

Attunement, Relation, and Autonomy as Virtues of Character

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In his engaging and thought-provoking essay, Peter Giampietro correctly observes that autonomy has a rich and enduring history within educational theory. One of the primary goals of education within a democratic context, a position he accepts, is encouraging students as future citizens to make informed, reflective, and independent judgments on the moral, social, and political issues they confront. In spite of Giampietro's worries, understanding autonomy as virtue of character promoted through education is a democratic goal well worth salvaging. In this essay, I defend the ideal of autonomy as a virtue of character against the two major criticisms Giampietro alleges: (a) autonomy focuses upon the agent as an isolated individual; and (b) autonomy encourages rigid technologies of the self.

By adopting the idea of autonomy as a virtue of character Giampietro worries that "we encourage individualistic interpretations of complex social processes, as if all the working class students need to do is 'find' or develop the right amount of will or character strength to succeed." There are, as Giampietro recognizes, various accounts on how education fosters autonomy as a virtue of character, but most of these models emphasize the qualities described by R.S. Peters: "Autonomy implies the ability and determination to regulate one's life by rules which one has accepted for oneself presumably because the reasons are both apparent and convincing."¹ Giampietro claims that such conceptions of autonomy ignore the potential structural impediments to autonomous decision making and provides the results of an ethnographic study on working-class girls as compelling evidence to support his view. We learn that, as a young working-class woman, Nicky emotionally struggles with how her autonomous aim of pursuing an academic career emotionally separates her from family. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, then, Giampietro claims that her ability to make a truly autonomous choice free from relational considerations is necessarily restricted. The virtue of "will strength" alone, in his view, is insufficient to ensure Nicky's pursuit of an academic career because it neglects the scope and depth of the practical and emotional challenges working-class girls such as Nicky confront. Giampietro is appropriately concerned that the liberal model of autonomy may imply to some that working-class students who fail to meet their educational goals lack the necessary character qualities to succeed academically. Failure to succeed educationally, then, becomes a failure of personal character rather than the result of the structural impediments and emotional tensions they confront.

Although I have genuine sympathy with Giampietro's concern, a decision to relinquish one's particular educational goals and pursue a closer familial relationship might actually be an autonomous decision if that decision is made on the basis of the agent's independent judgment. To suggest that women in similar circumstances to Nicky's are incapable of exercising autonomous choice is an actually an affront to their capacity to possess an authentic voice. Understanding this nuanced

model of agency, Robert Wolff points out that responding to the wishes or dictates or others might very well remain an autonomous choice since the autonomous person “may do what others tell him, but not because he has been told to do it.”²

The type of challenge to autonomy Giampietro advances is similar to those launched by feminists and communitarians who both highlight the external forces that inevitably impinge on an agent’s unconstrained capacity to act autonomously, entirely free from undue influence or coercion. For example, feminists such as Kathryn Pyne Addelson and Susan Hekman reject the traditional model of liberal autonomy by arguing that the concept rests on untenable immunity from social and patriarchal forces that seriously undermine a woman’s autonomous decision-making capacity.³ Communitarians often challenge the ideal of autonomy on the grounds it inadequately explains individual actions within historically mediated contexts. Hence, the concerns about autonomy prompted by the ethnographic examples cited by Giampietro are relatively common and important, but they do not, in my view, warrant jettisoning the ideal of autonomy as a virtue of character.

Regardless of the external constraints agents confront there remains an undeniably clear and tenable distinction between persons who arrive at their decisions on the basis of critical reflection and informed analyses, and those habituated to accept direction or information entirely on the basis of external testimony. Clearly, autonomous agents pursue actions to achieve ends they have critically and reflectively chosen as appropriate to the agent’s vision of self-identity. In Nicky’s case, this might mean the pursuit of an academic career but it might also mean a decision to establish closer emotional links with her family and friends. If virtue is defined as a trait of character producing a behavioral routine, the role of education in creating autonomous individuals is habituating students to the practice of making informed, critically reflective and independent choices. But, even if we view autonomy as attunement and relation, an agent possessing these sensibilities must still develop the particular virtues of character that foster such qualities.

The second point of criticism Giampietro raises in the introduction is never manifestly addressed in the paper. In the introduction he rejects autonomy as a virtue of character because, adopting Foucault’s position, it “encourages rigid technologies of the self.” Generally, the postmodern challenge to autonomy reflected in Foucault’s comments questions the possibility of a coherent subject who constructs identity on the basis of independent reflection. Hostile to the notion of a self constructing agent, Foucault views the self as a discursive construction that protects existing regimes of knowledge and power by creating a politically passive subject who internalizes prevailing social norms.⁴ Other postmodernists such as Baudrillard consider it impossible to stand beyond the ideological and limiting influences that shape individual consciousness.⁵ As postmodernists such as Foucault and Baudrillard suggest, there is probably no such thing as an entirely un-coerced and absolutely autonomous self and, even if there was, there is no definitively reliable mechanism to distinguish absolutely autonomous choices from ideologically manipulated ones.

Although Foucault bears a general hostility toward liberal notions of autonomy, he also seems to appreciate its fundamental importance in human experience. His

particular version of autonomy, if I may be permitted the considerable indulgence to term it in that fashion, allows for a dynamic notion of self absent in traditional liberal accounts. However, the ultimate objective Foucault identifies in the existential quest for critical ontology sounds strikingly similar to the liberal ideal of autonomy as a virtue of individual character:

The critical ontology of our selves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived of as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.⁶

Foucault's authentic subject seemingly reflects on the sources of his or her convictions and traces belief genealogy in a manner consistent with an autonomous agent who develops these habitual dispositions as virtues of character. His attention to this issue also underscores the existential human craving, even among skeptical postmodernists, to arrive at independently constructed viewpoints, values, and conclusions.

CONCLUSION

Although the challenges launched by Giampietro, feminists, postmodernists, and communitarians are all warranted to the extent they highlight the error in ahistorical identity construction, and emphasize the mediating role of community and ideological influence on individual agency, encouraging autonomous decision making as a character of virtue ought to remain a primary objective of education. There is no logical or practical contradiction in accepting the impact of external constraints on agency and promoting the ideal of autonomy as a virtue of character, an ideal that perhaps should include the virtues of attunement and relation. Giampietro's critique simply suggests understanding autonomy along more flexible lines in that the self must be understood as socially situated and heterogeneous; and autonomy must be understood along a continuum as a matter of degree, historically mediated by context and in relation to other individuals. Ultimately, however, there remains a clear and tenable distinction between individuals who arrive at their choices on the basis of informed reflection and independent critical analyses, and those who simply accept external direction. This fundamental distinction is best captured by understanding the concept of autonomy as a virtue of character fostered by an education that promotes, among other dispositions, the continual exploration of belief genealogy advocated by Foucault.

1. R.S. Peters, *The Philosophy of Education* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 197.

2. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 14–41.

3. Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *Moral Passages* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Susan J. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

4. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1991), 32–50.

5. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. M. Poster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

6. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 47.