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The Teacher's Dilemma: Redescription in the Teaching of Religious Studies

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Abstract. *In "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," Richard Rorty points out that redescribing people often humiliates them. Yet unless religious studies courses suppress the importance of the questions they raise, it seems that they directly or indirectly redescribe the students who take them. Hence the dilemma: do we eschew redescription at the price of a weak treatment of our subject, or do we practice redescription at the risk of humiliating our students? This paper reviews five strategies that do not solve the dilemma, then offers a sixth that does – by developing the distinction between proposing descriptions and imposing them.*

In "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," Richard Rorty introduces the notion of a "final vocabulary":

> All human beings [he writes] carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force. A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as "true," "good," "right," and "beautiful." The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, "Christ," "England," "professional standards," "decency," "kindness," "the Revolution," "the Church," "progressive," "rigorous," "creative." The more parochial terms do most of the work. (Rorty 1989, 73)

Later in the article, Rorty uses this idea of a final vocabulary to make an important point:

> [M]ost people [he says] do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The [redescriber] tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless.... The [redescriber], by threatening one's final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than hers, suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, *powerless*. Redescription often humiliates. (Rorty 1989, 89–90)

We recognize two things in Rorty's remarks: first, that this harm-by-redescription does indeed occur; and second, that we are among the ones who sometimes make it occur – redescribing people, after all, is what we do for a living.

Of course, we redescribe the people we study – we call this "interpretation" (Edwards 1994). But most of these people are dead or live in other cultures. Those who never read or hear our redescriptions aren't harmed or humiliated in the way Rorty describes.

But we also redescribe our students, and they are right there in front of us. Through our lectures and assignments, we alter the vocabulary in which our students think about religion, and thus we change the hard-working "parochial" portion of their final vocabularies. Whatever we might intend, our students end up being redescribed.

With Rorty's formulation in mind, then, we can state what I will call the Teacher's Dilemma: *if we redescribe, we may humiliate our students; if we don't redescribe, we may fail in our duty to teach them*. This dilemma is a problem for many teachers, perhaps all. Here I will concentrate on it only as a problem for

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those who teach religious studies in public colleges and universities.

I

Consider first the case of a teacher who takes the dilemma by the horns. In the classroom, this teacher redescribes a religion. Because it is the religion of many of her students, she thereby redescribes her students. Let's assume that she is a sociologist who studies American religions; in her largest course, she lectures on American Protestantism – to a class largely composed of American Protestants. Redescribing the denominations in terms of "structure," "function," "myth," "symbol," "ritual," "sacred text," "legitimation," "cultural system," and "secularization," she talks about phenomena that most of her students know only in terms of their own final vocabulary: "Lord," "Church," "grace," "Word of God," "sin," "redemption," "Cross," "Sunday." As she lectures, the potential to humiliate hovers in the offing; sometimes it becomes actual. Even though she respects the students' traditions and is careful in how she phrases her remarks, there are moments when some of her students feel uncomfortable, defensive, hurt, or angry. She fulfills her duty to teach, certainly, but at some cost. It is not obvious that the value of her teaching outweighs that cost.

Who escapes her dilemma? As I count them, there are five kinds of teachers who might claim to do so. I will call their strategies Distant Mirror, Comparativist, Emicist, First-Person, and Truth Lite.

1. *Distant Mirror*: in this strategy the teacher teaches about a religion other than that of her students. She redescribes people, but the people she redescribes are not her students. It would therefore appear that in redescribing these people she does not redescribe her students.
2. *Comparativist*: in this strategy the teacher teaches about religion in a terminology that transcends the vocabulary of any particular religion. Thus, she seems either to redescribe everyone or to redescribe no one, depending on how you look at it. If her comparative categories are taken to be external to the phenomena she studies, she redescribes everyone. If not, it is usually because her categories are thought to capture a deeper meaning "within" all such phenomena, and therefore she redescribes no one. In either case, the student suffers no more redescription than anyone else.
3. *Emicist*: this teacher relies heavily on the vocabularies of the religions themselves. She doesn't seem to redescribe even the people she studies, much less her students.
4. *First-Person*: this teacher teaches as a representative member of the religion under consideration. She belongs to the people she studies, and therefore sticks to their final vocabulary in what she says about them. Since she doesn't redescribe anyone, how can she redescribe her students?
5. *Truth Lite*: in this strategy the teacher teaches only information about religion. She thereby steers clear of problems of interpretation and other issues that impact final vocabulary. Thus, she redescribes, but not in Rorty's sense: her redescriptions do not reach to the level of final vocabulary.

The Emicist, First-Person, and Truth Lite solutions appear to avoid trouble because they do not redescribe overtly and aggressively the religion at hand. The Distant Mirror and Comparativist solutions are somewhat bolder, but they can afford to be only because they focus attention away from the religions of the students themselves. Thus, each of these solutions gives the appearance of solving the dilemma. Nevertheless, it is only an appearance. Such teachers succeed only in directing attention away from a redescriptive process that is in fact taking place.

1. The Distant Mirror Solution

In the Distant Mirror, no direct redescription takes place. The religion at hand is not the students', and no effort need be made to get the students to see themselves in the Tibetan Buddhists or Moroccan Muslims that are under consideration. Indeed, the gulf between the religion studied and the students studying it may even be emphasized.

Nevertheless, if some of the language the students use for their own religion is used of these others, then, by implication, the exotic religion is put on a footing with their own religion, and a comparison is implied. It turns out that these strange "others" have holidays, rituals, sacred writings, legends, symbols, ethics, and saints – not just like the students do, but enough like they do that the others provide a mirror in which the students can see themselves. The class begins to think comparatively. They are moved, however slightly, from writing off the others as weird to noticing how those others are similar to and different from themselves. That shift in comprehension and identification brings a shift in final vocabulary as well – not in the terms, perhaps, but in their meanings. "Holiday," "ritual," "sacred book," "story," "symbol," "ethics," and "saint" have all been tacitly redefined – as have words that aren't uniquely associated with religion, such as "person," "family," "mother," "father," "wise," and "happy." The

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students will continue to use the same words to describe themselves, but these words now have a different meaning.

In short, their final vocabularies have changed. It happens smoothly, of course; there is never a moment at which they must explicitly acquiesce in an imposed identity. Yet the very thing has happened to them to which they might have objected if it had been pointed out.

2. The Comparativist Solution

This solution faces the same objection as the Distant Mirror, except that instead of focusing attention on another people, it focuses attention on structures of the sacred that are thought to be held in common. Thus, the students' religion is put on an even footing with other religions, and their final vocabulary is extended to encompass the phenomena of those other religions. The redescription remains indirect, but it is much more explicit.

This style of redescription would be more controversial than it is if it were not that the structures are typically proposed as giving the meaning "underlying" religious phenomena. On this view, phenomenological essences and Eliadean forms are the "reality" to be discovered through interpretation; religious phenomena are merely the "manifestations" of this reality.

And yet redescription here is no less deep and thorough than with the Distant Mirror approach. If anything, the Comparativist Solution stipulatively redefines or replaces items of final vocabulary more directly. In the name of going deeper into the meaning of the final vocabulary, the Comparativist Solution actually goes outside that meaning to a new one. Thus – again without any overt obeisance to an alien lexicon – there has been a departure from the prior meaning of the home vocabulary, and thus a redescription.

3. The Emicist Solution

The Emicist Solution avoids the problem of redescription by using terms indigenous to the culture itself: "They have their final vocabulary and we have ours; when we talk about them, we use theirs; when we talk about us, we use ours." Good fences make good neighbors.

This solution doesn't solve the problem. Either we use their terms without understanding, or we incorporate our understanding into their terms. Once we have incorporated our understanding into their terms, their terms serve as not-so-distant mirrors by which we reflect upon and redefine the items of our own final vocabulary. Here again, the Other serves as a metaphor for the Self, and the interpretation of the Other thus entrains a reinterpretation of the self. In Rorty's terms, the students' final vocabulary is altered by the incorporation of new items and the tacit redefinition of old ones. Words like *taboo*, *mana*, *wakan*, *amae*, and *hubris* make their appearance; words like *law*, *power*, *holy*, *dependency*, and *pride* are quietly reshaped.

4. The First-Person Solution

This solution seeks to avoid offense by having a member of the people studied speak for those people in their own language. The dilemma arises nevertheless: either the students don't learn much or they are redescribed.

Suppose the teacher is an American Protestant who is teaching American Protestants in the language of American Protestants; here, it is true, no substantial redescription takes place. The American Protestant portion of the final vocabulary shifts slightly as it is used to talk reflexively *about* American Protestantism, but that's about it.

Yet, just as there is little done to the students, so there is little done for them. The students are reassured, perhaps, but they aren't learning much. If teaching doesn't challenge a student's final vocabulary, it is superficial. We aim in our work at a genuine broadening of horizons – and that means redescription and the risk of humiliation.

Suppose instead that an American Protestant instructor exemplifies her religion to a classroom primarily made up of American Jews – what then? Then either we get proselytizing or a variation on the Distant Mirror – let's call it the Nearby Mirror. Proselytizing, I take it, is out of the question. The Nearby Mirror, on the other hand, is a workable solution, but it intensifies all of the problems of the Distant Mirror. Redescription takes place more directly, and with no mediating vocabulary such as we find in Comparativism. The result is a difficult teaching situation.

5. Truth Lite

This solution distinguishes between informational learning and deeper changes in identity or character. It assumes that it is possible to attach information to a person without changing her at any deeper level.

The distinction assumed is bogus, but it can be sustained in practice, simply by keeping education at a superficial level. Information taught can't challenge conventional prejudices, skills acquired can't include penetrating modes of analysis – but all of this can be managed. Redescription can thus be minimized, but only because there is not much education going on.

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We see, then, that none of the five strategies succeeds in solving the dilemma.

II

So far we've been granting Rorty the connection he makes between redescription and humiliation. To get a solution, however, we need to question this connection.

When we do, we find that Rorty is actually combining two concepts of "redescription" under a single term. There is a sort of redescription that directly entails the abasement of a person, and there is another sort of redescription that doesn't. We can capture this distinction in a rough way by saying that the bad sort of redescription imposes a description, whereas the good sort of redescription proposes one. This distinction is useful. With it we can distinguish good and bad variants of the Distant Mirror, Comparativist and Emicist strategies, and can also distinguish between good and bad ways of teaching that are more radically redescriptive (Edwards 1994). Indeed, with it we can solve the dilemma as follows: *a good teacher of religious studies may be aggressive in proposing descriptions of her students, but she may not be aggressive in imposing them.*

I think this is the solution we want, but it needs to be clarified further if it is to be useful in practice. Let me make a beginning here, starting with the concept of "humiliation."

There are three aspects of humiliation: the abasement of a person, the person's awareness that he has been abased, and the pain that results from that awareness. There is an order of dependency among these aspects, such that the third presupposes the second, and the second presupposes the first. In current usage, each of the three aspects is necessary to "humiliation": a person can't be humiliated without being abased; he can't be humiliated without knowing that he has been abased; and he can't be humiliated without being in pain. Yet because of the dependency among the aspects, abasement deserves special mention; abasement is the primary harm to which, through awareness, the secondary harm of pain accrues.

My *Webster's Dictionary* defines "abase" as "to lower in rank, dignity, or estimation." The harm of abasement, then, is a harm to a person's rank, dignity, or estimation. Students can be abased in any one of these three respects, but the abasement that is most important and relevant here is a harm to a student's dignity, and, more specifically, a harm to her dignity as a person. Now her dignity as a person is not merely a matter of sensitivity; it is a matter of rights. Thus it seems plausible to say that the sort of abasement that is most important and relevant is a violation of a student's rights.

What right or rights might be violated by imposing a description? Apparently a right to dispose of such descriptions oneself. And indeed there are such rights: in this culture, for example, we believe that there is freedom of self-determination. This is a right to determine one's identity, and with it one's self-description, in matters of religion and ideology. In short, it appears that my students have an inalienable right to dispose of their own descriptions, and it appears that I have an inalienable obligation not to interfere with these dispositions. And interfering is what I do if I impose descriptions upon them. By such interference I abase them, reducing them from people who determine their own identity to people who do not.

Do I actually interfere in this way? It seems I do. Any self-description has entailments and implicatures that follow from it, and I can therefore refute a self-description simply by refuting one of those entailments or implicatures (on "implicature" see Grice 1989). And some of my arguments do refute entailments and implicatures that follow from student self-descriptions. Consider the self-description "I am a person with a sound argument for the existence of God, namely Aquinas's Third Way." In class I argue that the Third Way is not sound, and in so doing I refute the self-description in question. It seems, therefore, that some claims I make as a teacher interfere directly with the students' right of self-determination.

But it would be hasty to conclude that I should stop making such claims. Freedom of self-determination isn't absolute. Like anyone's identity, a student's identity is not something she can determine by fiat. There are conditions on identities, and sometimes it is the job of a teacher to point them out. If a student says, "I am a writer," I may say, "But you don't write." If a student says, "I am a Christian," I may say, "Your hero is Jesus, but you deny the existence of God." In saying such things, I am within my rights as a teacher.

This paper isn't the place to chart the points at which students' prerogatives interface with those of their teachers. That is a matter for a book. And without such careful charting any generalization about "proposition" and "imposition" is likely to be defeated by counterexample.

Yet, even without such charting I think I can say a little more about how we might avoid the abasement of our students. I have suggested above that we can be quite aggressive in giving descriptions of our students, provided that we don't impose those descriptions upon them. But I am well aware that the difference in power between student and teacher can mean that an ostensible proposition is really an imposition in disguise. I therefore believe that we need to do something that may seem rather extreme:

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we need to put in question the personal relevance of everything we say. Our teaching needs to be placed under an if-clause, namely, *if students want to be guided entirely by evidence and argument*, then these are the norms that are involved and the conclusions that seem to follow. Each student needs to be free to decide whether the if-clause is true in her case – that is, she needs to be free to decide whether her thinking in her personal life should be guided by the norms and conclusions that we propose to her.

Yet this move is not really as extreme as it may appear, for to view liberal education in this way is merely to see it as a context of play, and a context of play is what it already is. Our work is already under an if-clause. The reasoning that students do in our courses is not the reasoning that they do in personal deliberations; rather – *inter alia* – it stands for that reasoning (Bateson 1972, 180; see also Edwards 1993). Through the reasoning that she does in the course the student informs, but does not determine, the reasoning that she does outside it. It remains for her to decide whether and to what extent she wants to think about religion and ideology in the ways that her teacher suggests.

Play has a bad name in some circles, so let me hasten to add that it is no disparagement to say that liberal education is play. Quite the contrary – for play is one of the most important things that people do. Precisely because play is uncertain in its relevance, it provides the freedom to think new thoughts. It is because I am "merely" imagining a dialogue with Wittgenstein that I get new insights into his philosophy; it is because a theistic student is "only" playing an atheist in a debate that she gains a greater understanding of those who disagree with her; and it is because a Euro-minded undergraduate is "merely" taking a course on tribal religion that he begins to recognize the myths of his own tradition.

But if liberal education is already play, then it may seem that its norms and conclusions are already propositions, and that therefore there is no need to emphasize their play character. Don't these norms and conclusions have the status of propositions already, simply by being asserted in the context of undergraduate education? In principle, yes, but there are other principles at work here. In our culture, at least, the liberality of undergraduate education stands in tension with pragmatic and utilitarian ends. The emphasis on play is therefore necessary in practice, lest rights become lost in agendas. Emphasizing the play character of our teaching is needed, therefore, in order to ensure that we only propose the redescriptions of our students.

Does this emphasis on play really help the student whose self-description I refute? I think so. Let me describe briefly what I actually do. Like many teachers, I offer an argument in lecture not as a judge delivering a verdict, but as a member of the class testing his thoughts. I say things like, "Is this right?", "This is the best sense I can make of it," "Is there anything I've overlooked?", and so on. Thus I offer myself as an exemplary inquirer, but also as an example of human fallibility. The student I refute is free to challenge my refutation. If she does, she will be graded, not on her agreement or disagreement, but on the quality of her reasoning. Most importantly, she will be free to question whether the conclusions I draw and the norms I use are relevant to her life beyond the class. She is free to say things like "I need to think more about this," "Feelings are important too," and "I don't see why the rules of logic should be more important than my loyalty to my religion." She has been refuted, then, but because I emphasize that we are at play, her freedom of self-determination has been preserved.

There are many other questions that might be raised, but let me bring this to a close. I hope the reader has found some food for thought in this paper, and perhaps a new angle on the difficulties of our work. I have tried to show that the Teacher's Dilemma is tougher to solve than one might suppose, but that we can do so by using the distinction between "proposition" and "imposition." I have argued further that this distinction can be sustained in practice if we emphasize that liberal education is a context of play. And I have maintained that outside this context students remain free to question the relevance to their lives of our work and all its methods.

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