The Relationship between Self-Determination, the Social Context of Choice, and Authenticity

Michele S. Moses
Arizona State University

The 1959 film *Imitation of Life* tells the story of Sarah Jane, a young, light-skinned African American woman, and her struggle to find her place in a society that would likely oppress her if her racial heritage were common knowledge. However, this same society would celebrate her talents if she kept her race a secret, allowing others to believe she was a white person. Unfortunately, her choice to pass for white causes her much internal suffering because in order to pass, she must reject her African American mother, and, in so doing, deny a crucial part of her self.

I recount this story because it exemplifies the heart of the problem this essay addresses. Sarah Jane's case provides a dramatic instance of how the racial oppression a person faces can lead her to make choices within an impoverished "social context of choice" so that she can receive certain social advantages.[1] In other words, Sarah Jane feels forced to make the choice to deny publicly her identity as an African American in order to improve her context of choice, and, consequently, her life chances. Because she cannot then be her authentic self, she cannot determine meaningfully the way her life will go. In order to be truly self-determining, she needs instead a good range of options within which she can pursue a good life without having to sacrifice a significant portion of her identity, without foregoing public recognition of the worth of her race and culture — of who she truly is.

In a liberal democratic society that embraces autonomy and equality as virtues, how can we avoid situations like Sarah Jane's? Can we support a notion of the good life entailing that individuals will be respected for who they are authentically within the context of their particular histories and identities?

In this essay, I argue that we *can* (and, indeed, ought to) support such a notion of the good life, specifically one that places an ideal of self-determination at its center. This ideal is one where a person's life choices are not merely uncoerced choices, but choices that are in keeping with the person's authentic sense of self. As such, I conceptualize the contemporary liberal ideal of self-determination as importantly connected with one's social context of choice and sense of authenticity. I then conclude with a sketch of the implications this theory has for educational policy. The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationship between the concepts of self-determination, the social context of choice, and authenticity, paying special attention to how education can serve to foster the development of these concepts. Overall, I maintain that the social institution of education and its concomitant policies should strive to contribute significantly to students' development of self-determination.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is a capacity that can be constrained or expanded by one's life circumstances and social context. I rely, then, on the fundamental premise that

a just and democratic society requires that its citizens be autonomous — or self-determining, or, as Will Kymlicka puts it, be able to live life "from the inside."[2] This way persons will be able to be, in essence, the primary authors of their life stories. Related are a set of ideas.

First, according to Joseph Raz,

> the ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives.[3]

Second, David A.J. Richards contributes a description of this robust notion of personal autonomy as the reflective freedom to plan one's own life.[4] A person with this reflective freedom is one whose life is characterized by self-determination. She or he is able freely to choose her or his own goals and relationships. Self-determination thus is more robust than the barest notion of autonomy defined only by the absence of coercion. Self-determining people make not only trivial judgments about, for instance, whether to wear yellow or purple, but significant judgments about more substantial activities. Most important, they know the difference between the two. For Kymlicka, "allowing people to be self-determining is…the only way to respect them as fully moral beings."[5] Therefore, a just and democratic society ought to cultivate self-determination among its people. This way, people's choices, made in relation to their historical, cultural, and social contexts, represent who they are and who they want to become, rather than who they cannot be due to unjust societal limits.

Self-determination is characterized, then, by a significant capacity for autonomy (autonomy that is "worth wanting") within which one's life is not wholly determined by social factors outside of one's control.[6] In addition, self-determination depends on private and public affirmation of a person's authentic sense of self. This conception of self-determination is associated with two central requirements: a favorable social context of choice (expanding rather than constraining choices) and authenticity (being true to oneself and one's social and cultural identity). In order for persons to become self-determining, it is important to promote educational policies that systematically foster the development of autonomy through the creation of more favorable contexts of choice and the support of authentic cultural identities. While it is certainly possible to be autonomous in some form without necessarily enjoying a favorable context of choice or a sense of authenticity, it is not possible to achieve true self-determination without the fulfillment of these requirements.

The Social Context of Choice

A contemporary liberal vision of the good as promoting an ideal of self-determination underscores the need to create more favorable social contexts of choice for people. A favorable context of choice is crucial for the attainment of self-determination. As Richard Peters points out, "anyone who seriously asks the question 'What ought I to do?' is on the path to autonomy. But it is a further question whether or not he is free. This will depend on whether or not there are any constraints preventing him from doing what he has decided to do."[7] Although some constraints

are inevitable, constraints due to an unfavorable, or limiting, social context of choice are often unjust. These types of constraints not only limit a student's ability to do what she or he has decided to do but to see the possibilities for choice as well.

Take, for example, the African American children whose psychological interviews were cited by the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education* from 1954. When they were given two dolls, a black one and a white one, and asked which doll they thought was the best, most intelligent doll, they invariably chose the white one. This finding exemplified for the court that the choices that these children were making were severely constrained. Official social policy was serving to truncate their sense of self-worth. Their supposedly "separate, but equal" educations were contributing to internalized oppression and harming their cultural identities. Secure cultural structures are seriously undermined by societal oppression. Consequently, oppressed peoples may not enjoy a wide-open sense of possibility. And when these limits in possibility are internalized, the oppressed become, in essence, complicit in their own oppression. When choices are made under conditions of inequality and oppression, we may doubt their authenticity. So, while these types of choices may not be directly coerced choices, they are made from within a severely limited range of options. It is the character of the choice that makes a difference. Individuals are certainly responsible for their choices, but an unjust situation arises when there are grave inequalities within the context from which certain people are making their life choices.

In taking into account one's social context of choice in assessing one's capacity for self-determination, it is important to acknowledge that persons begin life from very different starting places. Kymlicka contends that

> the distinction between choices and circumstances is in fact absolutely central to the liberal project. Differences between people in terms of their resources may legitimately arise as a result of their choices…. But differences which arise from people's circumstances — their social environment or natural endowments — are clearly not their own responsibility.[8]

Societal institutions privilege some starting places over others, even though they are not justifiable by appeal to inherent worth or desert. We do not choose our socioeconomic status or our color, yet sometimes we are placed in a position of disadvantage or lowered expectations because of these facts.

If one saw things from, say, a libertarian point of view, one might counter that, while it is certainly true that people cannot choose their birth circumstances, it does not necessarily follow that anything should be done about that. After all, there is the basic issue of luck and differences can be caused by people's fortune through no doing of their own. Why should the state feel a responsibility to try to equalize such differences in luck?

While it is clear that state policy cannot control people's luck, it is equally clear that a discussion of luck begs the question about differences in people's initial life circumstances. There is a qualitative difference between whether or not I find a one hundred-dollar bill on the street and whether or not I have a decent experience at my neighborhood public school. I suppose I am unlucky if I happen to look up at a bird rather than down at the money on the sidewalk, but I am not only unlucky, but

oppressed, if my neighborhood school is in a shambles. The fact is that initial life circumstances are not only arbitrary like basic issues of luck, but they are arbitrary in a morally significant way. The reason that some societal starting places (for example, being Latino or being female) are less privileged than others is because of the legacy of historical power relations. Propertied, white men conferred and confer value onto certain ways of being in our society. Thus, in certain circumstances, one's race, culture, class, and sex, although arbitrary, have a profound and pervasive effect on life expectations, beliefs about value, and views about the good life.

As such, individuals need a social context of choice that is, according to Kymlicka, "conducive to acquiring an awareness of different views about the good life, and to acquiring an ability to intelligently examine and reexamine these views."[9] This context of choice is best described as a set of conditions within which one's personal and cultural identity is either affirmed or thwarted. As such, it does not wholly shape one's identity; authentic identity is developed through the interaction between individuals and societal circumstances. The social context of choice, then, is the context within which one's identity can be exercised. Thus, in order to be self-determining, persons need to feel a sense of authenticity in making choices that allows them to be true to themselves, to both their personal and cultural identities. This way they can enjoy worthwhile free choices, rather than bare, or empty ones that they cannot even recognize or imagine, or costly ones that require them to deny or distort their identities.[10] Such denial or distortions of one's identity often leave one with a much diminished capacity for self-determination. The development and maintenance of an authentic personal and cultural identity is thus another central feature of the ideal of self-determination.

Authenticity

A sense of authenticity is characterized by the ability to be true to oneself. This can occur in two ways. First, one's feeling of authenticity stems from the inside, from inner reflection upon one's personal identity. Second, it stems also from one's relations with others. This second way that authenticity is shaped is fundamentally dialogical in nature, and the public recognition of one's worth is a key component.[11] Authenticity, then, is defined here as a state of being within which one has the ability to act in keeping with one's true self, that is, to make uncoerced choices and to feel public affirmation of one's personal identity, of which one's cultural identity is a central part. This authenticity is not prescriptive in the sense that there are established identities into which one must fit but is defined both privately (by the individual) and publicly (by the community and society). We must define ourselves not just within the sometimes-damaging categories society might have assigned to us but within a secure personal and cultural structure. Without such a structure, people's cultural identities are undermined or even denied, and young people especially often lose the opportunity to have solid role models and life goals.

This section focuses on the concept of authenticity and its relationship with our personal and cultural identities, which makes it a primary feature of self-determination. In order to flesh this out, I rely on Charles Taylor's work on authenticity. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, he contends that "a society in which people end up as the kind

of [inauthentic] individuals who are 'enclosed in their own hearts' is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government."[12] As a result, democracy is seriously undermined. If people cannot honor their own culture and history, both privately *and* publicly, they essentially are giving in to the oppressive pressure of forced assimilation into the dominant culture. This assimilationist way of living is most certainly inauthentic; people cannot then be true to themselves.

Of course, all assimilation is not an evil that inevitably leads to a complete loss of authentic cultural identity. Some identity adjustment is certainly necessary for immigrants to a new society, as well as for others encountering a world they did not create. What does lead to inauthentic identity is a social context within which only the dominant culture is affirmed as worthwhile. In order to define one's authentic identity, one always must take into account a personal history and background — what one has come to believe is significant, especially distinct from others. Thus, the contemporary liberal idea of authenticity is both an inner concept and an outer one; while we must be true to ourselves, the only way really to do so is in relation to others — in taking into account our historical, cultural, and social contexts.

The development and/or maintenance of a sense of authenticity in one's identity is one of the most prominent characteristics of a sense of autonomy. The concept of authenticity revolves around a person's desires and choices. It is often mentioned as at least linked with the concept of autonomy, if not part and parcel of it.[13] Like autonomy, the concept of authenticity is criticized as too individualistic, too concerned with the inner life of the self. And as with liberal autonomy, these critics ignore the relational and contextual character of authenticity.

Consider scholar Adrian Piper, a woman who identifies as black, but looks white. People of all races often mistake her for white. She recounts one significant incident, where, when her racial identity is challenged by a powerful white professor, she feels shame and illegitimacy. She explains,

> their ridicule and accusations then function to both disown and degrade you from their status, to mark you not as having done wrong but as being wrong. This turns you into something bogus relative to their criterion of worth, and false relative to their criterion of authenticity.[14]

Due to delegitimizing incidents such as these, Piper's sense of authentic cultural identity is challenged and public recognition of her true identity is denied. She therefore must find a way to feel authentic in her identity by somehow balancing her inner sense of herself with how she is perceived by others. This is an example of how personal and cultural identity are shaped publicly in relationship as well as privately through self-reflection. What is pivotal in Piper's case is that she not be forced to claim only the identity that others give her, for her self-determination would then be sorely compromised.

With regard to authentic identity and authentic choices, as for Piper, not only is one's identity relationally created but it is also the identity that one *wants* to have. This contrasts with an identity that somehow one is forced to internalize, as we saw with the distorted identities of the African American children in the pre-*Brown* era of segregation. Returning to Taylor, authenticity is "something that we have to attain to be true and full human beings."[15] It would be wrong somehow for Piper just to

accept that, regardless of her heritage and upbringing, if she looks white, she must identify as white, just as it would be wrong for the African American children to accept that their culture was inferior to the dominant culture.

Particular Identities and the Issue of Commonality

There is a good case for supporting multicultural efforts toward developing authentic cultural identities, for marginalized and dominant groups alike. For members of nonoppressed groups in the United States, public recognition of the worth of their cultures is consistent and strong. However, privately, the cultural identity of dominant group members often is not considered important. A focus on educational efforts to foster authentic cultural identities would aid white students in seeing their color and their cultures. Still, while society clearly recognizes the worth of the dominant culture, too often social policy and expectations have placed marginalized people in particular on a path to inauthenticity due to the alienation from, and the devaluation and misrecognition of, their constitutive communities. If the dominant perspective is the only constitutive element of society, people of color may be forced into one of two paths: to deny their own identities in order to fit into the existing structure or to resist assimilation and risk social failure, both of which limit their self-determination. Consider Jody Cohen's story of a student who sacrifices her identity for traditional educational success; by allowing her identity as a black American to fade into the background, she can take advantage of educational opportunity.[16] But at what price?

There is, however, a third alternative. People can try to manage some combination of the above — some sort of balance that will result in neither full denial nor full assimilation — where one is still true to oneself. This third option is in keeping with our earlier conceptualization of authenticity. Finding a balance between the inner and outer influences on one's personal and cultural identities seems to me to be the most viable way to keep a sense of authenticity, and, as a result, be able to become self-determining.

This occurs partly through the recognition of the importance of people's cultural identities and the central part they play in the pursuit of a good life. This recognition is grounded in Taylor's concept of the "politics of recognition," which is characterized by a public recognition of the worth of people's cultures in a way that transcends mere toleration, reaches toward understanding, and mitigates the effects of misrecognition and internalized oppression.[17] If human identity is partly created relationally, then recognition is critical if a person is to have an authentic sense of identity.

Critics of multiculturalism fear that the recognition of particular identities causes a damaging societal disunity.[18] These critics maintain that a movement that serves to bolster people's respect for their own cultural identity ends up being too particularistic. They believe that an emphasis on the worth of many cultures tends to create separation and disunity rather than a common culture based on melting pot ideals. Arthur Schlesinger, for one, believes that the "militants of ethnicity" foster an unhealthy separatism that amplifies people's differences, nourishes animosity, and trivializes commonalities.[19]

At first glance, these criticisms seem to make sense. No one wants a disunited society that enhances separation among people and places them at odds with one another. Nevertheless, I believe that these criticisms do not hold up under closer scrutiny because they tend to idealize a societal structure that neither exists, nor has ever existed. For example, Schlesinger believes that the U.S. education system should contribute to forming "a nation composed of individuals making their own unhampered choices" rather than abandoning "historic purposes, replacing assimilation by fragmentation, integration by separatism."[20] What he neglects to take into consideration is who was excluded from defining those "historic purposes," and who actually can make those "unhampered choices" within a traditional educational and social system that focuses on a monocultural curriculum and forces assimilation. One of the reasons that we need to recognize multiculturalism is that the U.S. educational system was conceived by an exclusive group of Anglo men.[21]

So, while the current educational system may lead certain students to develop self-determination, other students are systematically left out. Too often, students of color end up with a distorted notion of their cultural identities and feelings of inauthenticity and inferiority that damage their senses of themselves. In addition, the diminished opportunity of some to develop self-determination has profound effects not only on those individuals, but on the proper functioning of a participatory democracy built upon equality as well.

Why Authentic Cultural Identities are Important

If cultural recognition and the development of authentic cultural identities are so vital, why is it that many people seem to lead good enough, self-determining enough lives without much attention to their race and culture? To be sure, this was more often the case during the pre-Civil Rights era of segregation in the United States, when most people did not really talk about "identity" or "recognition." This is not because they did not have a sense of identity or a desire for recognition but because cultural assimilation went relatively unchallenged.

For many people, the issue of culture just never plays an important role in their self-development, even though it is against their particular cultural backdrop that they develop a sense of what is most meaningful and significant in their lives. Usually, though, these people fit more easily into the dominant culture. For some, race and ethnicity are both privately and publicly defining. For others they can be an afterthought, even though they are no less defining.

One might question that while public recognition is important, what happens when a person (as in Adrian Piper's case) repeatedly is misrecognized? It becomes even more difficult for that person to feel secure with her or his inner conception of self in light of the public's (mis)conceptions. This is a thorny problem. In order to have a sense of authenticity in their identities, I think that Piper and others in similar situations have to develop that balance I discussed earlier. Thus, in order to foster self-determination, one needs to find a way to present oneself to be recognized. For Piper, this means "to do everything I could, either verbally or through trusted friends or through my work, to confront this matter head-on and issue advance warning to new white acquaintances, both actual and potential, that I identify myself as black."[22]

This, of course, places a consistent burden on her to have to explain her own identity. It is a compromise she is willing to make for greater overall self-determination, for, as she observes, "no matter what I do or do not do about my racial identity, someone is bound to feel uncomfortable. But I have resolved that it is no longer going to be me."[23]

Implications for Educational Policy

So, how can the preceding discussion of self-determination serve to help people like Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*? I have endeavored to show that people ought to be able to live their lives according to a healthy notion of who they are, not in imitation of a life they believe is somehow more socially worthy. In so doing, I have outlined a conception of the good that revolves around self-determination. This notion of self-determination is characterized by a favorable social context of choice and a sense of authenticity in one's identity. People's development of self-determination, then, should be a primary aim of educational policy in a just liberal society. As it currently stands, public education and its concomitant policies already contribute to the reproduction of a *status quo* that exacerbates inequality and oppression. Thus, education too often contributes to severely constrained contexts of choice for many students.

Should the educational system strive for something better in the name of democracy and social justice? John Stuart Mill said that if someone "causes evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction,…in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury."[24] Applying his sentiment to education, we can say that the educational system is therefore responsible and accountable for the injury it causes students by *not* providing them with an education for self-determination. Thus, in order for formal education to effect positive rather than negative consequences, it should play a central role in preparing persons to live self-determined lives and shape their own life stories.

---

1. Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 166.

2. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, 18.

3. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 369.

4. David A.J. Richards, "Rights and Autonomy," in *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy*, ed. John Christman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 203-20.

5. Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 199.

6. Kenneth R. Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy, and Schooling* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 18.

7. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1967), 115.

8. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, 186.

9. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 13.

10. See Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity* and Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).

11. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

12. Ibid., 9.

13. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*; Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York: Antheneum, 1970); and Scott Fletcher, *Education and Emancipation: Theory and Practice in a New Constellation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).

14. Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 235.

15. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.

16. Jody Cohen, "Constructing Race at an Urban High School: In Their Minds, Their Mouths, Their Hearts," in *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools*, ed. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 289-308.

17. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

18. See for example, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991) and Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992).

19. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*, 17.

20. Ibid., 16.

21. James A. Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice*, 3d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994).

22. Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," 266.

23. Ibid., 269.

24. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 70.