

Privilege and Speaking for Others

Reading: Peggy McIntosh on invisible knapsack (and others on similar theme); Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others” in *TF*.

I. Privilege exercise

II. Speaking for others

A. *What is the problem of speaking for others?*

“There is a strong, albeit contested, vein current within feminism which holds that speaking for others – even for other women – is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate.” (78)

This concern seems to stem from two claims:

1) “...where an individual speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what she says and thus she cannot assume an ability to transcend her location. In other words, a speaker’s location...has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or de-authorize her speech.” (79)

2) “...certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking on or behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for.” (79)

B. *Possible solutions* (80)

i) Only speak for your own group.

Problems: How should we delimit the group? Do groups have clear-cut boundaries?

ii) Only speak for yourself.

Problem: Does this abandon one’s “political responsibility to speak out against oppression”?

iii) Allow some people to speak for others, but not all.

Problem: How do we decide who can speak for others?

C. *Speaking “for” and speaking “about”*

Alcoff argues that speaking “for” and speaking “about” are equally problematic:

...if the practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others. This is partly the case because of what has been called the “crisis of representation.” For in both the practices of speaking for and the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of representing the other’s needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*, based on my own situated interpretation. (80)

In speaking for myself, I (momentarily) create myself- just as much as when I speak for others I create them as a public, discursive self, a self that is more unified than any subjective experience can support. (80)

Questions:

Are there no differences between speaking for and speaking about?

What exactly is the problem?

III. Metaphysical and epistemic backdrop to the problem

A. Relevance of context to meaning

All speech happens in a context, and context is a factor in determining the meaning of the speech.

Rituals of speaking are constitutive of the meaning of the words spoken as well as the meaning of the event. This claim requires us to shift the ontology of meaning from its location in a text or utterance to a larger space that includes the text or utterance as well as the discursive context. (81)

Examples:

Indexicals: I am hungry. It is hot in here.

Implicatures: The candidate has excellent handwriting.

Indirect speech acts: Can you pass the salt?

Presuppositions: He throws like a girl.

Plausibly, “what is said” depends not just on the words uttered, but who utters them in what context.

Alcoff suggests that context is not only relevant to determine meaning, but also truth. What does this mean? She says:

...truth is defined as an emergent property of converging discursive and non-discursive elements, when there exists a specific form of integration among these elements in a particular event...The speaker’s location is one of the elements that converge to produce meaning and thus to determine epistemic validity. (82)

Perhaps: if *what is said* depends on context, including speaker location, and whether what is said *is true (or warranted)* depends on what is said, then whether an utterance is true (or warranted) depends on context/location of speaker. She suggests: “To the extent that...context bears on meaning, and meaning is in some sense the object of truth, we cannot make an epistemic evaluation of the claim without simultaneously assessing the politics of the situation.” (83)

IV. Retreat?

So, should the privileged retreat from speaking for/about others? No.

- Retreat undercuts the possibility of political effectiveness. (84)
- It assumes that the individual *can* retreat and “disentangle herself from the implicating networks between her discursive practices and others’ locations, situation, and practices.” (84-5) My own “truth” constrains and conditions that of others.
- Retreat may result in acts of omission. (85)
- It may result from a desire to be immune from criticism. (85)
- Retreating may “consolidate a particular conception of experience (as transparent and self-knowing).” (86)
- Others may not be in a position to speak for themselves.

V. Guidelines? (87-88)

1. “The *impetus to speak* must be carefully analyzed.”
2. “We must interrogate the *bearing of our location and context* on what we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice in which we engage.”
3. “Speaking should always carry with it an *accountability and responsibility* for what an individual says.”
4. ...we need to analyze the *probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context*. (88)

Does following these guidelines solve the problem?

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