The Role of Truth in Social Justice Education … and Elsewhere[1]

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It is a pleasure to share this stage with three of my favorite people in PES, and an honor to have a chance to engage the thoughtful reflections in this Presidential Address. There are few topics meatier than the concept of truth and, as Professor Applebaum makes clear, there are few topics more actively in play in contemporary philosophy and theory. I admire the basic approach she takes, which is to endeavor to avoid certain easy dualisms and either/or choices, and if my suggested approach to these questions is different from hers, I think it partakes of the same philosophical spirit.

Starting with her title, one wonders first of all whether these philosophical issues are in any way particular to the field of social justice education. I think they are not, though social justice educators probably feel some of these tensions more keenly. On the one hand, social justice education, as she makes clear, needs a conception of truth if part of its purpose is to highlight struggles over injustice, inclusion, and unequal relations of power. If appeals to social justice are to have force, both critically and in terms of inspiring action to transform inequities, then the diagnoses offered cannot be merely matters of opinion or versions proffered by subscribers to theory A, B, or C. In some sense, these inequities need to be seen as *real*. On the other hand, Professor Applebaum argues, one part of systems of unequal power is the way in which certain discourses operate. Social justice educators are going to be especially attuned to the biases and exclusions built into certain ways of speaking, including certain authoritative and privileged ways of speaking about the truth.

But, having said that, I think that these are also real concerns in physics, medicine, marriages, and giving directions to the grocery store. In any of these contexts, questions of how discourses of truth reinforce unequal power and status may come into play. There is nothing unique to social justice education in this regard.

Professor Applebaum's approach to these questions is interesting because she resists buying into a duality that is common in the literature. Discourse theories are usually seen as relativizing matters of truth, since your discourse of truth isn't my discourse of truth, and since the bases of evaluation between different discourses of truth aren't normally epistemic, but settled on the basis of political effects (*qui bono*). Professor Applebaum resists that tendency, and argues that we need both defensible assertions of what is the case, *and* a sensitivity to how discourses have power effects. Citing Audre Lorde, she says that the Master's tools may be "tools that we might not be able to live without" and that they cannot be abandoned simply because they are the Master's tools. This doesn't mean they cannot be questioned and criticized. Privileged assertions of the truth are privileged for reasons that go beyond their epistemic grounding. Institutional advantages, the conservative force of tradition, and the power and status of the advocates for certain assertions, for example, all contribute to the force that certain truth claims have over us. And even

when they *are* true, these other factors create a context that can shield such claims from scrutiny, and that gives them an unquestioned naturalness, which is itself not epistemically grounded. Critics are right to question that.

At the same time, she makes clear, the arguments around the discursivization of everything lead us into some blind alleys. It is true that we can interrogate the vocabularies and practices through which "truths are produced and sustained." There isn't a view from nowhere. Every truth claim is made by someone, in a position, in an historical context, in a set of discursive relations to other people. To this extent, she says, "truth is an effect of discourse," and these discursive moves "do things" to and for people. But she is unwilling to go all the way to positioning every truth claim as just another discursive move. One reason why a social justice educator will be reluctant to do that is that there are circumstances where *other* positions are meant to be privileged: where standpoint, experience, or the position of alterity are claimed to be *epistemically superior*; where the voice of witnessing, the voice of experience, the voice of the outsider, are all taken to be more reliable perspectives on a set of circumstances than the authoritative, dominant view. This compensatory epistemic privileging has little force unless one can claim that these non-dominant assertions are, for various reasons, *more true*. And if one is going to try to argue that they are more true, one is going to end up making arguments that look like very familiar discussions about evidence, perception, consistency, reliability, and the way things are. There are those damn Master's tools again.

As I said at the outset, I like views that try to abide in tensions and avoid easy either/or choices. And so I appreciate Professor Applebaum's decision to try to hold both ends of the rope: to want to keep both the notion of truth and the critique of privileged discourses of truth. But I want to briefly sketch another way of going at this problem – one that builds these tensions into the very notion of truth. Then I want to say something about ignorance.

I have been interested for a long time in conceptions that try to build moral content into the idea of truth itself. Drawing from an idea that Suzanne Rice and I have written about, truthfulness can be seen as a communicative virtue.[2] Truthfulness includes the idea of respect for the truth, but is also more than that. We don't always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – nor should we. We have considerations such as keeping confidences, politeness, and appropriateness to context and relationships to keep in mind; in short, we can provide too much truth sometimes, as well as too little. Moreover, even telling the truth (a literal but carefully bounded truth) can be deceptive. For all these reasons, as a communicative virtue, "telling the truth" needs qualification.

Bernard Williams describes truthfulness as involving *accuracy* and *sincerity*.[3] Accuracy is, I take it, an intentional term: we are, one might say, *aiming* at the truth. But the truth is often a moving target, or we're a moving subject. The light may be dim, or the object too far away. We *try* to be truthful, but in many contexts it is more difficult than we can manage. For Williams, as for Jürgen Habermas,[4] sincerity, as part of truthfulness, requires not only that we endeavor to speak the truth, but also that we are honest about our motives in the truths *we* choose to speak. (I highlight

"we" because who we are in relation to what we are saying might also be relevant.) If someone chooses to report that "African Americans, on average, score lower on certain intelligence tests," it is no defense to simply say, "Well, it's true" (even if it is true). Why are you saying it? Why are *you* saying it, here, now, to this group of people? The statement means different things when it comes from the mouth of someone arguing against equal opportunity programs for African Americans; or from a black activist arguing that the tests are racist, even though they are pointing to the same fact.

Sincerity forces us to take responsibility for the effects of what we say, and for the intentions behind our saying it. And this isn't, it seems to me, an additional or external consideration outside of speaking the truth; because speaking the truth, or endeavoring to speak the truth, is always a communicative speech act and, as such, questions of moral responsibility to others are intrinsic to it.

This is my suggested alternative solution to Professor Applebaum's problem. It posits the idea that the endeavor to be truthful is an imperfect human aspiration. It makes the notion of truth pragmatic and contextual, without becoming relativistic. Most of all, it holds truth-tellers responsible for the positions (including positions of privilege), the intentions, and the effects entailed by what they say, even when – perhaps especially when – what they say is also true. Truth in this picture doesn't stand alone; it isn't its own justification. Sometimes there are other, more salient, considerations than simply "telling the truth" including, in many contexts, considerations of social justice.

Let me close by picking up another important theme in Professor Applebaum's paper, the problem of *ignorance*. One of the things I learned from my former student Jennifer Logue is that there are different kinds of ignorance.[5] There is the ignorance of simply not knowing something that you could not be expected to know. There is the ignorance of not knowing something that you could have known if you had made the effort to find out. There is the ignorance of not knowing something that you *should* have made the effort to find out. There is the willful ignorance of refusing to acknowledge something that is quite evidently the case. There is the ignorance of suppressed or unconscious understandings that one may be unable or unwilling to fully acknowledge, even though at some level one knows them. There are also other forms of partial ignorance – that degree of knowledge beyond which one is not willing to go. Like Applebaum, Logue relates these issues of ignorance to the complex forms of implication and responsibility for whites in a racist society.

The framework of truthfulness, I want to suggest, provides a way of thinking about the various kinds and degrees of moral responsibility tied to these different kinds of ignorance, and why we find them problematic – but not from a standpoint that juxtaposes truth and ignorance. On the contrary, there are kinds and degrees of both, and at some points they intersect.

1. Thanks to Joyce Atkinson, Cris Mayo, and Joyce Tolliver for comments on previous versions.

2. Suzanne Rice and Nicholas Burbules, "Communicative Virtues and Educational Relations," *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. Henry Alexander (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993): 34-44; Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (1991): 393-417.

3. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 246.

4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. I (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984).

5. Jennifer Logue, "The Unbelievable Truth and the Dilemmas of Ignorance," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2008): 54-62.