

THE RELUCTANT POSTMODERNISM OF BARBARA WEBER

REVIEW OF BARBARA WEBER, *PHILOSOPHIEREN MIT KINDERN ZUM THEMA MENSCHENRECHTE: VERNUNFT UND MITGEFÜHL ALS GRUNDVORAUSETZUNGEN EINER DEMOKRATISCHEN DIALOGKULTUR*

(Philosophizing with children about human rights: Reason and empathy as preconditions for a democratic dialogue culture)

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Mareike Gebhardt

Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany

Barbara Weber's book belongs to a series of three books that deals with rationality and empathy in the context of human rights and bodily perspectives on political thought.¹ In general, the analysis follows a path of reconciliation combining Jürgen Habermas' modern and Richard Rorty's postmodern democratic theory. After two philosophical volumes, Weber concentrates her attention in *Philosophieren mit Kindern zum Thema Menschenrechte* on the relationship between the philosophical notions of rationality and empathy and an educational concept that emphasizes the cultivation of human rights under transcultural conditions. Weber sketches the connection lines between a reciprocal understanding of rationality and empathy, a well-established reflection upon methodological aspects and a pedagogical operationalization of philosophical questions in the context of *Philosophy for Children* (P4C). This review follows those three lines of argument. It focuses firstly on a philosophical analysis of whether reason and empathy are antagonistic or reciprocal concepts; secondly, on Weber's highly skilled methodological pluralism, and thirdly, on the possibilities of philosophical inquiry within the classroom.

Weber's analysis oscillates between modern and postmodern thought: between a deep faith in communicative processes of reasoning and the importance of transcultural recognition of otherness (*Andersheit*). In this regard the book is a successful reconciliation of *modern* thinking – in terms of universal human rights and communicative action – and *postmodern* approaches – in terms of critical

thinking towards reason and universalism. On this account reason and empathy cannot be seen as antagonists between which philosophy and democratic education have to choose, but rather as complements to each other. When teachers talk to children about human rights and democracy, both capacities are of utmost importance: without reason, understanding the Other is based on contingent and unreflected acts of “judging” and must remain prejudice; without empathy, the recognition of the Other stays on a merely abstract level. Thus, children need both: an education towards reason as the capacity to judge thoughtfully and the sensitivity for the Other suffering as much as I do. Only communicative reason combined with sensitive judgment fosters the consciousness that the Other is unique in her Otherness but also very much like myself: A person that I sometimes cannot fully comprehend but that I always need to respect in her capacity to feel and fear cruelty. This is the lesson Weber wants us to learn.

Accordingly the book emphasizes the claim to universal validity of human rights – following ideals philosophy knows and appreciates since Enlightenment – and the importance of meeting the Other under fair and equal conditions in a transcultural and postnational lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Weber seeks to reinforce the importance of dialogue and mutual understanding in those situations of diversity and difference children are confronted with in their lives as human beings and later as citizens. She introduces a way of thinking that acknowledges the intersubjective truth-seeking procedures of deliberation and discursive dialogue (Habermas) and the need for a sensitivity that allows the emotional capacity for the recognition of the Other’s suffering to flourish (Rorty). For the latter, a body-based experience is very important. At that point, Weber criticizes Rorty’s approach for its mere concentration on linguistic arguments for a cultivation of empathy. She therefore adds a phenomenological interpretation of bodily experiences to Rorty’s language philosophy of empathy.

Drawing on a well-elaborated argument that reveals a deep knowledge of contemporary political philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy, Weber provides us with an enriching analysis of modern and postmodern ways of thinking about human rights. The study’s multiperspectivity sheds light on advantages and disadvantages of a mere modern, or a mere postmodern thinking. Her argument successfully manages to sketch modern and postmodern thought as complementary. In convincingly establishing a fruitful dialogue between modern and postmodern thought Weber does not vote one-sidedly for one or the other.

In accordance with her own thesis that dialogue can never be hierarchical, Weber does not decide in favor of one particular philosophical way of thinking. She leaves it open to the reader to decide which concept she finds more convincing or if she should follow Weber's path of not-choosing. Nevertheless, by not-choosing Weber "secretly" votes in favor of postmodern approaches: To deny the existence of an (absolute) truth is unambiguously postmodern. In that way, even Weber's reading of Habermas becomes postmodern when she emphasizes the contingency and temporality of the intersubjective "truth". Weber's subtle postmodernism discloses itself in her interpretation of Habermasian and Rortian philosophy: On Weber's argument Habermas' discourse theory works as a contemporary methodological supplement for the Platonic concept of (absolute) truth-finding. To him, truth can be *found* in intersubjective confrontations with others. Regarding the class room situation—as a very specific form of dialogue—the teacher leads the child to the "right" answer by using Habermasian techniques of discursive deliberation. On the contrary, Weber favors the Rortian concept: In *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) Rorty distinguishes between "finding truth" as in metaphysics and in the philosophy of Enlightenment on the one hand, and "making truth" in terms of constructivistic thinking on the other. He starkly votes for an intersubjective dialogue that is structured by asking questions more than by giving answers. The statements we make must be asked and constantly altered in disruptive waves. To Rorty, moreover, the notion of "truth" must be modified according to the normative standards of postmodernism: the only "truth" we can rely on is the "truth" we *made* by and for ourselves. In accordance with Rorty, Weber declares, nobody will give us "truth", nobody can find *the* truth, and it will never be everlasting. Instead, we *make* our socio-cultural situated and highly contextualized "truths". Unlike Rorty Weber emphasizes that the cultivation of sensitivity and empathy cannot only rely on linguistic terms but must be supplemented by bodily aspects. The importance of the body in encounters with the Other is being introduced through a phenomenology of the body (*Leibphänomenologie*).² Only a theoretical recourse that follows arguments from phenomenology of the body can thwart the formalistic and procedural character of the Habermasian model: not only reason, but also bodily experiences must be emphasized when talking about the cultivation of human rights. Children are confronted with the Other not only in situations of speech and talk but also by their bodily appearance: By seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling the others'

presences the abstract notion of otherness turns into a concrete experience. To Weber, only what is tangible (*greifbar*), can be comprehensible (*begreifbar*). For this reason, Weber's educative model towards the recognition of the inclusiveness of human rights cannot solely rely on modern, rationalistic, "enlightened" arguments (e.g. those of Kohlberg/ Habermas), but must be complemented by a postmodern view that draws attention towards empathy, emotion, the body, and the contingency of being.

Since bodily experience plays a major role in a child's development of empathy, an educational concept of P4C must consider not only rationality but has to support the child's ability to feel the other's suffering. Only then, Weber maintains, can the child's emotional and cognitive development be guaranteed. P4C is therefore adequately established only when communicative rationality *and* empathy are developed. To connect both, Weber suggests phenomenological, hermeneutical, dialectical, and speculative thinking to serve as a junction between philosophical methods that can be didactically transformed in the classroom and bodily experiences which constitute children's lifeworlds. In order to do so, Weber follows Ekkehard Mertens's plurality of methods: different methods are didactically applied according to the children's ways of asking and understanding. Such different methods serve as amplifiers for specific modes of approaching problems. *Phenomenological methods* refer to bodily experiences and are therefore bound to sensitive experiences. They foster and support the development of empathy. *Hermeneutics* is seen as a social practice: it is the art of understanding the other in her otherness. It helps to identify similarities between different individuals and groups for establishing certain forms of solidarity. In contrast, *dialectics* aims at the identification of differences and diverse interpretations of norms and values (thesis and antithesis). In the end, dialectical thinking synthesizes these differences. Thus, it clarifies the necessity for compromise and cooperation in contemporary lifeworlds where political and social unities have been demolished. *Logical thinking* seeks for insight and the intellectual recognition of intersubjectivity as the best way of solving problems—similar to Habermas' argument of the non-coercive force of the better argument (*der zwanglose Zwang des besseren Arguments*). Finally, *speculation* is not so much a coherent method but a mode of changing perspective: it bursts the chains of traditional thinking and dissolves the security of an all too obvious set of all too outdated rules and regulations. Thus, by speculative thinking new structures of thought are to be explored.

With her methodological diversity Weber withdraws from P4C-approaches that focus on the Socratic dialogue, since it relies on the existence of objective answers and solutions, and therefore “right” and “wrong”. For Weber, the binary code of ancient Greek and Enlightenment philosophy is inadequate in contemporary classroom-situations. Neither should the teacher be viewed as a classical leader of the child (*paid-agogós*) on the “right” path nor should the teacher be seen as an authority. Rather, teacher and children come together under the equal and fair conditions of the ideal discourse community (*Diskursgemeinschaft*). Children do not automatically seek for right answers and final solutions but are far more interested in asking questions playfully. Weber, of course, refers to the danger of too high expectations of children’s ability of philosophical reflection; but she emphasizes that children should not be underestimated in their capacity to deal with difficult and complex questions and situations. The teacher therefore does not impose her normative values on the *Community of Inquiry* but guarantees a free and fair atmosphere in which children should start thinking for themselves. They should learn to think freely and critically first, and then learn about the consequences that arise from their decisions and actions. This aims at helping them understand what their decisions mean to themselves and to the other. For that, they not only need a certain kind of rationality but also the capacity to feel (for) the other.

In general Weber’s research ranges between modern and postmodern thought. It can be considered a very convincing interplay of the two most influential lines of thought of contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless, her deep faith in communicative reason seems too optimistic in the face of irrationalities and particularisms that have been arising all over the world. Very often multiculturalism has failed in dealing with the challenges it meets. In a postnational and transcultural world we witness tendencies of regional and cultural withdrawal. These irrationalities Weber’s approach cannot mitigate. However, what makes Weber’s approach so enriching is firstly, her astonishing playfulness when it comes to her knowledge of and her competent dealing with philosophical concepts. Secondly, she maintains her argument a lightheartedness of thought that allows both a complex philosophical analysis – or may I say a dialogue with her readers about philosophical questions – and the development of a didactical model that takes the otherness of children seriously.

Correspondence:

Mareike Gebhardt

e-mail: mareike.gebhardt@fau.de

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¹ *Zwischen Vernunft und Mitgefühl. Jürgen Habermas und Richard Rorty im Dialog über Wahrheit, politische Kultur und Menschenrechte* and *Vernunft, Mitgefühl und Körperlichkeit. Eine phänomenologische Rekonstruktion des politischen Raumes*; both published by Karl Alber-publishers (Freiburg i.B.) in 2013.

² The Husserlian tradition of phenomenology differentiates between *Körper* ("body") and *Leib* ("limb"). While the notion of *Körper* refers only to the senses and therefore to the objectification of the human body, the notion of *Leib* refers to a transcendental concept that entails more than just the concrete human body ("soul"). The details of this difference are of subordinate importance to this review; for further information cf. Husserl, Edmund: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (1950ff.) and Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *La phénoménologie de la perception* (1945).