

## (Un)Disciplining Virtue: Autonomy as Attunement and Relation

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Discussing autonomy as an educational goal has a rich history within educational theory. Each decade since the 1960s has seen reformulations of its definition, educational and political justifications for its promotion, and explorations of the ethical problems it provokes. Recent liberal education theorists continue to build upon prior work, arguing again that an education for personal autonomy promotes liberal democratic ends.<sup>1</sup> I agree with them, but in this paper I argue that a key thesis emerging in contemporary arguments, that autonomy is a virtue of character, suffers from two essential flaws. First, it continues to focus autonomy theory upon the agent as an isolated individual, and second it encourages rigid “technologies of the self” to reinforce that isolation. I draw upon recent ethnographic research on the relationship between social class and education to situate my concerns about autonomy as a virtue. I conclude that we should reject the identification of autonomy with individual virtue, and, drawing upon Heesoon Bai’s notion of autonomy as “attunement,” I suggest that autonomy is better conceived as an intrinsically relational concept.

Autonomy theorists have long worried about how external conditions and social relationships unduly and unjustly influence individual choices. It is this focus that frequently motivates exploration of the notion of autonomy. Thus, many conceptions of autonomy take account of potential coercive circumstances and coercive “others.” We see this theme in contemporary accounts. For example, Rob Reich defines autonomy as “the ability of persons to examine and evaluate their underlying commitments, values, desires, motivations, and beliefs,” stressing *freedom from coercion*.<sup>2</sup> But, for many in the liberal education tradition dating back to R.S. Peters and R.F. Dearden in the 1970s, the rational scrutiny of our opinions and motives for action fails to capture what they take to be the essence of autonomy.<sup>3</sup> They want to further buttress the notion of autonomy by speaking of proper motivational attributes of persons. We find this in Eamonn Callan’s insightful writing: “The strongly autonomous self is to be distinguished from others partly by a level of rationality at which the motivational structure is developed in a realistic fashion and occurrent desires are regulated in the same manner.”<sup>4</sup> Callan explains that by “realistic” rationality, he means that the autonomous person embraces “a persistent orientation of the mind towards reality and a corresponding suppression of the various ways human beings are apt to evade reality.”<sup>5</sup> On his account, the autonomous person embraces critical reasoning and exhibits the strength to achieve goals in the face of difficulties.

Callan argues that, in the face of strong social forces tempting us, especially the young, *at every twist and turn*, certain character traits are needed to resist the pressures against the development and sustaining of autonomy. His view of autonomy emphasizes the fact that it is “an amalgam of capacity, desire, and

emotional susceptibility.”<sup>6</sup> The value of autonomy, he claims, is that it enables “us to live as we should under conditions of countervailing desire and emotion.”<sup>7</sup> On this account of autonomy, the autonomous person has well-developed “will strength.” Rather than succumbing to the irrational folly of accepting certain unexamined desires, the autonomous person is resolutely virtuous: “One can allow a state of mind to come into being in which what one wills is what one feels tempted to do. The struggle of resisting temptation is simply the attempt to prevent this mental state from arising by focusing attention upon those interests to which it runs counter.”<sup>8</sup> While he does not define autonomy as a virtue in Aristotelian terms, Callan does subscribe to the Aristotelian premise that the virtue of autonomy is sustained and nurtured by its continual practice. I admit that I find Callan’s notion of autonomy as a virtue quite compelling, but my explorations into social class leave me wondering if we should at least hesitate or even decline to adopt this sort of account.

In order to justify my inclination to reject a virtue account of autonomy, I turn to recent research into social class and education. Because social class greatly influences the probability of student academic success for a variety of reasons having to do with economic, structural, and social features associated with social-class membership, I contend that the struggle to succeed in middle-class dominated schools tests working-class students’ autonomy. Their self-chosen goals to attend college and to succeed in their academic pursuits involves the on-going negotiation and renegotiation of their social relationships, requiring them to sustain their autonomous growth in the presence of considerable pressures not to continue, to conform to social relationships that pull against “border-crossings” into the middle-class dominated world of academics.

In a recent longitudinal ethnographic study of girls in different social class locations, Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey, and June Melody present insight into the reasoning and emotional life of working-class girls attempting to succeed in school; for example, they detail the academic career of a working-class girl who identifies from a young age that she wants to attend a university, a “life plan” distinctly different from those of her immediate family members.<sup>9</sup> As an elementary student, Nicky’s teachers describe her as being “quietly motivated” with considerable “inner strength” and self-sufficiency. Her strength of will sustains her negotiation of considerable obstacles. For example, Nicky’s parents, while supportive, do not have the financial or the intellectual resources with which to help her succeed in school. As a result, Nicky shields them from her school challenges (academic and social), and she develops an identity independent of them. Nicky works long hours to fund school. Nicky disciplines herself to become the hard-working, successful student. But, because she seeks to shield her parents from worries about school funding, and from guilt about not being able to help her with academics and the myriad decisions associated with the school experience, Nicky separates herself emotionally, intellectually, and socially from her family. The changes associated with advanced study further exacerbate the alienation process.<sup>10</sup>

In college at the time of the research’s publication, the young woman the researchers describe now continues to be fiercely independent. She is also one who

is greatly conflicted emotionally because of her educational path. She expresses the common working-class sentiment that she finds no social congruence within the world of her working-class home or within that of her largely middle-class, university peer group. Similar to other working-class university students in the study, Nicky expresses a sense of profound isolation as a result. Although she forms friendships within her new academic setting, she maintains rigid boundaries between her school relationships and those of her working-class community. As a result, Nicky experiences increasing isolation from her family. Researchers stress that the resulting emotions of guilt, shame, and anger that students like Nicky experience are quite common. Despite this, the individualistic discourse of education helps working-class students internalize their emotional and intellectual struggles as personal failings. Subsequently, Nicky and her peers internalize the associated conclusion that their successes depend upon their increased ability to discipline themselves and to work harder at being “good students.”<sup>11</sup>

While students like Nicky might be thought to illustrate the value of an education that promotes autonomy, her narrative reveals that the sustaining of autonomy is definitely predicated upon the “will strength” liberal autonomy theorists describe. Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody argue that these inner resources of detachment and solitary fortitude enable working-class students’ academic successes only at great emotional costs. Most of the working-class girls in the study ultimately fail in their original academic pursuits because the conflicted, bifurcated selves they must construct in the middle-class educational experience exact too great a set of emotional costs to sustain.<sup>12</sup> The researchers worry that Nicky, too, will find that her university career is extracting too great a toll on her psychic life to sustain her autonomous plan.

We have further evidence of the danger of characterizing autonomy as a virtue of character in Diane Reay’s interviews with working-class families.<sup>13</sup> Just as in Nicky’s case, the working-class parents express anxiety about their inability to provide the same academic supports that middle-class parents are able to provide their children. As in Nicky’s case, these parents also discuss feelings of guilt, shame, and powerlessness. They take individual responsibility for what are differences in social class resources and come to regard themselves, at least with respect to providing an education, as inadequate parents. Again, like Nicky, so too do other working-class students assume personal responsibility for social failings. As Diane Reay argues, uneducated, working-class students internalize the message that they are “unfinished” and “incomplete in some way.” When they falter on “completion projects” associated with pursuing academic degrees, they most often attribute their fundamental difficulties to individual inadequacies and thus attempt to shore themselves up and solve their “problems” by appealing to inner traits of discipline and strength of character.

The tendency of working-class students and parents to blame themselves for their “failures” to negotiate an academic realm whose structure and character benefit the more affluent, reveals why we must be careful not to consider autonomy as simply an individual virtue of character, as will strength. The reason is that, in doing

so, we encourage individualistic interpretations of complex social processes, as if all the working-class students need to do is to “find” or develop the right amount of will or character strength to succeed. A more promising avenue, I believe, is to understand autonomy as a relational concept; a more relational concept than current educational theories admit or seem to allow.

It is important to note that liberal educational theorists have made great efforts to respond to the importance of social context as a fundamental feature of individual experience. They most often respond to the Communitarian challenge that the theory of autonomy presupposes individuals who exist or emerge free from significant familial or cultural commitments. Contemporary educational theorists acknowledge that significant attachments are vital to child development and human flourishing. Furthermore, they acknowledge that the capacity for autonomy is greatly influenced by these significant attachments. For example, Meira Levinson argues that deep cultural ties are necessary preconditions for autonomy, providing agents with important senses of “emotional, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic...and moral” cultural coherence, something necessary before they are able to make autonomous decisions about their life plans.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Reich argues that autonomy does not require an “atomistic” or individualistic sense of self, that in fact enduring and intimate relationships might be required for autonomous growth. But, unlike Communitarianism, it is important for liberal theory to stress that the autonomous individual chooses whether or not to retain these attachments, as implied in the right of exit of the sort Will Kymlicka discusses when he postulates that autonomy entails the right for members of cultural communities to choose to leave them.

I agree that autonomy does require an ability to extricate oneself from relationships, but I also argue that an examination of the story of Nicky and other working-class students like her reveals two important features of autonomy: First, what we might call a *divisive* will strength, taken to be the key element in a virtue analysis of autonomy, requires more and more self-discipline; and, further, this virtue of character, while it may be a necessary component of autonomy, cannot be sufficient. Second, the concept of will strength itself is fundamentally socially mediated and thus requires a definitional acknowledgment that autonomy is intrinsically relational. In what follows, I examine each of these points in turn, and while I cannot here offer a full account of a relational concept of autonomy, I do undertake to substantiate the view that anything less than a relational view will be self defeating for liberal theorists and generally inadequate.

#### DIVIDED STRENGTH OF WILL AND ATTUNEMENT

Nicky creates an autonomous project for herself, but it is one fraught with emotional contradictions and entails, for her, a lack of belonging in or identification with either of her significant social contexts. One might argue that, in fact, the example of Nicky seems to counter my thesis that will strength is necessary, but not sufficient. Indeed, for many Nicky may seem to personify the autonomous agent whose strength of will carries her through her educational life. But we must note that her self-reliance also requires *ever-increasing* amounts of will strength. While we

might wish to believe that her continued practicing of autonomy-related skills increases her taste for and skill in choosing the autonomous life, Nicky's world-crossings are not isolated, easily mediated, and defined events. Instead, they reemerge in countless ways in her interactions with people in her two predominant social worlds. In many situations, ones in which she interacts with her family, for example, Nicky's need for fortitude in the face of pressures to abandon her schooling project might require as much or more will strength as when she first embarked on her plan. Although the Aristotelian argument suggests that autonomy is achieved and becomes easier with practice, border-crossings like the ones associated with social class might not ever become any easier. In Nicky's case, pursuing an academic career that continues to put her in opposition to her family and the community norms governing what young women should do, believe, and become would seem to require ever-increasing amounts of self-discipline.

We see that Nicky's future agency might be compromised by these increasing requirements to control herself, to sustain this particular autonomy project amidst countervailing forces to thwart her intentions. Nicky's need for ever increasing strength of will captures the essence of the problem with linking autonomy with bifurcation, with control, and with the virtue of disciplining the self. Bai cautions, "There is something very peculiar about this notion of self-disciplining and self-mastery. The peculiarity has to do with the psychological process of self splitting itself to be both the ruler and ruled. A double, self-reflexive identity has to be created."<sup>15</sup> And it is not benign. As Bai notes,

Control, whether intersubjective or intrasubjective, is...an oppressive force which blocks and negates otherness (in a variety of forms), and this contributes, not to harmony, integration, and wholeness, but to disharmony, fragmentation of psyche (say, into mind and emotion, reason and inclination, and so on), and is a form of violence in that it sets out to subdue, silence, and dominate the otherness in whatever form.<sup>16</sup>

While Nicky may develop an appreciation for the life lived autonomously, a certain taste for the virtue of deciding for herself, her world-crossing will require the constant negotiation and renegotiation of those psychic forces that compel her to forego her autonomy. That seems like a difficult project to sustain, one that questions the very attractiveness of an autonomous life in the first place. What is wrong here has to do with Bai's observation that Nicky's self-discipline requires her to fortify herself against the pressures not to complete her degree, pressures she associates with her working-class home culture.

Bai, in sympathy with Confusion philosophy, contends that the task of education should be "the cultivation of the whole person who is fully integrated and harmonized intrapsychically, body-heart-mind, and interpsychically with all social and natural orders of the world."<sup>17</sup> This will require not merely the rational appraisal of one's goals and the necessary "following through," but also the intrapsychic task of understanding oneself and one's larger world, both rationally and emotionally. Our definition of autonomy should acknowledge this extra requirement. Thus, rather than separation from or domination over the pulls toward remaining emotionally and intellectually identified with a family who relate to the world differently than does

their newly “educated” daughter, a relational notion of autonomy might require that students like Nicky seek to integrate their conflicting “worlds” by embracing the contradictions and the associated pulls away from autonomy in the process. Separation leads to an increasing need to separate, while Bai’s emphasis on attunement requires a harmonization that can only be attained by seeking relational engagement.

In short, I am contending that considering autonomy as an individual virtue of character fails to account for the complexity of living within a world that requires the constant renegotiation of oneself as a radically situated being. Social class identifications inscribe themselves in myriad ways in the individual, and practicing autonomy within an educational context, for example, may not truly be like the process of developing the endurance nor the “taste” for a certain type of life as educational theorists suggest. Instead, the challenges to autonomy require renegotiations and perhaps the development of new skills each time they emerge. A separating will-strength, at the heart of many accounts of autonomy, fails to capture what might be necessary.

#### SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON THE NEED FOR WILL STRENGTH

Nicky’s story also reveals that social context clearly influences the need for will strength when engaged in an autonomous project. Working-class students who take on the goal of succeeding in middle-class schools have to find strength of character and nurture it constantly, while middle and upper class students are able to realize their school-based projects with relative ease. They draw upon a host of hidden supports that predisposes them to educational success. If both sets of students are autonomous agents, then we see that for one set, the social context demands greater inner resources than it does for the other. Middle-class students experience a linking of home and school cultures, such that they are not required to create the rigid boundaries and experience the conflicted internal associations with what for working-class students constitute such a “border crossing.”<sup>18</sup> Educational discourse describes their accomplishments as a result of or as feats of individual traits of character, and defining autonomy as a virtue of character further hides their dependence upon significant social supports.

Liberal autonomy theorists have recognized that autonomy *requires* substantial social relationships, but they have confined their discussions to issues associated with primary emotional attachments needed to develop cultural congruence and personally enriched lives. What I argue here is that the *context dependency* of both the need for and the generation of autonomy-sustaining character strength demonstrates the necessity of developing a notion of autonomy that is intrinsically relational.

To put it starkly, I am contending that contemporary accounts of autonomy place the responsibility for strength-of-will generation within the agent herself, and they do not attend to the social contexts in which that will strength and subsequent autonomy emerges. Thus, the literature presents us with an independent agent who must protect the self from contaminating influences of others. Further examination

of both working-class and middle-class students who succeed in school reveals that they generally draw upon a set of relational resources to help them negotiate the competitive world of education. Because the context of education is such that middle-class resources are hidden, and because there are myriad ways students draw upon them to enable their autonomy, we miss that an agent's continued autonomy is predicated upon a will strength that, unrecognized in many accounts of autonomy, emerges through a set of social structures and relationships that nurture its growth and continued development.

We also need to recognize that the *de facto* relational nature of autonomy means that some working-class students are able to draw upon social relationships to create autonomy-enhancing supports. For example, Julie Bettie's recent ethnographic foray into the social class experiences of girls within a California high school reveals how some girls like Nicky find social situations to help them with their projects to succeed in school, while developing support from similarly positioned peers.<sup>19</sup> Their will strength is socially mediated and nurtured by relationships with other students. For example, Bettie finds two distinct groups of working-class, Mexican-American girls who seek school success. One group adopts the look, style, and social demeanor of the White, middle-class girls who dominate the school's college preparatory track. These Mexican-American girls embrace a variety of routes to school success and future upward mobility. They play sports, join school clubs, and seek to belong socially and academically with the White, middle-class girls. These Mexican-American, working-class girls also adopt the physical styles of their White peers. The second group adopts a strategy of "accommodation without assimilation." They associate with working-class, Mexican-American, college-prep girls, and they become heavily involved in local Mexican-American community organizations. Some find great support in a school-based political/social organization for Mexican-American students. They aspire to school success, but reject middle-class, White styles. I must note that this choice entails consequences within this school community. White, middle-class teachers in the school equate Mexican-American clothing and make-up styles with over-sexualization and lack of interest in education. Mexican-American styles are routinely routed into vocational, specifically secretarial track courses. It is also important to note that both sets of girls draw upon relationships with older siblings who had previously earned academic success. The younger girls capitalize upon their siblings' "insider knowledge" about how the system "works," a commonplace though often hidden feature of middle-class school success.<sup>20</sup>

The point I wish to highlight here is that working-class students must constantly *choose* autonomy, and that their emotional lives and their subsequent strengths of will are influenced by a variety of contextual and relational circumstances that cannot be accurately be represented as strength of character alone. Autonomy, I am claiming, involves extra-agentic relational features such as the "insider knowledge" of more experienced others, or the emotional support of those who appropriately empathize with one's particular circumstances. When these features are absent, the need for the harmonizing process of attunement Bai takes to be autonomy (or crucial

to autonomy) becomes more pronounced; perhaps the Mexican-American girls who participate in politically-engaged school organizations find more harmony between their school and home worlds. The girls in the stories I present in this paper, then, have developed the ability to world-cross, but their on-going identification and taste for the autonomous life is greatly threatened by their alternative identifications with lives and versions of themselves that are radically different, lives that pull against what we might consider to be autonomy.

#### CONCLUSION

Current definitions of autonomy presuppose environments that assume a unified, rational subject who does not have to negotiate the on-going psychic turmoil associated with social class border crossings that I describe here. Given the increasing salience of social class issues in our schools, a definition of autonomy for education, if it is to be a useful theoretical tool, must account for the lived realities of our students. An education that promotes current liberal notions of autonomy will inadvertently promote an autonomy that is accessible mostly to middle and upper-class students, in violation of the expressed aim of the liberal theorists to work for democratic liberal justice.

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5. *Ibid.*, 30–31.

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