

Helping Adolescents Grow: Issues of Autonomy, Authenticity, and Identity Formation

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In her provocative and clearly written essay, Michele Moses invites us to think about the relationships that exist between and among certain political ideals and values and educational policies. Although she does not take her analysis deeply into the rich context of educational practice with its connections to the formation of adolescent identity, that is ultimately where I would encourage her to go next — to test how her analysis meshes with the messy examples teachers are likely to encounter in helping adolescents grow into authentic persons making informed choices to live more self-determining and flourishing lives. In this response I will first summarize briefly Moses's project, then generate a few questions and objections to her argument, and finally invite her to consider how her conceptual framework might be applied to a deliberately messy hypothetical example that I will construct.

First, Moses is to be commended for trying to connect an important conception of political philosophy to education policy; in so doing, her essay reminds us that "education" aims not merely at fostering academic prowess on standardized paper and pencil tests, nor at cultivating the intellect. Rather it aims to develop persons into social citizens whose public and private lives should be satisfying in themselves and should contribute to the communities in which they participate. In my view, the failure of so many contemporary educational leaders to remember that education requires this broader effort to develop flourishing social persons characterizes a conceptually bankrupt discourse about education today, a discourse that has reduced "being educated" to showing educational competence on standardized tests.

In her essay, Moses suggests that "the social institution of education and its concomitant policies should strive to contribute significantly to students' development of self-determination." Self-determination, she argues, "is characterized... by a significant capacity for autonomy (viz., autonomy that is 'worth wanting') within which one's life is not wholly determined by social factors outside of one's control." She also argues that the social ideal is one that will permit individuals to express their authentic personal and cultural identities within a social context that does not severely limit their life choices. Authenticity, she tells us, is "characterized by the ability to be true to oneself." Her argument is deeper and richer, but let me leave the summary here and start the critique.

Let me begin by raising an initial question and an accompanying philosophical concern. The question is what does it mean to "acquire an authentic identity?" This notion of "authentic identity" clearly invokes metaphysical conceptions of the self and of personhood, and not everyone agrees about these. Some acknowledgment of this disagreement would be useful. The existential, pre-Marxist Sartre, for example, does not believe there is anything like an "essential self" and the notion that

individuals might express one distorts what true existential freedom is about. We simply make free choices based on our capacity to project ourselves into the “not-yet” and deny what is. We do not express anything like an “essential identity” — personal and/or cultural. In contrast, Dewey’s view of freedom and autonomy, according to Raymond D. Boisvert, is one that rejects the notion of liberal freedom and autonomy; Boisvert emphasizes that Dewey rejected the “state-of-nature” model for Western liberal individualism and viewed individuals as coming to be socio-biological organisms in association with each other; we live as members of multiple communities and our task is to make those communities as democratically effective as possible. Thus, Boisvert writes, “autonomy as a model for freedom leads in practice to separation from others, not toward democratic community. Deweyan concrete freedom encourages individuals to seek out the proper sorts of association,” that is, those that secure greater powers of effective action.¹ My point here is simple. Metaphysical notions of the self and personhood are matters of great dispute in philosophy, not something upon which we can assume to agree. Since Moses invokes the importance of authentic cultural identity, I would simply note in most traditional Asian cultures “autonomy” or self-determination as a liberal ideal is not emphasized. Nor does it seem to have a central place in traditional Mexican culture.

Another question I would raise for Moses is simply this: Assume that we accept the metaphysical notion of the self and the political version of autonomous personhood you are drawing upon, what would constitute the major barriers to the development of an autonomous, authentic self? Indeed Moses focuses on the barriers thrown up by unjust and limiting social contexts of choice. But she does not adequately address the barriers that may be created by a lack of self knowledge, by self deception, or ignorance. This seems to me to be a severe limitation if we accept the likelihood that many adolescents do not know themselves very well at all. Many seem quite confused about negotiating their way between their own goals and values and those of their friends, their parents, and the different communities to which they belong. In none of her examples in the essay is there a lengthy or serious discussion of a person who simply does not know what she wants, who is confused about her identity, and her core choices.

A further question regarding identity is “how does it change” and what kinds of things are critical to its changing. Throughout the essay, perhaps unintentionally, we get a somewhat static conception of “a person’s identity.” Moses does suggest that one’s identity is “relationally created.” And this is contrasted with one that is “somehow forced upon one.” However, her analysis does not adequately speak to what seems painfully obvious — the extraordinary complexity associated with identity formation and change in adolescents. One might argue, as Herbert Fingarette did, that our sense of who we are is fundamentally opaque rather than transparent and that insights into oneself are rather like pin pricks through a black filter on our psyche — letting in little bits of sunlight that change our sense of who we are.²

In this regard, it seems obvious to me, that privileged folks, and not merely those weighted down by social injustice, could clearly make inauthentic choices; authenticity is affected by self knowledge, by self deception, and by ignorance as well as

by social contexts. However, this truth does not diminish the legitimacy of Moses's concern for eliminating contexts of oppression in schools.

There were times in the essay where it seemed that a limiting context or a coercive context might force inauthentic choices. I think that what Moses is getting at is that such a context can make authentic choices more difficult or dangerous, since she clearly does not want to give up the capacity for social agency among those belonging to oppressed classes. At least I do not think she does. To do so would be a mistake.

It is also unclear how much of a liberal Moses wants to be about schools' capacity to shape the significant contexts of choice regarding race, class, and gender. She writes that "public education and its concomitant policies already contribute to the reproduction of a status quo that exacerbates inequality and oppression." A more radical view would claim that schools are unlikely to become liberating contexts for personal and social choice. I am not sure if Moses would want to make such a claim, but my guess is that it is true. If so, the question for schools becomes not primarily a question about creating more liberating contexts but a question about whether good schools can help foster a deeper, more penetrating understanding of existing contexts and develop in students the capacity for, and inclination toward, resisting and transforming the contexts of oppression. A question is this: Can schools help students acquire the courage to "be themselves" where the social consequences of doing so may be painful?³

Now, finally, I think Moses's analysis would benefit from a richly detailed application to a messy case which may invoke the following ideas: i) adolescent confusion about making the right choice; ii) social presses from different directions to make conflicting choices; iii) identity consequences for the choice being made; iv) tensions between cultural identity and personal identity; and v) problems of figuring out what would make the choice authentic or not. So imagine the following: a 17-year-old Vietnamese adolescent girl has come to California having lived in refugee camps and been on boats raided by pirates; she has been separated from some members of her family but now lives with her mother and several siblings, along with some extended family members. She belongs to a Vietnamese social group on a large high school campus in the east side of San Jose where over 20% of the school population are Vietnamese. She is an excellent math student but does poorly in English; she also excels in music and is a member of the band. She has an Anglo boyfriend that she has not told her mother or her uncles and aunts about. Spring break is coming up and the band has planned a trip back east to play in a tournament. Her boyfriend would like her to come to Los Angeles with him to meet his parents; her mother and elder relatives want her to help with a large family reunion they would like to plan that week; her Vietnamese friends want her to go with them on a four-day camping trip in the Sierras. Most recently, she has been agonizing over a decision to go into teaching math in high school, a decision she knows would very much upset her parents and probably open herself up to ridicule by some friends, since teachers do not make much money. She feels torn and conflicted. She does not know who she really is and how she can possibly satisfy the various people and

groups that are making conflicting demands on her loyalties. Trying to satisfy them for the past six months has cost her countless nights of sleep. Now the Vietnamese girl comes to you, her English teacher for some guidance. How do you help her in her efforts to be self-determining and authentic? How do you conceive of the problem?

This, in my view, would be the kind of mini-case that would take us from the realms of abstraction where political philosophy intersects vaguely with “school policy” and into the concrete identity messes that individuals confront every day. In my view, the issue of whether Vietnamese culture ought to be included in the multicultural curriculum, however important that may be, does not take us very far towards the messier issues of how teachers and administrators can help individuals live flourishing lives. In such messes, we must balance the following: respect for a person’s privacy and idiosyncratic connection with his/her ethno-racial heritage; caring; and a concern for self-knowledge and self-deception. My guess is that there are no recipes for wise judgment here, although there will be ample opportunity to misread the situation; lastly, there will be a very specific and rich context for personal and cultural choice. It is my hope that Moses’s project will take her toward some of these kinds of practical messes — the ones teachers confront every day, the ones many teacher educators would rather avoid in the effort to do a purer form of philosophy.

1. Raymond D. Boisvert, *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 64.

2. See Herbert Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, and the Life of the Spirit* (New York: Harper, 1963).

3. I am indebted to Ron Glass for making this point to me clearly in an email dated March 16, 2000. I would like to thank Ron Glass and William Blizek for sharing their ideas on Michele Moses’s paper.