

On Not Being Arrested as a Wizard

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In this response, I want to make the counterintuitive claim that Seamus Mulryan's article, "Toward Deep Liberation," is not about educational authority. It is rather a comment on the necessary questionable-ness of any educational project. I will start with an anecdote.

Every year I teach a course entitled "Social Issues in Education." In this course, I spend quite a number of weeks lecturing on the capitalist underpinnings of school. We read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We discuss Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America*. We discuss the factory model of school production as outlined in Raymond Callahan's *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, and we discuss, what might be called, the origin of all this efficiency beginning with Comenius. I can humbly say that many of my students have epiphanies about the role schools have played in their own lives. They share ideas with family and friends. Sometimes they contact me years later to share where they have taken up the ideas of our course in their own lives.

One day, one of my former students - I'll call him Hanif - contacted me about a year after he had taken my course. This is what he said:

"Professor Bingham. Did you know that after your course I decided to drop out of school?"

"Oh, I didn't know that, Hanif. What happened?"

"No, no," he said. "It's a good thing. You know how we had discussions in your class about not being 'banked' by professors, like Paulo Freire said. Well, I just decided I would take time off of school to read exactly what I wanted and not what my profs wanted me to read."

I relate this story as it both made me smile and it made me nervous. I don't tell this story to just anyone. I'm not sure it is what a university recruitment officer would consider good publicity. But it does remind me a bit of Seamus Mulryan's reference to the potential for Socrates "being arrested as a wizard." I do wonder what would happen if a university administrator found out that the root cause of Hanif's withdrawal was his experience in my course. Might I be so arrested? I will come back to this anecdote later.

At first glance, Mulryan's paper is about what he says it's about: authority. Its aim is to compare the hermeneutic authority of Hans-Georg Gadamer to Henry Giroux's presentation of critical pedagogy's authority. Mulryan's presentation is clear. He compares two different "ontologies" of authority, and he wants to substitute Gadamer's for Giroux's.

However, after a close reading of Mulryan's paper, an acute *déjà vu* experience compelled me to surmise that his article could just as easily have been addressing the topic of language in education rather than the topic of authority. I say this because this paper is a fair replica of the debate between Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas in the 1960s and '70s. Mulryan's article re-stages, almost precisely, this famous debate.

In that debate, Gadamer and Habermas argue about language in exactly the same way that Mulryan stages an argument between Gadamer and Giroux on authority. Gadamer notes that one cannot go “behind the back” of language, in the very same way that Mulryan notes that one cannot go “behind the back” of the authority of tradition. And Habermas advocates for an ideological critique of language in the same way that Giroux advocates for teacher authority to join “in a wider social movement dedicated to restructuring the ideological and material conditions that work both within and outside of schooling.”¹ Gadamer, in the former debate, accuses Habermas of being naïve about the ontological status of language in much the same way that Mulryan accuses Giroux of being naïve about the ontological status of authority.

I want to propose that the Gadamer-Habermas debate informs the Mulryan-Giroux debate past the point of simply being analogous. I hold that the older debate indicates that what is at stake may not actually be authority, but rather language itself. As the Gadamer-Habermas debate demonstrated decades ago, the Frankfurt School - whose lineage Giroux is clearly a part of - had an intractable disagreement with Heideggerian/Gadamerian hermeneutics. The former embraced Marxist methodology as a means to eliminate ideological obfuscation, while the latter rejected any particular method *qua* method. What this means is that the Gadamer-Habermas debate had already established a pair of adverse perspectives that had little common ground.

So the Gadamer-Habermas debate focused on language, while the Mulryan-Giroux debate focuses on teacher authority. Could language be substituted for authority in the latter debate? As a thought experiment, I did a search for the word “authority” in Mulryan’s article and replaced it with the word “language.” The word “authority” was replaced by “language” 84 times. I am not stretching the truth to say that it read fairly well with this simple substitution. In my humble estimation, an hour’s revising would make it a passable PES paper. This leads me to the main question in this response essay, namely: Is this paper really about educational authority?

If my thought experiment holds true, and if Mulryan’s article might just as easily be centered on language, one is left with the following question: What might educational authority have to do with language if they end up being interchangeable in a debate such as this? This is where I would like to intervene, where I would venture to make a contribution to Mulryan’s discussion on hermeneutic liberation. I will first make a brief comment on language’s role in any authority relation, then focus on an alternative use of Plato’s *Meno*, and finally return to my anecdote.

How could language be equated with authority? How could they be equally substituted as a variable in a hermeneutics-critical theory debate? As I see it, the substitution is simple and unobjectionable. Authority is, at its foundation, a relation. When one person speaks, another person listens. At this very elementary stage, in this rudimentary gesture between humans, the relation of authority is enacted. This linguistic inauguration of the authority relation demonstrates - and this is where the hermeneutic intuition is absolutely superior to critical theory’s method - that authority is not about *what* one says. It is rather about the fact that one says something at all. As Mulryan rightly notes, nothing goes behind the back of the authority of tradition. And more broadly, nothing goes behind the back of linguisticity itself.

But this brings up another point of amendment to the Mulryan-Giroux debate. Specifically, I am not convinced that the *Meno* demonstrates an instance of what Mulryan calls “a fissure in the authority of tradition.” As closely as I can read this statement, it would seem to imply that something *can* go behind the back of authority, or, in the terms that I have presented, that something *can* go behind the back of language. I think this move undercuts the very ontology of authority - and of language - that Mulryan and Gadamer are trying to offer. Even if there is “a fissure in the authority of tradition,” the authority relation - or on Gadamer’s original model, the linguistic enactment - must be constitutive of that very fissure.

I agree wholeheartedly with Mulryan that a hermeneutic ontology of educational authority offers a more radical perspective than the ideological critique of Giroux. However, I would suggest that the radicality is more linguistic than it is ideological. And, I suggest that the *Meno* does not quite present a moment where, in Mulryan’s words, “we are briefly liberated from the authority of tradition.”

But I *would* like to recover Mulryan’s use of the *Meno* in a different way, before I return to the anecdote. It is possible to look at befuddlement in the *Meno* from a different perspective than Mulryan does. After all, the *Meno*’s theme is not only virtue. It is, more precisely: Can virtue be *taught*? The *Meno*’s latter interaction with the slave boy who “learns” geometry solidifies the pedagogical dimension of the *Meno*. I want to suggest that the numbness felt by Meno is a numbness about education *per se* just as much as it is a numbness about a particular concept such as virtue. Virtue, under scrutiny, can’t be taught. And geometry, under a somewhat different register, can be learned without having been taught; it can be learned through recollection. Meno’s grief does derive from a particular relation of authority (or of language), perhaps from a particular ontology of authority (or of language). However, the stinging is primarily a result of a rupture with pedagogy. If there is a prejudice that is pulled up short, it is the prejudice that education should not be questioned.

Befuddlement in the *Meno*, construed in this way, offers another perspective to the Mulryan side of the Mulryan-Giroux debate, a perspective that I personally advocate. Namely, that critical pedagogy needs to be more open to questioning pedagogy itself. Critical pedagogy has been too confident that its version of education will definitely be beneficial. If a revised ontology of the authority relation, or a revised ontology of language, can add a healthy *educational* befuddlement in the midst of this confidence, then such a revision has my vote.

Now back to my student’s story. I have always been happy that Hanif withdrew from university studies, even if I am someday to be arrested as a wizard. Hanif may not have escaped the hermeneutic circle, *and* I do *not* think that his withdrawal was somehow less beneficial as a result of missing out on critical pedagogy’s authority.

1. Henry A. Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Democracy’s Promise and Education’s Challenge*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 145.