Humpty Dumpty
An Ovular Model of Resistance to Modernist Recidivism

Kathryn Pauly Morgan
University of Toronto

I am delighted to respond to Nick Burbules's paper, "Deconstructing 'Difference' and the Difference This Makes to Education." I see this exchange as an opportunity to engage in dialogue that we both prize: dialogue (hopefully) marked by a spirit of openness, a willingness to take risks, and by a commitment to work together to respond not only with clarity but with a sense of social justice to some of the deepest struggles and challenges in contemporary North American educational settings. These aspirations, these commitments are what we share, what we have in common. They are important facets of our sameness.

Consider, however, one salient (possibly imaginary) difference: Nick likes to talk; I don't. This means that if I wanted to find Nick, in a contemporary North American urban setting, I would look for him in pubs and coffee-houses, in classrooms and public arenas. I would look at the volume of letters, faxes, and email messages originating with him. I would look at the positions of responsibility he has taken on which involve locution and interlocution. I, on the other hand, am more likely to be found in the solitude of a garden or forest, or happily occupying a corner in the rustling reading room of a library, or strolling down a path accompanied only by a silent dog. I find email mostly oppressive, functioning as yet another locus of communicative demands.

Bringing these conjectured differences into focus is important. Can we see these alleged differences? What is visible — and public — is our sameness. Both of us have had our white privileged gendered identities constructed and have actively participated in constructing those identities through speech, through words in The Philosophy of Education Society, and through our public, professional lives as graduate students, teachers, researchers, authors, and colleagues. Both of us are, I hope, not only talking heads but also talking hearts.

But — remember my original conjecture — Nick likes to talk; I don't. What kind of difference is this between us? Can it fit any of the categories or kinds which are spelled out in this paper? Is it helpful to invoke the notion of Sameness-in-Difference in order to understand this difference? What might be gained or lost if the Burbules typology — the map, the guide, the concordance, the translation, the codebook — comes between us?

SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE: AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

I find myself in agreement with Burbules on six major claims. (On optimistic days, this leads me to believe that Burbules is right about these points). They are:

(1) That differences that make a difference are defined only in terms of a larger system of relations.

(2) That Difference Theory is important because it unmasks systematically the pseudo-naturalness of categories.

(3) That attending to difference, as a matter of methodological and substantive principle, can make the previously invisible visible. (This is crucial in revealing relations of privilege and oppression in the construction and control over categories of sameness and difference.)

(4) That assimilation, mediated appropriated subjectivity, and disempowering rejection are intolerable choices for those labeled "different" in relation to a dominant group.

(5) That communication and understanding is, in principle, possible across differences.

(6) That, as educators, our ultimate task should be the critical (re)examination of the construction and content of difference, not simply mere tolerance or simple celebration of difference.

However, we also disagree, and disagreements constitute differences. What will this mean for our re-positioning? Here are three:

(1) Difference and Social Change:

Burbules maintains that Difference Theory carries with it a commitment to social change. Setting aside the tautological claim where even perpetuating the *status quo* counts as change, it seems to me that this claim is not always true. Federalists in Quebec, who are clearly different from Separatists, want no change. Neo-Conservative skinheads want social change in the sense that they want culture in the United States and Europe to move back to retrenched white European supremacist dominance. But this is not, I suspect, what Burbules means by "social change" which, in his framework, is given a more progressive spin. Here I simply disagree. Difference Theory is, as far as I can determine, as congenial a theory to white supremacists as it is to anti-racist activists. And both groups may be working with some version of identity politics which entails difference. And it is as consistent with a permanently static situation as it is with one of change.

(2) (A-)Symmetries of Constraint and Distortion:

Burbules maintains that "a wholesale emphasis on difference is just as constraining and distorting as the presumption of sameness." I disagree. While there are, indeed, difficulties with the reification of differences — one of the main difficulties with some versions of identity politics and theorizing[1] — there are, I believe, major consequences of the normative totalizations of sameness which are not generated equally by an appeal to difference: invisibility, dismissal, marginality, ridicule, solipsism, trivialization, bias, oppression, terrorization, extermination, and genocide.[2] While Burbules notes intolerable pressures to conform, he appears to believe that a "wholesale emphasis on difference is *just as* constraining." I do not believe this for conceptual, political, and historical reasons.

(3) Conceptualizing Multiculturalism:

Burbules says that "multiculturalism…is as much about a critical reflection on our own culture, our art, our science, our ethics, and so on, as it is about the exploration of other cultures." I am uneasy with this characterization. I wonder who the "our" is in this passage, the "our" that can claim a culture, an art, a science, an

ethics. My difficulty with this (common) characterization of multiculturalism is that it presupposes a level playing field based on the assumption of the existence of *multi*-cultures or a politics to create such a playing field. But what if:

(a) you might not have "a" culture, like women, for example.

(b) you might not have your "own culture," like colonial and post-colonial cultures, for example.

(c) you might not be seen as "having a culture" by those in the dominant culture, like lesbians, gays, transgendered individuals.

Apart from the problematic privileging of culture itself, Burbules's use of the language of cultural frames of reference renders many metaphysical and political questions about culture invisible.[3]

MODERNIST RECIDIVISM IN ACTION: TURNING THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF SAMENESS

At first read, Burbules clearly takes a post-modern, anti-naturalist, anti-foundationalist line. He argues that both difference and sameness are made, not born; that sameness and similarities should not be reified; that systems of sameness and difference have origins, grow out of cultures, and are open to simultaneous multiplicity.

But remember the original appropriation of the Sausurrian principle: "Differences…are defined only in terms of that larger system of relations." Burbules's allegiance to this principle leads him, I suggest, to what I think of as "modernist recidivism" as a second order position as he (re-)turns and (re-)turns, in his typology, the Kaleidoscope of Sameness, with hints of nostalgia for the universal.[4] Like Plato who warns true philosophers not to "lose themselves and wander amid the multiplicities of multifarious things,"[5] Burbules foreshadows the importance of the Kaleidoscope of Sameness in three important ways:

(1) as a principle of meaning (the Saussurian assumption);

(2) as a principle of political innocence (no attempt to establish sameness is inherently biased or oppressive);

(3) as a principle of substantive priority over modal variability (groups and individuals may pursue common goals in different ways).

It is not surprising, then, that refrains of sameness permeate his discussion of the Difference Typology as he promises to "explore how there are actually different kinds of difference and *how difference actually implies sameness*" [emphasis added]. Whether it is difference in variety, degree, variation, version, or difference by way of analogy, difference is always trumped by the sameness-conferring element: significant category over variable kind, continuum over degree, basic elements over variation, basic key elemental structural form over version, and singular shared frame of reference over diverse analogies. From this analytical typology, Burbules draws the following conclusion:

> [T]he discussion in each case shows, I think clearly shows, that one can only talk about a "difference" against the background of something that is shared in common — that the very assertion of difference says that we agree that something is important and that we share at least some broad understandings of what it is and why it is important. Contexts of radical, *incommensurable* difference are, therefore, relatively rare.

Leaving aside the various *non sequiturs* in this passage, I wish to argue that what we have here is full-blown second-order modernism at its most optimistic (with its humanist educational agenda waiting in the wings).[6] Is it recidivism? I think so.

How Does/should the Typology Work?

Burbules suggests that we ought to see the typology as a map, a guide, or as a codebook. I am uneasy with this proposal because of various epistemic and political associations with maps: the strong realism, the transcendent positionality of the map-maker, the privileged normative status of the particular map which is accorded objective, authoritative standing, the irrelevance accorded to individual and particular subgroup "maps," the exploitative colonial and economic history of map-making, and the role of maps as instruments of domination. Analogous remarks could be made about codebooks which presumably are designed to construct sameness. So I believe we should resist these metaphors — and that, at least, the first-order-Burbules should resist too.

On a stronger note, I wish to urge us away from such typological thinking in principle. Why?

(1) The typology produces a kind of conceptual stillness, a kind of horizontal thinking that camouflages the extent to which types in the typology are, themselves, sites of contestation.[7] Is race, for example, to be seen as a version, a variation, a difference in degree, a variety of sorts? Each of these alternatives has its history, its politics, and its theory-laden consequences.[8] My fear here is that focusing on the typology deflects attention away from political action and the politics of typology construction.

(2) Emphasis on the typology as a map, as a guidebook, urges us to see through the typology, to experience and look at the world, to trivialize difference when commonality cannot be found (since it won't appear on the typology), to search for some commonality when we may really be living radical incommensurability because of our locations within certain frames of interpretation. This allegiance to the typology can lead to distortion, bias, and/or denial of the primacy and frequency of this incommensurability.[9]

The moral: Use the map, the codebook, the typology with great caution if at all. *It is not innocent*.

Enter Humpty Dumpty: Modernist Resistor

Like some other contemporary theorists, I wish to advocate consideration of more radical positional heterogeneity than can be conceptualized or lived through multiculturalism or identity politics. Enter Humpty Dumpty, HD, the multipositional subject.

HD is, preeminently, interested in coalescences, resemblances, positionings, blendings, emergences. HD lives, inspires, and nurtures metaphors, symbols, art, politics, and ethical reflections through his(?) multi-sited heterogeneity.

Like many other living beings, HD is best if produced by free-ranging mothers. HD's strong, delicate shell reveals mysteries to us of the state of our eco-system and warns us of toxic dangers, warning us to tread lightly as we "walk on eggs" as an

oppressor species on the earth. HD's potential for growth and plasticity can be destroyed in one form only for it to be nurtured in another. Gently treated, once rent asunder, HD reappears as golden hollandaise sauce or the snowy peaks of soft or hard meringue. HD is capable of binding other agents together, of building commonality, of serving as the emblematic confirmation of male intellectual power. HD can be crafted into exquisite emblems of wealth as aristocratic Russian porcelain eggs — or hollowed out into breathtakingly fragile Ukranian fertility symbols. HD can be hard-boiled into weapons, flung raw in acts of political disdain. The HD's of the world resist positionality on the typology. Where can HD fit? Is HD a kind of variety, a variation, a difference of degree, a version, an analogy? I don't know, and I find myself resisting becoming involved because I don't want to lose HD in the process. Perhaps there is an important lesson here about the fluidity, the multipositionality of difference that eludes the typology.

A FINAL WORD

Like Burbules, I recognize the importance of moral and political intersubjectivity as the precondition for genuinely educational dialogue. I, too, struggle with difference and sameness in my classrooms, in my communities. Searching for compassion and justice, mutuality and connectedness is what we have in common in the midst of our philosophical differences. Maybe it's time to look for a chicken.

---

1. For sustained critiques of identity politics see Linda Martin Alcoff, "Philosophy and Racial Identity," *Radical Philosophy* 75 (Jan/Feb 1996): 5-14; Himani Bannerji, "But Who Speaks for Us? Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms," in *Unsettling Relations: the University as a Site of Feminist Struggles*, ed. Himani Bannerji, Linda Carty, Kari Dehli, Susan Heald, and Kate McKenna (Toronto, ON: The Women's Press, 1991), 67-108; Seyla Benhabib, "From Identity Politics to Social Feminism: A Plea for the Nineties," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael Katz (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 22-35; Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge, l994); Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

2. For example, sameness in the sense of conforming to (hetero-) sexual/gender dimorphism can and has been brought about through pre-natal euthanasia, surgical intervention, pharmaceutical control, or extermination of "deviants." It is hard to see how normative emphasis on difference-in-principle could generate such atrocities in the area in question.

3. For a trenchant criticism of this empiricist version of multiculturalism, see Bannerji, "But Who Speaks for Us?" 85-86. See also Peter McLaren, "White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism," in *MultiCulturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, l994), 45-74 for an analysis of the invisibility of whiteness. Burbules agrees in principle with these criticisms when he stresses the constructedness of difference, but they do not appear to impact on his model of multiculturalism. See also Nicholas C. Burbules, "Education, Discourse, and the Construction of Identity," in Katz, ed., *Philosophy of Education 1994*, 36-40

4. Burbules appears to suffer from a mild, hopefully curable case of what Elizabeth Spelman calls "plethoraphobia." See Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), 160-61. Spelman cites this quote from the *Republic* in her discussion.

5. Plato *Republic* 454b.

6. The most striking of these *non sequiturs* is the last sentence. It is often claimed that the suggestion of rarity can only be made from a position of privileged integrity. I believe that lived radical incommensurable difference is, in fact, common. I argue this in "Women and Moral Madness," in *Science, Morality, and Feminist Theory*, ed. Marcia Hanen, Kai Nielsen, *Canadian Journal of*

Philosophy 13 (1987): 201-26. Other feminist theorists who explore the theoretical potential of this notion are Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Press, l987); Braidotti, op cit. See especially the chapter "Introduction: By Way of Nomadism," 1-39; the authors in *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*, ed. Carol Camper (Toronto, ON: Sister Vision Press, 1994), Sneja Gunew, "Feminism and the Politics of Irreducible Differences: Multiculturalism/ethnicity/race," in *Feminism and The Politics of Difference*, ed. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1993), 1-19; Maria Lugones, "Hispaneando y Lesbiando: On Sarah Hoagland's Lesbian Ethics," *Hypatia* 5, no. 3 (1990): 138-46, "Playfulness, 'World' Traveling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3-19; and Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism,* ed. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1984), 9-64.

6. Bannerji, op cit. develops this point on pages 85-86. Burbules distinguishes between essentialist and voluntaristic identity theory. He also discusses the construction of identity as an important issue. My remarks here pertain to more essentialist versions which are likely to be conceptualized through typologies.

7. See Critical Race Theory for more analysis. For example, see David Theo Goldberg, *MultiCulturalism*, op cit., in particular, the chapter "Critical Multiculturalism," by the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, 114-39; David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, l993); and Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Matha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (Cambridge: The MIT Press and The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1990).

8. It can also lead to injustice for oppressed groups. Think about the politics surrounding "designated equity groups" which are made visible and targeted and those groups rendered invisible in the process. Think, too, about the inconsistency about individuals who are simultaneously privileged, for example, by class position, but who also belong to designated oppressed equity groups. These complications plague any affirmative action programs which work with finite typologies. Benhabib, op cit, makes a similar point.

9. For theoretical elaborations of this notion, see the sources in footnote 6. For a pedagogical exploration of multipositionality, see Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault in the chapter "Toward Positional Pedagogies," in *The Feminist Classroom* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 201-27