Aporia and Humility: Virtues of Democracy

Karen Sihra

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

The search for what defines democracy overall, and democratic education in particular, is a preoccupation for a number of theorists. Heesoon Bai defines democracy using its literal translation, whereby people have the power of self-determination and self-government.[1] However, this is a broad definition; using it raises a plethora of questions including what is meant by self-determination and self-government. Questions also arise regarding the different types of democracy, such as conservative or progressivist,[2] or around what is meant by the conceptual apparatus of democracy, such as equality, voting, or participation.[3] Although defining democracy through asking these questions empirically is an important task, philosophy is charged with exploring an equally significant issue, namely, what are the philosophical dimensions of democracy? Put another, perhaps more contestable way, what are the virtues of democracy? From very different positions, both Bai and Chantal Mouffe tackle this question.

Bai insists upon a model of liberal democracy that relies on a specific notion of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity for Bai is characterized by care, respect, related-ness, and empathy. Given that these characteristics present philosophical demo-cratic problems as questions of how individuals relate to one another in efforts to reconcile the "good" for the individual and the "right" for society, Bai seems to argue that questions of democracy are primarily moral.[4] Alternatively, Mouffe questions the very presence of morality in political democratic discussions, arguing that democracy is best served through what she terms agonistic pluralism, which recognizes conflict as embedded in modern democracy and seeks ways to resolve it through a struggle between adversaries as opposed to enemies.[5] Mouffe can be seen to point to the characteristics of Bai's intersubjectivity as an appeal to the moral which, for Mouffe, is problematic when dealing with democracy in a *political* framework. Although Bai and Mouffe differ in their expectations and perceptions of democracy, I argue that they approach the project of democracy with at least one shared democratic virtue, namely humility.[6] Furthermore, that Bai and Mouffe both maintain such different positions but still prioritize humility demonstrates that democracy — whether in the classroom or the broader public — requires humility. The thread of humility that runs through these discussions has particular relevance to democratic education.

This essay is presented in three parts. First, I outline what I mean by humility in a philosophical context. Second, I highlight the differences between Bai's and Mouffe's argument to show that although their views on democracy are nearly polar opposites, they both rely upon a notion of humility. Finally, I discuss the implications of understanding humility as a condition of democracy within educa-tion.

SOCRATIC HUMILITY

My use of the term humility in this context implies a specific meaning. Humility is often thought of as a religious or spiritual virtue. In such a context, individuals are encouraged to recognize their complete dependence upon an external authority, such as God, because of one's inferiority to His/Her/Its knowledge. Philosophical humility, while similar in some ways, must be distinguished from this type of religious humility. Indeed, there are many religious traditions that do not subscribe to the idea of an external authority in quite the same way as I have described; however, given the predominance of this view in current contexts — and in Western democratic traditions — the distinction between religion and philosophy here, and in this context, is significant.

Philosophical humility expects and relies upon some of the same conditions. We are encouraged to inquire about what we do not know and strive to come closer to what we may know. On the other hand, the idea of an external authority cannot be applied to philosophical humility. Philosophical humility accepts that there are things we cannot know, but not because of an external authority. Instead, it relies upon characteristics we already possess, including reason, intuition, imagination, and sensations.[7]

There is much debate around the existence of humility in philosophical traditions that seek to uncover an all-encompassing truth or knowledge of things. Leo Strauss, for example, looks at ancient theorists like Plato and concludes that a small number of privileged elite can indeed attain and possess knowledge of things and with it comes the responsibility to incorporate this knowledge into the lives of the ignorant masses.[8] This is but one reading of Plato, however. Philosophers like Tim Simpson hold that Plato was arguing something significantly different.

Simpson argues that Plato did not believe that philosophy is a pursuit to *possess* knowledge. Instead, the presence of dialogue, myths, and dreams in Plato's writings actually suggests attention to the *limits* of knowledge. Simpson cites Josef Pieper, who writes on Plato's rejection of a pursuit to possess wisdom:

> The quest for essence really implies a claim on comprehension. And comprehension is to know something in such a way as it is possible for it to be known…but there is nothing that the human being can know in this way or comprehend in this strict sense…It is a property of philosophy that it reaches toward a wisdom that nevertheless remains unreachable by it; but this is not to say that there is no relationship at all between question and the answer. This wisdom is the object of philosophy but as something lovingly sought, not as something "possessed"…It therefore belongs to the nature of philosophy that it only "has" its object in the manner of a loving search.[9]

The search Pieper describes must begin with humility; without it, wisdom is not sought, but acquired. A "search" means there is something to look for, to uncover, to discover. Searching does not mean there is something to be acquired.

Key to Plato's search for wisdom is the notion of *aporia*, understood by Simpson to be more than the mere recognition of a logical puzzle. *"The purpose of aporia is not simply to clear the ground of faulty reasoning, as important as that is. But, more importantly, it is to suspend comfortable conceit — pride — and elicit a

more humble attitude for the search."[10] *Aporia* functions to clarify faulty reasoning and to establish a stronger foundation for inquiry. The "logical puzzle" does not, therefore, necessarily imply a fitting together of pieces to assemble the larger picture. *Aporia* serves, in a way, to disassemble the pieces of inquiry and question what we think we know. *Aporia* can be seen as a necessary condition for philosophical humility in this sense.

Humility understood as a nonreligious search for knowledge fostered by *aporia* has a significant role for democracy. Although neither Bai nor Mouffe overtly recognize their dependence upon this understanding of humility, I argue that both of their arguments do rely on it.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND AGONISTIC PLURALISM

Mouffe argues vehemently against the approach to democracy that Bai proposes. Both are concerned with a similar question, namely, how do we reconcile difference in democracy? Yet where Bai encourages intersubjectivity among individuals in democracy, Mouffe holds that it is precisely this type of thinking that silences what she terms "the political" and discredits the importance of political collective identities. Mouffe states: "The political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification; the political always has to do with the formation of an 'Us' as opposed to a 'Them', with conflict and antagonism" (*PP*, 5). Bai, on the other hand, argues that we are "irrevocably unique individuals and cannot be reduced to sameness."[11] For Bai, democracy is not a bargaining game. It is instead a place that initiates a faith in collective wisdom. This faith emerges from mutual inquiry, consultation, and deliberation fostered by care, relatedness, and understanding. Establishing a collective wisdom in this way is what Bai terms intersubjectivity, whereby subjectivity is "shared, so that there is a transfusion of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and desires taking place…We become intersubjective beings when, through sharing ourselves, we are open to each other's subjectivity and allow its transfusion across our individual differences."[12] Intersubjectivity requires, therefore, a form of democracy best described as deliberative. Bai places the responsibility upon the individual in her approach, whereby democratic self-determination and self-governance is found in relationships that have the ability to reconcile differences between individual conceptions of determination and governance.

Alternatively, for Mouffe, democracy has very little, if anything at all, to do with the individual. In fact, to call upon the individual's capacity to participate in deliberative democracy leads to the end of politics, because deliberative democracy views "political problems [as], by nature, moral and can, therefore, be addressed rationally. The objective of a democratic society, in this view, is the creation of a rational consensus" (*PP*, 2). Creating a rational consensus denies that the very existence of identity relies upon the establishment of differences — differences which are often constructed hierarchically. Indeed, Bai's notion of intersubjectivity does not rely upon an individual that is oblivious to his or her identity, and therefore group membership; but it is the individual who is left to the task of reconciling these differences. "Liberalism's individualism means it cannot understand the formation

of collective identities" (*PP*, 5). Mouffe argues that it is the reconciliation that liberalism equips itself with that is problematic. Consensus achieved through rationalism must, by its very nature, negate antagonisms, yet antagonism is that which defines "the political." Mouffe distinguishes the political from politics, "which refers to the set of practices and institutions the aim of which is to create order, to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always conflictual because they are traversed by 'the political'…one could say that 'the political' is situated at the level of the ontological, while politics belong to the ontic" (*PP*, 7). Therefore, for Mouffe, *the political* in a liberal democratic framework is necessarily absent. "Liberalism has to negate antagonism since antagonism, by highlighting the inescapable moment of decision — in the strong sense of having to make a decision on an undecidable terrain — reveals the limits of any rational consensus" (*PP*, 5). Although it is questionable whether Bai subscribes to a liberal notion of the individual, Bai's project does indeed seek to, and believes it can, negate antagonism.

Mouffe's response to deliberative democracy's view that an inclusive consensus can be built is what she terms agonistic pluralism. Agonistic pluralism insists identity be based in the political, which is always a collective identity. She argues that as a result, one of the primary challenges of democracy is uncovering ways to "domesticate hostility and to defuse the potential antagonism in all human relations." To do this, others must cease to be seen as enemies. Instead, those with differing opinions and political beliefs should be seen as adversaries who must be fought, but their "right to defend those ideas will never be questioned" (*PP*, 8). The right to hold differing opinions and beliefs is central to Mouffe's argument, as democratic society, defined through agonistic pluralism, must have mechanisms to seek out and debate possible alternatives.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMILITY

It is the recognition of and consideration for difference that presents a commonality between Bai and Mouffe. Both Bai and Mouffe are seeking to uncover how to bring forth a notion of democracy that can address difference in the most effective way and therefore work against hegemonic practices. Although the two positions are in stark opposition, there is at least one common virtue in both of the presentations, namely the presence of philosophical humility. Above I defined philosophical humility as a nonreligious search for knowledge through *aporia* with the acceptance that knowledge can never be attained or possessed. While it is clear that neither Bai nor Mouffe make any claims to an external authority, religious or not, their belief in a continuous search for knowledge through *aporia* highlights the need for humility in democracy, and is therefore worthy of closer examination.

Neither Bai nor Mouffe argue that knowledge is something to be acquired. In fact, they both outline, in their own ways, a way to search for knowledge. Bai's argument does this through a belief in the common good as something that emerges through intersubjectivity. However, an establishment of the common good does not imply that knowledge is now possessed. On the contrary, a common good derived from intersubjectivity is characterized by care and relatedness. Care and relatedness do not cease when a common good is found, and as a result, the common good is

continually subject to dialogue, which requires understanding. For Bai, it is understanding that is the source of power that fuels democracy. It is not that we can understand knowledge in its entirety, but that we can attempt to understand the other's subjectivity. As a result, we are in a constant effort to understand because of our relatedness to others.

Bai's notion of intersubjectivity is, however, faced with challenges, most significantly, instrumentalism. Instrumentalism fosters a view that the world is merely an object, and therefore a resource or tool for our personal gain. It alienates the self and makes intersubjectivity, or a search for knowledge, impossible. Intersubjectivity encourages an "aporetic" experience. It wants to question the logical puzzles created by dominant practices. Intersubjectivity also ensures we do not replace one hegemonic practice with another. It questions the logical puzzle of hegemonic practices through questioning what we know and accepting the limits of what we can know.

Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism is equally attentive to the limits of knowledge. She questions the logic of liberalism which views political questions as moral by nature, and therefore faces such questions with a belief that they can be rationally addressed. The most problematic aspect of liberalism's logic is that it "relies on a conception of being as presence, conceiving of objectivity as being inherent in things themselves. As a result it cannot apprehend the process by which political entities are constructed" (*PP*, 6). Hence, liberalism falls into the very trap it claims to avoid, namely exclusion.

In response, Mouffe's argument for agonistic pluralism creates an "aporetic" experience through recognizing the hostility and potential antagonism in all human relations and then highlights the ways liberalism fails to address "the political." An understanding of the other as enemy cannot drive the search for knowledge of these antagonisms. Instead, Mouffe seeks to establish an "Us-Them" distinction that is compatible with pluralism and not dependent on a Them that becomes an other that is seen to be "questioning our identity and threatening our existence" (*PP*, 7). Mouffe's Us-Them distinction relies instead on the role of an "adversary" as opposed to the "enemy" of liberal logic. Viewed in this way, there remains a belief in the common democratic principle of "liberty and equality for all" even if there is disagreement around its interpretation. Disagreement is not problematic for Mouffe. The problem arises when the other is seen as an enemy to be destroyed, whether through silencing or through physical harm. Mouffe's insistence that we "hear" our adversaries implies that there are indeed things to be learned, and that although we may believe our political positions, we do not possess an absolute knowledge of these positions.[13]

Despite their very different approaches to democratic questions, Bai's and Mouffe's searches for a way to address difference and different ways of knowing demonstrates that humility is a necessary virtue in democracy. Their different approaches to uncovering ways that seek to eradicate hegemony and establish practices that bring us closer to democracy rely equally on others (whether others are

understood as individuals or collective identities) to uncover aspects of democracy that we have yet to come to know.

Humility and Democratic Education

HUMILITY AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

I hope to have shown, through using near opposite perspectives, that philosophical humility is a virtue and a necessary condition for democracy as Bai and Mouffe define it.[14] Accepting this has specific implications for democratic education. Indeed, the presence of democracy in an educational setting and as a pedagogical approach has been the focus of a broad range of inquiry. Specifically, the papers in Megan Boler's *Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence: Democratic Dialogue in Education* tackle many of the challenges of fostering and promoting democratic educational pedagogies and settings.[15] However, I argue here that all of the papers, in one way or another, embrace a notion of humility as I have described it above that gives further currency to my thesis that humility is an embedded characteristic of democracy. Furthermore, I argue in this section that the presence of humility has the potential to help us recognize democratic pedagogies and educational settings.

Ronald Glass provides a distinction that is useful to my discussion of humility. By arguing for moral clarity rather than moral certainty, Glass is indeed prepared for the "aporetic" experience in the classroom: "Moral clarity is not moral certainty but it still carries enough force to overcome relativistic positions and orient liberatory practices that criticise or condemn oppression's surface appearances and deep structures."[16] Although Glass calls specifically on a moral distinction, I have shown through Mouffe's argument that this need not be the case for democracy. For Glass, both teachers and students are responsible for moral clarity that ensures democratic dialogue "listens" to the "good" reasons to trust moral and political positions, even in the face of opposing viewpoints. The teacher is responsible for adding moral clarity to her or his own position and for asking students to clarify their positions. Similarly, students engage in democratic dialogue in the classroom by taking on the responsibility of their educations, wrestling with what they "think" they know, and constantly negotiating with teachers as they clarify their positions. Approaching dialogue in this way requires recognition beyond philosophical insight; it also requires recognition of prevailing attitudes, such as ageism, elitism, and classism. Glass argues "it is impossible for anyone born and raised within our society not to in some degree inhabit, and be inhabited by, the dominant ideologies."[17] The recognition of our habitation of dominant ideologies, by both teachers and students, is what Glass terms humility. In like manner, Jim Garrison's discussion of passionate ambivalence serves to complement Glass's discussion. For Garrison, passionate ambivalence insists that we "may learn to live with ideas, emotions, and actions and their accompanying cognitive uncertainties. We must resist the notion we may ever know, recognise, or realise 'the other' with absolute certainty."[18] Passionate ambivalence, Garrison argues, is a response to the violence embedded in Western philosophy and the nature of dialogue. He argues that the tendency of Western philosophy to reduce all difference to sameness makes democratic education, however it is defined, nearly impossible. Engagement of passionate ambivalence requires what

Garrison terms "constitutional reconstruction" of dialogue. Elements that have the capacity to reconstruct dialogue include open-mindedness and listening, which involve "mutual compassion, risk, and vulnerability (as well as a sense of humour) oriented toward the amelioration of a shared situation."[19] Reconstruction in this format avoids the certainty of dialogue, enabling us to see the exclusions we make through reducing the "other" to "same." Garrison holds that the "success of dialogue across difference relies less on ideas and more on attitudes of desire, imagination, possibilities, perceptions, risk, and vulnerability."[20] I interpret these all as a demonstration of humility because of their engagement in a loving search.

Both Glass and Garrison are concerned with the creation of democratic educational pedagogies and settings, and the role humility can play in characterizing democratic education. As such, the presence of humility can be, although admittedly not always nor exclusively, an indicator of democratic education.

William Hare argues for humility in teaching, yet does not formally recognize, in the context of his essay entitled "Humility as a Virtue in Teaching," that the type of teaching he is addressing is democratic. He argues,

> students and teachers need to recognise the *vulnerability* of their beliefs to counter-evidence and counter-argument…Belief and doubt *are* at odds with each other, though we may, of course, believe something *to some extent*. The *ability* to doubt, however, remains if we are able to entertain criticisms of our beliefs. Objections which we consider may in time become doubts of our own.[21]

Surely it is safe to say that this is democratic education as both the student and the teacher are self-determining and self-governing. Furthermore, both teacher and student accept that the "other" may indeed have something to contribute to their knowledge. Hare views Socrates as a proponent of humility.

> Whereby in the *Apology* Socrates reports having asked Callias to tell him who is an expert in perfecting the human and social qualities, he is driving home the point that many who set themselves up as teachers pretend to a wisdom they do not possess, or are self-deceived. In particular, they do not have final and authoritative answers on the question of what constitutes the good life.[22]

Hence, the search for knowledge through *aporia* highlights the impossibility of *possessing* wisdom. Using humility, then, the teacher and the student are charged with using *aporia* to critically challenge other views and reassess their own. The presence of humility in such a situation helps define democracy in general and democratic education in particular.

Humility requires us to accept that our truths are not the truths of others, that we may not absolutely "know," that reality for others is shaped by experiences different from our own, and that such differences constitute a challenge to the assumptions we make about the world. Why this matters is not solely a question of morality, of doing the *right* thing. Approaching the question of democratic education with the assumption that the learner can be *an other* without fear of violence, in both thought and action, demonstrates that there is something to be learned not only by the learner. To assume that no violence is done to ourselves when we do not engage with *the other* is naïve; it implies that our pride and our possessions are more important than coming closer to a common good, or in Gandhi's terms, "Truth."[23] Humility demands that we

reshape ideas and feelings of arrogant pride and possession. Rather than taking arrogant pride in what we know, humility requires us to take pride in having the ability to recognize what we may not know. Humility ensures that key elements of democracy are upheld. The need for a full picture to come from *aporia* is an unnecessary condition of knowledge. In fact, such an approach to knowledge has proved detrimental to efforts to support democracy. For democracy to truly be a reflection of self-governance and self-determination, philosophical humility must be present.

I surely have not addressed the complex nature of democracy and what defines it in this essay, but I have shown that there is at least one basic and unwavering virtue of democracy. Indeed, we are left, as a result, with a plethora of new questions. One significant question is what becomes of Truth in democracy when humility is accepted as a virtue? Does accepting what we do not know and recognizing that what we think we know may not be true necessarily lead to relativism? Can a belief in philosophical humility in democracy be Truth in and of itself? If not, is there any place left for Truth, as understood as knowledge-as-finite and all encompassing, in a democracy?

1. Heesoon Bai, "Cultivating Democratic Citizenship: Toward Intersubjectivity," in *Philosophy of Education Introductory Readings*, 3rd ed., eds. William Hare and John Portelli (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2001), 307.

2. See John P. Portelli, "Democracy in Education: Beyond the Conservative or Progressivist Stances," in Hare and Portelli, eds., *Philosophy of Education*.

3. See Kevin Graham, "Participatory Democracy in an Age of Global Capitalism," in *The Problems of Resistance: Studies in Alternate Political Cultures*, ed. Steve Martinot (Amherst, Mass.: Humanity Books, 2001).

4. See Dwight Boyd, "The Moralberry Pie: Some Basic Moral Concepts," *Theory Into Practice* 16, no. 1 (1977): 67–72.

5. Chantal Mouffe, *Politics and Passion: The Stakes of Democracy* (London: Centre for the Study of Democracy, 2002), 8–9. This work will be cited as *PP* in the text for all subsequent citations.

6. I am hesitant to use the term moral philosophy here given that the role of morality in discussions of democracy is contestable, as I will show. At another level, however, it is not moral philosophy I am speaking of here, even though the characteristic of humility is often seen as a moral virtue. Humility becomes a characteristic of democracy.

7. Of course, the very notion of possession could be considered counter to the ideals of humility.

8. See Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) and Earl Shorris, "Ignoble Liars: Leo Strauss, George Bush, and the Philosophy of Mass Deception," *Harpers Magazine*, June 2004.

9. Tim Simpson, "The Limits of Knowledge and the Desire for Wisdom," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 33 (2002), http://www.ovpes.org/2002/Simpson.pdf, 67.

10. Ibid., 68–9.

11. Bai, "Cultivating Democratic Citizenship," 310.

12. Ibid., 311.

13. See Israel Scheffler, *Conditions of Knowledge: An Introduction to Epistemology and Education* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1965).

14. This is by no means to imply that the comparison between the two exhausts possibilities of alternative views of education.

15. Megan Boler, ed., *Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence: Democratic Dialogue in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004)

16. Ronald Glass, "Moral and Political Clarity and Education as a Practice of Freedom," in Boler, ed., *Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, 22.

17. Ibid., 21.

18. Jim Garrison, "Ameliorating Violence in Dialogues Across Differences: The Role of *Eros* and *Logos*," in Boler, ed., *Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*.

19. Ibid., 102.

20. Ibid., 93.

21. William Hare, "Humility as a Virtue in Teaching," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 26, no. 2 (1992), 229.

22. Ibid., 232.

23. See Karen Sihra, "Philosophical Contributions of Gandhi's Ideas on Non-Violence," *Research and Practice in Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2006): 40–52.