Looking Back While Looking Forward: History, Complexity, and Education

Response to Allison

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Introduction

I want to thank Julia Allison for the edifying paper, and I want to "sit with" what she argues. Indeed, if what she says is true, then we cannot rush the matter. I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment of the paper and will not be critical of her main arguments. Rather, I want to continue thinking and inquiring along with her, bolstering her points, extending some, and ending with asking some critical questions—which subsequent reckonings with these ghosts have cajoled.

In her essay, "Reckoning with Our Ghosts: A Reconsidering of Early White Female Theorists in Contemporary Philosophy of Education," Allison poses an interesting dilemma: what do we (as philosophers of education broadly or feminists more narrowly) do with the complicit oppression of our past, present, and future? "Will we succumb to the 'empathetic trap' and be subsumed by the other, by our ghosts, or will we follow an 'altruistic ethics' which allows us to express our distinctive selves?"[1] However, before commenting on Allison's address to this question, I want to retrace some of the steps.

History

What is good about early feminist philosophy of educa-

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tion? This question is relatively straightforward, well documented, and is not the present concern. Rather, Allison asks the opposite question, and in doing so brings awareness to the darker side of the spirits that haunt us today. These spirits are still present—despite being released from "purgatory" by second wave feminists' vindication and reconciliation of agency—because the absence of what they stood for calls to us.

Allison reminds us that neglecting our history "unmoors" us such that we cannot know the full shape of the present without such an education. That is, to think well about how to live today entails knowing how others have lived in the past and acknowledging what has formed the way we engage with the world and the way the world engages with us. In this way, Allison shows us that philosophy is a way of life—the spirits of these early feminists are alive today and impact how we live. The injustice that they failed to attend to in the past not only impacts us, but also needs to be graciously reckoned with today. Nevertheless, the work of early feminists, and the work of others who charted and disseminated the trailblazing of early feminism (despite not seeing the complicity of the former), are rightly seen as a drive toward feminist educational theory. Or put another way, the concern for justice is the ultimate value of both early feminists and those of today. Nevertheless, injustice prevails.

Allison writes, "Contemporary white feminist theorists practice complicity in upholding whiteness within the academy if they fail to address the lived contradictions of their historical predecessors."[2] Again, I agree here—early feminists (amongst other philosophers) have not only benefited from oppressive systems by enacting power both implicitly and explicitly, but also by not recognizing their participation in such unjust practices. Recognizing this failure, what should we do with their spirits now and what should we do with ourselves?

Complexity

To ask "What is good for humans?" seems to presuppose a response to the question "What are humans?"—a question about the existence (or ontology) of something. Katja Vogt's (2017) *Desiring the Good* reminds us of the need to begin with what she calls the metaphysics of human life.[3] She writes, "[t]he discussion of a good human life cannot proceed as if human beings were, say, gods. Human beings are one kind of living being with a given physiology, biology, and so on."[4] Like all natural existing things, and unlike gods, humans are subject to change, so our inquiry into the nature (and value) of human beings needs to reflect this phenomenon. That is, in the face of an ever changing world, we need to find out how our minds work, what motivates us, what are our needs and desires, etc. if we are to think well about what is good, right, virtuous, or just. In other words, with an adequate study of humans, one is better positioned to ask what is good or bad for humans. Call this *the human constraint*. The human constraint holds that if a conception of social justice does not correlate with what human beings are, then the non-correlation suggests that the theory is missing something crucial. To be sure, some of the theory and practice of Emma Willard (again, amongst other lovers of wisdom) were clearly off the mark. This needs to be recognized and pushed forward.

Inquiry into the metaphysics of human life further illustrates that we are practical creatures. We need to do things to live. We have physical, physiological, and psychological needs that come with demands. Not only do we need clean drinking water, but also food, shelter, love, etc., and this often comes with the need to intentionally and accurately create, build, maintain, and do things. Thus, as humans we are limited to our practical nature—in what we could or have to do. In short, we are complex. It is generally not possible for one human to do everything they want to

do. One needs to think, imagine, remember, partake in dialogue, listen, deliberate, and decide what to do with their limited time and resources. This is in part what humans are. However, we are also fallible—namely, we fail and get things wrong. Though early feminist theorists have got some things right, their failures continue to haunt us, and demand to be reckoned with. Put another way, we need to learn and be transformed by their mistakes.

Education

In the words of Allison, "In bringing this history to bear, we can envision these predecessors as more substantiated individuals within whom we in turn may see our own contradictions."[5] Though this can be difficult, a crucial step in moving forward is avoiding what's called the *empathetic trap*. That is, experiencing shame while reckoning with our ghosts can be overwhelming and "diminish one's power to act."[6] In response, Allison supports altruistic ethics, which holds that we are never "the same." That is, it is necessary to recognize the uniqueness of the past, present, and future and also the haecceity of each individual. Each is part of a larger whole, and no one part is exactly the same as another. There are similarities, continuities, and interrelationships, but we cannot be trapped by strict regularities, identities, and certainty. This opens a space for looking back at our ghosts while looking forward to our actions. We are each unique—so much that we must each ask ourselves, "How ought I to live?"

This education involves the need to practice the moral virtues of courage and humility. However, these moral virtues are simultaneously epistemic virtues; possessing such excellences allows one to learn about the world more than if they did not have such virtues. Paradoxically, we are epistemically better off by being aware of and owning our epistemic

limitations.[7] Educating for intellectual courage and intellectual humility, which Allison is doing, allows us to look back (and within) critically and graciously, while simultaneously moving forward.

Conclusion

Although we admire the love of early feminists' wisdom, we can clearly see where their love and where their wisdom dims. If I have learned anything from Allison's paper it is that the merit of a scholar's work will be judged not only on what it is about but also on what it is not about. The larger social justice project "that remains unfinished" is where I want to conclude—these ghosts that Allison has brought to our attention speak to me in a specific way. As a philosopher of education with indigenous heritage, her essay resonates with me; I am continuously visited by past injustices that do present harm in education. Furthermore, the absence of what is often written about calls to me. Relatedly, I ask, "What should we do with our complicity in presently harming the environment?"

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1 Julia Allison, "Reckoning with Our Ghosts: A Reconsidering of Early White Female Theorists in Contemporary Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 1 (2020).

2 Allison, "Reckoning with Our Ghosts."

3 K. M. Vogt, *Desiring the Good: Ancient Proposals and Contemporary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4 Vogt, *Desiring the Good*, 36.

5 Allison, "Reckoning with Our Ghosts."

6 Allison, "Reckoning with Our Ghosts."

7 Dennis Whitcomb, et al., "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," *Philoso-*

phy and Phenomenological Research 94, no. 3 (2017): 509-39.