

Tolerance and Intolerance Gricean Intention and Doing Right by our Students

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Professor Heslep's paper invites comments on at least three levels. The first is esoteric and philosophical. The second is moralistic and somewhat "preachy." The third is contentious and polemical. I will address each of these in turn based on the extent of my agreement with Professor Heslep. The extent of my agreement, however, is in reverse order of the above.

Like Professor Heslep, I too am fed up with political correctness. While advocates of political correctness berate well-meaning innocents for an unfortunate use of words, matters of great importance are often overlooked. Professor Heslep reminds us that the advocates of political correctness drive people into taking themselves too seriously. We seem to have lost our collective sense of humor and modesty. So, with what I take to be the polemical element of Professor Heslep's paper, I concur with the implication that we should all just "lighten up."

Besides discouraging those who act as verbal police or, those who wish to teach others to act as verbal police under the guise of multiculturalism or some other well-meaning social curriculum, Heslep broaches the more fundamental questions of teaching both tolerance and intolerance.

For quite sometime now, educators have insisted that children be taught tolerance of others. But, what does it mean to be "tolerant of others?" If we rely on Heslep's characterization of recent multicultural concerns, teaching students in single-minded fashion, to be tolerant of others, does not encourage students to respect or otherwise attempt to live *harmoniously* with others. If the fact of the matter is as Heslep tells us it is, the current pedagogical focus on tolerance requires only that students endure one another. Obviously, one can endure much while at the same time harboring deep feelings of disrespect and even hostility. Multicultural education should surely aim at something more. For example, as Professor Heslep documents, current multiculturalists not only forbid hate-speech, but they go much further and craft for students a proper set of linguistic practices. This crafting of linguistic practice does nothing to appease Heslep. Rather, it serves to irritate him further. Here Heslep's complaint seems to be that we have gotten our priorities in wholly reverse order. We should be teaching respect for the cultural practices of others, and this means allowing for speech practices that, while a bit indelicate toward others, can hardly count as hate speech or even a subtle show of public disdain. Surely, Heslep is right in all this, at least as far as he goes.

One purpose of education generally, should be to engineer a learning environment encouraging students to respect the personhood of each and every other student. The only way a student can learn to respect the personhood of another is to develop and sustain an active appreciation for individual experiential history. Appreciating another's experiential history entails respecting the individual's

unique cultural inheritance. If this is so for education generally, then surely respect for personhood must be especially important for right-minded programs of multicultural education. Respect is what is needed, not tolerance. Heslep aptly notes, mere tolerance contributes very little to the conditions of respect. Indeed, tolerance can co-exist with growing disrespect, and even public disdain for others.

In *The Ethical, Legal and Multicultural Foundations of Teaching*, Fred Kierstead and I address the importance of teaching both tolerance and intolerance as part of a comprehensive multicultural education.¹ Our position is in sympathy with Heslep's, though we never address the problem of offensive linguistic practice. Kierstead and I argue that schools should be unrelenting in their efforts to teach students to respect one another. This means, in part, that teachers should *show* students that the classroom is a place wholly intolerant of racism, sexism, or bigotry of any kind. We argue further that tolerance for the cultural practice of others is an intellectual imperative for schools. Briefly, what we argue is that schools must be places where everything that can be done to engender in students a passion for truth, must be done. No one can find, much less appreciate, the "truth" inherent in various cultures without first studying them — in depth and, with an open mind.² Tolerance for the cultural practices of others is an intellectual imperative for anyone seeking those truths likely to illuminate the world common to us all. Kierstead and I speak not of multicultural education, or even pluralism, but rather something we call "transculturalism." In transcultural education, people are single-minded in learning everything that might extend their personal and collective understanding, regardless of cultural origin.³ For transcultural education to succeed, people must be taught to be passionate in their search for understanding, in getting things right. This means, among other things, that people must be tolerant of the apparent linguistic insensitivities of others — at least until we understand more fully the origin of those insensitivities. Moreover, if transcultural education is to succeed, we must show students that education, like other social practices, advances more readily when people work together in a communal and mutually interdependent fashion. At this point, I fear I too am becoming a bit preachy and a bit too sweeping in my generalization. Suffice for now to say, I sense that I am in sympathy with Heslep's uneasiness about multiculturalism's lack of moral focus.

There are at least two very important philosophical points that are glossed over by Heslep and I think it is important at least to note each of them. First, the whole notion of culture is somewhat suspect. In an excellent book, *The Mismeasure of Man*, scientist Stephen J. Gould warns against the temptation to reify alleged referents of terms.⁴ Many terms that we use in science have considerable heuristic value, yet there is little reason to insist on their reflecting a certain ontological status. In biology for example, there are many who worry that the term "phylum" is taken too seriously as an ontological claim. The term phylum has proven very useful to evolutionists working through the implications of neo-Darwinian theory, but few would now argue that phyla should be granted the same ontological status as a species. Since inferences are made about species as a result of their assignment to various phylum, it is easy to see just how tempting it is to reify phyla. Nevertheless, inferential habit alone is insufficient for establishing ontological utility. In like manner, we have

become so accustomed to talking in terms of “culture,” we overlook the fact that the term may be a heuristically valuable sociological concept, with little to be said for its ontological status as some sort of natural kind. Consider, for example, cultural questions such as: Do African–Americans constitute a culture? Are white African–Americans of a different culture than black African–Americans? Do black African–Americans in Navasota, Texas constitute a different cultural sort from those in Harlem, New York?

To my mind at least, it is not at all clear what counts as a culture. Consequently, scholarly insistence that people be classified and treated in virtue of their assigned cultural heritage leads to some peculiar theorizing, and this in turn leads to equally peculiar practice.

The second philosophical subtlety that piqued my imagination, subsequent to reading Heslep’s paper, pertains to the role of intentionality when using speech of immediate sociological import. For example, how is it that any of us knows that a speech act of another harbors morally repugnant elements of disrespect? In contrast, how do we recognize compassionate and genuinely empathetic talk from those who live lives quite different from our own?

To my mind, these are great questions. They are such good questions and, inasmuch as I have only recently begun considering them, I have no answers to share with you. However, I think the best place to begin studying these questions is in light of the writings of Oxford philosopher, H.P. Grice, and among his many serious disciples such as Richard Grandy, Richard Warner, and Deirdra Serber.⁵

Grice, a former colleague of ordinary language philosophers J.L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle, takes very seriously the idea that speaker and listener intentions are contributing determinants of anything identified as shared public meaning. That is to say, the speaker’s intentions are something speaker and listener can in some sense share in meaningful communication with one another.⁶ Grice is even so bold as to say that some intentions, emerging as they do from universal attitudes, lead to meaningful evaluations of nearly universal import within a single native tongue. Other expressions of valuation remain relative to the attitudes of local communities and others to families and even individuals. In each case, the possibility of shared access to meaning diminishes proportionately to the number of individuals sharing the requisite attitudes. If Grice is right then herein we can find some clue as to *how* we can lighten up and free ourselves from the distractions of linguistic imperialism. By granting intentionality its proper due, speakers acknowledge that meaning rests on more than conventional *use* alone.⁷ For example, the derogatory term used to describe African–Americans, the N_____ word, is universally acknowledged in the United States, as a malicious piece of hate speech — even, one might suppose, by the likes of people such as Mark Fuhrman. In contrast, the term “girls,” when applied to adult females, is rejected as offensive by academics, while embraced as a term of endearment by some highly educated Houston “society women,” as well as by their dates and mates. The difference between these two cases might be fruitfully illuminated by serious study of Grice on Constructive Theory. I invite you to undertake such study as will I, but in this brief response I can say nothing more about

the matter other than that Heslep might be making a powerful philosophical point when he says intentionality ought to be considered before determining the moral value of specific speech acts.

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1. Frederick Kierstead and Paul A. Wagner, *The Ethical Legal and Multicultural Foundations of Teaching* (Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark, 1992).
 2. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.
 3. *Ibid.*, 76.
 4. Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1984, chap. 1).
 5. See for example Richard Warner and Richard Grandy, eds. *Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
 6. H.P. Grice, *The Conceptions of Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
 7. *Ibid.*, 4–9.