedience is far easier when understanding that you’re imposing an eternal, divine standard. Among well-meaning people, however, this will can be sapped when believing the standard is merely



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your own agenda or that of other mere mortals. If all is taste and nothing Truth, whose tastes should act as tyrant? (Note: The tyrannically minded don't trouble over this question, and they're exactly who take control once moral decay yields civilizational collapse.)

Of course, improving education could be as simple as observing when it was better, yesteryear, and resurrecting that day's standards. Note here one report that a college degree today is merely the equivalent of a 1947 high-school diploma; there are also studies indicating that 1950s students had larger vocabularies than more recent generations. Yet respect for "old" ideas has diminished along with respect for old people, and for the same reason.

One of the few assets a wizened and weary elderly gentleman can enjoy — and what in earlier times could have made him a governing "elder" — is attainment of wisdom. But that quality is properly defined as knowledge of what is *true* or *good*; of course, if an idea called old also can be characterized as true and good, it is actually eternal. Yet these absolutes mean nothing in a relativistic age, which is why the eternal is discarded as antiquated. This is one reason being "with the times" is so significant today: Perceiving nothing ageless, we become creatures of the age. We fall into a type of chronological chauvinism, where our time must be the best simply because we happen to be in it. And why not? Our feelings were molded by it and thus align with it, so our age has the endorsement of that ultimate guide.

Yet the worst thing about today's education, in school and the home, is not what is or isn't learned but what is not tamed: the beast within. As I pointed out recently in "Infantile Nation: How Breeding Overgrown Children Begets the Nanny State" (The New American, January 9, 2017), the Founding Fathers repeatedly emphasized the importance of virtue, and training in it long had been central to education. But virtue, being the set of "good moral habits," is meaningless in a relativistic time, which is why today we speak of "values," those things that could be good, bad, or neutral and which every tyrant has in abundance.

Not surprisingly, having lost touch with moral reality, we're confused, and our schools' values are so often Trojan horses for vices. "Self-esteem," emphasized in education, is just a euphemism for pridefulness. And so it goes. As I wrote in the above-mentioned essay, "Lust is called 'sexual liberation' and incredulity (lack of faith) sophistication. Envy masquerades as compassionate redistributive policies; and vindictiveness, wrath, and injustice as 'social justice.' Dishonesty is spun as 'spin' or a 'narrative' while imprudence can be a 'lifestyle choice.' Cowardice in action may be called compromise, and indifference is branded tolerance." The result, wrote Ahlquist, is that the whole educational system "is destined for total collapse and the whole culture is in danger of collapsing with it. That is what happens from following the fads instead of following the truth."

Of course, all this was inevitable when God was kicked out of school and atheism became education's de facto belief. For atheism correlates with relativism, which leads to moral decay. This is why I said that education could never be limited to just three legitimate r's. To quote Chesterton one last time, "It does make a great deal of difference whether the instructor implies that truth is real, or relative, or changeable, or an illusion." And as George Washington warned, "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles." A moral education cannot prevail without them, either. Yet God was long ago kicked out of government schools based on a bizarre conception of separation of church and state, making the state the church, and meaning that a separation of school and state is in order.



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