

Autonomy, Education, and Politics

Edward Sankowski
University of Oklahoma

INTRODUCTION

This essay is intended to make it plausible to believe three connected propositions. The essay is about the variety of social institutions that educate persons (for good or ill) about normative issues. It is about some connections between this institutional variety and an improved model of the central ethical notion of individual freedom as autonomy. Along the way, it is argued that the revision in the concept of autonomy also requires a revision in the concept of the legitimate authority to educate (if any such authority applies) of various institutions and society as a whole. The three propositions, and a brief explication of each one, are as follows.

First, taking individual autonomy seriously (particularly as an ethical concept), properly understood, is consistent with an emphasis on the importance of institutions in social and political philosophy. This is so despite indications that some authors assume a conflict between autonomy-centered and institution-centered social and political thought.¹

Second, individual autonomy can and should be reconceived as a multi-institutional educational notion. The autonomous person is concerned on the new model to have an appropriate share of influence over the multiple institutions which educate her or him (for better or worse). The exercise of autonomy, when autonomy is interpreted as such an educational notion, is not always an activity analogous to the actions of governmental, or even governmental-like, institutions. The concept of self-government should be seen as only one aspect of a more comprehensive concept of self-education, in a better model for individual freedom as autonomy.

Finally, there is some uncertainty about which institutions do or should fulfill the most important educational functions for autonomous persons. The shift to a multi-institutional educational model of autonomy probably de-emphasizes blame and punishment as paradigm expressions of respect for autonomy in educating for autonomy. "Morality" (in roughly Bernard Williams' sense²) as an institution focusing on general principles, moral obligation, and blame, continues to matter in a self-education model of autonomy, as does the criminal law, with its focus on general laws, obligation to obey, and legal punishment. (Williams contrasts the broader field of ethics with morality in the aforementioned narrower sense. In the narrower sense, Williams sees Kant as one of the greatest expositors of morality; a mixed compliment, since Williams regards morality as a form of bondage.) The autonomous person, however, according to the self-education model advocated here, is also concerned about a due share of influence over many other institutions which shape her or him. Correspondingly, such an autonomous person, and an autonomy-enhancing community, will question the legitimacy of many institutions, not solely government. The autonomous individual, and the autonomy-enhancing community, moreover, will be concerned to reconstruct not only government, but

other institutions, in light of what is best for autonomy (among other considerations). Advocacy of different views about which institutions are most important in educating for autonomy is (to a notable extent) advocacy of different views about what aspects of the self are most important. These are the sorts of issues that are permanently open, never conclusively resolved; nor are these issues to be resolved in the same way everywhere at a given time.

It should be understood that “autonomy,” in the sense intended here, is primarily a capacity or tendency of a person to regulate that person’s own psychology and/or acts freely, on the basis of good reasons. Autonomy discourse takes many forms, and it is easy to misconstrue the ideas about ethics and education in this paper by understanding “autonomy” in some other way. Most emphatically, the notion of autonomy, as used here, does not imply either egoism or isolated self-sufficiency.³ As used here, autonomy requires some capacity and/or tendency to reason freely about ethical problems, when the situation requires this.

As John Dewey has memorably taught us, education is much more than schooling.⁴ Following up on Dewey with a special spin for present purposes, we should note that numerous other institutions educate about values (including ethics), whether educating well or badly. Peoples’ work experiences, the operation of the legal system, family life, the interactions typical of the ethical practices of a society, and so on, communicate values (beliefs with propositional content and also non-propositional skills and habits). One worthwhile task for philosophy is showing the consistency (or not!) of the supposedly authoritative educational institutions with the typical individual’s capacity and tendency for exercise of free rationality, especially in its ethical dimensions. It would be distorted to see the situation in terms of a possible conflict between individual autonomy and the state only. It would also be a distortion, as some communitarians such as Charles Taylor have helped us see, to overemphasize the degree to which the autonomous individual can escape the educative workings of culture and community.⁵ Although individual self-education is crucial for autonomy, the self that sometimes educates oneself is, to a large extent (though not entirely), emergent from culture and community.

It would be impossible to describe comprehensively (here or anywhere) the multi-institutional educational network which is a culture or community. Perhaps, however, it would assist in the illustration of the ideas of this essay to think periodically about examples from higher education (by which is conventionally meant certain types of schooling and their extensions). Universities, especially, can be interpreted as institutions in which (along with many other more obvious activities) the claims emanating from varied social institutions to legitimate authority to educate about values are endorsed, challenged, clash, and so on, and where the question of the bearings of multi-institutional education on individual autonomy should be assessed. Universities do not usually acquit themselves well at this task, but one could plausibly argue that the task itself should be one central function of the modern university; the university should even investigate its own pretensions to educational authority. Dewey connected democracy intimately with education. Building on Dewey, we might plausibly say that a vital component of education for

democracy must be such an examination of the credentials of various institutions which engage in values education. What better place, in theory, for such an examination (if all were as it should be) than the modern university? The neglect of this task by many universities needs criticism from whatever pulpit or lecture platform is available. This is not because other institutions, such as business or the state, could somehow take over wholesale the task of the universities — quite the contrary. One index of the condition of democracy in a contemporary society is the extent to which universities are enabled to carry out the task of critical examination of the authority of the multiple educational institutions of society in the interests of autonomy. It seems very unlikely that this critique could be adequately done in a modern community without well-organized, independent, critical universities. Since, for the most part, we lack such universities, we can add that lack to the many other reasons for worrying about democracy, and for devising whatever plans for improvement imagination in the service of autonomy can provide.

AUTONOMY AND INSTITUTIONS

In their remarkable book, *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah and his co-authors discuss institutions in the United States of America. They scarcely mention autonomy. The discourse of autonomy came in for criticism in the authors' earlier *Habits of the Heart*, so perhaps the authors view it as unnecessary to elaborate on the earlier criticism and more imperative to stress the critical discussion of institutions.⁶ In *The Good Society*, in a chapter entitled "We Live Through Institutions," they write, "The classical liberal view has elevated one virtue, autonomy, as almost the only good, but has failed to recognize that even autonomy depends on a particular kind of institutional structure and is not an escape from institutions altogether" (*GS*, 12).

It is indeed a good thing to remind us that "autonomy depends on a particular kind of institutional structure." (What such a structure might be is, of course, a controversial matter.) It is a good thing, however, only if one does not reject autonomy altogether. There are signs, though, in *The Good Society* of a more puzzling and negative view than that about autonomy. Autonomy is criticized in the same breath as "Lockean individualism," and it is written:

In the polity as in the economy, Americans have imagined that they can behave as autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests...But the illusion that we are autonomous is becoming increasingly implausible as we experience more directly our dependence on collective forces (*GS*, 112).

Discourse about autonomy takes many different forms. This essay does not profess to represent all forms of autonomy, nor, in particular, to defend Lockean individualism. This essay does aim to show, however, that emphasis on autonomy, appropriately construed, can be consistent with acceptance of an ethical and political outlook that acknowledges the significance of varied institutions. This also requires, however, a broadening of the question of which institutions legitimately have the authority to educate in a way consistent with autonomy.

Contrasting *Habits of the Heart* with *The Good Society*, the authors write that "we are now focusing on the patterned ways Americans have developed for living

together, what sociologists call institutions” (*GS*, 4). In an appendix on “Institutions in Sociology and Public Philosophy,” there is additional discussion of the nature of institutions and how to study them (*GS*, 287-306). The present essay agrees with much of that discussion, including the spirit of the remark that “we see a need in both the social sciences and philosophy for more explicit ways to attend to institutions” (*GS*, 303). This essay, however, constructively combines and does not contrast autonomy and institutions. Recent philosophical work on autonomy, and other philosophical work on institutions, suggests the feasibility of this.⁷

Suppose we think of autonomy, as in this essay, as a capacity or tendency of a person to regulate freely that person’s own psychology and acts on the basis of good reasons. Suppose further that we think of autonomy as to a large extent (not entirely) the product of education. The exercise of autonomy can itself be conceived as an educational process. “Education,” as used here, includes conscious and unconscious shaping by groups and individuals of a person’s capacities and tendencies. Education is not limited, of course, to schooling. Education is accomplished through the action of many institutions. Schooling, however, and particularly its higher educational manifestations in universities, is the most formal and self-conscious attempt of a society to educate, whether for autonomy or otherwise. The culture wars in universities, whether declared over or not, the constant skirmishing among different disciplines and areas in the university, the anxieties and resentments when universities extend their influence into the rest of society, or, as is more likely, when the rest of society seeks various controls over universities, all these are symptoms of the symbiotic relationship between authority claims (and critique of authority) in the university, and counterparts in the political culture outside the university. The university is only one institution, but it seems extraordinarily revealing about the wider society’s explicit or implied claims about the legitimate authority to educate.

It might be thought that we are taking too much for granted in using the notion of an institution. What, after all, is an institution? Roughly (as in *The Good Society*), institution-concepts are used in the context of an area of social activity with characteristic values of its own, for example, conceptions of goods and bads, roles, obligations, rights, virtues and vices, and so on. Participants in institutional activity, and others talking about them, often refer to an institution with an ordinary language word or a phrase: the state, the family, religion, and so on. There is, however, no necessity that all interesting institutions can be picked out in this way. It is, indeed, part of autonomy to seek deepened understanding and critique of the more and less obvious institutions that educate (for good or ill).

FROM SELF-GOVERNMENT TO SELF-EDUCATION

In this essay, autonomy is conceived as an educational notion. By “education,” what is meant is primarily ethical and political education. Education in values, however, is also of interest here, and that is a broader concept. Education in ethics, politics, or values generally occurs constantly, sometimes surreptitiously, as much in the advanced engineering course as in the moral philosophy seminar. To think that issues about education for autonomy are absent from the more technical parts of the university curriculum, in general, is a great mistake. The question is whether or how

they are addressed. Not only are there the usual issues about professional ethics in the university curriculum. In a broader sense, the technical areas are always in service, or co-existing with, or challenging, the political order, including its pretensions to democratic legitimacy (when these are present). The politics of democracy is a topic to be dispersed (in a critical and anti-dogmatic way) throughout the university curriculum, not to be set aside in a separate course or department.

Without abandoning completely the picture of autonomy as self-regulation, self-rule, self-determination, self-government (in particular), and so on, we wish to super-impose on this picture an idea that includes it, but goes beyond it: the idea of self-education. As with self-government, self-education is rendered possible, or facilitated, by the acts of other individuals, and society generally. Previously we defined autonomy as a capacity or tendency for a person to regulate freely that person's own psychology and acts on the basis of good reasons. The exercise of autonomy in this sense could be conceived as a mode of self-education, as readily as a mode of self-government. A good reason, freely applied in self-regulation, teaches something, and one learns from it.

This suggested shift is partly a shift in metaphor. One's metaphors are no trivial matter philosophically. The metaphor of self-government encourages excessive attention to laws or, analogously, relies excessively on moral principles in practical reasoning. Arguably, this is true of the Rousseau of *The Social Contract*, and of some versions of Kantianism. While laws and principles matter for autonomy, some good reasons appeal to neither. Another problem about autonomy, conceived as self-government, is that it lends itself too readily to excessive reverence for the state. By modeling rational freedom excessively on the idea of government, we encourage the acceptance of statist modes of thought without careful examination. Oddly, relying heavily on the metaphor of self-government can also encourage unreflectively excessive hostility to the state, as the supposedly primary threat to autonomy. Thus statism and its supposed opposite, culturally and educationally, in actuality, help support one another.

The tendency of the metaphor of autonomy as self-government is to depict paradigm exercises of autonomy as less enlightening to the autonomous person than such exercises can be, and more a matter of coercion or constraint, legal or moral. This is admittedly a matter of nuance. Ideas such as government, rule, regulation, determination, do allow to some extent for the governor to influence the governed, and vice versa, by back-and-forth exchange of reasons, or careful justification by the governor, or free acknowledgment by the governed of the merits of a policy, or even the personal transformation of the governor or the governed. There is also a temptation, however, to think of these notions in terms of command and obedience, the imposition of one will on another, a sequence in which neither those who command nor those who obey learn much. In exercises of autonomy, sometimes the person who commands is the same as the person who obeys, and governmental metaphors can encourage the picture of a strangely divided being. These coercive or constraining connotations of talk about the interpersonal phenomena of governing and being governed are too readily transferred by analogy to the internal organization of the supposedly autonomous person.

Often, writers on autonomy stress the ideas of law, government, and the like. So writes Joel Feinberg:

Philosophers have long had an expression to label the realm of inviolable sanctuary most of us sense in our own beings. That term is *personal autonomy*. The word "autonomy" is obviously derived from the Greek stems for "self" and "law" or "rule," and means literally "the having or making of one's own laws." Its sense therefore can be rendered at least approximately by such terms as "self-rule," "self-determination," "self-government," and "independence." These senses are all familiar to us from their more frequent, and often more exact, application to states and institutions. Indeed it is plausible that the original applications and denials of these notions were to states and that their attribution to individuals is derivative, in which case "personal autonomy" is a political metaphor.⁸

Gerald Dworkin, similarly, writes:

What I believe is the central idea that underlies the concept of autonomy is indicated by the etymology of the term: *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law). The term was first applied to the Greek city state. A city had *autonomia* when its citizens made their own laws, as opposed to being under the control of some conquering power.⁹

The Greek city state, we are told by Dworkin, was autonomous to the extent that it was free of foreign domination. Now, by way of contrast, it is worth remarking that "nomos" can be law, but can also be convention, usage, or custom. To some extent, this helps us to challenge the focus on the state in many pictures of autonomy, and to shift to a picture of acculturation that is more general and more complex than governmental control. Whatever the Greeks said, as everyone should acknowledge, how we develop and modify our metaphors is up to us. The individual self, we suggest, is found in large part by acceptance, rejection, modification, or innovative creation of this or that set of conventions, customs, usages: we could call these institutions in a broad sense. To summarize, autonomy can be conceived as self-government, but only if that is understood as compatible with self-education through diverse institutions. The autonomous person is not solely concerned about the state and its commands (or analogous phenomena), but also about the generation of many normative urgings through many institutional forms. The legitimate authority of these diverse institutions, and of society as a whole, requires scrutiny, in terms of respect for autonomy in the re-interpreted sense.

THE NETWORK OF INSTITUTIONS AND THE FUNCTION OF BLAME AND PUNISHMENT

It is in the nature of institutions that there is no finite list of institutions. Nor is there a uniquely correct institutional description and explanation of a society's activities. Which institutions *do* educate is a difficult question to answer; which *should* educate, still more difficult.

The law-oriented and moral-principle-oriented outlook is an artifact of a particular philosophical period. During this period, especially from Rousseau onward, much emphasis has been put on whether or how the state might be legitimate, especially in those laws which demand obedience, with pain of punishment for disobedience. Sometimes, as in Rousseau, this admittedly tremendously important question distracts us from the critical examination of other aspects of autonomy and institutions: the inadequacies of the patriarchal, sentimental nuclear family, for example, which can itself crush autonomy. This undermines Rousseau's political theory. The less socially explicit approach of Kant also focuses on general

moral principles which are law-like, and corresponding obligations, transgressions of which demand blame. There are many corrective complexities in Rousseau and Kant. This essay is somewhat caricaturing these great authors to make a point. As pre-eminent modern theorists of autonomy, their influence has furthered a focus on criminal laws and moral principles in autonomy-centered politics and morality. One of the purposes of a multi-institutional, educational account of autonomy is to correct that view of autonomy.

It requires more discussion than can be supplied here, but the change in emphasis advocated here requires a correlative rethinking of the role of blame and punishment in morality and law, in light of changed views about autonomy. Radical skepticism about the justifiability of blame and punishment is one serious alternative. What is more likely, however, is the following. The connections between the theory of autonomy and the theory of blame and punishment will have to be re-conceived. The best education for autonomy may turn out to have only a subsidiary role (if any) for blame and punishment. We do not now know this, but we cannot do moral and political philosophy as if it were self-evident that the big questions are about moral or political obligation, and related issues about blame and punishment. That older way of thinking still conceives of autonomy (as a capacity) in its role in violations of general principles or laws, violations that subject the violator to blame or punishment. Blame or punishment of agents for actions which violate general moral principles, or the criminal laws, continue to be important institutions, worth critical examination. Critique and re-construction of such institutions is very important in the account of what constitutes a legitimate social and political order. Blame and punishment, however, are at most a part, and perhaps a small part, of the set of institutions which would best educate for autonomy.¹⁰

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In re-conceiving autonomy as an educational notion, in broadening (beyond the state) the set of institutions which claim legitimate authority to educate, we need not give up the idea that the contribution of the individual to that same individual's own education matters, though we recognize the enormous part played by culture (indeed, by the multiplicity of cultures) in education, sometimes aptly described as "shaping" the individual. The potentially autonomous individual is educated about values (sometimes in very imperative terms) by numerous institutions that make up a culture, but can also intervene in varied ways to function as a contributor to, and creator of, culture. This goes far beyond obeying and creating the laws of morality or the criminal justice system. The legitimate authority of a society as a whole depends on achieving the correct harmony of influence among educative institutions, and the correct harmony between the whole set of institutions and the individual who must react to, but also reinvent, them. Admittedly, much more would have to be said to make these phrases into something definite as a political and educational ideal. These are problems that remain for future inquiry and practice. But there is an additional dimension worth commenting on briefly.

This essay has been cast as a discussion of society's legitimate authority to educate, considered from a domestic point of view, that is, its internal authority

among its own people. The concept of autonomy, and the part played by education, however, are grander even than this. On a global and international scale, increasingly, we must work out a justifiable set of values to guide educational practice among state-level societies. Universities also have their role in carrying out this task, particularly in an age of increasing internationalization. It is very difficult to work out a set of global and international values (whether inside or outside of university culture) without crossing a boundary about reasonable arguments among people of good will in different societies, crossing into serving as agents of cross-cultural domination. That is also an educational and political problem within the multicultural societies that constitute many countries. But there are added complications when we attempt to argue that something like the concept of autonomy, suitably re-interpreted as an educational notion, might assist in guiding cross-governmental, cross-national encounters. Can we avoid falling into ethnocentrism or chauvinism? On the other hand, if we lose our nerve and drop the demands of self-determining freedom as universal demands, might we be falling into some objectionable relativism (not assuming all relativisms are objectionable)? Might we, in that case, be giving up the grandest guiding idea of all in ethics, politics, and education? Huge problems in internationalizing political philosophy loom here. Only by discussing the nature and prospects of world community can we hope to make progress with these problems, rather as we need to address the nature of institutions and community on the domestic front within any society that hopes to educate free citizens within its borders. Actually, the international issues impact on questions of democratic legitimacy on the domestic front. This is a point that much traditional political philosophy, as studied in Western universities, has tended to overlook. The many international issues about education for autonomy, and the combining of self-government with self-education on an international as well as national level, however, will have to wait for philosophical treatment in another context.

1. See, for example, Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991). This book will be cited as *GS* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

2. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), esp. chap. 10, "Morality, the Peculiar Institution."

3. For a helpful discussion, see David A.J. Richards, "Rights and Autonomy," in *The Inner Citadel — Essays on Individual Autonomy*, ed. John Christman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

4. See, esp. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

5. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

6. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

7. For a sampling of views about autonomy, see John Christman, *The Inner Citadel*. Views on autonomy may be distinguished according to the degree and manner in which they incorporate reference to institutions into an account of what autonomy is. Philosophers are not always self-conscious about this when they write about autonomy. For an interesting discussion of institutions, see Marcus Singer, "Institutional Ethics," in *Supplement to "Philosophy,"* ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 223-45.

8 See Feinberg, "Autonomy," in Christman, *The Inner Citadel*, 27-53, esp. 27.

9. See Gerald Dworkin, "The Concept of Autonomy," in Christman, *The Inner Citadel*, 54-62, esp. 57.

10. Interestingly, Feinberg is aware of the possible future decay of the nation-state, and he concedes that this might require adjustments in our thinking about the analogy between autonomous individuals and autonomous states. Feinberg, however, does not seem to favor or even entertain the idea that if there were fundamental institutional changes, we might do well to modify our reliance on analogies between individual persons and states, so far as the theory of autonomy is concerned. See *Harm to Self*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 50-51. Feinberg here comments on autonomy as the "sovereign authority to govern oneself." His position is puzzling, especially in its unsupported assertion that even if a sense of world community grows, we ought to continue to model individual autonomy on the nation-state.