

# Post-Truth as an Epistemic Crisis: The Need for Rationality, Autonomy, and Pluralism

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## Abstract

Contemporary society is experiencing an epistemic crisis, evidenced by such “post-truth” phenomena as “alternative facts.” Traditional notions related to knowledge and Truth have been under continual, partly justifiable, attack under the eclectic banner of postmodernism, and alternative epistemic foundations (essential for democracy to function) have not been provided. Drawing on the European and North American literature of political theory, philosophy, and adult education, this article offers an update and defense of three core epistemic concepts: rationality, autonomy, and pluralism. To address the epistemic crisis, adult education needs to develop epistemically responsible learners, promote diverse public learning spaces (agoras), and teach learners how to engage in meaningful dialogue outside of their own echo chambers.

## Keywords

epistemology, rationality, autonomy, pluralism, educational philosophy, civic education

We are experiencing a time when “truths” are treated as infinite, and evidence is countered with “alternative facts.” Similar to Benkler et al. (2018), we call this *post-truth*

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situation an *epistemic crisis* because a common epistemic foundation is lacking in society. Diverse groups cling tightly to their own perspective, prescribed and reinforced through news and social media, thus forming increasingly polarized echo chambers without any connecting points to other perspectives (e.g., through arguments, evidence, solidarity, empathy, playing devil's advocate against the presumed unshakable perspectives of one's tribe). These trends create breeding grounds for tyranny (Snyder, 2017). For the maintenance of democracy as a form of government and way of life, it is indispensable that shared epistemic standards exist upon which public deliberation can occur.

The common acceptance of lies by the general public—and worse, the willing adoption of lies as Truth—is the death knell of free democratic society. As Arendt warned: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction ... true and false ... no longer exist” (Arendt, [1951]/1973, p. 474). And, as Lynch (2016) similarly cautions: “if we do not agree on what counts as evidence, on our epistemic principles, then we aren't playing by the same rules anymore. And once that happens, game over” (p. 50).

To address today's epistemic crisis, we must insist that Truth exists and honestly strive to approximate it as best we can—even if our conceptions of Truth are held tentatively, as only current approximations of what omniscience would allow. This article is an argument defending the need in free societies for a shared epistemic foundation and updating three concepts necessary for such: rationality, autonomy, and pluralism.

## Epistemology, Education, and Democracy

Epistemology, as used in the education literature, refers to “beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, how knowledge is evaluated, where knowledge resides, and how knowing occurs” (Hofer & Pintrich, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, our use of the term includes also the habitual, day-to-day practices of constructing knowledge and evaluating knowledge claims (Hoggan, 2016). From this perspective, education scholars are especially interested in questions about how knowledge arises, evolves, transforms, combats distortions, and solidifies into habits of thinking.

Epistemic dangers include clinging too tightly to a predetermined “Truth,” as well as adopting a stance of complete relativity (i.e., claiming the right to have one's own “alternative facts” regardless of evidence or rationale), thereby abandoning the search for Truth. Both of these dangers are manifestations of the same epistemic phenomenon in which a critical examination of knowledge claims and evidence is neglected, and an open-minded yet critical dialogue is not considered.

While interacting with each other and co-shaping society, it is imperative that we give reasons for our beliefs, ask for justifications of others' claims, and judge the validity of both. An important element in this epistemic crisis is a diminishing of the possibility for dialogue, because this requires at least some shared epistemic principles. A dialogue presupposes that the boundaries of our reality somehow coincide. As an

illustration, there are many competing hypotheses explaining the origin of the moon: centrifugal separation hypothesis, evaporation hypothesis, collision hypothesis. Scientists argue with each other about which is the likeliest one. This dispute is possible only because the opponents recognize the same reality with the same physical laws. None of them could have a dispute about the origin of the moon with someone who sees the moon as, for instance, the eye of God or as an artifact of aliens. If it becomes acceptable for everyone to have their own facts, then it becomes impossible to have a discussion over differences; instead, there is simply a retreat into alternative realities.

There is no reason to believe that the factors which contributed to today's epistemic crisis will go away any time soon. Therefore, a more explicit focus on epistemology is required in adult education. As Michelson (2019) advocates, in our adult education practice, we need to help develop the "ethical knower," one "who takes responsibility for her own epistemological practices, that is, for the ways in which she attends to, receives, and processes information and the habits of mind with which she decides what is true" (p. 150).

With what conceptual tools can adult education combat today's epistemic crisis? Historically, adult educators have drawn on principles that can be traced back to the Enlightenment: for example, autonomy, critical thinking, rational deliberation, and emancipation. Adult education strove to help people "develop their capacity to communicate as rational human beings to explore alternative viewpoints and perspectives" to address democratic values of inclusion, equality, and social justice, and to disrupt or challenge oppressive societal structures (Gouthro, 2006, p. 12).

Such Enlightenment principles, however, came under critique by postmodern scholars. In challenging monolithic, totalizing systems of thought, these critiques emphasize multiplicity over essentialization, and diversity of cultures and identities over homogenization (Wood, 1997). Concepts such as rationality and autonomy are decried as idiosyncratic Western concepts which were too often used as tools to establish and maintain dominance and power (Derrida, 1976; Foucault [1969]/2012). Some education scholars, for instance, describe how rationality was used in female oppression; Nussbaum expressed a common feminist critique that:

by placing all emphasis on rationality as a mark of humanity, it has emphasized a trait that males traditionally prize and denigrated traits, such as sympathy and emotion and imagination, that females traditionally prize. This emphasis has permitted men to denigrate women for their emotional natures, and to marginalize them on account of their alleged lack of reason." (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 26)

The postmodern critique applies to all universal "world-explanations" that are subjugated to one central principle (e.g., reason, progress) and which only tolerate phenomena or narratives that are classifiable according to the developed "universal" scheme (Bauman). As a result, any particularities, deviations, or subjectivity are either marginalized, suppressed, or silenced. For postmodernists, the multiplicity of voices and stories should therefore be set against the "grand narratives" of modernity (Lyotard).

The acknowledgment of particular, previously marginalized narratives ostensibly required the shunning of universal principles (e.g., autonomy, rationality), which, intentionally or not, served as tools of oppression. However, how can we address the effects of echo chambers or combat such views as racial superiority or nationalism without formulating some universally shared values and commitment to such principles as following justifiable arguments and listening to reasons?

In response to this dilemma, we argue that, yes, the concepts of *rationality* and *autonomy* may indeed be Western constructs. However, the same critique could also be leveled at *democracy*; it is a particular, perhaps idiosyncratic concept for social relationships and government that is not necessarily inborn, nor does it inevitably spring out of all peoples around the globe. Democracy, with all its difficulties and flaws, is a human-made construct intended to provide a more principled and qualitatively *better* form of living together than its alternatives (e.g., tyranny, oligarchy). In addition to being incredibly difficult to create and sustain in practice, it is the most cognitively demanding form of living together, presupposing many human capacities (e.g., critical decision-making) and social processes (e.g., public deliberation), all of which require some shared epistemic principles.

Lifelong learning is necessary to establish, maintain, and promote an epistemic foundation to support democracy and, specifically now, to combat today's epistemic crisis. In this vein, Faulstich calls for a post-postmodern education. His argument is similar to ours, that postmodernism contributes to diversification of perspectives and reduces marginalization through its critique on oppressive and homogenizing concepts of modernism, but it also contributes to adult education losing its fundamental orientation and idealistic validation (Faulstich, 2015). We see our article being placed in the same intellectual effort: to think about adult education *after* postmodernity to find ways to *better* live together and to develop necessary capacities of robust dialogue and problem-solving across differences. To this end, the following sections explore three key concepts that are essential in establishing a shared epistemic basis for today's world: rationality, autonomy, and pluralism.

## **In Defense of (a Bounded) Rationality**

Rationality has numerous definitions and interpretations, leading to ambiguity and confusion as different disciplines focus on various aspects of the term.<sup>1</sup> Central to many definitions of rationality is that it embraces an appeal to reasons to generate, justify, evaluate, and modify beliefs and actions (Siegel, 1988). An additional element is that these reasons are interconnected with each other and build a certain consistency and coherence, such that the reasons are not self-defeating. Thus, rationality, in the broadest terms, is a characteristic of the quality of thinking. In the literature, there is a distinction between theoretical or epistemic rationality (rational beliefs and inferences) and practical rationality (rational acting). The value of rationality, as an epistemic foundation for democracy, lies in both: the application of reason to convert information into justifiable beliefs, and the use of knowledge as a basis for decisions, which then translate into actions. For many representatives of pragmatic philosophy,

“rationality consists in the intelligent pursuit of appropriate objectives” (Rescher, 1988, p. 7). Rescher further maintains, “to behave rationally ... is to make use of one’s intelligence to figure out the best thing to do in the circumstances” (p. 1).

Historically, the concept of rationality is most closely associated with the Enlightenment, which upheld it as the key to the unlimited progress of knowledge and societies, victory over obscurantism, and liberation of humankind from a “state of immaturity” (Kant, 1784, p. 481). A focus on rationality can be traced back at least as far as 17th-century science, with philosophers such as Descartes proclaiming that Truth was to be approached through the scientific method, thereby providing a rational alternative to the metaphysical or religious claims of knowledge dominant at the time.

Max Weber, the German sociologist often presented as the last herald of Western rationality, sees it as a way of thinking and acting that served as the motor of the modernization of societies (Weber, 1922/1985). For him, rationality is a defining feature of human action in society; he expanded the role of rationality from individuals to also include institutions and social structures (e.g., law, economy, and science). According to Weber, social action can be rational in terms of achieving its ends through (appropriate) means (instrumental rationality, *Zweckrationalität*) or in terms of choosing actions according to certain value systems (value-rationality, *Wertrationalität*), in which actions are rational if justified by their inherent values, regardless of their consequences (e.g., doing good for the sake of doing good). Additionally, he distinguishes two other forms of social action (which are for him irrational): affective action (emotional reaction to external stimuli) and traditional action (based on habitual practices) (Weber, 1922/1985, pp. 565–567). Based on this typology of social action, there is legitimate and illegitimate political rule: only a rational rule can have legitimacy; the traditional or charismatic (affective, demagogue) rule does not. Applied to jurisprudence, for instance, Weber argues it is irrational (and therefore illegitimate) if it is based on any kind of “oracles” or superstitions. Rationality is therefore to credit, according to Weber, for the possibility of understanding and explaining the world, even if it is to blame for the loss of the mysterious, spiritual, unexplainable, and transcendental sides of our lives (“disenchantment of the world”).

Contrary to Enlightenment assumptions, history has shown that rationality guarantees neither progress nor Truth. Indeed, in the 20th century, rationality was accused of turning to its opposite. Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) famously describe how in Germany it led to forms of political, economic, and social oppression that resulted in some of the worst atrocities of modern times. They point out how an instrumental rationality, untethered to humanistic values, could be used to justify monstrous purposes. They did not condemn rationality, as such, but rather insisted on a more critical conception of it as a tool, the results of which depend on the purposes for which it is wielded.

Similarly, Charlier speaks of the “tyranny of the impersonal” (Charlier, 2002, p. 74), arguing that rationality “does not suffice to abolish tyranny” because “it knows nothing of people’s faces” (p. 74). This critique is in line with the core arguments of

Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) who speak about the “identifying reason,” which is when we homogenize and subject everything to given categories, the personal (real and concrete) gets subjected to the universal (abstract). Horkheimer and Adorno propose a way out for rationality—it needs to be self-reflective, searching for and acknowledging one’s own shortcomings, and retain its openness to modification and singularity (i.e., non-homogenizing).

Rationality alone is therefore insufficient; we also need, for instance, humanistic values, solidarity, and conviviality (Formenti & West, 2018). Without these connections and orientations to others—on a wide scale, beyond narrow conceptions of one’s tribe—rationality can indeed be a tool for monstrous purposes. Scholars also note the need to pay attention to other ways of knowing (e.g., somatic, intuitive, and imaginative), as they “link knowledge that exists within us in raw experiential form (both preconscious and prelanguage) to conceptual (rational/analytical) knowing” (Hoggan et al., 2009, p. 16). In the end, though, we must incorporate rationality into our own self-reflections and in our communications with others because convention, habit, and social norms can be deeply embedded in our various ways of knowing (e.g., racism often feels right to racists).

Indeed, one of the theoretical traditions embracing rationality in and since the 20th century is critical theory. Theorists like Benjamin, Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer developed a tradition of critical inspection of social and political life to reduce human suffering, injustices, and atrocities. Methods of critical thinking and rational discourse were seen as tools to understand the oppressive dominant structures of modern societies in hopes of changing them to make the world a better place. It is through the use of reason that critical theorists see the possibility for liberation and emancipation of dominated, manipulated, and oppressed groups.

Over the last several decades, however, rationality has come under severe criticism, especially among adherents of postmodernism who argue that not only does it not necessarily lead to Truth, but that rationality itself can actually reinforce dominant paradigms and ways of thinking through the “conquest” of nature and the subordination and exploitation of populations, legitimated in the name of universalistic claims (Foucault [1969]/2012). Postmodernism, thus, sees itself also as post-rationalism by its criticism of the Enlightenment’s notion of rationality that tried but failed in the attempt “to impose reason’s order on the recalcitrant, bitter world” (Agger, 1990, p. 13).

Even the emancipatory tradition of education, rooted in critical rationality, is accused of reinforcing existing (Western) power dynamics and dominance. In this vein, Freire, one of the most famous anti-oppression educational theorists, is criticized for being ethnocentric and imposing Western modes of thinking and dominant forms of knowledge production onto learners from different backgrounds (Bowers & Appfel-Marglin, 2005). Similarly, Feyerabend (1987) criticizes the idea of rationality as discouraging diversity and advocating for “a right way of living” (p. 11), arguing that “rationalists clamoring for objectivity and rationality are just trying to sell a tribal creed of their own” (p. 301).

Habermas, stepping into dialogue with postmodern theorists (predominantly Foucault and Derrida; later Rorty), acknowledges the emancipatory intentions of their theories yet criticizes their demotion of rationality. Furthermore, he challenges Derrida's endeavor to detach philosophical thinking from the task of intersubjective problem-solving, and in doing so to reduce it to mere "literary criticism," as it robs such thinking "not only of its seriousness, but of its productivity and efficiency as well" (Habermas, 1985, p. 246). In doing so, Habermas argues, postmodern scholars ignore the importance of humans' reasoning capacity in the very process of emancipation (Murphy & Fleming, 2010). He calls, therefore, for an updating of rationality, rather than its abandonment. As an alternative concept, he suggests "communicative rationality"—one that enables the achievement of mutual understanding and consensus through communication (Habermas, 1981, p. 30). As Gouthro points out, Habermas' ideas around communicative rationality, although subject to critique, laid the groundwork for much adult education scholarship, especially in the learning contexts we ideally want to create, by providing "criteria, for developing a context where ideas can be shared, contested, and mediated" (Gouthro, 2006, p. 13). Interestingly, even as feminist scholars critique Habermas (Fraser, 1985), they are "unwilling to dispense" with Habermasian concepts such as communicative action, public space, democratic legitimacy, dialogic ethics, discourse, and critical social theory (Cohen, as cited in Gouthro, 2006, p. 18). We would add that, even though rationality is not included in this list, it is essential to all these concepts.

We argue further that the primary value of rationality is not to lead inevitably to Truth. Rather, it is to lead to better thinking and acting; to allow for the possibility of people to live collaboratively and collectively (as opposed to living in echo chambers). If rationality cannot necessarily lead to an assurance of Truth, it does at least provide a basis on which the paths leading to error can be reevaluated to find a better way. The goal of identifying inexorable Truth is too difficult and rare (if not impossible) to attain, but the goal of moving closer to it by discovering and naming untruths is plausible. Even if we claim that we cannot know with a surety what Truth is, we doubt anyone would say that there are no untruths and no lies; consequently, there are knowledge claims that are falsehoods (e.g., flat Earth theory).

Rescher (1988) advocates similarly for a realistic (as opposed to idealistic) notion of rationality, in which we can rationally make only hypothetical claims; there are no absolute guarantees of Truth. For our rational thinking and acting, this means that it necessarily remains dependent on the relevant empirical and reasoning material available to us at the given moment. We argue in like manner that rationality is mainly a "bounded" rationality (Simon, 1957); it implies the need for epistemic humility, as our rational thinking and acting are only possible within the limits of our (always finite) capabilities and resources.

Acknowledging the potential for rationality as a characteristic of human beings, we emphasize that it must be initially learned, that it comes in degrees, and that habits of employing rationality must be continuously developed (Kern, 2020). It is an indispensable lifelong educational aim, a foundation upon which the idea of democracy relies, and therefore needs to be a focal point of adult education.

In adult education scholarship, the question of rationality has been most often connected to critical thinking, with the basis of such work usually pointing either to Dewey (1916), Siegel (1988), or Brookfield (1987). Paul (1990) distinguished between critical thinking in the “weak sense,” rationalizing an opinion or bias (*technical rationality*), as opposed to the “strong sense” where assumptions are challenged in a “global and Socratic” manner and contradictions identified (*emancipatory rationality*). In educational settings, it is arguably the emancipatory rationality that most scholars consider as worth pursuing (e.g., Mezirow, 1991).

## Autonomy Defended

Intertwined with and necessary for the social process involving rationality is the “preserving and adhering to one’s own independent judgement,” in “thinking for oneself” (Kant, 1784, p. 481). An adjoining educational aim, then, is that of fostering autonomy, specifically the ability to use one’s own rational capacities to determine the worthiness of beliefs, judgments, values, and actions (Kloubert, 2018). As with rationality, autonomy is also ubiquitously criticized in the academic literature, in its case for focusing attention on the ethic of individualism (Mendus, 2000; Shweder, 2003). And, similar to our response to the critiques of rationality, we argue that equating autonomy with individuality, and thus rejecting it as an appropriate educational aim, is akin to the proverbial ousting of the baby with the bathwater. Autonomous thinking is not mutually exclusive with social bonds.

However, committing to one’s community and collectivity without pursuing autonomy as a counterweight would be hostile to the ideals and requirements of a democratic society (Kloubert, 2018). As Adorno (1971/2013) argues, adherence to the collective is a path to barbarism and tyranny.

People who blindly integrate themselves into collectives are already making themselves into something like material, erasing themselves as self-determined beings. This includes the willingness to treat others as amorphous masses. [...] A democracy that is not only supposed to work, but to perform according to its concept, requires autonomous people. (p. 107)

Political theorists have been wrestling since antiquity with the issue of autonomy, especially in its connection with forms of government. Plato ([circa, 380 BCE]/1983) was concerned that people invested with power in a democracy could never be completely autonomous but rather could often be manipulated by those who are skilled in rhetoric and persuasion (pp. 282–283). Later, John Stuart Mill claimed that not everybody is capable of forming independent judgments on important political issues and therefore argued for giving more voice to people with more education (implying that education promotes the capacity for greater autonomous judgment) (Mill [1861]/1987, p. 305). Estlund (2008), who coined the term epistocracy as governmental rule based on knowledge, rejects this form of societal structure. He argues pragmatically that it would be nearly impossible to reach an agreement about who epistocrats are, and it would



contradict democratic principles for people to be subject to rulers whose status as such they can reasonably dispute: “(N)o one has authority or legitimate coercive power over another without a justification that could be accepted by all qualified points of view” (Estlund, 2008, p. 33).

In contrast to epistocracy, a better approach, and one more consistent with the principles of democracy, is to focus on educating all people to be better participants in society. According to Levine (2013), “There is no alternative to more and better work by the residents of a whole community” (p. 12), and journalist Thomas Freedland, “The standard answer is that we need better leaders. The real answer is that we need better citizens” (p. 12).

In line with Plato and Mill, we see here direct implications that the requirements for good citizenship necessarily include autonomy, but this cannot be automatically presupposed. Similar to rationality, we see autonomy as a human potential that must be learned if it is to be developed appropriately (i.e., not merely a recalcitrant individuality).

We do not make this assertion blithely; autonomy as a personal characteristic is not without challenges and contradictions. Hand (2006), for instance, argues against it as an educational aim for this very reason. Differentiating between *circumstantial autonomy* and *dispositional autonomy*, Hand (2006) argues that the former (defined as freedom to determine one’s own actions) pertains to living circumstances and is, thereby, a political rather than an educational issue. The latter, dispositional autonomy, identifies a quality of character referring to a personal “inclination to determine one’s own actions” (p. 537). This quality can be taught, but Hand (2006) questions whether it should be a desirable aim:

Dispositional autonomy would confer advantage only if it were always or generally the case that actions one has determined for oneself are more effective, appropriate or worthwhile than actions performed under the direction of others. And it seems obvious that this is not always or generally the case. (p. 538)

Hand (2006) denies that these conditions are given in at least in two situations. The first case is when a person’s actions are part of a larger social structure. For systems to operate effectively, “someone must have the authority to make these decisions and everyone else must be willing to abide by them. ... The effect of cultivating dispositional autonomy in pupils would simply be to make their lives more difficult in situations requiring heteronomous action” (pp. 538–539). The second case is when deep expertise is lacking in a given domain (e.g., doctors knowing more about diseases and treatments than patients).

Acknowledging the problematic nature of autonomy, we nevertheless disagree vehemently with the conclusions drawn above. The example of people with “the inclination to determine (their) own actions” implies that such an inclination renders them incapable of judging when a necessity exists to act under the direction of someone in charge. People can be inclined to determine their own actions even when a social hierarchy also exerts a strong influence. Further, to claim that people need to be

conditioned to *follow orders* without also including a strong emphasis on autonomy in their thinking, has terrifying consequences. While agreeing that in most hierarchical, “heteronomous action” situations, there does not need to be any real conflict between a disposition toward autonomy and the need to act under someone else’s direction, there always exists the need to be willing to refuse to follow those directions that would result in some great harm.

The second situation, when expertise in a given domain is lacking, is deserving of consideration, especially in light of trends such as the anti-mask and anti-vax responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hardwig (1985), for instance, argues that “it is sometimes irrational to think for oneself—that rationality sometimes consists in deferring to epistemic authority and consequently, in passively and uncritically accepting what we are given to believe” (p. 343). A complete intellectual independence from the authority of experts is not only impossible, it lacks credibility and a sense of realism. No person can have in-depth and well-examined reasons for each of their beliefs: “I might never be able to obtain the evidence for my belief that relativity physics is correct, no matter how much time and effort I devote to the enterprise” (Hardwig, 1985, p. 339). There is no real contradiction between autonomy and recognizing situations where it is appropriate to trust in the expertise of others. As Hardwig proposes, “If I were to pursue epistemic autonomy across the board, I would succeed only in holding relatively uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore irrational beliefs” (p. 340). Hardwig speaks of justifiable epistemic dependence when “B has good reasons to believe that A has good reasons to believe that p” (p. 338). Fostering autonomy (combined with rationality) implies that the learner adequately assesses the situation, their own knowledge, the quality of the source, and the information to make a decision to rely or not to rely on the epistemic authority.

Respecting autonomy, based on an epistemic rationale for one’s beliefs, is the only pedagogical method that treats learners with dignity as persons. As educators, “We strive to enable them to think for themselves, competently and well, rather than to deny them the fundamental ability to determine for themselves, to the greatest extent possible, the contours of their own minds and lives” (Siegel, 2017, p. 6). In all instances of coexisting in a pluralistic democratic society, and especially in today’s post-truth situation, there is a need for the skills and capacities that can protect against unreflective groupthink, as well as attempts toward indoctrination and manipulation, and autonomy is essential for this.

Promoting autonomy indicates a commitment to pluralistic democracy, which can only be carried out by individuals capable of having meaningful dialogue with others and making autonomous (political) choices. Autonomy in decision-making, although not completely reachable given the caveats described above, cannot be abandoned as a regulative principle pointing to the ideal. Furthermore, fostering autonomy in a democracy is the *sine qua non* of respecting the dignity of each human being, treating them as subjects (rather than objects).

In sum, autonomy equated with extreme individualism is poorly conceived. Eneau (2008) alludes to this in his emphasis on the distinction between autonomy and independence. For him, interpersonal relationships play an important role in the creation of

learner's autonomy, a phenomenon he labeled as "reciprocity." Autonomy, for Eneau, is defined as the subjects' ability to engage in relationships of mutual interdependence. In a similar vein, Boucouvalas (2009) draws on the concept of "homonomy" to name "the meaning derived in life by being and feeling part of a greater whole" (p.3). She characterizes homonomy and autonomy as two aspects of selfhood that can and should be "complementary trajectories of development" (p. 3). We agree, and we would add that the development of both these aspects is essential in adult education.<sup>2</sup>

Promoting autonomy in the service of democracy has traditionally been a mainstay of adult education philosophy. Knowles (1957) argues that our discipline is inherently liberatory, and as such it must "meet the test of really producing greater autonomy and self-direction. To the extent that any learning activity ... leaves an adult with as much or more dependency upon external direction, to that extent (it is) failing to contribute to the inherent aim of adult education" (p. 239). We assert that a lack of autonomy lends itself to manipulation and demagoguery. Autonomous determination of what a person will believe and how they will act—based on an appropriate epistemic foundation, which necessarily includes, at times, a reliance on experts—is a prerequisite for effective living together in pluralistic democracies.

## **Pluralism Within Humanistic Bounds**

It is tempting to fantasize that in a dialogue, while giving someone better reasons for a perspective, the person on the other side of the argument will transform their beliefs, and then we can take one more step toward a unified worldview where all members of society are convinced of the rightness of particular perspectives. However, not only is this fantasy hopeless, its ultimate aim is undesirable. To explore this resistance to homogeneity, we draw on political theorists Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, who claim that a universally ideal concept of life does not exist, and attempts to homogenize views across society toward such an imagined ideal would, by definition, turn into a totalitarian project (Berlin, 1988; 2000; Arendt, 1951/1973; 1963). No entity has the right to form other human beings according to a given model (Adorno, 1971/2013, p. 106), and "even if there were someone wiser than Socrates in our midst, she still could not claim the right to order the souls of all citizens" (Gutmann, 1989, p. 72).

According to Berlin (2000), the idea that perspectives need to be harmonized into a synthesis fails to recognize the necessarily contingent character of values that underlie those perspectives. In any society, there are many purposes, principles, and values used by its various citizens to understand the world and order their lives. Objective human values such as justice, compassion, courage, equality, honor, and liberty exist, but even these values can be in conflict with each other. In many concrete cases, we will need to choose between conflicting values because some are incommensurable: they cannot be arranged according to the degree of their importance (Berlin, 2000). Thus, an appeal to reason alone will not help to solve a conflict because there will often be no single rationally justifiable solution or choice (e.g., between the values of security and freedom).

Differing circumstances coupled with self-interest and contrasting perspectives on the importance and merits of various values will inevitably lead to disagreement in any society where people are free enough to voice their opinions. Zacharas (2013) describes how the co-existence of incompatible values was understood in Berlin's writings:

When designing basic political institutions, however, in a world such as ours, I hold that certain values—notably the avoidance of suffering and the attainment of a minimal threshold of personal autonomy—should be given priority, at the cost of others. I acknowledge that others may disagree, and they are not irrational for doing so... because human values really are plural and incommensurable, and so human suffering has no rational priority over other goods. (p. 95)

Embracing value pluralism means both affirming a person's own values that guide their way of life, while also acknowledging the existence of and justification for differing ways of life based on other values. These assertions do not, however, mean that we must adopt a completely relativistic stand. We can and necessarily should still evaluate underlying values based on the extent to which they are within, as Berlin calls it, the common "human horizon" (Berlin, 1988, p. 12).

Of course social or political collisions will take place; the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimised by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair—that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour, otherwise we are bound to lose our way. (Berlin, 1998, p. 20)

At some point among all the incommensurate, coexisting values, universal consensus becomes necessary; there must be a commonly agreed-upon foundation of values that may not be violated (such as, e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This is the essential distinction we see between pluralism and relativism. Relativism insists on the premise that no bedrock exists upon which competing values can be judged or ranked against each other. Pluralism, as we envision it, rests upon the premise that inherent in all social systems are underlying values. To maintain, foster, and promote any particular form of society, the underlying values must continuously serve as the standard upon which all other competing views, positions, and actions are measured. There exists a symbiotic relationship between a form of society and the core values underlying it.

Pluralism is not only a descriptive characteristic of a society; it is also linked to (epistemic) action (Berlin, 2000). We as individuals, groups, and institutions are constantly confronted with difficult choices, with the necessity of choosing between competing values, in ever-changing conditions, with imperfect knowledge, and shifting priorities. These conditions mean that there can be no "perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist" (Berlin, 1988, p. 14). Nevertheless, we are forced to make decisions, and this puts another "burden" on each individual: to justify the

choice for oneself and for the other fellow citizens. Pluralism, if it is to promote a democratic society, implies an ethical epistemic action for which we (as an epistemic agent, knower) take responsibility (see Michelson, 2019).

It is the ability and willingness to put one's own views into question and to transform them when necessary that Berlin regards as the means of guarding against dangerous ideas/values imposed by a group (who pretends to have a monopoly on Truth). There is no *correct* set of values that can be derived—through rational analysis or other means. They are human-made concepts, and arguments can be made to support most any positive value. Values are, therefore, both a product of choice and a result of the process of being bound to a certain culture, context, and patterns of perception. While reflecting on values to make a decision, we reflect on our (culturally learned) basic assumptions, on our feelings of commitment to different ideas. For Berlin (2000), the result of our reflections is not predetermined. It implies that no conception of a good life, nor any values or cultural identities can be excluded (forever) from criticism and revision. Pluralism within humanistic bounds thus requires that one does not simply retreat into a recalcitrant individuality or stay within their own echo chambers; rather, it implies the willingness and readiness for people to call their own perspectives into question in dialogue with dissenters.

If we argue that different values can be mutually exclusive but still available as “choices” within a “horizon of humanity,” we can then ask when this plurality becomes problematic in a democratic society. The problem arises when a given alternative becomes hegemonic, when its adherents strive for its domination through ideological uniformity. A possible antidote to this problem can be found in the concept of the agora, or public space, as suggested by Hannah Arendt. For plurality to be a beneficial factor in our societies, we need these spaces where different positions confront each other in dialogue. She argues, “The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue [...], the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion” (Arendt, 1968, p. 241).

Beneficial plurality comes about only in a place where we can talk, share, and discern with one another about the common world. Arendt (1963) presupposes that in a democracy, human beings should be participants in agoras where they express how the world genuinely appears to them (i.e., they should not simply repeat the maxims and platitudes provided by others). The precondition of plurality is, for her, a reflecting, autonomous person who analyzes the given world and the possibility of interaction with this world. For Arendt, such authenticity and public interaction leads to the greatest possibility for freedom, happiness, and well-being for all participants (Arendt, 1963, pp. 272–273).

## Implications

John Dewey (1916) argues that there is nothing inherent in human beings that leads them toward effective living in a democracy; education is essential to cultivate the rational capacities necessary for such a complex and human-conceived method of

social arrangement. Consistent with Dewey, we argue that for any pluralistic democratic society to function, rationality in combination with autonomy and pluralism needs to occupy a central position among our shared epistemic values. We see a necessary connection between these three concepts that are essential in addressing today's epistemic crisis: plurality requires choice, which we argue requires the capacities of evaluative rationality and autonomous thinking and acting. Here, adult education plays an essential role. We should not abandon key feminist and postmodern insights, but neither should we turn away from key epistemological concepts necessary to overcome today's epistemic crisis and otherwise allow for a functioning democracy.

Historically important concepts such as rationality and autonomy, however, have virtually disappeared from the adult education literature. In this journal, the flagship publication of our discipline, a search through the last 70 years of scholarship shows the terms "rationality" and "autonomy" are mentioned respectively only 19 and 12 times in the abstracts, and only 12 and 4 times as key words. And, in many of these cases the discussion revolves around Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation, with many of the articles decrying his focus on these concepts. ("Pluralism" can be found 6 times in the abstracts; "Value Pluralism" as a term cannot be found anywhere in the texts of the articles.)

The abandonment of the historically important Enlightenment concepts of rationality and autonomy in the scholarship of adult education seems odd considering the history of our field. Adult education obtained its important impulses and core values from the epoch of Enlightenment (Hufer, 2016). And, even if this epoch (as all others) needs critique, dismissive attitudes toward its achievements are not justifiable. It was during the Enlightenment that adult education as a practice was allowed beyond the restrictive and oppressive constraints of church and aristocracy as the only sources of legitimate knowledge. In the service of emancipation and empowerment, adult education provided spaces and opportunities for adults to question authorities, form their own views using their capacity to think, scrutinize existing knowledge, and seek for new insights—through, for example, salons, reading societies, culture clubs, public libraries, newspaper publishing (Olbrich, 2001, pp. 27–52). Acknowledging that those spaces still were restrictive (to a large extent open only for men or rich women), they still pointed to an ideal vision of an education for all that was, to our knowledge, previously unconsidered. And, even if the enactment of the principles of rationality and autonomy stayed within the constraints of the current norms and thus have been rightfully criticized as being blind toward various manifestations of power and the marginalization of many groups, they were nevertheless essential for emancipatory questioning of the status quo. Still today, as Nussbaum (1994) argues, rationality is the tool to overcome oppression.

Convention and habit are women's enemies here, and reason their ally. Habit decrees that what seems strange is impossible and "unnatural"; reason looks head on at the strange, refusing to assume that the current status quo is either immutable or in any normative sense "natural." The appeal to reason and objectivity amounts to a request that the observer refuse to be intimidated by habit, and look for cogent arguments based on evidence that has been carefully sifted for bias. (p. 59)

In line with Nussbaum's arguments from the 1990s, and despite ongoing skepticism toward rationality and autonomy, we do hear postmodernist and feminist voices in adult education calling for the promotion of epistemological rigor. Michelson (2019), for instance, speaks of developing "ethical knowers" who "account for their epistemic practices" (p. 153). Educators, she argues, should pose question such as:

What makes a source trustworthy? What kinds of background knowledge are required to make a credible truth claim? How does one evaluate the value of a piece of evidence? How do we distinguish between purported information, including information that we would like to believe, and information that we are justified in believing is true? (p. 153)

We see this focus on epistemological rigor in accordance with values and ideals of adult education, committed to assisting adults in being responsible citizens of their worlds, with the right and duty to ponder, to ask for reasons and to give arguments, to disagree, to develop their own life perspectives, and to (re)build democracy together. And, we see adult educators having the responsibility to be advocates of democracy—not for particular positions or Truth, but for reflective, thoughtful, and dialogical processes inherent in constructive dealing with differences.

Adult education has a role to play in addressing today's epistemic crisis by promoting capacities and habits of rationality, autonomy, and living with pluralism, all as gradually achievable outcomes that need to be learned and improved throughout life. To do this, we need lifelong learning, inside and beyond formal institutional contexts, to be an indispensable part of our pluralistic democratic societies. The pursuit of rationality, autonomy, and plurality relies on the extant possibilities in society to learn and practice them in various forms of *agora*. Therefore, as adult educators, we need to develop and pursue common, shared public (learning) spaces as platforms for encounters and dialogue across differences. Such formal and informal learning platforms are necessary to challenge, nuance, and otherwise develop our assumptions and beliefs—within the human horizon but beyond tribalistic dogma depending on, for example, party affiliation. A lack of such platforms for public social (constructive) deliberation is a direct threat to democracy, as there must be a mechanism to develop epistemically responsible thinkers and actors—citizens of the world(s) in which we live.


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## Notes

1. For an overview of different definitions of rationality, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bounded-rationality/>, chapter “Appraising Human Rationality.”
2. We do not elaborate on the concepts of reciprocity and homonymy here solely due to lack of space. We indeed find these concepts essential and address them in other writings.

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