Knowledge, Dialogue, and Humanization: The Moral Philosophy of Paulo Freire

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Paulo Freire has been one of the most influential educationists of the 20th century. While many theorists in recent years have focused on the application of Freirean ideas, this paper concentrates on the philosophy which lies behind Freire's practice. The author considers the metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions to Freire's thought. A number of key moral principles in Freire's work are identified. The paper suggests that Freire's moral philosophy is built on a dialectical approach toward the world, a praxical view of knowledge and the human ideal, and a deep commitment to the liberation of the oppressed.

Paulo Freire fut un des pédagogues les plus influants du XXème siècle. Alors que nombre de théoriciens se sont intéressés à l'application des idées de Freire ces dernières années, cet article se concentre sur la philosophie qui est derrière la pratique de Freire. L'auteur considère les dimensions métaphysique, ontologique, épistémologique et déontologique de la pensée de Freire. Un certain nombre de principes moraux clefs sont identifiés dans le travail de Freire. L'article suggère que la philosophie morale de Freire est construite sur une approche dialectique du monde, une perception praxéologique du savoir et de l'idéal humain, et un engagement profond envers la libération des oppressés.

Over the past 25 years, the work of Paulo Freire has influenced countless theorists and practitioners across the globe. Freire's classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972a), has been enthusiastically studied (with varying degrees of critical rigour) by many political

activists, Left intellectuals, liberation theologians, and radical educationists in the Third World. Additionally, Freirean ideas have found application in diverse settings in the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Freire's writings have been investigated by adult literacy coordinators, development theorists, sociologists, women's studies scholars, counselors, psychologists, social workers, health professionals, prison rehabilitation workers, and linguists.

While much has been said in recent years about the *application* of Freirean ideas, discussion of the philosophy which underpins Freire's work appears, at times, to have faded somewhat into the background. The identification of a clear set of moral principles, in particular, has been largely ignored. Yet, as a recent article in the *Journal of Moral Education* demonstrates, in Freire's emphasis on dialogue, the posing of problems, and the critical interrogation of everyday life we find a profoundly *moral* form of pedagogy (Ṭappan & Brown, 1996, pp. 106-107). This paper explores elements of Freire's metaphysic, ontology, epistemology, and ethic, with a view to elucidating the distinctiveness of Freire's moral position. Freire's moral philosophy is a complex synthesis of a wide range of intellectual traditions (Mackie, 1980). While the programmes he developed in working with illiterate adults in Brazil and Chile in the 1960s constitute perhaps the most memorable aspect of his work, Freire's practical activities need to be understood in the light of his views on the nature of reality, his conception of what it means to be human, his theory of knowledge, and his ideas on oppression and liberation. These dimensions of Freire's work lie at the heart of this paper.

Freire on the Nature of Reality

Freire adopts a *dialectical* approach toward understanding the world. This statement has a dual meaning. In one sense, Freire conceives of reality *as* dialectical; in another sense, he *is* (or strives to be) dialectical in his style of social analysis. In other words, Freire attempts to *think* dialectically about a reality which is dialectical. Drawing on ideas from Hegel and Marx, among others, Freire posits a dynamic relation between consciousness and the world (Torres,

1994). He explicitly rejects two positions which ignore the dialectical nature of this relationship: mechanistic objectivism and solipsistic idealism. The former reduces consciousness to a mere copy of objective reality; the latter sees consciousness as the creator of (all) reality (Freire, 1972b, p. 53). Objectivist views negate human agency since all human actions become merely a product of material or environmental influences. Mechanistic behaviourism, for example, sees human practice as analogous to the operation of a machine. Human beings exist as material bodies (with sense organs) who respond to stimuli. No human event could be other than it is. A human being could not act other than he or she does in any particular situation, given the combination of stimuli – past and present – to which he or she has been subject. For the extreme idealist, on the other hand, there is no world at all: material reality is simply an illusion, a construction of consciousness. Both stances deny the possibility of reality being transformed through conscious human activity.

According to Freire, all aspects of objective reality are in motion. Objective reality encompasses both the world of nature and socially-created material objects, institutions, practices, and phenomena. The world, for Freire, is necessarily unfinished and ever-evolving: "the more I approach critically the object of my observation, the more I am able to perceive that the object of my observation *is not yet because it is becoming*" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 82). As reality changes, ideas, conceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and so on – in short, all the products of consciousness – shift also. This is not a sequential, lock-step, cause and effect relationship, but a complex process of constant, multi-layered interaction between human beings and the world. From Freire's point of view, neither "consciousness" nor "world" are comprehensible without the other. Consciousnesses are constituted by the world, but without someone to say "this is a world" there *is* no world.

Freire, like Marx (1867/1976) and Mao (1968), places particular emphasis on contradictions in the social world. The most important of these in Freire's ethical and political theory is the contradiction between oppressors and the oppressed. Oppressors can only exist *as* oppressors in the presence of their opposite, the oppressed. The two groups stand in an inherently contradictory relationship,

irrespective of how either group perceive themselves. The possibility of oppression being negated through an act of (liberating) revolution is always latent if not made manifest.

Thinking dialectically involves seeking out contradictions in social reality; it implies a penetration beyond and beneath surface appearances. A dialectical approach demands that social phenomena and problems be understood not in abstract isolation but as part of a totality, and theorized in global terms. A true dialectician is always striving to relate one aspect of world to another, and is always seeking to more deeply explain the object of study by contrasting it with that which it *is not*. Thinking dialectically is, for Freire, equivalent to thinking *critically*: it means being constantly open to further questions, and to the possibility – indeed, probability – of current assumptions being revised, repudiated, or overturned (Roberts, 1996a).

Freire's Epistemology

Freire's epistemology can be seen as an extension of his ideas on the dialectical nature of reality. We come to *know* through our interaction with an ever-changing world (Freire, 1976, p. 107). Knowing, for Freire, necessarily implies transformation: it is the task of human subjects encountering a world dynamically in the making. Knowledge arises not from abstract thinking or theorizing, but from human practice. The ordering of moments in the process of knowing is important in understanding Freire's philosophy. Freire is adamant that theory never precedes practice: "First of all I have to act. First of all I have to transform. Secondly I can theorize my actions – but not before" (Freire, 1971a, p. 2). Freire (1972a, p. 50) talks of thinking becoming *authenticated* only when it is "concerned with reality," "generated by action upon the world," and carried out through communication with others. Authentic thinking constitutes an act of knowing. Freire's position here is consistent with the fundamental tenets of dialectical materialism, one of which is that "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men" (Marx & Engels, 1845-1846/1976, p. 42).

Given that all aspects of reality exist in a constant state of change, it follows that we can never know *absolutely*: we can, at best, come *closer* to knowing the "*raison d'etre* which explains the object [of study]" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 82). Knowing involves searching for the reason for (or behind) the existence of an object or fact (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 78). Knowledge, on the Freirean view, is necessarily incomplete:

> Knowledge always is becoming. That is, if the act of knowing has historicity, then today's knowledge about something is not necessarily the same tomorrow. Knowledge is changed to the extent that reality also moves and changes. (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 101)

Knowing for Freire is a permanent process of discovery – of searching, investigating, inquiring, and probing (cf. Freire, 1985, pp. 1-4; Davis, 1980, p. 66). To know is not to have reached a predetermined destination; rather, it is a manner of traveling – a way of being in, and interacting with, the world (through dialogue with others). It is precisely through recognizing that they know little that people strive to know more. Freire speaks of knowing as a *praxis*, implying both a reflective and an active component. Knowing demands a curious, attentive, restless attitude toward, and interaction with, social reality. From Freire's point of view, there can be no final act of knowing. If absolute knowledge could be attained, the possibility of knowing would disappear for there would no longer be any questions to ask or theoretical problems to address. All statements about knowledge and its opposite, ignorance, must be qualified: these terms only make sense when defined in relation to something specific. On the Freirean view, neither knowledge nor ignorance are complete: "No one can know everything, just as no one can be ignorant of everything" (Freire, 1976, p. 117). This insight provides the ground, by implication, for a redefinition of conventional constructs of the intellectual. As Giroux points out, Freire regards all men and women as intellectuals in the sense that every person constantly interprets and gives meaning to the world (Giroux, 1985, p. xxiii; cf. Gramsci, 1971, pp. 5-23; Lankshear, 1988).

The distinctiveness of Freire's view can be elucidated through a comparison with the Platonic conception of knowledge. Plato (trans. 1974) distinguishes true knowledge from mere opinion. Opinion

pertains to the visible (physical, practical, material) world: knowledge is confined to the supersensible, intelligible realm (section 507). At its lowest level, opinion takes the form of illusion, by which Plato means simple impressions of the world, or perceptions of objects as they appear in their material form. Given their focus on images and outward appearances, such impressions provide an inherently distorted view of reality (509d, 510a). A higher level of opinion is belief, which is manifest in commonsense ideas about "matters both moral and physical, which are a fair practical guide to life but [which] have not been fully thought out" (translator's note, p. 311). Neither illusion nor belief can provide genuine understanding of the nature of reality, since both remain tied to that which can be perceived by the senses. The sensible world deals with particulars, is always changing, and as such is never truly knowable. The world of ideas or forms, by contrast, is unchanging: it is the realm of universals from which the particulars we observe derive. Mathematical (deductive) reason participates in this higher intelligible realm. The pinnacle of pure intelligence, however, is dialectical reason, which Plato describes as follows:

> It treats assumptions not as principles, but as assumptions in the true sense, that is, as starting points and steps in the ascent to something which involves no assumption and is the first principle of everything; when it has grasped that principle it can again descend, by keeping to the consequences that follow from it, to a conclusion. The whole procedure involves nothing in the sensible world, but moves solely through forms to forms, and finishes with forms. (511b)

The highest level of knowledge, Plato argues, is knowledge of the form of the good (505a). The good is "the end of all endeavour, the object on which every heart is set" (505d). The form of the good "gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower's mind the power of knowing" (508e). Attaining knowledge, for Plato, is a matter of remembering or recovering that which existed in the soul before its incarnation in a body. Knowledge has a divine origin: the capacity for pursuing it – that is, recalling what is already there – is "innate in each man's mind" (518d), though few progress beyond mere opinion to the higher forms of intelligence.

Freire's position is precisely the opposite. True or authentic knowledge for Freire arises not in some realm beyond the sphere of objective reality; to the contrary, knowing is thoroughly grounded in the material world. The origins of knowledge lie not in some form of celestial divination but in the day to day transforming moments of human activity. As Freire sees it, knowledge is not recollected through philosophical thought but *created* through reflective action in a social world. Freire, like Plato, wants to go beyond a mere apprehension of appearances, but speaks of searching beneath the surface of the object of study as an intensely practical endeavour. The path to knowledge is not to be found in some form of abstract, inner, individual activity, but in active, communicative relationships with others. Knowing through dialogue does not transcend, but rather is mediated by, the (material) world. For Freire, there is no world of forms to be known. Dialectical thinking is elevated above other modes of understanding for Freire, as it is for Plato, but the modes of knowing implied by each theorists' conception of the dialectic are quite distinct. From Plato's perspective, dialectical reason is distinguished by its complete separation from worldly particulars; for Freire, dialectical thinking is defined by its focus on interrelationships between concrete particulars within a social totality. Goodness and knowledge are closely connected for Freire, as they are for Plato. But where Plato speaks of the good as the supreme form from which all particular acts of goodness in the world derive, these acts (i.e., those which are praxical), from Freire's point of view, *are* the supreme good and it is through them that knowing occurs.

Freire is not an epistemological relativist. As McLaren and Silva (1993) point out, he does not believe all ideas are of equal merit. On the Freirean view, some ways of thinking, some theories, some appraisals of the nature of reality are better than others. As we shall see shortly, this line of argument applies to Freire's ethic as well: certain ways of living one's life, of acting toward others, of being in the world, are, according to Freire, superior – that is, morally preferable – to others. On the other hand, Freire's theory of knowledge is not absolutist in the Platonic sense: there are no static, unchanging, truths which transcend time and space. Instead, Freire argues that ideas "must be understood contextually as historically

and culturally informed discourses that are subject to the mediation of the forces of material and symbolic production" (McLaren & Silva, 1993, p. 55). On the Freirean view, knowledge is *constructed* rather than derived or bequeathed: it is forged within particular social relations, is reflective of (and partially constitutive of) given ideological and political formations, and is always grounded – whether directly or indirectly – in human practice. Certain constructions of reality, though, are better than others: a dialogical and critical reading of the world, for Freire, affords a deeper understanding of the object under investigation than antidialogical or passive stances allow (Roberts, 1996b).

As humans, we have the capacity to reflect on the very process of knowing itself, on (our) consciousness and its relationship with the world. We can not only know, but know that we know (Davis, 1980, pp. 58-59). For Freire, the essence of human consciousness is intentionality toward the world. Humans can "stand back" from the immediate reality of their material existence and reflect upon it. Freire speaks of this as a crucial moment in human evolution: what Teilhard de Chardin (1959) calls "homonisation" – the shift from instinct to thought. Only human beings can engage in reflection. Humans have the ability to problematize not only the object of attention but the process through which this problematization takes place. This, then, is a form of meta-awareness – an awareness of our conscious efforts to understand ourselves, others, and the world.

Humanization: Freire's Moral Ideal

Just as Freire sees knowledge as necessarily incomplete – as always evolving – so he sees human beings as always in a state of becoming. The human ideal Freire espouses is one of humanization, or "becoming more fully human." One can never, on the Freirean view, become *fully* human – one can, at best, become *more* fully human. Humans are necessarily imperfect, unfinished, incomplete beings, who exist in and with an ever-changing world (Freire, 1972a, p. 57). Humanization, which Freire sees as both an ontological and an historical vocation of human beings, is opposed by dehumanization which, although an historical reality, is not an ontological inevitability. Humans pursue their vocation of becoming more fully

human when they engage in authentic praxis, through dialogue with others, in a critically conscious way.

The Freirean concept of an ontological vocation can be explained through reference to the ancient Greek notion of human beings having a *function* (cf. Lankshear, 1993, pp. 108-109). Plato (trans. 1974) suggests that the function of a thing is "that which only it can do or that which it does best ... everything which has a function [has] its own particular excellence" (353a-353b). For every distinctive excellence there is a corresponding defect. Hence, if the function of the eyes is to see, the eyes perform this function well when X has perfect vision but perform their function poorly if X suffers from blindness (353b). Plato's intent in this line of inquiry is to establish grounds for arguing that a just society is one in which each person performs his or her proper role in accordance with his or her particular function. Different individuals in Plato's ideal society have different functions: philosophers have one function, military experts another, shoemakers yet another, and so on. Aristotle (trans. 1976), however, wants to know whether there is a function all human beings have simply through being human: "Just as we can see that eye and hand and foot and every one of our members has some function, should we not assume that in like manner a human being has a function over and above these particular functions?" (1097b). Aristotle's concern is to discover that which is *uniquely* human. It cannot be the life generated by nutrition and manifested in growth, for plants share this with us; nor is it our sentient life, for animals possess this quality too. It must, Aristotle concludes, be our capacity for practical *reason* which sets us apart from all other beings or things. The function of humankind, thus, is "an activity of the soul in accordance with, or implying, a rational principle" (1098). Whether one reasons well or poorly, the function remains generically the same: *all* human beings are distinguished (from other beings) by their reason. A function is "performed well when performed in accordance with its proper excellence" (1098). For Aristotle, happiness – the "best, the finest, the most pleasurable thing of all" (1099) – is the ultimate end to which human actions are directed (1097). A good, truly happy, ideal human life is one lived (properly and well) in accordance with the highest human virtue, namely, reason.

Freire's notion of an ontological vocation can be understood in a similar light. According to Freire, what makes us distinctly human is our ability to engage in praxis. Praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1972a, p. 28). Only human beings can engage in praxis. While animals alter aspects of the material world in the process of adapting to it, their modification of objective reality is purely instinctive. Human beings, however, have the ability to consciously and intentionally transform the world. Freire states:

> Of the uncompleted beings, man is the only one to treat not only his actions but his very self as the object of reflection; this capacity distinguishes him from the animals, which are unable to separate themselves from their activity and thus are unable to reflect upon it (Freire, 1972a, p. 70).

Animals are submerged in reality: they cannot stand back from the world and reflect upon it. Humans, by contrast, have the capacity to reflect on the world and to transform it in accordance with this reflection. Only human beings *work* in the sense of engaging in *purposeful* activity: consciously directed action on and interaction with the world (Freire, 1974, p. 141). Animals simply react to stimuli from the environment; humans, by contrast, perceive and respond to challenges in the world. These ideas resonate strongly with Marx's often-cited example of the differences between the activities, respectively, of architects and bees:

> A bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 284)

Animals are creatures of contacts; they simply adapt to the world. Humans, on the other hand, can become both adapted to the world and integrated with it. Animals are merely *in* the world. Humans are both *in* the world and *with* the world. Animals have no conception of time; they live in a permanent today. They cannot confront life, give meaning to it, or become committed to it (Freire, 1969, p. 3). Humans, though, are historical beings, aware of a past and able to conceive of a future. Humans, unlike animals, *make* history (and in so doing confirm their temporality) in consciously

transforming the world around them (Freire, 1972a, pp. 70-73; 1976, pp. 3-5).

For human activity to be praxical there must be a synthesis of reflection and action. Action which is not accompanied by reflection amounts to nothing more than activism; reflection without concomitant action is mere verbalism (Freire, 1972a, p. 60). Action which is praxical "envelopes the whole being of the actors – their emotions, their feelings, their 'language-thought-reflection'" (Freire, 1970a, p. 1). This does not mean that reflection ought to *always* be followed by action: sometimes, Freire notes, action is not feasible. Critical reflection is also a form of action (Makins, 1972). The feasibility of action – including educational intervention – in any given situation can only be determined by reflection through communication with others (Roberts, 1996a).

To live well, on the Freirean view, is to transform the world through reflective, critical, dialogical action. The vocation of all human beings is to realize this capacity in the fullest way possible. The pursuit of humanization is a quest to become more profoundly what we already are as humans: that is, beings *of* praxis (Freire, 1970b, p. 16). Not all forms of praxis, though, are humanizing. Freire (1972a, p. 97) distinguishes, for instance, between "revolutionary praxis" and "the praxis of the dominant elites," the former being humanizing and the latter dehumanizing. The crucial element (fundamental to the first form of praxis but absent in the second) is *dialogue*.

Dialogue and Social Transformation

The pursuit of humanization can never, in Freire's view, be an isolated, individualistic activity (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 109; Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 111). Humans, as communicative beings, enter into relationships with one another, and create a *social* world. In participating in this process, humans simultaneously recreate themselves (cf. Marx, 1859/1970, p. 21; Marx & Engels, 1845-1846/1976, p. 42; Freire, 1972b, pp. 29-30, 51-57). Just as it makes no sense (in Freirean terms) to talk of pursuing one's humanization in isolation from others, so too is it nonsensical to think of having (sole) responsibility for one's dehumanization. We humanize

ourselves through dialogue with others. This goes to the heart of what it means to be human for Freire.

Where Descartes (1931, p. 101) theorized self-identity in his famous dictum "I think, therefore I am," for Freire an "I think" is only comprehensible in the presence of a co-existing "We think" (Roberts, 1996c). Freire does not deny that individual human beings are unique – that they understand and respond to the world and to others in distinct ways – but argues that it is only through intersubjectivity that individual existence makes sense. The existence of an "I" is only possible because of the concomitant existence of a "not-I," where "not-I" implies both others and world. For Freire, the "we exist" explains the "I exist:" "I cannot be," he observes, "if you are not" (Fonseca, 1973, p. 96). The "I exist" does not precede the "we exist" but is fulfilled by it (Freire, 1985, p. 129). Knowing, on the Freirean view, cannot be a purely individual process but is only possible through dialogue – through a relationship with others, whether this is direct (face to face) or indirect (e.g., via texts), mediated by the objective world (cf. Buber, 1958, 1961).

In Freire's moral philosophy, praxis and dialogue are closely related: genuine dialogue represents a form of humanizing praxis. Dialogue is "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1972a, p. 61). "Naming the world" is the process of change itself: the human quest to understand and transform the world, through communication with others. This naming is a continuous process of creating and recreating: the world, once named, always presents itself afresh as a problem demanding a new naming. Freire claims that humans have a *primordial right* to "speak their word." It is in speaking a "true word" that human beings name the world and thereby transform it. A true word is an authentic, dialogical synthesis of reflection and action. Ultimately, "no one can say a true word alone" (p. 61). To "speak a true word" is to enter the historical process as a Subject, changing (objective and subjective) reality through consciously-directed action, informed by critical discussion with others.

If it is to be humanizing, dialogical communication must involve a love of the world and of other human beings. This in turn demands a certain sense of humility. Faith in the ability of others to "name

the world," together with trust between participants, and a hope that dehumanization can be overcome, are necessary. Finally, Freire stipulates that critical thinking is vital if dialogue is to become a humanizing praxis (Freire, 1972a, pp. 62-65). When these conditions are satisfied, and where two or more people communicate with one another in seeking to understand a common object of study, there is, Freire would argue, a true dialogue and an authentic, humanizing praxis.

The Politics of Liberation

While humanization through critical, dialogical praxis represents the ethical *ideal* as far as Freire is concerned, the pursuit of humanization by some groups and individuals is frequently impeded by the actions of others. Where this occurs – when "A objectively exploits B or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person" (Freire, 1972a, p. 31) – the situation becomes one of oppression. To prevent someone from engaging in praxis – either through limiting the range of possible actions open to that person, or through inhibiting his or her ability to think critically – is to dehumanize that person. Hence, oppression, as Freire sees it, is dehumanizing. In dehumanizing another, one also – albeit in a different way, and with different implications and consequences – dehumanizes oneself (Freire, 1972a, p. 24). To deny someone else's humanization is also to deny one's own, since, for Freire, humanization is a *dialogical* process. Those who dehumanize others practise a profound form of antidialogue, and thus cannot be engaged in the task of becoming more fully human.

Humanization and dehumanization are both concrete possibilities for human beings, but only humanization is an ontological and historical vocation. The vocation of becoming more fully human is what defines us as human beings; it is the *essence* of being human. Humanization is an historical, as well as ontological, vocation because it calls us to act (on the basis of critical reflection) in the objective world of lived social relations. Dehumanization represents a distortion of this vocation. Freire stresses that dehumanization arises from specific (oppressive) *social* practices: it does not, therefore, constitute a given destiny. If human beings have *created* social structures, living conditions, and modes of thinking

and acting which are oppressive, it follows that humans can also change these circumstances.

The task of those who are oppressed is *liberation*. For Freire, liberation is not a psychological process: something which occurs (purely) as a shift in consciousness, or as some form of inner transformation (Brandes, 1971, pp. 6-7). Rather, liberation takes place in the transformative action of human beings on the world, within specific historical and social circumstances. Freire is thoroughly Marxist in his stance here. As Marx and Engels state in *The German Ideology*,

> It is possible to achieve real liberation only in the real world and by real means ... people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. "Liberation" is a historical and not a mental act. (1845-1846/1976, p. 44)

For Freire, liberation is a form of critical, dialogical, praxis directed toward overcoming oppression. The oppressed cannot be liberated by their oppressors, but must liberate both themselves *and* those who oppress them. Paradoxically, only the weakness of the oppressed is strong enough to liberate the oppressor (Freire, 1975, p. 17; 1972c, p. 2). Freire believes that "because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against them who made them so" (Freire, 1972a, p. 21). He asserts that no one is better placed than those who experience oppression to understand the significance of an oppressive society and to recognize the necessity for liberation. Yet Freire also points out that the oppressed have often been so dominated by the oppressors that many have taken on the oppressors' view of the world: they see oppression as inevitable. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed have no awareness of their oppression – they know what it means to be oppressed through their *experience* of oppression. But, Freire notes,

> Their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression ... their perception of themselves as opposites of the oppressor does not yet signify involvement in a struggle to overcome the contradiction; the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole. (1972a, p. 22)

There is a danger, where this perception of reality prevails, that the oppressed, in fighting against their oppression, will themselves become oppressors. The model of humanity presented to the oppressed by the oppressors portrays a vision of the (oppressor) individual as the ideal. Under these circumstances, "to be" (human) is to be like the oppressor (Freire, 1975, p. 16). The problem of confronting the ideology of the oppressors is compounded by what Freire, drawing on the work of Fromm (1984), calls the "fear of freedom." The oppressed "are afraid to embrace freedom ... [whereas] the oppressors are afraid of losing the 'freedom' to oppress" (Freire, 1972a, p. 23). Freire regards freedom as an "indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (p. 24): liberation *requires* freedom if it is to be authentic. Freedom implies autonomy and responsibility, and must be *won* by the oppressed: it cannot be given to them. Freire speaks of revolutionary action by the oppressed against the conditions which oppress them – and this may include violent struggle – as an act of love. The violence of the oppressed, though, is "not really violence at all, but a legitimate reaction [to an oppressive situation]" (Freire, 1972c, p. 3). In many countries, especially within the Third World, conditions are so intolerably dehumanizing for the oppressed that the violence of revolutionary struggle is justified (Freire argues) where it is the only means for overcoming the greater violence of oppression (cf. Fanon, 1967).

Freire warns that the oppressed, having internalized the view of the oppressors, are likely to have little consciousness of themselves as a class (cf. Lukacs, 1971). This works against the possibility of effective revolutionary action and serves as a prop for continuing oppression. Freire is socialist to the core in the stress he places on unity, solidarity, and a shared sense of commitment among the oppressed to a better social world. Echoing the immortal (but now, in postmodern times, somewhat unfashionable) call by Marx and Engels at the end of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* for working people of all countries to unite (1848/1967, p. 121), Freire argues: "the universal solidarity of the working class is far from being achieved, but it is essential and we must struggle for it" (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 59).

Liberation, Freire concludes, "is thus a childbirth, and a painful one" (1972a, p. 25). The struggle for liberation must be ongoing – a

permanent process of reflection and action – as social reality changes and new forms of oppression unfold. This is an explicitly social process:

> I don't believe in self-liberation. Liberation is a social act .... Even when you individually feel yourself *most* free, if this feeling is not a *social* feeling, if you are not able to use your *recent* freedom to help others to be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only an individualist attitude towards empowerment or freedom. (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 109)

In any historical epoch in a given society there will be a complex array of (often-conflicting) ideas, values, hopes, and challenges which, in their concrete representations, constitute the *themes* of that epoch (Freire, 1976, p. 5). Critical examination of these themes reveals a set of *tasks* to be carried out. Freire terms impediments to critical thought and transforming action "limit-situations." The tasks implied by limit-situations require "limit-acts" (Freire, 1972a, p. 73). Freire speaks, for example, of the economic dependence of Third World countries on the First World as a limit-situation: those countries subject to this relationship become "beings for others." In order to become "beings for themselves" (cf. Sartre, 1969), such societies require limit-acts directed toward revolutionary independence and political sovereignty (cf. Freire, 1970c; 1971b, p. 115).

Freire maintains that liberation is "the most fundamental task ... we have at the end of this century" (1993, p. 84). Overcoming domination or oppression (Freire uses these terms synonymously) entails negating those aspects of an oppressive reality which limit the oppressed. Hence, within a single society where the dominant theme is oppression, there will be whole range of limit-situations which characterize that oppression. In the Third World countries in which Freire worked, these might have ranged from the poor living conditions endured by peasants, to the payment of low wages to workers, to the broader limit-situation of national economic dependency. While the ultimate task of the oppressed in such situations is liberation, the pursuit of liberation calls for the negation of each of the limit-situations which (together) form an oppressive reality. Freire notes: "Epochs are fulfilled to the degree

that their themes are grasped and their tasks solved; and they are superseded when their themes and tasks no longer correspond to newly emerging concerns" (1976, p. 5).

In times of transition, as in Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s, "contradictions increase between the ways of being, understanding, behaving, and valuing which belong to yesterday and other ways of perceiving and valuing which announce the future" (Freire, 1976, p. 7). In the Brazilian case, the movement was from a closed society to one in the process of opening. With this shift, themes such as democracy, popular participation, freedom, property, authority, and education were invested with new meaning. The transition from one epoch to another is a dynamic mix of "flux and reflux, advances and retreats," filled with confusion and uncertainty, but also the hope and anticipation of impending change (Freire, 1976, p. 9).

Moral Principles in Freire's Philosophy

Freire's moral philosophy cannot be understood apart from his metaphysic, ontology, and epistemology. Ultimately, the significance of a Freirean ethical position can only be appreciated via an examination of the educational and literacy programmes with which Freire has had major involvement (see Freire, 1972b, 1976, 1978, 1993; Brown, 1974; Sanders, 1972; Lloyd, 1972; Taylor, 1993). These practical initiatives provide both an exemplification of key principles in Freire's moral philosophy and the source for many of Freire's educational ideas (compare, Freire, 1972a; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Shor, 1980, 1993; Aronowitz, 1993). Given space constraints, however, it has not been possible to examine either Freire's educational theory or his approach to adult literacy education in the present paper. I have addressed these dimensions of Freire's work, and the arguments of some of Freire's strongest critics (Berger, 1974; Bowers, 1983), at length elsewhere (e.g., Roberts, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1998).

In extracting key moral principles from Freire's philosophy, three points from the preceding discussion bear repeating:

1. All aspects of reality are constantly changing. This idea, which reflects Freire's dialectical approach toward understanding the world, permeates every dimension of Freire's philosophy, and

finds expression in both his earlier and later writings (compare, for example, Freire, 1974, 1994). From its starting point in his metaphysic (where Freire speaks of change within and between the objective and subjective dimensions of reality), to his epistemology (where it is assumed that knowledge is never fixed nor absolute), to his ontology and ethic (where he argues that human beings are necessarily incomplete and always in a process of becoming), the principle remains the same: our world – in its myriad material, social, and personal spheres – is a world of change, of interaction, of incompleteness.

2. Freire assumes a certain essence to the human condition. Humans, unlike animals, are conscious, temporal, historical beings. Most importantly, for Freire, all human beings, simply through being human, have an ontological vocation of humanization. In this sense, while Freire acknowledges the educational significance of differences across class, race, and gender lines, there is nevertheless an implicit assertion in his work that there is something about being human which transcends these differences (cf. Weiler, 1991; Freire and Macedo, 1993).
3. Humans interact with objective reality (altering it and modifying themselves in turn) and enter into relationships with others. We live in a *social* world, and any attempt to consider how the world ought to be must take this observation into account. It makes little sense to talk of Freirean ethics purely in terms of certain ideal qualities in, or modes of conduct for, the *individual*: liberation is a dialogical, collective process of struggle.

What, then, can we say about Freire's moral philosophy? In keeping with point (3) above, two related facets of Freire's ethical position must be addressed:

a) At one level, Freire upholds the notion of human beings becoming critical, praxical Subjects, in control – as far as this is possible – of their own destinies as creators of history and culture (and thus of themselves).

b) At another level, Freire's theory points toward a vision of a social world characterized by relations of liberation rather than oppression – that is, a world where *all* people have the

opportunity to engage in humanizing praxis, through dialogue with others.

Given this dual focus, (at least) four key principles in Freire's moral philosophy can be identified:

1. People ought to pursue their ontological vocation of becoming more fully human (through engaging in critical, dialogical praxis).
2. No person or group of people ought to knowingly constrain or prevent another person or group of people from pursuing the ontological vocation; that is to say, no person ought to oppress another.
3. We ought (collectively and dialogically) to consider what kind of world – what social structures, processes, relationships, and so on – would be necessary to enable (all) people in a given social setting to pursue their humanization.
4. All people ought to act to transform existing structures where critical reflection reveals that these structures serve as an impediment to the pursuit of humanization (by any groups within a society): this is the task of liberation

Had there been space for a more detailed discussion of Freire's pedagogy, a further principle might have been added:

5. Educators and others who assume positions of responsibility in the social sphere ought to side with the oppressed in seeking to promote a better (more fully human) world through their activities.

These moral principles are necessarily intertwined in Freirean philosophy, for the pursuit of the ontological vocation by one person inevitably depends on the affording of an opportunity for this pursuit by others (and by the structures, institutions, attitudes, practices, etc. of the world in which one lives). In all cases, the processes involved in pursuing or adhering to Freirean moral principles are continuous and necessarily incomplete. We can, it will be recalled from earlier discussion, only ever become *more* fully human, never *fully* human; similarly, the task of creating a better social world must be renewed each time that world takes on a new face (with a new set of themes and tasks to be confronted).

Summary

To summarize, the moral philosophy of Paulo Freire is built on a dialectical conception of reality and an epistemology in which theory and practice are dynamically related. The ontological and historical vocation of all human beings is humanization, or becoming more fully human. We pursue this ideal when we engage in critical, dialogical praxis. Constraints imposed by one group to the quest for humanization by another group indicate a situation of oppression. An oppressive reality is dehumanizing for both the oppressed and the oppressors. Oppressive social conditions are negated by a praxis of liberation. Given an ever-changing world, humanization is a continuous, unfinished process, with new problems to be addressed as each epoch unfolds.

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