

*Educating for Autonomy: Reconstructing a Moral Ideal*

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*Introduction*

My paper deals with the ideal of personal autonomy as a central educational aim. Autonomy holds as one of the most central values in recent modern western culture. In daily practice, people are commonly held responsible for their autonomy. That may happen in many ways and in varied contexts. Autonomy may refer to independence in economic sense, but also to the right of self-determination in a more general sense. The concept of autonomy stands for personal freedom as this underpins scores of practices and ideals in a liberal, democratic society.

In my paper I am concerned with autonomy as *moral value in education* and as *goal of education*. Autonomy refers to the freedom of a person to make personal choices and mostly also to the ability to deal responsibly with that freedom of choice. According to William K. Frankena, an autonomous person is an individual who is capable of thinking, judging and acting on his/her own. Autonomy refers to the individual's capacity and freedom to be psychologically, morally, and socially self-governing. It encompasses self-esteem, self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, and self-determination. Now, in my reference to educating for autonomy, the term 'education' is not limited to schooling. Education, as used here, includes conscious and unconscious shaping of a person's capacities and tendencies, as well under the influence of others, as by the influence the formed self has on one's own process of formation.

There is a considerable agreement among educators that autonomy ought to be taken as a highly desirable aim of education. Within pedagogy as discipline, the goals of formation are then often formulated in terms that imply familiarity with the concepts of autonomy such as maturity, personal responsibility, self-responsible self-determination, an ability to make choices by oneself, independence, absence of coercion and authority, etc. But also within education as profession, the ideal of autonomy plays an important role. In concepts such as independent learning and 'development oriented learning' (Dutch OGO), its authors speak of the independence or autonomy of the child as basic needs. In that event, autonomy has, to be sure, a more specific meaning, that is, the of the need of a child to be able to explore and undertake matters without dependence on another. But there is no doubt that even this specific principle cannot be divorced from the great adherence to the general notion of autonomy I described above.

Historically speaking, there is also a close relation between the ideal of autonomy and the ideal of formation, within education. Formation is a modern concept that mainly expresses Enlightenment ideals for the independently thinking and performing person, with the express aim to improve the social circumstances of man (Vanderstraeten 2001, 45-46). Formation has therefore an emancipating and democratic quality. This holds also for the *Bildung-ideals* of the German philosopher Von Humboldt, something that commonly is forgotten due to the elitist connotations that the concept of *Bildung* acquired in the course of the 19th century (Lechner 2003, 139-191). Autonomy then traditionally means that I can not allow my life to be determined by authorities beyond and above me (heteronomy), but that I determine myself how I run my life, because I dictate the law (*nomos*) to myself (*autos*). Formation is then precisely the factor making it possible to develop as an independent individual. I will return to this historical context below.

The question now is what precisely is the content of autonomy that is being aimed for and how such can be formulated within education. Autonomy viewed as the freedom and potential to make personal choices and to determine one's own life, is an ideal of formation that certainly is not without problems, as, for instance, has been determined by communitarian thinkers. In the course of my paper I want to explore three current meanings or connotations of autonomy and reinterpret these from a more original meaning structure and in relation to the concept of formation.

In the first place there is a tension between autonomy as freedom of choice and the human conditioned state. The question is to what extent my freedom of choice leads me if I realize that I in many respects am who I am through factors that I myself certainly did *not* choose.

In the second place there is the question which law it is that I hold myself accountable to if autonomy means "dictating the law to oneself".

Finally I address the question how personal autonomy relates to heteronomy that is inherent to the religious relation, namely in the relation to God.

### *1. Autonomy as free self-determination*

In the first place, autonomy as self-determination assumes that I have a large measure of *freedom to choose* in order to fill my life to my own liking. Freedom is primarily held here to be a 'freedom from', namely from all forms of coercion and authority. This 'freedom from' manifests itself in the freedom to make choices by oneself. This freedom applies mainly to the private domain, as the area where people can lead their own lives without pressure from others. In this way, 'leisure time' [in Dutch literally, 'free time'] can be taken to mean not being hampered to follow whatever whim one has at that moment. Freedom here is undetermined (negative freedom), but assumes the possession of possibilities of choice. Negative freedom also includes the *possibility* to choose or not to choose certain things (Hermans 1993: 173-174).

Although the concept of autonomy in some perspectives is limited to this ideal of having a free choice, yet we cannot take recourse to the negative concept of freedom to characterize autonomy. To be sure, we may expect an autonomous person that he *factually* makes certain choices or has made them and that he determines his life himself in that way. An autonomous person must actually do something with that freedom of choice. This requires a certain positive orientation to be attributed to the negative freedom. It concerns the aptitude to give direction to one's own life by developing oneself in the desired direction ('freedom towards'). One speaks of one's personal development when a person successfully develops his own capacities, talents or abilities, with the purpose of making the most of oneself and becoming oneself (Hermans 1993: 173-175).

I conclude that the requirement for self-determination is in fact the normative condition inherent to the concept of autonomy. In that way, autonomy appears to be a moral ideal that contains an inner contradiction. When the requirement to develop myself is inherent to autonomy, then this requirement itself does not flow forth from my own autonomous choice. Autonomy means that I can choose whom and what I want to be, but means at the same time that I cannot choose not to choose. *Il faut choisir*. This points to the compelling force of the ideal of self-determination and the coercion to become a perfect chooser [Dutch literally: the maker of choices]. I have to get the best out of myself and when that is not successful, then my life would be a failure.

I am not the first to point out the overestimation of human freedom of choice in this ideology. The question is then also if our life really is the result of free subjective choices. In case we see in our own lives, for instance, to which extent we make choices, we realize quite well that in many respects we are *conditioned* by biological, psychological and sociological

factors, all making me the person I am. This fact hedges my range of choices. And even if our choice and living possibilities would be unrestrained, as commerce and advertising would have us believe, then even then it holds that the autonomous choices that I take on grounds of subjective reasons, to a large extent, are determined by the same particular biological, psychological and sociological factors (Nagel 1986, 116-118).

This means subsequently that I *cannot* develop my life in any desired direction. That also becomes apparent from a reading of the concept of self-development. If this is characterized as the requirement to develop one's own capacities, talents and abilities, then it already assumes a certain *givenness* in capacities, talents and abilities, which hold as conditions and as potential for my self-development. To be sure, the actual performance of developing these talents requires a form of self-determination, but the direction that self-development takes is first and foremost dependent on that factor that has or has not been given me as a potential. Briefly stated, I can not therefore "become whom or what I just want to be". The human finiteness is the realistic curtailment of the ideal of autonomy (cf. Kolen 2002, 213-216). And the concept of self-development points out of itself to an already given self that forms the condition for the development.

For this reason I propose to reserve our speaking of autonomy in the sense of self-determination and self-development for *the manner whereby* I am responsive to the requirement to develop my given potential. It concerns the self-conscious and self-determining relation that I take as already given self to myself. As guideline I take here the definition of the self as given by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*: 'The Self is a relation that relates itself to itself' (Kierkegaard 1980, 13). In this definition we find we could say, a first and a second self. Of the 'first self' it is summarily said that it is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom or possibility and necessity, of the psychical and the physical. With this description is meant the given physical and psychic possibilities and restraints regarding the finiteness as well as the abilities to transcend oneself. For such a synthesis it does not yet hold according to Anti-Climacus that it is a self. We could say, that here is meant a negative self in the sense of an undetermined self. In order to speak of a positive self that can realise itself in freedom, we need to recognize that 'the relation relates itself to itself'.

Applied to the concept of autonomy, this Kierkegaardian concept of becoming a self could mean I hold the following. Only when I take responsibility for my life as that is necessarily and potentially, and adopt it as a demand unto myself, then we could speak of autonomy. We are not faced at this point with an absolute self-determination, because I relate myself to that what I necessarily just am and potentially can become. This relation to the self is a spiritual attitude that represents the freedom of the self (cf. Vos 2002, 130-133).

It is of importance to determine that this free relation to the self according to Kierkegaard is in any case more exception than rule. Following the definition of the relation to the self, we read in *The Sickness unto Death* a detailed analysis of the uncountable ways in which the relation to the self can become derailed and the self is in despair. When we regard autonomy as self-determination in relation to the Kierkegaardian becoming of the self, then autonomy is more exception than rule. In other words, autonomy is not a matter of the "first self", but an ideal of the "second self" that is not always within reach. Autonomy is a goal whereto men have to be formed and including having overcome oneself in one's despair.

From this analysis I will provide a small application in education. When autonomy is a *goal* whereto men are formed and not just an empirically available *capacity*, then it is unrealistic when children in primary school are treated as autonomous choosers by allowing them complete personal choice in what they are to learn, as that is the case in some schools and educational concepts in the Netherlands (ex. Iederwijs). Making each child responsible for their own learning process denies the difference between a child that is not yet formed and

the adult teacher whom is responsible for that formation. In effect this is cruel regarding the child, even though the contrary is often preached. The adult withdraws from his responsibility and loads that on the child without its being equipped to handle that. After all, on what grounds must a child choose what to learn of not? The untenable presupposition is that a child already is autonomous, independent and responsible for oneself. The active participation of the learning person in securing the learning process may only increase to the extent maturity increases and the reflective capacities of the formed child are expanded.

This does not deny that it is of great importance that young children can develop themselves at school in the direction that fits what they can do independently, be it that this is a relative independence. But the basis for that is not an already existing autonomy, but the proper perspective on the existing potentialities and intelligences of the child, whom moreover must be formed in the right manner in order to achieve development. A child certainly can not grasp that. Therefore the child is dependent on others, in particular on the teacher.

This external dependence brings me to the second aspect of autonomy that I want to discuss.

## *2. Autonomy as 'dictating the law to oneself'*

Autonomy has in current language the connotation of *independence*. In the event I determine my own life and lay down the law for myself, then it is I who determines which values and norms hold for me and I am not dependent on others for that. Autonomy represents the freedom of the individual, independent of external authorities and social conventions.

As I have said, historically speaking the ideal of autonomy came about in collaboration with the emancipatory movements found in the Enlightenment. It concerns here the Enlightenment ideal that Kant worded so well: 'der Ausgang der Menschheit aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit'. Through the disappearance of the class ridden society, in modern times heredity and lineage play a decreasing role and we see the hierarchical system gradually be displaced through differentiation of functions (for instance, complementary role differentiation between physician and patient, teacher and student, consumer and producer). Individual aspects that are relevant in a certain functional system become more important. The individual becomes a decision making center, that makes choices and is not to be lead by anything else than one's own insights (Vanderstraeten 2001: 46-49).

Whereas Kant holds emancipated man to always be the responsible man (as I will demonstrate below), this ideal has increasingly degenerated into the profile of man that has everything sufficient unto oneself: an independent, self-forming individual aiming at maximizing personal profit. His independence is threatened by the eventual influence of other individuals, against which he guards himself by calling upon privacy, enlightened self-interest and the intangibility of the private sphere (cf. Verkerk 2003, 122-123). Put in liberal language: I am free to do what I want, on the condition of non-maleficence (not damaging others).

If we would regard autonomy in this individualistic sense, it may be clear that many people, such as the handicapped, the chronically ill and the elderly are precluded from this ideal. They are after all in increased measure dependent on other people. But even aside from this, it is of course the question whether this individual independence as such does justice to the reality of human existence. People design their lives within a social context. The individual practically and continually uses for his self-determination certain models, examples, icons or idols that are put forward within the social context, even if this is the model of the 'independent individualist'. In addition to this, the benevolence or care I give to others – the care I give to others as well as what I receive – inextricably is connected with human existence (Verkerk 2003, 124-125). Also from communitarians we hear criticism on

the idea of an atomistic, isolated self that underlies the ideal of individual autonomy. MacIntyre, for instance, emphasizes that relations are constitutive for the identity of a person. My personal identity is always embedded in communities and traditions from which I draw my identity.

This means, in my view, that the manner in which a person provides content to his autonomy is dependent on the manner in which he is formed. And formation takes place primarily with others that have preceded him. Jacques de Visscher demonstrates well how we are ‘forced’ from our birth to engage in dialogue and relationality, because nurturers and educators respond to us and uphold this responsiveness until we can respond ourselves and our response can be answered in a dialogue. This dialogue must always be placed against a “cultural-historically determined thematic background”. In the actual performance and words of a mother regarding her baby, the values, norms and habits are carried over from generation to generation (De Visscher 2000, 12-13).

Also in education it holds that formation always assumes a certain cultural, moral and worldview context, that is passed on by an older generation to a younger generation. Formation is therefore always more than self-forming, because it entails the transfer of morals and mores, the values and norms, perspectives and expectations of the cultural community to which the to be formed person belongs. The formation that takes place at school, arises not from out of the *need* of the pupil, but flows forth from the *interest* that a mature generation places in the transferal of that which is supportive for their living environment and culture. In that respect, the emphasis is on a concept of the ‘good life’. Missing such a directional idea - in which, in the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a whole world is represented<sup>1</sup>, means being at a loss where formation ought to be aimed at.<sup>2</sup>

But to which extent is it then possible to speak of autonomy, if I am primarily formed by the communities, traditions and the social context I partake of? And am I actually autonomous when formation implies that I am formed in an already given cultural whole? We encounter here in fact the so-called pedagogical paradox (*Führen oder wachsen lassen*). On the one hand it is inherent to nurture and formation in general that children are led into and initiated in an already given tradition and culture, with its corresponding moral values. On the other hand, the goal of formation precisely is realizing the independence or ‘self-responsible self-determination’ of the formed person, so that the pedagogue may become dispensable. I believe that we must realize that this paradox does indeed contain an imagined conflict. The pedagogical challenge is actually to connect the opposing elements in this dissociation, that is, between being formed and the independence, in a proper way. The independence whereto the individual is being formed, presupposes the community and given culture that constitute the *space* wherein the free individual can develop himself independently. Cultural formation is therefore a condition for coming to autonomy. Self-determination requires after all a frame of reference, a culture in which man can develop oneself (Hermans 1993: 190).

This is precisely what autonomy means when we regard it in the original sense of ‘dictating the law to oneself’. The question is then what that law is. In any case, ‘nomos’ points towards something that transcends the primary preferences, inclinations and wishes of the individual. The law that I hold myself to, points towards something outside of myself and therefore does not coincide with the ‘values and norms’ that I only draw out of myself, as the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gadamer: ‘Jedes einzelne Individuum, das sich aus seinem Naturwesen ins Geistige erhebt, findet in Sprache, Sitte, Einrichtungen seines Volkes eine vorgegebene Substanz, die es, wie im Sprechenlernen, zur seinigen zu machen hat. So ist das einzelne Individuum immer schon auf dem Wege der Bildung und immer schon dabei, seine Natürlichkeit aufzuheben, sofern die Welt, in die es hineinwächst, eine in Sprache und Sitte menschlich gebildete ist.’ (Gadamer 1960, 9).

<sup>2</sup> According to the classic philosopher of *Bildung* Wilhelm von Humboldt the formed person is the one ‘whom is able to realize the universal in oneself’ (cit. in Laeyendecker 2001: 67).

vulgar views on autonomy suggests. 'Nomos' could refer as well to mores and habits, the values and norms of a cultural community, as this is advanced by the social context. Connected to the concept of *Bildung*, this would mean that the individual in a process of alienation will positively relate himself to that what he is familiar with from his own social-cultural background (cf. Gadamer 1965, 11-12). If I hold myself to the law in this sense, then this means a 'return' to already given laws, values and habits of a culture, which I factually accept as my own.

Other than in this communitarian perspective, I want to argue that 'nomos' must be taken in the more absolute sense and that the concept of autonomy is to be re-interpreted in the manner as provided by Kant. Following Manenschijn, I take Kant's view on autonomy to be the ability to place oneself with the help of reason under *an unconditional moral law*. This is not a law that may hold for the one and not for the other, but nothing more than the categorical imperative that prescribes to me an unconditional moral command (Manenschijn 1999, 54-57; cf Biesta 2001, 104 nt 3). I am not pleading for a Kantian ethics as such, but for his idea of autonomy as the demand to hold oneself to the unconditional moral duty to do the good.

When personal autonomy is intrinsically connected with this moral duty, it means first of all that it is incorrect to characterize autonomy in an individual way as independence, because an autonomous person places himself under an absolute moral law. We can only speak of autonomy if the self is able to transcend his own subjective preferences, desires, values and norms (that commonly are regarded to be an expression of autonomy). Secondly, by being responsive to this transcendental law, not only are my own subjective longings, values and preferences, but also that of a pertaining cultural community being held into account. The concept of autonomy is a critical principle in regard of the pertaining values, norms, mores and habits in a cultural community. This critique does not happen by referring the individual to his own subjective preferences and perspectives, but by placing them under an absolute moral law. Autonomy requires me to do the good, even if it appears contrary to the interests of my community. Regarding formation for purposes of autonomy, we see again something of a pedagogical paradox: the pedagogue directs our attention towards the transcendent and even beyond the values of the cultural community he represents, to an absolute duty. In the third place, autonomy appears in this sense to denote religion. And that allows me to go on to my third paragraph.

### 3. *Autonomy as heteronomy*

From Christian perspective, autonomy has been criticized on the thought that it is not I, but God that holds me to the demand of the law. Instead of being autonomous, we are heteronomous. I am of the persuasion that the one does not exclude the other. The said contradiction would hold in the event we see God and man as competitors: either I dictate myself the law, or God dictates the law to me. Self-determination over against God's rule. In the Christian tradition there has always been the realization that man is responsible personally, as steward, as image of God, as co-worker of God, and so forth. But not only is there more space thinking from out this religious perspective for independence of man. Philosophically speaking it is of interest that we could state that autonomy out itself already points towards a transcendental authority. Dictating the law unto myself, this law places itself above me and to me. This law above and beyond me appears to imply, therefore, a form of heteronomy. The question now before us is whether this form of heteronomy also points toward God.

Also on this point, Kant's thinking is of interest. Following Manenschijn's reading, God becomes relevant if we realize that man is inclined to do evil and therefore does not as such will the good. There is a moral gap between the unconditional demand of the moral law

and our human incapacities to then live according to that law. Whereas in man we find tensions between his inclination towards evil and the good will, God can do no other than will the good, because He is the good. There is only One who is good, and that is God. This conclusion is drawn by Kant on the basis of reason, namely by combining the *idea* of moral perfection with the *idea* of completely free will. Only in God our knowledge of the good and the perfect coincide. God is then for us the authority that gives meaning to our moral life because He gives us the moral law. We find the moral law, which is the law of God, as an archetype in our minds. God is in addition the authority we need in order to do actually the good and to bridge the moral gap. The divine assistance consists in His teaching us to live according to this archetype of His will. It is the disposition of Christ-in-us that makes us into new persons and teaches us to die to our sins (Manenschijn 1999, 67-70).

How sympathetic this perspective may appear, the problem is that postulating God in this way ultimately rests on the obviousness that belief in God had for Kant and his contemporaries. In the late modern period, this necessity disappears. In the second place, the God Kant puts forward is for many faithful not the God Whom they experience in their daily lives as the God they believe in. God is for Kant more of a rational construction than a God towards which one relates personally (Kole 2002, 226). After all, the concept of God for Kant is limited to the idea that ultimately reaffirms human autonomy. Manenschijn points out that God's assistance in Christ is reduced to an idea of humanity and that Luther's *simul justus et peccator* is substituted by a 'before and after'. Renewed man is the virtuous man that has left the old man behind himself permanently (Manenschijn 1999, 71-73).

In short, Kant's analysis of the moral gap between ought and can may be convincing, but ultimately it is man himself – albeit with divine assistance – that must bridge the gap. In my view, this is a reestablishment of the belief in the boundless possibilities of human autonomy and hence the belief in God becomes obsolete. My conclusion is that autonomy as such does not exclude faith in God, but at the same time that this faith is not necessary. Autonomy as holding myself to an unconditional moral law *can* therefore be connected with God, but is not *required*.

The question that remains is whether the moral gap can be bridged in this manner. After all, by being good I do not release myself of previously incurred guilt. This guilt can not be absolved within a purely ethical perspective. The moral law is in the end an accuser that continually indicts me within my autonomy. Without pretending to have dealt with the relation between autonomy and God exhaustively, I want to finally point to an alternative that has been contributed in Kierkegaard's religious concept of becoming oneself. With Kierkegaard, the tension found within the moral gap is not solved ethically-religious. The relation to God is rather a way to cope with the tension. In *The Sickness unto Death*, the self is a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to that which established the entire relation: God. Despair consists in its ultimate form, to will to be oneself in despair. The despairing person in that case wants to be oneself and understands his own despair, but seeks to break that despair by himself alone. To me this is the situation of the autonomous person who despairs about the gap between the person he is and the person he ought to be. Because he wants to bridge this moral gap through his own powers, he remains in despair and drives himself all the more deeper into deeper despair. The religious perspective consists precisely in that the self rests transparently in the power that established it (Kierkegaard 1980, 13-14). The manner in which the self relates to God is the confession that I am always guilty, as the ethicist in *Either/Or* is told by his befriended pastor. And this ethicist in many respects corresponds precisely with the Kantian autonomous subject. In the confession 'before God', a call for deliverance and forgiveness is put before God, 'for Whom all things are possible'. For Kierkegaard the opposite of sin, different than by Kant, is not virtue but faith (Kierkegaard 1980, 67-74, 82).

Summarizing, autonomy is a ‘self-responsible self-determination’ for which one must be educated and formed. In the end it is ethically speaking necessary to respond to an absolute moral law, which is the heteronomous backside of autonomy. In the attempt to be truly autonomous in this sense, I always remain at fault. It is my relation to God that allows me to bear the unbearable burden of autonomy. For moral formation within Christian education, this understanding is crucial. ‘Educating for autonomy’ is not contrary to belief in God, but ends from the Christian perspective in such belief.

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