

Autonomy, Education, and the Big Picture

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I agree completely with what I take to be the major thrust of Sankowski's paper: We ought not jettison the concept of autonomy from political/educational theory; instead, we ought to understand it in relation to institutions. But I think he overestimates how much distance he puts — and needs to put — between himself and others, especially if the concept of autonomy is not isolated from the big picture. This is the primary point I will make in these remarks, and I begin with a few observations about Sankowski's critique of *The Good Society*, by Bellah et al.¹

Sankowski is right to criticize Bellah et al for their all too *thin* conception of autonomy, which amounts to little more than being left alone to pursue one's self interests. For autonomy has a much more *thick*, contextualized interpretation, the interpretation that Sankowski calls "educational." Still, Bellah et al are not that far off (perhaps not off at all) in providing a *description* of the prevailing conception of autonomy in contemporary U.S. society, precisely the conception that Sankowski criticizes and would replace with his educational conception. It is important to note that Bellah et al criticize it too, at least as a *prescription*:² Although they make the mistake of ignoring the possibility of a richer and more robust — a *thick* — conception of autonomy, and therefore reject autonomy as a desirable principle altogether, they otherwise hold virtually the same view as Sankowski concerning the educational function of institutions. In particular, both Sankowski and Bellah et al hold an essentially Deweyan view that emphasizes understanding the moral-political nature of institutions and their power to educate for good or ill.³ Examples of such institutions include the family, the economic system, the media, and schools and universities.

Now, Sankowski explicitly acknowledges his overall agreement with Bellah et al's analysis. But he so emphasizes his differences with them about the proper way to understand autonomy that what he shares with them disappears from view. Because autonomy is abstracted from the overall picture in this way, Sankowski's disagreement with Bellah et al about how to understand it looks to be little more than verbal dispute. That is to say, no substantive differences, regarding either how to conceive of institutions or what good ones would look like, follow.

The idea of keeping the big picture in view carries over into what I have to say about more specifically philosophical analyses of autonomy and education. Consider Dewey.

Dewey's conception of the educative power of institutions, as indicated before, is one that Sankowski endorses. Dewey, however, did not make much of the concept of autonomy; he was more inclined to think in terms of freedom and liberty. But the parallel to Sankowski's view is, I think, quite close. Liberty for Dewey, like autonomy for Sankowski, must be understood in the context of social arrangements and the institutions that figure importantly in making them up. Liberty is a "hopeless

abstraction,” according to Dewey, when isolated from communal life, for “no man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone.”⁴ “Liberty,” Dewey says, is “the secure release of and fulfillment of personal potentialities only in rich and manifold association with others.”⁵ So far as I can tell, if we substituted “autonomy” for “liberty” in the preceding several sentences, we would have Sankowski’s view. When Sankowski says he is “building on” Dewey or putting “a special spin” on him, it is hard to see how this amounts to much more than employing different wording to advance the same view.

Sankowski’s view also shares much with liberal philosophy of education on the contemporary scene, even though he does not explicitly refer to it. Amy Gutmann’s influential *Democratic Education* provides a case in point.⁶ (Perhaps this should come as no surprise, since Gutmann, too, acknowledges a rather large debt to Dewey.) In Gutmann’s case, it is “conscious social reproduction” that fulfills the role that the “educational” interpretation of autonomy fulfills for Sankowski.

For Gutmann, as for Dewey, institutions are powerful educators that serve to reproduce social life. Whether this educational power is good or bad is determined by whether institutions *merely* reproduce individuals or, alternatively, empower — educate — individuals to consciously participate in reproduction. Schools and universities are obvious sites where fostering the capacity for conscious social reproduction, as well as enabling its practice, should take place. But Gutmann’s theory also encompasses the legal, legislative, and economic systems, as well as sites of “extramural education,” such as libraries and television.

Gutmann’s theory is especially relevant to Sankowski’s project because it provides considerable insight into a central theme that remains quite inchoate throughout his discussion: legitimizing the authority to educate. In broad (very broad) strokes, Gutmann’s position is that parents, the state, and educators each have legitimate authority regarding education. The claims that flow from these different sources of authority must be balanced, consistent with Gutmann’s two principled constraints on democratic deliberation: nonrepression and nondiscrimination. These principles are required because, if violated, democracy is undermined. At the bottom of Gutmann’s view is the fundamental principle that the citizens of a democracy must be able to effectively participate in democratic deliberation, in “conscious social reproduction.” Institutions that foster such deliberation possess political and educational legitimacy.

I have suggested several similarities among the views of Sankowski, on the one hand, and Bellah et al, Dewey, and Gutmann on the other, in an effort to make the point that the path along which he is traveling is not quite as divergent as he seems to think. He has plenty of fellow travelers, some of whom are in rather close proximity.

The general project in which I see Sankowski to be engaged is grappling with the problem, broadly construed, of how to square liberal democracy with communitarian insights and criticisms. This is a major focus of contemporary political and educational theory, one that involves many voices and vocabularies. Marshaling a response to Sankowski’s arguments has led me to the tentative and

wholly unanticipated conclusion that working out a robust conception of autonomy is not necessarily required to see this project through — *provided*, that is, the values such a conception of autonomy promotes and protects are included in the big picture.

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1. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).
 2. Whether the public actually uses the language of autonomy is another issue.
 3. Bellah et al., *The Good Society*, make explicit reference to emulating Dewey, 8.
 4. John Dewey, "Search for the Great Community," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 634.
 5. Dewey, "Search for the Great Community," 624.
 6. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).