

Learning in Humility

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Democracy depends upon traits of character that are fragile, such as being able to be open to others and to listen to what others have to say. This dependence is vital, for if it is breached, the life of the *polis* is diminished, and, more importantly, the vitality of the culture fades. A lively culture and government by the people and for the people should be based upon a buzzing interchange of ideas from all quarters, and these ideas cannot be encased in hierarchical communication. A command-and-control system works best in settings such as the military, where structure aimed toward a goal trumps variegated expression and dilatory action. Such instrumentalism is anathema to a democratic way of life that depends so vitally, as John Dewey famously expressed, on “conjoint, communicated experience.”

In “Aporia and Humility: Virtues of Democracy,” Karen Sihra searches the work of two theorists, Heesoon Bai and Chantal Mouffe, for an underlying thread defining democracy and, particularly, democratic education. She puts forward the armature of her argument early on, asserting that democracy requires humility. She then shows how humility, understood philosophically, is common to Bai’s model of intersubjectivity, with its attendant notions of “care, respect, relatedness, and empathy,” and Mouffe’s procedural idea of democracy as agonistic pluralism, where conflict is recognized as a source of democratic vitality.

Sihra begins her paper with a helpful analytic discussion of humility. But what exactly is humility for Sihra? We need to clear away some of the tangled brush around a term that is not precisely understood. For some of us, the “ever so ‘umble” Uriah Heep of Charles Dickens’s novel *David Copperfield*, with his manipulative insincerity masked as respect, comes immediately to mind. Or we may recall painfully *being humiliated* or shamed, perhaps in a crass public power play by Mr. or Ms. Alpha Ego. These instances of humility and humiliation, common to the popular imagination and everyday use, are not what Sihra has in mind. She distinguishes religious humility, or dependence on a higher and greater Being, from philosophical humility. With the latter, she focuses upon the Socratic Plato, where philosophical humility is enacted through *aporia*. This is when we recognize the limits of our knowledge and indeed admit how much we do not know. As Meno says to Socrates, such recognition is like the sting of a ray, where questions cause (momentary) numbness, preparing the way for constructive epistemological moves toward a search for wisdom and knowledge to be made.¹ As Sihra says, “*Aporia* serves, in a way, to disassemble the pieces of inquiry and question what we think we know.”

Sihra sees this philosophical humility as the way to join two competing views of democracy recently proposed by theorists who interest her. She examines in some detail Bai and Mouffe on democracy and democratic education, arguing that the common presence of philosophical humility in these near opposite perspectives on

democratic function demonstrates that philosophical humility is a virtue and a necessary condition for democracy. Mouffe sees the core of democracy as political contestation, an “agonistic pluralism” generative of a better life. The edges of hostility and antagonism are softened and defused so that the open exchange of differing beliefs may occur. Bai focuses on democracy, as Sihra states, as a “place that initiates a faith in collective wisdom,” where the political antagonism underlying Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism is overcome through consensus and deliberative discussion.

Sihra goes on to cite essays in Megan Boler’s widely read collection, *Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence: Democratic Dialogue in Education*, as further evidence that humility is “an embedded characteristic of democracy.” She all too briefly touches upon Ronald Glass’s preference for moral clarity over moral certainty, as well as Jim Garrison’s fusing of opposites in “passionate ambivalence” in a “loving search” for understanding. While both of these papers support her thesis, Sihra does not discuss any others. Yet she prefaces her discussion of the Boler volume by claiming that “all of the papers, in one way or another, embrace a notion of humility as I have described above that gives further currency to my thesis that humility is an embedded characteristic of democracy.”

After asserting humility as a necessary condition of democratic education, Sihra claims, in finishing her discussion of Glass and Garrison, that “humility can be, although admittedly not always nor exclusively, an indicator of democratic education.” She then goes on to fault William Hare for not recognizing “formally” that the type of education he advocates is democratic, even though he seems to recognize the role of *aporia* in this formulation. Near the end of the paper she states that “For democracy to truly be a reflection of self-governance and determination, philosophical humility must be present.”

I am not sure why Sihra equivocates here on the status of philosophical humility in her formulation of democratic education. For me it was a minor point, a slight distraction from the main concern of her paper. Philosophical humility, shown in a passionate, ambivalent, loving, and provisional search for understanding and shared values, is for Sihra woven tight in the cloth of a democratic education.

The number of authors and positions that Sihra discusses in a short paper limits her to a less robust discussion of humility than optimal. Sihra is a gifted theorist, and I wanted to read more. In particular, I wanted to hear more about Gandhi, noted briefly in a citation to a previous paper. There the distinction between philosophical and religious humility breaks down, as it does with Socrates whom she discusses in greater detail.

Of course there are many other lives where philosophical and religious humility are difficult to distinguish. For our purposes, I would add just two more to Socrates and Gandhi: Albert Schweitzer and Martin Luther King Jr. I will grant Sihra that religious humility can be, as she characterizes, a dependent and inferior relationship to an absolute. However, religious humility is more complicated than that, in her choice of examples and in the two I have added.

Gandhi's nonviolent work toward, as Sihra says, "coming closer to a common good" suggests that immanence rather than transcendence is central to the enactment of both philosophical and religious humility. King's hope that his "four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" implies an infinite quest for understanding and for etching content's character upon the plan of one's action, rather than a finite determination of worth based upon accidents of birth such as skin pigment. Schweitzer's dictum "*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*" ("Reverence for Life") grounded his work as a physician in immanence (this actual sick child in his hospital in Lambaréné, Gabon) and transcendence (*Leben*, the life that gives meaning to all that we do). And Plato, chronicler of his teacher Socrates, has him state at the end of his trial, "The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways — I to die, and you to live. Which to the better fate is known only to God."²

While religious and philosophical humility may be more enmeshed than Sihra allows, the central message of her paper is that humility in the form of accepting limits to our knowledge does not mean we give up the quest for wisdom and understanding. Such wisdom may come to any solitary soul in what Karl Jaspers calls the encountering of "boundary situations" where we may "shipwreck" existentially. But such wisdom can be gathered in social settings, among others with whom you share this quest, in listening to voices with which you agree, or even with whom you struggle agonistically. These voices, in unison or contestation, make up democracy, and democratic education, in action.

1. Plato, *Meno*, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 80a.

2. Plato, *Apology*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in Hamilton and Cairns, eds., *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 42a.