Shifting the Authority Project

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I would like to thank Randall Curren for asking me to respond to this essay and Barbara Applebaum for writing it. This interaction has been particularly evocative for me and I appreciate the opportunity to work with Barbara and to benefit from her generous commitments of time and attention.

I want to jump right into the notion of relational authority that Applebaum discusses in her paper because I think that the reconceptualization of authority that she initiates is very important. For me, Applebaum's project not only dissolves the opposition between nurturance and authority, it actually infuses nurturance into the authority project. This transformation significantly alters not only feminist educators' capacity to claim authority but also the very project in which we engage as we claim authority.

The grammar of talking about authority as a project is a little awkward here, and I do not mean to suggest that this is the only way we would need to think about authority, but this form of reference helps me to underscore the connections between the transformation Barbara describes and Kathleen Jones's critical account of authority as sovereignty, so I hope you will bear with me.

Relational authority, then, as it is portrayed in Barbara's paper, infuses the authority project (in teaching) with nurturance. It replaces an ontology of atomistic individualism with that of second personhood; it replaces or at least augments respect for generalizable others with attention to particular, concrete others in their specificity and social location.[1]

Nurturance is infused into the authority project as well through processes of refusal; refusal, that is, of a hierarchical, unidirectional, coercive, and silencing authority project. It occurs as the legitimation of third-party institutionally located accreditation is replaced by a trust generated interactively through first-hand experience. Here it is not only the shift from indirect to direct evidence of legitimacy that interests me, but also the nature of the influence that is anticipated in the process of claiming authority. What Applebaum claims is far more contingent, interactive, multidirectional, and perhaps even temporary than the kind of influence generally associated with claims to authority. Here, Jones's notion of authority as sovereignty is helpful. Jones, citing Clifford,

> Authority constructs rules with which to organize behavior, to master and control it. The authoritative, as an interpretive reading of values and practices, "locate[s] the unruly meanings of a text in a single, coherent intention." Authority and the authoritative, in short, become signs of sovereignty.[2]

Jones goes on to say that authority as sovereignty forecloses further discussion. I quote her again:

> In a very strong sense, that is precisely what traditional notions of authority are intended to do: suspend the process of judgment and decision-making as an ongoing, conflicted, and collective process, and locate it in one, ultimate, sovereign point.

However, in reconceiving authority as relational and construing it as provisional, which is to say not complete except in the interactions between students and teachers, Applebaum lets go of sovereignty.[3] She does not claim the right to be obeyed, or the right to be recognized as "right-thinking," or the right to be certain. What she claims is a withholding of doubt, both her own and, temporarily at least, that of her students; she claims the right, if "right" is the correct name for it, to be confident of her ability to make a meaningful contribution to the joint educational project into which she invites students. And she is confident because her commitment to nurturance compels her to attend to her students' full human presence.

As I worked with Barbara's paper, I found myself wanting to have more details about the teaching and attention practices through which she sees herself as building the basis for relational authority. I still have these questions, but in the meantime I have been struck by the apparent parallels between Applebaum's notion of relational authority and Frank Margonis's description of relationality in Paulo Freire, in his paper, "Relational Pedgogy Without Foundations: Reconstructing the Work of Paulo Freire."[4] In the interest of space I will refer to just one example. Writing of Freire's appropriation of Martin Buber's social ontology, Margonis writes:

> Where Freire's commitment to a dialogic view of humans leads to deficit portraits of students, Buber's insistence that students and teachers approach one another as complete beings preempts the process wherein a teacher singles out the student's traits that need to be changed. Moreover, the terms of the relationship would evolve in the process of interaction; neither partner has the authority to stipulate the specific rules of relating.

I was caught by Margonis's description of the way the educational project would be responsive to the students' own educational purposes, and I think that this contingency and focus on interaction is consistent with Barbara Applebaum's authority project.

This interactive feature of relational authority allows me, in hindsight, to think more clearly about a struggle I had earlier this year with one particular student in a graduate level class on Race and Gender Issues in Education. This student, let me call her Margaret, engaged very seriously with the subject matter of the course. She read and studied widely, wrote pages of commentary, and conversed with her classmates intently. In each of these activities, however, she presented less than conventional processes of reasoning. There were usually some recognizable connections in what she was saying or doing, but I struggled to follow the logic. Eventually she wrote an essay and handed in a draft for me to examine. The title of her paper was "Violence Against Women: A Personal Transformation." I won't go into details here, in the interest of space, but the title helps to identify the dilemma I believed I faced. Margaret's paper was far off the mark of what I could recognize as graduate-level work. In places it read like a word association interview, as the connections between thoughts seemed to rely solely on the use of a single phrase in totally different contexts. Margaret's inquiry caused me to struggle with questions of what I was trying to do in my course, what the university was doing when it "allowed people-like-her into the program," and what she thought she was doing in this paper. I was, for a considerable time, the picture of exasperation. I can only imagine how this process was exasperating for Margaret! To make this long story

short, it was the way that this paper clearly demonstrated that Margaret was following a path of personal transformation that forced the strongest issues for me. It forced me to consider what I could do to facilitate her project; to ask if I was requiring the wrong kind of writing from her. If her task was one of personal transformation would it require that I apply different criteria to my reading of it? And was the master's degree in education at Lakehead University a place where people could pursue this kind of personal transformation effectively?

In truth, I mostly thought not. I mostly thought she should be writing at a local library in a creative writing class that focussed on autobiography, and ultimately I did find myself negotiating just what the project could aim to do within the limits of our course, Margaret's thoughts, and the feminist literature that she wanted to address. She did not, in the end, write a paper that I could assess as graduate-level work, and she passed the course on the strength of a presentation she and several colleagues made together. Yet her engagement with questions she considered personally transforming pushed me to consider how widely I would need to be able to move if I were to honor her reasons for being in the course I taught.

I think it is useful to see this situation in terms of the letting go of sovereignty that I perceive to be central to Applebaum's account of relational authority. Applebaum's account helps me to affirm the choices I made in Margaret's situation and throughout my interactions with students, to encourage them to claim their own projects and attempt to listen to their resistances. It also helps me to understand some of the pain I experience when my attempts to let go of sovereignty run smack dab into the middle of institutional requirements that I, as course instructor, police the boundaries of academia, re-inscribing sovereignty as the authority project most integral to higher education.

I had wanted, in this response, to pursue this last point further because I think that the institutional structures place monumental barriers in the path of educators who would attempt to make relational authority, as Applebaum has described it, central to their pedagogy. I also think that the connection in Al Neiman's paper, which Applebaum cites, of socio-political authority, epistemic authority, and aims of education (as perhaps found in Richard S. Peters's notions of ethics and education) might not be tossed out completely as an example of "power-over" authority. In short, if we consider the origin of the problem with socio-political authority and epistemic authority to lie in masculinist ethics and epistemology, indeed, in masculinist accounts of reason, then infusing those projects with nurturance rather than sovereignty could perhaps allow us to argue in favor of educational projects and educational institutions of quite different sorts than those within which we are accustomed to working in contemporary public education. That argument, however, will have to wait for another paper.

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1. I think both Lorraine Code's use of this term as an epistemological construct and Annette Baier's use of the term as an ethical construct are useful to the relational authority in teaching. See Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 2, "Second Persons" and Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust," *Ethics*

96 (January 1986): 231-60; For discussion of concrete vs. generalized others see Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: the Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987). For discussion of care to particular others, see Marilyn Friedman, "Beyond Caring: The De-Moralization of Gender," in *Science, Morality, and Feminist Theory*, ed. Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielson, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy,* Supplementary vol. 13 (1987): 87-109; See also Maria Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991).

2. Kathleen Jones, "The Trouble with Authority," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (1999): 108. The quote is from James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representation* 1 (1983): 118-47.

3. I would suggest that it is not just the relationships between students and teachers that would need to be considered, here, but also relationships between students and students and, I dare say, relationships between classrooms and both the large and small communities within which classrooms are situated.

4. Published in this volume.

5. Alven M. Neiman, "Education, Power, and the Authority of Knowledge," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 1 (1986): 64-80 and Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).