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THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE UNIMAGINABLE ESSENCE OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION: A POSTMETAPHYSICAL CRISIS IN TEACHING HUMANITIES AND ARTS

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Introduction: The Decline of the Sacred in the Educational Sphere.

Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God in *The Gay Science* (1882) resonates throughout contemporary debates on the crisis of modern education, particularly in the fields of humanities and arts. This death symbolizes not merely the decline of religious belief but the erosion of metaphysical structures that once underpinned the legitimacy of knowledge, culture, and values. In our neoliberal epoch, education is increasingly functionalized, stripped of metaphysical depth, and subsumed into economic logics that reduce knowledge to marketable skills. In the humanities and arts, where education once engaged deeply with questions of existence, morality, and meaning, this crisis is felt acutely.

Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God" in *The Gay Science* (1882) reverberates deeply in today's educational crisis, particularly in the humanities and arts. God's death was not simply the end of religious belief; it marked the collapse of the metaphysical structures underpinning the legitimacy of knowledge and values. In a neoliberal world, education is stripped of its transformative, existential power and reduced to a market mechanism. Where it once engaged students in the profound questions of existence, morality, and truth, education today is functionalized and commodified. As God dies, so too does the ideal of education as a transformative, metaphysical force. Neoliberal educational reforms distance themselves from metaphysical foundations, opting instead for postmetaphysical pragmatism. In this essay, we will prove that the "death of God" in education represents the death of a metaphysical horizon in which education could once engage students with profound existential and ethical questions. Instead, modern

educational systems, shaped by neoliberal ideology, function to produce sanitized, de-ideologized individuals fit for a globalized capitalist system, erasing the subject in favor of standardized outcomes. In this essay, we argue that the "death of God" in contemporary education signifies the disappearance of a metaphysical horizon, a disappearance that has deeply affected the teaching of the arts and humanities. Education no longer seeks to engage the student with the philosophical questions of life but is subsumed into an economic logic that produces de-ideologized, sanitized individuals primed for the global capitalist market.

I. Neoliberal Functionalism: Education Without Transcendence. The transformation of education into a functionalist machine is one of the clearest manifestations of the postmetaphysical crisis. Under neoliberalism, education is no longer valued for its ability to engage the student with "big questions"—the ontological inquiries that define the human experience. Instead, education is now a system of outputs: universities and schools measure success in terms of employability, marketable skills, and efficiency. This shift can be traced to Michel Foucault's concept of *governmentality*, where power operates not through coercion but through the shaping of subjects that govern themselves according to market logics. The modern student is not educated to transcend themselves, to encounter the "Other" in the Levinasian sense, but to prepare for the job market. Knowledge is consumed in neatly packaged segments, devoid of historical depth or philosophical inquiry.

Education, once a space for the transformative encounter with "the Other" (Levinas, 1961), has become a sterile environment, where the encounter with alterity is discouraged, and where the subject is reduced to an object of data—tracked, assessed, and quantified. Deleuze's (1992) notion of the "control society" is apt here: in the neoliberal university, the subject is continuously modulated and reshaped, not to become a more profound human being but to adapt to ever-shifting economic demands. The "dividual" in Deleuze's sense can be understood as the fragmented self that emerges from the sum of all the data sets, roles, or identities you are associated with. Instead of a unified, whole individual, the dividual is made up of various parts—your online profiles, consumer habits, personal data, pieces of education / information, and social roles—that are segmented and treated separately by different systems of power and control. In this sense, you are no longer just "one person" but a composite of multiple pieces of information that define how institutions and technologies perceive and manage you. It's a way of highlighting how modern life increasingly divides and distributes our identity across various platforms and networks. Under neoliberalism, education is increasingly functionalized, reduced to measurable outputs like employability, marketability, and efficiency. The value of education is no longer in its ability to lead

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students toward transcendence or to grapple with the great existential questions, but in its utility as an instrument for producing a pliable, efficient workforce. This is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari called the "deterritorialization" of knowledge. Knowledge, which once had ties to the metaphysical, is now radically immanent, serving immediate economic functions. Education today operates under a radically immanent paradigm, as Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of deterritorialization suggests. The transcendent ideals of knowledge, beauty, or moral truth no longer serve as guiding principles. Instead, education is an exercise in horizontalization, where students engage with knowledge superficially, without any promise of deeper personal or spiritual transformation. The process of learning is strictly utilitarian, paralleling the decline of metaphysical frameworks that once anchored the arts and humanities in grand narratives of human progress or ethical development.

Jean Baudrillard's critique of the hyperreal offers a useful analogy here. Just as reality has been replaced by endless simulations of itself, so too has education been transformed into an endless reproduction of shallow skills devoid of depth or meaning. Students become passive consumers of education-as-commodity, stripped of any encounter with the metaphysical or transcendent. Following Baudrillard (1994), the student in this educational system becomes an empty signifier, a mere vessel for capitalist functions rather than an active participant in the world of ideas. In Ukraine, as in many other countries following neoliberal reforms, we see a similar trend in education, where "wellness" and "self-optimization" have become central goals. Students are conditioned to view education as a means of enhancing their productivity and employability, reflecting the values of a global capitalist system (Panasiuk, 2024). Yet, as pointed out in contemporary critiques, this wellness culture only serves to further the postmetaphysical agenda, turning students into sanitized, secular subjects who are indifferent to the larger existential and moral questions that once animated education.

II. The Erasure of Metaphysical Horizons in the Humanities. The death of God in contemporary education has led to the collapse of metaphysical frameworks that once grounded disciplines like philosophy, history, and literature. In its place, postmetaphysical education embraces a radical immanence, devoid of any appeal to transcendence or ultimate values. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue in *A Thousand Plateaus*, modern capitalism deters the metaphysical and the transcendent, preferring the proliferation of immanent connections and flows of desire that support consumerism and the perpetual motion of the market. In this context, the humanities have been rendered obsolete in their traditional form. They are no longer concerned with engaging students in the search for universal truths or ethical commitments. Instead, humanities education has been rebranded as a

tool for cultivating "critical thinking" skills, detached from any moral or philosophical grounding. The student of the humanities is no longer asked to engage with questions of justice, beauty, or the good life, but to develop marketable skills like problem-solving and adaptability.

This functionalization is most visible in the arts, where the aesthetic experience has been reduced to its economic utility. Art history, for example, is no longer a space where students reflect on the sublime, as Immanuel Kant envisioned, but a site for the development of curatorial skills, auction expertise, and cultural marketing. Walter Benjamin's (1936) critique of the mechanical reproduction of art as leading to the "aura's" decline echoes here. In the neoliberal academy, the work of art loses its metaphysical significance and is treated as a commodity, valued for its exchange value rather than its capacity to evoke the sacred or the divine. The humanities have long been spaces where students engaged with the metaphysical—questions of justice, beauty, truth, and meaning. However, under the current neoliberal paradigm, the humanities are undergoing a process of depoliticization and functionalization. According to Boris Groys (2024), contemporary art and culture have lost their "magical power" to provoke deep, sacred feelings; instead, they have become instruments of secular and capitalist ideologies.

As Groys explains, this transformation is not limited to art. In education, the arts and humanities no longer provide students with an opportunity to confront the transcendent; instead, they train them in skills necessary for the cultural and creative industries. The emphasis is not on cultivating an ethical, aesthetic, or philosophical sensibility but on creating individuals capable of navigating the commodified world of art galleries, museums, and corporate cultural institutions. This shift reduces the study of the humanities to a pragmatic exercise—art history becomes about curating exhibitions, literature about marketing narratives, and philosophy about problem-solving. Neoliberalism's grip on education also flattens human subjectivity, desubjectivizing individuals and reducing them to economic actors. The educational system no longer aims to cultivate a rich, subjective experience but rather to produce sanitized, "sanitized" subjects who can function within a predefined set of socio-economic parameters. This echoes Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the individual as a desiring machine within capitalism, stripped of any intrinsic essence or subjectivity, and re-engineered to fit into the productive apparatus. Deleuze's notion of control society is useful here. As Deleuze argues, in modern societies, institutions like education no longer produce disciplined individuals (as Foucault once described) but rather modulated, flexible subjects who can quickly adapt to changing economic demands. In this educational system, the study of humanities and arts is reconfigured as a means to foster creative workers for the global marketplace.

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III. Postmetaphysical Education and the Crisis of the Arts. The retreat from metaphysical concerns has had a particularly devastating effect on the teaching of the arts. Where once the arts were spaces for encountering transcendence—the sublime, the ineffable, and the ungraspable—postmetaphysical education flattens the experience of art into something quantifiable and manageable. Giorgio Agamben's (2005) critique of modernity as a state of "permanent exception" is instructive here: in the space of education, the extraordinary nature of art has been neutralized, its capacity to disrupt and transcend reduced to nothing more than a means to an economic end. This is a direct consequence of the neoliberal need for sanitized subjects. As we see in the rise of wellness programs and therapy culture within universities, students are encouraged not to confront the Other or the sublime but to focus on their personal well-being and productivity. As Slavoj Žižek (1989) argues, the modern subject is encouraged to live in a post-ideological state, where therapy replaces metaphysics, and the focus is on self-improvement rather than existential or moral inquiry. The "sanitized" neoliberal subject is therefore incapable of encountering the radical otherness of art or thought.

This is evident in the way that art education has been restructured to prioritize "project-based learning" and "creative industries." The emphasis is no longer on cultivating an aesthetic sensibility or grappling with questions of meaning, but on producing graduates who can navigate the commodified world of art galleries, marketing firms, and digital media. The postmetaphysical subject, as Agamben notes, is a product of an "immanentist" world in which the sacred is banished, and all meaning is reduced to its immediate utility. One of the most significant impacts of the postmetaphysical crisis is visible in the arts. Historically, art has been a domain where the sacred and the sublime were encountered. The experience of the sublime, in Kant's terms, was meant to provoke reflection on the limits of reason and the vastness of existence. However, as Groys and Baudrillard argue, the postmetaphysical age has neutralized the sublime by reducing art to a mere commodity. In Ukraine, the controversy surrounding the work of artists like Serhiy Zhadan and Kristina Soloviy (2023) exemplifies this crisis. When these artists created a provocative music video in a Greek-Catholic church, it sparked outrage among traditional religious communities, who saw the act as sacrilegious. However, to the artists themselves, the church was simply a metaphor—a cultural symbol devoid of its sacred metaphysical significance. The controversy highlights the postmetaphysical turn, where even religious spaces and symbols are appropriated for secular artistic expression, detached from their original spiritual context. Baudrillard's (1994) notion of "simulacra" helps to explain this transformation. In the postmodern world, Baudrillard argues, symbols no longer refer to any underlying reality but instead circulate in a closed system of signs. In

the case of Zhadan and Soloviy's video, the church becomes just another simulacrum—a sign devoid of its original religious meaning, repurposed for aesthetic consumption. This is emblematic of the broader trend in contemporary education, where metaphysical depth is replaced by functional, surface-level engagements with culture.

IV. The Ethical Void: Education's Failure to Address the Other. The notion of the Other, central to 20th-century existentialist and phenomenological philosophy, has become almost irrelevant in contemporary education. Thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas (1961), Martin Heidegger (1962), and Martin Buber (1970) emphasized the ethical responsibility of encountering the Other as a fundamental human experience, one that transcends mere functionalism. Yet, in today's educational environment, the encounter with the Other is increasingly mediated by bureaucratic and institutional frameworks that seek to homogenize difference rather than embrace it. The most profound consequence of the postmetaphysical turn in education is the ethical void it creates. Emmanuel Levinas argued that ethics precedes ontology—that the face of the Other demands an ethical response that transcends any rational or functional calculation. However, in the neoliberal educational system, the ethical encounter is hollowed out. Ethics is no longer about confronting the Other but is instead reduced to a set of marketable skills: diversity training, corporate responsibility, and ethical compliance.

This echoes Guy Debord's (1994) analysis of the "society of the spectacle," where the image of interaction replaces the genuine, transformative encounter with the Other. In neoliberal educational settings, students are encouraged to engage with abstract notions of diversity or inclusion without ever truly encountering the Other in an ethical sense. The Other becomes a sanitized, depersonalized category to be integrated into the curriculum rather than a subject of moral engagement. Thus, education, like society at large, becomes a closed loop, reflecting only itself and reinforcing a self-referential system devoid of ethical transcendence. Levinas' philosophy emphasizes the radical alterity of the Other and the infinite responsibility this entails. However, neoliberal education, with its emphasis on self-optimization and marketability, denies this encounter. Instead, students are trained to manage ethical dilemmas through prepackaged frameworks that serve the logic of the market. This is not ethics in Levinas' sense, where the encounter with the Other disrupts and challenges the self; rather, it is ethics as another marketable commodity. For instance, in Ukrainian educational reforms, we see an increasing focus on promoting Western liberal values such as diversity, tolerance, and inclusion. These values, while progressive in theory, often serve as tools for reinforcing neoliberal ideologies, as they depoliticize and sanitize ethical issues. As Baudrillard might argue, these values have become simulacra of

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ethics, devoid of any real engagement with the complexities of human existence. Instead of confronting the radical otherness of the Other, students are taught to adopt a shallow, depersonalized form of ethical thinking. Levinas' ethical philosophy, which places the face of the Other at the heart of moral responsibility, provides a powerful lens through which to critique the ethical failures of postmetaphysical education. For Levinas (1961), ethics is "first philosophy," preceding ontology and metaphysics. However, in contemporary education, ethics has been reduced to a secondary concern, something to be addressed through "diversity training" or "corporate social responsibility" courses. These superficial engagements with ethics do not challenge the neoliberal system but rather serve to reinforce it by framing ethics as a skill to be acquired and measured.

In this postmetaphysical framework, the encounter with the Other, once the foundation of humanistic education, has been replaced by a sanitized version of "ethical training." Students are not taught to wrestle with difficult moral questions or to face the radical alterity of the Other. Instead, they are trained in pre-packaged forms of ethics that align with neoliberal values of inclusivity, tolerance, and diversity—values that, while ostensibly progressive, often serve to mask deeper inequalities and systemic problems. The "death of God" in contemporary education has led to a profound crisis—a crisis not only of knowledge but of meaning, ethics, and existence. Neoliberalism's postmetaphysical agenda has stripped education of its transformative power, reducing it to a mere instrument of economic production. The humanities and arts, once spaces for encountering the sublime, the sacred, and the ethical, have been functionalized and commodified, leaving students ill-equipped to grapple with the profound questions of life. To counter this trend, educators and philosophers must reclaim the metaphysical dimension of education. This does not mean a return to religious dogma but rather a revival of the role education can play in helping students engage with the existential and ethical questions that define human existence. Only by restoring a metaphysical horizon to education can we hope to resist the flattening effects of neoliberalism and return to a system of education that is genuinely transformative.

V. Groys and the Sacralization of the Secular. Boris Groys offers a compelling perspective on the intersection of religion, art, and secularism in modern society. In his analysis, the religious is never fully banished from the secular domain; instead, it returns in the form of "iconoclasm" and the desacralization of traditional religious symbols. Groys (2024) suggests that the very act of profaning sacred imagery—something that artists like *Pussy Riot* have famously engaged in—provokes religious sentiments that modern society struggles to repress. While contemporary art lacks the "magical power" once ascribed to it, this desacralization paradoxically reawakens the dormant religious energies that traditional institutions fail to mobilize. Groys' argument hints at the persistent metaphysical void in post-secular

society, where the sacred is reconstituted through its destruction. This notion has a direct parallel in education. The postmetaphysical world of learning does not abolish the sacred; it commodifies it. As neoliberal education forces a utilitarian view of knowledge, it displaces metaphysical inquiries with functional skills. Yet, this creates a longing for the sacred in new, paradoxical forms. The act of desacralization in the educational realm—where grand narratives and spiritual pursuits are marginalized—leaves students in a state of longing, even if they cannot name what they are longing for. In this sense, the neoliberal student becomes akin to the desacralized subject Groyes describes: detached from transcendent values yet paradoxically drawn to the remnants of metaphysical inquiry. This reaffirms the idea that God may be "dead" in modern education, but the void left behind demands some form of engagement, whether through self-optimization, identity politics, or the pursuit of individual success as a quasi-spiritual project.

VI. Foucault and the Ethics of Self-Care in Postmetaphysical Society. Michel Foucault's work on ethics, particularly in his later studies on *technologies of the self*, offers a valuable critique of how modern individuals navigate the absence of metaphysical guidance. Foucault (1984) observed that in ancient Greco-Roman thought, the idea of *self-care* was deeply intertwined with ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics. Ancient subjects were encouraged to view their lives as works of art, cultivating ethical practices that reflected their values and metaphysical commitments. In contrast, modern neoliberal education reduces the subject's ethical engagement to forms of self-regulation, focused primarily on efficiency and productivity. Foucault's (1991) concept of *governmentality* is essential to understanding how postmetaphysical education regulates the individual. Under the guise of self-care, neoliberal education encourages students to constantly manage their own emotions, behavior, and productivity. This is seen in the rise of wellness programs and mental health initiatives within educational institutions, which frame the student not as an ethical subject confronting existential dilemmas but as a self-optimizing unit within the market. Foucault would argue that this emphasis on self-care, disconnected from any larger metaphysical or ethical framework, reinforces the neoliberal order by keeping subjects engaged in an endless loop of self-surveillance. The ethical void that results from this transformation is striking. Whereas ancient subjects sought meaning through self-care as a metaphysical practice, modern students are left with the hollow pursuit of self-improvement for its own sake. This is the essence of postmetaphysical education: a system that encourages the individual to optimize themselves, but without any deeper sense of purpose or ethical engagement beyond personal success.

VII. Religion, Secularism, and the Educational Crisis. Religion and its relationship to modern secular education also play a critical role in understanding

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the current educational crisis. Groy's argument that modern art—and by extension, modern thought—lacks the "magical power" of the sacred resonates in the classroom. In secular education systems, religion is often viewed as an outdated metaphysical relic, incompatible with modern pedagogical goals. Yet, the absence of metaphysical or religious frameworks leaves a void in students' ethical and intellectual development. The desacralization of education does not mean that metaphysical questions disappear; rather, they are replaced by what Slavoj Žižek (2008) describes as the post-ideological condition, where the focus shifts to pragmatic concerns such as employability, diversity, and inclusion, all devoid of metaphysical depth. This can be seen in how contemporary education addresses "ethics" through diversity training and inclusivity initiatives. These initiatives, while important, are often devoid of the philosophical richness that comes from grappling with moral and religious traditions. Furthermore, the secularization of education, particularly in Western contexts, has led to a suspicion of any form of religious engagement. Groy's points to the irony of modern societies that react strongly against religious symbolism, even as they fail to offer compelling alternatives for meaning. The post-secular student is thus caught between a world that denies the relevance of religion and a system of education that fails to provide a meaningful substitute. This tension can be seen in the rise of movements that blend spirituality with neoliberal ideals, such as the wellness and mindfulness movements that permeate modern curricula.

Conclusion: Toward a Post-Neoliberal Education. As we reflect on the death of God in contemporary education, it becomes clear that the crisis we face is not merely institutional or economic but existential. The absence of a metaphysical framework has led to the reduction of education to a functionalist, market-driven process, where students are prepared not for life in its fullest sense but for a narrow form of economic survival. In this context, the arts and humanities, once the guardians of existential and ethical inquiry, have been reduced to irrelevant relics in the post-metaphysical classroom. Yet, this very crisis presents an opportunity for reimagining education beyond the strictures of neoliberalism. A post-neoliberal education would reject the purely functionalist model and embrace a form of learning that recognizes the importance of ethical responsibility, subjective growth, and metaphysical inquiry. It would restore the arts and humanities to their rightful place as spaces of existential exploration, where students are encouraged to engage with the profound questions that shape human existence. Only then can education transcend the limitations imposed by neoliberalism and once again become a space for genuine transformation. By addressing the loss of metaphysical meaning in education, we might rekindle a sense of purpose that moves beyond economic utility and towards a more expansive vision of what it means to learn, to be human, and to encounter the world in all its complexity.

Incorporating such thinkers as Deleuze, Baudrillard, Žižek, and others, and examples from Ukrainian curriculum and arts deepens the critique of postmetaphysical education by linking it to broader cultural and ethical shifts. Agamben, Heidegger and Foucault highlight how the erasure of metaphysical structures leads to new, often paradoxical, forms of engagement with the sacred, ethics, and the self. This further demonstrates how the "death of God" in education is not merely an academic problem but a profound cultural crisis.

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