Arrogant Worlds

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Beginning with *The Lucky Dog* in 1921, the cinematic duo Laurel and Hardy seemed to embrace "the principle that human error, in its infinite variety, is the most natural thing in the world," Anthony Lane recently noted. "We should feel disappointed when things go right."[1] There is some wisdom in this offbeat principle, hard though it is to apply to our own learning or that of our students. We like to get things right. We love a class that goes smoothly. When things go awry, it feels like a deviation from how a class ought to be. Yet when things go smoothly, what we are *not* taking into account may be more important than what went well. Writing about multiculturalism as a shared undertaking, African American author and civil rights activist Julius Lester observed, "Right now, we don't have a clue how we should do this." Because we are a diverse society, we are "grappl[ing] with challenges humans have not grappled with before," and we will "make mistakes."[2] That has to be part of the process — not only inevitable, but necessary.

As Kirsten Welch observes in her fine article, students are reluctant to be wrong. In a tacit pact to preserve rightness all round, they may practice a form of transactional relativism whereby everyone can lay claim to their own truth as *merely* (thus seemingly humbly) their own. Despite the superficial appearance of openness to others' positions, such practices of intellectual tolerance have "the potential to work *against* the cultivation of true intellectual humility," Welch writes. Insofar as students believe that the passion with which their views are held authorizes their beliefs, they are indifferent to any need to "question the legitimacy of their own views of the world," and indeed are indifferent to the claims

of "the reality of the world."

Iris Marion Young frames a conception of moral humility that, although in some ways congruent with Welch's conception of intellectual humility, differs importantly in how it frames relationship and fallibility. It is not merely that we know we may get things wrong; Young argues that it is *impossible* to fully understand another. We have an obligation to listen *because* we cannot grasp the other's position. "If you think you can look at things from their point of view, then you may avoid the sometimes arduous and painful process in which they confront you with your prejudices, fantasies and understandings about them." The recognition of alterity and asymmetrical relations necessitates moral humility.

> If I assume that there are aspects of where the other person is coming from that I do not understand, I will be more likely to be open to listening to the specific expression of their experience, interests, and claims. Indeed, one might say that this is what listening to a person means.[3]

APORIA AND TRUTH

Welch is concerned not with moral fallibility in understanding other points of view but with cognitive fallibility in confusing belief with truth. Because robust classroom engagement requires a willingness to interrogate one's own potentially mistaken beliefs, she suggests cultivating students' awareness of their intellectual limitations through "Socratic questioning, leading students to a state of *aporia*." The implied ideal is receptivity to having one's mind changed through the presentation of evidence, the acceptance of rational arguments, and the disposition to

be undone: the willing embrace, through love of truth, of the spectacle of one's own cognitive fallibility.

Although Welch's injunction to know the "reality of the world" registers an implicit and important challenge to contemporary Know-Nothingism, it risks borrowing the arrogance of the worlds in which we are interested in moving. The ideal of intellectual receptivity as a kind of willingness to be persuaded is organized by three awkwardly linked forms of authority. The first is the teacherly position of imparting to students not only information and skills, but a reorientation to truth. In the portrait of *aporia* that Welch offers us, there is a telling slippage between humility and compulsion: "When a person arrives at a state of *aporia*," Welch explains, "she is forced to admit that she does not know how to proceed." Framed in the passive voice, the source of this force is left unidentified, because the ideal site of compulsion is one's own reason. But the proximal and propelling sources of this force lie with the teacher and the texts.

At the same time, paradoxically, each individual student is positioned as a judge. As rational agents, students are sovereign, the ultimate arbiters of the arguments and evidence made available. Students whose worlds align with the dominant culture and with schooling will know how to move; they will expect to feel relatively competent. They can expect to be heard, to be given social uptake. For other students, Maureen Ford points out, schools are "places of risk, indifference, assimilation, and invisibility."[4] The classroom clash between worldviews, lifeworlds, and worlds thus is staged by the intellectual commitment to exploration, analysis, and understanding of a *particular way* of moving within and between worlds.

Finally, the status of the evidence and the argument exerts its own kind of authority. Unless we attend to how discourses pulse and are sticky

with historical and cultural associations, how words and bodies bear the traces of asymmetrical relations, how meanings are indexed to power, our judgments about reality will be organized by those values. Take our description of "crime" — a seeming fact. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the Los Angeles Police Department "helped create the 'wars' it fought on crime, social movements, drugs, gangs, and immigration to legitimate a proactive assertion of their authority" over racial control, writes Max Felker-Kantor. "Through the crises they helped manufacture," the LAPD expanded their political power and legitimated the unprecedented expansion of that authority into schools and community organizations. [5] Thus, the fear of a particular idea of inner-city *crime* was constructed through battles over the discretionary authority of designated *crime-fighters*.

I agree with Welch that fallibility, vulnerability, and wonder are vital to learning. They are as vital to teachers as they are to students. But what may be more salient than individual virtues are the institutional and social asymmetries in which intellectual arrogance is prepared for and organized: the world-making in which it is embedded. Indeed, individual virtues may serve to mask our actual investments, expectations, and loyalties in asymmetrical relations.

SHAKEN WORLDS

Whereas the prisoners in the cave perceive the world of shadows as real, we, together with Socrates, know that the prisoners will gain real knowledge only when they break free of that artificial world and reorient themselves to the Sun. What is at stake is not definitive knowledge of the real world but a particular orientation to it: how the prisoner's soul gets turned around. For Cris Mayo, it is more a *dis*orientation that is called for: the point of *aporia* is not just to confront ignorance but to experience an "unmooring" of

our troubled relations with others, a "reorientation" that requires all students, but particularly those with privilege, to "experience shifts in context that stun them into reconsideration of their knowledge and practices."[6]

"Socrates seems most concerned to emphasize that we should not be quick to make fun of the person who has come down [into the cave of ignorance] from above, and who for that reason feels confused and appears ridiculous."[7] I want to close with an affirmation of the ridiculous knower by invoking María Lugones's argument about "being a fool" in the spirit of loving play.[8] The "arrogant perceiver" sees no need to travel to other epistemic worlds, refusing to give up the privilege of being at ease in the social hierarchy. Losing one's way in unfamiliar languages, for example, is an unacceptable burden for those who associate their monolingual fluency with competence. By contrast, being willing to fail in competence in another's world, to learn lovingly and playfully, is a form of epistemic disloyalty to our relations with the worlds in which we feel most competent.

Working uneasily with forms of repetition and ritual that are not our own or listening in non-reductionist ways to what we don't really understand is like being faced with a poem that feels obscure, compressed, and freighted with meanings to which one does not have the key. The incomprehension is part of the possibility of wonder and the openness, the longing and absence, the transformation of the inchoate into shape. How we are willing to play in others' worlds, to be "a fool" in those worlds, is a different order of response from knowing how to be competent in multiple worlds. There are already multiple worlds in our classrooms; it is almost inevitable that there will be challenges and clashes beyond the grasp of reason. "It is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape," Sara Ahmed

writes.[9] The classroom is a site of production for new worlds (including worlds of pain). It is not an innocent facilitator of rational awareness of the world out-there.

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1 Anthony Lane, "Togetherness," *New Yorker,* Jan. 7,
2019, 72.
2 Julius Lester, "Reflections," in *Children's Literature Remembered: Issues, Trends, and Favorite Books*, ed. Linda M. Pavonetti (Westport, CN: Libraries Unlimited, 2004), 122.
3 Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 3, no. 3 (1997), 350.
4 Maureen Ford, "Knowing Differently Situated Others: Teachers and Arrogant Perception," *Journal of Educational Thought* 43, no. 1 (2009), 55.
5 Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 4.
6 Cris Mayo, "Relations Are Difficult," *Counterpoints* 259 (2004), 124.
7 Grace Ledbetter, "The Power of Plato's Cave," in *Plato and the Power of Images*, ed. Radcliffe G. Edmonds III and Pierre Destrée (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 134.
8 María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 288.
9 Sara Ahmed, "Collective Feelings, Or, The Impressions Left by Others," *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004), 29.