

Locating Oneself: A Plea for more Critical Awareness

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Barbara Applebaum has written an insightful essay about the limitations of self-location and moral agency. In what follows, I shall say a few words about her project, with specific attention to those areas that I particularly liked. I shall reserve the last part of my essay for some concerns about her criticisms of the “rational” moral agent, as well as with her problematization of dialogue. I do so as an interlocutor who is also a liberal in his sympathies.

Applebaum takes her cue from Dwight Boyd’s 1996 presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society. In this address, Boyd examines the relationship between “social location” and philosophy of education.¹ He concludes that one’s “social position” frames, in part, who one is, and further, that this position has consequences for one’s relations with others. For Boyd, these consequences are often negative. Boyd often lapses into pessimistic rhetoric in detailing his argument, saying, for example, that “Our prejudices constitute our personal identity,” and arguing group-embeddedness as “insidious” and “mob-like.”² To me, Boyd’s argument seems a contemporary variant of Hobbes’ pessimistic determinism. Groups relate to each other primarily through domination and suppression.

Applebaum, to her credit, is able to sift through Boyd’s work and pick out what is salient and strong, while rejecting the pessimistic rhetoric of group domination as inevitability. She agrees with Boyd that “social location” is a useful way to proceed in discussing matters of group identity. But she challenges Boyd in that she argues that the location of oneself, in its effects, is not insurmountable. In fact, locating oneself can give rise to moral agency amongst members of the dominant group. She rightly recognizes that Boyd’s critique does not help us to target what to do to assist in the dismantling of social injustices, nor does it answer the question of why the dominant group should bother to do anything at all, other than carry on with its destructive practices. She hints at Boyd’s unwillingness to confront the fact that, although deeply held assumptions are difficult to overcome, this does not mean that through mutual respect and listening one (as a member of a dominant group) will be unable to bring these assumptions to the fore.

Unlike Boyd, she believes that dominant “performance scripts” (after Alison Bailey) can be resisted and subverted. Applebaum’s answer to Boyd’s dilemma is to emphasize inward recognition of the harm caused to the other, together with active (I would say critical) listening, and constructive, open dialogue that invokes a strong sense of mutual respect. As such, Applebaum’s plea comes to look a lot like the pleas from certain members of the “liberal” camp, though I am not sure Applebaum would readily identify with this group.³

Nevertheless, I do have some concerns with the essay. I will take them up one by one. Although I do not believe that they detract much from the overall validity of Applebaum’s argument, they are compelling enough to me to deserve comment.

First of all, Applebaum is suspicious of something she calls the “rational” moral agent and “epistemic privilege.” I am unclear what Applebaum means by “rational” and “epistemic” here, but I suspect that together, they imply a disconnection of oneself from one’s context, one’s group, one’s circumstances, in pursuit of something like “the Truth,” “the logical,” or “the one right way, which is mine/ours.” If this is what she fears with respect to “rational” and “epistemic,” then I share her concern. There can be no good reasons for disconnecting oneself from one’s context in the situation of self-location and the attendant interrelational dilemmas that it gives rise to. I hope that Applebaum does not equate her notion of “rational” with “critical,” however. (She seems not to.) To do so would rob her of the very tool that reflection upon one’s self-location, not to mention one’s ability to do “active listening,” and healthy dialogue, demands. It seems to me more fruitful to call these “epistemic” privileges “moral” inasmuch as they seem to have built in to them an assumption about the rightness or wrongness of another group’s norms, behavior, activity, and less so the ability to be rational, or to reason.

Second, while I agree that those with privilege have (as a result of their privilege) the tendency to frame the discussion and dialogue in their terms, I see the dialogic process as more able to remedy some of these unfortunate occurrences than Applebaum does. For example, it seems that, on the dialectical model of self and other presented by Boyd and Applebaum, one can (in part) come to know something about another only in and through interaction with that other. So one may have one’s guiding fictions about oneself as a member of a group, as well as another as a member of a separate, particular group. But what allows me to change my conception of the other is contact of some sort with that other. No contact, no change. I may, as a member of a privileged group, have certain assumptions about my qualifications qua member of that group to lead the discussion and frame it in my own terms. This may hinder the conversation, and spark resentment and fear in another. But it is only when I am challenged by another from outside of my group that I can begin to problematize what I am doing, and thus take the initial steps to change. The dialogic process, in this case, represents both the capacity for the dominant group to enforce the rules of conversation to their liking, and the capacity for subsequent change via those who challenge the control of the conversation. The solution to the problems with dialogue rests (in part) in and with dialogue itself.

Finally, I want to turn to the example that Applebaum uses to illustrate how “decentering” works, and why it is so important. To back up her claim that those who belong to a group with power often are unaware of their control of dialogue she details a graduate level classroom event in which “epistemic privilege” was being discussed. Two white students then asked a black student how she felt, as a black woman, about this discussion. The black student retorted that she felt marginalized by this experience. Applebaum is right to credit this as a truly educative moment, although I agree with her on this for perhaps different reasons. Applebaum sees this as an example of how typically liberal people can succumb to racism regardless of intention. I see this as an example of how the liberal tenets of dialogue, active listening, and critical self-examination (self-location) can help unmask hitherto hidden privilege.

As I argued earlier, the dialogue has the capacity for both bad and good. We see this readily in the above example. Two white students unwittingly offended a black student in the context of a conversation. The black student, by sharing her dislike of the comment, and her retort that “as a white woman, what do you think about...,” opened up an opportunity for critical self-reflection on the part of the white students. Suddenly their behavior and remarks towards this woman were challenged. Their situation was problematized, and (one hopes) this spurred them on to carefully consider the fact that someone had been hurt by their questioning. In this situation, while the context was clearly troubling (the asking of racially insensitive questions), the interaction may have at least led to greater self-awareness on the part of the offending students. Of course, Applebaum does not need recourse to a theory of social privilege to make her argument that what was done to this student was wrong. The old, liberal assumption that all human beings deserve respect and freedom from harm (physical, mental, emotional), can also suffice.

My point is to suggest that we see Applebaum’s arguments for reflection on one’s self-location, and the reconstruction of moral agency based upon a critical awareness of one’s self-location as a member of a dominant group as, if not a continuation of, at least in sync with, what I consider the liberal tenets of mutual respect, active and careful listening, and open-ended and critical dialogue. Inasmuch as Applebaum agrees on the importance of these tenets and their place in ongoing conversations about one’s social location with respect to other groups, she breaks bread with many of us liberals, who want much of the same.

1. Dwight Boyd, “The Place of Locating Oneself(Ves)/Myself(Ves)I Doing Philosophy of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 5.

2. *Ibid.*, 7 and 14.

3. I am thinking here of John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and to a lesser extent, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.