

Autonomy and Virtue

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Abstract

Opposition to directive values education and virtue training is usually based on the contention that these practices undermine the development of autonomy. To the extent that directive moral education and training merely impose on children the moral opinions and attitudes of the so-called educators, "values education" and "virtue training" are held to be nothing but indoctrination and inculcation. The supposed paradox of moral education is that it teaches children to imitate their elders and to obey the moral rules under threats of punishment; but actions thus motivated do not qualify as moral actions. It is argued that since values education and virtue training promote imitation, conformity and obedience, these practices are obstacles to autonomous moral decision-making and thus, paradoxically, they promote neither genuine valuing nor genuine virtue.

Against these objections, we argue that directive values education is compatible with the development of autonomous individuals and that virtue training facilitates this development.

Introduction

Many contemporary moral philosophers argue in favor of a return to the Aristotelian emphasis on virtue. Following Aristotle, it is claimed that the virtuous person is one who possesses a "fixed" character and acts from a disposition to do the right thing. The late Edmund L. Pincoffs wrote:

The inculcation of habits may be the best way to develop dispositions. That is why we can give children 'moral training.' But moral training, at best, is imparting habits that are likely to bring about appropriate dispositions Dispositions, as I understand the term, are not just tendencies to act in certain ways but also to feel, to think, and to react and to experience 'passions.'¹

Amy Gutman describes this position at length in her book, *Democratic Education*, from which the essay containing the following remark is drawn:

1. Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986, pp. 80-81.

What I call *moralist* positions on moral education begin where this critique of liberal neutrality leaves off, with a conception of moral education whose explicit purpose is to inculcate character. Proponents of moralist positions, both liberal and conservative, seek to shape a particular kind of moral character through their educational methods They recognize that public schools are appropriate institutions of moral education because good moral character is a social, not just an individual or familial, good.²

And Paul Weiss put the goals of virtue education rather bluntly when he wrote:

§2.69 Men should be taught virtue and be forced to act virtuously Since men are not born virtuous, they must acquire their virtue. The acquisition is the outcome of the performance of acts which promote the attainment of the Good. Such acts are sometimes performed by accident. But they are most effectively and persistently performed when men are directed and controlled by trainers, coaches, disciplinarian teachers in and outside the home. Moral training is in fact one of the primary tasks of the family, and one of the main accomplishments of organized sport..³

Section 1

Consider the person who acts in a certain way simply because another person tells him to do so. Is such a person autonomous with respect to these actions? Some have argued that one is autonomous in such a case as long as one *accepts for oneself* the directives of another. But what does it mean to *accept for oneself* a directive or code of conduct formulated by another?

If to accept such directives for oneself is to critically reflect upon them and to decide for oneself — by applying one’s own standards and values — whether or not the directives ought to be followed, then one is not acting according to the directives simply because this other person tells one to do so. The fact that another commands it is incidental in such a case. The decision to act in accordance with the directives is made not on the basis of the fact that this other person has commanded them, but on the basis of one’s own independent judgment that the directives ought to be followed. The directives are not being followed because they were imposed by an external authority, but because one accepts them and imposes them on oneself. Since one decides for oneself to act as one does, one is clearly autonomous with respect to such actions.

But what if one is considered to *accept for oneself* the directives of another when one freely chooses to uncritically accept these directives as authoritative? Is one autonomous when one chooses to substitute another’s judgment for one’s own, thereby allowing another to decide how one will act? Some have argued that as long as one has freely chosen to uncritically act according to the directives of another, one’s actions can be identified as a product of one’s own independent decision, and thus one is autonomous with respect to these actions. We consider this view to be mistaken. As Robert Paul Wolff has observed,

2. Amy Gutman, “Should Public Schools Teach Virtue?” in Claudia Mills, ed., *Values and Public Policy*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, p. 495.

3. Paul Weiss, *Modes of Being*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958, p. 157.

The autonomous . . . man may do what another tells him, but not because he has been told to do it . . . [B]y accepting as final the commands of the others, he forfeits his autonomy.⁴

Gerald Dworkin rejects this contention and advances a view of autonomy according to which a person who adopts the policy of doing *whatever* his mother, friend, or religious leader tells him to do is autonomous.⁵

He is doing what he wants to do. He is leading just the kind of life he thinks is worth leading. How can he not be autonomous?⁶

The reason such a person, on our view, is not autonomous is that he fails to exercise the capacity for willful action, where the will that directs the action is *one's own*. He is not doing what *he* wants to do, but is allowing another person's wants to determine his actions. He is not leading a life that he things is worthwhile, but is suspending judgment about the quality of the life he leads, substituting another's judgment for his own.⁷

Another example of the forfeiture of autonomy is the commitment to obey the law — be it human law or the law of God — simply because it is the law. Such a commitment also involves the suspension of one's own critical judgment. Rather than exercising one's own capacity to decide whether or not a particular law ought to be followed, one is allowing another's decisions to determine one's action. One is not autonomous with respect to these actions since the will that directs these actions is not one's own, but the will of a legislator or legislative body, be it human or divine.

The response to our view is, of course, that these actions are ultimately traceable to one's own will to the extent that one willfully decides to accept the decisions of another as authoritative. Since one's actions are ultimately a product of one's own decision, it is argued that autonomy is preserved. Distinguishing between formal and substantive views of autonomy, Dworkin rejects the latter and contends that autonomy does not involve any particular content. Consider his explanation of the substantive-procedural distinction:

There is a tension between autonomy as a purely formal notion (where what one decides for oneself can have any particular content), and autonomy as a substantive notion (where only certain decisions count as retaining autonomy whereas others count as forfeiting it). So the person who decides to do what his community, or guru, or comrades tell him to do cannot on the latter view count as autonomous.⁸

4. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 14, 41.

5. Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 21.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

7. Moreover, it cannot even be safely said that the life he leads is based on what another person considers to be a life worth living since it is conceivable that the person directing his life regards it as a worthless existence.

8. Dworkin, *op. cit.*, p. 12

Dworkin's suggestion that "substantive" accounts of autonomy should be rejected commits him to the conclusions that it is impossible for one to decide to forfeit one's autonomy. One retains one's autonomy *no matter what one decides for oneself*. This has the odd consequence that individuals who sign themselves into slavery contracts remain autonomous, that individuals who are in prison remain autonomous, and even that quadriplegic individuals remain autonomous.

Section 2

Er ist nichts so elend als ein mensch, der alles will und der nichts kann. Goethe

1. We propose an analysis of actions as complex assemblies of routines that are, in themselves, automatic. Examples include driving an automobile, playing a piano piece, riding a bicycle.

2. Routines are acquired through training, practice, and are the resultant habits, acquired over long periods and strengthened through repetition under widely varying conditions.

3. Actions (i.e., complex assemblies of routines) are purposive. They may be themselves autonomous or automatic; the difference is one of locus of control. For example, consider the student who practices the piano or plays in a recital because his mother says to or because it is regarded by his piano instructor as a part of training, as compared with the student who plays a piece of music for the joy of its production, and who revels in the achievement of the ability to render the piece well. The former is a student whose playing of the piano may well be externally indistinguishable from that of the latter; her doing so, however, is at the direction of another. The latter student may well have had the same training, the same exercises, the same practice schedule; the motives for undergoing the rigors of training and practice, however, are different, for they lie within the student. One can imagine the latter student has undertaken mastery of the piano despite opposition from a practical-minded parent; the compliant "good girl" would readily abandon the piano if her parent or instructor directed her to do so.

4. Minimally autonomous actions involve internal locus of control in that they issue from arrays of routines sequenced for some purpose; but they are minimally autonomous when the purposes for which they are arrayed by the individual are not chosen by the individual but are selected and directed by others.

5. Fully autonomous actions are minimally autonomous actions to achieve ends critically and reflectively chosen as appropriate to the agent's vision of the self she is and wishes to become; in fully autonomous actions, critical assessment is applied to routines as means as well as to the ends being pursued.

6. Hence, habit and autonomy are mutually supportive in fully autonomous individuals; however, autonomous action presupposes routines first acquired through habituation.

On our analysis, a virtue is a trait of character productive of a behavioral routine. Virtues, as dispositions, are exercised or not. But one who lacks the behavioral routine is one who cannot act virtuously.

7. Hence, autonomous moral action is fully autonomous action resulting from the exercise of virtues.

8. To value is a verb meaning to prefer; hence, a value is a preference. If the goal of values training is to lead the individual into holding certain preferences, the preferences so inculcated will not count as moral values, as values autonomously elected.

9. But as virtues are (only) routines, the goal of virtue training is the inculcation of various abilities: the ability to act decisively, the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, the ability to select a course of action after assessing the potential consequences attendant on the various alternatives.

10. Hence, to escape the paradox of moral education, moral education should aim at (a) training in the skills needed for autonomous, moral reasoning, (b) the ability to set goals and sequence routines into actions that lead to those goals, © the ability to make critical, reflective choice of goals.