Autonomy: A Philosophical Capture

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***Abstract**: Humans, because they are self-conscious, have the capacity to take control over their own behaviour in a way that non-self-conscious entities, such as the local cow, do not. However, if we do not clearly understand how humans can do this, we will never be able to fully activate that potential. In what is to follow, the change in the **value dynamic** will be traced from the initial position in which humans respond - like any animate being - to the values in their environment, to the emergence of learned responses as a function of purposeful reinforcement, to the emergence of 'self-control' in which self-conscious language-users borrow values from significant others, and finally to the emergence of genuine autonomy, when self-conscious agents are able to free their practical judgements from external influence by thinking through value issues impartially. Since thinking through an issue impartially is the sine qua non mark of philosophical thinking, it would appear that learning how to think philosophically is of particular importance to agents who wish to maximise their potential for autonomy.*

In Order to Harness Freedom, One Must Understand It

In comparison to most others entities in the animal kingdom, the characteristic that makes humans unique is the capacity for self-consciousness. Both ethically and legally we recognise this characteristic as bringing with it the capacity to choose and, hence, the capacity to take responsibility for one's actions. As self-conscious entities, humans thus have the capacity to 'become their own persons' - to be 'creators of themselves.' Humans have the capacity to become autonomous. However, this capacity is merely that – a capacity, or a potentiality. In order for that potential to be fully actualised, it must first be understood. In order for self-conscious agents to take more control over their own capacity for freedom - and in so doing acquire a kind of second-order freedom, i.e., the freedom to maximise their own freedom - they must fully appreciate the mechanics that underpin the evolution of this qualitative difference in behavioural control.

The Dynamics of Value

The most fundamental axiom that needs to be grasped in order to understand human action is that **value creates all animate behaviour.** Animals are originally set in motion, and are kept in motion, by value. Animals can be described as being set in motion by value in the sense that all animals begin life pre-programmed so that they respond to a range of objects and/or situations that are saturated with value. The shape of a hawk is saturated with a natural negative value for a gosling,[1] a smile has a natural positive value for young humans. Through association, or learning, other objects and situations borrow value from the original 'sign stimuli.' The resulting behaviour is more complex but the behaviour nonetheless remains totally determined by 'percepts that are saturated with value,' or what are more commonly referred to as 'external stimuli.'

This behaviour/value dialectic can be illuminated through an analogy with colour. Let's presume that all animals are pre-programmed so that red is appetitive (i.e. red elicits an approach response) and blue is aversive (i.e. blue elicits an avoidance response). With association, red and blue rub off on various objects and situations so that, with extensive experience, an animal's environment becomes a riot of colour with many shades and variations of red, blue, and purple. Were we to have the appropriate metaphysical glasses, we would be able to predict an animal's behaviour merely by seeing the colours of its world. We would know, for instance, that a vibrant red would be extremely appetitive, a pale blue mildly aversive, while we would predict that a deep purple would elicit a highly ambivalent response.

What is important to note with regard to the learning process is that **value moves** from object to object, or situation to situation, as a result of **association**.[2] What is also important to note with regard to the learning process is that this association can transpire either naturally, or as a result of contrived pairing. The modification of the behaviour of wild animals takes place entirely as a result of natural association, with the result being a 'fit' between the animal and the environment that it inhabits. A domestic pet, on the other hand, is also subject to purposeful pairing. A domestic pet therefore learns to fit into its social setting as well as its natural environment. The basic dynamic of behavioural control in both these situations, however, remains the same. The behaviour of both wild and domestic animals is totally determined by values that adhere to external percepts.

With the emergence of self-consciousness,[3] the dynamics of value begin to change. Initially, the very young pre-linguistic human, like a domestic pet, is subject to behaviour-modification both by natural association and purposeful pairing. However, as the child matures cognitively and develops language, a qualitative change in the dynamics of value occurs. What happens now is that instead of a caregiver merely trying to 'repaint' the values of a child's environment directly, now the caregiver, through symbolic interaction, tries to infuse

1 See Schneirla, T.C. (1965) Aspects of Stimulation and Organisation in Approach/Withdrawal Processes Underlying Vertebrate Behaviour Development, in *Advances in the Study of Behaviour*, Vol. 1 (pp. 1-74)

2 See various writings on classical conditioning, for example, D. Bindra, 'A Unified Account of Classical Conditioning and Operant Training,' in A.H. Black and W.F. Prokasy (eds.), *Classical Conditioning II: Current Research and Theory*. New York: Appleton-Crofts, 1972, pp. 453-481.

3 This account of self-consciousness finds its roots in the works of G. H. Mead, *On Social Psychology*. A. Strauss (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934. Mead's work gave rise to a movement referred to as *Symbolic Interactionism*. The reader will note that the term 'symbolic interaction' is used frequently in the present work.

values into the child (rather than directly into the child's world) in the hope that the child herself will project those values into relevant situations, and in so doing be moved by them.

Let us follow this change in the dynamic of value through an example. Let us suppose that a mother, Mrs Smith, initially trains her child, Mary, through a typical association programme; smiles and hugs for all the desired behaviours, and negative 'no's' for actions that she hopes to eliminate. With cognitive maturity and the development of language, however, Mrs Smith begins to explain to Mary, that, for instance, generosity is a virtue and that therefore Mary ought always to share her possessions with her playmates. In subsequent play situations, even if Mrs Smith is absent, we can presume that though a new toy will serve as a strong behaviour-eliciting stimulus for Mary, a projected image of a greatly admired child generously sharing her toys with her playmates will also exert an appetitive pull. What is happening here, in other words, is that a projected image of the self serves as a behaviour-eliciting stimulus that competes with the 'external'[4] behaviour-eliciting stimuli in the child's environment. If the self-projected stimulus overrides the external stimuli, Mary can be described as having gained self-control.

From a metaphysical point of view, the emergence of 'self-control' can be described as dramatic; from an everyday point of view, however, this drama is usually utterly invisible. This is so because, on the surface, there is no obvious difference between, for example, Mary refraining from being selfish with her toys because it conflicts with her mother's worldview, and a dog ceasing to chew on shoes because the behaviour was paired with a wallop. However, the difference is dramatic, and that drama resides in the potentiality of the former that is absent from the latter. Clearly the latter, i.e., learning that results merely from physical association is relatively crude and limited. On the one hand, one can only carry out just so many pairings, and, on the other, in order for an animal to be 'trained,' it must first produce the behaviour that one wants to positively, or aversively, reinforce. As well, the whole procedure must be done with great precision so that one actually reinforces the desired behaviour rather than a closely associated one. If Rover hesitates before coming, the subsequent treat may reinforce the hesitation rather than obedience.

By comparison, values that emerge as a result of linguistic interaction are more malleable, complex, and precise, to say nothing of the virtually miraculous fact that learning can transpire in the imagination rather than in actuality. Because self-conscious entities can imagine themselves in the future, they can imagine themselves doing both desired and undesired actions and, through symbolic interaction, others can pair those behaviours with positive or negative reinforcement. Thus, for example, in the above situation, if Mary had been a dog rather than a human child, the only way Mrs Smith could have produced the desired 'sharing response' would have been to somehow elicit a 'sharing' response and then positively reinforce it (though, as we dog-lovers know, eliciting a genuine sharing response from a dog is well neigh impossible). However, since Mary is self-conscious and is capable of symbolic interaction, her mother's words can not only conjure up an image of Mary sharing her toys, her mother's words can also conjure up an image of mother being mightily impressed by the fact that Mary is sharing her toys. Learning can thus take place in Mary's imagination. No *actual* behaviour or *actual* reinforcement need take place.

From a collective viewpoint, the evolutionary payoff of being able to undergo such complicated and precise learning without having to play it out in actuality is enormous. Such entities are able to co-ordinate their actions in a way that is far more complex and layered than entities that only learn through physical association. From an individual point of view, however, at least in terms of autonomy, entities seem to be going the wrong way. That is, precisely because self-conscious entities are able to undergo such complicated and precise learning, self-conscious entities appear to be subject to far more powerful and sophisticated external sources of behaviour-modification than their non-self-conscious counterparts. Rather than moving individuals toward autonomy, the emergence of self-consciousness appears to bring with it a kind of 'over-determination.' Though self-conscious entities have a capacity for 'self-control' which non-self-conscious entities do not, we need to keep firmly in mind that this so-called[5] 'self-control' is really behaviour that results from projected values that have been introjected from others. This is, as it were, number painting with the design and colour scheme being pre-determined. Individuals are not really painting their own worlds; they are not in charge of their own practical judgements.

The term 'self-control' is thus a misnomer. The emergence of 'self-control' is really the emergence of a finely tuned social control. Unlike animals in the wild that are controlled by the values that adhere to the natural environment, and unlike domestic pets that are controlled by the natural environment **and** contrived pairing, self-conscious entities are controlled by the natural environment, **and** contrived paring, **and** introjected values that they themselves project into the environment. How can such entities reach for autonomy?

If the ultimate value for self-conscious entities is autonomy, it appears that there is irony in the route. In their pursuit of autonomy, it would seem that self-conscious entities must first go deeper into the quagmire of determination before arising out of it. This is so because, paradoxically, the capacity for self-consciousness, symbolic interaction, and value projection - all of which are necessary for autonomy - first tighten the puppet strings. This is the risk of self-consciousness. If one loses oneself in the journey, one is even further from the epitome to which individual humans can aspire than one was at the beginning.

4 'External' has been put in quotes so as to signal that the force of any external stimulus is also a function of the internal state of the conscious being. For example, the appetitive pull of food is at least partially a function of the degree to which the conscious being in question is hungry.

5 This capacity for 'internal control' is generally referred to as 'self-control' by contemporary psychologists and laypersons alike, e.g., 'In losing his temper, he showed a distinct lack of self-control.'

Getting Control of One's Own Values

It is value that moves behaviour. Thus if one wants to control one's own behaviour, one must get control over one's values. How does one do that?

The first step that is necessary in order to take control over one's behaviour is to understand clearly how others, heretofore, have controlled one's behaviour. Others have controlled one's behaviour either by literal purposeful pairing, or through symbolic pairing, i.e., dialogue. Trying to take control over one's own behaviour by literal purposeful paring is rare. For one thing it is crude; for another, it implies that one must resort to treating oneself as a pre-linguistic animal. However, in some instances such literal purposeful pairing is appropriate. Some alcoholics, for instance, resort to pairing highly aversive stimuli, e.g., drugs that produce severe nausea, with alcohol intake, in an effort to conquer their addiction.

The most effective way to take control over one's behaviour, however, is to take control over one's own reasoning processes. Others have plugged into one's reasoning processes by pairing, through symbolic interaction, an imagined action with an imagined reinforcement, either positive or negative. **That reinforcement, or value, is what we call a reason.** 'You ought not to do 'x' *because* others will think ill of you,' 'you ought to do 'y' *because* it will help you flourish,' and so on. The word 'because' signals a reason. In theoretical reasoning, the word 'because' signals a reference to a matter of fact, e.g., the bridge collapsed because the cable snapped. However, in practical reasoning, i.e., reasoning about how one ought or ought not to act, the word 'because' ultimately signals a reference to a value. The reference may not be direct, but it will eventually get there. Thus, though the 'because' in the claim 'you ought to contact your grandmother because she is dying' directly refers to a matter of fact, i.e., that your grandmother is dying, it indirectly refers to the value that 'one ought always to try and make contact with people (or relatives) who are dying.'[6] Practical reasoning must eventually end with a reference to a value because the only thing that moves behaviour is value.

Autonomy thus requires that one learn how to reason with oneself about practical issues. However to say, i.e., that 'autonomy requires that one learn how to reason with oneself about practical issues,' is **not** to say that one must simply learn how to supply oneself with reasons. If autonomy is the goal, then there is a certain **kind of reasoning** that must be mastered, and that is the kind of reasoning that neutralises outside influence. After all, to be autonomous means that one can make decisions by oneself; that one's decisions are not influenced by outside pressures. Reasoning that is not influenced by outside pressure is **impartial reasoning**. Autonomy requires, in other words, that one learn to reason impartially. **Autonomy requires that one follow reasons** (as opposed to wishful thinking or preconceived ideas) **where they lead**. Autonomy requires that one become a **reasonable** individual. Thus, to say that 'autonomy requires that one learn how to reason with oneself about practical issues' is to say that, if autonomy is the goal, an individual must learn to think through issues impartially - an individual must become a reasonable person, i.e., follow reasons where they lead.

Different Value Histories

Learning to reason impartially with oneself is no easy feat. To begin with, there are often overwhelming reasons why one is loath to follow reasons where they lead. The conclusion to which reasons point may appear to be counter to one's own short term best interests, or contrary to the beliefs held by one's reference group. However, perhaps more importantly, learning to reason impartially may be difficult because one has rarely been exposed to it. In fact, quite the contrary is too often the case. Many young humans, unhappily, are chronically exposed to utterly biased reasoning, i.e., the sort of cognitive trickery that distorts reasons so that they fit preconceived conclusions.

That young humans are often exposed to 'unreasonable' environments is not always evident. This is so because it is often assumed, incorrectly, that children who are exposed to 'talking' are exposed to reasoning. That is, with regard to parenting styles, parents often assume that there are two main methods (a false dilemma as it turns out): either use physical force to obtain discipline, or talk to your children. Those who pick the latter assume that the result will be a 'reasonable' child. This is a false assumption. **Talking with one's child is not the same as reasoning with one's child.** Talking parents often engage in dialogue with the assumption that the aim is to get the child to do the parents' will. **Going into a dialogue with the aim of getting anyone to do one's will is not going into a dialogue with reasoning in mind.** It is going into a dialogue with manipulation in mind. Going into a dialogue with reasoning in mind is to go into a dialogue with the assumption that both parties will follow reasons where they lead. Participants, of course, may assume that they can predict where the reasons will lead, but participants must, nonetheless, be prepared to genuinely explore one another's points of view and to allow reasons - not persons - to adjudicate. In a reasoning dialogue, all participants must believe that it is reasons - not persons - that rule. If children are exposed over a long period of time to **dialogues in which reason rules**, they will believe - to their very core - that should their reasons for wishing to do, or not to do, anything have overwhelming merit, their parents will happily support them. Children exposed in this way to **dialogues in which reason rules** will never believe that any decision is arbitrary, or that sheer power has any influence.

If parents honour the rule of reason,[7] their offspring are liable to do likewise. Rebellion is only necessary against arbitrary power. When people - as opposed to reasons - rule, then there will always be a subliminal war as to who has the upper hand. If parents - as persons - rule, they can expect that their children will eventually try to

6 Practice in finding 'hidden premises' (a common exercise in most 'Critical Thinking' courses) is necessary if one is to become competent in seeing the values that anchor practical reasoning.

7 In is important to understand that learning through reasoning is only one kind of learning, amongst other kinds of learning, that ought to take place in childhood. The sort of learning that ought to take place in any given situation is a function both of the dynamics of the situation and the state and maturity of the individuals involved. Attempting to use reason when a toddler is overwhelmed by massive stimulus overload, for example, is clearly inappropriate.

wrest that authority from them. Such rebellion, of course, is rarely in the name of genuine autonomy. Such rebellion is usually merely an attempt to move from the 'frying pan' of being finely socially attuned to one's parents, to the 'fire' of being finely socially attuned to one's pals.

Unhappily many parents try to avoid rebellious confrontation by abdicating parental authority altogether, i.e., letting their kids do virtually whatever they want. Such a disastrous environment predictably breeds undisciplined self-centred individuals. Autonomy is not nurtured in a jungle.

If the goal is to create an environment which will nourish 'reasonableness,' the answer lies **not** in merely talking to one's children, **nor** does it lie in *not* expecting a lot from one's offspring. If the goal is to create an environment which will nourish 'reasonableness,' the answer lies **not** in creating rules and then trying to talk one's offspring into them, **nor** does it lie in creating no rules at all. **The answer is to honour the rule of reason**. Children who are chronically exposed to **dialogue in which reason rules** will become highly disciplined reasonable individuals who have been given the tools to genuinely aspire to the best that humans can be. Children who are chronically exposed to dialogue in which reason rules can, with ease and grace, become their own persons; they can with ease and grace soar to autonomy. Children who are chronically exposed to dialogue in which reason rules will be able to decide for themselves, in whatever unique circumstances they find themselves, what is needed in order to be the best that they can be.

Locating One's Own Position

Understanding the value dynamic, and knowing the quality of one's own 'value background,' is important as it allows one to estimate where one is in the dynamic of value. Locating one's own position within the value dynamic is important as it can alert individuals to the degree of difficulty that they will likely encounter in their aspirations to becoming the best to which individual humans can aspire. Those who have never seen reason rule will be reticent to try the route at all. Those who have been chronically exposed to linguistic manipulation will frequently spin their wheels on an ingrained and distracting belief that the point of reasoning is to persuade others to see issues as they do, or to get others to do their bidding. The lucky ones will have already experienced the excitement of following reasons where they lead, and hence will also have experienced a growing confidence in themselves as thinkers, as well as in the content of their thought. The lucky ones will have had a glimpse of freedom. However, regardless of one's present starting point, and the potential pitfalls in the journey ahead, if one can estimate where one is, as well as the inherent dangers that are yet to be faced, and if one keeps one's vision firmly on the goal, autonomy ought to be possible for most.

How Is Freedom Possible?

Since you are a physical object, you are subject to the same physical laws as other physical objects. In that sense you are determined. Since you are a biological being, you are also subject to biochemical laws that govern other biological beings, and to that extent you are determined. Since you are a learning animal, you are subject to the same 'passions' as other animals, i.e., the values that saturate your world willy nilly elicit behaviour from you in that same way that behaviour is elicited from the lion in the jungle. In that sense you are 'behaviourally' determined. Since you have been subject to purposeful pairing in the same way that domestic pets are, in that sense you are determined by stimuli that elicit learned responses. Since you are a social being, you have introjected values from significant others to whom you have been exposed, and to that extent, you are psychosocially determined.

However, you are self-consciousness. Because you are self-conscious, you can imagine yourself in future distinct situations, and you can imagine yourself over the long term. Because you can think about, and hence decide **for yourself** how you want to act in any given situation and, in so doing **enact values**, you have the capacity to **create yourself.** However, in order to gain control over that capacity, you first have to understand **that** you have that capacity (otherwise you will remain blindly at the mercy of all the determining factors in your life), and you must gain the skill to **activate** that capacity.

If you have read thus far, you have taken the first step toward autonomy. You have learned that it is possible to strive toward freedom. Now you must begin the journey of acquiring freedom-enhancing skills; you must learn how to impartially think through all the value decisions that confront you every day of your life.[8] Since thinking through an issue impartially is the *sine qua non* mark of philosophical thinking, gaining the skill to **activate** your capacity for autonomy requires that you learn how to think philosophically. Ultimately autonomy is a philosophical capture.

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8 Clearly it is not within the scope of this article to describe impartial thinking in detail. However, for those who wish a glimpse, it can be described as 'a chronic (i.e., always present) willingness to test one's position against the strongest possible opposition.' For a lively philosophical account of impartial thinking one would do well to read J. S. Mill's 'Liberty,' which can be found in *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*. New York: New American Library, 1962. For those who wish practice, at least with regard to academic issues, almost any philosophy course will be of assistance. However, few courses focus on impartially thinking through practical issues of everyday life. The happy exception here are courses modelled after the philosophical tradition entitled *Philosophy for Children,* that use a *Community of Inquiry* as the central pedagogical tool. For those interested in *Philosophy for Children*, see any of the works written by Matthew Lipman, for example, M. Lipman, A. Sharp, F. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980, or any of the journals devoted to *Philosophy for Children, e.g., Analytic Teaching*, published by Viterbo College, La Crosse Wisconsin, U.S.A.