

Reconstructing Paradoxes of Democratic Education

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My reply intends to be not primarily a critical one but, instead, a clarifying one. Neither of the two individual but inter-related paradoxes John Covaleskie identifies I find to be intrinsically paradoxical. However, I believe there is indeed something paradoxical about a distinct kind of virtue that is presupposed by democratic education as its fundamental aim, and that conditions the very possibility of democracy as a way of life and a form of political governance. This is the virtue of moral autonomy. I believe it comprises an ability and disposition not fully revealed or accounted for in the context of citizenship or political education. As such, the distinction between, on the one hand, socialization into the ethics and politics of a culture and, on the other, education for moral autonomy is an important one.

In Covaleskie's account, moral autonomy emerges within the idea that the obligations and constraints imposed upon rational members of a democracy for the promotion of the common good must be voluntary, freely accepted by citizens. In other words, I am required to freely choose to abide by the common good as an external restraint upon my own interests, desires and choices. This is the democratic virtue of "self-restraint," as Covaleskie terms it. I display and develop this virtue in respecting others' rights and freedoms and in according with interests common to us all. Let us call this condition of democratic virtue the "accordance condition." It is clear that Covaleskie requires more of democratic virtue than this condition can satisfy. The obligation runs deeper. Here, we begin to hone in on a distinct kind of virtue. His claim is that democracy as a way of life and as a (set of) virtue(s) imposes upon us all the obligation to sometimes freely waive our political and civil rights in accordance with the common good. Covaleskie asserts this in three different parts of his essay: in his differentiation of a democracy from a plutocracy, in his consideration of the idea that a democracy may allow one the "right" to be sexist, and in his claim that while one has a "right" to care for one's children poorly (within limits), one has no right to actually do so. The proliferation of meanings of "rights" here clearly signals a concern transcending political or civil rights. Let us call the obligation to freely limit one's choices and pursuits, even when one is fully within one's civil rights to make and pursue those same choices, the "autonomy condition" of democratic virtue.

Notice that the kind of freedom and obligation identified by the accordance condition is significantly different from the kind of freedom and obligation specified by the autonomy condition. On the accordance condition, behavior and dispositions displaying voluntary self-restraint accord with or conform to the obligation to maintain and promote the common good. Such self-restraint, however, while *according with* the common good, may not be *for the sake of* the common good, to use Kantian language. I can, this is to say, fulfill the accordance condition in a heteronomous manner. I can voluntarily restrain my pursuit of my, or my tribe's,

self-interests and respect others' civil rights simply out of the recognition that others possess recourse to and means of redress in the event of my violation of their rights and liberties. I voluntarily act in accordance with the rights and freedoms constitutive of the common good but I engage in this self-restraint out of the heteronomous motive of preserving the security of my own, or my ilk's, freedom and well-being. It is only because of the authority of the state, the possibility of punitive sanctions coercively imposed upon me, that my accordance or conformity with the common good is secured. My self-restraint remains voluntary, as is my acceptance of the obligation to conform with the dictates of the common good. However, this self-restraint is not an expression of morally autonomous virtue; it is not from the motive of respect for the common good of humanity or personhood for its own sake that I limit my choices and projects, but from the prudential motive of according with the common good as a means to the maintenance and promotion of my own ends. From such a motive, I have no necessary moral reason or obligation to suspend any of my rights and freedoms for the sake of any good that may contradict my and/or my tribe's interests and authenticity. The obligation of "free self-restraint" under the accordance condition of democratic virtue is of a qualitatively different kind from the obligation of "free self-restraint" under the autonomy condition. The latter is a self-imposed moral obligation constitutive of the virtue and rationality of moral autonomy.

The disposition of moral autonomy entails a self-imposed obligation to respect rational persons as ends in themselves and this purely for the sake of personhood itself. This is, of course, Kant's understanding of the free submission of oneself to moral law that defines the "good will."¹ Such an obligation, and the autonomy it evinces, is not derived from or legitimated by political or civil rights; on the contrary, the latter are themselves always open to critical assessment on the grounds of the law of rational, autonomous personhood and the conditions of its freedom, well-being and dignity. This is the significance, as I understand it, of Covaleskie's claim that voluntarily self-imposed obligations can legitimately transcend the scope of politically permissible (and required?) action delineated by a judicial framework of civil rights and duties. Covaleskie's "democratic virtue" is the virtue of an autonomous disposition for morally principled deliberation and judgment. But such a disposition cannot be circumscribed by the circle of citizenship and political education. As he himself puts it, we face "the question of moral education: 'How does one become good?'" Signs of autonomous moral obligation and virtue include the belief in "giving to others what they need... [and not only] what they have somehow earned," the belief in Socrates' dictum that "no one has a right in a democratic society to act in ways that diminish the society that has nurtured them," and paying "maximum attention to the rights of others" even when, especially when, we ourselves are within our rights to ignore or deny such attention, or when others have no right to demand or expect such attention from us.

So where is the real paradox already? I believe the paradox rests, not originally in the character of a democratic state or in the virtues it relies upon for its possibility, but rather in the very dual nature of moral autonomy as free self-governance. I think Isaiah Berlin, quoting Kant, renders it nicely:

Kant tells us that when “the individual has entirely abandoned his wild, lawless freedom, to find it again, unimpaired, in a state of dependence according to law,” that alone is true freedom, “for this dependence is the work of my own will acting as a lawgiver.” Liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, becomes virtually identical with it.²

The free submission of oneself to a liberating self-governance that enables autonomous deliberation, judgment and choice for the sake of fulfilling (one’s self-imposed obligations to) humanity as an end in itself is the paradox I believe the various threads of Covalleskie’s account are out to weave. But it is a paradox originally attributable not to democracy as a form of political governance or way of life but to the features and conditions of autonomous moral rationality upon which democracy is itself derivative and through which its virtues and obligations of discourse or deliberation are shaped. As Habermas’s “Discourse Ethics” attempts to show, democracy is constituted upon the conditions of rational speech or discourse presupposed within the moral principle of universalization: “U.”³

Another intriguing paradox I offer is that the obligation to justify moral autonomy as a necessary and legitimate educational aim of the public schools of a liberal democracy faces the objection that autonomy is just one more value and virtue encircled by other competing and incommensurable ones demanding recognition and inclusion. And yet the justification required here would seem to presuppose that very autonomy which a democracy may have no right to universally presuppose or privilege. How to draw a circle that does not simultaneously include and exclude members of our community?

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 69-70, 91-2, 130-31.

2. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 148. For Kant’s statement of the equivalence between free will and moral law see *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 52.

3. For a recent statement of the aims and results of Discourse Ethics see Jürgen Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality,” in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).