

On Epistemic Vulnerability and Open-mindedness

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It is indeed a pleasure to have the opportunity to respond to Jennifer Logue's essay, and to engage with her work on the "epistemic practice" of ignorance and its role in maintaining unjust systems and institutions. I see this essay as an extension of themes I first heard her speak about at the 2008 Philosophy of Education Society conference, in her essay, "The Unbelievable Truth and Dilemmas of Ignorance."¹ In particular, I see her current argument for a pedagogy of epistemic vulnerability as an attempt to flesh out her earlier claim that, "We need to create a pedagogical space of dynamic uncertainty wherein the interplay between knowledge and affective investments in forms of ignorance can be explored."² In building her case Logue draws on examples of forbidden knowledge about sex and sexuality to show how ignorance can be mobilized and transferred, and how transferred ignorance in turn affects politics and policy and contributes to the creation of closed communities. I am sympathetic to her overall aims and especially her concern for more socially just educational theories and practices. Therefore, in what follows I will not critique the fundamental aims of the essay, but will focus on the concept of epistemic vulnerability itself and then raise a couple of questions or concerns about advocating a pedagogy of epistemic vulnerability in classrooms.

EPISTEMIC VULNERABILITY

Central to Logue's essay is the way in which ignorance can thwart attempts at social justice by creating resistance to new and difficult knowledge. Drawing on Erinn Gilson, Logue claims that (perhaps somewhat paradoxically) the "perilous effects of motivated but misrecognized ignorance can be attenuated only through the promise of ignorance itself" — by, in Gilson's words, "cultivating the attitude of one who is epistemically vulnerable rather than that of the masterful, invulnerable knower who has nothing to learn from others."³

When I first encountered the term "epistemic vulnerability" I wondered what it could offer that was not already covered by the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness. An obvious objection to my comparing the two is that open-mindedness, as it is typically taken up in philosophy of education, derives from a conception of subjectivity characterized by sovereign rational autonomy, whereas Logue and Gilson endorse a conception of the subject as inescapably dependent on the other. But I want to bracket that difference for a moment in order to look at open-mindedness and epistemic vulnerability specifically as intellectual dispositions or postures.

Put simply, an open-minded person is someone who cares about truth and is thus disposed to revise or reject an idea or position she holds if sound objections are brought against it.⁴ Genuine open-mindedness thus requires both humility and vulnerability. One needs humility in order to recognize that whatever knowledge one holds is partial and incomplete, and vulnerability comes into play when we

expose our existing ideas to scrutiny in the course of which they are vulnerable to counter evidence or counter argument. Closed-mindedness, on the other hand, is characterized by refusing to look at or listen to something, failing to consider another's point or perspective, ignoring the other speaker, and so on — actions that are also symptomatic of epistemic invulnerability as described in the quote from Gilson above. In other words, both open-mindedness and epistemic vulnerability are characterized by openness to affecting and being affected by another (idea or person, for instance), and closed-mindedness and epistemic invulnerability are characterized by a refusal or resistance to being so affected. However, when applied specifically to social justice education, some important differences come to light.

In a conception of education that aims at objective, impartial truth, open-mindedness is needed so one can adjudicate competing knowledge claims and revise one's own position if it is found wanting on the scale of rational justifiability. But I suspect that the knowledge claims Logue is most concerned about in her essay and her teaching do not fall within the domain of rational thought. Obviously, a more accurate rendering of the history of injustices against marginalized groups is essential to social justice education — so the claims of Holocaust deniers can be weighed against scientific evidence, for example. But social justice education as I read it in Logue and others seeks not only to correct inaccurate perceptions and ideas about others; it also seeks to effect a change at the level of students' self-understanding as knowing subjects.⁵ The epistemic force of the legacy of transferred ignorance means that the ideas we hold about people whose race, gender, sexuality, religion, or ability is different from our own are probably not as susceptible to evidence or rational counterargument as the concept of open-mindedness would suggest. Therefore, social justice education that seeks to uproot that legacy of ignorance needs to include pedagogical experiences beyond the pursuit of objective, impartial, and rationally justifiable truth.

I am thinking, for instance, of the experience of hearing George Yancy deliver his essay, "How Can You *Teach* Me If You Don't Know Me?"⁶ at the Philosophy of Education Society conference last year. The essay includes a phenomenological account of his experience as a black man walking down the street:

The sounds of car doors locking are deafening: Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click, Click, Click. ClickClickClickClickClickClickClick. The clicking sounds are always already accompanied by white nervous gestures, and eyes that want to look, but are hesitant to do so. The click ensures their safety, effectively resignifying their white bodies as in need of protection vis-à-vis the site of danger, death, doom, and blackness. In fact, the clicks begin to return me to myself as this dangerous beast, a phantom, rendering my body the site of microtomy and volatility. The clicks attempt to seal my identity as a dark savage.⁷

Obviously my (white) performance of Yancy's words dramatically changes their effect. But the point I want to make is that the educative potential of his phenomenological account ought not to be measured by standards of objectivity and impartiality, but rather by its power to destabilize prevailing assumptions about everyday racial relations and about our own position and complicity in those relations. Hearing and learning from Yancy's address requires something more than open-

mindedness and the capacity to weigh evidence and argument; it requires us to be open to that which might shatter our knowledge, our identities, and even our self-understanding as knowing subjects.⁸ It requires, as Logue says, rooting out “destructive structural forms of ignorance” and “allowing ourselves to be touched, moved, and transformed through the encounter with difference.” But advocating this kind of learning in classrooms is no simple matter, which brings me to my second point, Logue’s argument for a pedagogy of epistemic vulnerability as a promising approach for social justice education.

A PEDAGOGY OF EPISTEMIC VULNERABILITY

Let me return for a moment to the comparison with open-mindedness. As William Hare explains, open-mindedness can be seen as both an aim of teaching and a way of teaching: if we believe that open-mindedness is an important disposition in any educated person, we would expect teachers not only to aim at developing open-mindedness in their students, but also to model it in their practice.⁹ I take Logue to be saying something similar with regard to epistemic vulnerability. However, classrooms are not just any place; they serve a particular function in democratic societies. And whereas open-mindedness — as both educational aim and pedagogical practice — is bound by the criteria of evidence and rational argument,¹⁰ I am not yet clear on whether Logue would set limits on encounters with “other knowers and ways of knowing” in classrooms or whether she would recommend a posture of epistemic vulnerability toward all others. In other words, are there, in Logue’s view, situations in which the pedagogical demands of care and a commitment to democratic values outweigh the value of openness to difference? If so, what are they and how would she weigh those competing demands?

A second, related concern is that a pedagogy of epistemic vulnerability might risk positioning marginalized students as those who have to do the heavy lifting in social justice education. As Logue puts it, in a pedagogy of epistemic vulnerability, “ignorance would function as the desire to know more,” and she recommends “stimulating curiosity about difference rather than fear and admitting the erotic as a force that structures the encounter with difference.” However, I am not sure how such an approach would, in practice, mitigate the fantasies of mastery and dominance of the other that she rejects earlier on.

That said, there is much to commend in Logue’s exploration of ignorance and epistemic vulnerability, and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

1. Jennifer Logue, “The Unbelievable Truth and Dilemmas of Ignorance,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 54–62.

2. *Ibid.*, 61.

3. Erinn Gilson, “Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 324.

4. William Hare, *Open-mindedness and Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979), 9.

5. See, for example, Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010).

6. George Yancy, "How Can You *Teach* Me If You Don't Know Me? Embedded Racism and White Opacity," in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012), 43–54.
7. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
8. Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 146.
9. Hare, *Open-mindedness*, 65.
10. *Ibid.*