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The Discourse of Philosophy of Education

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Maxine Greene situates Philosophy of Education within the discourse about rights, self, rationality and power and provides an analysis that emphasizes deconstruction and renewal. In developing this narrative she raises the most important issues that contemporary philosophers and philosophers of educators must come to address—how traditional (Western) conceptions of rights can be mobilized to generate renewal without reinforcing hierarchy and domination. To put the problem slightly differently: How can the liberating features of the language of human rights be maintained while avoiding using the concept of rights—developed by white, Western, bourgeois males—to lord it over others who have not yet reached the stage of development where they can appreciate the wisdom of the Enlightenment tradition? Although Greene echoes Cixous's ambivalence regarding this conception of rights and the "inalienable" self that it attaches to, she also shares, I think, correctly, Cixous's reluctance to abandon the concept completely.

Given this dilemma, Greene believes the principle role of philosophers of education is to find a way to "expose the inadequacies (and the racism, and the sexism) in so much of the discourse without disposing of the texts themselves." The texts are patriarchal expressions of communications "tightly constrained by rules of logic, linearity, and (on occasion) a range of technical controls," limiting the free flow, imaginative, and spontaneous conversation

that characterizes healthy and productive human relationships. Rights talk interrupts the discourse and is patriarchal to the extent that, in doing so, the father in *To the Lighthouse* becomes the interpreter of reality and the final arbiter of truth. It becomes colonial when it "has not only imposed a 'right' way . . . ; it has in many cases deformed, belittled . . . what has been considered 'undeveloped,' implicitly regressive."

In addition to the philosopher's task of exposing the inadequacies of language without disposing of the text, Greene proposes an additional task for philosophers. True philosophy, she tells us quoting Merleau-Ponty "consists in relearning how to look at the world." . . . 'Learning how to look' (certainly for educators) may mean learning how to reflect with others upon intersubjectivity itself . . . The philosopher's obligation may involve enabling all sorts of persons to think about the ways they direct their attention, the vantage points they take, the naming, the caring, the concern."

Deconstruction serves as an important tool for engaging in this reflection by revealing the hierarchical binary relations that provide the framework for much of the discourse on Philosophy of Education. In disclosing how much of our thinking is governed by hierarchical binaries such as white/black, male/female, cognitive/affective we have taken an important step in, as Derrida puts it, "overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system." In this way, Derrida, according to Greene, believes that we can "overcome the privileging of the logos and the systematized, the abstract and the universal."

The obligation to relearn how to look at our world—in Merleau-Ponty's terms—is carried on as an intergenerational, as well as an individual project; when it takes on generational proportions, it suggests the role that Philosophy of Education may play in this enterprise. Greene accepts Hanna Arendt's idea that education is the commitment we make when we both provide the material, spiritual, and intellectual support that enables our children to "undertake something new" and at the same time "prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world." For Greene, this means that Philosophy of Education serves, among other things, as a reminder of the traditions within which our lives are woven while at the same time reminding us that the vantage point which that tradition provides is, like all vantage points, partial and incomplete. In this recognition, Philosophy of Education provides the release for imagination and for opening "vistas on what might be, what is not yet." Hence, Philosophy of Education is involved in self-development and self-formulation which requires attending to the silences in our own tradition and our own history and therefore breaking through that aspect of the Enlightenment tradition that has served to subordinate women, people of color, and non-Western peoples.

These insights are not just academic or abstract, but have a profound impact on schools and other educational institutions. They are responsible for many of the demands to establish schools that serve a single ethnic or

racial group or a single gender. Both the The Corporate School and the New Concept School, private schools serving African-American students in the Chicago area, have received high praise not only for the academic achievement of their students but for instilling a strong sense of racial pride rooted in African and African-American ideals. Researchers have praised all-girls schools for the self assurance, assertiveness, and sense of competence that they nurture. Other institutions have also been influenced by the rejection of the Western-centered philosophy that has dominated our thinking for more than a century. Museums must reexamine entire displays developed when the savage/civilized binary was taken for granted as the appropriate framework in which to show the *progress of man*.¹ The imperative that Greene describes is already taking place. Part of the problem for philosophers of education is whether a field more accustomed to academic argument and conceptual analysis has a role to play in the important changes that are encompassed by Greene's observations. I will argue that there is an important role for Philosophy of Education to play, but in making this argument I will need to complement Professor Greene's conception of the field itself by bringing another discourse into focus.

Greene's placement of Philosophy of Education within an intergenerational context is valid: an important task of educational scholarship is to examine the factors involved in intergenerational reproduction and disruption.² Philosophy of Education serves as a reflective analysis and evaluation of the intergenerational reproduction of knowledge, skills, and sensibilities.³ Contemporary philosophical discourse about education should be located within the context of the discourse about rights, self, rationality and power. However, I want to suggest that the discourse Greene describes need not constitute Philosophy of Education, at least as presently conceived. It could simply reflect a philosophical discourse about education (this is but one feature of the discourse of Philosophy of Education). Another side is a discourse about institutions that are intended to educate. The term school can be used to indicate such institutions, but in doing so it is important to remember that formal schooling is but one representation of such institutions. *Schooling* is used here to indicate institutions that take on intentional or expected educating functions, and discourse about such institutions grounds the field of Philosophy of Education as much as the discourse about rights, power, and self.⁴

Without the institutions and practices that are explicitly intended to educate, the profession of Philosophy of Education as we know it today would not exist. This is not to say that there are not educational problems that can be dealt with philosophically without necessarily referencing institutional practices. Questions about the nature of knowledge, the character of teaching, the nature of moral education and virtue need not be addressed in relationship to any ongoing institutional practice. However, when they are addressed in this way they can be situated within a standard philosophical discourse such as epistemology, philosophy of mind, and social philosophy.

This discourse takes on the characteristics of Philosophy of Education when it is informed by or centered on institutional practice.

Hence Philosophy of Education is institutional philosophy. It is a reflection on the aims of actual organizations and the practices of established institutions that are involved in some official or semi-official way in educating people. It is for this reason that courses in Philosophy of Education are not usually found in philosophy departments and it reflects the fact that the organ of Philosophy of Education—the Philosophy of Education Society—arose out of the efforts of a group of educators.⁵ To remind us that Philosophy of Education has something to do with schooling—a reminder that Greene, whose work in schools is legendary, does not need—is not to say that each and every issue philosophers of education address must bare immediately on the work of teachers. Issues of educational policy as well as evaluation and goals may be quite indirectly related to classroom practice but are certainly important concerns for people in the field of Philosophy of Education. Nor is it to say that schools must be accepted as the best or most appropriate sites of learning. Arguments for de-schooling are important and provocative—although not especially convincing—and they certainly have a place in philosophical debates about the kinds of institutions that educate. Arguments about de-schooling are philosophical when they seek careful reflection on existing practices and the framework of institutional discourse, and they count as Philosophy of Education because they are truly about schools. It is not to say that Philosophy of Education is not often well served by people whose graduate degree is in philosophy rather than Philosophy of Education. It is simply to observe that a philosophical discourse about education that is informed by the practices of schools and other educational institutions is a discourse in Philosophy of Education. In this sense of the term, Philosophy of Education is somewhat more like scholastic philosophy than it is metaphysics; and it has a practical goal—the improvement of the institutions through which the activity of educating is advanced. Unlike much of scholasticism, however, Philosophy of Education does not begin the discourse by ruling out reformation or revolution.

This is not meant as an essentialist definition of Philosophy of Education, but a description of the actual practices that are presently identified as Philosophy of Education and it identifies a role that is recognizable both by those within the field and those outside of it. To the extent that it serves as a definition, it does so through recognizing that definitions perform certain functions in relation to ongoing practice and that they are not completely separable from the institutions which sustain the practices. There is a real sense in which Philosophy of Education is what philosophers of education do when they see themselves doing Philosophy of Education. However, this operational definition should not be taken too far, for if philosophers of education did not relate their discourse to an ongoing institution there would be very little to distinguish their discourse from other forms of philosophy that are concerned with rights, power, self, or that attempt to understand knowledge

and the possibility of its transmission. In this sense, Dewey was probably wrong when he equated all philosophy to Philosophy of Education. True, Philosophy of Education asks most of the interesting questions of philosophy, but it answers them in relation to on-going institutional practice.

To describe Philosophy of Education in this way is to acknowledge the importance of the history and practices of the Philosophy of Education Society and to embrace the concern that R. Bruce Raup expressed in its founding to improve "teaching in the Philosophy of Education in schools for the education of teachers and in other educational institutions."⁶ Whether or not Raup overemphasized the importance of teachers colleges for Philosophy of Education—and I think he did—the more important point is the need to situate the field at the intersection of two discourses—one philosophical and the other institutional. Teachers colleges and schools of education make the latter discourse more likely and more easy to sustain. It is not, however, the only possibility.

The conception of Philosophy of Education that I have offered, partial as it is, delineates the activities of philosophers of education from the work of philosophers, even those with explicitly educational concerns. The difference is not only in the nature of the work itself but in the discourse within which the works are situated. That the work of a philosopher of education is situated within a professional discourse about the existing practices of schools or other ongoing educating institutions is reflected in the standards used to evaluate work in the field. The philosophical community is rightly concerned with the rigor and originality of the argument, a concern which philosophers of education should also share. However, the community of philosophers of education must also be concerned to reflect an informed and up-to-date awareness of the actual work and issues of the schools or of policies and research that pertain to contemporary educational practices. This does not mean that people who are identified as philosophers will not on occasion write articles or books that are informed about school practice. Nor does it mean that philosophers of education may not sometimes be poorly informed about the activities of schools. The point has to do with the expectations of the field rather than with just how well someone inside or outside of the field may meet those expectations. Or, to put the matter slightly differently: A philosopher who makes mistakes about school practice may still meet the standards of good philosophy. However, a philosopher of education who is consistently uninformed about educational practices and research is failing to meet the standards of the field.

The different discourses in which philosophy and Philosophy of Education are situated have an influence on the way in which the concerns of education are explored. Nevertheless the two have a good deal in common. For example, both philosophers and philosophers of education are likely to address such fundamental questions as what counts as education, how education can be distinguished from indoctrination, training and the like—questions that

were popular among the last generation of both analytic philosophers and philosophers of education and which remain important questions. This common ground is reflected in many of the common texts and issues that are shared by both fields. Plato's discourse on justice in *The Republic*, Rousseau's discussion of freedom in *Emile*, Dewey's reframing of democracy in *Democracy and Education* and R.S. Peters's exploration of the aims of education are likely to be treated in classes taught by both philosophers and philosophers of education. Moreover recently, the influence of feminism, Marxism and postmodernism is being felt within both the philosophical community and the field of Philosophy of Education and has added to each a new concern about whose interests are served by different conceptions of knowledge and different assigned aims.

Philosophy of Education departs from a philosophical interest in education in the high level of interdependence between the work of empirical educational researchers and the work of philosophers of education. Philosophers of education must both mine the findings of empirical traditions to understand the constraints and possibilities of human development and, as practitioners of institutional philosophy, they must critically analyze the extent to which methodological frameworks may reinforce institutional practices that arbitrarily restrict educational discourse. It is at this point, that the rights discourse and the institutional discourse intersect.

Institutional philosophies such as Philosophy of Education or Philosophy of Medicine have a complicated relationship to the practical knowledge that is carried on within the institution itself. In the Philosophy of Medicine, the philosopher does not need to be able to perform the technical work of the nurse or the physician or to share the same knowledge base. She does, however, need a working understanding of the organization and structure of healthcare, the availability and benefits of certain kinds of treatment, and a general conception of health and disease. If, for example she was concerned with a just distribution of healthcare, she would need to know the relative benefits, say, of introducing a new water treatment plant in Third World countries as opposed to the development of a new open heart surgical unit. Each has its costs and its benefits, but in many countries the former is likely to service the needs of the vast majority of a population, while the latter benefits only the few who are wealthy enough to survive to the age where heart disease becomes a serious problem. Both the philosopher of medicine and the philosopher of education need, in Greene's phrase, to be able to imagine other arrangements. This imagination, however, is but one stage in a larger process. They must have the philosophical tools to evaluate present practices against alternative possibilities. In these evaluations, conceptions of justice, fairness, autonomy, and independence must begin to inform the existing institutional standards.

Within institutions the meaning of concepts is established through their historical use. The feminist critique of rights that Greene draws upon is

powerful precisely because the institutional history of this term is mixed, serving both liberationist, and non-liberationist goals. When institutional meanings are confronted by feminist and other critical scholarship, the historically encrusted meanings are reconstituted as objects of discourse and criticism to be held up against more honorific understandings. As institutional philosophy, Philosophy of Education confronts the practices and present meanings of existing institutions. Moreover, as Greene notes, deconstruction provides an instrument for revealing frameworks of domination and subordination and overturning—to use Derrida's phrase—"the classical oppositions."

Although deconstruction may encompass critical method and philosophy, it is at best a moment in the Philosophy of Education. In Philosophy of Education, the exposure of institutional meanings provides a promissory note that the possibility of reconstruction will be considered and that serious attempts will be made to reconstitute meanings in new and non-dominating ways. To enter this phase of institutional philosophy, it is important to expose the limits of deconstruction by asking what purpose we might wish to, as Greene advocates, "practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system." What is the reason to bring to consciousness such oppositions as "white/black; male/female; cognitive/affective; literal/figurative" if not because we operate under some notion that certain voices and certain purposes have been wrongly silenced. Yet deconstruction itself is silent when it comes to the question of reconstruction.⁷ This is a silence that Philosophy of Education cannot share.

Maxine Greene poses the dilemma of reconstruction eloquently:

This differs considerably from a conception of objectively existing frameworks in which we can somehow ground a normative order of consequence for young people in our schools. Yet it remains difficult to set aside our commitments to theoretically-grasped principles like freedom, justice, and equality. Similarly, for all our familiarity with the problematic of the "Enlightenment Project" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), we are still drawn to idealistic renderings of reason linked to progress and to humanism. They continue to draw us towards them, either as regulatory norms or unrealized possibilities. In a moment of shattered frameworks and alternations between scepticism and hopelessness, they seem to glow in the dark as reminders of what might be, and of what is still to be achieved.

Reconstruction requires that the floating scepticism that energizes the deconstructive project yield some reminders—as Greene puts it of "what is still to be achieved". Such reminders can be found by examining feminists' and deconstructionists' insights and by exploring the larger project which supports these insights. Greene's scepticism of scepticism provides a way to reveal the nature of this project.

When Derrida speaks of overturning the classic oppositions which have much "to do with the way we think and speak" and I would add, feel and act, he is not just proposing a random rejection without any direction in mind. Because the overturnings are of systems of dominance and subordination he clearly seeks a world where, if these hierarchies are not eliminated altogether, they are at least not taken for granted and allowed to exert a decisive but subliminal influence on our structures of discourse. Similarly, when feminists reject the ideas of dead white men, they are not rejecting their ideas just because they are old or because they came from white males. They are rejecting them because they sense that there was woven into their expression a system of privilege which has been perpetuated through and along side of the ideas. They do not accept the view that the ideas can be separated from their expression. Instead, they hold that the way a person lives is connected to the ideals he expressed. For example, the fact that Jefferson continued to hold onto his slaves during his lifetime, tells a good deal about the conception of rights that he had in mind when he authored the founding documents. Without identifying this system of privilege as the object of deconstruction's scepticism, it is simply impossible to understand why we should overturn this opposition rather than that one; or, why we should worry about overturning any opposition whatsoever. And without similarly identifying this system of privilege as the object of feminists' concern, we are simply relegated to a behavioral paradigm where the difference between being silenced and being quiet is erased. Yet if these are indeed the core projects of these two movements, there is every reason, as Greene affirms "not to set aside our commitments to . . . principles like justice, freedom and equality." The object is in fact to see them for the role they can play in liberating dominated groups while also understanding how they have been sometimes used otherwise. This may very well mean not an out-of-hand rejection of the writings of white males, but a renewed exploration in order to understand both the possibilities they helped to articulate—often as oppressed subjects themselves—and the avenues they blocked as they expressed themselves through the images, norms, and conceptual distinction of their own period and gender. The project also requires the resurrection of ideas of woman, native peoples, people of color, and blue collar workers whose words were less likely to be provided a public forum.

For philosophers of education concerned about classroom activities and relations, it is very important to be clear about the direction one is taking and the principles that are being supported.⁸ As a pacifist, a person may indeed agree that gay people should not be discriminated against in the military—because they believe that discrimination anywhere is wrong. This need not, however, be taken as supporting the military. Similarly, take a teacher who is concerned about the tendency for the boys to dominate the classroom conversation. For this reason the teacher tries to call on girls before boys, to encourage reluctant girls to raise their hand and to teach boys

to be patient while a girl is speaking. Consider the different reasons a philosopher of education might give for viewing this *bias* in favor of the girls in a positive light. One reason might have to do with the cash value assertiveness plays in our society. The adage "children should be seen and not heard" just is not good advice for raising children—whether girls or boys—in late twentieth century America. Yet to advance assertiveness for this reason is not to overturn a classical opposition, but to affirm an existing and widespread social value—the value of assertiveness. A philosopher of education who is not wild about assertiveness may, like the pacifist, support the activity for other reasons, say, women have an equal right to good jobs and income and in this society they need to be assertive to secure them. Another likely reason is that children learn more when they engage in active discussion in class, but as a general principle this seems incomplete. Children learn more when they are active participants in a *good* discussion. And a good discussion involves people seeking clarity and truth while they are also concerned about the quality of the relationships that enables the search for clarity and truth to continue in a reasonably unthreatening atmosphere.

There are at least two compelling reasons for the concern about silencing. The first is that people who want to speak have a right to do so and if others systematically monopolize the conversation, this right is being denied. This reason has very little to say about the quality of what is said, but it has a lot to say about the way in which traditional rights doctrines can be used to advance progressive agendas. Systematic silencing in school can be a special and most serious violation of such a right because of the long-term consequences it entails as girls learn eventually to silence themselves.

This reason for objecting to the systematic silencing of girls is an example of how our sensitivity to rights actually guides critical scholarship. Granted, it calls for a more extended discussion of rights and the way different groups are advantaged and disadvantaged in learning to exercise them. Yet the discussion cannot begin without some awareness of what it means to have a right and when it is appropriate to equate the inability to exercise a right with its violation. A second reason for concern about the girls' silence is that they likely have something important to say and that the silence denies everyone the benefit of their insights.

Although there are at least two reasons for concern about the silence, they mandate considerably different institutional responses. There is a vast institutional difference between the right a person has to speak and the concern that a person be heard. The first is often therapeutic activity—an activity that is undertaken because of a personal deficiency and as a step on the way to something else. The second is a way to promote clarity and truth-seeking by assuring that as many different perspectives can be considered in a deliberation.

Philosophers of education have a stake in the way this distinction is developed because they are engaged in a practice that is centered on the improvement

of educational institutions. And, while removing silences—whether for reasons of rights or for reasons of truth—is likely to improve the lives of children, education is advanced when the former also serves the latter.

An important feature about institutions and practices as far as Philosophy of Education is concerned is that they constrain discourse in certain ways that transcend simple logical possibilities. Discourse here entails intervention in ongoing activities. To become conscious of an institutional practice as a practice (rather than an unchangeable act of nature) is to force a decision about whether to endorse the practice through allowing things to be, or to intervene in a way that will change the practice. In the arena of Philosophy of Education arguments are framed within the context of existing practices and possibilities. Historical and social factors must be accounted for and taken into account. Here, ongoing practices exist in a way that constrains action and provides the framework for normative discourse. Philosophy of Education reflects on existing practices as they relate to schools or other educative institutions. Such reflection is most importantly about the aims of those institutions as they are embedded in practices.

NOTES

1. Appreciation to Willard Boyd, President of the Field Museum for this insight.
2. Walter Feinberg, *Understanding Education: Toward a Reconstruction of Educational Inquiry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 pp. 147–74.
3. Ibid.
4. Because schools and other educative institutions exist within a network of supporting institutions and practices, the scope of Philosophy of Education is wide ranging, encompassing critiques of popular culture, media, and economic practices as they impinge upon the education of the young.
5. For a most useful history of this organization see James M. Giarelli and J. J. Chambliss, "The Foundations of Professionalism: Fifty Years of the Philosophy of Education Society in Retrospect" *Educational Theory*, Summer, 1991 41(3): 265–74.
6. As quoted in Giarelli and Chambliss., p. 268.
7. In referring to deconstruction I am not speaking of its use strictly as a literary method in, say the work of Barbara Johnston. I am addressing its limitation when used as a device for social criticism. The extreme of this, of course, would be in the work of Paul DeMan.
8. It is important to see the opposition between principled and relational thinking that has recently been made to characterize the difference between male and female thinking, not as a logical opposition, but as built into genderized practices that could be otherwise.