Situated Moral Agency: Why It Matters?

Barbara Applebaum
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

In her essay, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," Minnie Bruce Pratt speaks of her struggles to understand racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism.[1] In the process, she examines the moral education she received as a young, white Christian girl growing up in the United States South. Pratt maps her learned ways of seeing (and not seeing) what morality is all about. But she also recounts how, implicit in her moral education, she was

> taught to be a *judge*...of moral responsibility and of punishment only in relation to *my* ethical system; was taught to be a *martyr*, to take all the responsibility for change, *and* the glory, to expect others to do nothing; was taught to be a *peacemaker*, to mediate, negotiate between opposing sides because *I* knew the right way; was taught to be a *preacher*, to point out wrongs and tell others what to do.[2]

What kind of moral agency underlies the type of moral education Pratt received and does her social group location (that is, how she is positioned as raced, gendered, classed) affect the type of moral agency she develops?

Essential to any conception of moral education is the notion of moral agency; the capacity to choose and act in accordance with judgements about what is right and wrong. In traditional moral philosophy, the question of moral agency arises in conjunction with discussions of moral responsibility and has been primarily concerned with how reason makes free action possible. Conspicuously absent throughout these scholarly deliberations is the social location of the moral agent. Moral agency has been primarily analyzed from within the framework of atomic, abstract individualism. It is in one's ability to rationally choose and act upon rational judgement that one is free, and hence, responsible for one's actions. Immanuel Kant has bequeathed to philosophers a legacy alleging that persons have moral standing by virtue of their rationality. Kant has left us with a vision of moral personhood that is impersonal, impartial, that is unembodied and devoid of emotional bonds, interpersonal relationships, particular commitments and projects. The multiple sources of social identity constituted by one's gender, race, or class have no role to place in this traditional image of the moral agent.

In his discussion of the inadequacies of theories of moral education that are grounded in the assumption of abstract individualism, Dwight Boyd compellingly argues that such an assumption actively functions to occlude the role played by privileged social positions in sustaining social injustice.[3] Valued as an equalizer, the assumption of the abstract individual subject, not only marginalizes and excludes, but also works to sustain systems of domination and oppression by concealing, naturalizing and mystifying social injustice. Boyd calls for theorists, whether in moral education or in philosophy of education, to take our situatedness seriously.

Recent work across a wide range of academic disciplines has moved away from the abstract, disembodied subject and toward the recognition of radically situated

and contingent identities. Extensive explorations of the epistemological and onto-logical assumptions surrounding this subject, however, often come precariously close to denying the possibility of agency. Having documented the ways in which social institutions constrain and constitute who we are, researchers are often left with subjects so determined by their social world that agency becomes an incoherent and futile idea. Ann Ferguson raises some crucial questions that must be addressed before such notions of subjectivity can play a useful role in theorizing about any type of moral education.[4] Ferguson asks, if there exists institutionalized forms of oppression and domination that constitute who people are and that narrow the options of certain groups in a way that increases the benefits of other groups, who is responsible for perpetuating them? And if it is not possible to point to who is responsible, how can change occur? Ferguson refers to this as the "determinism-responsibility problem" and she contends that

> any theory that purports to explain how these systems work and how oppressive social inequalities are maintained must not be so framed as to imply that those who benefit from them are not free to change them. Otherwise they would not be morally culpable for their part in perpetuating the system.[5]

This essay explores the relationship between moral agency and social group location. Using a feminist model of self, in what follows I attempt to outline a notion of situatedness that elucidates the complex and mutually sustaining relationship between the individual and social structure. Not only does this notion of situatedness explain how dominant group members can unintentionally support oppressive social systems but it also suggests a notion of agency that can account for the possibility of dominant group resistance. Finally, I illustrate why situated moral agency should matter to dominant group members committed to social justice.

Positionality and Seriality as a Way of Understanding Situatedness

Concerned with the postmodern challenge to the essentialist idea of self and the political dangers of rejecting the category of "women," Linda Alcoff and Iris Marion Young separately propose novel and fascinating accounts of gender and the self that compliment each other.[6] For Alcoff, understanding subjectivity begins with ontol-ogy—not in the sense of biology but rather in the sense of lived experience. Specifically accentuating practices, habits and discourses that are historical, fluid, contingent and revisable, Alcoff construes the category "women" as *positionality*. Positionality has two dimensions—as the social context in which one is situated and as a political point of departure.

In order to explain positionality as social context, I find it helpful to turn to Young's notion of "gender as seriality." A series "is a social collective whose members are passively unified by objects their actions are oriented around or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of others."[7] Just as the succession of things in a series is often ordered and arranged by external goals, so too, the notion of "women" should be defined not by a set of internal biological or psychological attributes, but rather by the external context within which such people are situated. Women are not women because of some internal characteristic but rather external factors make them so. Returning to Alcoff, the category "women" is not defined primarily by a set of attributes, but rather by a particular position or relation:

the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces.…The positional definition…makes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on.[8]

When Alcoff speaks of "women" as positionality, she is not referring to a place in which one is situated that is natural, ahistorical, or essential or even fixed. Rather she is pointing to a social relationship that produces external constraints that affect the lives of the people who are ascribed or categorized as "women."

But Alcoff also speaks of subjectivity as positionality in terms of ways in which women can take up their subject position as a point of departure for feminist politics. Although identity is always a construction and positioned, actual women are not merely passive recipients of an overdetermined identity. By recognizing and understanding the social position they are in, women can also *actively utilize* this recognition, and while not being able to transcend it, they can construct new meanings and practices. This is exactly what having feminist consciousness means—acknowledging one's positionality but employing that understanding to conceive of the world as otherwise. Collectively, women, according to Alcoff, can contribute to transforming the social context they find themselves in.

Young's notion of seriality takes Alcoff's analysis one step further. A series not only depicts the external constraints that women experience but also the behavior-directing and meaning-defining environment in which they are situated. In other words, assigned identity compels certain practices and performances on series members. If one is seen as a woman, one is impelled to behave and expected to behave in certain ways, and one is induced to have certain beliefs and certain attitudes. Expected performances, beliefs and attitudes, however, cut across other dimensions of oppression and are context dependent. For example, the expected performances of a white middle class woman differ from the expected performances of a poor woman of color. As the former slave, abolitionist and feminist, Sojourner Truth is known to have remarked during a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, "Ain't I a Woman?"[9] In all cases, however, these expected performances are experienced as a "felt necessity" that are given or natural.[10]

In terms of personal identity (not how one is perceived and treated by others but how one sees one's self), Young (like Alcoff) argues that series membership is not necessarily definitive. An individual woman can be so determined by her external position that the meaning of assigned identity and her personal identity coincide. But a woman can also "choose to make none of her serial memberships important for her sense of identity."[11] Moreover, it is within the possibility of contradiction between ascribed and personal identity that political agency referred to by Alcoff and Young can arise.[12] Thus, the series "women" is not about designated attributes that attach to series members nor is it necessarily definitive of personal identity. It is rather about the social environment or milieu that delimits or constrains actions of a social group and impels certain behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. This understanding of the category "women" has the advantage of describing women as a social group

"without false essentialism that normalizes and excludes" and it also explains how resistance is possible.[13]

The strategy that Alcoff and Young recommend for explaining the category of women illuminates the complex relationship between individual agency and social structure by providing an explanation as to how women can sustain oppressive systems but also how they can resist. These models of self provide means for conceptualizing a notion of moral agency that both takes social location seriously but is not immobilized by determinism. Although, primarily focused on marginalized identity, these models also help to account for dominant group identity and moral agency.

According to these models, dominant group identity is not static or stable, but rather is relative to a constantly shifting context; it intertwines with and is affected by other positionalities in complex and altering ways (for example, gay men, men of color, white women). As a category, a dominant group identity (for example, men, whites, or heterosexuals) does not necessitate reference to essences, biologically or socially constructed. Alcoff's and Young's models are useful in that they not only explain how dominant group identity can play a major role in sustaining and naturalizing hierarchical social systems, but these models also provide for the possibility of resistance. In addition, the seriality model highlights the behavior-directing and meaning-defining environment in which individuals are located. Being in some way affiliated with a dominant group will involve some pressure to exercise practices that are rewarded with taken-for-granted, unearned privileges that not only sustain but also camouflage unjust social hierarchies. Dominant group members will likely not even be conscious of the performances they enact, perceiving them to be "just what is normal."

The models, however, also suggest ways in which these mechanisms can be challenged. Dominant group members, these models imply, can take up their social position as a point of departure for anti-racist politics. Sandra Harding discusses the ways in which she can *activate* her dominant group identity in ways that have antiracist feminist goals.[14] Alison Bailey discusses "traitorous identities" and explicates how whites, who are critically reflective of their privilege and who challenge the racial scripts that we all learn at a very young age, can make a "shift in their way of seeing, understanding, and moving through the world."[15] But why should this model of self and the socially situated notion of agency that it hints at matter to dominant group members who claim to be committed to the eradication of social injustice?

Situated Moral Agency—Why it Matters

Recall Pratt's experience of moral education with which I opened this essay. Pratt underscores the sense in which her moral education led her to believe that she was on the side of "right," and that her moral agency was connected to a sense of moral control. Trina Grill and Stephanie Wildman refer to this as the "center staging" character of white identity.[16] They contend that growing up with white privilege creates the expectation not only that white people will be in control but also that their concerns will be central in every discourse. As a white woman educator,

I was initially resistant to any intimation that my sense of moral agency and the moral agency I try to promote in my classrooms may actually work to sustain the very injustice I claim to be committed to eradicating. But the control that Pratt is talking about (and the centering that Grill and Wildman refer to) is very subtle and often not visible to those in dominant social locations. Two classroom incidents made this extremely clear to me.

After what I understood to be an indepth discussion of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed (that the oppressed may have more accurate knowledge of their oppression than those who are in a privileged state), the topic of the objectification and degradation of women in rap music came up. Two well-intentioned white women, mistakenly thinking that they were *giving* epistemic privilege to the oppressed, turned to the only Black woman in the class and asked, "As a Black woman, what do you think of rap music?" By making her feel noticed and marked *as Black*, these two women unintentionally marginalized their classmate. She was furious but was able to express her anger. In the ensuing discussion, it became clear to all the white people in our class (myself included) that what was so disturbing to the woman of color was not only her classmates' failure to treat her as an individual (which is what I had originally thought). Rather, it was more an issue that the white women in the class assumed that they had the power to determine and the control over when and where her Blackness would matter.

Patricia Williams echoes a similar experience. Williams mentions a white colleague who rebuked her for making too much of her race.[17] In fact, her colleague told her, he did not even think of her "as Black." Yet at a later point in time when a Black colleague was experiencing difficulties with a tenure review, this same white colleague exclaimed to Williams that he wished the school could find more Blacks like her! As Williams explains, "I was acutely aware that the choice of identifying as black was hardly mine."[18]

In her discussion of white, feminist women's theorizing, Maria Lugones notes this white tendency to center and control,

> not all the selves we are make you important.…Being central, being a being in the foreground, is important to your being integrated as one responsible decision maker. Your sense of responsibility and decision-making are tied to being able to say exactly who it is that did what, and that person must be one and have a will in good working order. And you are very keen on seeing yourself as a decision maker, a responsible being: It gives you substance.[19]

Unintended patterns of discourse subtly absorbed from associations with dominant group privilege create expectations in dominant group members that their concerns must always be addressed and that they will be in control.

Lest one believe that all my white students had to do was to ask my student of color whether she minded being referred to as "Black" consider the following situation that complicates the matter. In my undergraduate course on communications, a student of color was giving a presentation about the insidious effects of labeling. The first white student, seemingly uneasy in addressing questions to her after her presentation, preceded her question with a polite, "Do you mind if I use the word "Black"?" The woman of color responded that she felt ok with that word. Two

minutes later, another white student asks a question, and again introduces her query with the same question regarding racial descriptors "Do you mind if I use the word "Black?" Civilly (though I sensed the student who was presenting was getting frustrated) she answered, "No problem." But it was not more than a few minutes later when yet another white student wanted to make a comment and prefaced his comment with, "I hope you don't mind if I use the word "Black?" to which the woman of color angrily burst out, "Give me a break! Do you like it if I always asked you if I can call you ""white?"" The white students in the classroom were aghast and one was so hurt, she had tears in her eyes. After all, they felt they were being sensitive to the woman of color by asking her what she prefers to be called but ignoring that she had told them it was ok three times! What can account for this "not listening" or "forgetfulness?" Did the white students not hear the student of color the first time? I highly doubt it. As I reflected on this incident, I wondered was this an issue of not hearing? Was this an issue of respecting and being sensitive toward the woman of color, a concern with *her*? Or was this an issue of needing moral vindication that "I am a good white person?" Was what I was observing a reflection of each of my white student's need to have their moral agency affirmed and when the woman of color did not endorse their moral agency *they* got angry and offended?

This type of center staging strategy is not easily exposed because, in the experience of dominant group members, it is concealed by allusions (illusions?) to moral agency. In "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire and Absolution in the Classroom," Alison Jones attempts to understand how anti-racist discourse that is designed to benefit the marginalized can be usurped by the privileged group.[20] In addition, this article serves as an illustration of how a dominant group member, Jones, can decenter and resist reinscribing systems of domination and oppression.

As a white educator of both Maori (native, marginalized) and Pakeha (European, dominant) students, Jones finds herself surprised to discover that in a course aimed to encourage dialogue across difference the Maori students in her class preferred separation rather than integration with the Pakeha students. Jones attempts to understand both her understanding of her Maori students' desire to have race-separated classes, as well as her Pakeha students' angry reaction to this decision by investigating the following questions: For whom is dialogue good? For whom is silence bad?

Dialogue has long been assumed to be a desirable pedagogic practice and the paradigm means of working through cultural and racial difference in education. Dialogue has the potential to reflect openness to difference, equality and reciprocity, a means by which to break down the silence of the marginalized and to allow a multiplicity of voices to be heard. Yet Jones's Maori students did not want to dialogue with her Pakeha students and preferred to be taught in separate classes. As Jones works through this incident, she realizes how asymmetric positions of social power affect the perceived outcome of dialogue. The Maori students have very little to gain from such mixed race dialogue. Indeed, the marginalized have no need to listen to the voices of the dominant as they are forced to be attentive to such voices daily.

Jones argues that the focus on marginalized voices in such dialogue has the effect of keeping the power in the hands of the dominant by implying that such a focus is a good benevolently bestowed upon the marginalized—an *allowing them* to speak. As Jones remarks, "This call for dialogue or shared talk or border crossing is, at root, a request for action by the dominant group — for them to *grant a hearing to* the usually excluded and suppressed voice and realms of meaning of the subaltern."[21] Moreover, while such dialogue emphasizes the telling of stories, what it obscures is who hears these stories and how. Jones is concerned that this desire to know the "Other" on the part of the dominant is a certain form of voyeurism and exploitation that further reinscribes privilege and marginalization. Even with the best of intentions on the part of dominant group members, the possibility of misunderstanding puts the marginalized in a position where they are doing all the work, and thus re-instating the authority of the dominant.

My point here is not to dismiss the potentially positive contributions of dialogue but rather to illustrate how dominant group moral agency is subtly reinscribed in a particular anti-racist strategy. The situation that Jones describes exemplifies how moral agency that ignores social location may unintentionally perpetuate the very injustice it wants to eradicate. Jones, herself, (I contend) is an example of a dominant group affiliated individual who tries to challenge the "normal" way of being "moral" in her classroom.

Situated moral agency, particularly in reference to dominant group members, requires that we revisit the traditional role of intentions in our conceptions of moral agency. Moreover, situated moral agency requires that dominant group members decenter their "ability to do." Although "agency" traditionally refers to a "taking action," situated moral agency may require a "not doing" or more specifically a "not deciding on one's own what needs to be done." As Barbara Houston warns us "Do not take responsibility unaccompanied by those who can show you your part in the harm."[22]

Situated Moral *Agency*: Why it Matters

In her penetrating article, "Vertigo at the Heart of Whiteness," Cris Mayo astutely cautions social justice educators of the dangers in any reaffirmation of the moral agency of those affiliated with a dominant group.[23] Giving white students a greater sense of agency seems to Mayo to be mistaken. Mayo points to the voluntarism of men who assert their condemnation of rape and who assumed that their good intentions will exculpate them when they complain about their exclusion from a Take Back the Night march by women. Similarly, Mayo warns that the voluntarism of white moral agency will function as a "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" that allows whites to be "good people."

I share Mayo's suspicions of the voluntarism of dominant group agency and I concur with her contention that agency cannot be understood without appeal to social structures. Yet I believe her cautions raise deeper questions that require further attention. What are the pedagogical implications of advocating "vertigo"? Mayo argues against any rearticulation of the agency of white students. She contends that "in so many respects, white students have too much agency, although not of their

own making, exactly."[24] If we understand agency as connected to structure, how-
ever, does this imply that pedagogically we must disallow agency? Do white people
have to give up all notions of agency if they are to be anti-racist? Is this possible?
On the one hand, if educators were to take the position that white people must give
up their sense of moral agency, could this not generate a sense of immobilization that
goes above and beyond the paralyzing effects of liberal guilt? On the other hand,
would not such "giving up" of agency again be just another reinscription of dominant
group privilege? I think Mayo's insightful comments compel us to demand a clearer
explication of the pedagogically practical. Her comments also provoke us to clarify
the notion of agency implied.

In her analysis of the debate between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler around
the notion of agency required for feminist political projects, Fiona Webster is
troubled by the practical implications of Butler's notion of agency.[25] According to
Webster, both Benhabib and Butler reject the autonomous, rational subject of
liberalism and they both agree that feminists require some account of agency.
Benhabib, however, sees agency as that point at which we are "free" from our
situatedness to deliberate and decide while Butler rejects any sense of a "doer behind
the deed." Butler insists that the meaning of agency is to be found in the very
instability of the subject. Webster contends that while Butler's notion of agency is
theoretically important for feminist theory, it is inadequate to deal with the *actual*
freedom or the type of resistance required by embodied subjects or groups of
subjects in the political arena.

To return to the perceptive cautions that Mayo calls forth, I want to underscore
the deeper questions that, I believe, her arguments give rise to and that Webster's
analysis underscores. The issue of clarifying the meaning of agency as connected to
social structures and not merely to individual volition, and the question of the
connection between theoretical analysis and practical issues, both political and
pedagogical, require further examination and clarification.

In conclusion, I join Mayo in her call for making a "perpetual vigilance a
necessary way to live one's life as a white anti-racist."[26] As she has explained to me
in our on-going and stimulating communications, the type of vigilance she is trying
to get at involves the "queasy suspicion" of one's own moral actions that "keeps one
from thinking of oneself as heroic."[27] I nevertheless contend that such vigilance or,
more specifically, such a willingness to be suspect of one's own moral actions, is
unfathomable and practically unattainable without a lucid conception of situated
moral agency.

1. Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, ed. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1984).

2. Ibid., 14-15.

3. Dwight Boyd, "A Question of Adequate Aims," *Journal of Moral Education* 25, no. 1 (1996): 21-29.

4. Ann Ferguson, "Moral Responsibility and Social Change: A New Theory of Self," *Hypatia* 12, no. 3 (1997): 116-40..

5. Ibid., 117.

6. Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective, " in her *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

7. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism," 23.

8. Ibid., 349.

9. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

10. Young, "Gender as Seriality," 25.

11. Ibid., 31.

12. Natasha Levinson, "Unsettling Identities: Conceptualizing Contingency," *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 28.

13. Ibid., 31.

14. Sandra Harding, "Who Knows? Identities and Feminist Epistemology," in *(En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, ed. Joan E. Harman and E. Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 102.

15. Alison Bailey, "Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character," *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 27-42.

16. Ibid., 33.

17. Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman, "Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms), " in *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, ed. Adrien Katherine Wing (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

18. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

19. Ibid., 10.

20. Maria Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 42.

21. Alison Jones. "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 307.

22. Barbara Houston, "A Conversation Beyond Argument: On a Bridge Over Troubled Waters," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998) 28.

23. Cris Mayo, "Vertigo at the Heart of Whiteness," in *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001).

24. Ibid., 317.

25. Fiona Webster, "The Politics of Sex and Gender: Benhabib and Butler Debate Subjectivity," *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-22.

26. Cris Mayo, "Vertigo," 319.

27. Cris Mayo, e-mail communication, February 2, 2002.