Pushing Back on Epistemic Pushback with Alison Bailey

Christiane Wisehart, producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

{Begin music}

Christiane: When I think of pushback in a classroom, I imagine students complaining about the amount of homework they're given, or rolling their eyes during a boring lecture. But today's guest, the philosopher Alison Bailey, says that she often encounters a different, and much more problematic, form of resistance in her classroom. She calls it "epistemic pushback" and explains that students often do it without even noticing.

{Pull quote: Alison Bailey} And I don't think this is malicious. I think people feel uncomfortable and they take the conversation somewhere else. And the way I like to describe it is they pull the conversation onto an epistemic home turf where they feel comfortable.

Christiane: Stay tuned for my interview with Alison Bailey on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: In her work on teaching strategies, the philosopher Alison Bailey writes: "No one likes to consider the possibility that they might be part of the problem...We like to think of ourselves as good people, so when discussions of injustice challenge our goodness we push back."

And she's right. For example, I'm white, and for much of my college years, I simply avoided talking about race because it made me "feel bad." Hearing that I was a part of a racist system challenged my perception of myself as a good person. So until I learned better, my strategy used to be to avoid the topic altogether.

Alison says that there are other ways that people avoid talking about issues that point out their privilege or make them feel uncomfortable. She sees one of these strategies often in her classrooms. She calls it "epistemic pushback." And don't worry, I'll explain exactly what that means in just a bit. But before I do that, you probably need some information about the kinds of classes Alison is teaching.

Christiane, on tape: So, you teach classes that center around feminism, and critical race theory, right, and philosophy?
Alison Bailey: Yeah.
Christiane: So, how do students respond to those kind of classes differently than they might to another kind of philosophy class?
Alison Bailey: Yeah, it's been really interesting for me to explore this because I'm trained as a philosopher, and I'm trained in applied ethics and so I've always taught issues that have to do with social injustice, or puzzles that have a more social domain, and the pedagogy for those classes is very different. So, if you're just teaching Descartes, you can just talk about skepticism and external world and students don't have a real emotional investment in that. But when you teach social justice issues and applied philosophy content, it has an emotional resonance with a lot of students, and it triggers stuff that I think philosophical pedagogies are not really completely competent to deal with.

So you can run arguments. You can analyze propositions for truth and falsity and talk about validity and soundness, and those are really, really good tools to have in our philosophical tool kit. But those tools, I think, fall short when we talk about social justice issues, or issues that touch nerves with students because they have an emotional response.

And so when I teach courses with applied content, not only do we run arguments, but I try to watch student's bodies for how they're reacting. I'm attentive to the tones of their voices. I'm trying to figure out if there's something that's not being expressed. I track where conversations go. Sometimes they go way off target. Sometimes they engage the literature. And it's really interesting to figure out when you have a problem on the table and students dodge the problem and take the conversation somewhere else. I always like to ask, "Why did it go there? And what kind of work is it doing when it went there?"

Christiane: Alison says that these evasive, resistant moves follow noticeable patterns. Whenever students with privilege (and we're generally talking about privileges like being white, being male, being cisgender, and so forth)--whenever these students were uncomfortable with a given topic, they'd use similar strategies to avoid the subject. To demonstrate these strategies, she created a couple of examples for us. The first centers on a student she calls DeEndré.

Alison Bailey: He sits in his usual seat in the back of the row and we're discussing an article by a feminist philosopher named Claudia Card called "Rape is a Terrorist Institution." And the argument in the article is basically rape culture functions to discipline women's bodies in the same way that terrorist threats function to keep people in a state of fear.

So that's the argument and I'm trying to get students to talk about it. So, DeEndré, who positions himself as the class gadfly, visibly searches the internet and tries to find some statistics on domestic violence against boys and men. And he finds some and he raises his hand and he says, "Well, look, men are victims, too. According to a recent statistic more men than women are victims of intimate partner violence." So armed with this new information he asserts that our

discussion would be less biased if we just talked really generally about violence and intimate partner violence, rather than always focusing on women and girls. And you could take his point, right? Because we need to talk about gender and men and boys as well, but that's not the point of Claudia Card's article.

Women in the class feel very uncomfortable with this claim that he's made and they challenge his response. They explain why gender and race are both important to the discussion. They offer their own statistics and they tell their stories about how ever present threats of violence affect their daily movements, where they choose to go, where they choose to live, where they choose to shop, whether they go to the library at night, who they choose to date, who they hang out with. But he insists that they're reading too much gender into the episodes of human on human violence, so he erases the gendered and racialized dimensions of that.

Christiane: Alison's second example is about a student she calls Jennifer and how she reacts during a discussion on institutional racism.

Alison Bailey: And Jennifer who's a white philosophy major shares a story about some racist graffiti that uses the N work that she's found in her dorm. And she says the N word - and not calling it the N word - and she animates it with that little two fingered scare quote gesture that people use to signal that they're just mentioning it, and they're not using it. So I stop the class and I ask her to consider the history of the word and how it might mean something different coming out of white mouths. And I ask her really nicely not to use it. And then she turns and gives me and the class a mini lecture on the use-mention distinction, reminding me that it's this foundational concept in analytic philosophy. And I can see students squirming. And Shelia, who's one of the two black women in the class offers a history of the word and how it was used to degrade and discipline black bodies. And Jennifer nods in agreement, and then she holds her ground, she says, "Exactly, that's what happens when you use the word, but I'm just mentioning it."

So Shelia shares how she feels when white folks mention the word, and I think Shelia does a little mention with her fingers, too. And she asks Jennifer not to use it and not to mention it. So Jennifer calmly responds to Shelia, "Oh, you just don't understand the use-mention distinction and it's foundational to philosophy." And she proceeds to explain it again.

Christiane: Alison explained that she sees resistance like this again and again in her classes. In the case of DeEndré, the evasiveness centers around the fact that he's more comfortable talking about violence in general rather than violence against women. In the case of Jennifer, she's so invested in the philosophical concept of the use-mention distinction that she just won't let it go.

Alison Bailey: And so she wants to hang onto philosophical convention even when it's harming, which is a really interesting case. She refuses to let go of the use-mention distinction, even though it's not moving the conversation forward. So, I think that Jennifer is really excited about

the tools of philosophy and she's really interested in using them well, and she's trying to use them well. But, she doesn't know that that use has a particular power move embedded in it.

Christiane: Alison calls instances of classroom resistance like the ones in the examples “epistemic pushback.” So “epistemic” is basically a philosopher-y way of saying “knowledge.”

Alison Bailey: So in general epistemic pushback is just a resistance to hearing and believing knowledges that challenge your worldview. So I'm particularly interested in a species of epistemic pushback called Privilege Protective Epistemic Pushback, which I see as a variety of willful ignorance that a lot of folks who are members of dominant groups engage in when we're asked to consider the injustices that folks of color, or people in the margins experience daily. So I think in practice privilege preserving epistemic pushback, or privilege protective epistemic pushback is a collection of cognitive and affective and verbal tactics that we use to derail conversations we find threatening. And I don't think this is malicious. I think people feel uncomfortable and they take the conversation somewhere else. And the way I like to describe it is they pull the conversation onto an epistemic home turf where they feel comfortable. So like DeEndré is saying, "I just don't want to talk about the gendered aspects of violence. Let's just talk about violence against people." So he pulls it onto an epistemic home turf and then drains all the women's testimonies about how they live in the world of their meaning. So it doesn't move anything forward. There's no beneficial part of that. It actually makes the conversation more narrow and you get no friction on this. You can't move the conversation forward in interesting ways.

Christiane: It’s really tricky to identify and track epistemic pushback. It’s not like Alison is teaching her classes and one of her students raises her hand and says, “I don’t like talking about race and racism. I feel uncomfortable and challenged. Let’s change the subject.” Epistemic pushback is more subtle than that. And in fact, in many cases, epistemic pushback can mask itself as healthy skepticism.

Christiane, on tape: Well, I guess you could argue that epistemic pushback, maybe it's just a healthy form of philosophical skepticism. What would you say to people who say something like that?

Alison Bailey: Yeah, so that's interesting because I don't think it is skepticism. I think students have a more common ordinary language sense of skepticism, which is just this blanket doubting and pushing back. So, let me say a little bit about why I think privilege protecting epistemic pushback and healthy skepticism are doing different kinds of work. So, healthy skepticism is one approach to thinking critically and there's value in thinking critically. I'm not trying to deny that. I think we should not accept our common beliefs at face value. So to think critically really is to show, like a kind of good judgment in recognizing when arguments are faulty, or certain assertions lack evidence, or truth claims appeal to unreliable sources.

The pushback in these examples doesn't do that. The pushback says, "I don't buy it. I think you're wrong. Convince me." And there's often this little gesture of, "Come here, convince me." And that's a psychological response to the material. So I think what happens when we treat this privileged epistemic pushback as an expression of skepticism is that we can't track how power moves in the classroom. DeEndré's just taken back the playing field. He's like, "Come here. Talk to me. Not about Card or the article, but about human on human violence. That's the conversation I want to have." And it's like, that's not the conversation we're having and you haven't convinced me that the conversation we're having is wrong, and this is a better framework. You've just pulled it back into a place where you feel more at ease, or more innocent, or something.

Christiane, on tape: It's a way of derailing in a way that seems okay in the classroom, right?

Alison Bailey: Yeah. Because I think it passes as skepticism and it passes as critical thinking because a lot of students, until they take philosophy classes, have a very, like I said, a very loose view of skepticism and the models we have on TV and on the internet are all, "Shut up, you're wrong. Convince me. No, be quiet. Sit down." And that's not what we do as philosophers. So they think that ... Well, they get excited about challenging things, but they don't quite have the tools yet to do it in a way that I think is epistemically productive.

Christiane: So if epistemic pushback isn't, as Alison just said, "epistemically productive," then what is? She explained that she's not arguing for a classroom in which everyone just nods in agreement all the time. She's looking for something she calls "beneficial epistemic friction."

Alison Bailey: When students do make these pushback moves, their doubting reflex has worked to obstruct, rather than create knowledge. So it closes off communication. It detours it. So think about a car getting stuck in the mud and there's no friction and the tires keep spinning. You're not going anywhere and you haven't left your own epistemic home turf to take risks and see what else is out there. But when you get friction the wheels hit the ground and you go. A car with dry earth underneath it has got this friction.

So what makes it beneficial? Well, beneficial friction moves conversations forward. So my worry about moving conversations back to epistemic home turfs is that we don't have the opportunity as philosophers to follow these certain paths. Certain questions, problems and curiosities. It kills our curiosity and I don't think that's what good classroom behavior is. You don't just treat people that kill curiosity as objectors. You try to say, "I want to move you out of your comfort zones, let's ... You don't have to believe what I'm trying to get you to see, but I want you to see it and decide for yourself.

Christiane: Alison explained that these pushback moves are like weights that slow unfamiliar or scary discussions down. I asked Alison if one way of avoiding pushback could be to make these conversations feel less scary for students. There's been a lot of talk in the last decade or so

about creating classrooms that are safe spaces in which to engage this uncomfortable material. I asked her if this might help create that beneficial epistemic friction she was talking about.

Alison Bailey: I've become pretty skeptical of safe space pedagogies because I've come to realize that classrooms are really never safe spaces where everybody is comfortable speaking. So I'm thinking about the exchange between Jennifer and Shelia and I'm sure the classroom's been a safe space for Jennifer, but for Shelia my guess is that not so much. That when issues of race and gender and stuff are discussed that the white students look at her, the professor says something that makes her feel uncomfortable or doesn't get it, or doesn't control the class or manage the class when things get really violent and agitated and people get really upset.

So, again, I like to think of classrooms as unlevel knowing fields. And the safety for white folks often implies that folks of color are going to be unsafe. Or cisgendered folks will be safer than trans folks. I think to reduce everything to, “There’s this thing called a safe space and it’s going to be fine” dissuades students from taking risks. I think we need a pedagogy that embraces discomfort because I think it's not quite true that safe spaces create comfort. And if you just acknowledge that this is going to be messy and encourage students to take risks, and we're going to make mistakes and we're going to feel horrible and we might have to take a break and there's going to be tears and there's going to be anger and there's going to be joy. And all that stuff, that that's just part of the landscape.

So, it doesn't mean that our aim should be, I guess, to foment a hostile environment. But I think pedagogies of discomfort will ask students to take risks and make themselves vulnerable and share stories. And I think there's a lot of power in taking risks and telling our stories. Because when students do that, I think folks listen in a way that they don't listen to this endless conversation on the use-mention distinction. But if someone tells a story about the N word and what that does to them, then people say, "Oh.” And so there could be a conversation that happens there when folks take risks.

So, I try to encourage my students to walk into places that scare them, not merely just look for comfortable retreats, or comfortable places to express their own views. So, I think that when we try to create and maintain safe spaces and market them as these comfortable spaces where no one will be upset, we do a form of intellectual disservice because we set people's expectations up for safety and then we fail them and the world has just never been a safe space anywhere for most people, so we need to just walk into that and see what that looks like.

{music break}

Christiane: So epistemic pushback is a move that students sometimes make to avoid uncomfortable topics, like race or gender. Take Alison’s example of DeEndré from earlier, where he reacts to an article about sexual violence against women by bringing up the fact that men experience sexual violence, too. I asked Alison how she handles epistemic pushback like DeEndré’s in her classroom.

Alison Bailey: I think there's a lot of knowledge that can be cultivated in being mindful around these episodes, and students need to experience and understand why this pushback doesn't get us knowledge. And that there are other ways of opening up conversational spaces. Once someone like DeEndré has made that move I say, "Okay, DeEndré, can we use this as an example?" Um, so I say to the class, "Look, let's be curious about Card's claim that rape is a terrorist institution? What do you think she means by this?" And students then do free writing or they just start talking about what they think that means. One response might be, "Well, the threat of rape is analogous to the threat of terrorism. So that's what Card's trying to say." And then a second response might be, "I think she's trying to say that rape culture terrorizes women."

So those first two responses, the students are engaging the reading and they're trying to make sense of Claudia Card's argument. So, fair enough, right? And then I put other responses on the board. So the third one might be, "Well, I think she's saying the threat of rape is like the threat of terrorism and those things are completely different. I just don't think those are alike at all. I don't even know why she's saying that." And that's a form of resistance. So I want to put the resistance on the board. And so then I'll ask again and I'll say to DeEndré, "Look, I think DeEndré's response would be something like, "Men are victims too according to a recent statistic."

So you've got four things up on the board, the first two engage Card, and the second two are resistant responses, but they're resistant in very different ways. The first one is just, "I don't think she's right about that." And you can work with that. You can say, "Okay, that's really interesting. So, why? Tell me more about that." But the second one doesn't engage the text and it goes somewhere. It takes the conversation back to a different epistemic home turf. So, I call these, these moves “shadow texts” because they shadow the readings like a detective would shadow a suspect, like they follow without engaging. So I like that image. But shadows are also the product of when an obstacle, light shines on an obstacle and then a shadow is cast. So shadow texts make something opaque rather than moving it forward and giving it traction. So I introduce the term shadow text there and then I try to get students to see the difference between shadow texts and just resisting the text and having an objection to what Card is saying.

Christiane: Alison pointed out that it’s important not to track shadow texts in a way that shames the person enacting them.

Alison Bailey: So, I'm not trying to shut down conversation. And the first time it usually doesn't go well, but this move is so predictable that every time it happens I say, "Okay, let's do the shadow text thing again and see what happens." It's usually by the fourth or fifth time that people begin to see, or learners begin to see, the difference between these two things. And then you can teach critical thinking. And sometimes I'll do a shadow text because this stuff is deep and then I'll stop and go, "Did I just do a shadow text?" And they'll go, "Okay, let's think about this." [laughs] Yeah. So I think it's really important for instructors to present themselves as

learners as well. And when we make mistakes, be vulnerable and say, "See how deep this stuff is? You really have to be attentive to it if you're going to think well."

Christiane: Alison argues that epistemic pushback and shadow texts are instances of ignorance circulating in our conversations. She writes, “...ignorance is not a simple gap in knowledge: It is an active social production.” She explained that classrooms not only produce knowledge, but that they can produce ignorance as well.

Alison Bailey: Sometimes there are a lot of facets to an issue that escape our notice. So for years and years we talked about social injustice without talking about privilege but there was this white ignorance circulating in classrooms that escaped the conversation. So, something I'm interested in exploring, but really haven't figured out a way to do that is to think about how ignorance circulates in higher ed or any educational institution and how to track that. And it's difficult because when you say, "How do we track ignorance?" People automatically think that you're picking out ignorant people. And I'm really interested about what doesn't get taught, what doesn't get engaged, what stuff falls off the table. When we talk about philosophical issues, how we bracket them so that some conversations and issues don't come up. And I think that's an interesting question.

Christiane: Alison says that she wants her students to be able to first of all identify epistemic pushback in the classroom. Then, she wants people to recognize their own defensiveness and realize that it’s not anything to be ashamed of, because we’re doing it all the time.

Alison Bailey: So to be able to catch it and be mindful of it and say to yourself, "Okay, what work is this doing and is this defensiveness or pushback something that's going to move us forward, or cast an obstacle to our kind of knowing?" I just think it's important. I think thinking about critical pedagogy and thinking about how, what kind of discursive moves students make the in the classroom gives us information about power. And then that with the critical thinking tools will give us some information about truth and belief and stuff like that.

So if we can catch ourselves making those moves... and one way to catch them is to think about defensiveness. When do we get defensive? And you can feel it in your body when you start to heat up and you push back immediately as a way of protecting yourself. I don't know if you can stop yourself, but I think you can become aware by listening to your body when these things are coming on, and then think about what you've said. And you can't do it alone. Sometimes you have to talk through with people and say, "Why did I go there?" But then I might say something and hopefully my students will call me out on it, too because there's stuff I miss.

Christiane: If we want to move difficult conversations about privilege and oppression forward, we need to pay attention to all the forms of resistance that come up in the classroom--not just the obvious ones. Once we learn to recognize epistemic pushback in others and in ourselves, we are better poised to dive into the risky, uncomfortable but worthwhile discussions that move us towards a better understanding of the society we live in.

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Christiane: If you want to know more about Alison Bailey's work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org, where we have links to her articles and other work on pedagogy.

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Easter egg:
Christiane: Let me know what you think of today's show - bleck, *us*.

Eleanor, off: [laughs] Let *ME* know!

Christiane: Let *me*, Christiane Wisehart. Do not write to Eleanor Price, do not write to Andrew Cullison.

Eleanor, off: My home cell number is…[Christiane laughing] Please call or text...