Ethics and the "Not Entirely"

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After reading Benjamin Endres's thoughtful explication of the ethical underpinnings of critical theory, I was reminded of a Walker Percy quotation wherein he reflected on world views and theorizing. In this passage, Percy directs our attention beyond or perhaps behind the theory.

> I would prefer to describe it as a certain view of man as wayfarer, in a rather conscious contrast to prevailing views of man as organism, as enculturated creature, as consumer, Marxist, as subject to such-and-such a scientific or psychological understanding — all of which he is, but not entirely. It is the "not entirely" I'm interested in — like the man Kierkegaard described who read Hegel, understood himself and the universe perfectly by noon, but then had the problem of living out the rest of the day.[1]

In like manner, Endres is asking us to identify the ethical framework that underlies critical theory that in turn will help us answer questions about "living out the rest of the day." To this end, I would like to explore an ethical issue that is inherent in the critical theorist's call for an "ideal speech situation." I propose that the critical theorists' moral conversation does not go far enough. Rather, they stop short of getting our attention so that we might assess whether or not Habermas's model does truly mediate oppressive power relations.

In this regard, I wholeheartedly endorse Endres's careful examination of the ethical framework inherent in the critical theory of education. I, too, appreciate the link that Habermas makes between knowledge claims and ethical claims inherent in the social context of knowledge-making. As Endres points out, Habermas's theory that links epistemology with ethics is only a beginning. Endres states that he believes that "communicative action, as a constructive ideal for knowledge and ethics, helps to translate critique into action." In this response I hope to enrich Endres' argument by discussing an ethical aspect of the "ideal speech situation" that demonstrates that there are multifaceted ethical dimensions of epistemology that deserve continued investigation.

In proposing the "ideal speech situation," Habermas hopes to attain the ethical ideal of inclusivity. As Endres correctly notes, Benhabib expands this notion by naming two ethical principles that should underlie any communicative action. These are: (1) the principal of universal moral respect, and (2) the principle of egalitarian reciprocity.[2] These are worth elaborating. The principle of universal moral respect acknowledges the right of all beings to be participants in the moral conversation, and the principle of egalitarian reciprocity indicates that individuals must all possess symmetrical rights to the process of conversing, that is, to initiate the conversation, to reflect and critique presuppositions, to contribute. Benhabib suggests that identifying these two principles provides the necessary normative context within which the "ideal speech situation" can truly become inclusive. She hopes that these two principles lay the groundwork for expanding the public conversation by furthering what Benhabib describes as a "capacity to reverse perspectives...the willingness to reason from the others' point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their

voice."[3] Yet I would pose the question to the critical theorists whether it is necessarily true that by virtue of the inclusion of voices, that the power relations will necessarily be transformed? Will the dialogue reach its ethical ideal of inclusivity simply by the additional perspectives seated at the table?

While I agree with Benhabib that these two principles are indispensable, in the context of critical education there is much more yet to be said. Benhabib states that "power is not only a social resource to be distributed, say like bread or automobiles. It is also a sociocultural grid of interpretation and communication."[4] Because power is enmeshed in these two activities of interpretation and communication, we must be interested in:

> identifying those social relations, power structures and sociocultural grids of communication and interpretation at the present which limit the identity of the parties to the dialogue, which set the agenda for what are considered appropriate or inappropriate matters of institutional debate, and which sanctify the speech of some over those of others as being the language of the public.[5]

Taking seriously the ethical implications of the two principles that Benhabib names means that we must pay attention to the question of how we will be changed by being in the presence of the "other" in any given "ideal speech situation," or more informally, in our educational endeavors. I would argue that there are ethical aspects still unnamed by the critical theorists that create two distinct, but equally important tensions inherent in realizing the "ideal speech situation."

The first tension is one that is situated in how we define and structure any given endeavor or discipline. While the parameters of any given discipline or activity are defined through tradition, when we honor our ethical ideal of inclusivity, we are inviting distinct others to contribute to the ever-changing tradition. Or are we? I would suggest that we in the academy, and in education in general, have an easier time with the rhetoric of inclusivity than with its implications. Even in our own experiences in philosophy of education, we have seen the tension that arises when analytic philosophy interfaces with postmodern or feminist philosophy, for example. The tension arises because while we may acknowledge that various disciplines are never static, the legitimate question remains, to what extent can a discipline allow itself to be changed and still retain a sense of its identity, standards and practice?

In *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick speaks of this dilemma. She describes having a "love affair with Reason" as she grew up in the world of education. Although she loved and found refuge in them, the standards of rationality and philosophic reason were narrow and limiting. Hence, even though she came to sit at the philosopher's table, her presence as an "other" did nothing to transform the dominant dialogue of philosophy. She felt an outsider. "Reason, at least as Western philosophers had imagined Him, was infected by — and contributed to — the pervasive disrespect for women's minds and lives....For a woman to love Reason was to risk both self-contempt and a self-alienating misogyny."[6] As she continued with life experience, that of falling in love, of becoming a mother, she found herself pushing the edges of Reason, traditionally defined. Yet the dominant discourse of the academy held sway and it did not appear that her inclusion as a woman in a predominantly male discourse transformed that "ideal speech situation."

The second tension takes place in the realm of the interpersonal. We must seriously consider whether we really want to be changed by the inclusion of the "other" in our dialogue? At varying times within our own culture today, we tend to fool ourselves into thinking that we have been inclusive simply because the presence of the "other" is noted. But the hegemony of the dominant discourse may only allow for the presence of the "other" as long as the "other" does not change us in any significant way! This is a deeply ethical dilemma and it plays out on the stage of education, as well as in other sociocultural spaces.

In "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," Lisa Delpit describes what often happens in educational settings when African American folks try to talk to Euro American folks about the educational needs of children of color. She shares the following frustration of an African American woman whose presence signifies inclusivity, but whose experience does not:

> I try to give them my experiences, to explain. They just look and nod. The more I try to explain, they just look and nod, just keep looking and nodding. They don't really hear me. Then, when it's time for class to be over, the professor tells me to come to his office to talk more. So I go. He asks for more examples of what I'm talking about; and he looks and nods while I give them. Then he says that that's just my experience. It doesn't really apply to most black people. It becomes futile because they think they know everything about everybody. What you have to say about your life, your children, doesn't mean anything. They don't really want to hear what you have to say. They wear blinders and earplugs. They only want to go on research they've read that other white people have written. It just doesn't make sense to keep talking to them.[7]

If it doesn't make sense to keep talking, then what sense can we make of the ideal of inclusivity?

Freire tells us that the oppressors can "free neither others or themselves."[8] So even with the insight that the critical theorists have provided us regarding power relations, we must still address the further ethical dimensions of the framework they have linked to epistemology. Freire goes on to give us some direction regarding how we might respond to these tensions I have identified. He states:

> The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor — when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis.[9]

To be involved in the process of humanization, to realize the deeper dimensions of inclusivity, to risk an act of love means that we do not disregard the concrete world of experience. Beckoning us is Ruddick's example. Through her immediate and contextual experience of mothering, she brought a new dimension to the philosophical table. Speaking of her daily life that was shared with children and other mothers, she asked, "Could this 'chattering' so unlike the philosophy in which I was trained, be 'thinking?' Did I, did we, through endless telephone calls and late night coffees, create themes of a 'discourse?'"[10] Ruddick's question gets to the heart of the tensions I have identified as crucial to realizing the ethical promise of "communicative action."

Is it enough to have the presence of the "other" in our discourse? I would answer that it is not. Rather, the concrete situation must be transformed and the presence of the "other" must change us. We must allow ourselves to be changed by the inclusion of the "other" or their presence is meaningless. Really, it is Gadamer that helps us understand that the critical theorists have not gone far enough. The ethical framework that critical theorists offer is to critique power structures and define the parameters of "communicative action." Understanding the hermeneutic circle will enrich this ethical awareness. By becoming open to transformation by the "other's" meaning, we participate in the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle implies that each of us comes to any human activity with a set of pre-understandings that will influence the communication that occurs there. While individuals bring their own pre-understandings to the dialogic task, they also hear the understandings of the "other." Though this is difficult, Gadamer explains how the hermeneutic circle impacts the meaning we make:

> Of course this does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our foremeanings concerning the content and all our own ideas. All that is asked is that we remain open to the meanings of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings.[11]

By acknowledging our own inclusion and that of the "other" in this unavoidable hermeneutic circle, we may become more open to allowing ourselves to be changed by the presence of the "other." Understood in this way, the inclusion of the "other" may in fact, change even the ethical criteria that currently define "communicative action." Unless we allow for this possibility, we are not truly inviting inclusivity. By paying attention to the implications of such a hermeneutic understanding of inclusivity, perhaps we can address the deeper ethical dimensions of critique that we bring to education, and in so doing, understand those aspects of our ethical relationships that are encompassed in the "not entirely" dimension identified by Walker Percy...those dimensions beyond the scope of abstract theory, be it critical or otherwise.

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1. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1992).
2. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 29.
3. Ibid., 28.
4. Ibid., 48.
5. Ibid.
6. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 4-5.
7. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 22.
8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 42.
9. Ibid., 34-35.
10. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 11.
11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 268.