

Implications of Deweyan Non-ideal Autonomy on Education Practice and Policy

Sarah M. Stitzlein

University of Cincinnati

Terri Wilson and Matthew Ryg offer a helpful reconstruction of a Deweyan conception of autonomy, an endeavor that itself seems to partially embody the Deweyan spirit of inquiring into the usefulness of a concept and grounding it in real contexts before assessing its value. I appreciate the way they carefully bring together Deweyan accounts of interest, self, and habit to offer a non-ideal account of autonomy, while being careful not to problematically read into or onto John Dewey a notion of autonomy when he himself uses the term so rarely. I say “partially” embody the Deweyan spirit because while this essay lays the groundwork of justifying an intriguing account of non-ideal autonomy, to fully embody a Deweyan approach, Wilson and Ryg need to pay much more attention to how this reconstructed concept might actually *work* within real contexts, especially in the midst of debates regarding educational policy and practice today — to determine whether it works, for whom, and in what circumstances. In this response, I will briefly add additional clarification to Wilson and Ryg’s helpful overview of self, interest, and habit, before addressing ways in which Dewey’s non-ideal view of autonomy might be helpful, and then close by expanding more on why this view of autonomy matters for educational practice and policy, especially in the context of school choice issues today.

As Wilson and Ryg rightfully note, many conversations about educational authority and choice today revolve around interests, specifically the interests of the state, the parents, and the child. Borrowing from Dewey, Wilson and Ryg also rightfully argue that the interests approach is problematic, for there is no ready-made person who abstractly holds or invokes his interests regardless of situation or environment. Indeed, the self cannot be abstracted from the world in which it acts and transacts. So Wilson and Ryg point us toward a notion of autonomy that is a “critically reflective *dimension of the self*, but the self always remains constituted by specific habits, practices, and environments.” They locate autonomy within the self in ways that are necessarily connected to others, rather than as some type of solely distinct feature of a person.

This is the point at which habit is perhaps the most useful notion they draw upon in their reconstruction. For Dewey, “All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will they *are will*.”¹ As I have argued elsewhere,

There is no complete distinct person behind the habits who is completely divested from habits them and can choose which habit to enact and when. People do not use habits at will because they do not preexist them. “The use itself is the habit, and ‘we are the habit.’”²

Habits are active and projective. They are not just acquired ways of being that we form through social transactions, but rather also entail the active, organizing force

of intelligent inquiry. It is habits that enable us to perceive and process the world around us, thereby preceding and shaping our ideas.

With this additional insight into the Deweyan understanding of habit, we see that Dewey's notion of autonomy points toward autonomy as what Wilson and Ryg dub a "quality of experience," but one that is active — one that acts as a verb. Dewey sees bodies (or more accurately, body-minds) as verbs or gerunds — bodying. They are centers of activity. When autonomy is seen as a quality of experience of the engaged Deweyan body-mind, then autonomy is not some type of goal or end state that can be conveyed as a noun. Rather, it is an action, something that the body-mind does as it transacts with the world. As actions must always be situated, the reconstructed Deweyan account of autonomy is necessarily grounded in our real world experiences, which themselves are multiple and conflicting, rather than an abstracted ideal. This sense of autonomy better fits with the ways in which autonomy claims are often invoked in education practice and policy — as being torn between the interests of children, parents, and the state.

In terms of educational practice, the focus of teaching must then be on creating certain types of social environments that foster autonomy as an embodied habit, an activity guided by intellectual inquiry. Bad habits are those that become stagnant and routine, failing to keep up with the changing world around us or enable fruitful relationships between people. They prevent us from full reflection, intellectual inquiry, or the ability to envision and enact a different world for ourselves. If educational experiences do not foster the interplay of reflection and transaction directed toward growth, bad habits may thrive and autonomy may be at risk. Teachers, then, have a responsibility to prevent the stagnation of habit, to keep habit flexible and viable so that it carries students from one satisfactory experience to the next. Dewey explains, "We cannot change habit directly: that notion is magic. But we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions, by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfillment of desires."³ Good educational practice facilitates environments that immerse students in conflicting interests and ways of being, so that students must not only make decisions between them, but must act on them, in turn, shaping their lives.

In more ideal-driven philosophy, autonomy is a concept often linked with notions of freedom, where one's measure of achieving freedom depends in part on the fulfillment of autonomy. For Dewey, freedom "depends on the continued development and growth of experience. Insofar as Dewey conceives of freedom as the ability to change oneself, to frame purposes in the world, and to enact environmental change, flexible habits are central to achieving this goal."⁴ It seems, then, that Dewey's non-ideal autonomy may give us a new way to measure whether schools are sufficiently cultivating or enacting autonomy by looking at the extent to which it "works" within our real world endeavors to frame new purposes and to change oneself and the surrounding world — ends-in-view that guide our experiences. I admire Wilson and Ryg for asking, "to what extent does autonomy draw from the realities of lived experience? In what ways might it subsequently refine and guide

experience?” Notably, Dewey does offer criteria for “what works” that takes into account democratic norms, pursuit of freedom, impact on others, facilitation of growth, flourishing, and the meeting of our needs.

The implications of Dewey’s non-ideal autonomy are important in education policy matters, especially those related to authority, school choice, and the interests of parents. For example, school choice movements increasingly seem to shift attention to schools and choices that affirm particular religious or cultural beliefs of parents or a community. This shift warrants attention from philosophers of education as public schools or public funding sources and their mission of creating educated citizens must be balanced alongside private interests of parents and communities who want to pass on their particular views to their children.

School choice policy offers an intriguing testing ground for Dewey’s non-ideal autonomy. If a father removes his daughter from a public school that he finds objectionable and places her into a private school more aligned with his cultural, moral, or religious beliefs, the exit option of the private school poses an interesting situation for non-ideal autonomy. Because the girl (via her father) always has an exit option within a private school setting, the private school can even more forcefully or narrowly cling to its mission or worldview. So while the father may be enacting some form of freedom by placing his daughter into a school he prefers, the Deweyan non-ideal form of autonomy Wilson and Ryg describe may be jeopardized.

Whereas established arguments using more idealized forms of autonomy⁵ would highlight that the child could not achieve this desired state unless presented multiple options of the good life and enabled to choose between them in some type of largely unencumbered way, the non-ideal form calls attention to the need for an educational setting that actively engages children within conflicting worldviews. It urges that children be immersed in multiple and competing communities so that they can learn to navigate for themselves as they frame purposes and act in the world around them. To do so, the alternative views espoused in those communities must be legitimately held and expressed by believers and should not be downplayed by the availability of an exit option. Finally, the quality of the school experience for cultivating autonomy depends, in part, on its ability to provide students a space where they not only select amongst alternative visions of the good life, but construct and pursue their own visions via guided intellectual inquiry. This measure of whether “it works” may lead to new thinking on determining whether private schools are valid alternatives to public schools or recipients of public funds via vouchers.

In closing, Wilson and Ryg have reconstructed a useful notion of non-ideal autonomy, one I hope that other philosophers and policy analysts will begin to test out in more detail within school practice and policy.

1. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1922/2002), 25.

2. Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Breaking Bad Habits of Race and Gender: Transforming Identity in Schools* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 16; quoting Gert J.J. Biesta and Nicolas C. Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 38.

3. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 20.

4. Stitzlein, *Breaking Bad Habits of Race and Gender*, 100.

5. See Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006).