Spontaneity, Freedom, and First Philosophy: A Response to Peter Roberts

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In his vigorous and clear defense of Freire, Peter Roberts argues that Freire embraces the Levinasian position that ethics rather than ontology or epistemology is first philosophy. Although I appreciate deeply both the friendly tone of his defense and the carefulness with which he develops it, I would suggest that to paint Freire as essentially Levinasian is premature. I would hold, alternatively, that Freire's ethical agenda remains situated in ontology, or more particularly, in the ontological vocation of humans. And yet, at the same time, Freire's deepest motivation is an ethical one, seeking justice for the oppressed. Thus, my contention is, using Levinas's framework, that these two are in competition for the status of first philosophy. Levinas resolves this tension by situating ontology within ethics. For Levinas, ethics is first philosophy. If we keep in mind that Levinas means something other and more originary than "applied ethics" as it is typically understood, this "reversal" will help rather than hinder Freire's overall ethical project of ending oppression, that is, his continued call for justice. But in my estimation, Freire might have to modify his ontology to reflect this, as well as his epistemology based in this ontology.

Roberts ends his defense by saying "freedom and justice for Freire are not merely compatible but inseparable." This implies that I think they are incompatible in Freire. However, nowhere did I argue that freedom and justice are incompatible or that they ought to be separated. Instead, I suggested that they are in tension because of a strain in Freire's thought, a tension as to what constitutes first philosophy, ethics or ontology. My premise is that, fundamentally, Freire wishes to have ethics – which I represent in my title by the term "justice" – as his guiding

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framework. Yet, in his epistemology Freire uses the language of ontology – which I represent in my title with the term "freedom" – as foundational, as first philosophy. I'm not challenging Freire to abandon the language of freedom. Instead, I'm asking Freire to be more explicit and consistent about using the language of ethics (i.e., justice) in framing his epistemology, and thus his ontology. The issue is not an incompatibility between freedom and justice. Instead, the issue is one of first philosophy, and its role in informing an epistemology whose ultimate agenda is justice, overcoming oppression. My argument is that Freire's epistemological language still reflects a modernist ontology (i.e., freedom) as first philosophy. As is clear at the end of my article, I suggest that freedom and justice are indeed both compatible and inseparable. But only so if freedom is situated in justice. And Freire's epistemology would be more consistent with his overall agenda of justice if it reflected this.

Roberts's argument seems to hinge on the suggestion that I have misread Freire's notion of freedom. He seems to suggest that I take "freedom" in Freire to include characteristics such as "laissez faire approach," "anything goes," "permissiveness," or "license." I would entirely agree with Roberts that this reading of Freire's notion of freedom is wrong. However, his criticism is misplaced. Nowhere do I characterize Freire's notion of freedom as pure permissiveness, license, or "anything goes." Roberts reads these terms into my use of the notion of spontaneity. Despite his recognition that epistemology and the general notion of freedom in Freire are not identical, in his argument Roberts seems to misunderstand the way that I am using the term "spontaneity." I'm suggesting that the epistemological subject in Freire is still too modernist to fit easily with his agenda of promoting justice. My claim is that Freire's epistemological subject is still primarily constituted by spontaneity, a notion traceable at least to Kant. In Kant, for example, the subject is characterized in terms of autonomy – with regard to the moral realm – and spontaneity – with regard to theoretical knowledge (Kant, 1929, p. 93; see Allison, 1995). In Husserl, another philosopher who informs Freire's notion of consciousness (see Duarte, 2001), this becomes the universal structure of intentionality, namely, "consciousness of." In Kant and Husserl this certainly does not mean

epistemological licentiousness or an attitude of "anything goes;" instead, it means rational agency.

Thus, although Roberts rightly points us to passages in Freire that refer to the limits of freedom, those very passages point also to the spontaneity of the subject, that is, to agency based in consciousness. For example, Roberts points out that the limit of freedom for Freire is to be characterized as a boundary requiring struggle: "without limit, it would take me outside the sphere of human action, intervention, or struggle" (Freire, 1998, p. 96). Roberts's gloss is that "Freedom is not given; rather, as humans we must strive for it." However, the notion of freedom within limits still keeps ontology as first philosophy, namely, humans as active subjects or agents struggling against limits. This notion of freedom is still grounded in a modernist notion of the subject as a spontaneous point of intellectual power (see Taylor, 1989).

Roberts's discussion of the general concept of freedom in Freire misses my main point, for I am not interested in Freire's general notion of freedom per se. Roberts is mistaken in assuming that I am equating spontaneity with freedom generally in Freire: I am silent on the general notion of freedom. My focus, more modest and specific, is on Freire's epistemology and the language characterizing the knowing subject. This is where the notion of spontaneity (which in the title I refer to as "freedom") arises.

Interestingly and revealingly, in his characterization of Freire's epistemology, Roberts relies on the very language he suggests that Freire does not use, the language of spontaneity. This includes phrases such as "we can come closer to understanding the essence that explains an object of study," "attempting to get to grips with reality," "more and more layers of reality are penetrated," "active and ... critical engagement," "fight with the object of one's investigation," "to reconstruct reality," "to see the world in a new light," "separate ourselves from the world," and "gain some distance." I recognize that these phrases are embedded in passages of Roberts's text where his focus is on qualifiers and caveats, and thus I am reading him here "against the grain." Nevertheless, these phrases do suggest that, at bottom, the knower is an active subject, conceptually grasping the world. Knowing is attempting to comprehend the world. But terms such as "grasping" and "comprehending" have historically been associated with the knower as a centered, active agent

constructing knowledge, that is, a spontaneous subject. Here ontology (i.e., freedom) is first philosophy. The fact that the world is changing, that it exhibits complexity and mystery, or that "we can never know the object in an absolute or final sense," are not in themselves arguments against the idea that the nature of the knower is, in essence, an active constructor of knowledge. Freire's central notion of naming in the knowing process, something that Roberts does not address directly, seems to me to be crucially constructionist and modernist. Certainly, the nuances and qualifications of provisionality and complexity do matter. But in the end, they do not change the overall language of spontaneity characterizing the knower. Moreover, in Freire, spontaneity seems to function as the final ground for epistemology: ontology is first philosophy, framing epistemology. It is part of the ontological vocation of being human. And, following Levinas, I wish to point Freire to something more originary, namely, the obligation to do justice as the rightful context for epistemology. Ethics is first philosophy.

Certainly, Roberts is right to suggest that these are not incontestable interpretations of Freire. And thus, these suggestions are more in the spirit of a first word than a last one. More conversation is both necessary and welcome. For if both Levinas and Freire teach us anything, it is that continued dialogue is paramount. Anything less would be less than just.

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