



Garrison Rejoinder

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Source: *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 118, No. 3 (May 2012), pp. 395-396

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665016>

Accessed: 26/06/2014 10:11

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Forum

Garrison Rejoinder

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Lately, I have started sculpting short polemical pieces that purposefully overstate my case as a way of disrupting dominant educational discourses rather than arguing against them. Quantitative standardization and quantitative sameness are two such instances.

Participating in dialogues such as mine with Christopher Robbins, Kenneth Saltman, and John Rury allows readers to draw their own individual conclusions so they may contribute their own unique perspectives to the ongoing education dialogue about these issues. My respondents have served us much to think about. Because of limited space, I must greatly abridge my response.

My essay mentions that "Dewey's critique of Enlightenment individualism and defense of more enlightened social-cultural constructivist notions of individuality resonate throughout his writings" along with his "assault on atomistic individualism" and realization that "fundamental Enlightenment ideas employed in the founding of 'American' democracy are mostly false" (371). The Enlightenment's atomistic, liberal individual is today's neoliberal whose hyper-individual antics Robbins skillfully condemns. Robbins helps name a serious omission in my polemic: the dependence of individuality on "the public" and "its requisite variegation of substantive associations" (383), to use his apt phrases. Although I mention the social nature of Dewey's individual in my essay, I do not use it. This creates a serious imbalance. However, much of my other work explores the social nature of the mind and self; I urge interested readers to seek it out. I appreciate Rury reminding me that we cannot divorce individuals from the social context that shapes their unique potential, although I believe NCLB to be a bad context for democratic education.

Saltman captures what I was trying to say with the expression "the new

Electronically published March 27, 2012

American Journal of Education 118 (May 2012)

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0195-6744/2012/11803-0009\$10.00

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structural feudalism” (370). I thank him for following my inarticulate clues and solving far more mysteries with them than I did.

Rury worries that I never clearly define “standardization.” Perhaps, but, expressed poetically by William Blake ([1793] 1988, 44), here is what I mean: “one Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression.” If one needs something more logical, I did say “democratic moral equality celebrates *incommensurably* unique, one-time-only *qualitative* individuality. When we interpret equality in terms of *quantitative* sameness and one-size-fits-all standards, it destroys democratic moral equality” (370). I do support equalitarianism. I also support inequality as the aristocracy of everyone, hence, the critical role of incommensurable moral equality understood as individuals having an equal right to actualize their unique potential. Since it is not commensurable, moral equality fails to meet the basic criteria of even rudimentary measurement theory (it is not well ordered). This defines my point about quantitative standards precisely enough.

Rury acknowledges: “Factories influenced the early development of schools, and bureaucratic systems control eventually came to dominate them” (385–86). He never says when this ended. Robbins and Saltman show it never did. Finally, I agree that cognitive skills matter, although Tom, the child with Down syndrome portrayed in my essay, confutes Rury’s claim that “it hardly seems possible for true individuality or creativity to exist” without “the cognitive skills demanded by today’s society” (387). There is much more to say, so let the democratic dialogue continue.

Reference

Blake, William. (1793) 1988. *The Marriage Of Heaven and Hell*. In *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. New York: Anchor.

Note

I would like to thank the editors of the *American Journal of Education* for facilitating this dialogue.

JIM GARRISON is a professor of philosophy of education at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. His work concentrates on philosophical pragmatism. His most recent book is an edited work with A. G. Rud, *Teaching with Reverence: Reviving an Ancient Virtue for Today’s Schools* (Palgrave, 2012).