

Education Beyond Hegemony?

Kevin Murray

University of Colorado Boulder

Katariina Holma and Hanna-Maija Huhtala provide us with an important opportunity to critically reexamine what has been a fundamental concept in educational theory.¹ Following our collective emphasis on the non-ideal, they remind us that no conception of autonomy useful in the struggle against the existing social and economic architecture can float above the material, social, and ideological conditions in which we interact with ourselves, others, and nature. They take up one of Adorno's central questions: "how is it possible for the subject to transcend the limits of modern society and reconstruct her relationship to nature?" They move toward a non-ideal conception of autonomy that might allow us to understand and challenge "the human inclination to internalize and follow the distorted moral rules of one's culture and society." These problems are among the most urgent that confront us in educational theory and practice. I want, then, to raise sympathetic questions about their revised conception of autonomy. "

In one of his lectures on pragmatism, William James writes:

There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere — no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and sometime. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.²

Following James, I want to reflect on how Holma and Huhtala's revised conception of autonomy might transform our lived attempts to cultivate autonomy in educational practice. What "definite difference will it make to you and me?"

Put broadly, I take Holma and Huhtala to suggest that we might appeal to the "archaic impulses" and "inner nature" of our students in order to cultivate autonomy. This suggestion follows directly from their non-ideal conception of autonomy. They note that, for Adorno, the fundamental problem of modern society is the reduction of reason to mere instrument. Developing alongside the existing social order, we are pushed into instrumental relation with ourselves, others, and nature. We learn, for example, to suppress compassion and empathy in order to navigate the harsh world of capitalist competition — we must subsume these emotions into instrumental rationality in order to survive in a structure that demands the exploitation of others. According to Holma and Huhtala, Adorno takes the possibility of autonomy to be situated in "the archaic impulses prior to such cognitive functions that developed later as reasoning." By appealing to these "archaic impulses," then, we might connect to some portion of subjectivity in students that has evaded full adjustment to late capitalist society.

But are we justified in conceiving of archaic impulses sufficiently removed from dominant ideology to serve as a starting point in our attempts to make distorted social

rules explicit for our students? Is the inner nature that we might appeal to always already structured by internalized ideology and filtered through dominant concepts? In *Eclipse of Reason*, Max Horkheimer writes:

Just as all life today tends increasingly to be subjected to rationalization and planning, so the life of each individual, including his most hidden impulses, which formerly constituted his private domain, must now take the demands of rationalization and planning into account: the individual's self-preservation presupposes his adjustment to the requirements for the preservation of the system. He no longer has room to evade the system.... Therefore adjustment becomes the standard for every conceivable type of subjective behavior.³

Horkheimer raises the possibility that development alongside the existing social apparatus adjusts even the “most hidden impulses” to that apparatus. What follows for how we might draw on this revised conception of autonomy in educational practice? To be clear, I do not mean to claim that we ought to understand ideology as fixed and complete totalization.⁴ But it seems to me that we must respond to these questions if this new notion of autonomy is to make a difference in our practice.

An example might help to illuminate these questions. Each semester I teach an undergraduate educational foundations course in which we reflect on schooling and social reproduction, structural racism, and so on. I seek in this course to invite my students into critical and structural knowledge about schools and society. One question in particular sparks heated discussion: are we obligated to work toward equalizing school funding in the United States? Here, I appeal to inner nature and archaic impulses. I attempt to facilitate certain kinds of encounters with the other — that is, those with whom my (typically) affluent students have not had much direct experience due to structures of segregation along lines of race and class — as we examine the disparity between the most and least privileged schools in the United States.

Each semester there are many students who are not moved by these appeals. I take the existence of these students to be significant for this revised conception of autonomy: they raise the haunting possibility that, at least for some individuals, dominant ideology is sufficiently comprehensive to shape our emotional responses such that empathy and anger, for example, appear or not according to internalized social logic. We might suspect that these students have thoroughly internalized dominant concepts — meritocracy, for example, and a libertarian notion of freedom — such that seeing the other does not conjure up anger or empathy. Appealing to archaic impulses seems to be a form of immanent critique: some individual claims to possess empathy and a sense of justice; by appealing to this person's inner nature, we might reveal his or her failure to live up to these stated values. Might we use such an appeal in educational practice if there is no substantial interior nature beyond hegemony to which this immanent critique might connect?

Holma and Huhtala anticipate these questions. They write:

Our psyche is not independent of the norms and values of the society within which it has developed. Society shapes both our emotions and our cognition during their development. Furthermore, the capacity for exerting agency in a particular society requires that one has, to some extent, adopted its norms and rules. However, Adorno sees that in the psyche, there is the possibility of seeing both oneself and society in a different light.

But I find that my concerns are not alleviated by this explanation. Given that “society shapes both our emotions and our cognition during their development,” are we justified in imagining that there exists in the psyche the transformative possibility of autonomy? What follows for educational practice? How are we to understand — and work with — the students that I have described above?

Later in *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer writes:

There are still some forces of resistance left within man. It is evidence against social pessimism that despite the continuous assault of collective patterns, the spirit of humanity is still alive, if not in the individual as a member of social groups, at least in the individual as far as he is let alone.⁵

How might we (re)vitalize these “forces of resistance” in our students? The non-ideal conception of autonomy developed by Holma and Huhtala moves us toward understanding how we might undertake such critical work in educational practice. But it seems to me that we need clearer answers to the questions posed here if we seek to fulfill the transformative potential of their revised conception of autonomy.

1. See, for example, Olivia Newman, “No Child Is an Island: Character Development and the Rights of Children,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 1 (2012): 91–106; Lucas Swaine, “The False Right to Autonomy in Education,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 1 (2012): 107–124; Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Perry Glanzer, “Rethinking the Boundaries and Burdens of Parental Authority over Education: A Response to Rob Reich’s Case Study of Homeschooling,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 1 (2008): 1–16.

2. William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 20.

3. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 65–66.

4. See, for example, Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112. Williams writes: “A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities.... Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.”

5. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 95.