Transformative learning and moral character education

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I. Introduction

Jack Mezirow (1923–2014) is widely known as a pioneer of adult learning theory. . .

I question aspects of its normative presuppositions, which seem to mirror problematic tendencies found within proceduralist forms of public, or political, reasoning. Perhaps an alternative, and specifically Aristotelian means of adult 'transformation', would be welcome . . .

II. Transformative learning in outline

Transformative learning is 'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference — sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) — to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open . . . and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58).

'Taken-for-granted frames of reference include fixed interpersonal relationships, political orientations, cultural bias, ideologies, schemata, stereotyped attitudes and practices, occupational habits of mind, religious doctrine, moral-ethical norms, psychological preferences and schema, paradigms in science and mathematics, frames in linguistic and social sciences, and aesthetic values and standards' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59).

III. The proceduralist challenge of critical-dialectical discourse

Mezirow defines critical-dialectical discourse as 'a form of dialogue in which the validity of ideas is seen as hypothetical and is explicitly addressed as problematic'. 'In discourse', Mezirow continues, 'we suspend our *a priori* judgment about the value of an idea and let the weight of evidence . . . establish or negate its validity. . . [I]t is a consensus among participants . . . that determines validity' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 143).

Mezirow himself associates transformative learning with democratic participation: each is 'an important means of self-development . . . producing individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity, [and] better able to engage in moral discourse' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 62).

Mezirow claims that evidence 'would lead any rational, objective and informed judge to come to the same conclusion' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 143).

'[N]ot all frames of reference are equal; some are more useful in dealing with diverse or changing circumstances . . . Generally speaking, frames of reference that are more inclusive, differentiating, open to other perspectives, [and] critically self-reflective . . . are better able to deal with a wider range of decision-making' (Mezirow, 1996, p. 238).

Mezirow claims that critical reflection and discourse are 'simply . . . found to work better in more circumstances than . . . other options', such as 'tradition, authority, or physical force' (Mezirow, 1998, p. 188).

'Some . . . validations are universal in scope. This is why quite different cultural traditions share many of the same values — like life, health, children, kinship, [and] love . . . — while often making different interpretations of how to apply them' (Mezirow, 1996, p. 237).

IV. An Aristotelian alternative

Like transformative learning, Aristotelian character education utilizes a 'rational principle' to seek personal as well as societal or political change (Aristotle, 2009, pp. 21-22) (see 1102b34–1103a10).

Youth are 'not yet capable of . . . acts [that contribute to happiness], owing to [their] age' or inexperience. Aristotle has in mind 'good' and 'noble' acts that are characteristic of political animals (Aristotle, 2009, p. 11) (see 1097b10–15) and, by extension, are required for citizenship (Aristotle, 2009, p. 15) (see 1099b25–1100a99).

'Habermas identifies four different conditions which must pertain to assure the validity of consensual speech actions when there is not already established a consensus upon which understanding may be based: what is said must be *comprehensible*; its content must be believed to be *true*; the speaker must be accepted as *truthful* or sincere and hence believable; and what is said must be accepted as *appropriate* or "right" in light of prevailing norms and values so that agreement is possible' (Mezirow, 1985, pp. 143-144).

Concisely put, Aristotle proposes a teleological form of reasoning which aims toward human happiness as its final end (Aristotle, 2009, p. 11) (see 1097b20).

'It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits' (Aristotle, 2009, p. 4) (see 1049b23–25).

References

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