ALL THINGS WITH A RESERVATION: THE CHALLENGE OF ALAIN LOCKE'S CRITICAL RELATIVISM

Linda O'Neill
Northern Illinois University

> *All philosophies, it seems to me, are in ultimate derivation philosophies of life and not of abstract, disembodied "objective" reality; products of time, place and situation, and thus systems of timed history rather than timeless eternity. . . . the lineaments of a personality, its temperament and dispositional attitudes projected into their systematic rationalizations.*
>
> *Small wonder. . . that I project my personal history into its inevitable rationalization as cultural pluralism and value relativism, with a not too orthodox reaction to the American way of life.*
>
> *I should like to claim as life-motto the good Greek principle, – "nothing in excess," but I have probably worn instead as the badge of circumstance, – "All things with a reservation."*
>
> \- Alain Locke (1935)

In her recent comprehensive review of genres of multicultural education, Christine Bennett identifies cultural pluralism as a "foundational principle" and recognizes Horace Meyer Kallen along with "scholars of color" such as Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois as significant contributors.[1] African American philosopher, Alain LeRoy Locke (1885-1954)[2] is not mentioned in this context. Locke, widely acknowledged for editing *The New Negro*, the most important anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, is perhaps less widely recognized for the distinctive formulation of cultural pluralism[3] that will be used in this discussion of Jane Elliott's anti-racist pedagogy.[4]

Locke's pluralism grew from questions raised in his 1918 dissertation, *The Problem of Classification in the Theory of Value, or an Outline of a Genetic System of Value*. More than a decade and a half later in "Values and Imperatives," Locke revisited the subject of values, attempting to systematize "common sense" experience within the classical categories of beauty, truth, and goodness. Without underestimating the totalizing tendencies of "institutionally vested interests,"[5] Locke argued that it was possible to socialize values in such a way that a cultural pluralism based on reciprocity and tolerance might become viable. Twelve years later, in "Pluralism and Ideological Peace," Locke explored cultural pluralism's potential role in racial, national, and international rapprochement.[6] By 1950 in "The Need for a New Organon in Education," Locke was ready to delineate a "methodological approach" for fostering value and cultural pluralism. In the set of principles he called "critical relativism," Locke attempted to combine his

© 2003 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

phenomenology of values with its "corollary" cultural pluralism and its goal, ideological peace.[7]

Even though Locke called himself "more of a humanist than a pragmatist," throughout his life he remained drawn to the "radical protest of James."[8] His philosophy shares characteristics that Barbara Thayer-Bacon has attributed to the "qualified relativism" of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Qualified relativists view inquirers as "socially embedded and embodied," limited by environment and "human capacities," and dependent upon "fallible criteria for making choices."[9] Locke also shared the pragmatists' conviction that moral justification entails tolerance for "other ways of being in the world" – a tolerance requiring that ideas and beliefs be brought "down to a human level" to avoid the violence "hidden in abstractions."[10]

Locke's pluralism, while reflecting commitments and concerns of pragmatist contemporaries, was unique in its attempt to balance individual and group rights in a nation that both exalted individualism and remained mired in racism. Criticizing the early cultural pluralists for avoiding the issue of race, historian John Higham asked, "Could anyone for that matter, have built a pluralist philosophy on the black experience?"[11] Locke attempted to develop just such a philosophy as well as a "methodology" for negotiating value conflicts, even those as deeply rooted as the conflict between U.S. Constitutional and racial "group" values. In this effort, he is part of the wide-ranging tradition of multicultural education, which includes the more recent anti-racist work of Jane Elliott. Locke's philosophy and methodology will be used here to explore university students' responses to Elliott's work, suggesting ways in which Locke's critical relativism might offer an alternative to Elliott's pedagogy.

Weathering Jane Elliott's Storm

Fourteen years after the death of Alain Locke, elementary school teacher Jane Elliott conducted a classroom experiment prompted by the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For more than three decades, her response to this event, broadcast in the ABC documentary *The Eye of the Storm*, has been used internationally in teacher preparation and diversity training. Breaking her class into two groups on the basis of eye color, and using collars to identify the "inferior" group, Elliott demonstrated the raw power of discrimination on children's behavior and academic performance.[12] Her subsequent documentary videos involving public school children, college students, and adults have been widely viewed. Businesses around the world continue to make use of her consulting services.

In the initial classroom experiment Elliott required her third grade students to experience what it was like to be both privileged (without the collar) and oppressed (with the collar). In her workshops blue-eyed participants (more likely

to be European Americans and thereby historically, socially privileged) wear collars and bear the brunt of discrimination while brown-eyed participants (more likely to be victims of racial discrimination) are witnesses. After viewing the documentary *The College Eye*, featuring a group of undergraduates who were promised college credit for attending what they were told would be a diversity training workshop, a student in a Spring 2002 section of Social Foundations of Education,[13] described Elliott's exercise:

> Jane told them [the brown-eyed students] that they were the preferred group. They were told to treat the blue-eyed students with disrespect, referring to the men as "boy" and the women as "honey" or "doll" when the "blue eyes" joined the group.... Throughout the session, Jane reminded participants that they were enduring for a short time a little of what others experience on a regular basis. (Student 1, 1)

A second student wrote:

> The intimidation went on with the blue-eyed students (most of the attacked were female) while the brown-eyed students sat and watched. Almost none participated in the assaults, but none tried to stop it either. Many [blue-eyed students] tried to fight back only to become frustrated when they would not be heard. Whenever a student became frustrated to the brink or point of tears, Elliott would shout out news clips naming minorities who had been maimed or killed. It was a message to those students that their pain was nothing compared to others. (Student 2, 1)

A third student in the class compared Elliott's exercise with the Zimbardo and Milgram experiments:[14]

> The key tool Elliott used to create authentic understanding of discrimination was to model the behavior she hopes to extinguish. Her controversial approach put her subjects in a position where they couldn't possibly ignore the events unfolding around them.... I must admit, after watching the video, I kept thinking, "Why the *** doesn't anybody say something?! Then I thought, "Have I ever looked the other way?" (Student 3, 4-5)

As the student excerpts above indicate, Elliott is a virtuoso in evoking strong feelings. She trusts the power of a single, startling dose of discrimination to effect lasting change. She also believes that feelings evoked when privileged groups "live for one day as other people live for a lifetime" will lead to new empathy for and a deeper understanding of disenfranchised groups.

Elliott's anti-racist pedagogy has been described as an *inoculation*, a metaphor implying that a single concentrated "shot" can protect against future "infection." In the documentary, *A Class Divided* (1985), she views the fifteen-year reunion of her 1970 third-grade class as confirmation that experiential and generalizable (racist, sexist, ageist) inoculations against prejudice are possible.[15] One Social Foundations student, despite objections to Elliott's tactics, seemed to concur:[16]

> It was extremely moving, powerful, real, and definitely changed the views and lives of those who participated in it. The after-experiment interviews confirmed this. I only watched the video, and I know I'll never be the same! (Student 3, 6)

Other students voiced reservations. One questioned the concrete consequences of Elliott's deliberate use of pain as an educative force as well as her exclusion of dialogue:

> It seems like a good idea: sensitize people to the idea that prejudice hurts real people in real ways.... But what did she [Elliott] really accomplish? She made some girls cry, she embarrassed a few boys, she affirmed African American students who were pleased that the white students knew a little of their pain in that brief time. But what did they learn about each other? Nothing...Elliott can claim that she taught the White children a "lesson" – she showed them what it felt like to be belittled and mortified, but this is something I bet most have already felt. She showed the Black students that the White students could feel pain, something I'm sure the already knew. Justice will never be reached if we can not feel comfortable discussing with one another our own life experiences. It certainly will never be reached if we continue the game of who can and has hurt who more, which is exactly Elliott's proposition. (Student 2, 7-8)

Elliott's approach, unlike Megan Boler's pedagogy of discomfort, uses "confrontation" rather than "mutual exploration"[17] to effect dramatic changes in perspective. While both Elliott and Boler attempt to make use of discomfort, Boler calls for an open, dialogic examination to provide the space necessary for "inhabiting a morally ambiguous self." This space allows us to acknowledge our own complicity in the patterns of discrimination that sustain institutionalized racism, and to assume moral responsibility for combating them. Some students believed that Elliott's "simulation" foreclosed essential elements of anti-racist education by denying this kind of space.

In addition to Elliott's confrontational strategy, some Social Foundations students questioned Elliott's essentially experiential approach to history, suggesting that it was more likely to engender resistance than understanding:

> I was in high school before I truly realized the pain White people had inflicted on another people. I felt embarrassed of my own skin color. I still feel uncomfortable talking about those sections of history. By shouting the headlines about the mutilated and murdered African Americans, Elliott only caused more guilt and more reluctance on the part of White students to understand what happened. (Student 1, 6)

In Elliott's third grade classroom, the experience of intense discrimination built upon the children's study of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. In her workshops, passing references to past injustices (shouting "out news clips naming minorities who had been maimed or killed") provide historical context. Most Social Foundations students agreed that using historical examples to combat racism was educationally justifiable. But in endorsing the changes sought in Elliott's anti-racist workshops, several students objected to her "use of force" to combat bigotry. For example:

> To dehumanize someone, even in an experiment where they volunteered, will just breed hostility. Pain is not the correct way to make someone understand your point of view. If I kick you out of hatred and you kick me back, I'm not going to say, "I'm sorry. Now that I know how it feels, I will not do it again"... an owner who kicks his dog out of anger will not care if the animal shows pain.... What is more, if the animal bites back to defend itself, the master is not going to rethink his actions; he will most likely beat the animal until it understands that he is the one in charge. This is the mind-set of racists. Force will not show them that they are equal to a creature they consider inferior. The only way to combat racism is through understanding, communication, and justice because bigotry is formed from ignorance, pride, and the ability to be in power (Student 1, 4).

Alain Locke's Alternative

Alain Locke's critical relativism offers Social Foundations students a different perspective on shared pain, the significance of history, and the possibility of "understanding, communication, and justice." Unlike Elliott's *inoculation*, Locke calls critical relativism an *antidote* to the mindset of fundamentalism and orthodoxy.[18] Locke's metaphor implies that he is offering a corrective to the "poison" of absolutism that supports racism. Locke sees human beings as susceptible throughout their lives to absolutist temptations in many guises

(absolute God, absolute reason, absolute morality, absolute state, and absolute culture); therefore, he seeks an antidote to that temptation rather than an inoculation against it. His antidote, critical relativism, includes six interrelated elements (indicated in the following discussion by numbers in half parentheses), which have been adapted for this analysis.[19]

Critical relativism attempts to bring values "down to a human level" by 1) "referring them to their social and cultural backgrounds."[20] For Locke, the very act of viewing values in social, cultural context begins to weaken the "psychological roots of dogmatism." 2) Values can then be interpreted not as separate from the world or absolutely, universally valid, but as functional responses to particular needs of particular peoples. The test of a value becomes the extent to which it functions adequately within a specific social, cultural context. 3) Validity is not claimed for values beyond their functionality; but this does not imply a retreat to relativism, nihilism, or skepticism. Judgments and choices must still be made and consequences carefully weighed in light of the shared values of the group, the shared "feeling references" of human beings, and the potential for promoting ideological peace based on "mutual respect, reciprocity, nonagression and nondisparagement."[21]

The link between feeling references, values, and consequences warrants a brief explanation here. Locke identifies feeling references such as ecstasy and zeal, tension of conscience and duty, curiosity and satisfaction, joy and disgust.[22] These feeling references and their corresponding value types – religious, ethical, logical, and aesthetic – reflect the "commonsensical" categories of human experience incorporated in traditional wisdom teachings and classical Greek philosophy. While we, as human beings, share feeling references and value types, we do not necessarily share the socializing processes, including education, initiation, and indoctrination by which they are expressed. Socializing processes encourage groups to integrate shared feeling references with personal temperament, experiences and cultural influences to foster habitual inclinations that eventually become dispositional. These dispositions are rationalized as attitudes that develop into imperatives for decisions and actions.[23]

4) Ideologies – as attitudinal frameworks – should be viewed, not as political or biological theories under which human beings must be subordinated, but as "rationalizations of values and value interests." Ideologies stem from human activity, developing and changing as human needs and interests shift. 5) Important developments and their ideological justifications can and should be traced historically as dynamic processes, not forced to fit predictable paths aligned with reified ideals. 6) The work of scholars examining and interpreting value controversies should remain connected to these dynamic processes rather than confined to a "traditional value analytic" with "unrealistic symbols and overgeneralized concepts."[24]

Elements of critical relativism are discernible in Locke's interpretation of individualism within the context of U.S. democracy. Early in his career, Locke explored the functional value of individualism as an ideal for African Americans who had been enslaved, subjected to institutionally sanctioned racism, and consistently denied Constitutional rights. Acknowledging the value of individualism, Locke also recognized the need for valuing and advancing group traditions rather than individual interests.[25] Basic rights had been denied African Americans, not simply as individuals, but as group members by those who refused to recognize shared humanity across what they considered to be "essential" racial differences. For many African Americans, individualism was a clearly inadequate response to the formidable, structural racism permeating society.

Locke saw individualism within democracy not as an absolute or fixed value but as part of a democratic ideal in need of reconceptualization.[26] In Locke's view, racial solidarity and racial pride were more likely to create a just space for African Americans in the United States than an enduring faith in individualism. Locke's philosophical work, as well as his promotion of the cultural flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, remained connected to his commitment to both trace and nurture the dynamic processes of racial identity and to judge these efforts on the basis of their consequences. This commitment superseded unconditional loyalty to an American ideal.

Locke's critical relativism suggests possibilities for addressing some of the concerns Social Foundations students raised about shared pain, the role of history, and the possibility of "understanding, communication, and justice" in Jane Elliott's workshops. Locke warned against reducing what he called the "spectrum of values"[27] to a pain/pleasure dichotomy. Locke recommended instead that educators provide students with opportunities to acquire both appreciation for the rich plurality of values and an understanding of the human tendency toward value tyranny.[28] In Locke's view, religious, ethical, scientific, and aesthetic feelings help constitute the spectrum of values. Students need access to the various ways different peoples in different cultures have expressed these values in religious ceremonies, political institutions, moral codes, scientific pursuits, and artistic creations. But this is not enough.

Individuals, institutions, and social systems embody and transmit values, sometimes attempting to achieve unity in values through force. Even within a single individual, any value has the potential for overwhelming others once it gains enough power. The force of value tyranny in individuals and groups can lead to value bigotry. On the other hand, recognizing the dangers of value tyranny can lead to reciprocity and tolerance, especially when we take the time to refer values to specific social, cultural contexts and trace the evolution of values in terms of their human advantages. This requires a much more systematic approach to history than Jane Elliott's "shouting the headlines" as reminders of "our

shameful pasts." Locke's critical relativism requires us to view values as expressions of social and cultural hopes, fears, and needs that evolve for specific, historically grounded purposes. By examining history, circumstances under which values have combined with "non-ideological factors" to increase or ameliorate "strife and discord" can become instructive.

We must be "schooled" to look beyond our own culture and our own time for expressions of beauty, truth, goodness, and Godliness; we must be encouraged to search our own psyches for the value tyranny that resides within. Differences in values cannot always be reconciled, but they can be interpreted with sympathy on the basis of shared human "feeling references" that constitute aesthetic, scientific, ethical and religious values. Our imperatives can be tempered as we recognize our own capacity for the value absolutism expressed, often tragically, in militant fundamentalism and fanaticism. Despite much evidence to the contrary, Locke's critical relativism affirms that we do have the capacity to learn "to accept or even to prefer an attainable concord of understanding and co-operation in lieu of an unattainable unanimity."[29]

Conclusion

Locke maintained that "the effective antidote to value absolutism" was "a systematic demonstration that values are rooted in attitudes, not in reality and pertain to ourselves, not to the world."[30] Like many of his contemporaries, Locke viewed values not as divine or universal, but as human responses in "light" of brute facts. Cultural pluralism, in honoring differences across a spectrum of values, requires "schooling" in the processes by which values come to be held, expressed, shared, changed, and defended. Honoring value differences requires knowledge of cultural contributions and adaptations. The alternative to knowledge of cultural and historical particulars is ideological oversimplification rather than the "mutual respect, reciprocity, nonagression and nondisparagement" of ideological peace.

Sharing Locke's goals of racial equality and reciprocity, Jane Elliott places her hopes for the eradication of racism "and every other kind of invidious discrimination" on concentrated experience. Elliott hopes that living "for one day as other people live for a lifetime" with a full dose of discrimination will provide the necessary *inoculation*. Many of her classroom students and workshop participants claim that they have been permanently transformed by her anti-racist pedagogy.

It seems obvious that Locke's hope for ideological peace requires more than a single inoculation, however powerful. His "remedy" for "value bigotry" requires the arduous work of tracing conflicts and adaptations from their feeling references to their myriad combinations with temperament, experience and culture to their functions in fulfilling personal and social purposes. Out of this

"process-logic" learners are challenged "bravely to take a normative stand."[31] Critical relativism that fosters and supports cultural pluralism also entails understanding the dangers of value absolutism revealed over time and in many places. Locke offers an alternative to Social Foundations students with reservations about Elliott's approach. It is the combination of value relativism and cultural pluralism in pursuit of ideological peace that he used to guide and sustain his own life's work.

Notes

1. Christine I. Bennett, "Genres of Research in Multicultural Education," *Review of Educational Research 7*, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 173. Although not mentioned in Bennett's review of genres of research in multicultural education, Locke's philosophy supports the curriculum model delineated in Bennett's *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).

2. Locke's birthdate is given as September 13, 1885 (not 1886 as Locke himself claimed) in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 389.

3. Locke's unique form of cultural pluralism may be overshadowed by his social, literary, and artistic contributions. Even Locke referred to himself as "more a philosophical mid-wife to a generation of younger Negro poets, writers, artists than a professional philosopher" in Alain Locke, "Values and Imperatives" in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Horace M. Kallen and Sidney Hook (New York: Lee Furman, Inc., 1935), 312.

4. Many thanks to Ingrid Erickson for initiating this exploration of Elliott's anti-racist pedagogy and to Richard Quantz for his insightful response to this paper. Quantz, while acknowledging the contributions of Locke's axiology (as well as Dewey's aesthetics), points to crucial explanatory gaps in the pragmatists' move from empirical to ethical theory.

5. Alain Locke, "Values and Imperatives" in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Horace M. Kallen and Sidney Hook (New York: Lee Furman, Inc., 1935), 331.

6. Alain Locke, "Pluralism and Ideological Peace" in *Freedom and Experience: Essays Presented to Horace M. Kallen*, ed. Milton Konvitz and Sidney Hook (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1947), 63-69.

7. Alain Locke, "The Need for a New Organon in Education, Goals for American Education," in *Proceedings of the Ninth Symposium Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion* (New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion), 201-212.

8. Locke, "Values and Imperatives," 312.

9. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, "Using the 'R' Word Again: Pragmatism as Qualified Relativism," *Philosophical Studies in Education 33* (2002): 99-100.

10. Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 440.

11. Talmadge Guy, Linda O'Neill and Amy D. Rose, "Cultural Pluralism as Adult Education: Alain Locke, Horace Kallen, and the Discourse of Difference" in *37th Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings* (Tampa, Fla.: University of South Florida), 155. Thanks to Amy D. Rose for this insight.

12. See William Peters, *A Class Divided: Then and Now* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987). *The Eye of the Storm*, as an ABC news documentary received the George Foster Peabody Award. Elliott has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey (1992) and Johnny Carson shows and was invited to the 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth. *A Class Divided*, a follow-up documentary broadcast on March 26, 1985, on PBS Frontline won an Emmy. Peters was producer-director-writer of "The Eye of the Storm," producer-director of "A Class Divided" for Frontline, and author of the companion volume.

13. All student excerpts are from papers submitted 4 April 2002. The Spring 2002 Social Foundations class included 24 students, all of whom were European Americans with the exception of one exchange student from Germany. This group's responses will be compared with those from more diverse groups in the future.

14. In class discussions, this student alluded to the Zimbardo Prison experiment at Stanford University that was cut short after six days (it was originally planned for two weeks) when college students placed in the roles of prison guards became sadistic and their peer "prisoners" became increasingly depressed. He also noted the "shock experiment conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University documenting experimental participants' willingness to subject others to what they believed to be painful and potentially lethal shocks when instructed to do so by a "legitimate authority."

15. Peters, 172. After documenting the reunion of 11 of the 16 third graders in Elliott's 1970 class, Peters claimed: "These were young adults who clearly had been inoculated against racism – and every other kind of invidious discrimination."

16. This student, who concluded that Elliott's purpose and outcomes more than offset the potential damage of her approach, did object to two specific aspects of the workshop, which he identified as "points of disagreement." The first was Elliott's response to one female student who broke into tears: "Stop crying! I don't care about your pain. You're not the one in any danger here. The

one who truly deserves my sympathy is [gives name of victim of violent racist hate crime]" (Student #1, 6) The second was Elliott's assumption that "people of Color have no need at all to learn about discrimination" (6). He observed that Elliott's role reversal presumed a "Black experience" devoid of cultural context and nuance.

17. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 199.

18. Locke, "New Organon," 68.

19. For Locke's discussion of the elements of critical relativism see "The Need for a New Organon in Education, Goals for American Education" reprinted in Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1989), 263-276. See 273-274 for list of six elements.

20. Locke, "New Organon," 209.

21. Locke, "Pluralism," 68.

22. Locke, "Values and Imperatives," 324.

23. For a comprehensive matrix of feeling references and corresponding values see "Values and Imperatives," 324.

24. Locke, "New Organon," 210.

25. Locke helped raise national awareness of the scope of racial disparity in the U.S. by contributing to Myrdal's landmark study. See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy,* Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Harper Row, 1962), 1ii.

26. For a comprehensive analysis of Locke's reconceptualization of democracy see Talmadge C. Guy, "Prophecy from the Periphery: Alain Locke's Philosophy of Cultural Pluralism and Adult Education" (Ed.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1993).

27. Locke, "Values and Imperatives," 339.

28. Ibid., 328.

29. Locke, "Pluralism," 69.

30. Locke, "Values and Imperatives," 329.

31. Locke, "New Organon," 204.