Autonomy, practical rationality and being at one with oneself: a reply to Wendelborn

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*ABSTRACT: In his belated reply to my 2006 article ‘Against autonomy as an educational aim’, Christian Wendelborn advances two objections to my argument and proposes two new candidates for an educational aim deserving of the name autonomy. I show here that his objections miss their mark and that neither of his new candidates is appointable.*

Christian Wendelborn purports to find two flaws in my argument against autonomy as an educational aim (Wendelborn, 2020). As he rightly observes, my strategy in making that argument was to identify two ordinary senses of autonomy, and a range of technical senses currently popular with philosophers, and explain why none of them passes muster as an aim of education. Wendelborn contends that my objection to one of the ordinary senses fails because it ‘trades on ambiguities’ (p.XX), and that my objection to one of the technical senses fails because it ‘misses the point’ (p.XX) of the sense in question.

The interest of Wendelborn’s article lies not so much in the charges of ambiguity-trading and point-missing, which seem to me wide of the mark, as in the two new candidates he proposes for an educational aim deserving of the name autonomy. In this brief response I shall indicate where Wendelborn’s criticisms go astray and assess the merits of the additional senses of autonomy he invites us to consider.

**Dispositional autonomy**

The ordinary sense of autonomy Wendelborn doubts I succeed in dispatching is *dispositional autonomy*, which I characterise in my original article as follows:

[Dispositional autonomy] is *the inclination to determine one’s own actions*. To possess this trait is to have a preference for relying on one’s own judgment, to be independent-minded, free-spirited, disposed to do things one’s own way… It is properly contrasted with dispositional heteronomy, with the inclination to submit oneself to the direction of others. (Hand, 2006, p.537)

I argue that neither dispositional autonomy nor dispositional heteronomy should be erected as an educational aim. I distinguish both from a third quality of mind whose cultivation in educational contexts I endorse:

We can, if we wish, try to educate pupils in such a way that they are averse *neither* to authority *nor* to independence of mind. We may not merely refrain from imparting, but actively discourage the formation of, either dispositional autonomy or dispositional heteronomy. We may aim rather at producing rational, well-balanced people willing and able to exercise independent judgment, rely on expert advice or submit to legitimate authority *as*

*the occasion demands*. (p.539)

It still seems to me that this is the quality of mind we should favour with respect to action-determination. Let us call it *practical rationality*. Things go best for us when we have neither a preference for doing things our own way nor a preference for submitting to the direction of others, but when we are governed by the demands of practical reason. Whether we exercise independent judgment or rely on expert advice should be determined not by a general inclination towards one or the other, but by relevant features of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Now, Wendelborn’s accusation is that my account of dispositional autonomy is ambiguous between a preference for doing things one’s own way, on the one hand, and practical rationality, on the other. He thinks my argument against dispositional autonomy as an educational aim fails because I trade on this ambiguity to secure my conclusion: I try to reject dispositional autonomy in both senses on the strength of an argument that only rules out a preference for doing things one’s own way. Because practical rationality is untouched by my objection, my argument does not go through.

I hope it will be clear that this criticism is quite unfounded. My account of dispositional autonomy is not ambiguous in the way Wendelborn suggests, and I do not trade on any ambiguity to secure my conclusion. I equate dispositional autonomy with a preference for doing things one’s own way, and it is in this specific sense that I reject it as an educational aim. Far from trying to smuggle in a concomitant rejection of practical rationality, I say that this is precisely the educational aim we should endorse.

Setting the misplaced charge of ambiguity-trading to one side, the real point of interest here is Wendelborn’s claim that the quality of mind I am calling practical rationality is, in fact, well described as dispositional autonomy. If he is right about this, I shall be only too pleased to concede that I am, after all, a defender of autonomy as an educational aim. But is he?

Wendelborn contends that the practically rational agent who submits herself, where appropriate, to the direction of experts and the instruction of legitimate authorities, can still properly be said to be determining her own actions. His argument for this contention has two parts. In the first part, he characterises submission to the direction of experts as *acting on indirect evidence*: his thought here is that deciding what to do in light of knowledge acquired from experts is no less autonomous than deciding what to do in light of knowledge acquired through observation and experience. In the second part, he characterises submission to the instruction of legitimate authorities as *deciding de dicto rather than de re*: a considered decision to take the as-yet-unspecified actions required by a legitimate authority is no less autonomous than a considered decision to take a specified action assessed on its merits. There is, he concludes, a serviceable sense of dispositional autonomy that is quite compatible with these two forms of submission.

Both parts of Wendelborn’s argument seem to me unsatisfactory. First, submitting to the direction of experts is not at all the same thing as deciding what to do with reference to information supplied by experts. When my doctor prescribes a course of medical treatment and I assiduously comply with her instructions, I am not deciding for myself how to treat my medical condition. I am not just taking account of a professional opinion prior to formulating my own plan of action: I am following doctor’s orders. In John Wilson’s phrase, I am ‘putting myself in someone else’s hands’ (Wilson, 1977, p.97). I do not deny that we sometimes do, and perhaps sometimes should, take the stance towards medical advice Wendelborn apparently favours: ‘If my doctor believes that I should exercise more regularly, then the fact that he believes this is indirect evidence that I should exercise more regularly’ (Wendelborn, 2020, p.XX). But it is clear that, insofar as I treat my doctor’s advice merely as information pertinent to my own decision-making, I am precisely *not* submitting to her direction. So, while I agree with Wendelborn that actions I determine for myself with reference to information supplied by experts qualify as autonomous, this has little bearing on the status of actions taken under the direction of experts.

Second, from the fact that a *de dicto* decision to do what a legitimate authority requires is autonomous, it does not follow that subsequent acts of compliance with that authority are also autonomous. Indeed, the *de dicto* decision might fairly be described as an autonomous *giving-up of autonomy* with respect to matters on which the authority rules. The teacher decides for herself to accept a job in a school and to be governed by its timetable; but she then has no choice about taking 7B for History on a Friday afternoon. Following an established convention in philosophy of language (see also Kripke, 1977), Wendelborn uses the example of spouse selection to explain the *de dicto*/*de re* distinction: a decision ‘to marry the most beautiful woman in Frankfurt’ is *de re* if one is choosing a particular woman who happens to be the most beautiful in Frankfurt, but *de dicto* if one is choosing whichever woman turns out to be the most beautiful in Frankfurt (Wendelborn, 2020, p.XX). If we transpose this example to the ‘authority-situations’ of present interest, the distinction is between deciding to marry a particular person and deciding to marry whichever person is deemed a good match by a legitimate authority. Irrespective of the view one takes on the goods and ills of arranged marriages, it is natural to describe decisions of the latter kind as *renunciations* of autonomy in the matter of spouse selection.

In both parts of his argument, Wendelborn tries to shift attention away from the heteronomous actions routinely taken by practically rational people. Sometimes, to be sure, reasonable people determine their own actions in light of knowledge acquired from experts; but at other times they let the experts tell them what to do. And while, ideally, reasonable people will make their own decisions about submitting to legitimate authorities, these are precisely decisions to allow those authorities to determine their actions in the relevant domains. There is no getting away from the fact that a great many perfectly sensible acts are heteronomous, or from the fact that a disinclination to accept direction or instruction from others would be a serious impediment to acting well. For these reasons I think we must reject Wendelborn’s claim that dispositional autonomy is an appropriate synonym for practical rationality.

**Autonomy with respect to desires**

The technical sense of autonomy to which Wendelborn finds my objections unpersuasive is *the disposition to evaluate one’s desires for oneself*:

We influence the long-term survival of our desires, wants and preferences by identifying with them or withdrawing from them. Now it is clear that these acts of identification and withdrawal may be either autonomous or heteronomous: when we endorse or repudiate desires, we may do so either independently or under the direction of others. Autonomy in the arena of desire-determination is therefore the disposition to evaluate one’s desires for oneself. (Hand, 2006, pp.547-548)

I advance two objections to erecting autonomy in this sense as an aim of education. The first is that desire evaluation ‘is just not important enough, not sufficiently central to well-lived lives, to merit serious educational attention’ (p.548). The second is that ‘it is very often reasonable to submit to the direction of others in evaluating one’s desires’ (p.549). When we are in the grip of unrealistic, false or pathological desires, we may not be well placed to diagnose the problem with those desires, so it makes sense for us to defer to those who are.

Wendelborn’s complaint about my argument here is that I ‘miss the point’ of the technical sense of autonomy I am discussing. He writes:

The contrast between the autonomous and the non-autonomous person is not, as Hand is saying, the contrast between the person that evaluates her desires for herself and the person that lets this work be done by others. The contrast is between the person that is at one with herself, i.e. that identifies with and endorses her various desires, and the person that is more or less alienated from herself, i.e. that does not or cannot identify with and endorse her desires. (Wendelborn, 2020, p.XX)

This is a puzzling complaint. I clearly specify the sense of autonomy I mean to address, then set out my reasons for rejecting it as an educational aim. Wendelborn, it seems, would have preferred me to address a different sense of autonomy – what he calls ‘the Frankfurt-style sense’ (p.XX)[[1]](#footnote-1) – presumably on the grounds that he thinks it has more going for it. But since I do not discuss that sense, nor make any claim to be discussing it, there is no basis for the accusation that I have somehow missed the point of it.

Again, more interesting than Wendelborn’s misdirected complaint is his positive suggestion that autonomy in the Frankfurt-style sense is a ‘worthwhile goal’ and amenable to educational influence (p.XX). Perhaps there are things educators can do to bring it about that children are ‘at one with themselves’ – that they have only the desires they endorse and are not disturbed by desires they would prefer not to have. What matters, on this conception of autonomy, is not whether it is me or someone else who decides which of my desires I should repudiate, but that, once I have repudiated them, I am no longer troubled by the desires in question. Wendelborn concedes that there are some philosophical loose ends to be tied up here, but he thinks the appeal of autonomy so construed is self-evident: ‘the idea is clear enough to see how autonomy in this sense can and should be an aim of education’ (p.XX).

It would certainly be interesting to hear more about how Wendelborn understands the Frankfurt-style conception: his discussion is frustratingly brief. On the strength of the account he provides, though, the appeal of Frankfurt-style autonomy as an educational aim is far from self-evident. I think there are at least three reasons to be sceptical about it.

First, I doubt that anyone qualifies as autonomous in this sense. The most cursory acquaintance with human psychology reveals that we are continually disturbed by desires we would prefer not to have. As I sit at my computer writing this article, there is a miscellany of unwanted desires that contrive to distract me from my task: I want to make another cup of tea, to check the news headlines, to read the comments on my last Facebook post, to go for a walk, to play a game with the children, to marinate the chicken for dinner, to watch the next episode of my current Netflix obsession. I have an unambiguous second-order preference not to be troubled by any of these first-order desires for the next couple of hours, while I have a clear stretch of writing time, but sadly my preference is largely impotent. Of course, if all goes well, I shall succeed in *resisting* my unwanted desires, but that is a very different thing from being without them.

Perhaps it is not first-order desires of this kind that autonomous people are supposed to be able to quell with their second-order preferences. After all, there is not much wrong with the desires just mentioned – their only crime is to intrude on my thoughts at an inconvenient time. Maybe it is just *deficient* desires, desires that are permanently unwelcome, by which autonomous people are undisturbed. Consider, then, the two examples of deficient desires in my original article: the unrealistic desire of the amateur pianist of modest talent to turn professional, and the false desire of the victim of a violent crime to exact vengeance on the perpetrator (Hand, 2006, pp.548-549). Here, too, it seems psychologically implausible to imagine that either pianist or victim, on fully accepting the deficiency of her desire and abandoning any attempt to satisfy it, is thereby somehow relieved of it. The pianist opts to pursue a more viable career in law or accounting, but a part of her still longs to be giving recitals in packed concert halls; the crime victim draws a line under her ordeal and moves on with her life, but she is still haunted by dark thoughts of avenging her assault.

I am not sure, then, that people are ever at one with themselves in the way Frankfurt-style autonomy seems to require. We are not so constituted that our first-order desires fall obediently into line with our second-order preferences. A person wholly undisturbed by unwelcome desires, it is tempting to say, would hardly be human at all.

Second, and relatedly, I doubt that autonomy in this sense can be acquired by educational means. What sort of learning is needed if children are to have only the desires they endorse? And how are we to bring about that learning? There may well be sensible educational steps we can take to improve children’s evaluations of their desires, but to be a competent evaluator of one’s desires is not yet to be at one with oneself. For the latter, one must have second-order control over one’s first-order desires. If this is supposed to be learnable, and by extension teachable, we need some account of the kind of learning and teaching that might deliver it. It is hard to imagine a pedagogy capable even in principle – let alone in practice – of freeing children from desires they would prefer not to have.

It may seem that I am now denying what I have previously affirmed: that ‘we influence the long-term survival of our desires, wants and preferences by identifying with them or withdrawing from them’ (Hand, 2006, p.547). But I was at pains to emphasise in my original article that, because desires cannot be the immediate objects of volitions, such influence as we have over them is indirect, partial and long-term. I said that there are many desires of which we can never be free, and that the effect of withdrawing from desires is usually just to make them burn a little less brightly. I certainly did not suggest that teaching children to evaluate their desires could yield anything close to Frankfurt-style autonomy.

And third, one of the objections I advanced to autonomy as independent desire evaluation – that it ‘is just not important enough, not sufficiently central to well-lived lives, to merit serious educational attention’ (p.548) – applies with equal force to autonomy as second-order control over first-order desires. Even if autonomy in this sense really is attainable, and even if it is attainable by educational means, it remains to be shown that it deserves to be an aim of education. There is, arguably, something rather self-absorbed, even narcissistic, about a preoccupation with arranging one’s first-order desires to one’s second-order satisfaction. And given the great difficulty of making such arrangements, we plausibly do better to focus our educational efforts on learning to *resist* unwanted desires than on learning to *dispel* them.

I conclude that neither of Wendelborn’s new candidates for an educational aim appropriately described as autonomy is up to the job. Practical rationality is indeed a central aim of education, but it involves too much heteronomous action-determination to qualify as a possible sense of autonomy. Being at one with oneself is unobjectionable as a sense of autonomy, but the problems with erecting it as an aim of education are formidable.

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1. In his article ‘Freedom of the will and the concept of a person’, Harry Frankfurt (1971) famously distinguishes between first-order and second-order desires, in a way that has heavily influenced subsequent discussions of autonomy (though Frankfurt does not mention autonomy in his article). Wendelborn dubs his preferred conception of autonomy ‘the Frankfurt-style sense’ because he takes it to cleave close to Frankfurt’s account of freedom of the will. I make no comment here on whether this is fair to Frankfurt. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)