

Deconstructing Privilege: A Contrapuntal Approach

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In classrooms that are largely comprised of students from white, western, middle-class social locations, the idea that institutionalized racisms warrant investigation into the phenomenon of white privilege is often met with various forms of hostility and resistance.¹ In such classrooms (and in society at large) ideological justifications, self-deception, various forms of culpable ignorance, along with the desire to believe that one is innocent provide privileged individuals with the luxury of believing that they have earned and deserve all the material, social, and psychological advantages they have accrued. Few seem comfortable with the fact that they are somehow complicit in a matrix of global domination as a result of their being socio-discursively constructed in a nebulous network of power relations. After reading and discussing literature on the invisible privileging mechanisms that make whiteness “natural” and preferred at the same time, one of the students in a pre-service education class I visited asked her group: “Why would anyone notice or challenge something that benefits them?” Might her question be rendered moot if privilege were not conceived as entirely beneficial?

Certain critical social theorists in education question the idea that “privileged” individuals actually benefit from the system that is said to work in their favor. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for example, Paulo Freire argues that relations of domination which privilege some and oppress others dehumanize both oppressed and oppressor alike.² On a similar note, emphasizing that the rise of instrumental reason and the new culture industry offer individuals of industrialized nations only a semblance of freedom and liberation, members of the Frankfurt School argue that increasing mechanization and administration, the new technological order, and the development of mass culture have managed to so manipulate needs and desires that variously privileged “individuals of developed industrial civilization are sublimated slaves, but they are slaves....”³ Yet, the trend within educational theory and practice, is to focus on the ways in which privileged individuals secure myriad material, social, and psychological benefits at the expense of disadvantaged or underprivileged Others.

While critical pedagogies can offer an alternative reading and do hold out very real possibilities for creating liberatory practices of education and social transformation, Jennifer Gore suggests that it may not be as easy as we are inclined to believe, for our conceptual tools are ridden with problematic epistemological presuppositions.⁴ Further reflection is needed, she argues, on what we mean by terms like empowerment and liberation: Who empowers and who needs to be empowered? Is power a form of property that can be bestowed by one upon another? The concepts we use to theorize oppression and resistance are in need of interrogation.

As part of the project of conceptual interrogation and overall linguistic overhaul, this essay attempts to deconstruct the concept of “privilege” by examining two

approaches — recognition and *re-evaluation* — deploying the concept and their potential impact on the goal of transformative social justice education.⁵ While these two approaches are by no means complete, I urge that reading “privilege” contrapuntally uncovers important hidden dimensions that lurk behind the concept, rendering the term problematic, if not entirely inadequate.⁶ At least within the field of education, I argue that dismantling privilege requires (among other things) its *re-evaluation* in addition to its *recognition* and hope to illustrate this point by investigating claims about what it means to recognize privilege in one domain and subsequently, in another genre, to revalue that privilege in the context of harms that are occluded by the practice of recognition. Reading “privilege” contrapuntally may provide social justice educators with insight into how to more effectively engage the resistance they are faced with in their classrooms on a daily basis.

WHY PRIVILEGE?

There is a wide consensus in critical educational theory and practice that it is time to shift the gaze to the privileged side of oppression.⁷ In order to de-naturalize privileges, we need to *recognize* the ways they have been invisibly embedded in language, institutions, and intersubjective relations. For the purposes of size and scope of this essay, I focus on two approaches that theorize white privilege, for disrupting the invisibility and normativity of whiteness has been named fundamental to the project of creating transformative critical pedagogies.⁸ Analysis of phenomenologies of oppression has been helpful in documenting the myriad ways in which members of different groups are victimized, marginalized, harmed by, and resistant to domination while the practice of privilege has remained relatively free from interrogation. In other words, “the power that whiteness holds for its owners has not been explicitly documented.”⁹ Like the construction of masculine privilege through lifetime socialization, the process is largely hidden.

READING “PRIVILEGE” CONTRAPUNTALLY

Contrapuntal reading is a methodological strategy mapped out by Edward Said designed to re-examine problematic foundational assumptions that have been constituted by the exploitation and exclusion of difference. It involves learning from that which has been (wrongfully) excluded from academic discourse by reading texts for their absent presences, juxtaposing different narratives that may seem distinct but are linked and mutually constituting. Texts that exist in “dominant” cultures are read together with texts from “othered” cultures. In this way, we can start to think of cultures and identities as an ensemble formed out of historical contexts that need to be re-examined to fully understand how they have shaped who people think they are.¹⁰

As an attempt to begin to read “privilege” contrapuntally, the two approaches I identify to deploying the concept of privilege emerge out of different historical contexts. The first approach, the *recognition approach*, arises out of contemporary educational theory and practice and aims to identify and challenge the institutionalization of invisible privileging mechanisms that have for too long allowed some to benefit from the oppressions of Others. The *re-evaluation approach* arises out of a return to the insights of anti-colonial scholarship and critical social theories that

challenge the inherent valuing of privilege as a good. These scholars theorize “boomerang effects of domination”¹¹ and the new technological order with its new forms of domination to demonstrate that the practice of “privilege” damages all, not just the “victims” at the bottom of the social hierarchy. I offer a brief account of each approach and argue that key insights of what it means to be privileged are occluded by the practice of recognition alone.

RECOGNIZING PERKS OF PRIVILEGE

Within the field of whiteness theory, the *recognition* approach uncovers invisible privileging mechanisms that organize perception, language, structural relations, subjectivities, and even dignities that fail to be recognized as such. Alerting us to the need for structural, conceptual, institutional, and personal transformation, current research on whiteness begins the process necessary for understanding both the power of whiteness and the beginning of its deconstruction. And while whiteness theories differ with regard to their methodological approaches, aims, and theoretical claims, they all problematize the normalization and naturalization of whiteness as well as values coded as white that function as generic and colorblind norms.

Audrey Thompson distinguishes between material, discursive, institutional, and identity theories of whiteness, all of which help to demonstrate the way scholars who employ the *recognition* approach to the concept of “privilege” uncover the way white privileges have been embedded in both micro and macro practices of power.¹² In her ovarian/ovular/(seminal) work on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh provides concrete and everyday examples of the myriad ways white skin privilege provides various legal, material, political, social, and psychological benefits to its holders, arguing that privilege is an indiscernible combination of “unearned assets that one can count on cashing in each day, but about which one is ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” White privilege, she writes, is like “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”¹³ Extending this analysis, Bailey asserts that the structured invisibility of privilege ensures that “accomplishments” (or lack thereof) will be recognized on the basis of merit rather than on the basis of group membership. Bailey asserts that not only do members of dominant groups (privileged individuals) receive special advantages from the invisible knapsack of privilege, but they also receive additional benefits, which can be in the form of *positive* or *negative* privilege.¹⁴

Social justice educators who attempt to engage students in the practice of *recognition*, the process of becoming aware of unearned advantages bestowed on them by virtue of their whiteness, report being met with various degrees of distancing, anger, and hostility when challenging ideological justifications and phenomenologies of denial.¹⁵ Alice McIntyre, for example, names “white talk” as talk that serves to “insulate white people from examining their own individual and collective roles in the perpetuation of racism.” Such talk “not only denies white people the experience of seeing themselves as *benefiting* from racism, but in doing so, frees them from taking responsibility for eradicating it.”¹⁶ Kathy Hytten and John Warren report that students often invoke “cultural logics” that work to either erase

their own complicity in whiteness and systems of power, or they so distanced themselves from the topic that they ceased to see any possibility for resistance.¹⁷ Not only do social justice educators need to recognize the ways privileging mechanisms have been embedded institutionally and expose the various unevenly distributed material, social, and psychological perks that are conferred to owners, they need to find effective ways to engage students in critique of the various (ideological) justifications that keep invisible privileging mechanisms in place. While the strategies and starting points for dismantling privilege and mobilizing resistance in the *recognition* approach differ from scholar to scholar, they all share in common emphasis on the *benefits* that accrue to dominant subjects, who are conceived as *beneficiaries* of the *oppression of others*.

IS PRIVILEGE ALL PERK AND NO PERIL?

While most of the advantages outlined in the new taxonomies of privilege appear (at first glance) to be a set of *benefits* that enhance the life of those for whom they are available, there seems to be a missing element, for even before they had been more fully articulated, McIntosh wrote,

We need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive.... Those who do not depend on conferred dominance have traits and qualities that will never develop in those who do.¹⁸

For this reason, the word “privilege” now seems particularly misleading; “we usually think of privilege as a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth, or luck.”¹⁹ But if McIntosh is right that not all privileges are beneficial or desirable, why is it defined as an invisible weightless knapsack filled only with perk providing special tools and provisions? Why the trend to “taxonomize” the perks of privilege without fully articulating the perils? What else is in the (proverbial) knapsack? And why is it important to look?

DEHUMANIZATION AND ONE DIMENSIONALITY

Returning to the insights of scholars who employ the *re-evaluation* approach reveals that there are important dimensions of domination that are occluded by the practice of recognition: the so-called perks of privilege do not come without costs the term fails to connote. The driving metaphor for privilege emphasized by the *recognition* approach might be thought of as a “free ticket” to access all life has to offer found inside an “invisible weightless knapsack” granted to some at the expense of Others. Scholars in the camp of *re-evaluation*, however, might be inclined to point out that the “free ticket,” the “special provisions, maps, passports and blank checks” lead not to the land of luxury and freedom but into state of dehumanization,²⁰ “psychic alienation,” and “corporeal malediction.”²¹ And with the rise of “instrumental reason”²² and new forms of domination, the “privilege” of the “administered individual”²³ is to be a participant in a catastrophic form of liberation, which provides only a hollow semblance of freedom. The emphasis for *re-evaluation* scholars then, is on the inherent *dehumanization* of the *perpetrators* of “privilege.” Agency and personhood become problems for dominant subjects not just their so-called “victims” when one approaches the concept of “privilege” contrapuntally, engaging dialectical tensions and contradictions.

Re-evaluation scholars conceptualize dominant subjects as insecure, alienated, anxious, anguished, violently repressed, and/or pathological. Unable to consummate the privileges they so stridently seek, these subjects appear as self-destructive co-victims of the “massive psycho-existential complexes” born of colonial conquest.²⁴ Dominant subjects in either setting fail to “enjoy” privileges but are *haunted* by them, forced to disown the very values they claim to maintain.²⁵ Neither free nor autonomous, such subjects are perceived as imprisoned in a state of bondage based on self-denial and violence maintained through ignorance and fear of difference. The struggle for justice and equity, then, is not seen as one of oppressed against oppressors, but both of them against a system that turns them both into co-victims.²⁶ Scholars employing the *re-evaluation* approach stress the need to begin the process of dis-alienation by revealing the pleasures to be had in experiencing social solidarity.

Theorizing dominance in the context of colonial conquest Ashis Nandy reminds us that colonialism “encouraged the colonizers to impute to themselves magical feelings of omnipotence and permanence.”²⁷ But the fantasy of superiority failed to secure within the fantasist any sense of security or bliss. The possibilities for self-determination and actualization are annihilated in the equation of domination and submission, which, as Aimé Césaire so astutely confirms, “turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.”²⁸ In order to maintain a *posture* of domination, the agency of the dominant subject is confined to the dictates of an imposed imperial identity. The actions that provide the conditions of freedom for the “superior” subject annihilate the possibilities for its realization.

Grappling with this agentic ambiguity, the harsh dominion that dominant subjects must exercise over their own subjectivity, Klaus Theweleit theorizes the militarily produced, constructed-as-hard, organized, mechanized, and ready-for-attack body of the dominant subject, which becomes a “mechanism for containing the desiring production of his own unconscious.”²⁹ In pursuit of the posture of absolute domination, Theweleit’s Nazi subject endeavors to become a “man of steel,” whose most urgent task “is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human.”³⁰ Only through violence can this subject know himself as in control, such that “inside this man is a concentration camp, the concentration camp of his desires,” for this “man of steel” must develop an extraordinarily “thick skin” which insulates him from his own body and that of the Other, suggesting that though domination involves “enjoying” undeniable economic gain and political power, the one in the privileged position is agentially compromised, emphasizing that power operates dialectically, subjecting even those at the top of social/global hierarchies to its tyranny.³¹

Elucidating the undertheorized boomerang effects of domination, Frantz Fanon documented the pathologies of colonial officials who tortured war criminals and became increasingly violent with their own families, becoming themselves disfigured and distressed by various forms of psychic unrest.³² The performative

self-imprisonment involved in the practice of privilege is in Césaire's estimation a result of the fact that, "the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal."³³ Problematising ordinary conceptions of "privilege," Fanon asks, "Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?"³⁴ Social relations of privilege and oppression preclude such possibilities, whether maintained through the brutal violence of the colonial era, the Nazi regime, or the hegemonic complicity found in contemporary western societies. In such equations (hierarchical social relations), relative economic and political advantage, i.e. usurpation amounts to a superiorized form of alienation: before it can adopt a positive voice, "freedom requires an effort at dis-alienation."³⁵

But what exactly does the dominant subject in conditions of colonial conquest have in common with a privileged individual in contemporary North American society? Herbert Marcuse argues that the development of mass culture establishes a false harmony between private and public interests, reinforcing privatization and an orientation to consumption. Freedom becomes defined as consumer choice and adherence to an advertising ethic that manipulates desires and identities, leading to pursuit of "false and limited wants and needs."³⁶ New forms of control rely on administered individuals, "who have made their mutilation into their own liberties and satisfactions, and thus reproduced it on an enlarged scale," so that the question becomes how to liberate these individuals from themselves as well as their masters?³⁷

RISKS OF RE-EVALUATION

There are indeed some potential risks that need to be considered if we are to take the re-evaluation approach seriously. First of all, it may be objected that the dominant subject reviewed in the context of re-evaluation bears little resemblance to a privileged individual in contemporary North American society. Secondly, one might want to know why we should draw out the boomerang effects of domination when the perks of privilege are so clear and ever-present. It could be objected that rather than de-centering the dominant subject, the re-evaluation approach re-centers it. Finally, one might protest that emphasizing how the dominant suffer in social relations of exploitation and oppressive inter-subjective relations amounts to stretching the term to meaninglessness.³⁸

While a certain dominant subject has been at the center of knowledge production and reproduction, the human beings constituting those subject positions have, with stupendous efforts, almost successfully written themselves out of the discourse: "silence from and about the subject was the order of the day,"³⁹ while volumes have been written on the racialized and "inferior" Other.⁴⁰ The re-evaluation approach to eradicating privilege subjects *the subject* to interrogation that for too long it has escaped. Does this amount to stretching terms into meaninglessness? I hear a voice in the back of my mind loud and clear: "when the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word 'oppression' is being stretched to meaninglessness."⁴¹

But in my attempt to employ a contrapuntal analysis, I hear other voices: “For me, oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man — of oppressed and oppressor alike, for if colonization destroys the colonized, it rots the colonizer.”⁴² Contesting the idea that privilege entirely benefits the overall well-being of the individuals in whose favor it apparently operates, re-evaluating privilege is a strategy aimed at undermining both the inferiority and superiority complexes born of colonial conquest, suggesting that manifestations of false superiority, alienation, injustice, and resentment will likely prevail if privileges are conceived as entirely advantageous.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL, ETHICAL, AND POLITICAL CONCLUSIONS

While neither approach discussed here is meant to solve the problem of privilege once and for all, juxtaposing the two highlights that important aspects left out of much contemporary debate on whether and how privileges can and should be renounced impede our being able to fully grasp the nature of the problem with privilege, potentially implicating invocation of the term in the reproduction of systemic inequalities rather than their transformation. Privilege amounts to more than *either* an invisible knapsack filled with special benefits and innumerable advantages *or* an onslaught of boomerang effects. What are alternative readings and why inquire?

Epistemologically speaking, without reflection on the complicated and contradictory elements of privilege, we risk solipsism and ignorance. Ethically speaking, we need to dislodge notions that “we” are doing something for “them” if social justice is to become something other than a performance of false superiority. Recognizing perks of privilege without maintaining vigilance to “the psyche or peculiarity of the oppressor” risks setting the oppressed group up as “powerless and defective by contrast with the more powerful group which is seen as the norm, and not examined for its cultural specificity, peculiarity, or pathology.”⁴³ Politically speaking, as long as privileges are thought to be entirely desirable and advantageous, it seems likely that they will continue to be coveted, protected, denied, and resented. Contrapuntal reading suggests that the concept of “privilege” is in need of further interrogation, of re-conceptualization, for not only does the concept often connote something desirable, a superior state of being in the world, it also seems to maintain an illusion of autonomy, and the price one pays for securing and perpetuating privilege remains relatively free from scrutiny; and it may be that the price of privilege, particularly in the so-called free world, is freedom itself.

INDICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While they have provided us with insight into the nature of the problem of privilege, both approaches outlined in this essay seem to be at once totalizing and incomplete. Neither approach theorizes the relational elements of how privilege works in different social contexts, nor examines the complicated dynamics of how privilege can be met with deference, resistance, moral lethargy, or sly decency.⁴⁴ Clearly, we need a finer grained analysis of power and privilege as socially negotiated processes, along with a more nuanced account of what is to be done with privileges one has but strives to subvert. Although this essay has not provided a

complete theoretical account of strategies to be deployed in politics, I hope to have highlighted some of the troubling tactics that exist in the field of education and how we might at least begin to address them.

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1. Scholars who employ the recognition approach have documented this phenomenon and will be outlined subsequently.
 2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993).
 3. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 32.
 4. Jennifer Gore "What We Can Do for You! What *Can* 'We' Do for 'You'?: Struggling over Empowerment in Critical and Feminist Pedagogy," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, ed. Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 331–348.
 5. I also refer to transformative critical pedagogies and have in mind those practices which challenge imperialist practices of knowledge production so that education resists rather than reproduces various unnecessary forms of interlocking race, gender, and other oppressions.
 6. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
 7. Scholars who employ the recognition approach share this assumption.
 8. Aida Hurtado and Abigail J Stewart, "Through the Looking Glass: Implications of Studying Whiteness for Feminist Methods," in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, ed. Michelle Fine, Linda Powell, and L. Mun Wong (New York: Routledge, 1997).
 9. *Ibid.*, 300.
 10. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.
 11. This phrase was coined by Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonization*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
 12. Audrey Thompson, "Summary of Whiteness Theory," <http://www.pauahtun.org/Whiteness-Summary-1.html>.
 13. Peggy McIntosh, "'White Privilege and Male Privilege,' A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, ed. A. Minas (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), 31.
 14. Negative privilege is understood as the absence of barriers while positive privilege is understood as the presence of additional perks that cannot be described in terms of immunities alone. Most men, for example, will generally have access to the negative privilege of not being afraid to go out alone at night, and an example of a positive privilege is being treated with respect as a result of one's skin color. Alison Bailey, "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's 'Oppression,'" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (1998): 104–119.
 15. Sandra Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 151–166.
 16. Alice McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 31 (emphasis added).
 17. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, "Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 65–89.
 18. McIntosh, "White Privilege," 36.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. "As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized." Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 56.
 21. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Fanon describes the psychological effects of colonization on the colonized as producing a *psychic alienation*. But a case can be made that this term can also apply to the colonizer, for Fanon is concerned with the elimination of a vicious circle in which the "black man wants to be white and the white man slaves to reach a human

level,” (9–10). Both are alienated in this equation and in need of liberation. Again, Fanon’s concept of *corporeal malediction* is designed to refer primarily to the condition of the Black man. See Linda Martin Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), for elaboration of my claim that a case can be made that these terms can also be used to describe those in privileged positions.

22. Instrumental reason is the technical rationalization for economic and administrative systems marked by an increasing logic of efficiency in the coordination of social interaction, which is colonizing all aspects of what Jürgen Habermas calls the lifeworld. For more on the distinction Habermas makes between instrumental and communicative rationality, see Dieter Misgled, “Emancipation, Enlightenment, and Liberation: An Approach toward Foundational Inquiry into Education,” *Interchange* 6, no. 3 (1975): 23–37.

23. This term comes from Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*.

24. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 12.

25. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

26. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

27. *Ibid.*, 35.

28. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonization*, 42.

29. Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 60.

30. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, *Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 160.

31. *Ibid.*, 6, 144. Theweleit stresses that this thick skin should not be understood metaphorically.

32. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

33. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonization*, 41.

34. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 231.

35. *Ibid.*, 231.

36. In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse defines false needs as “those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice,” 5.

37. *Ibid.*, 251.

38. Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1983).

39. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 51.

40. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

41. Frye, “Oppression,” 1.

42. Albert Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), xvii.

43. Peggy McIntosh, “Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race” (Wellesley College, MA: Center for Research on Women, 1990), 7.

44. On “moral lethargy,” see Barbara Houston, “Taking Responsibility,” and on “sly decency,” see Cris Mayo, “Sly Decency,” both in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 1–13, 36–39.