

## Education within a Damaged Democracy: A Few Diagnoses and Definitions

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In her stirring Presidential Address, “Democracy, Extremism, and the Crisis of Truth in Education,” Michele Moses engages in an enormous yet inescapable task.<sup>1</sup> Her work in making sense of the causes of (and desirable responses to) growing fractures within our fragile democracy requires grand scope of vision and patient analyses.

Moses does much to advance this work by pressing against the usual boundaries of group membership (for example, progressive vs. conservative), holding to account those with whom she shares considerable values and goals. Rather than resting in defined roles, this sober-minded engagement with our collective problems models the distinctive contributions of philosophy to addressing that which ails our democracy.

While I am deeply appreciative of the richness and the breadth of Moses’ work here, I cannot, bound as I am by the limits of this context, meaningfully engage with all portions of the wonderfully nuanced points she offers. Thankfully, I am inclined to agree with much of Moses’ assessments and, rather than press against her arguments, my response endeavors to take seriously her provocative invitation to philosophers. How can and should we, *as philosophers of education*, understand the crises that Moses has described? What role do philosophers and does education play in creating and correcting these states?

In the response ahead, I wish to consider how philosophers of education might initiate productive work on those questions; in this, I wish to focus on conceptualizations of the inquiry and the inquirers that rest at the center of Moses’ good project. As much of Moses’ address focuses on how persons might inquire well with one another, I believe that epistemic and social/political analyses will be helpful here as we consider the ways in which they meaningfully intersect within a democratic project. In sum, my remarks are offered in the service of contributing to additional analyses that might sit alongside Moses’

careful work on democracy-sustaining education.

### EPISTEMIC DIAGNOSES AND DESIDERATA

First, I would like to begin by pointing to some of the difficulties in diagnosing those occasions when our epistemic practices are vulnerable. While it may seem easy to consistently point to the moments within which the lines between fact and falsehood have been undesirably eroded, I would like to suggest that these instances, egregious though they might be, are an extension of issues that are far more difficult to reliably identify.

For example, given that we wish to avoid occasions of falsehood circulating as fact, what ought we (and others) do when the very status of fact and falsehood is under contention? The reasonableness (here, I invoke the same political liberal traditions that undergird Moses' analyses) of a disagreement may seem to be an immediately legible and reliable criterion for navigating those cases within which multiple parties hold competing conceptions of what ought to be identified as settled fact. Indeed, in my own scholarship, I have invoked reasonableness and remain committed to its use as a standard for boundaries of discussions under pluralistic circumstances.<sup>2</sup> But, even though reasonableness is attractive as a standard for sidestepping a descent into the relativism that seems to recur across various "both sides" approaches to pedagogy and politics, I encourage us to recognize that reasonable disagreement likely exists about what constitutes *reasonableness*. In short, I am calling attention to a vexing problem of action-oriented invocation of good ideal theorizing applied to non-ideal contexts—and it is a problem that philosophers of education would do well to directly address. Experts like Darren Chetty have written about how identity-based assumptions (his analyses have rightly drawn attention to racialized norms and perceptions) can be smuggled into seemingly neutral conceptualizations of reasonableness in discussion-based educational contexts.<sup>3</sup> Identifying *that* reasonable disagreements about fact ought to be allowable in our deliberative spaces (for example, educational institutions and other straightforwardly civic contexts) is the beginning of a complex deliberation in itself.

Moreover, presuming that we (as philosophers of education) will make

or have made meaningful strides in this diagnostic work, we might also benefit from being attentive to the ways in which reasonable disagreements can, in aggregation, create the types of impoverished epistemic circumstances that we might wish to avoid. That is, though an individual statement or question posed in a philosophy course (or scholarly conference) might represent a reasonable view, that view could possibly intersect with other reasonable views to create an unreasonable epistemic context within which, though no individual might endorse the view, the community's stance is an unreasonable one. Moses' good work rightly directs our attention to the complex issues entailed in the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and (legibly) justified standards for reasonable epistemic practices.

### ENGINEERING A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INQUIRY

Next, having identified some potential diagnostic challenges, I would like to turn attention to further epistemic matters of the relationship between inquiry and truth. I wish to suggest that the prioritization to a particular account of inquiry (one of potential many) may be limiting democracy-sustaining interactions. Given this, I think it wise to label and demarcate what we take inquiry to accomplish so that we might have greater analytical clarity about what we intend in pedagogical and political contexts.

Inquiry is often defined in the service of new knowledge about truth. But, perhaps this view, helpful in some contexts, is a source of frustration when deeply held values or apparently foundational facts are invoked. Perhaps inquiry into, say, gender or race threatens members of the right and the left when understood as an attack on known truth which will be replaced by "new," "woke," or "alternative" truths. To be clear, I do not wish to suggest a fuzzy-minded relativism here; truths exist and are valuable across physical, social, historical, moral, and other categories. Rather, I want to point to how high the stakes might *feel* in a democracy when inquiry is understood as *only* about settling (and unsettling) truth. The motivation to monitor inquiry (for example, by legislating curricula or censoring unpalatable views) is less surprising under these vulnerable terms. Perhaps, we can make meaningful contributions to curbing these motivations by improving the concepts used in engaging with them.

Epistemologist Avery Archer is helpful in identifying that inquiry is not always/only aimed at producing knowledge or justified true belief.<sup>4</sup> On Archer's "epistemic improvement" account, the constitutive aim of inquiry into some question, Q, is found in improving one's epistemic standing relative to Q. Archer's account is particularly useful in identifying the value of a) inquiry that does not produce new knowledge and b) inquiry into those questions about which one already has a strong sense of confidence in holding a complete answer to Q.

Though Archer does not argue in this way, I would assert that an "epistemic improvement" account of inquiry potentially opens possibilities for members of the political right and left (in the ways that Moses has invoked) to a) appreciate the value of inquiry even when ambiguity of a question (for example, a matter about which there is deep but reasonable disagreement) has not been resolved and b) accept inquiry into matters that seem settled—without perceiving that inquiry to necessarily entail a denial of factual knowledge (or deeply held values). Thus, this account represents a potential avenue towards an improved epistemic community within which members more readily resist the affective states contributing to the ills that Moses describes. That the rhetoric of many university communities already aligns with this view of inquiry is promising.

Still, I want to be careful to note that creating analytic possibilities or engineering a concept towards just ends does not ensure specific political actions or outcomes. Sadly, a good philosophical argument is not guaranteed to motivate all actors. Though it may seem necessary to provide good analyses of these problems, those analyses seem unlikely to be sufficient for progress on these issues. How, then, we might ask ourselves, should philosophers of education proceed?

### STRATEGIC PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSES

Having offered some definitional and epistemological comments, my remarks now turn to some of the social and political limitations that philosophers of education ought to consider as they work towards strategic pursuit of the good goals that Moses has identified. Under ideal conditions of reason-giving and responsiveness, philosophers would simply offer analyses that would move

our interlocutors to reconsider their values, interpretations, motivations, and actions. But we labor under non-ideal conditions and practical obstacles complicate the straightforward efficacy of philosophical work.

I cannot here provide full analyses of all such factors, but perhaps the biggest impediment to the work ahead is that there exists a range of actor types, each of which likely call for specific response from philosophers of education working in support of democratic norms. The actors might be understood in reference to their intentions and their capacities. Relatively ideal actors are those well-intentioned persons with the capacities (including willingness) to appreciate good reasons and revise their positions in accordance. These actors (if they are contributing to democratic ills) need little more than our philosophical analyses to correct their courses. As they might be persuaded by legible arguments, in many cases, the work of the philosopher is largely that of translation of too-nuanced arguments into more legible formulations.

Of course, some less-ideal actors are quite likely to resist even these bespoke responses. Within this category, one might imagine actors holding prioritized private justifications (say from a comprehensive view of the good) that are obscured by their (also sincerely held) articulated public reasons even as (philosophically rigorous) response to those reasons does little to shift the actors' social/political commitments. While these are not necessarily *bad* actors, their stances make it difficult for philosophers to present and/or translate analyses in ways that can actually motivate change. For these actors, philosophers must first engage in difficult and discerning efforts to determine the germane perspectives to which they are to respond (without, of course, becoming paternalistic or condescending in assuming privately held reasons).

Finally, philosophers cannot overlook the category of more straightforwardly bad actors. Characteristic of this category are those actors with a relatively deep degree of insincerity regarding their articulated reasons and an unwillingness to respond to arguments that engage their privately held reasons. These actors are, in a sense, unavailable to be moved by even the best of our arguments and analyses. For many of these actors, the deleterious consequences for democracy, as described by Moses, are not an incidental by-product of their

actions but are the very motivations for them. Continually offering justifications (or making practical concessions) to these actors as a part of a cooperative project seems unwise as they are inauthentic participants in that democratic work. Here, a task for philosophers might be to better engage others in reliable and specific recognition of these bad actors and their practices (for example, in, *inter alia*, refining shared standards of reasonableness in public discourse). In all of this, I have suggested that we would do well to know our students before we prepare our lessons.

### CONCLUSION

In my response to Moses' splendid invitation, I have begun to articulate one philosopher's replies to the questions that ought to drive our work as philosophers of education within our damaged democracy. Much outstanding work in our field replies to these matters in alternative and encouraging ways. As ever, I look forward to learning from Michele Moses and others as they answer her call.

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### REFERENCES

- 1 Michele Moses, "Democracy, Extremism, and the Crisis of Truth in Education," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1 (2023).
- 2 Joy Dangora Erickson and Winston C. Thompson, "Preschool as a Well-spring for Democracy: Endorsing Traits of Reasonableness in Early Childhood Education," *Democracy and Education* 27, no. 1 (2019): Article 1; Joy Dangora Erickson and Winston C. Thompson, "Engaging Particularly Vulnerable Students in Civic Education: An Argument for Avoiding Unchecked Apprehension of Moral Indoctrination," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 54, no. 2 (2021): 210 – 222.
- 3 Darren Chetty, "Racism as 'Reasonableness': Philosophy for Children and the Gated Community of Inquiry," *Ethics and Education* 13, no. 1 (2018): 39-54.
- 4 Avery Archer, "The Aim of Inquiry," *Disputatio* 13 no. 61 (2021): 95-119.