

Responsibility and the Boundary between Childhood and Adulthood

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1. A debate about equality of opportunity

Suppose we think that equal opportunity is the right ideal to inform our educational system. What exactly does that require?

- **The one-off view:** we require a level playing field at the age of majority. Equality of opportunity is satisfied if we ensure that, at that particular time, we have successfully neutralized or eliminated a class of equality-undermining factors (like race, gender, or social class). (See e.g. Arneson 1989, Ackermann & Alstott 1999, Brighthouse 2000.)
- **The life-long view:** one's duties are not exhausted by guaranteeing a single moment of equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity requires life-long effort. (See e.g. Lippert-Rasmussen 1999, Brown 2006, Chambers 2009.)

The central challenge (stated by Ben Sachs):

There is no principled defence of one-time fair equality of opportunity's wedding of egalitarianism at the start and liberalism thereafter. (Sachs 2012: 331).

2. Autonomy and responsibility

My view (cf e.g. Colburn 2010): autonomy consists in an **individual deciding for herself what is valuable and living her life in accordance with that decision**; and **the state should promote and protect autonomy** so understood.

Responsibility is central to this conception of autonomy. An individual's life is fully autonomous only if her life goes as she has decided is valuable, *and* she is responsible for that, in two senses:

- **Explanatory responsibility:** *x* is explanatorily responsible for *y* just in case there exists some relation *Rxy* which plays a crucial role in the explanation of *y*. Your life must be *explained* by your decisions/actions for it to be autonomous.
- **Evaluative responsibility.** *x* is evaluatively responsible for *y*, in respect of a normative upshot *z*, just in case there exists some relation *Rxy* such that *z* depends upon *Rxy*. You must have *authority/normative ownership* over your life for it to be autonomous.

So, responsibility (in both senses) is both as an *end to promote* and as a *constraint on that promotion*. In particular, there are deficits in actual autonomy which the state *should not* aim to correct, because it *cannot*, on pain of self-defeat.

Even if a state aims to promote autonomy in general, that state would *have* to allow that agents can end up properly being unequally autonomy, so long as the inequalities are ones for which they are explanatorily responsible.

This implies something *like* luck-egalitarianism, with one important difference, which is that it incorporates a safety net. If an individual drops below the level where they just aren't capable thereafter of leading an autonomous life at all, then we should intervene, even at the cost of undermining their explanatory responsibility:

- ... because their explanatory responsibility is vitiated anyway...

- ... and because (following Olsaretti (2009) we might say that when the stakes are so high we can't be held evaluatively responsible to the point where the basic capacity for autonomy is the cost.

3. Childhood and Adult education

Concerning education, this means that the basic conditions of explanatory responsibility must *always* be in place if someone is to be able to live an autonomous life. But beyond that point – e.g. with continued and specialist education – there is a danger of self-defeat *unless* we're in circumstances which remove that element of self-defeat, because:

- The basic conditions of autonomy are threatened, hence neutralising the danger of self-defeat by undermining explanatory responsibility, or
- The individual is so placed relative to your circumstances that it's not appropriate to hold them *evaluatively responsible*.

One way this might happen: you're not yet the right type of entity that can bear the appropriate relations to states of affairs. This is probably the case in respect of *some* children and *some* responsibility relations.

So, crucially, the line between childhood and adult education turns out to be an implication of our answer to the following question: when is interventionist state-provided autonomy-promoting education self-defeating, and when is it not? And, if we follow Tamar Schapiro (1999), we might think that this is true of distinction between childhood and adulthood too.

Moving from childhood to adulthood means expanding the range of responsibility-generating relations we can stand in, thereby acquiring more capacity for autonomy, but also constraining other peoples' autonomy-promoting efforts for us: the point of adulthood, on this view, is the point where almost all such effort becomes self-defeating.

References

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