Freedom, Justice and Understanding

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I wish to begin with a note of appreciation. Joldersma has made an important contribution to Freirean scholarship in his article, "The Tension Between Justice and Freedom in Paulo Freire's Epistemology." He develops an original critique of Freire's work and addresses some searching epistemological and ethical questions in a fresh light. Joldersma refers to a wide range of Freirean texts in developing his position, and several of his key ideas are conveyed in an admirably clear and concise manner. The issues raised in his paper provide an agenda for ongoing research, and those committed to the continuing project of rereading Freire's writings will find much of value in Joldersma's analysis. At the same time, and in the spirit of Freirean critique, I feel compelled to draw attention to what I see as a crucial weak plank in Joldersma's argument. I can accept the view that "Freire's epistemology is at bottom meant to constitute an ethical project, centered on the role of knowledge in bringing social justice;" what I find problematic is Joldersma's interpretation of Freire's concept of freedom. In this response I provide an alternative reading of Freire's work. I argue that, for Freire, freedom and justice, rather then being in tension, are intimately (and necessarily) intertwined. Such a reading suggests that some of the conclusions Joldersma draws about *both* Freire's epistemology and his ethic cannot be sustained.

Joldersma claims that justice and freedom are in tension for Freire. 'Freedom' on Joldersma's account, however, is defined in rather narrow terms as a form of agency grounded in a constructivist epistemology. "Freedom," he says, "is that part of our human epistemological equipment which gives us the capacity to go beyond present knowledge to change the current perceptions of reality." While Joldersma admits that there is a close link between knowledge development and social transformation (effectively captured in the concept of praxis) in Freire's work, he

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reduces the Freirean idea of 'naming the world' to a form of epistemological intervention. Joldersma then goes on to assert that Freirean freedom involves "neutralizing the world qua other and encompassing it with the subject's identity." This reading provides the basis for a number of subsequent (and equally problematic) claims. These rest on a "Levinasian-inspired" account of objectification:

> Objection is a form of domesticating the world as other by getting it to surrender, forcing it, in Levinas's terms, to 'lay itself open to grasp.' Objects are not other, but part of the subject's same, a reduction to identity. To the extent that they are objects they have no mystery but are something known, grasped, conceptualized. Objects are entities *domesticated* for possession and control by removing their alterity.

Freire's constructivist epistemology, Joldersma argues, "remains too close to the overall position he wishes to avoid." There are some differences between Freire and "the oppressors" – these differences being principally associated with the "democratization and universalization of power" – and in this sense the Freirean approach is "certainly a step in the right direction." Nonetheless,

> It still remains the case that structurally Freire's epistemology at bottom is similar to that of the oppressors, one for power and domination, possession and control. The freedom required for a constructivist epistemology still leads to a kind of oppression. This seems to be in fundamental tension with his ethical project of social justice, ridding the world of oppression.

This position, in my view, rests on several mistakes. First, and crucially, I think there is more to the Freirean concept of freedom than Joldersma's account would have us believe. Second, the fit between Freire's epistemology and the form of constructivism Joldersma wants to align him with is somewhat inexact. Third, neither Freire's epistemology nor his concept of freedom (and I want to suggest the two are not equivalent) are concerned with the sort of 'power and domination' or 'possession and control' Joldersma ascribes to them. Fourth, there is no fundamental incompatibility between Freire's ethical project and either his epistemology or his concept of freedom.

How might we attempt to understand Freire's concept of freedom? Joldersma speaks of "the movement of enveloping the

world by the spontaneity and freedom of the constructing subject," yet Freire consistently argued against the linking of freedom with spontaneity. Freedom does not mean 'anything goes' – it is not the same as 'licence'. There are *limits* to the human activities Freire wants to include within the province of freedom. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire puts it this way:

> Freedom without limit is as impossible as freedom that is suffocated or contracted. If it were without limit, it would take me outside the sphere of human action, intervention, or struggle. Limitless freedom is a negation of the human condition of unfinishedness. (1998, p. 96)

In his later works Freire states repeatedly that he wishes to promote neither authoritarianism nor a laissez faire approach to pedagogy. The former places excessive limits on the free activity of teachers and students, while the latter lacks the structure, direction, and purpose necessary for liberating education (see Roberts, 1996). Freire is careful not to confuse 'authority' with 'authoritarianism'. Teachers, he says, can and ought to exercise authority in a manner that enables critical reflection, dialogue, and action to proceed. A certain form of authority is not only legitimate but necessary in a pedagogical context. Teachers, he argues, should be 'authorities' in their subject areas; they have a responsibility for structuring learning programs; and their pedagogical knowledge is important in leading purposeful discussions. Education is, to be sure, concerned with developing the "taste for freedom" (Freire, 1996, p. 151), but if freedom lapses into a form of permissiveness development regresses and democracy is impeded. Freire's position on the relationship between freedom and authority is beautifully captured in this passage from *Letters to Cristina*:

> In the final analysis, authority is an invention of freedom so that freedom may continue to be. Parental authority did not create the freedom of children; the children's need for freedom generated the authority of parents. Authority, then, makes no sense and is not justifiable if it loses its principal task: to assure freedom the possibility of being. (1996, pp. 150-151)

Freire's distinction, in his pedagogical writings, between authoritarianism and the legitimate exercising of authority forms part of a wider concern with questions of ethics. Freire argues for an ethic of humanization, based on radical democratic political

principles and grounded in a rereading of humanist traditions (cf. Aronowitz, 1993). Freedom is an important element in the task of becoming more fully human, but it is best understood as a "starting point" rather than the "finish line" (Freire, 1996, p.151). Freedom is not *given*; rather, as humans, we must strive for it. In the settings Freire worked in, freedom became intimately linked with the process of *struggle* – the struggle to secure better working conditions, a more equitable distribution of wealth, food, water, clothing, shelter, health services, and educational opportunities. Liberation is defined not as an ideal state of mind or as an endpoint but as a process of active, dialogical, critical striving 'to be more'. Freedom is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation. Working to transform conditions of oppression entails the balancing of freedom with the authority necessary to make the process of liberation possible.

Thus, for Freire freedom is not merely a mode of knowing but a form of social practice. We can, in Freirean terms, speak of both a 'freedom *to*' (act in certain ways) and 'freedom *from*' (oppressive structures, practices, and modes of thought). The authentic expression of the former requires the existence of, or at least an attempt to establish, the latter. There is, to put this another way, a strong link in Freire's work between freedom and social justice: the freedom to engage in worthwhile activities is not really freedom at all if it rests on a foundation of oppressive social relations. A free society, Freire might have claimed, is not one in which every citizen acts as he or she chooses but one in which all are permitted to actively participate in deciding what counts as free activity. The scope for pursuing interests and wants only becomes genuine freedom when such conditions exist for *all* citizens. Hence, it is not possible to speak of a country characterized by inequities along class, race, and gender lines as a 'free society'. Working toward freedom in its fullest Freirean sense entails not just the maximization of opportunities for spontaneous and creative expression of human talents and abilities but the elimination of poverty, exploitation, racism, and patriarchy.

Humanization, from a Freirean point of view, is not a matter of 'neutralizing' the world but of becoming integrated with it. Freire recognizes that we can never completely separate ourselves from the world. Education should, to be sure, be

concerned with encouraging participants to gain *some* distance from their everyday perceptions of social reality, but Freire acknowledges that this neither could nor should be a process of 'neutralizing' the object under examination. Rather, the idea is to see the world in a new light by placing one's existing interpretations into radical interaction with alternative ideas. Dialogue is pivotal in this process. The object of one's inquiry is reconsidered, but not 'neutralized', each time it is subjected to dialogical scrutiny. The proper epistemological stance, Freire stresses, is one of active and respectful critical engagement. This applies whether one is examining a book or a theme of national importance or a contemporary social issue. Whatever the 'text' under consideration (and 'text' here means not just written texts, but actions, events, policies, and spoken utterances), one should, as Freire puts it, 'fight' with the object of one's investigation while 'loving' it (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 11). The goal is not to domesticate, possess, or dominate the object of study (or the world within which one is acting) but to reconstruct reality through reflective, dialogical action. This demands a posture of humility, curiosity, and courage. Humility is necessary when we recognize that our knowledge of the world will always be limited, and that there is always more to learn – from others, and from our interaction with an ever-changing world. Curiosity drives the process of inquiry and encourages us to keep *re*knowing the world. And, especially in the situations with which Freire was dealing, being prepared to test and act upon one's ideas and convictions requires considerable courage.

Freire makes it clear that he is *not* interested in promoting certitude in understanding and knowing the world. In several later publications he encourages us to be "less certain of our certainties." This reflects, in part, the value he places on qualities such as openness and tolerance. Freire (1994, 1997) argues against dogmatic and reactionary positions among groups on both the Right and the Left. He stresses the importance of considering alternatives, of being open to new ideas, and of avoiding narrow 'Party lines'. He sees a certain kind of tolerance as a 'revolutionary virtue' (see Escobar, Fernandez, Guevara-Niebla, with Freire, 1994). More than this, though, the need to be "less certain of our certainties" arises from a particular reading of social reality. Joldersma is wide of the mark in his comments

about Freire and the idea of objects having "no mystery." His remarks about Freire and knowing subjects domesticating the world through a process of objectification are also misplaced. We can, Freire says, come *closer* to understanding the essence that explains an object of study, but we can never know it in an absolute or final sense (cf. Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 82). From one point of view, it is the very complexity of the world that makes it worth knowing. Our curiosity as knowing human subjects is stimulated by the perplexing problems we encounter when we turn our attention, in a reflective, open-minded, and dialogical manner, to the world around (and within) us. The creation of generative themes does not attempt to reduce the complexities of the world to certainties. To the contrary, it is the complexity of social reality that, in part, forms the basis for such themes. It is precisely through the act of reconsidering the world via discussion of and reflection upon generative words and themes that we come to appreciate just how complex the world really is. Problems that previously seemed simple, or did not appear at all, begin to emerge more vividly through this process. Perceptions of reality are challenged by this confrontation with complexity, and participants begin to act, relate, and think in new ways. The attempt to know the world in this way does not, however, 'solve' one's problems. Freire favored problem-*posing* education, not problem-*solving* education. He recognized that as one problem is addressed, and a new reality emerges, that new reality in turn poses further problems to be addressed. The world, Freire maintains, is always changing. There are better and worse ways of attempting to get to grips with reality, but there is no single legitimate reading or interpretation. Every attempt at understanding the world must be regarded as a *provisional* reading, to which subsequent *re*readings can be applied as more and more layers of reality are penetrated.

I want to suggest, then, that Joldersma's account of Freire's epistemology and ethic can be challenged. There is considerable value, however, in some of the questions Joldersma raises in response to Freire's work. In particular, there is, I think, much that might be gained in reflecting on questions about the 'other' – especially as these relate to dialogical and educative relationships. There is scope here, I believe, for productive comparisons with some bodies of poststructuralist and

postmodern work, and for the further development of Freirean ideas on the nature of human communicative processes. Insights from thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Irigaray, for example, might profitably be brought to bear on a rereading of Freire's ethical theory. At the same time, Freire's attention to the political dimensions of education has something to offer those who place themselves in poststructuralist and postmodern traditions of scholarly inquiry. If a new research agenda along these lines is to be developed, aspects of the analysis provided by Joldersma will need to be sharpened and extended. Joldersma's concept of 'the world' is somewhat ambiguous, and his leap from 'humans' to 'reality in general' in applying the ideas of Levinas is not given adequate justification in the paper. I believe Freire would have agreed with Levinas's key ethical principles as articulated by Joldersma in the latter part of his paper. Freire would have supported the proposition that freedom "must heed a call, endure a limit, be conditioned in one way rather than another." Joldersma maintains that a 'Levinasian-inspired' approach situates freedom in the context of justice and grounds epistemology in ethics. This, I have argued in this paper, is exactly the position Freire takes. Freedom on the Freirean view embraces *both* an epistemological dimension and an ethical dimension. Joldersma makes the mistake of confining Freirean freedom to the domain of epistemology, and he misrepresents Freire's views on knowing, understanding, oppression, and liberation. As a result, he draws erroneous conclusions about the relationship between epistemology and ethics in Freirean theory. Against Joldersma's position, I have argued that freedom and justice for Freire are not merely compatible but inseparable.

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