

Know Thyself: A Contemporary Command

Victor L. Worsfold

University of Texas at Dallas

Tradition at the Philosophy of Education Society meetings dictates that a respondent to an Address politely acknowledge the many excellences of the paper just read and then move swiftly into the denunciative mode, finding fault with the speaker's argument at as many turns as possible, leaving the paper in a heap of shreds. I am going to eschew that tradition and, following the lead of Kathryn Pauly Morgan in her 1995 Response to President Siegel's Address,¹ I am going to attempt "intellectual and personal openness...calm philosophical reflection...[and] caring and intellectual illumination," as I respond to President Boyd's Address. In light of President Boyd's remarks, attempting this stance invites the question: What is it about *me* that leads me to undertake this exercise in philosophy of education in this way? For, he writes, "to fail to locate myself in my doing philosophy of education" is to commit a moral mistake. To provide an answer to my question about my identity, as I eschew P.E.S. tradition and attempt a supportive stance, I must take seriously my social location my "group embeddedness-es" so that the "somebody who is me" stands before you. The absence of this exercise for Boyd — I prefer to call him Dwight: after all, how supportive is it to call him Boyd and thereby deny the fact of our twenty years of friendship? — "warps the nature of my performative moral engagement with others that is necessary for educational discourse," an example of which I intend this response to be. What then is the comma list that I perform and that performs me so that, instead of engaging in Dwight's "oppression," I start across the "rackety bridge between us," taking responsibility for my "mobs," being as aware as I can of who the me is who is approaching him. Notice, incidentally, that as I enunciate my supportive stance, I, as Dwight so correctly points out, do so with reference to the group that is P.E.S. I believe I am working against the group, but clearly P.E.S. is prior to me, and my identity as Dwight's respondent is formed partly in terms of its traditions. But, to my list!

Utilizing Dwight's categories, I am white, male, gay, middle class, Scots, and, like him, still fairly able. But I would add a couple more markers to Dwight's list because, as Dwight says, "they are determinant of both [my] identity and [my] life prospects," both personally and professionally. First, I am now a secular person. I have no religious faith. This dimension of my identity is, I believe, central to how I respond to my friends who are religious and in Dallas, Texas, that is the vast majority and to my work as a philosopher, teaching ethics. Imagine the response of two hundred eighteen year olds brought up in and around Dallas with its indelibly religious mindset — Dallas is the home of athletes for Christ, I'd remind you — when I announce that I believe there are perfectly legitimate conceptions of ethics that do not require a religious foundation. And I would add as a second marker, namely what I might call my intellectual age; that is, my years of experience in doing and teaching philosophy. I add this because I suspect that this dimension of our identity affords us a sense of the journey each of us has made in our chosen work,

with its successes and its failures, and how we have learned from these. I think no matter what our work, if we are to take the place it has in shaping our identities seriously, we must have some marker that invites reflection about it; so I choose intellectual age. Now what does my having delivered my comma list accomplish exactly? Of course, the answer to this question depends on contextualizing the question: accomplish for whom or for what purpose? Let me confess to Dwight that on these last points I find him somewhat elusive about his intentions.

My purpose in telling my comma list is in an attempt to understand why I take up the stance I do in responding to Dwight's paper. But his purposes in enunciating the need for such self-awareness seem to me to be very generalized. He writes, for example, that "the fundamental centrality of race as an element of social reality shapes not only our identities but also our material prospects of life," and he confesses that his comma list is as it is because it comprises what "are arguably important [markers] at a qualitatively different level from other kinds of groupings of humans." Now the difference between his list and mine is, I think, that mine is particularist and his is universal. My first question about this difference is: must not a comma list always be particularist if it is to be practicable? In other words, must we not know the specifics of the situation for which the comma list is designed before we know how many markers to provide? Indeed, I suspect it is precisely this kind of thinking that led me to add my two additional markers. Without them I could not be standing before my fellows in Dallas, though I might have been able to stand before you since you may not need to know about secularness nor my antiquity as a philosopher of education. And this realization leads to another question about the idea of providing a comma list. Can I over-reveal myself in my attempting to approach you? Dwight seems concerned solely with the harm done by not identifying enough of the markers that constitute my existential condition. I wonder if harm can be done by revealing too many markers.

If we are to conceive of ourselves walking towards each other across the rickety bridges of our intercourse, again I believe we must ask what the purpose of the particular bridge I am attempting to cross is before we can decide how many markers about ourselves we need reveal. If the "suspended performance" is in the classroom as opposed, say, to being in the service of making friends, it may not be as necessary to reveal so much of our identities. In fact, it might be harmful to provide students with as many of our markers as we can. I think Dwight is aware of this danger in making his suggestion that there are some markers that are qualitatively different from others. But there is no hint in what he writes of the idea that markers might best be provided to others on a need to know basis, while keeping to ourselves our awareness of the full list. Again, the purpose of the bridge will, I believe, help us decide the cut off point for our self.

But this realization leads to what is perhaps the most complicated issue that Dwight's idea of the comma list raises; namely, just what it is that I am saying about myself under each of my markers. And Dwight is well aware of this problem. I want to try to help him better articulate it.

In his realization that there are what he calls "multiple lived configurations" of the categories of his own self identification," Dwight juxtaposes the idea of the

specificity of the categories to the grossness of these categories. But he, I suspect, could better capture what he is trying to get at when he argues for the inadequacy of the bi-polarity of these categories — black/white, masculine/feminine, gay/straight, and so on — by conceptualizing these categories as range categories, lived out in differing degrees by their “performers.” In this way, Dwight might invite us to identify ourselves with a kind of precision that would avoid the kind of harm he is so urgently trying to have us steer clear of by not “participating in a discourse that, by its very existence, reifies those very things that are the problem,” namely the categories themselves. By conceiving the categories as comprising a range of dimensions which may be lived at differing degrees, Dwight would allow for the possibility of a more dynamic construction of the self whose articulation is being essayed and, at the same time, permit a precision of articulation that the gross categories lack. For example, realizing that I am Scots may not be nearly so helpful to those whom I am approaching as it is to know that I am a non-Presbyterian Scotsman who is capable of generosity and gregariousness — the very reverse of what I have learned the revelation of Scots-ness to connote in these parts. And merely to say that I am gay is not to reveal the degree to which I am such — very happily partnered for ten years, in my case — nor to reveal the range of gayness in which I engage — monogamy, since my partnering. Again, the more precise rendition of the lived category seems to flaunt at least one of the most prevalent connotations of gayness, namely promiscuousness, not to say irresponsibility.

But, the skeptics amongst you will want to know how, precisely, does my acknowledgement of my identity to myself and to you assist in my performing morally towards myself, Dwight, and you in responding to Dwight’s paper. Let me remind you that Dwight alleges I must perform morally if I am to engage in educational discourse. The short answer to my question for me is that the acknowledgement allows me to be accountable to myself and to those who may legitimately demand my accountability. I can explain myself to myself and to others when called upon to do so. And it is just this ability to do so that permits me to think of my engagement in the enterprise of educational discourse as moral. The longer answer to the skeptics’ question is that this self-consciousness can aid in my understanding why I find important what I find important in my life in general, and in engaging in philosophy of education in particular. For the ability to articulate our identities in the ways suggested by Dwight allows us to unravel the relation between the personal and the professional dimensions of our lives or, more precisely, how the personal impinges on the professional in our lives. Such issues as why I choose to work on some topics and not others, the emphasis I stress in teaching these topics, how I deal with the arguments in opposition to my view, arguments I often cannot quite be quit of, and the solution to the problems both in research and teaching to which I am sympathetic may all be informed by my knowing who the I is who is attempting to resolve them. Even the less tangible moments of my being — my gait, my physical appearance, my dress, my gestures, and so on — those features of my being that constitute my image of myself which I project to myself and others can now begin to be explained by inspecting these categories of my identity. David Nyberg might well remind us of our capacity for self-deception at this point,² so that

the need for honest self-appraisal under these categories is great, as well as courage in disclosing what I discover about myself on inspection of my embeddednesses when the situation demands such disclosure.

To provide examples of what I am arguing, I must, I think, turn again to my autobiography. When asked to account for why I take the moral stance I take as I am frequently asked by students and colleagues I can explain my turning away from the ethics of duty to the ethics of virtue approach, especially the virtue of care, not simply in terms of the logical adequacy of the arguments for the latter approach but also in terms of why these arguments appeal to me. My experience as a gay person in the last fifteen years has taught me at first hand the appeal, perhaps even the necessity of, an ethics of care. I have experienced Nel Noddings's philosophy of caring³ as I have watched friends die of AIDS. I have been "the one caring" and, at the death of a friend of long standing, "the one cared for." I find what Dr. Noddings writes about moral education in the conclusion to her recent book, *Philosophy of Education*,⁴ utterly convincing because, in part, I have performed the care perspective and, to come back to Dwight, it has performed me. Duty is no longer my moral watchword, despite my admiration for Kant and Israel Scheffler⁵ and my Scottish upbringing, which both at home and in school daily reminded me of my duty to others and myself. By identifying my sexuality and where it has led me, I now understand why I find the ethics of duty inadequate: its exercise can be dehumanizing. To care for one dying of AIDS because I take myself to have a duty to do so simply does not address the needs of the victim in the situation he or she finds herself or himself in.

Another example of my following the acknowledgement of my identity is as follows. I take myself to be a teacher-scholar, and each year I write something to this effect in the Annual Report of my professional activities. As I attempt to understand why this construction of my professional identity as teacher-scholar so appropriately describes the me who works at The University of Texas at Dallas, I can once more talk about what really appeals to me about the professoriate and what does not and justify in those terms this self description. But, following Dwight's identity model of accountability, I now understand what of my personal dimensions informs my professional life; namely, my sense that addressing the needs of people, especially those who are my students, is morally prior to addressing the needs of scholarship for me. And I am not left saying "that's just the way I am" to those who inquire why I think as I do. I can account for this stance as mine by reflecting on my years of experience as a professor of philosophy and explicating, in light of that lived experience, how my priorities come to be as they are.

Now the skeptics amongst you may still not be appeased. What harm is done by my not acknowledging my sexuality or my lived experience as a professor these skeptics will ask. Failure to acknowledge these markers on my part, I believe, is failure to locate myself *vis-à-vis* the groups within which and against which I sculpt my identity. To the extent that I avoid awareness of my indebtedness to these groups as I approach others on the rickety bridges I build to them, to that extent I am dishonest about myself to these others and myself and lack courage in giving as full an account of myself as I can. Dishonesty and moral pusillanimity can pave the way

to morally harmful behavior, especially in the practice of education. So much of that practice is an act of self-disclosure on the part of teachers toward their students, so that moral inaccuracy in identifying myself can certainly lead to moral mis-education and perhaps moral dis-education.

In the end, I suspect Dwight is ultimately rehearsing a dictum as old as Western philosophy itself, namely, know thyself. But instead of construing the self as a set of convictions as Socrates did, Dwight is asking us to be true to the markers that make us. By acknowledging the group origins of these markers, we can each fathom much about our identities and how these shape our doings, both personal and professional. Dwight has done us a great service in drawing our need to understand these markers to our attention

-
1. Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "We've Come to See the Wizard! Revelations of the Enlightenment Epistemologist," *Philosophy of Education 1995* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 29.
 2. David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), part 3.
 3. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chaps. 2 and 3.
 4. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 190-96.
 5. Victor L. Worsfold, "Israel Scheffler's Ethics: Theory and Practice" in *Reason and Education: Essays in Honor of Israel Scheffler*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 189-200.