

Epistemologies of Resistance: Pluralism and Communities of Epistemic Criticism

Jeff Edmonds

University School of Nashville

José Medina

Vanderbilt University

“Needing Not to Know: Ignorance, Innocence, Denials and Discourse” focuses on a difficulty in the pedagogy of social justice that Barbara Applebaum frames in the following way: “If exposure to others is already distorted by meta-insensitivities that are socially supported, how can exposure to alternative views be a remedy for meta-ignorance?” The difficulty is clear and resonates with a long-standing problem in education that can be traced back to the Meno and other aporetic dialogues. The general pedagogical difficulty of which this is a specific form runs something like this: (1) Learning requires openness to new experiences; (2) ignorance is the state of not being open to new experiences; (3) therefore, the ignorant person cannot learn. One could view Socrates’ torpedo-fish rhetoric as an attempt to shake off this paradox and pierce the veil of ignorance or as a sign of a deep and even metaphysically intractable problem for education. In Plato’s *Republic*, this paradox plays a central role, as it gives license to invoke philosophical insight as a transcendental solution to this paradox. If wisdom cannot be taught, but only directly perceived through transcendental insight, then there is no possibility for a democratic social arrangement. The best political arrangement grants authority to the philosopher, follows her lead, and hopes for the best.

Democracy needs a different sort of epistemology. Applebaum follows José Medina into the difficulty of unravelling this knot without recourse to a transcendental (and ultimately antidemocratic) cut. Both agree that kaleidoscopic pluralism provides the best chance for an immanent solution to the problem of ignorance. They reframe the Platonic difficulty of educating ignorance in terms of socio-epistemic power: white privilege is associated with an epistemic colorblindness that functions to produce meta-ignorance that desensitizes the experience of white people, perpetuating privilege by stripping them of the power to critically confront their own ignorance. As Charles Mills’s work reveals, white privilege writes a sort of sealed contract granting itself the authority to write off any contestation to that privilege as itself acritical and ignorant. Colorblindness dismisses any claim against its privilege a priori, immunizing whiteness from even having to consider its power. White privilege thus reinscribes the paradox of the *Meno*, closing experience off to any possibility of learning.

Medina’s claim is that a fully pluralized epistemic friction can resensitize the social actor to points of view that meta-ignorance has worked to desensitize. *The Epistemology of Resistance* functions as a pluralistic catalogue of ways to get back to the rough ground of learning. Less a final answer to how to cut the Gordian knot

of meta-ignorance, *The Epistemology of Resistance* is a book on the order of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* — a collection of epistemological practices from analytic, continental, and pragmatic traditions, each bearing some family resemblance and woven together like strands in a rope around themes of resistance, friction, sensitivity, injustice, power, and privilege.

Applebaum's analysis shares and deepens the themes of *The Epistemology of Resistance*. For example, in her insistence on the usefulness of discursive critique, Applebaum finds herself working alongside Medina, who also cites Foucault as a primary influencer of his approach. Yet Applebaum's insistence on discourse analysis over and against representationalist tools runs counter to Medina's deep pluralism. While Medina draws upon representational views of language, he never eschews discursive analysis, and we ought not use academic distinctions to wedge apart potential political friendships. Here we quote Applebaum: "Without a comprehension of how discourse works, exposure to diverse perspectives may not be effective and interrupting the mutually reinforcing cycle of first-order and meta-ignorance can be impeded." Truer words have not been spoken. We fear, however, that in leaning too heavily on a distinction between discourse and its representation, Applebaum stymies potential collaboration between different epistemological approaches that, taken together, can be powerful allies. Social justice as an activist practice is most often working from a position of vulnerability and poverty. It will often find its tools need to be refashioned, having been honed by those in more powerful positions. For this reason, it is even more important that we not look to undermine potential sources of connection through the identification of a refashioned tool with its original source.

This pluralism is the central lesson of *The Epistemology of Resistance*; let's not undo it by creating false oppositions. We need friction in the right places, not everywhere, and in our view, intramural academic opposition between competing epistemological models tends to give off more heat than light. The question before us is not whether a Foucauldian discursive approach or a more representational approach is the more effective model, but *how and in what circumstances* the various tools might be combined for effective resistance along multiple lines. Here, Applebaum has much to offer and raises some difficult questions, especially in its concrete analysis of the difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of racism education.

FURTHER QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES POSITIONING ONESELF:
ENGAGED LEARNING/ENGAGED TEACHING

Fighting active and self-hiding forms of ignorance requires active learning and teaching. Among the obstacles educators find here are *distancing strategies* through which students hide from themselves their own involvement in a problem such as white privilege or racism. Distancing strategies — as they appear, for example, in classroom discussions — include silence, social dissociation, separation from responsibility, focusing on intents instead of impacts, shifting responsibility, and dismissing charges of complicity.¹ Distancing has been depicted primarily as an obstacle to anti-racist, feminist, or other forms of social justice pedagogy; but it constitutes a larger pedagogical problem, since it blocks awareness and sensitivity of one's responsibility with respect to the object of learning. As Matt Whitt puts it,

distancing protects and promotes meta-ignorance because it prevents involved and engaged learning by hiding one's positionality with respect to bodies of knowledge and/or ignorance: by distancing herself, the student remains (actively) unaware

of her own lack of awareness, and so does not realize how her knowledge is conditioned, enabled, and limited. In other words, distancing prevents students from examining the conditions of their world, their knowledge, and their lives. This makes distancing a real concern, not only for instructors who teach about in/justice, or those who pursue social justice pedagogy, but for all teachers who aim to help students understand how the world works, how knowledge is produced, and how selves and self-conceptions form.²

And, of course, distancing is not only something that students do. Educators also indulge in forms of distancing, whether as a conscious pedagogical strategy or in implicit and unconscious ways. What is the position of the educator here as the one who mediates and decides who is ignorant and who is not? What are the relations of differential authority, epistemic power, and agency in classroom dynamics in which educators find themselves?

THE AFFECTIVE SIDE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING: EMPATHY, ANTIPATHY, APATHY

Active ignorance takes the form of *insensitivity*, a kind of *numbness* that affectively positions the learner with respect to certain phenomena and issues, acting as a shield against stimulations to question certain assumptions or to learn more about certain things. This *numbness* involves communicative dysfunctions such as difficulties in listening to certain considerations or in taking those considerations seriously, difficulties in seeing oneself affected by those considerations or in being moved to respond to them. Racial insensitivity, for example, involves a lack of openness to discuss racial problems, to take claims about racism seriously as claims that make demands on all of us and require a response. This lack of openness has an important affective dimension. For example, it can take the form of hearing claims about racism as personal attacks that call for defensive reactions, as overreactions, or as attempts to be divisive that should be met with contempt. The kind of closed-mindedness characteristic of racial insensitivity consists in a whole battery of mechanisms of avoidance and resistance to know and to learn. The affective side of meta-ignorance has to be taken up and engaged in our pedagogical strategies and techniques, for the learner's affective investments — her capacity to feel empathy, antipathy, or apathy — have great diagnostic value for identifying the limits of her epistemic sensibilities, and where epistemic interventions and transformations are needed.

Even before learners have a clear sense of what it is that they are missing — their lacunas and epistemic limitations — the affective side of their epistemic sensibilities can give us clues about their capacity to learn and to overcome meta-ignorance: their affective investments can tell us what learners feel comfortable or uncomfortable hearing, discussing, questioning; and they are an opportunity to ask why that is so and what can be done to change it, that is, how the learner's epistemic (in)sensitivity has been constituted and how such (in)sensitivity can be altered or expanded. Educators need to work with feelings of *epistemic comfort* and *epistemic discomfort* that can either facilitate or block learning, providing incentives or disincentives to participate actively in learning processes.³

DISCOURSES, SILENCES, AND COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMICS IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Does the work of undoing meta-ignorance call for discursive analysis? At the very minimum, the contributions that discourse analysis can make here require that we understand discourse in a broad and complex way, so as to include the interrelations between speech and silence, the power relations within communicative dynamics, the institutional settings and structural backgrounds that support meaning-making and knowledge/ignorance-producing practices, the differential agency that differently situated subjects have in those practices, and so on. It is very important that we identify the limitations and constraints of our discourses so as to understand how insensitivity and meta-ignorance work across discursive practices and how they surface in our expressive attitudes, communicative habits, and silences. In the recent literature, researchers have called attention to subtle and insidious forms of heterosexism and racism that pervade our daily communicative interactions and go (almost) unnoticed by most participants. Here we can emphasize racist *microaggressions* through which the epistemic status and agency of racial minorities are routinely undermined in subtle ways. These microaggressions must be countered with *micropractices of resistance* in which participants in those activities express epistemic solidarity with those unfairly treated and contribute to empower their voices.⁴ And note that microresistance does not need to be initiated by the victims of microaggressions, but it can be produced effectively (sometimes even more effectively) by others involved in the interaction even though they were not targeted — in some cases, even by bystanders who were not thought of as being involved in the interaction. For example, imagine passengers on the bus in a major U.S. city overhearing someone lecturing to some kids about blacks or Hispanics being oversensitive when being questioned by the police; instead of extricating oneself from the uncomfortable situation, everybody present (and not just the kids involved) can and should feel responsible to intervene, that is, not let the microaggression go unquestioned and not let the microaggressor get away with it.

Here, crucial pedagogical questions arise as well: What are the racist micropractices and the micropractices of resisting racism that we can find within the communicative dynamics of the classroom? And how do the micropractices of the classroom connect with the communicative practices outside the classroom?

1. See Kim A. Case and Annette Hemmings, Annette: “Distancing Strategies: White Women Pre-service Teachers and Antiracist Curriculum,” *Urban Education* 40, no. 6 (2005): 606–625 and Matt Whitt “Other People’s Problems: Student Distancing, Epistemic Responsibility, and Injustice,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (2015): 1–18.

2. Whitt, “Other People’s Problems,” 9.

3. See José Medina, “Towards an Ethics and Pedagogy of Discomfort: Insensitivity, Perplexity, and Education as Inclusion,” *Civitas Educationis* 3, no. 1 (2014): 51–67 and José Medina, “Ignorance and Racial Insensitivity”, in Rik Peels and Martijn Blaauw, eds., *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).

4. See Medina, “Ignorance and Racial Insensitivity.”