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Educating for Humanity?

Democratic Legitimacy and Education Policy

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The idea that education should first and foremost be concerned with the deployment of humanity is at the core of "modern" educational thought. This idea – according to which children should be supported in becoming "truly human" – was spelled out in different ways by authors such as Rousseau, Kant, Fichte or Humboldt. The notion of true humanity is mostly connected with ideas such as autonomy or individual self-realization. Those German educational philosophers who see themselves in the tradition of modern educational thought still defend versions of this view, relating it to the concept of *Bildung*.

Typically, they also defend a *second* claim – that the modern tradition of educating for humanity (or *Bildung*) has left behind all types of teleological thought (e.g. Benner 1987; Ladenthin 2012). The discourse on *Bildung* is grounded on the idea that the human being is "unfixed" or "undetermined", and is free to determine himself. In this way, the value of autonomy or self-realization is sometimes directly derived from the insight that the human being is not determined by nature (Benner 1987).¹

A *third* view that can be connected with the two aspects already mentioned is that education policy should be rooted in the idea of *Bildung* itself and not be determined by parental or political decision-making. As Dietrich Benner (Benner/Stepkowski 2011) states, education cannot (and need not) be democratically grounded. Benner holds that the democratic state should not try to regulate education in its own terms, but respect the pre-given idea of *Bildung*. So on the one hand, the teleological character of *Bildung* is denied, and on the other hand, this idea is used as a normative ground for education policy.

These three aspects are typically connected with a *fourth* point, a reservation with regards to citizenship education. It is claimed that the democratic state should enable the deployment of humanity – of autonomy or individuality – instead of trying to create citizens. There is a deeply-rooted worry, in German *Pädagogik*, that the state could "instrumentalize" children for its own purposes instead of respecting them as „ends in themselves“, to use the

¹ At this point, I should also mention the notion of *Bildsamkeit* that plays an important role in Benner's work. This concept – that is used by Fichte and Herbar – is commonly seen as an translation of Rousseau's concept of *perfectibilité*.

Kantian vocabulary. An education for humanity is seen as a precaution against political or economic forms of instrumentalization. The idea is that once children have become truly human, they are able to deal appropriately with political and economic demands (see esp. Humboldt 1792/1980).

I should say in advance that I am sympathetic with those educational theorists who try to keep the spirit of modern educational thought alive. My aim is to maintain what I take to be the normative substance of modern pedagogy. I think, however, that this can only be achieved by rethinking the set of views just outlined.

First, it is important that the normative – the “perfectionist” – character of the idea of educating for humanity is acknowledged. The concept of perfectionism is used, in moral and political philosophy, for accounts that entail an objective conception of the human good. Some of these accounts rely on a normative notion of human nature.

Once the perfectionist character of the idea of educating for humanity is no longer denied, the problem of political legitimacy must be addressed. I do this in the *second* part of this talk. As will be made clear, thinking about legitimacy opens up new perspectives for the justification of modern educational ideals.

In the *third* section, the issue of citizenship education – as distinguished from an education for humanity – will be reconsidered.

1 The perfectionist character of the idea of educating for humanity

In an recently published essay on *Bildung*, Volker Ladenthin states that “teleological concepts of all times have tried to constrain the freedom and autonomy of the human being” (Ladenthin 2012, p. 19; my translation)². Enlightenment pedagogy – Ladenthin goes on to say – freed itself from teleological ways of thinking and conceived of human existence as radically open and unconstrained.

The claim that human existence is “open” might be understood in two different ways: First, it can be stated that the life of the human being is not – or not fully – determined by his or her biological nature. Second, it can be argued that human existence is *normatively* unconstrained, that is, it is not determined how human beings *should live*.

It should be pointed out that the idea of an education for humanity (that is, for autonomy or individuality) cannot be directly derived from one (or both) of these claims. If the human being is undetermined, then why should he or she be determined to determine himself? In this context, theorists such as Kant or Fichte – but also Benner – use the notion

² “Teleologische Konzepte aller Zeiten versuchten Freiheit und Autonomie des Menschen einzuschränken.”

of *Bestimmung* (vocation, calling, destiny). They express the idea that the human being is *bestimmt* (destined) to be autonomous.

This betrays the perfectionist character of modern educational ideals. Traditional forms of teleology functioned as a justification for social inequalities and unequal types of education. These teleological accounts are of course rejected by modern educational thought. They are replaced by a form of perfectionism according to which the human being reaches “perfection” by developing his individuality and his capacity for autonomy. Becoming autonomous is considered as objectively valuable for human beings, and it is assumed that the demand to become autonomous is somehow rooted in human nature.

This sort of perfectionism – we might also call it *liberal* perfectionism – is open for various forms of life, but not for all. Some people deny – especially on religious grounds – that individual self-realization or autonomy are valuable. They might have a different view of what it means to be “truly human”. Others might not be strictly opposed to perfectionist liberal values, but nevertheless reject the idea that education policy should be guided by these values. They might claim, for instance, that the regulation of schools should first and foremost be directed by economic demands.

So, the modern notion of educating for humanity is a contested *perfectionist* ideal. This raises the problem of political legitimacy.

2 Democratic legitimacy and the education for autonomy

Political legitimacy is itself a contested issue that I cannot discuss here in detail. Roughly put, if we talk about legitimacy, we are concerned with justified (and unjustified) uses of political power or authority.³ *Democratic* legitimacy binds legitimate political power to democratic processes of decision-making. As Fabienne Peter puts it: “Legitimacy entails an ideal for how members of a democratic constituency ought to make decisions about how to organize their life together” (Peter 2011, p. 1). In what follows I presuppose that democratic legitimacy is best understood in terms of a *deliberative* account of democracy that is characterized by two basic aspects: *First*, democratic decision-making should not be reduced to acts of voting, but should be based on public reasoning among the members of the democratic community. *Second*, this collective form of reasoning should take place under certain normative conditions – such as the condition of normative equality (ibid., p. 31).

Benner states that education cannot and need not be democratically grounded. This can be read as meaning that education policy – or at least some core aspects of education policy – should not be subject to processes of democratic legitimation. His view might also be expressed as follows: In democratic processes of decision-making, citizens are not free to col-

³ In recent political philosophy, legitimacy is mostly distinguished from (distributive) justice. Principles of justice determine how relevant goods should be distributed among individuals.

lectively decide how children should be educated. They are bound to a pre-given educational ideal – *Bildung*.

However, exempting a controversial issue of this kind from democratic legitimation is highly problematic. It privileges one particular – the liberal perfectionist – conception of the good and renders the views of those who reject it as irrelevant from the outset. This is a strange way to deal with the ethical and religious pluralism that pervades modern societies. Democratic legitimation processes are designed to produce generally acceptable solutions to political problems under the condition of pluralism. It is therefore important that adherents of different conceptions of the good have a say in these processes.

One way to respond to this is to point out that a general consent on educational matters is not to be expected anyway. For instance, there are parents who support racist or sexist forms of education, or dream of a theocratic order of society. It is not clear how these views should be accounted for, in public reasoning processes. The question is, then, why we should not also exclude all those views that are opposed to liberal perfectionist ideals such as autonomy or individuality.

I would like to give an answer to this question that focuses on *the conditions* of democratic legitimacy. As already said, democratic legitimacy presupposes some notion of normative equality. The idea is that the participants in democratic legitimation processes should be seen as persons with equal normative status, that is, as equally entitled to participate in public reasoning processes. So, we have to ascribe to each person a negative right to political participation.

This, however, is not enough. Persons might have this kind of right, but still be unable to effectively participate in democratic processes as equals. For instance, they might be unable to do so because they lack an adequate education. So, having access to an adequate education seems to be part of the conditions of democratic legitimacy. But what is an adequate education?⁴ In this context, the notion of adequacy refers to the pre-given purpose of ensuring legitimacy. The question is, then, what *level* and what *kind* of education is necessary for this purpose. *First*, all children should acquire certain basic skills – such as the capacity to read and write. Since these are “all-purpose educational goods” that are useful in economic, political and personal contexts, their value is generally acceptable. *Second*, effective political participation depends on some sort of general education. This means that children should be initiated into a variety of fields of knowledge and cultural practices. Here, it is controversial which cultural practices young people should become acquainted with. For instance, it might be asked whether competent political decision-making requires being initiated into the fields of music, art, literature, or philosophy. *Third*, it seems clear that political decision-

⁴ On adequacy in education, see also Satz 2007.

making demands the capacity to think critically about political issues. Persons who lack this capacity tend to rely on others' judgement, in the political process, and can easily be manipulated. So, we can say that participating in political reasoning processes as *an equal* requires some kind of (civic) autonomy.

The question is whether the demand for democratic legitimacy also justifies an education for critical thinking (or autonomy) in *personal* matters. I think that this is indeed the case. Let me briefly give two reasons for my view: The *first* reason is that in the course of political reflection and debate, it might become necessary to transform one's conception of the good. Consider someone whose religious views contain a theocratic conception of the state that is incompatible with liberal principles. If this person is willing to become a liberal citizen, she must critically evaluate her religious views – and decide which elements can be kept, and which must be abandoned.

This first point presupposes a person who already possesses religious views *of her own*, but has to modify them in the course of the public debate. The *second* point refers to persons' capacity to *develop* a conception of the good that is *truly their own*. Citizens cannot reasonably discuss political issues if they lack views of their own, in religious or ethical matters. They have to be aware of who they are and what they want.

The question is whether having views of one's own depends on critical self-reflection. It seems perfectly possible, for instance, to live on one's own views without constantly questioning them. However, the case of children's upbringing raises special problems. In processes of education and socialisation, the child takes up all kinds of attitudes without prior rational evaluation. Moreover, in some forms of manipulative or authoritarian education, certain beliefs or values are forced upon children. It therefore seems necessary that children come to critically reflect on the views that they have acquired during childhood.

These considerations amount to an *non-perfectionist* argument for an education for autonomy that captures some important aspects of the modern (perfectionist) demand to educate children for humanity. The argument is silent about what it means to be "truly human" and focuses instead on the conditions of legitimacy within a deliberative democratic framework. The point of the argument is that a capacity for autonomy is necessary to ensure democratic legitimacy. In other words, forms of education that do not foster autonomy *undermine* democratic legitimacy because they do not enable children to effectively participate in public deliberation.

But there is a problem, here: Even if it is generally acknowledged that legitimacy requires some sort of education, it might still be controversial what kind of education this should be. The legitimacy-based argument for autonomy as an educational ideal, however, *exempts* this ideal from further public discourse. I said earlier that it is problematic to ex-

empt controversial issues from the democratic process – doing so tends to undermine democratic legitimacy. However, legitimacy might also be undermined if persons lack the abilities for effective participation. So, legitimacy is endangered by both a high educational standard that includes autonomy, and an educational minimum.⁵

One way to address this problem is to develop a *dynamic* understanding of legitimacy according to which the conditions of public decision-making are not *definitely* exempt from collective decision-making, but are open for discursive re-evaluation (Gutmann/Thompson 2004, p. 26). It seems clear, however, that participation in this kind of debate requires capacities that go beyond an educational minimum.

3 Educating for humanity – educating for citizenship

Against this backdrop, we can come back to the forth of the views mentioned in the introduction – the reservation with regards to civic education. The justification of autonomy as an educational ideal just proposed refers to persons *as citizens*, not as human beings. Moreover, legitimacy-based considerations leave room for the justification of further-going *civic* demands in education. It seems clear, for instance, that persons must respect each other as equals, in public decision-making processes. From this, it follows that legitimacy can only be ensured if children are educated to respect others.

It should be pointed out, however, that this sort of civic education does not amount to a problematic form of instrumentalization, because it is grounded on the idea of the *equal normative status* of all those involved. An education for respect ensures that persons recognize others as equals (or as “ends-in-themselves”). Clearly, children should also be educated to see *themselves* in this way. The education for autonomy ensures that children are capable of a critical evaluation of political or economic demands.

Nevertheless, it might appear unattractive to replace the modern ideal of educating for humanity by some sort of civic education. Can it really be wrong to say that children should first and foremost become human – and only later become acquainted with civic concerns? One way to address this worry is to point to the distinction between the *modes of justification* for educational aims, and the *types of aims* that are justified. My primary claim is that education policy must be subject to political processes of legitimation. This means that all educational aims must be politically *justified*. This does not mean, however, that all the aims that are justified in this way are political in a narrow sense. It is clear, that in democratic deliberation, many non-political aims will be generally accepted. For instance, it will be agreed that seven-year olds should develop capacities that are important for a flourishing human

⁵ Here, I am inspired by Fabienne Peter’s considerations on the “political egalitarian’s dilemma” (Peter 2011, ch. 5.1.).

life in general. The modern ideal of educating for humanity, however, goes beyond this – it expresses a particular and contested view of what it means to be truly human.

Concluding remark

At the beginning, I said that my aim is to maintain the normative substance of modern educational thought. One way to do this would be to acknowledge the perfectionist character of modern educational ideals and defend some sort of perfectionist liberalism. My proposal is to justify these ideals – or at least certain aspects of them – in non-perfectionist terms. The argument presented here does not highlight the “vocation” of the human being, but persons’ equal normative standing in democratic legitimation processes.

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