

Autonomy Reconsidered: A Proposal to Abandon the Language of Self- And Other-Control And to Adopt the Language of “Attunement”

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In this exploratory essay, I shall question the moral status of the notion of autonomy and its attendant notion of self-control. I will argue that autonomy as it is usually understood, namely having control over oneself and one's environment, is a morally problematic notion because control implies negation and suppression of the “other” (even if the other is none other than aspects of oneself). I shall further argue that thinking of autonomy not in terms of control but in terms of “attunement” will answer my concerns about autonomy and provide a conceptualization of the more integrated and harmonious moral agency. What I propose then is a change of our moral vocabulary and its attendant ways of thinking.

Autonomy has been regarded as an unquestionable educational good. Indeed, who in the liberal society would deny that autonomy is an all-important educational end? Crittenden comments: “Autonomy captures those aspects of living that we think essential to the good life in liberal democratic politics: our lives are self-directed; we choose the ways of life we direct....autonomy means that we are, as Michael Walzer comments, ‘the owners not [only] of one's body but of one's character, qualities, and actions.’”¹ Hare and Portelli also comment: “Education...is normally associated with awareness, understanding, consciousness-raising, responsible and informed choice, open-mindedness and critical thinking, wittingness, sensitivity and care, and autonomy.”² Looking at this long list, one could justifiably argue that autonomy undergirds many of the listed items. A point to remember here is that autonomy is an educational good because it has to be “learnt” or cultivated: it is not something that we are born with. But how do we become autonomous? What does it involve to become autonomous?

Autonomy is controlling oneself only through reason which is natural and internal to the self and, at the same time, is eliminating the variety of externally imposed forms of authority.³ Historically, this notion of autonomy as “controlling oneself only through reason” was central to the Enlightenment Project: It proposed to emancipate the lot of humans from “bonds of dependence on an external ‘authority’ in all its forms by recovering through education that which is internal to ‘man.’”⁴ As long as the self is controlled by external forces, the self is not autonomous but heteronomous. Moral maturity is usually understood as a gradual shift from heteronomy to autonomy, as it has been theorized by, for instance, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg.⁵ According to their view, until the human being has established a sense of core self and disciplined it to abide by moral principles or rules, he or she has not become an autonomous moral agent. An important point to note here is that self-discipline is most central to autonomy. Before one can relate to the world with an autonomous, that is, independent, will and opinion, one has to

become first one's own master, having disciplined oneself to be a commander to oneself, as it were. One who has failed to discipline oneself suffers from "weakness of will" (in Aristotle's terminology, "*akrasia*") which Aristotle discourses about at length. The problem of *akrasia* has occupied a central debate for many moral theorists, Aristotelians and non-Aristotelians alike.

Autonomy is foremost self-control. Before the self siding with reason can control its environment, it has to control and discipline itself because the self contains non-rational, even, irrational aspects. Until the self is capable of self-mastery and self-discipline, it is not capable of wielding influence and mastery over what is outside the self — the Other. The old dictum, "One has to be a master of oneself before one can become a master of the world," captures the meaning here.

There is something very peculiar about this notion of self-discipline and self-mastery. The peculiarity has to do with the psychological process of the self splitting itself to be both the ruler and ruled. A double, self-reflexive identity has to be created. A general exploration of how the psychic engineering of this self-reflexivity comes about is beyond the scope of the present essay. Nor am I particularly concerned about the fact that our psyche is capable of self-reflexivity. But my concern in this paper is the particular character of this self-reflexivity, namely, self-control and self-rule. What the self-control and self-rule implies is that there are aspects of oneself that need to be negated and subdued, to be put under the control of the rational part of the self.

This notion of self-control, where the self, under the guidance of reason, lords over aspects of itself that fall outside rationality proper, such as, for example, presumably, the entire affective and sensuous dimensions, is central to much of the traditional moral theories that we have known in the West.⁶ The fundamental step to becoming moral has been understood, from Aristotle to Kant to Freud to Kohlberg, to involve the struggle between the rational force and the non-rational and irrational force in the self, and the triumph of morality coincides with the rational force winning over the latter. Also, it has been the task of many psychologists theorizing on moral development to show us how rationality in humans becomes established in the first place, given that we are not born with it. Thus, for instance, Freud postulated how "superego" as the voice of conscience was developed through the internalization process of the parents' external control.⁷ This notion of internalizing the external control of the authority figure as the foundation of rational self-control is something that has become part of our folk psychology. My concern here is not with internalization per se. Once again, I can take that as an empirical "fact" of our psyche. But the question remains as to why it has to be the external control that has to be internalized. For a contrast, take Taylor's notion of the self as arising within conversation. The self comes to have a voice of its own as "a matter of gradually finding one's own voice as an interlocutor, realizing a possibility that was inscribed in the original situation of dependence in virtue of its dialogical form."⁸ What is described or proposed here is a very different model of internalization from that of external control. So, the point I am making is that internalization may very well be psychologically inevitable for us, but what and how exactly we internalize

is not inevitable but is open to our choice. Autonomy as internalization of the external control represented by authority figures of reason, for instance, the parents and the teachers, is one choice among others, albeit one that has been subscribed to and practiced so long as to have become the “psychological fact.”

The history of control by reason, whether intersubjectively or intrasubjectively, has not been a happy one. Control means exclusion, negation, delegitimation, domination, and suppression. The military metaphor of war and violence is pertinent here. When A controls B, A is the master or conqueror who subdues and rules over B. If B is resistant to A’s rule, then it needs to be subdued and won over. Note, though, that this same logic was used historically to oppress women, children, foreigners, and “mad” people who were perceived to be not in full possession of reason. In the name of reason, our species has inflicted an untold amount of suffering on each other. This is the intersubjective infliction of suffering. Intrasubjective infliction of suffering is probably no less exacting.⁹ Indeed, what is suffering but, ultimately, lack of peace and ease in one’s mind-heart, and this lack would have many different causes, from physical pain to inner conflict. The dichotomy set up between reason and inclination in the human psyche and, moreover, the moral demand that the reason controls and rules over, is a sure invitation to the whole dis-eased psychic operation of conflict, struggle, and domination-subjugation.

To me, the notion of control in autonomy is highly problematic, and I argue this on moral grounds. I am well aware that my argument here is ironic since, precisely, self-control via reason has been viewed as the fundamental step in mature moral development, and yet I am objecting to it on moral grounds. Could it be that my sense of moral ground departs from the sense that sees self-control as quintessentially moral? Fully unpacking the difference of understanding with respect to what morality is about is a complex task which is beyond the scope of the present paper, but I must at least briefly sketch out my characterization of morality since it is from this alternative perspective that I am able to see the problematic nature of the notion of autonomy as implying self-control. The perspective I have in mind is an alternative to the extent that its conceptualization of morality departs from the traditional one in which morality is understood primarily as a system of “obligations (and consequent rights), which can tell us what we should do in any instance.”¹⁰ Under this latter conception, conformity to moral principles and rules determines moral rightness. Lack of conformity, of course, implies moral wrongness. Autonomy as self-control is then a function of conforming to what is right and resisting what is wrong, where the rights and wrongs have been *preestablished* as part of the system of obligations.

While I do not deny that the above conception of morality, where control and conformity are central, can do the job of regulating people’s behaviour intrasubjectively and intersubjectively, I do not consider it the only way, nor the best way. Control, whether intersubjective or intrasubjective, is to me 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

therefore, to an overall diminished well-being. Or, to put it more strongly, control is a form of violence in that it sets out to subdue, silence, and dominate the otherness in whatever form.

If intersubjective and intrasubjective regulation is achieved through negation of otherness, I do not consider the achievement morally desirable inasmuch as morality does aim at regulation of some kind. While I acknowledge that morality is concerned with rights and wrongs, such being the criterial aspect of moral judgment, in my opinion, rights and wrongs do not address the more fundamental characterization of what morality is about or for. I shall state, but without arguing for at length, that the aims of morality is to enable people to live their lives, collectively and individually, with a sense of well-being. To me, the eudaimonic conception of morality is prior to the deontological conception. Moreover, psychologically speaking, well-being cannot be achieved by means of any form of oppression and repression, even if in the name of reason. There cannot be a sense of well-being where there are forms of control, negation, and suppression. It is for this reason that I am looking at the Taoist conception of moral thought, for here, regulation of human conduct is not conceived in terms of control and conformity but in terms of integration and harmonization.

In the Taoist conceptualization of morality, harmony-perceiving and harmony-making are quintessential to what it is to be moral, and hence achieving intrasubjective and intersubjective regulation and coherence at the expense of qualities of harmony in the self and in all its relatedness to the world fails in the most fundamental sense of morality. The challenge of morality in the Taoist conception is to integrate all the elements and forces that constitute human reality in such a way as to achieve an optimal sense of harmony. Thus the challenge is not for the particulars (read: each individual, each psychic dimension, and so forth) to conform to some preassigned order of rightness, such as moral principles in general and reason in particular, in which case, what does not conform is negated and suppressed.

The difference above between the Taoist conception of regulation and the autonomy-based conception of regulation illustrates two fundamentally different orders of thinking which Ames calls “the logical order of thinking” and “the aesthetic order of thinking.”¹¹ I shall now turn to Ames’ analysis of these two orders to further lend support to my critique of the notion of autonomy.

Ames explains that the logical order prioritizes “a preassigned pattern of relatedness, a ‘blueprint’ wherein a unity is prior to plurality” (*PTB*, 116). Given this priority, “logical construction” constitutes an act of “‘closure’ — the satisfaction of predetermined specification,” and the result is conformity (*PTB*, 116). In contrast, the aesthetic order prioritizes “the uniqueness of the one particular as it collaborates with other particulars in an emergent complex pattern of relatedness” (*PTB*, 117). Hence, aesthetic composition constitutes “an act of ‘disclosure’ — the achieved coordination of concrete details in novel patterns that reflect their uniqueness” (*PTB*, 117). An aesthetic order is not something that preexists the concerned particulars but is something that contingently arises from the dynamic effort on the part of the particulars to attune themselves appropriately to each other. To this end, the effort is made of judiciously and at the same time creatively interpreting the self and others

in the concrete particular context so as to achieve a coherent sense of harmony. The particular harmony that arises through this effort is not something that could have been predicted, planned on, specified, or counted on. While a deep familiarity with diverse things and situations may enable one to anticipate likelihood of outcomes, there can be no prior expectations or predictions of particular outcomes because knowledge of the particulars involved is disclosed only through the process of collaborative harmonious interaction with them. Ames says the following to illustrate the distinction he makes between these orders of thinking:

To the extent that, in our interaction, our conduct is limited by appeal to a preassigned pattern of relatedness, be it political or religious or cultural, and to the extent that we conform to and express this pattern faithfully and precisely as rules determinative of our conduct, we constitute ourselves as a logical construction. On the other hand, to the extent that we interact freely and without prejudice, without obligatory recourse to rule or ideal or principle, and to the extent that the organization which describes and unites us emerges out of a collaboration of our own uniqueness as particulars, we are the authors of an aesthetic composition (*PTB*, 118).

My own illustration by example of the contrast between these two orders of thinking takes the form of quilting. As a former quilter (I guess I now quilt with ideas and words), I am well aware of the major difference in approach between the quilting that utilizes fabric scraps one collects from various projects and the quilting that involves cutting out uniform pieces from new fabric and putting these together according to a preexisting pattern. The former approach has no “blueprint” to conform to, and the product is entirely dependent upon the odd collection of remnants one has at hand and one’s aesthetic sensitivity to the endless possibilities of harmonious color and shape patterns. The challenge of the project is to perceive the possibilities of harmony through the interpretive effort of integrating the pieces in such way that they mutually enhance each other. Here, even a piece that is not particularly appealing on its own is not discarded but is integrated with other pieces so as to bring out its best potential, which in turn contributes to the enhancement of the whole.

Another beautiful example comes to my mind, this time from the auditory realm, bringing out a literal meaning of harmony as “attunement.” I once learnt from an experienced keyboard technician who came to tune my family piano that she tuned the keyboard strings in relationship to each other rather than to each key’s absolute (mathematical) pitch. Doing it the latter way is possible: There are even electronic instruments that precisely gauge the standard pitch of each key. But an expert piano tuner tunes the keys to harmonize with each other, which takes a longer time since each key has to harmonize with all the other keys. Hence the tuner’s repeated back and forth tuning of each key. Attunement is, as from this example, mutual harmonization of all to all in a given domain. Harmonization is then a very different operation from conformity-seeking.

Each particular’s attuning itself to every other particular in the given field of organization: Such is the Taoist understanding of intersubjective and intrasubjective regulation. If, by morality, we are to understand strictly the conformity to the dictates of moral reason or moral principles, the Taoist understanding of harmony-perceiving and harmony-making will not qualify as morality. As Ames points out, the Taoist

conception is closer to “ethos” than to “ethics.” I agree. However, there is no reason to restrict the meaning of ethics to just one conception and delegitimize other viable conceptions. The Taoist conception of harmony-perceiving and harmony-making is a viable alternative to the control-based conception of morality, such as the morality of autonomous agency, because it achieves formally the same aim of morality, namely regulation and coherence of intersubjective and intrasubjective human psyche and behaviour but with a substantially different sense of regulation, namely harmony and integration as opposed to imposition and control. In closing this section on Ames’ analysis of the two orders of thinking, I quote a summative passage:

[T]he perceived order is not a given but an achievement. It is an order that cannot be valued on the basis of conformity to principle; it must be assessed as we would a symphony or painting in terms of creative expression — ultimately, its “rightness” for what it is. It does not disclose a necessary order, but only one of many possible orders available under prevailing conditions. In this paradigm, the particular achieves its own self-expression through patternings of deference: deferring to its environing conditions to establish an efficacious and fruitful integration while at the same time fully disclosing its own integrity as a particular (*PTB*, 135).

Schooling as an institutionalized activity is particularly prone to the language of control, of the “logical order” of thinking and doing. Teachers are exhorted to be “in control” of their class, the lessons, and the instruction. The students are exhorted to be in control of their attention, their study, their future, and so on. The teachers’ and students’ lives alike are driven by instructional objectives and outcomes. Short of clearly specified and stated objectives and outcomes, both parties tend to feel uncomfortable or even terrified by the contingency and indeterminacy that characterizes our experience *not yet* shaped by the “blueprints” or “preassigned patterns” of educational or instructional objectives. Here, I am reminded of Fromm’s thesis that the source of desire, nay, compulsion, to control others (we could also include the desire to control the self) is fear of life, or to be more precise, fear of unpredictability, uncertainty, and openness which are intrinsic to life not yet controlled and disciplined.¹²

Teachers walk into classrooms “armed” with carefully specified instructional objectives, ready to impose them on the students, and teachers even pledge a promise of what the students will have learnt at the end of the lesson. “At the end of this class, you will have learnt to identify...to produce.” Seduced by the promise of success, students welcome such promise, and if not given one in advance, they do not feel assured, like buying a product without the label, “Satisfaction Guaranteed.” But how can we promise that the students will or will not do something unless the implication is that the teacher will *make sure* that they do it, that is, compel them to do it? Once we realize this implication, we would see the true nature of such promise: control. That this mode of control is taken for granted can be shown by the fact that such language of control is welcomed, expected, and even demanded by the students. Many students become very uncomfortable and anxious unless objectives and expectations are clearly and in detail spelled out from the beginning. Any attempt to give the students the opportunity to explore and articulate their own doubts, problems, ignorance, as well as their own accomplishment is often met by student resentment. The attitude of “You are the teacher. Show us and tell us exactly what

to do (so that we will receive good grades),” prevails. In this situation, student autonomy is nothing more than their willingness to discipline themselves to conform to the preassigned specification set out before them.

When confronted with the pressure from the students to supply them with the specifications of what to learn, think, and perform, it is tempting to go back to the mode of imposition and control in teaching, especially given that teachers are nowadays sensitive to their self-image as belonging to a service-sector of industry. But I believe what is at stake here is much more than knowledge, grades, future jobs, and client-satisfaction. What is at stake is the shape of humanity: how we live with each other, with our selves, and with the environment at large. We, as teachers, as students, or as parents, have to ask ourselves the most important question that education should pose to us: What kind of life do we want to create and live, and what kind of people should we become to live a good life?

1. Jack Crittenden, “The Social Nature of Autonomy,” *The Review of Politics* 55 (Winter 1993): 35-65; 35-36.

2. William Hare and John P. Portelli, eds., *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings*, 2d ed. (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1996), 329.

3. Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education* (London: Routledge, 1994).

4. *Ibid.*, 136.

5. See Paul Crittenden, *Learning to be Moral: Philosophical Thoughts about Moral Development* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1990).

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Charles Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, ed. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 304-14; 313.

9. Intersubjectivity and intrasubjectivity mirror each other. Repression and oppression share the same source of negating and suppressing “otherness.” For example, one may as a child have to learn to make no chewing noise while eating, such being the polite manner that the child’s culture prescribes. If the child had to adopt this custom through a negative association, for example, by associating the behavior with a brute-like or subhuman behavior, the child’s success at internalizing the custom was due to repression. She had to hate and denounce, therefore repress what was formally an aspect of herself. The denounced part becomes “otherness,” and when this otherness is encountered in other people, the child directs the same negation and denouncement, but this time, towards the other, thereby creating a situation of oppression.

10. Richard Shusterman, “‘Ethics and Aesthetics Are One’: Postmodernism’s Ethics of Taste,” in *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, ed. Gary Shapiro (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 115-34; 122.

11. See Roger T. Ames, “Putting the *Te* Back to Taoism,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press), 113-44. This book will be cited as *PTB* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

12. Arne Johan Vetlesen discusses Fromm’s thesis of fear of life in *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).