

On the Epistemology of Freire's Pedagogy

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Abstract: This paper serves as an analysis of Freire's pedagogy from a philosophical perspective, illustrating how knowledge is acquired in pedagogy and relating pedagogy back to its philosophical sources. This paper is structured into four sessions: 1. an overview of Freire's pedagogy; 2. an epistemological analysis on pedagogy; 3. Freire's epistemological materialism; 4. the philosophical source of Freire's pedagogy. The first session is a brief introduction to pedagogy, clarifying what problems pedagogy is trying to solve and how pedagogy addresses these problems. The second session fits pedagogy into a broader philosophical context, explaining how it is possible to acquire knowledge within pedagogy and what type of knowledge is acquired. A division of "knowing how" and "knowing that" is introduced in this session, ending with the conclusion that "knowing how" is more emphasized in pedagogy and that knowledge in Freire's view, has a broader meaning than merely accumulating facts. The last two sessions focus on where pedagogy is derived from and how this context determines pedagogy's framework and limitations. This session demonstrates that dialectical materialism and Marx are inevitable when discussing Freire's pedagogy, displaying how important concepts in pedagogy arise from dialectical materialism and Marx, and figuring out where pedagogy goes beyond these philosophical backgrounds.

Keywords: Freire, epistemology, dialectical materialism, Marx

1. Introduction

Freire's pedagogy has a long-term influence on both education and philosophy. In his pedagogy, Freire criticizes the traditional sense of education by describing it as pure oppression and pictures an ideal model of teaching and studying. Introducing plenty of terms, including cultural circle, oppression, critical consciousness, transformation, dialogue, etc., Freire builds a colossal education system. To better understand Freire's theory, it is important to demonstrate where all these concepts come from and why they are significant, which turns our attention to the underlying philosophy of Freire's pedagogy. This study, thus, is intended to analyze Freire's pedagogy from a philosophical perspective and is structured into four sections: 1. overview of Freire's pedagogy; 2. Freire's pedagogy from an epistemological perspective in general; 3. Freire's Epistemological Materialism; 4. Philosophical source of Freire's pedagogy. These four sections relate Freire's pedagogy to a broader field, where the relationships between the terms would be revealed. This is crucial in understanding a system as complex as Freire's pedagogy.

2. Overview of Freire's Pedagogy

As a brief introduction to Freire's pedagogy, this session focuses on the following themes: the problem Freire's pedagogy is trying to solve, an overview of the contents of Freire's pedagogy, and the general view of education underlying Freire's pedagogy.

2.1. Against the Bank Concept

As a revolutionary philosopher, Freire challenges the traditional teacher-student relationship, which he refers to as a "banking" concept of education, and reveals its fundamentally narrative character [1]. Under this "banking" concept, according to Freire, students are constantly under oppression from teachers who narrate knowledge in their own manners. Freire criticizes this "banking concept" for being dehumanizing, dominating students' minds with the oppressors' wills for their own interests. [2].

Against this "banking" concept, Freire advocates a pedagogy where students are intended to be for themselves instead of being for others (oppressors in particular), and Freire's pedagogy, in this sense, is an ideal model instructing students to humanize themselves.

2.2. Social Circle System

In the social circle system, Freire includes detailed instruction to bring students out of the bank concept and liberate themselves from oppression. Regarding the implementation of pedagogy, Freire introduces the concept of a cultural circle system, including four steps: 1) problem posing, 2) critical dialogue, 3) solution posing, and 4) plan of action [3]. In general, the cultural circle stresses the importance of praxis in forming critical consciousness and humanizing students. Embracing many of Freire's most important concepts, the cultural circle can be reckoned as a condensed framework of Freire's pedagogy.

2.3. The Critical Consciousness

In Freire's critical pedagogy, being conscious of this oppression is how students challenge the traditional system and, therefore, acquire knowledge. This critical consciousness allows students to "learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" [4], and, therefore, enables them to intervene with the world under their own wills.

2.4. The Underlying View of Education

When analyzing the traditional view of education and Freire's pedagogy, scrutinizing the underlying views of reality could help us better understand how Freire constructs his pedagogy. Under the traditional view of education, reality is motionless and static, where knowledge exists as a fixed body, narrated by authorized teachers to ignorant students as a passive receptacle of knowledge. Freire's pedagogy, on the other hand, emphasizes the constantly transforming nature of the world where students engage in as subjects able to reflect and participate rather than objects passively waiting to be imbued by the oppressors.

3. Freire's Pedagogy from Epistemological Perspective in General

While Freire's pedagogy tries to picture an ideal model of studying patterns, it is important to illustrate how it is possible for students to truly acquire knowledge in Freire's pedagogy. In order to

demonstrate Freire from an epistemological perspective, this article will dive into this discussion from two aspects -- knowing that and knowing how.

First, a division of “knowing that” and “knowing how” must be put forward. When an individual knows that something is the case, it means that she or he can judge its truth value, knowing whether the statement is true or not. In the “knowing that” process, concepts serve as the ground for analysis, and being able to tell the statements in strict words could be a symbol for “knowing that”.

Knowing how, on the other hand, refers to the ability to conduct in a particular way with specific intention under certain circumstances. When an individual knows how to conduct a certain mission, he or she is not able to describe the implementation in the strict sense with well-defined terms and concepts, which indicates that the process of conceptualization is less important in general than “knowing how”. It is important to notice here that “knowing that” and “knowing how” are fundamentally different, and there is no implication from any of them to the other.

In Freire’s system, “knowing how” is emphasized more than “knowing that”. In Freire’s pedagogy, understanding is a process taken through critical consciousness, where engagement is the key element (this point will be discussed in detail in section three). To judge the truth value of a statement can not find any justification of being knowledge in Freire’s system, for truth value is not necessarily based on experience and engagement in reality, which, in Freire’s pedagogy, is a key component of understanding. In this sense, knowledge in the form of “knowing that” is more fit to the “banking” concept, where knowledge in a static state is deposited to students.

“Knowing how” requires an individual to positively engage in real situations, and it is this active interaction with reality Freire takes as the key element in learning. The following examples illustrate how “knowing how” overweight “know that” in pedagogy. Freire, who once worked with illiterate adult peasants, introduced a cultural circle system to bring these peasants out of their state of ignorance. However, the target of this education is to “stimulate the appearance of a new perception that allows for the transformation of the participants’ concrete reality [5]” rather than accumulating knowledge in fixed text taught by teachers. The idea here is that broadened perception stimulated by education brings a broader world into view through consciousness, which makes further interaction possible and, thus, a cultural circle in which students are intended to actively perceive the world in their own manner rather than knowledge narration given by teachers, is implemented by Freire. In another case, under Freire’s view, knowing “the capital of Para is Belem” without knowing what Belem means for Para and what Para means for Brazil could hardly be counted as knowledge [1]. Understanding the meaning of Belem and Para indicates that people will be able to put the facts into a bigger picture and, thus, make the knowledge possible to be “transformed” in a certain future circumstance. Simply knowing the fact that “the capital of Para is Belem”, on the other hand, is reckoned by Freire as motionless knowledge narrated by the teacher in a “banking” concept of education.

From an epistemological perspective, Freire’s emphasis on “knowing how” indicates that his concept of knowledge has a broader meaning than justified true beliefs. Though an individual with knowledge is able to put it down in the form of written text, knowledge in a static form has a trivial meaning in Freire’s pedagogy. Together with this form of knowledge, discussion related to truth judgment is not the focus of Freire’s theory.

4. Freire's Epistemological Materialism

“Consciousness and the world cannot be understood separately, in a dichotomized fashion, but rather must be seen in their contradictory relations. Not even consciousness is an arbitrary producer of the world or of objectivity, nor is it a pure reflection of the world.” [2]. Humans should not understand consciousness as isolated from the world in a dichotomized way. In contrast, the relationship between consciousness and the world should be reckoned as contradictory. Consciousness, after all, never

arbitrarily generates objectivity or reflects the world [2]. Describing the world as existing objectively outside consciousness, and stressing the contradictory relations between consciousness and the world, Freire absorbs dialectical materialism in his pedagogy. In the following analysis, this article will show how important concepts in pedagogy come from dialectical materialism and how it goes beyond dialectical materialism.

4.1. Dialectical Materialism as a Foundation

Critical consciousness is taken as the first example to indicate Freire's dialectical materialism. However, critical consciousness can not be fully explained within the scope of dialectical materialism, and this point will be further discussed in the next section in terms of "engagement". Freire draws the concept of consciousness from dialectical materialism [6]. According to Freire, humans "are not only in the world but with the world" [2] and have "the capacity to adapt ... to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and transform that reality" [2]. Here, Freire stresses the mutual relationships between humans and the world, revealing the capacity of humans to engage in the social world and make changes with their own intentions. It is this freedom to behave under one's own intention that Freire defends when criticizing the "banking" concept of education where oppression undermines human's right to "be with the world. The following excerpt from Freire [7] demonstrates an explicit explanation of consciousness in terms of conscientização.

To understand what kind of role consciousness plays in liberating humanity and what conscientização is, it is important to know that instead of existing separately and being isolated from each other, consciousness and the world serve as subject and object, respectively, reacting dialectically.

Dialectics could also be found in Freire's anticipation for the relationship between students and teachers, which he names as teacher-student with students-teachers -- "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" [5]. The reciprocity of student-teacher relationships also breaks down the barrier between students and teachers, encouraging both to learn and teach simultaneously.

The interacting nature between humans and the world also brings society as a whole into view, for humans never exist individually but exist within a community, which unveils the fundamental social essence of consciousness. Therefore, humans never think alone but only think together with others [2]. In Freire's culture circle, 12 to 25 students should be involved in a dialogue, where students within the same state of realization could develop their consciousness in groups.

In addition, dialectical materialism sheds light on the origin of "praxis". Distinct from "determined beings", humans are endowed with the right to "reflect critically about their conditioning process and go beyond it" [2]. Under the dialectics view, constant development results from the tension between two opposite but unified poles [8-10], and praxis, in a dialectic sense, serves as the counterpart of this development, which makes all progress in humans possible, driven by tensions between consciousness and the world. Here are words from Freire:

Human beings ... are being of 'praxis': of action and of reflection. Humans find themselves marked by the results of their own actions in their relations with the world and through their actions on it. By acting, they transform; by transforming, they create a reality that conditions their manner of acting [2].

One of the key concepts in Freire's pedagogy -- cultural circle system -- finds its justification in dialectical materialism as well. The following two sections will analyze how problem posing and dialogues, two steps in cultural circles, are embedded in dialectical materialism.

4.1.1. Problem Posing and Decoding

Problem posing is intended to highlight the constantly changing and transforming nature of reality. “In problem-posing education, [humans] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” [5]. As the prerequisite for the following praxis, problematization prevents humans from understanding the world under static perspective and asks people to “reflect on the act itself to act better together with others within the framework of reality [2].

Problem posing involves decoding and coding, intending to break down reality as a totality and totalize reality as a whole (dialectical materialism). These two steps take place after the “problem situation” is raised by individuals, serving as the objective to be decoded and coded afterward. Freire’s materialism lies beneath the codification procedure. The possibility to grasp reality through codification, deconstruction, and reconstruction by decoding and coding, to be specific, presupposes the world as an objective existence waiting to relate to critical consciousness.

4.1.2. Dialogue

As probably the most important step in a cultural circle, dialogue deserves a detailed analysis. Since it is held as an active reflection of other human beings, dialogue springs from the material world and, therefore, asks for critical thinking, which, in Freire’s words [5], “discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and humans and admits of no dichotomy between them - thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity - thinking which does not separate itself from action...”

Dialogue is also the key element in Freire’s pedagogy that is against the “banking concept”. Dialogue, a combination of reflection and action, is the main method students possess to transform and humanize, which, according to Freire, could never be replaced by the act of imposing ideas on others. Dialogue serves as a circumstance where the subject who “name” encounters rather than where some people speak on behalf of others [5].

Herein-above, the importance of social consciousness with which people, as a community, find their connections to reality has been illustrated. Therefore, dialogue, where people with the same realization are involved, is a process that supports an individual to understand reality as well as oneself. Freire reckons dialogue as the only way of self-illustration by saying, “I cannot think for others or without others, no one can think for me ...” [5].

4.2. How Freire’s Pedagogy Goes Beyond Dialectical Materialism

Though he draws most of his concepts from dialectical materialism, Freire’s pedagogy goes beyond the scope of dialectical materialism when discussing the concept of critical consciousness. According to Carlos Alberto Torres, Freire’s theory should be taken from two distinct but related aspects: dialectical materialism perspective as well as critical agency [11], which is given in a less apparent manner in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Critical consciousness enrolls people in the search for self-affirmation... the awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontent precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation. [5].

To understand how critical consciousness is related but still different from dialectical materialism, elaborations on critical consciousness are necessary. Critical consciousness serves as the source for the oppressed to notice the fact of being oppressed and express their discontent, encouraging individuals to actively challenge the oppression. Based on the relationships between subjects and objects, critical consciousness is linked to dialectical materialism (this point has been explained in

the previous section); however, it also focuses on the self-consciousness that bridges “ego” and “desire” and fuels the struggle against oppression. [11].

Introducing the concept of “engagement” could help us understand how critical consciousness goes beyond dialectical materialism. Humans engage in the world in the purpose of creating reality or sticking to the reality of the world, and this engagement is generally realized in forms of dialogue, praxis, etc. James M. Czank reckons this “level of engagement” is “not typically associated with consciousness” and claims that “Torres’ reference to a critical theory of agency (rather than consciousness) is necessary” [12].

From an epistemological perspective, critical consciousness hints at Freire’s attitude that “knowing that” alone is not equal to truly understanding situations by discussing how an individual truly grasps causality. Instead, critical consciousness requires people to understand “things and facts as they exist empirically in their causal and circumstantial correlations” [2]. Concepts of naive and magical consciousness are used to represent two failed consciousnesses, respectively, and the discussion will imply what kind of understanding Freire refers to.

Naive and magical consciousness causes an antinomy in understanding, and each represents an extreme situation in understanding. Humans in magical consciousness fail to realize their “agency” in the world and are unable to grasp the causality. Students who suffer from the “banking” concept of education offer a good example. They passively comply with the authorities without recognizing the possibility of positively behaving as transformers, which contributes to their indifference to causality [2].

Naive consciousness, by contrast, is applied to those who think themselves superior to reality and, thus, can understand the world in their own manners without respecting facts. Naive consciousness eliminates the interacting nature of human-world relationships, isolating humans from the world instead of putting them inside the world as a part. This consciousness is introduced to represent the act of “superimposing” one’s will on the world [2].

This emphasis on a neutral level of engagement contributes to the critical consciousness, which, in Freire’s system, plays an important role in understanding the world. Besides, since engagement must be considered under specific circumstances where details of engagement could be found, the understanding can not be realized in forms of static knowledge written down in text alone.

5. Philosophical Source of Freire’s Pedagogy

After analyzing Freire’s pedagogy in terms of dialectical materialism, elaborating on the relationships between Freire’s theory and other giants’ philosophy will provide us with further support in understanding Freire. Among the philosophers who influenced Freire’s works, Marx deserves the most attention, and the content followed will display these relationships.

Both Freire and Marx were more for the emancipation of humanity, intending to bring humans back from alienation and relate them to their species and nature. A discussion of Freire and Marx without mentioning humanity would be impossible [12]. Based on the concept of humanity, Freire’s theory, when analyzed from a pure philosophical aspect, must be treated with carefulness, especially when trying to fit its theory into a broader philosophical background. This carefulness has been shown both in the second section, where epistemological analysis is used to reveal Freire’s inclination to “knowing how” rather than “knowing that”, and in section three, where Freire’s pedagogy is discussed both inside and outside dialectical materialism. With its foundation on humanity, Freire’s theory is limited by its context, and the carefulness from a philosophical perspective will remind us of these limitations and enable us to link the various concepts in pedagogy to each other under a broader philosophical framework.

The Marxist philosophy comes down in Freire’s pedagogy in terms of freedom. Freedom is what allows individuals to exist with their own rational reflections, determining their own futures [12].

Humans, in Freire's theory, are endowed with great potential to achieve. To exploit this intellectual capacity and embody it in the real world through positive interaction with reality is what Freire's pedagogy is all about. Established upon Marx's philosophy, Freire's pedagogy can be understood as an application of dialectical materialism in the field of education. This type of construction of conceptualized and abstract philosophy upon concrete, specific, and practical real situations results in the unapparent links between various concepts introduced by Freire. To understand Freire's theory is to scrutinize these connections, seeing how pure philosophical concepts, including subject, object, dialectics, etc., are explained and described in educational terms. After all, Freire's theory is not an isolated realm where every detail finds its justification within the system but an application of philosophy upon education in accordance with Freire's own teaching experience.

6. Conclusion

As a general philosophical analysis of Freire's pedagogy, this paper puts pedagogy under epistemological context and Marx's dialectical materialism. From an epistemological perspective, pedagogy, stressing the importance of actively interacting with the world as transformers, hints at an emphasis on "knowing how" over "knowing that" and indicates Freire's disagreements with defining knowledge as true facts. Dialectical materialism serves as the framework for pedagogy, determining the ideal relationships between people and the world, students and teachers, and justifying how praxis bridges people and the outside world. Social circle system with concepts including coding and decoding, dialogue, praxis, etc., also reflects the importance of dialectical materialism as an underlying base. Finally, this paper traces pedagogy back to Marx, demonstrating how Freire and Marx share a common emphasis on the emancipation of humanity in terms of freedom.

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