

The Ethics of Difficult Conversations: Epistemology, Education, and Communication

Across Difference

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In “Racial Battle Fatigue, Epistemic Exploitation, and Willful Ignorance,” Barbara Applebaum offers an impressive and powerful analysis of the ways in which the emotional burdens and moral costs of race-related epistemic injustices have been theorized in recent years. On the foundation of this good analysis, Applebaum offers original and quite thoughtful reflections on what these may mean for the often-challenging conversations of race in the classroom.

I applaud Applebaum’s fine work and, via this brief essay, provide a modest attempt at extending some of the insights she offers. In this, I wish to demonstrate the importance of her work by moving its insights into two contexts of increasing and aggregating complexity, followed by a candidate for ameliorating (though not fully resolving) some of the concerns raised across both Applebaum’s article and my own.

DEFINING POSITIONS

Applebaum provides an extremely rich analysis of the epistemic costs of being called upon to educate those who ought to take greater responsibility (potentially recognizing their own culpability in not having done so sooner) for their own racial education and awareness. These persons epistemically exploit their interlocutors by both asking them to explain their experiences and simultaneously discounting their testimony. In this, the default interaction described is between the dominant and marginalized knower. In many related cases, the occupants of these positions are rather clear; indeed, Applebaum uses example of interactions between persons identified as white (educator) and POC (students) in her article. But what ought one do under circumstances in which it is unclear who is dominantly situated and who is marginally situated?

For example, what of a hermeneutical contestation between two people

of color? Here, I offer a pastiche of recently observed interactions between self-identified Somali immigrant students and self-identified African American students in Central Ohio:

As the two students process their shared experience in a classroom, the African American student asserts that their shared Black identity is explanatorily relevant. The Somali immigrant student resists this interpretation on the asserted basis that she is not Black. This frustrates the African American student as she states that this denial of her interpretation feels as erroneous (and burdensome) as claims made by racially naive white classmates. This frustrates the Somali immigrant student as she states that this denial of her interpretation feels as erroneous (and burdensome) as claims made by internationally naive white classmates.

In this example, who is a member of the epistemically dominant group? Who is a member of the epistemically marginalized group? Is one person asserting the epistemic significance of racial identity categories on a person for whom such categories are disconnected from their lived experiences? Does this rest upon a specific category of willful ignorance of racial categories across international contexts? Is one person denying the epistemic significance of legible (to them) racial categories because doing so allows them to potentially avoid some of the burdens of Black identity in the United States? Does this effort rest on (a form of) “white” ignorance? Who of the pair is failing to recognize how they are implicated in perpetuating epistemic injustices? How ought these students speak and listen to one another in this classroom?

DIALOGUES AND PLURALITY

Of course, the classroom contexts that Applebaum discusses are even more complex than the example above. Though most of the analyses of epistemic exploitation involve two dialogical participants, real-world classroom encounters contain a far greater number of involved persons. Indeed, Applebaum notes this as she describes her own experiences with navigating the emotions and assumptions of a white teacher with racially marginalized and racially dominant students in her classroom. The number of observers surely complicates the

dialogue between any two parties (e.g., teacher-student, student-student, etc.) in the group,¹ but a classroom is also a space within which dialogue can happen across a plurality of persons. How then, as a full participant in conversation with two or more others, ought one respond to the category of hermeneutic contestation described above?

Firstly, we might consider how one who is caught between the two hermeneutical frames of her dialogical partners ought to proceed in her capacity as a hearer. As a hearer under these circumstances, one has much to navigate as she attempts to avoid visiting epistemic injustices upon either of her interlocutors (holders, as they are, of incompatibility views). Though she may regard one position as more attractive than the other, given her own pre-existing interpretations, she would do well to question whether that view is based in testimonial injustices impacting the distribution of subject matter credibility on the issue at hand. Perhaps, a desirable course of action for one, as a hearer, in this position is to remain attuned to the new information and perspectives provided in her conversation, considering these to the best of her ability as she attempts to improve her epistemic position (i.e., learn).

Secondly, we might also consider how one who is caught between the two hermeneutical frames of her dialogical partners ought to proceed in her capacity as a speaker. While she might wish to share her views and pose questions towards clarifying her own understanding of the perspectives of her conversational partners, she might do well not to attempt driving the progression of the conversation nor assume the role of arbitrator in the hermeneutical contestation. Instead, she might adopt a more minimal speaking role, creating space for her colleagues to proceed (or not) in articulating the details of their differing interpretations. To do otherwise might risk exploiting their epistemic labor for her own educational benefit.

DETERMINING PROTOCOLS

But, one might ask, does not educational engagement surely require opportunities for questions, discussion, disagreement, evaluation of justification

and the like? These may seem to be hallmarks of many discussion-based learning methods. Perhaps, one might posit, worrying about epistemic exploitation and the rest, worthy though such aims might be, dilutes the educational essence of classroom spaces within which persons might learn that which is difficult to learn well in other contexts. Can a social-justice-oriented class about race do the difficult work of discussing race if its members are wary of the forms of epistemic injustice Applebaum rightly describes? Perhaps, even if only to a limited degree, the matter hinges on consent.

Epistemic exploitation, like other forms of exploitation, might be understood as a matter of unfairly taking advantage of another person's vulnerability, to one's own benefit. The *burden* of epistemic exploitation might persist even as the *exploitative* nature of that burden might be addressed via sufficiently robust mechanisms of consent. That is, these forms of consent might allow the marginalized knower to agree to the protocols and boundaries of the interactions of the classroom discussion, while recognizing that the burdens of such a discussion are not equally distributed. Indeed, many classroom groups similar to those discussed above seek to establish discussion rules for themselves; these might be especially salient for the marginalized knowers in these spaces. Under the right set of explicitly identified discussion rules, one marginalized knower might consent to, for instance, engage in "talking to white people about race." Another marginalized knower might continue to decline doing so under the same conditions. Both situations prioritize the agency of the marginalized knower (by making the "ask" explicit, instead of presuming engagement) rather than the demands of the dominant knower. As such, both are superior in legitimacy to situations in which marginalized knowers are thrust into emotionally and epistemically burdensome interactions without consenting to such an experience.

One matter that deserves serious consideration is that of whether or not marginalized knowers can authentically consent to a scheme of classroom guidelines requested within a larger structure of epistemic domination. That is, the consent described above might be coerced "consent" if there is little possibility for truly declining it. In ways analogous, yet oppositely directed, to Dotson's description of testimonial smothering (i.e., a speaker withholds testi-

mony that she believes will not be regarded as credible) a marginalized knower might feel compelled to offer her testimony to the dominant knowers. This compulsion might be navigated at the conscious level (e.g., “I don’t want to be a race expert again because it’s a major burden on me, but I will be one because I know they expect it of me.”) or unconsciously navigated as it is a manifestation of background arrangements of systemic power (e.g., “It didn’t occur to me that I could decline to be their race expert. It just seemed like the natural thing to do and I didn’t fully realize it was so burdensome until I stopped.”). Both present real concerns for creating classroom spaces that respect the marginalized knower as a knower.

CONCLUSION

Applebaum’s richly researched article provides deeply valuable analyses for educators and students. In my brief comments I have attempted to extend her generative remarks towards engaging with some complicating aspects of classroom dialogue. In this, I have pointed to the possibility of hermeneutical contestation within unclear positions of domination and marginalization. Following this, I have underscored her observation that classroom dialogues are often more complex than the dyads discussed in much (though not all) of the relevant literature. In closing I have reminded the reader of the usefulness (in this specific context) of classroom discussion rules, as they might accord greater power to marginalized knowers. Taken in sum, perhaps these observations might incline speakers and hearers to greater nuance in matters of exploitation and ignorance.

1 Here, I have in mind the performative aspect of dialogue when one has an awareness of a third-party audience to the exchange.