

Forum

Recent Discussion of Moral Autonomy and Moral Training

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In this paper, the discussion of moral autonomy and related ideas by Malikail and Stewart (1988) in their article, "Moral Autonomy and Moral Training," is examined. It is claimed that Malikail and Stewart do not stress the development of capacities of reflective analysis in ways that would significantly distinguish autonomous from nonautonomous moral thinking. Comments are also made regarding Orteza y Miranda's (1989) response to Malikail and Stewart, "On My Moral Judgment," and the reply to Orteza by Malikail and Stewart (1990), "My Moral Judgment": A Rejoinder."

Cette réflexion fait suite à la discussion amorcée par Malikail et Stewart, dans leur article intitulé "Moral Autonomy and Moral Training" (1988). Notre propos est de souligner le fait que les auteurs passent sous silence le développement des capacités d'analyse réflexive qui sont pourtant le critère même de la réflexion autonome. Le présent article offre aussi des commentaires autour de l'échange entre Malikail et Stewart, d'une part, et Orteza y Miranda (1989), d'autre part, au sujet de leurs positions respectives sur le sujet du jugement moral autonome.

In their article, "Moral Autonomy and Moral Training," Malikail and Stewart are concerned that teachers (and others dealing with the young) often claim that they are interested in having those in their charge make up their own minds about moral judgments, as though these were merely matters of personal taste. For Malikail and Stewart, such an approach fails to recognize the public nature of moral judgments which requires reasons and justification to support them. They are, in effect, critiquing a type of "meta-ethical" (or "meta-moral") view implicit in much discussion in education contexts and elsewhere. There is much to be said for this type of worry, particularly in this era of "relativism." However, here I wish to examine briefly the notion of moral autonomy and its development that emerges from the discussion by Malikail and Stewart, particularly in terms of some of the sources to which they refer.

The concepts of *autonomy* and *moral autonomy* are controversial ones and considerable debate surrounds their history and use (see Krolikowski & Reuland, 1977, pp. 237-239). Malikail and Stewart do not explicitly analyze these terms, but do assert that "in the moral realm, each individual cannot be autonomous in the sense of selecting his data, choosing his own principles and, therefore, his own conclusions" (1988, p. 99). How do they arrive at this? Autonomy is often associated with the idea of freedom, and the authors discuss individual moral freedom with references from Murdoch and Spinoza, the former speaking of freedom in terms of "the clarification of vision and the domination of selfish impulse" (1988, p. 99). The vision to which Murdoch refers in this context is of the Platonic conception of the Good, glimpses of which help free us from "deluded selfish will." With regard to Spinoza, Malikail and Stewart may have in mind Hampshire's (1971) commentary:

A man whose attention has been drawn to self-evident, primary truths, the terms of which he understands, will unavoidably follow a continuous train of thought and will unavoidably affirm the necessary conclusions. If he fully understands, he has no choice. If he has a choice, and if he can doubt and hesitate until he settles the matter by a decision, his conclusion will be determined, at least in part, by something that is external to the thinking process itself. (p. 185)

Spinoza's view that the free man understands that he has no choice (and no conception of good and evil) relates to his critique of the ideas reflected in popular language. Within Spinoza's system, to the extent that one understands the total necessity of all that exists, including the causes of our actions, one will discard notions of good, evil, and free choice, since these terms, as ordinarily used, imply the possibility that things could be other than they are. Regarding attitudes toward others, Hampshire (1951) also notes that:

The free and wise man therefore feels morally and emotionally neutral towards the particular things and persons around him, both because he understands why they are what they are and why they cannot be otherwise, and because he no longer ignorantly sees them as the true causes of his own pleasures and pains. (pp. 161-162)

In light of this, if Malikail and Stewart adopt Spinoza's conception of freedom, it is odd that they emphasize, for example, the importance of understanding the feelings of others (1988, p. 101). And, although Spinoza and Plato differ markedly in their metaphysical positions, for both freedom is associated with attuning oneself with "self-evident, primary truths" or a reality which is fixed and "there" to be seen or comprehended. In what sense, then, could such a "free" person be autonomous and make moral decisions?

Malikail and Stewart do not develop their idea of autonomy, but state that "to meet the criteria of moral thinking, every individual has to become mentally involved in the processes leading to a moral decision. In that sense, individual autonomy is a necessary condition of moral judgment" (1988, p. 99). But what

type of mental involvement is envisioned here and by what type of process is it to be achieved? Malikail and Stewart invoke R.M. Hare to support their conclusion that "non-rational methods of early moral training, which are not methods of indoctrination, are central to the development of moral sense including judgment and character" (1988, p. 101). Hare wants to distinguish indoctrination and education, but does not quite say that nonrational methods are not methods of indoctrination. His point is that such methods, which in the early years of life are unavoidable, need not necessarily entail indoctrination. It depends on the aim, which is discovered

over a period ... The educator is waiting and hoping all the time for those whom he is educating to start *thinking*; and none of the thoughts that may occur to them are labelled 'dangerous' *a priori*. The indoctrinator, on the other hand, is watching for signs of trouble, and ready to intervene to suppress it when it appears, however oblique and smooth his methods may be. (Hare, 1964, p. 69)

Malikail and Stewart are also concerned that the young start "thinking" (1988, p. 100) but it is not clear what they mean here. For example, we have noted their claim that individuals cannot be autonomous in the sense of choosing their own data, principles, and conclusions. Yet, curiously, above this passage we are told that in making moral judgments "this does not mean that alternative moral conclusions are not possible, but when they are, they must meet the criteria of being morally justifiable" (1988, p. 99). Malikail and Stewart agree with Hare that indoctrination may be avoided if the teacher's purpose is to have students appraise moral principle for themselves, but the nature of this thinking and appraisal would apparently be quite different for them. It is perhaps worth noting that when quoting Hare's statement, "we can [then] happily start by securing the adherence of our children — if necessary by nonrational methods — to the moral principles which we think best, provided that these are consistent with the form of morality" (1988, p. 100), they omit the last words of the sentence: "but we must leave them at liberty later to think out for themselves different principles, subject to the same proviso" (Hare, 1964, p. 63).

Malikail and Stewart would not appear to agree with Hare that "indoctrination only begins when we are trying to stop the growth in our children of the capacity to think for themselves about moral questions" (Hare, 1964, p. 52). In particular, they would part company with Hare when he stresses that "moral judgments are things that one has to make for oneself" (1964, p. 63) and that moral education involves children "learning to find their *own* moral principles to guide their *own* lives" (Hare, 1979, p. 104). Their discussion concentrates on the utilization of nonrational methods of moral training to develop the habituation and mental involvement necessary to follow and apply moral rules and principles. This would be done, for instance, through imitation of adults who exemplify "a constant and consistent commitment to principles such as honesty, fairness, and compassion" (1988, p. 101). Hare (1964) agrees that it is inevitable that moral training must embody some content, but also says: "It must be emphasized that

it is not the content of any particular morality that is being handed down — that would be indoctrination, if the aim was, at all costs, to implant these particular moral principles” (pp. 61-62).

Aristotle is referred to by Malikail and Stewart regarding the need to develop habits that shape a firm character, “for it is by means of habit that moral virtue or character develop. Habit, says Aristotle, is but long practice that becomes our nature in the end” (1988, p. 100). But in commenting on Aristotle regarding autonomy, Frankena remarks that “Aristotle seems to put off the introduction of reflection by the child until relatively late, and by that time the child may have formed habits that preclude him from developing any real autonomy of mind and action” (1965, p. 60). Schwartz also points out that:

All men of practical wisdom are raised to have an unquestioning commitment to one highly specific and inclusive set of goals. They also learn to stifle any personal inclination to deviate from those aims, and to view all who do not espouse them as inferior. By inculcating these dispositions, Aristotle’s educational program prevents even his ideal choosing agents from developing the interests in self-expression and the critical capacities that would allow them to have a role in creating their aims ... They accept them without question, instead of carefully considering alternatives and then rationally deciding whether to revise or retain them. (1979, p. 106)

It would appear that it is the aim of Malikail and Stewart for young people to become mentally involved in making moral appraisals and judgments in a way that would not depart from their early moral training. If so, then their purpose would be indoctrinative according to Hare’s (1964) analysis: “At the end of it all, the educator will ... find that he is talking to an equal, an educated man like himself — a man who may disagree with everything he has ever said; and, unlike the indoctrinator, he will be pleased” (p. 70). Even though Malikail and Stewart want to deny that there is a “dichotomous division between education and indoctrination” (1988, p. 100), they may respond that their aim is not indoctrination, because they want teachers to present arguments for their conclusions as well as counter-arguments and invite honest discussion in the classroom. If this occurs, then the teacher cannot be accused of “imposing” values on students (1988, p. 100).

But, even if teachers hope to have their students think through and appraise moral views, there may be problems with the criterion of purpose or aim as a way of identifying indoctrination, for one may be engaging in indoctrination without intending to do so (Beehler, 1985). Teachers may believe that they are helping students to think by exposing them to arguments and counter-arguments regarding moral conclusions. However, these might well be part of a stock repertoire which teachers have learned and which they pass on to their students. For example, Malikail and Stewart state that we must often appeal to authority in various areas of life, and if a person “has concerned himself with the rightness of accepting the judgment of those giving him orders or advice, he could, in an

extended sense, be said to be a 'moral' agent" (1988, p. 99). It could be that many teachers have done just this by learning from educational "authorities" the kinds of techniques of "values clarification" that are based on the type of personal "relativism" attacked by the authors. Such teachers may themselves have been taught ways of attempting to counter potential objections and be unaware or oblivious to serious questions or arguments that could be (and have been) raised about their position. Thus, they may be indoctrinating their students into ideas about the nature of value judgments and values themselves, while claiming that this is what they are trying to avoid (Baer, 1977, 1982).

A similar point could be made about Foot's claim that, as with evidence for monetary inflation and brain tumors, "it is laid down that some things do, and some things do not, count in favor of a moral conclusion" (Malikail & Stewart, 1988, p. 98). This is part of the reason Malikail and Stewart say the individuals (including teachers) cannot be "autonomous" in the sense of choosing their own data, principles, and conclusions. As Robinson has indicated in his response to Foot, evidence for such things as brain tumors may change and new analyses may be required:

Similarly in morals. Every one of us must decide for himself whether the fact that this man intends to murder is good evidence that it is right for me to lie to him, or, as Kant is said to have believed, not good evidence for that ... (A)nd he who merely adopts a decision 'laid down' ... on the matter is not yet a fully moral or reasonable being. (Robinson, 1961, p. 428)

This does not mean that such decisions are merely matters of arbitrary fiat, but that there need to be grounds for appealing to authority, especially on moral questions. On what basis does an individual determine "the rightness of accepting the judgment of those giving him orders or advice" if one has, in keeping with the advice of Malikail and Stewart, learned through nonrational methods of moral training to follow and apply certain principles? How would one distinguish the mental involvement here from that of one who thinks and "does actions almost reflexively" (Malikail & Stewart, 1988, p. 99) and thus not autonomously, particularly if there is "naivete in drawing (a) line between rational action and conditioned acts" (1988, p. 100)?

The point is that Malikail and Stewart do not speak of moral autonomy in terms of the development of the skills, abilities, and powers of reasoning and analysis with which students might begin to examine the adequacy of various positions on moral issues, including those of their teachers. Without this type of mental involvement, exposure to and discussion of different views may be simply confusing to young people. What is involved here and how it might be accomplished is itself a topic of current debate centering around "critical thinking." But, in any event, the data, principles, and conclusions of moral thinking, as well as the concept of freedom discussed by the authors, would themselves be subject to examination. There might be (and I think are) good reasons for rejecting a position which reduces morality to matters of personal

taste. But what of a student who eventually formulates, in a rather sophisticated manner, a "meta-ethical" position of this sort — one which shows appreciation for the difficulties involved and recognizes counter-arguments that need to be addressed? It is not clear that the conception of moral autonomy espoused by Malikail and Stewart would provide for such development or that they, like Hare, would be pleased.

On another issue, Orteza y Miranda, in her response to Malikail and Stewart's paper, might regard this student's analysis as unique to him/her in a way that evades objectification:

My moral (here "meta-moral") judgment is one's own in the sense that no one else will ever express it, have it in exactly the same way as this or that particular person ... There must be some unnamed qualities which could only be said to belong to that or this particular person ... In short, they cannot be objectified. (1989, pp. 167, 169)

She wishes to "allow for the subjective participation of the person who makes the judgment, retaining that which is peculiar or unique to him/her, without necessarily making the judgment a matter of personal taste" (1989, p. 166). But, in one sense, this appears to be fairly obvious, since it would seem that such experiential participation would be part of any type of judgment made by an individual. No doubt it would be of importance to the person involved and might well be of interest (or concern) to others who try to understand the judgments that are made. This point is noted by Malikail and Stewart in their rejoinder to Orteza. Here they emphasize a basic difference between the explanation of a moral judgment or action and its justification, between the psychological state of the moral agent and the justification of moral judgments offered by the moral critic. These matters are asymmetrical: They are independent of one another, governed by different criteria, and can be discussed separately. The concern of Malikail and Stewart "was to discuss the public character of moral judgment, not the psychological features of moral choice or behavior" (Malikail & Stewart, 1990, p. 128). Since Orteza y Miranda focuses on the psychological factors relating to moral agency, her response may be relevant to the explanation of moral judgments, but their justification must be determined apart from the "good faith," for example, of individuals.

However, this type of distinction is not drawn as sharply in the discussion of Malikail and Stewart as they might wish, either in their rejoinder or original article. For instance, Malikail and Stewart assert that psychological states, such as the agent's motives "have a considerable impact on the *quality* of moral judgments made," (1990, p. 129), [emphasis added] so that asking whether a person's motives are morally good is relevant to assessing "the *justification* of moral judgment/action" (1990, p. 128). But then they go on to claim that a psychological condition such as good faith is "a logical factor in judging the *person* but not in justifying the *decision*" (1990, p. 130). In their original paper Malikail and Stewart stress that "early formation of moral habits is indispensable

to achieving moral agency and moral autonomy” (1988, p. 97). Through nonrational methods of moral training and “by learning to follow the rules of morality, children will begin to sense and feel what moral life is about” (1988, p. 101). Malikail and Stewart claim it is psychologically sufficient that moral agents “be alert, that they be ‘conscientious,’ and ‘mentally involved in the processes leading to a moral decision’” (1990, p. 129). But this takes us back to points made above relating to the nature of mental involvement, autonomy, and training outlined by Malikail and Stewart.

If they are primarily concerned with the justification and reasons given for judgments, the different perspectives alluded to by Orteza y Miranda which individuals bring to issues, including ethical and meta-ethical ones, may shed new light on these problems or lead to more persuasive ways of arguing for viewpoints that have been rejected in the past. This would be more likely if moral autonomy were conceived in terms of a developmental process which includes more than a focus on early training through nonrational methods in order to develop “moral sense.” It would also provide for the cultivation of reflective thought which would enable individuals to scrutinize critically arguments and conclusions relating to morality, as well as their own “moral sense.” In light of this, Malikail and Stewart would be correct in saying (presumably inadvertently) that “the almost complete logical vacuity (and the possibly undesirable impact) of statements such as that in a free democratic society every individual has the right to choose his own (moral) values needs to be examined more closely” (1988, p. 99).

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