

Dialogue on Dialogue on Dialogic Pedagogy



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Abstract

It appears that in September, 2011, Rome experienced much more than a dialogue on dialogic pedagogy but a gladiatorial clash of personalities and ideas. Heat, we are told, was generated (above, p.1) and in the dissipation of this heat on to the page, even the reader gets hot and flushed. We are told that arguments “fail” (above, p.16); that terms “are not clearly defined” (p.21), breakthroughs in classification (e.g. epistemological dialogical pedagogy) are tackled and dragged down to personal eccentricities “his so-called epistemological dialogical pedagogy” (p.22), politeness tries to get a grip periodically, “I agree. But maybe I agree with Kiyoo only to a point” but shouting (e.g. capital letters/underlining terms – e.g. “NOT the exclusive practice” (p.26)) and assertions take over. Accusation fly - sometimes to the point of legal charges “I charge the Epistemological Pedagogical Dialogue II with...” (p.29).

As a spectator, the strength of these emotions and the depth of intellect are compelling and enjoyable. These are “idea-heroes” (Bakhtin, 1999). We can hear the banging of swords against shields, we flinch at the violence of the thrusts but we empathise with the heroes’ odyssey. Many disagreements are at stake and some are more “crucial” (p.40) than others, as the authors argue. As a reader, we experience this too because the authors have created the plot and are to be congratulated on living us through it. After raging through the pages and sharing this journey, however, the resolution ends with another dialogic disagreement. We sense that there is no exhaustion that has brought it to an end but rather a pragmatic decision to just end it. So, too, with Dostoevsky’s novels. He doesn’t do endings well, Bakhtin tells us.

Yet, this is not the typical consummation experience that the reader would have hoped for – in my case, from years of watching American movies. There is no happy ending, there is no joint epiphany or learning moment, there is no arm around the shoulder. So, I will attempt here, in an effort to satisfy my own cultural leanings, not to arbitrate between these disagreements but instead to find common ground and will try for a happy ending. At the end of the day, are not these differences very minor? Obviously in the heat of the battle they are crucial, as Kiyoo points out, but shouldn’t there be some common ground here? Don’t worry, however, I will try not to bore with pat togetherness or with saccharine aspirations or worse, with already-acknowledged areas of agreement (such as some of the partial agreements around polyphonic authorship). I will start with the form of the dialogues and what this form tells us about the

implicit epistemology before moving to discuss ontology. I will end with another ology, hopefully not a tautology, which is “axiology.”

The epistemological issue –dichotomies, classification systems and hierarchies

A key issue of debate through these two commentaries is whether Eugene’s thinking is dichotomous. Kiyo suggests it is while Eugene argues that it is not at all dichotomous. In the first debate, Eugene really gets the ball rolling in this series with a set of classifications around dialogic pedagogy – particularly epistemological, ontological and variations of these such as instrumental and non-instrumental. Kiyo tells us that he is unable to agree with these as being mutually exclusive dichotomies. This leads to some puzzlement on Eugene’s part and he suggests that there must have been a misunderstanding: “I think I tried to make it clear that any ontological approach has an epistemological aspect while any epistemological approach has an ontological aspect” (p.26). Still, Kiyo appears unconvinced as he repeats the claim on the last page, “As I have already noted in my response to your description of ontological dialogue and epistemological dialogue as mutually exclusive categories...” (p.42).

So, Kiyo, are these mutually exclusive, as you suggest? In theory, they are not. It makes sense for these to be conceptualised as tendencies that characterise dialogue. In practice, however, there also appears to be at least a hint of mutual exclusivity. From looking at the diagram on p.5, representatives are proposed of each, which are then assigned to one particular box. Freire is a representative of the instrumental dialogic but Lakatos is a “good representative” (p.9) of non-instrumental dialogic, epistemological II. The representatives of each approach should probably appear more than once (Socrates appears twice but this is unsurprising as there are two Socrates (Plato’s and Socrates’ version of Socrates). Hopefully, this is more than just a shallow point. It is people, including Eugene, rather than ideas, that have ended up in these boxes as representatives of particular kinds of dialogue. Later, Kiyo is suspected as being a member of Epistemological Pedagogical Dialogue II (p.27). There is authorial power in this – a kind of aestheticisation of the characters that does not cover the polyphony that Kiyo so admires. With this system, and while clearly outside of the spirit of Eugene’s discourse, there is also great potential for abuse – e.g. by performance managers – where suspicion can indeed be bred (“makes me suspect that he is a proponent of...” (p.27).

In the second, Kiyo-led dialogue, this same issue pops up again but in a different guise. Eugene makes a distinction between “responsive” and “self-generated” dialogue and Kiyo suggests that it is another dichotomy, “first issue is about your dichotomy between the responsive authorship and the self-generated authorship” and although Eugene does not reply, I’m gathering from his comment on p.37 that he anticipated this objection and moved to inoculate against it, “there is no clear-cut distinction between these types of students’ dialogic authorship” (p.38). Kiyo takes this inoculation as a smokescreen, however, and argues, “though you argue that there is no clear-cut distinction between these types of students’ dialogic authorship, you substantially describe these two types as mutually exclusive opponents” (p.40).

To suspend the question of disagreement for a moment on whether Eugene’s thinking is or is not unwittingly dichotomous, we can immediately see that both Eugene and Kiyo are united in viewing dichotomous thinking as a vice and that they both have a desire to be anything but dichotomous. Eugene is puzzled by the suggestion he is dichotomous and takes pains to detail why it is not dichotomous but Kiyo remains unconvinced throughout and keeps pressing this point. To echo a point that Eugene makes with regard to the Klara dialogue, Kiyo is pressing an unpleasant “mama-truth.” For me, the ontological dialogue that it sparks is whether it is indeed all that unpleasant?

This common ground against dichotomous thinking makes a lot of sense as both thinkers are persuaded by dialogical pedagogy. Both are inspired by Bakhtin (Kiyoko particularly in terms of polyphonic authorship; Eugene in terms of learning as a form of living). Why are they attracted to Bakhtin? Is it because he presents us with a world where people can change and that even when they inhabit a role, they are not defined by it but rather the role looks “comical” on them? Dichotomies suggest a drab world of finalities and rigid thinking, where concepts may not touch each other (they are separated by clear water with no bridge) in comparison.

What does epistemology mean? It is a theory of knowledge. Here, the theory goes that we cannot know very much by being dichotomous. Perhaps it is ‘closed-circuit’ to again echo one of Eugene’s points. This theory, in itself, appears to build on a set of values. In the world of practice, dichotomous thinking occupies as legitimate a place as the world of non-dichotomous thinking. Dichotomous thinking finds a heritage in Aristotle’s laws (particularly the law of non-contradiction) and it is an everyday cognitive heuristic used to simplify complexity. Cognitively, its full of errors, of course, like prejudices and stereotypes but it works pragmatically, even instrumentally and many great insights in logic are attributable to the law of non-contradiction. Many of Bakhtin’s concepts appear dichotomous, even mutually exclusive in any one moment in time – self and other; author and hero; spirit and soul and much of the argument here revolves around the “teacher-student” dichotomy. Perhaps dichotomies allow some stability, a reference point, in a world of flux; and aloofness in a world where things/people/ideas constantly touch each other.

My broader point here is that Eugene and Kiyoko are united not only against dichotomous thinking (maybe a negative freedom) but also in using a value-hierarchy to get at knowledge. It is a hierarchy where dialogical thinking is the master and dichotomous thinking is the sub-altern – to be run out of town. This makes sense to me, in education, and I believe in the pedagogy but getting back to a theory of knowledge, it is difficult not to privilege certain ways of knowing over other ways of knowing, which ironically appears to be the very thing both of these authors argue against in the classroom. Later I will ask if it is fair to ask teachers not to privilege traditional, safe ways of knowing over students’ ways of knowing, when these conflict.

This value-hierarchy, from an epistemological standpoint, finds a second expression in the use of classification systems by both Kiyoko and Eugene. Kiyoko classifies polyphonic and non-polyphonic teaching or teacher as author/teacher as dialogic author and student as hero/student as dialogic hero. For Eugene, we have a more extensive form of classification. These find graphical representation on an equal plane in Eugene’s case but it is clear that he places a higher value on the “non-instrumental dialogical ontological.” Perhaps it is his eloquent style, and my own journey in academia, or the fact that I like Eugene and he is a named representative/hero of the “non-instrumental, dialogical” but I find myself rooting for this hero, of all the protagonists, that he outlines.

I think there are two adventure-struggles for Eugene’s ontological dialogue that are not picked up by Kiyoko. One is his insistence that it moves us beyond high-culture and a fascination with high culture of the sort we find in epistemological dialogue. Yet at the same time, its name: “non-instrumental ontological dialogue” is not exactly from ‘the street’ and I wonder if teacher-practitioners would experience this as high academic culture. Obviously, its message, that being has priority over knowing and that as a consequence, we ought not to bracket and devalue the mundane from teaching, makes a lot of sense and I think in broad terms, Kiyoko is in general agreement with this.

Secondly and relatedly, however, what catapults ‘non-instrumental dialogical ontological’ into the realm of high-culture is the mysticism and reverence that accompanies it, and which Eugene

acknowledges but is keen to avoid. From the mysticism point of view, such dialogue permeates existence, although it is hard to specify and, while the Klara example is useful, there's no way of knowing if it has taken place. Maybe it may have only taken place when one looks back. What appeared to be pedagogical violence at one point, on mature reflection, could have turned out to be ontological dialogue. That's not to say that Eugene is not on to something. He is picking up on an aspect of dialogue – its decentering of taken-for-granted 'constants' such as time and space– via a connection to physics – that also intrigued Bakhtin and was built into his theory of dialogue. In social theory, however, without the hard maths, it is difficult to shed the mysticism.

From a “reverence” point of view, this kind of dialogue is “higher”/holy, maybe making high culture out of low culture. It reads here as an ultimate, transformative, high-octane learning experience. To me, “high” culture and “low” culture is difficult to define by the contents (for instance when so many “high-culture” novelists were serialised for the masses originally) and marginally easier to define synchronically or in the moment of interaction by the beholder's degree of reverence.

To help the protagonist (non-instrumental ontological dialogue) to overcome these challenges, I would suggest drawing again on epistemology. The theory of knowledge that ontological dialogue suggests is that some experiences are beyond the reach of knowledge (we may not know it has taken place for our interlocutor or students and in ourselves only after a lapse of time). In other words, knowledge (self-knowledge/other knowledge) can meet a limit. This is quite a Kierkegaardian point. We have to take a “leap of faith” that ontological dialogue may take place or may have taken place. This brings us back to the use-value of ontological dialogue. It will resist the best-laid lesson plans but the practitioner has to take the odd leap of faith that maybe not today and maybe not tomorrow but at some point they will have had such a dialogue. Maybe this is an aspect of Eugene's epistemology that is a little buried in there and which is worth drawing out. Following from this, it is no surprise that Eugene privileges ontology over epistemology (just as Kierkegaard would – substituting hope and faith for knowledge) and nor is it a surprise that Kiyo refuses to make this move. For Kiyo, “animals must act in order to know” (p.19). If this is the case, then there can be no suspension of knowing or substituting knowing for ‘faith’ for if one does, then it is pointless to act.

Kiyo's value-hierarchy (in the classification system outlined in his initiated dialogue) privileges knowledge in yet another way. While Eugene provides a number of transitional steps up the hierarchy towards ontological dialogue, Kiyo appears to be much more dramatic. Teachers are authors, students are heroes, and there is just one big step – from non-being to being – dialogical. Here, in this elevated sphere, we can meet a dialogic author (teacher) and a dialogic hero (student). Although wary of the potential of this hierarchy for abuse, like Eugene's value-hierarchy, it is an analogy that resonates with my reading of polyphony and I am not surprised that Eugene also finds much of value here and largely endorses many of its implications. It is worth noting, however that knowledge that is generated in this dialogic way appears to be privileged by Kiyo over knowledge that is generated in a non-dialogic way – e.g. non-dialogics (to coin a term for a group of teachers and students) take teaching material as easy and straightforward, “dialogics” take teaching material as profoundly challenging; non-dialogics may place a value on listening but (stupidly?) “the nature of teacher's listening to students has not been fully understood” (p.33). Dialogics understand this relationship very well.

The frame of debate from here, in Kiyo's initiated dialogue, puzzles me a little. If you like, the protagonists (Eugene and Kiyo) have taken the battle up into the clouds of the highest point of the value-hierarchy. On this ground, it is clearly better to be a dialogic teacher/student – that is the ground. The battle concerns whether the students have enough freedom to initiate their own inquiry from underneath

the author's nose or whether the students really can be treated aesthetically rather than as embodied, complicated beings. I sense that Eugene wishes to radicalise the polyphony analogy to the ultimate freedom (to not only initiate their own dialogues but also to walk away), which in a way brings it to its 'logical' conclusion, rather than dispensing with it entirely – (although I don't think he would agree). But Eugene, polyphony is the capacity to surprise the author and what greater surprise could the author have than to have their hero bow out?

To put this in another way, I read the disagreement here as one regarding two different readings of polyphony – a traditional one (Kiyō) and a radical one (Eugene). I don't think the debate is about the distinction of art and life and the ethics of treating life as art – which only masquerades as a fault line. It is clear that for both Eugene and Kiyō, art (whether high or low) and life can be read as mutually answerable to each other, just as Bakhtin (1990) tells us is the key to reading his social theory. What puzzles me about this debate is why the question of teacher-student learning has become subsumed to a more high-academic-culture question of specifying the most authentic form of dialogue – (e.g. self or other initiated). With a quest for authenticity the principles that are being defended may possibly be undermined.

What concerns me even more about Kiyō's polyphony analogy is the displacement of the carnivalesque in this polyphony. Carnival is great at turning hierarchies upside down and at giving voice to the subaltern. At one level, this clearly happens in the analogy insofar as the teacher (as traditionally understood) is decrowned and simply a participant among others. At a broader level, however, the epistemology that Eugene and Kiyō leave us with is also a hierarchical one. What will happen, in this value-hierarchy, to the "old-school" teachers, the unreconstructed teachers and students (e.g. the students with no eros) and the macho or those who just don't share these values? Would a terrifying fate await them or is this hierarchy also open to a laugh? Then again, maybe this is a misplaced question considering the dominance of other hierarchies outside of dialogic pedagogy. Maybe it is an unfair question to an oppressed pedagogy, fighting its corner.

ONTOLOGY: The Christ-Like Figure of the Teacher and the Threat of Pedagogical Violence

So, I've just given a brief account of what I see as the epistemology that underpins the dialogues. In this next section, I'll outline a bit of the ontology. Here, I'll make a simple point that follows on from the epistemology. This is, both Kiyō and Eugene appear to present us with an ontology that is profoundly Christian in spirit.

Kiyō is quite clear about this. When I read of Kihaku Saitō, I was reminded of Christ immediately. There is the "garden of eden" vulnerability to being betrayed by Judas students; the very students with whom the teacher has worked with "all her/his heart." Yet, strength arises from weakness "when the teacher becomes aware of her/his work's frailness, powerlessness and loneliness, she/he will acquire new strength" (Saitō, 1963, p.13). Nietzsche would tell us that this is a "slave-morality," embodied by Christ. The meek shall inherit the earth. He is who is last shall be first. Turn the other cheek. The virtuous is the weak.

It is in this ontology that it seems to be Kiyō's turn to get all mystical and transcendent on us. I enjoy it, I have to say, and I'm guessing that many would agree with the sentiments. In my own teaching, I constantly try to efface an almost primal desire to loudly assert institutional authority (like telling students that talking while I'm talking/texting or coming in to the class very late is all "against the rules"). I try to make these points in a gentle and loving way or maybe not make them at all. I definitely feel frail and at

the end of the day, I'm shattered. At the same time, I keep something back for myself, a little detachment from some of the double-binds of the classroom and a modicum of indifference regarding student progress (shock-horror). Otherwise, I feel I would have no home life.

What I am questioning here is the ontology where the teacher teaches with "all their heart" such that it is open and vulnerable to betrayal and exhaustion. Should they "commit themselves to the teacher's work" (p.42)? Is there any place for irony in this system or in this community? Just for a moment, it is worth considering Richard Rorty's (1989) argument (building on Kierkegaard and others) that the public community stands apart from private self-creation:

This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable. It sketches a figure whom I call the "liberal ironist." I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (p.xv).

I find this distinction interesting and relevant for the debate at hand insofar as it permits a space for the teacher to be a little indifferent, a little ironic and a little less committed to the great teaching project. In Kiyō's ontology and in the examples he uses, I can see a commitment to the public sphere and to solidarity with a deeply non-ironic teaching project ("they believe that they can do something for the learners only in a lesson" (p.42), "to have rich dialogic experience," (p.43).). It is polyphonic but non-ironic – just as Dostoevsky's characters were non-ironic, hastily committing suicide or to self-torturing dialogue.

I think this is why Kiyō ends his dialogue response with such a powerful "final remark" (p.43). Of course he will find Eugene's position disturbing. Why would Eugene have a pedagogy? To me the answer to that question is that Eugene develops, a bit like the early Socrates and Kierkegaard again, the position of the ironist in education. He is committed to a position where learners may not care about the teacher and the teachers' projects and I think, although it is understated, a position where the teacher may not care particularly about the students and their projects. Teaching is "secondary" in education and the teacher may structure and facilitate but it is the students who are autonomous beings. For me, a logical implication of this position is that teachers mirror students' attitudes. They should not worry so much about what the student engages with in their self-learning and in their project of self-creation (the liberal ironic position, as Rorty describes it). Perhaps recognising a non-dichotomous tension between the pedagogy of public dialogic experience amidst private irony and indifference would help us to see the threats to dialogic pedagogy (the threat from a broken heart after an epic public struggle or the threat of alienation from private projects of self-creation).

In a sense, Eugene and Kiyō epitomise the tension in the liberal-ironist position and the incommensurability attached to it. On the other hand, however, looking at these dialogues from afar, Kiyō provides the liberal and Eugene provides the ironist to a liberal ironic dialogic pedagogy (at least ontologically). However, this is actually another dichotomy in a way, as there is already a fair streak of liberalism (in the sense above, as cruelty is the worst thing we do) that runs through Eugene's earlier comments. It is with this part of the liberal-ironic ontology that I'll wrap up my comments and my broader project to draw these epic heroes together.

A “superaddressee” in Eugene’s ontology is the figure of the violent pedagogue or the threat of “pedagogical violence.” It is this quality of both recognising the contingency and chance attached to values but also that violence is the worst thing we do, that marks this discourse around ontology as liberal-ironic – at least for me. This moral value or “slave morality,” in Nietzsche’s terms, acts as a foundation for judging particular frameworks:

However, modelling classroom discussion after an epistemological dialogue can lead to pedagogical violence (p.8);

an assumption or an expectation that all participants are *automatically* and *non-problematically* interested in a problem can lead to big pedagogical disasters and eventually to oppressive pedagogical violence (p.10);

I suspect that establishment and maintenance of the teaching taboos regime promoted by the Epistemological Pedagogical Dialogue II requires pedagogical violence (p.29).

So, here we do not have the “Christ-like” figure that Kiyoko presents us with but instead its doppelgänger (they are both on the same page here): the ominous threat of pedagogical violence and the Aristocratic, violent teacher? Actually, I would like to read a bit more about what constitutes pedagogical violence and who the perpetrators of it are. For example, the students who betray, those students that Kihaku Saitou appeared to have some experience of, are they pedagogically violent. If we grant the students equality, then presumably they have equal rights to terrorise? Perhaps even persuading others is pedagogically violent and maybe privileging “high-culture” over “low-culture” is also a form of pedagogical violence. It seems that even the “mono-topic development of an idea” has to be supported by pedagogical violence (p.11).

Following Nietzsche can we “re-value” this value? I think we can if we follow Foucault’s tack that power is productive as well as repressive. It can have a double-edged quality. So, while pedagogical violence appears as a form of “sovereign power” (power attached to the Sovereign) here, perhaps it could be viewed also as part of a diffuse network of relationships. We know that in many senses, violence leads to cruelty and this is the worst thing we can do. What about masochism as opposed to sadism or a situation where sadistic teaching leads to masochistic learning? That is, what if pedagogical violence is experienced as a painful mental workout, a torture-rack? A situation where the teacher forces the “development of one theme” (p.12). Its not the kind of learning style that I would personally like to enjoy or encourage. Then again, I’m not into S+M (sado-masochism) but if that’s how people get their kicks, that’s how they get their kicks and I’m a little reluctant to use it as a foundational judgement value. Perhaps in this regard I’m more ironic than Eugene or maybe, as I say, I need to read more of Eugene’s thoughts on pedagogical violence.

I think this thought brings me crashing back to the world of practice. Throughout my re-readings of this dialogue, I kept trying to put myself in the place of a teacher in a classroom and to recall my days as a trainee school teacher and the kinds of resentment I encountered against academics in ‘ivory towers’ in the staff room. Throughout these dialogues there is something immensely appealing in the ontology that we are presented with but it also smacks of the same kind of ethereal religiousness that commentators have identified in Bakhtin’s work (e.g. Hirschkop, 1999). That’s not bad, in itself, of course. I just struggle to match it with my experience of the ordinary person wanting to make a living out of being a teacher. Eugene identifies a descriptive and prescriptive dimension to ontological dialogue. I would love to see more of a connection between these two aspects of dialogical pedagogy in any future dialogue.

A brief conclusion – the third ‘ology’

There are many ‘ologies’ in these dialogues but one ‘ology’ that is missing, one that is immensely important to Bakhtin, is axiology. Axiology is a system of values. In this commentary, I have tried to tackle the values that underpin the epistemological and ontological debates. In doing this, I have encountered some overlaps in sharing this journey. To articulate these – I see a common thread in a commitment to a traditional naturalistic epistemology in classification and hierarchy in the organisation of the knowledge. At the top of this hierarchy, however, I see Eugene as committed to a mystical “leap of faith” in his epistemology while Kiyō has no desire to break the link between knowledge and being. I am curious about how those at the bottom of the value-hierarchy should be conceived. In ontological terms however, Kiyō betrays a mystique to the dialogic teacher that brings us into the realm of vocational spiritualism while Eugene maintains an ironic distance. Both, however, appear to be united in what Nietzsche refers to as a “slave morality.” Again, this is unsurprising considering Bakhtin’s influence here and in particular his Christian leanings (one that I too am drawn to as a liberal, ironic non-believer). The ontology in other words, like the epistemology, arises naturally from a foundational axiology. Maybe we don’t need to be ironic about this foundational axiology but some distance and re-evaluation of the value, (e.g. for the Christ-like teacher and pedagogical violence) may be helpful.

To conclude on a less ironic note, I would say that the “eros” behind these dialogues is immense. These authors saturate their thinking with their emotion and feeling and most importantly, their attraction to dialogic pedagogy. In doing so, and to carelessly break my promise against pat togetherness, they inspire the dialogue to go on... sorry, they highlight the challenges and the potential of dialogic pedagogy as an idea with a rich texture.

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