

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is, to present a discussion, in which we hope to show that "freedom" properly understood cannot be an aim or an ideal of education, and that when educators talk of 'freedom' as an aim or ideal of education, they usually have in mind the development of autonomy.

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Is "Freedom" an Aim of Education?

Introduction

Talk about free schools, experimental schools, open classrooms and the like is very much in fashion nowadays. But we think that such talk exhibits more vagueness than clarity, and that we are still far from a systematic philosophical discussion on the concept of freedom in the *educational* context.

1. *The relationships between "freedom" and "education"*

In order to deal fruitfully with the subject 'is 'freedom' an aim of education?', it seems reasonable to first consider the relationships between "freedom" and "education". We will argue that no one of the criteria or the essential features which are to be found in the concept of "education" are to be found in the concept of "freedom".

"Education" implies that something worthwhile should be achieved. The criterion of something valuable is built into the concept of "education". It is inseparable from judgments of value. "Education", as Peters¹ has argued, is an evaluative concept. It would be very odd to say about a man that in educating his son he changed him for the worse. "Freedom" does not imply that something worthwhile or valuable should be achieved. There is no necessary connection between "freedom" and engaging in worthwhile activities. "Freedom" does not involve any moral requirements. From the point of view of "freedom", it makes perfectly good sense to say of a man that he is free to cheat his friends or that he is free to tell lies as pleases, although, clearly, one's freedom to behave in these ways might well be valueless or undesirable.

"Education" must involve knowledge and understanding, and some sort of what Peters calls "cognitive perspective". The "educated man" must have some kind of rational scheme or procedures to deal with things, and "some understanding of the 'reason why of things'". "Freedom" need not involve either of these. A man can be free without having any knowledge or understanding of principles. A man can be an idiot and free at the same time. There is no contradiction in saying

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about a man that he is free and yet he is an idiot. The one does not exclude the other. Again, his freedom might well be useless or of very little or no value, but it is still freedom.

“Education” must involve all sorts of constraints. For firstly, the moral and cognitive requirements make it obvious that within the wide range of activities open to children, there are many which are not included. Activities such as: billiards, burglary, bingo, drug-taking, sexual affairs, drill, conditioning, indoctrination, propaganda, etc., which are necessarily inconsistent with the criteria of “value” and “understanding” involved in the concept of “education” should be ruled out. No educator (not even Neill) would recommend sexual-affairs or drug-taking in his school if the children ‘chose’ them. Similarly, the notions of ‘growth’ or ‘self-realization’ and ‘being oneself’, which the advocates of radical theories of education so warmly recommend, are normative notions which presuppose value judgments about what man should be. Clearly, a person can grow to be a criminal, or he can be himself by committing all sorts of immoral actions. But would the radical theorists (or anybody else) approve of such situations?

Secondly, the practical requirements concerning learning by actual people in a concrete situation make it necessary that certain minimal conditions of order and rules should be established within an educational situation, for without such controlled conditions, learning will be impossible. Furthermore, “learning” involves restrictions on the way in which the change is brought about. The change which occurs in learning must be a consequence of the learner’s past experience, rather than merely a matter of maturation. “Freedom” does not involve any kind of constraints. On the contrary, “freedom” can only mean that some constraints or restraints are absent. Any kind of constraint is a limitation of freedom. The constraints are not part of what is meant by ‘freedom’, but rather a general empirical condition of it. This is not, of course, to deny that there are all sorts of political and social situations in which constraints are needed, but rather to deny that constraints are, in this way or another, an extension of one’s freedom.

If this account is acceptable, then it seems quite clear that “education” cannot be viewed as falling directly under the concept of freedom. “Freedom” is a negative concept; it does not entail any positive practical plan. Indeed, the expression ‘education for freedom’ makes very little sense, if any at all. We can create conditions or situations for freedom, but how can we educate for it? In education we don’t want pupils simply to be free. A person can be free without knowing what to do with his freedom, or he can abuse it. The slogan: “Set children free”, surely does not make sense unless we know in what respect “free”, and “free” to do what? In education we want children to be free to do or to achieve certain desirable or valuable aims, rather than simply to be free. “Freedom”, then, cannot be an aim of education, but a condition for exercising certain desirable aims, as for example, autonomy (see the next section).

By concentrating on the concept of freedom, and thus complaining about undue or unnecessary constraints-eg., school rules, no options in the curriculum, authoritarian teaching methods, etc., the advocates of the radical theories of education draw our attention to certain *procedures* or *methods* of education, rather than prescribe any specific *direction* or *contents* for them. They place all the emphasis on procedures or methods and raise them to a level of aims. What is properly a procedure is assumed here to be an aim. This is also in accordance with their view that education is connected with “educere” = “to lead out”, rather

than with "educare" = "to bring in". But clearly, education should include both these meanings and not only one of them.

At this point, it might be asked, why anyone would want to make a close connection between "freedom" and "education". It is important to show that such a connection does not exist for our further argument, that "freedom" properly understood cannot be an aim of education.

For something to be an aim of education there must be a conceptual connection between education and what is chosen as an aim. In other words, for x to be an aim of education, there should exist a *logical* connection between it and what is regarded as education. Thus, to say for example, that "the aim of education is rationality" would be tantamount to say that rationality is part of what one means by or defines as "education". But if, as we have shown, no one of the criteria or the essential features which have been found in the concept of "education" are to be found in the concept of "freedom", then it follows logically, that "freedom" cannot be an aim of education.

It might be objected that all that has been shown is that "freedom" cannot be an intrinsic aim of education. But it might be asked, what about "freedom" being an extrinsic aim of education? Cannot freedom be an extrinsic aim of education?

For something to be an extrinsic aim of education it would be necessary to show that it is attained through, or as a result of education. Thus, to say for example, that "the aim of education is citizenship", would be tantamount to saying that through education or as a result of it, people become useful citizens. But is there such a connection between freedom and education? Surely, from a logical point of view, a person can be educated (indeed very educated) and unfree, or he can be uneducated and free. In other words, the connection between the two is only a *contingent*, and not a necessary one. But what, it might be asked, about an empirical connection between the two. As far as I know, an empirical connection of that sort has not been shown.

2. Freedom, autonomy and education

How is it then, one may want to ask, that so many writers so strongly connected these two concepts of "freedom" and "education"? The answer seems to have originated in their false and twisted view of the concept of "freedom". They gave "freedom" all kinds of meanings, which almost equate it with the concept of "autonomy". But what is "autonomy"? How is it related to freedom? Can a man be said to be free without being autonomous? Can he be autonomous without being free? How are all these connected with education?

Deardon² characterizes the autonomous person by the following features: (I) asks for justification of things which are usually taken for granted; (II) thinks critically; (III) defines what he really wants; (IV) conceives his own goals and purposes; (V) chooses between alternatives; (VI) reflects on and reexamines his actions and attitudes. (For a very similar account of the concept of "autonomy" see Peters³).

It seems then that we can properly talk about three main notions which are logically connected with "autonomy": authenticity (or independence of mind), rationality and choice.

Those radical theorists and existentialists who put all the emphasis on "authenticity", thus stressing elements such as independence from authorities, doing what

one wants, indulging one's own desires, forming one's own course of conduct, and so on, fail, of course, to see the complementary, more positive aspect of autonomy, that of deliberation, testing the truth of things and asking for their justifications, rational reflection, critical thinking, and so on. In other words, their concept of autonomy as "choice of self" or "authenticity" is autonomy without *normes*. Authenticity cannot be the whole of autonomy. A person can be authentic and quite unreflectively obey laws or customs merely because they are socially accepted.

This makes it quite clear that "freedom" and "autonomy" cannot be identical. What the advocates of the radical theories of education fail to see is that freedom cannot be equated with autonomy. Freedom can only be a necessary condition for the exercise of autonomy, but not a part of its meaning. Furthermore, one must not confuse, as these people seem to do, the *exercise* of autonomy with its *development*. For as Dearden very correctly points out, freedom being a necessary condition for the exercise of autonomy, by no means logically implies its being a necessary condition for its development. "Logically", writes Dearden, "it could be the case that a rather strict and tightly controlled upbringing best developed an autonomous character, partly through the ingredient disciplines which it taught and partly through the inward rebellion which it engendered."⁴

The advocates of the radical theories of education seem to think, against any evidence (either logical or empirical), that the best way to arrive at autonomy is by adopting some sort of laissez-faire attitude, or by creating a permissive atmosphere where children can be left to do whatever they want; that the development of autonomy is merely a matter of unfolding in a permissive atmosphere. Thus, they postulate something very odd, indeed absurd, such as: "Natural development towards autonomy". What is properly an outcome is assumed here at the start. What is properly a matter of learning and initiation is assumed to be simply a matter of maturation and biological development.

This brings us to the idea, that perhaps there is no point in talking about "freedom in education" when what we really mean is "autonomy in education"; that when educators talk of "freedom" as an educational aim or ideal, they usually have in mind the development of autonomy. Indeed, the concept of "autonomy" is much more promising and fruitful than the concept of 'freedom' when dealing with *educational* issues. The concept "autonomy" serves in much more adequate and successful way what we actually want and mean to say when we talk about "freedom in education". So, why not use it instead of "freedom" and in such a manner prevent unnecessary problems and superfluous confusions.

"Autonomy" can also be a legitimate aim of education. As we have seen in the previous section, for something to be an aim of education there must be a conceptual connection between "autonomy" and education which makes it a possible candidate for being an aim. Such a conceptual connection is not difficult to show, for one of the main features of both "autonomy" and "education" is *rationality*. Both "education" and "autonomy" necessarily involve the active process of reasoning and the promoting of critical thought and self-criticism. Hence, they can be very readily related, thus making "autonomy" a legitimate aim of education.

3. *The Justification of Autonomy*

At this stage, the reader may well ask: (1) What is the value of autonomy? Why is it of such fundamental importance in relation to other values? (2) What is the justification of autonomy vis-a-vis other aims?

To answer the first question: There are several ways to indicate the important value of autonomy. On utilitarian grounds it can be argued that autonomy is connected with qualities, such as individual choice, independence of mind, and self-direction, which are firmly approved of in an affluent-democratic society as ours. In more and more jobs (now not only in the high levels), people are expected to exhibit such traits of character as "the ability to make decisions", "to be able to stand on their own feet", "to know what they want, or what they ought to do", "to assume responsibility" and "to be relatively independent of others". Also, the constant state of change which is one of the main characteristics of our time, make it almost necessary that qualities or traits of character such as the ones mentioned above should be possessed, in suitable ways, by everyone interested in understanding and in participating in the world in which we live.

But it might be argued whether these qualities are approved of in affluent-democratic societies: (a) Many might object to such societies, (b) Athens was both affluent and democratic, but "autonomy" was not one of her prized virtues. Man was a citizen of the state and very proud of it.

Another approach is the hedonistic-type of argument (see Dearden⁵), which points to the pleasure and satisfaction derived from being autonomous. But if E. Fromm's thesis in *The Fear of Freedom* is correct, it can be questioned whether autonomy results in feelings of happiness in all people.

This can lead to more intrinsic types of arguments. Autonomy, it might be argued, by giving a man a good opportunity for indulging in and accomplishing what he really wants, enables him to express his unique and innermost personality and thus contributes to his self-esteem and dignity. There is a very direct relationship between the development of autonomy and respect for the unconditional worth of each person. Autonomy involves the ability to choose for oneself and to formulate and carry out one's own decisions, purposes, and policies. In other words, through autonomy, man fulfills himself as an individual and hence, achieves dignity and self-esteem.

It might further be argued that people should be encouraged to think for themselves, to define what they really want, to reflect on and re-examine their actions and attitudes, i.e., to be autonomous persons, because by doing so, they commit themselves to the development of rationality which is of utmost importance. To the question "why is rationality important", it might be answered: (a) The very question "why is rationality important", or "why is rationality good" pre-supposes rationality (i.e., giving good reasons); (b) to deny the value of rationality is to do away with the distinction between good and bad thinking, and hence, with any meaningful communication.

As to the question of the justification of autonomy vis-a-vis other aims, it seems that one must admit at the start that autonomy cannot be regarded as the *only* thing that matters or as an *over-all* aim of education. It should not be forgotten that there are many other values as well, both in education and in life, and quite obviously they do not always go hand in hand. Train-robbers could have been very autonomous people, as was presumably the Marquise de Sade. And what are we to say about more communal values, such as citizenship, co-operation, fraternity, etc.?

Clearly, this indicates that autonomy is not by itself sufficient. There is the need for reconciliation of autonomy with other values (cf. Dewey's attempt to combine "growth" with "shared experience", etc.). It also serves to show that in any

education aimed at developing autonomy references should be made to the *content* of what one determines oneself to do or be, and not simply to "self-determination" or "authenticity". The "self" which rules in the autonomous person is not merely the individual self, but also the "rational self" which transcends the individual. The autonomous person, therefore, can and should see the exercise of autonomy, not chiefly as the assertion of himself as an individual, but as the duty of fostering in himself an impersonal standard of truth and rationality. He can and should be a rational person who acts in accordance with rationally justifiable norms or laws which he sets and accepts for himself. Self-determination alone will not suffice, but rather a rational self-determination. (see, A. Gewirth⁶ and G. Wall⁷)

Finally, something must be said as to the argument that autonomy is rather an elitist aim for education. For if the Piaget-Kohlberg theory is true, very few can/do reach an autonomous stage of morality.

Autonomy clearly develops progressively and does not emerge full-blown from the start. A person cannot easily assume autonomy nor can he receive it as his whim. It is rather an achievement which one strives to attain and toward which one is gradually educated. If deliberation, decision, self-direction and independence of mind are considered central to and representative of autonomy, then surely they have to be learned. But it does not follow from this that autonomy is an intangible ideal, or that it should be regarded as an objective which only a small group of intellectual pupils are capable of achieving. The reasons for this are:

(a) Autonomy is very much a matter of *degree*. Absolute autonomy would, indeed, be beyond the reach of the human being, for no one can be completely independent of others, or rely on himself for his development. Different people will presumably achieve different degrees of autonomy, according to their skills, motivation, and education. The more that a person is able to decide for himself, to define what he wants, to conceive of his goals and purposes, to form his own opinions and actions and to reflect critically on them - the more autonomous he will be.

(b) Far from being tied to some particular form of activity (intellectual or artistic), autonomy may take many different forms of activity and may be carried out in more than one manner. Its breadth of applicability can range from choices of clothes, to cooking and interior decorating.

(c) The teacher should distinguish different *levels* of developing autonomy, according to the pupil's different levels of cognitive and psychological development. This means, that autonomy would be progressively developed so as to gradually transfer more and more responsibility from the teacher to the pupils. Ideally, the teacher should seek the point at which he will not be needed any more, the point at which the pupil will be able to stand on his own feet and determine his own destiny.

Résumé

La "liberté" est-elle le but de l'éducation?

L'objet de cet article, est de présenter une étude par laquelle nous espérons montrer que la "liberté" bien comprise ne peut pas être le but ou l'idéal de l'éducation, mais que, lorsque les éducateurs parlent de "liberté" comme d'un but ou d'un idéal, ce qu'ils ont généralement à l'esprit c'est développement de l'autonomie.

Footnotes

¹Peter, R. S., *Ethics and Education*, Longdon, George Allen & Unwin, 1966, ch. 1.

²Dearden, R. F., *The Concept of Personal Autonomy and its Educational Implication*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1973, p. 148.

³Peters, R. S., 'Freedom and The Development of the Free', In: J. F. Doyle (ed.), *Education Judgment*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 123-125.

⁴Dearden, R. F., 'Autonomy as an Educational Ideal', In: S. C. Brown (ed.), *Philosophers Discuss Education*, London, Macmillan, 1975, p. 11.

⁵Dearden, R. F., 'Autonomy and Education', In: R. F. Dearden et al, (ed.), *Education and the Development of Reason*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 460.

⁶Gewirth, A., 'Morality and Autonomy in Education', In: J. F. Doyle (ed.), *Educational Judgments*, London, Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1973, pp. 3-45.

⁷Wall, G., 'Moral Autonomy and the Liberal Theory of Moral Education', *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, Supplementary Issue, Vol. VIII, no. 2, July 1974, pp. 222-236.