

Thought, Action, and Moral Virtue: Who Needs Open-Mindedness?

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Rebecca Taylor provides an argument for autonomy-promoting education against autonomy-facilitating education, and the necessity of open-mindedness in autonomous reflection. Taylor's tasks are to first prove both (a) that autonomy-facilitating education (AFE) *does not* result in autonomous action, and that (b) autonomy-promoting education (APE) does, and secondly that open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue is required for a person to act autonomously. I share Taylor's desire to find effective ways to promote autonomy, though I disagree with her characterization of the different outcomes of AFE and APE and that open-mindedness is necessary for autonomous reflection. I will more closely examine the process of reflection and probe for sufficient motivation for autonomous agency as manifested by action beyond intellectual activity.

I begin by restating the definitions of autonomy provided by Taylor, which serve as the accepted conceptions for my response. These three conceptions require what she calls "critical reflection or rational revisability."

- Gerald Dworkin: "a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth and the *capacity* to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values."¹
- Rob Reich: "a person's ability to reflect independently and critically upon basic *commitments*, values, desires, and beliefs, be they chosen or unchosen."²
- Will Kymlicka: "*being able to* assess and potentially revise [our] conception [of the good]" and to "make informed *judgements* about what is truly valuable."³

All three conceptions emphasize the critical and reflective component of autonomy requiring thoughtful, critical reflection on one's conception of the good in light of competing or alternative conceptions.

Under the conceptions above, autonomy's powers are chiefly intellectual and embedded with motivations of varied urgency, motivations that lie in the commitments that influence the reflection and judgments thusly derived. Given the influence of one's perceived commitments — to religion, family, principles — in the course of reflection, if APE is to be motivating it must exert its influence on the commitments first and the judgments second. Reflection is a process that can occur, however critically, without any manifestation of its products, and given the inherently obfuscated nature of the connection between intellectual and empirical activity, there appears to be little difference between APE and AFE: neither offers reliable inducements for autonomous *action*. What is it that turns the plan, judgment, or decision into genuine action?

Lorraine Code notes that one can be a passive or neutral recipient of information or experience and be reliably critical and open-minded in deliberations, but the active person will be so precisely in response to her social obligations⁴ It is therefore vitally important that Taylor's Tabitha frames her reflection in regard to her existing commitments if there is to be hope of action once she passes judgment. Tabitha's motivation is embedded not in some abstract conception of the good, but in a truly instrumental conception of the good rooted in one's life as a social being and maintained by relationships. Taylor agrees, citing Eamonn Callan's recognition of "the social contexts in which autonomy is exercised" and that these social contexts are inextricable foundations for an individual's privileged epistemic standpoint.⁵ Taylor then concludes that there is an epistemic claim made regarding the privileged standpoint; namely, that such a standpoint can sufficiently contribute to an individual's determination of the good life.

Taylor suggests that in this claim open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue similar to the conceptions of autonomy offered earlier wherein open-mindedness requires "revision based on evidence and argument, giving due regard to reason, and taking seriously the merits of other views." Taylor distinguishes between autonomous reflection and open-mindedness wherein autonomy is restricted to reflection upon one's own ends and open-mindedness involves the contemplation of alternative ends. I am not convinced the distinction is so clean. Rob Reich's definition of autonomy calls for reflection on "commitments, values, desires, and beliefs" that may be "chosen or unchosen," meaning that in "un-choosing" one chooses an alternative and in doing so one must reflect on an alternative end. Thus autonomous reflection inherently admits the possibility of alternative ends and contains the *process* by which one considers alternatives. If open-mindedness is offering a process to contemplate alternatives, then it does not offer anything new that autonomous reflection needs. Therefore autonomous reflection in AFE is as capable of promoting autonomy as it is in APE insofar as their processes are the same.

If, however, open-mindedness is a necessary component of autonomous reflection — wherein the scenario described above identifies that open-mindedness is an inherent and necessary process for autonomous reflection to occur — then AFE, which Taylor admits entails autonomous reflection, albeit neutrally oriented, is as foundationally capable of promoting autonomy as APE. In either case, open-mindedness would appear to be unnecessary for autonomous reflection and the distinction between AFE and APE begins to fade.

I now turn to the italicized words in the conceptions of autonomy offered earlier. *Capacity* and *being able to* indicate ability or power, whereas *commitments* suggests obligations or duties that might warrant the operationalization of those abilities or powers. *Judgment* occupies a slightly different position, but since it indicates decision-making powers it serves as a specific power that could be a capacity someone possesses. These words imply potential or possible motivations for action, but are actionably inert: none indicate the manifested doing of something. A judgment is an action insofar as it requires intellectual thought, reflection, and deliberation, but

has no force until acted upon in “the world” where autonomy is actualized.⁶ Thus Tabitha’s critical reflections, however open-minded, are moot unless she *does* something about them (including choosing *not* to act).

Motivating an autonomous thinker to become an autonomous actor depends upon the commitments or social contexts in which the individual lives, but we are still left without a mode of propulsion, with or without open-mindedness. What if Tabitha critically examines her life and the lives of those outside her community with an open-mind, reflects ever so carefully, and chooses to pass on the tight jeans and Miley Cyrus albums and instead dons, yet again, the long loose skirt and the norms of her family’s restrictive religion. Has she acted autonomously or not? If not, then is it merely because she chose less individual freedom than some others might desire her to? Or is it because the social contexts that influenced her reflection were too powerful to overcome? How much stock can we put in the empirically observable products of reflection to evaluate autonomy?

If one is still acting autonomously if one has chosen not to act, then empirical action is not a requirement for autonomy, but our ability to know if another has acted autonomously is obfuscated by the inability to know another’s mind. In this case the difference between AFE and APE becomes a matter of playing (unverifiable) percentages. If, however, one is required to provide empirical proof of autonomy, then there is no way to effectively promote autonomy without either (a) requiring that after autonomous reflection one must act in an observable way, or (b) imbuing all privileged epistemic standpoints with the value that acting (observably) on one’s commitments in a social context is necessary, regardless of the decision one comes to. Unfortunately, (a) would have a chilling effect on autonomy by denying those who wish not to act the choice of doing (not doing) so. Attempting (b) would be an even more illiberal and autonomy-crushing act, forcing a value on those who might not hold it, a contradiction for autonomy.

Taylor might be better served calling upon Aristotle’s conception of *moral* virtue. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the word *hexis* to indicate moral virtue, but *hexis* not only indicates a person’s capacity for judgment about what is worth doing, but also one’s ability to actually do it. Therefore the argument for autonomy-promotion could be served by using open-mindedness as a *moral* virtue. The moral virtues — those that put us into action — are required for the autonomous reflection to become autonomous action. If open-mindedness is a moral virtue, then it introduces an active compulsion to the commitments held and judgments derived that open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue fails to deliver. Further, Aristotle found the mean for virtue to be hard to hit and that choosing the right place on the mean was a matter of perception rather than reason. Perception is easily tied to one’s perceived commitments and the social contexts in which judgments are rendered. Thus in autonomy, open-mindedness as a moral virtue reinforces the epistemic privileged standpoint that accepts the perception-influencing nature of one’s commitments and social contexts in choosing the good life. Whether this is facilitated or promoted, *hexis* acts.

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1. Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20 (emphasis added).
 2. Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 91–92 (emphasis added).
 3. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 92 (emphasis added).
 4. Lorraine Code, “Toward a ‘Responsibilist’ Epistemology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45, no. 1 (1984): 29–50.
 5. Here Taylor is drawing from Eamonn Callan, “Autonomy, Child-Rearing, and Good Lives,” in *The Moral and Political Status of Children: New Essays*, ed. David Archard and Colin M. Macleod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
 6. I follow Hannah Arendt’s conception of “the world” “as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable.” See Hannah Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günter Gaus” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, trans. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 19.