

Abstract

The paper explores the relationship between dispositions, emotions, episodes and the development of moral autonomy. The view taken here is that autonomy requires a settled disposition towards the good, and that interpretations of the moral life that emphasize its episodic nature are destructive of autonomy.

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DISPOSITIONS, EMOTIONS, EPISODES AND THE AUTONOMOUS LEARNER

One of the fundamental aims of education is to produce morally aware people. People, that is, who are able to analyse situations and detect the moral issues and who also have the mature self-confidence to act on that awareness. A morally mature person is an autonomous person able to choose his or her behaviour in the light of the constraints of moral norms, and in response to the claims of other people. Morality may be said to be, in the words of Whiteley, "... a complex of thoughts, feelings and desires of different kinds cohering in support of certain norms of behaviour".¹

If one accepts the principle of respect for persons as a minimal definition of the norms of behaviour to be supported, then autonomy would seem to be a central notion. To educate for autonomy then becomes the central concern of moral education. Such a programme of education would involve, *inter alia*, attempting to create a settled disposition towards the good. It would attempt, in other words, to develop a sense of respect, an awareness of what constitutes legitimate demands from persons, and the confidence to act on that awareness. In this sense the law (nomos) is owned by the moral individual. The design of a successful programme of moral education would then imply a contrast between settled dispositions and episodic behaviour, the latter suggesting erratic behaviour open to whim and fancy. This in turn raises the issue of the bearing of desire on rational behaviour. A settled disposition towards the good involves the bringing of wants and desires under the tutelage and eventual control of reason. In this paper the effort is made to explore, in outline only, the interrelationships between dispositions, episodes, desire, and the development of rational autonomy.

Episodes and Dispositions

Existentialist and situationist interpretations of the moral life tend toward the clearest instances of episodic behaviour, as, for example, in Sartre's claim that man creates himself in his choices. In the authentic human being those choices are unconditioned. One of the difficulties that arises from such a perspective on the moral life is that the notion of a person implies a sense of personal identity, and without the idea of a continuum of consciousness it is difficult to understand in what that identity could consist. The continuities of inclinations and habits, that is, dispositions, appear to be essential constituents in personal identity.

Dispositions are partly inherited, partly culturally formed, and partly the result of myriads of choices made by the individual. The tendency of the existentialist emphasis on decision or choice is to break human behaviour into episodes. It emerges, in moral decision making, in the view that

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the situation must determine the response of the moral agent, and that there are no continuities in human experience. Human behaviour may be thought of here as a series of geysers gushing forth out of the earth's crust in contradistinction to the metaphor of a 'stream of consciousness'. It is the latter which I believe is the more accurate metaphor. A disposition is a more or less settled way of looking at the world composed of habits, inclinations and skills, and is manifested in responding to demands and situations in a more or less expected manner. Dispositions may be open to change, and insofar as they are changeable, the behaviour resulting from them will be less expected than otherwise. Most dispositions, especially those having a high mental or intelligence component, will be expressible in an almost unlimited variety of ways. Ryle illuminates the distinction between a habit and a disposition by employing the notions of single- and multi-track responses, a habit being a single-track disposition.² The responses made by the individual will vary according to need. Furthermore, such dispositions can, in general, be dissociated from their characteristic physical expressions. It is possible for a person to ponder a potential response to a situation without actually making the response. Again, memory of past incidents may not be expressed in a behavioural response, but they may be recalled with a sense of shame or pleasure, and, thus being recalled, as fitting with one's dispositions or as not. Though I do not wish to embrace the full implications of Ryle's theory of mind I think he expressed the nature of dispositions well when he wrote:

To possess a dispositional property is not to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change; it is to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change, when a particular condition is realised. The same is true about specifically human dispositions such as qualities of character.³

The disposition a person has may be said to constitute his or her continuing understanding, which is actualised at the moment when a physical process gives expression to an intention the person has. The intention, to put the matter another way, coordinates and directs the dispositions in an actual act. A physical act of a person has both mental and physical components in it, and here I depart from Ryle's account of action. It is not that the human action has two acts — a mental and a physical — but that the action has both mental and physical components. It is precisely in this conjunction, or rather coordination, of the mental and the physical that autonomy can be said properly to consist. The autonomous learner is precisely the person who has — or increasingly has — mastered both the physical and mental aspects of action, and brought them into an integrated, coordinated whole. Insofar as a person is dominated by impulses and desires, or is not able to plan and realise goals and purposes, it is the strongest desire or the particular circumstances that rule the will. In other words behaviour is erratic or episodic. The *nomos* element in autonomy points us to this. It is a "disposition to think in a certain way,"⁴ that is, it is thinking done in accordance with some regular procedure, and the procedure will differ according to the discipline or subject matter involved. The non-episodic nature of autonomous human behaviour is well expressed in some eloquent words of Professor Edward Shills. He wrote:

It is the sentient, mindful human being whose experiences are not just transient events in time and space but are elements gathered up in memory and transformed by the power of mind into a coherent judging, choosing, discriminating self-regulating entity, conscious of its self-hood. In its individuality, the human organism develops an ego, a complex, bounded system into which the past is assimilated, the future envisaged and sought, and the present made the object of discriminating decisions in which are contained assimilated precipitates of past experience, and judgements and choices about the future.⁵

The sense of identity that constitutes the core of the autonomous person, and which enables self-regulating behaviour to occur, is made up of dispositions governed by reason. From such

self-identity one expects consistent behaviour to emerge, behaviour, that is, that is rationally appraised.

It might be, of course, that this sense of identity can be distorted by powerful emotions, and if so the notion of a settled disposition towards the good will become suspect. The relationship between autonomous learning and emotion may be approached along two avenues. One is to examine the impact of desire upon autonomous behaviour. The other is to compare two different bases for autonomy : want-regarding and ideal-regarding bases. Some attention must now be paid to both approaches.

Desire and Autonomous Behaviour

The first of these two issues may be expressed in the form of a question : Is action simply the strongest desire? If it is, then talk about autonomous learning is misleading. Such a conclusion depends on what 'desire' is, and whether it bears on action in the determining manner implied.

'Desire' is defined by the concise Oxford Dictionary as 'unsatisfied appetite'. This may be expanded to mean a felt condition of unrest which is directed towards an end represented in consciousness and recognised as a good. Desire, so understood, normally arises when an impulse in some direction is obstructed, and this obstruction produces a feeling of disquiet accompanied by some idea of the means by which the unrest can be satisfied. It is important to note that both feeling *and* cognition enter into desire. It is not mere perception or mere feeling, but a combination of both.

Thus in estimating the strength of a desire both aspects must be examined. Such an examination brings out the fact that desires are not isolated phenomena, but are intimately connected with the self in two ways. First, desire is always for an object, however vaguely understood that object may be. But in every case the object is one which has value for the self. Where there is not interest in the object there is no desire. There may not be universal desires since what appeals to one person may leave another cold. Because of this a person can be said to create his or her own objects of desire, for as the character changes so do the objects of desire. What a person desires faithfully reflects what manner of person he or she is. Second, the object is desired because, in achieving the object, the self conceives itself to be attaining a fuller, better and happier self. Desire indicates not only what the self is, but what the self, as a developing organism, is growing into. Desire is the consciously informed impulse of forward movement of the whole self.

Further, desires are related to one another and spring from more or less fully organised dispositions in the self. There are centres of interest, subdivisions of consciousness, which are related to one another, sometimes completely, sometimes incompletely, but in their totality they constitute the self. Perhaps no person would claim to be a fully organised, coherent being with every part of his or her personality in perfect harmony. In everyday life we hold in consciousness only certain parts of our self, allowing the others to sink into the background. Thus we loosely speak of the social self, the professional self, the business self, etc., when we mean that we habitually live below the level of a full consciousness of personality, and drift from one dominant interest to another. These subdivisions are sometimes called 'universes of desire', and for which the term 'disposition' could serve as a synonym. A 'universe of desire' is a nexus of feelings grouped around a partial orientation of the self. So, for example, the 'social self', as one such universe of desire, may have feelings associated with being a parent or a friend, about forms of entertainment, dress, etc. Such feelings may have a different expression when linked, for example with the

'business self'. The fact remains that the strength of a desire is derived from the strength of the universe of desire from which it springs. Thus the strength of sexual desire for a particular person arises from the universe of desire, hetero- or homo-sexual, of which it is an expression.

If the foregoing analysis is correct it follows that when two desires conflict the battle is between two universes of desire, or dispositions, rather than the individual desires. In the result, that desire will be carried into effect which arises within the more fully organised universe. The strongest desire then represents, not simply an unconscious group of desires, but the strongest part of the self, that part which is most completely harmonised. The business man unable to relax because the desire to succeed dominates everything else, may serve as an example. Between desire and will there is a stage of deliberation followed by the conscious acceptance of one desire and the rejection of at least one other. The essence of this is decision in which the whole self identifies with the particular object presented by the desire and authorises the steps for its attainment. Thus will is the whole self acting, whereas desire belongs to a part of the self.

Admittedly, will accepts the strongest desire when strongest means the strength of the universe of desire, which is much more than desire, *per se*. The self as was claimed earlier, always moves in the direction of its most fully organised parts. Thus, will is not the strongest desire, or merely the agent of desire. It is the conscious identification of the whole self with a desired object, and is determined by the strength of that part of the personality which we have allowed to become the more fully organised. By building up a more elaborate and carefully balanced self, a person can become more capable of willing and doing things that now he or she does not *want* to do. Slowly and painfully at first a higher self can be developed by which even the fiercest desires can be subdued. This is the meaning of intellectual and moral struggle, and it is possible because of the cognitive element present in desire. It is the presence of that cognitive element that makes the education of the emotions possible. The emotional life of a person may be dramatically altered by non-educational means, such as the use of drugs. Such procedures are quite distinct from educational processes. Educational processes influence the emotional life of persons, as Peters has pointed out, by affecting the 'appraisals' one makes in responding to a situation. Peters expresses the point thus:

Emotions have in common the fact that they involve appraisals elicited by external conditions which are of concern to us or by things which we have brought about or suffered... They differ from each other because of differences in what is appraised. Fear, for instance, differs from anger, largely because seeing something as threatening differs from seeing it as thwarting... these different appraisals are largely constitutive of the different emotions. By that I mean that at least a logically necessary condition for the use of the word "emotion" is that some kind of appraisal should be involved, and that different emotions must involve different appraisals. In other words, emotions are basically forms of cognition. It is because of this central feature which they possess that I think there is any amount of scope for educating the emotions.⁶

Without this possibility of educating the emotions, and thus building up universes of desire in which rational appraisals predominate, human beings would be at the mercy of irrational passions. Of course, other elements, such as the aesthetic dimension, are also necessary for the full education of the emotions. But without attention to the cognitive, the character will not be properly formed.

In the light of this argument it can be seen that the development of autonomous learning is essential for the fullest growth of the individual, including the fullest flowering of the emotional life. Our desires are developed and directed by educating the appraisals which are a significant element in the dispositions or universes of desire.

Different Bases for Autonomy

Is this conclusion born out by a consideration of the difference between 'want-regarding' and 'ideal-regarding' theories of autonomy? The distinction employed in the question was made by Barry. He defines want-regarding principles as principles which take as

... given the wants which people happen to have and concentrate attention entirely on the extent to which a certain policy will alter the overall amount of want satisfaction or on the way in which the policy will effect the distribution among people of opportunities for satisfying wants.⁷

Ideal-regarding theories he defines as "the contradictory of want-regarding principles, the two being jointly exhaustive of the possibilities". Wants relate to individual value-systems and are shaped by the society the individual inhabits. The logic of the concept of 'want' relates it to the irrational life of the person more than the cognitive in that wants are not necessarily open to cognitive appraisal. In this the logic of 'wants' is very different from that of 'needs'. White puts the point by insisting that 'want', unlike need, "carries no necessary reference to an end state in virtue of which something is wanted".⁸ In this sense wanting may be antithetical to the development of autonomy and autonomous learning. But, the fact that wanting is connected to belief (in that something is wanted because it is believed to have desirable characteristics) links wants also to the universe of desire or dispositions mentioned earlier. What is needed, on the contrary, is independent of what is believed by the subject. Insofar as such linkages occur between wants and beliefs, then cognitive appraisals are possible and with that the possibility of educating one's wants, that is, of changing the character of what is wanted. Autonomy cannot then be based upon a want-regarding theoretical basis, it must be an expression of the ideal-regarding principle. It is the ideal to which educational policy is directed, not because people, or some people, may want it, but because it expresses the fullest ideal of the person. An education aimed at achieving autonomous learning then cannot be offered merely on the grounds that it meets the 'needs' of people or of society since such a claim hides a prescription as to what those needs are. Equally it cannot be based upon what people are supposed to want, since wants may not be consistent, and may also be linked to selfish and/or personally damaging beliefs about what is regarded as good. What people want, therefore, may be said to be the basis of episodic behaviour. The concept of autonomous learning forms the central core of the curriculum because it is believed to be right and good, and is supported by an amalgam of social, psychological, moral, political, and scientific elements. To find the right balance of those elements, that is the balance that helps to create a settled disposition towards the good, is the central, continuing problem of the design of the curriculum for moral education. It is by looking to autonomy and autonomous learning that the balance is most likely to be found.

Résumé

L'étude explore la relation entre dispositions, émotions, épisodes et le développement de l'autonomie morale. Le point de vue exprimé ici est que l'autonomie exige une disposition habituelle vers le bien et que les interprétations de la vie morale soulignant sa nature épisodique détruisent l'autonomie.

Notes

- ¹ Whiteley, C.H., "The Justification of Morality" in *Philosophy*, Vol 57, No. 222, October, 1982, p. 437.
- ² Ryle, G. *The Concept of Mind*, (London: Penguin 1949), p. 46.
- ³ Ibid, p. 43.
- ⁴ Hare, in Brown, S.C., (Ed.), *Philosophers Discuss Education*, (London: Macmillan 1975), p. 36.
- ⁵ Shils in Lerner, D., *The Human Meaning of the Social Sciences*, (New York: Meridian Books 1959), p. 118.
- ⁶ Peters, R.S., *Psychology and Ethical Development*, (London: Allen & Unwin 1974), p. 175.
- ⁷ Barry, B., *Political Argument*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1965), p. 38.
- ⁸ White, A.R., "Needs and Wants" in *Proceedings of The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, July 1974, p. 166. I have followed White's discussion in this paragraph.