

Searching for Alternatives

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Most of us contemporary philosophers lead a privileged life. We spend months, years, even lifetimes investigating questions like, “Is there an erotic aspect to teaching and learning?” And even though we do confront many of the most difficult aspects of the human condition, we do so in a safe and abstract manner. For us, the pain of hunger appears in indices of unemployment and poverty; the anger of the picket line translates into the abstract noun, “class conflict”; and the tribulations of the gay or lesbian person leading a double life is accounted for by using fascinating terms like “compulsory heterosexuality.” So, what is the price of our privilege? We need not, like Socrates, fear that our cutting logic will lead to a death sentence. Nor need we, like Spinoza, fear lynching because we have disturbed the sacred order of our neighbors. Nor need we, like Gramsci, waste away in prison because we are a threat to the political order of our society.

President Diller suggests provocatively and wisely that the price of our privilege comes in the resolute commitment to endure the shock of the torpedo fish. Diller’s heroines and heroes are people who seek wisdom, despite the pain that revelation often brings. She says, “It takes considerable courage, self-knowledge, a brave heart, and honest openness to face one’s own ignorance and to stay present to the concomitant experiences of discomfort, perhaps feeling horrified as well as torpified.” One should be willing to face one’s own privilege, insensitivity, or racism, to take the shock and proceed ahead, willing to again and again pursue wisdom even when the inquiry highlights one’s own failings. I think it is most profound that Ann describes vulnerability as one of the most basic philosophical strengths.

Having described philosophical thought using the experience of the torpedo fish, Ann is insistent that we share this process with our students. She criticizes philosophical education that replaces the act of philosophizing with the memorization of previous thinkers’ views. Students should do far more than learn Descartes or Deleuze. She wants them to ask Descartes’ or Deleuze’s questions, or their own questions, with the same sort of urgency and concern betrayed by Descartes and Deleuze. Ann thinks students will be better philosophers and better students if they become philosophers of their own education; she wishes for them to become thoughtful architects of their own learning in the way Adrienne Rich asks that students claim their education. And we can trust that Ann is right to believe that students claiming an education will encounter their moments of vulnerability, shock, and discouragement.

With Ann’s vision of philosophy and philosophical education in mind, I would like to explore further the torpedo fish experience, for I submit that some torpedo experiences are better than others. But, before developing that argument, I must say just a little about what I most value in philosophy. The philosophy which most

excites me offers substantive alternatives to the dominant ways of thinking about our society and our lives. Without knowing which philosophies will lead to a more just society, I am continually looking for worldviews which offer alternative visions of truth and reality; of the individual's relation to the group and world; and of fair economic, political, and social institutions. I start from the Gramscian assumption that as a white middle-class male who is now an agent of the state, I have been imbued with dominant cultural perspectives designed to justify the existing society, including its inequitable and unjust relations.¹ Thus, my search for alternatives is part of a counter-hegemonic hope that meaningful alternatives can be articulated and pursued.

Thus, the torpedo fish experiences which most excite me are ones which bring a juxtaposition of dominant and nondominant group worldviews, forcing us to consider the epistemological standards, values, limitations, and vested interests attending both views. Many experiences of questioning are not of this nature. If we take examples from Ann's address, Meno does not have this sort of experience when his definition of virtue falls prey to the dialectical skill of Socrates. For Meno's shock comes merely from the logical disintegration of his own position. After Meno articulates a conception of virtue, Socrates leads Meno through a series of questions, bringing him to agree that his view assumed an incorrect premise.²

Now the Meno example is extremely important, for I believe there is a tendency in Western philosophy to view Meno's questioning as paradigmatic of the philosophical endeavor. Notice that even our grounding metaphor here, the idea of ambling along in the shallow water and accidentally stepping on a sting ray, portrays reasoning as a process in which one is methodically arranging one's premises and conclusions only to be stung by an argument which goes awry. To me, this metaphor is quite apt in discussing what happens to Meno in his discussion with Socrates, but it does not describe the sorts of quandaries I most hope to experience and most hope to pass on to my students.

The sort of torpedo fish experiences which I most value do not come instantaneously like a failed syllogism, nor can they be sprung on thinkers against their will. Rather, the philosopher must claim these painful realizations through a long process of sympathetic engagement with people and perspectives she barely understands. If we were to extend the torpedo fish metaphor to consider the sorts of experiences I prize most highly, it would involve a northerner swimming south for thousands of miles in unfamiliar waters in search of a sting ray which, then, she might step upon.

I appreciate Ann's interest in highlighting this second type of torpedo fish experience, in the form of Dwight Boyd's realization that John Rawls neglects American slavery and mentions only the slavery of antiquity.³ Here Boyd's encounter with a contrasting worldview brings him to recognize his complicity in a distinctively Anglo form of denial — denial of slavery and its contemporary manifestations in segregation and job discrimination. Boyd only recognizes his intellectual complicity in white strategies of control because of his own willingness to aggressively pursue a line of thought stemming from premises quite different than his own; he becomes torpified — not because an interlocutor has caught him in a

logical error — but because he is searching for the meaning of Charles Mills's insight. Perhaps he finds in Mills's remark a hint of a very different perspective on the society he inhabits and assumes that his denial has prevented him from understanding the views of many fellow citizens. For the difference between Boyd's original reading of Rawls and Mills's insight signals their participation in very different cultural traditions and practices; it signals their respective positions in dominant and nondominant groups. In short, Boyd's insight recognizes the way we are situated within particular positions of power, practice, and culture — that our standards of truth, value, and fairness may indeed be at stake in the juxtaposition of these different traditions.

Were we to decenter the vision of philosophy represented in the *Meno* and elevate the importance of philosophical studies which juxtapose nondominant and dominant worldviews, the implications would be significant. The central Western exhortation to “know thyself” would be complemented by an understanding that a diversity of traditions offers a wealth of insight and that oppressed groups may have especially keen insights on numerous matters — fairness and the distribution of wealth being obvious examples.⁴ Moreover, the very process of knowing oneself would itself be altered. Just as Boyd needed to read Mills to know himself, we would expect that one could not know oneself without understanding one's relationship to one's group, and one's group's relations with other groups. Philosophy, on this view, cannot be easily separated from empirical studies in anthropology, sociology, and history, for the standards one shares with one's group and that deviate from other groups become a basic component of the philosophical puzzle.

And the educational implications of this perspective would suggest that students from nondominant groups ought to be provided ample opportunity to develop their perspectives in a way consistent with students' cultural and personal integrity. Ann's suggestion that resistant students may be budding philosophers contains a great deal of truth, for in many cases, students resist because their culture and their persons are not welcome in the society or school.⁵ Student resistance often reflects the tremendous reservoirs of knowledge lived out in the communities whose traditions are not represented in the curriculum or in Western philosophical debates. The more African-American, Chicano/a, Navajo, or gay and lesbian perspectives are heard within our educational institutions, the richer will be our intellectual exchanges, and fewer students will be forced to navigate between an unreceptive public institution and a concealed private existence.

In brief, I wish to thank President Diller for articulating a conception of philosophy and philosophical education that places rigorous existential demands upon philosophers while embracing a vision that is broad and humane.

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York: International, 1971).

2. *Meno*, 77b-78b, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

3. Dwight Boyd, "The Place of Locating Oneself(ves)/Myself(ves) in Doing Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education: 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998).

4. Celeste Condit and John Lucaites argue, for instance, that the U.S. conception of equality has achieved a far more substantive contemporary meaning as a result of African-American protest movements and articulations of the meaning of equality. See Celeste Condit and John Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

5. There are numerous examples. See, Stacey Lee, *Unraveling the Myth of the "Model Minority" Stereotype* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Harriet Romo and Toni Galbo, *Latino High School Graduation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); and Donna Deyhle, "Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (1995): 403-44.