

Attunement with Action

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When a deftly crafted essay challenging a fundamental concept of my own thought arrives in the mail, I am alerted. Autonomy and self-control are ideals I have long valued. I rely upon Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers for a goodly chunk of my moral vocabulary. I have counseled students and my preteen daughter toward self-rule and a critical stance regarding peer pressure, just as I chide myself whenever I allow others to make decisions for me that I ought to have made on my own. As an academic administrator, I like to feel professionally in control, though I wonder often if I am.

Heesoon Bai provokes us right from the title of her essay. With taut language, she argues for reconceptualizing autonomy with an alternative vocabulary. In this brief response, I shall summarize some points of her argument, raise a few questions, and sketch a bit of my own position. I turn to Kant, Spinoza, and Albert Schweitzer to amplify some of Bai's points, and to support some of my own. I finish with a brief caveat regarding her views on attunement and education.

Bai's blending of Western and Eastern thought is compelling. She questions an idea that undergirds much of our moral thinking, social psychology, and educational practice. Bai objects to a language of control, because such implies a self that is split, with one part ruling or dominating the other. Such a version of autonomy rests upon the notion that humans are rational animals. It is our animal, appetitive, unconscious part that is in need of control by our mindful rules and reasons. Such control, then, is the basis for self-rule.

Arguments for self-rule, such as Kant's, make a claim for personal responsibility as essential to a moral order. The interest in autonomy for Kant comes in response to concerns other than those stated by Bai, however. Kant addresses these in his famous popular essay, "What is Enlightenment?"¹ For Kant, Enlightenment is "man's (sic) emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance."² Kant is not so concerned with the negation or control of the appetitive side of the self as he is with questioning the forms of authority not based upon individually achieved reason. Enlightenment is accomplished by first taking responsibility for one's own life, a difficult task as it is usually easier to cede control to others (in Kant's tart words, "it is so comfortable to be a minor"³).

Bai's route to moral maturity heads elsewhere. Her notion of autonomy as control relies upon claiming that the split of the self is bad because it is violence to the whole. If it is this split and attendant need for control that Bai criticizes as morally deficient, then what should be in its place? She argues for autonomy as *attunement*, making an aesthetic and moral argument that draws upon Taoism and several vivid metaphors.

Attunement is a holistic concept with an internal, dialectical logic. Bai uses examples from quilting and music to make her points regarding Taoist harmony and integration. She argues for the moral claim of Taoism because such a philosophy achieves a regulation of the self, not through a domination or rule of one split over the other, but a recognition that parts are only such in relation to the whole, which logically determines them. The whole is the universe, and the self is but one part in relation to all other parts, much as parts of a quilt form a pleasing whole.

Bai's idea of attunement has some similarity with Spinoza's metaphysics, where harmony with God or Nature is realized through the application of deductive reason. Spinoza's philosophy rests upon recognizing through such reasoning the necessity of the natural order, and the place of humans within it. Freedom for Spinoza is achieved through an "intellectual love" of God or Nature.

A question raised by some readers of Spinoza's *Ethics* concerns the status of human agency in such a moral system. Some are not satisfied to realize that moral goodness is achieved through an intellectual appreciation of humans' necessarily determined role in the universe. Spinoza's metaphysical system, like Hegel's, leaves many a more existentially minded thinker cold and forlorn.

I have some of the same feelings about this new vocabulary of attunement. I am deeply ambivalent about the concept. I seek attunement of sorts in my own life through meditation and other contemplative activities. Yet, I question whether attunement as offered by Bai is enough to help deal with challenges requiring vigorous moral agency.

Albert Schweitzer wrestled with these same issues. Like Spinoza, Schweitzer believed in the moral neutrality of the natural world. Yet, for Schweitzer, such a belief is not enough to account for needed human action aimed toward a better life. He combined a Spinozistic view of natural necessity with a Christian ethical imperative. In this view, attunement would not be sufficient to account for a rich, robust, and courageous moral life.

To view the natural world, replete with its catastrophes and misfortune, as inevitable and morally neutral can leave one patient and accepting. Contemplative meditation has its value that both Bai and Schweitzer recognize. Undergirding Schweitzer's famous dictum of "reverence for life" is an ethical imperative to do better, not only for human society, but for all living things. Without such urgency, it becomes difficult to comprehend Schweitzer's many years of work in his African hospital. Deep in the humid jungle at Lambarené, he *enacted*, often through humble manual labor, what he and others *wrote* about. Schweitzer literally and intellectually turned his back on Europe and its cultural assumptions as he made his life his argument.⁴ It is this model of patient acceptance of natural calamity coupled with a vigilant agency regarding human actions that I recommend as an enlargement of Bai's concept of attunement.

Bai concludes her essay with some discussion of the educational implications of her position. In our postindustrial world sped up by a relentless information technology, her call to prepare students for life through a more contemplative and

accepting manner is eloquent and welcome.⁵ Yet, I remember well the sting I received when I talked about Socratic pedagogy last summer in my philosophy of education class. A number of my students were getting extra certification or pursuing a graduate degree, in special education. They let me know decisively that Socratic teaching would not work with their students. My experienced special education teachers claimed that their students needed an almost rigid pedagogy based upon control and hierarchy. These hardened veterans of teaching would probably find Bai's notion of attunement richly provocative and pleasant enough to contemplate for their own harried lives. Yet, I fear they would dismiss attunement as an airy, impractical classroom ideal much like Socratic pedagogy, unsuitable for their special needs students.

1. Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 383-89.

2. *Ibid.*, 384.

3. *Ibid.*

4. I draw my discussion of Albert Schweitzer from George Marshall and David Poling, *Schweitzer* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), esp. chap. 21, "The Man Within."

5. See Anthony G. Rud Jr., "Musty Paper, Blinking Cursors: Print and Digital Cultures," *Educational Researcher* 26, no. 7 (1997): 29-32 for a discussion of my experiences of this phenomenon.