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Dignity and Education

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Let me start with two oppositional statements concerning the relation between dignity and education.

First, we might say that to respect a child's dignity means to educate her. This could mean, among other things, that the development of her capacity for autonomy should be fostered.

Second, it could be said that educational interferences *threaten* a child's dignity. Education is often thought of as a form of heteronomy. To educate someone means to control or constrain her behaviour or to mould her values and beliefs. If my wife tried to educate me in the same way that we educate our children, I might feel violated in my dignity.

These statements make clear that the concept of dignity has at least two different *functions* in educational thought. First, the child's dignity can ground a demand for education. The idea is that the child – or the adult that he will become – is *in need* of education: without education, she could not live a good, autonomous life and she would be deprived of certain social and economic opportunities.

The problem is, however, that fostering certain valuable capacities might be contrary to the child's *present* desires. This leads us to a second function of the concept of dignity: it can work as a normative constraint on educational interferences. According to a radical educational anti-paternalism, acting contrary to the child's desires for educational reasons cannot be right. On this basis, one could say that children – like adults – have a "right to autonomy" and that any violation of this right is tantamount to a violation of children's dignity.

The common view, however, is that at least some forms of paternalistic acting towards children are morally justified – or even required. So if respecting the child's dignity is identified with a respect for her autonomy, it seems that her dignity cannot be *fully* respected in the present educational situation. But the idea of a merely *partial* respect for a person's dignity is at odds with common uses of the term: the concept of human dignity does not allow to do things by halves. To ascribe a dignity to someone means to grant to him an *absolute* protection against certain kinds of treatment. It therefore makes no sense to say that *partial* violations of the child's dignity are allowed if this is likely to bring about positive effects in the future.

We could reply, of course, that the child's dignity is not violated if the restrictions on her present freedom will, in the long run, benefit *herself* – and not merely others. This leads us back to the first function that the idea of dignity might have in educational thought: A person's dignity grounds a demand for education and this justifies certain constraints on the child's present freedom. In other words, it justifies certain "intrapersonal trade-offs". In contrast to "interpersonal trade-offs" – one person's interests are neglected for the benefit of others – intrapersonal trade-offs seem to yield no moral problem.¹

I think, however, that certain kinds of educational measures are morally wrong independently of their future effects. I take it, moreover, that the notion of the child's dignity is useful to specify this idea. However valuable some educational aim might be, we could say, its realization should never violate the child's dignity in the present. But what exactly can this mean? If we do not want to adhere to the radically anti-paternalistic view, respecting the child's present dignity cannot be identified with respecting her present autonomy.

So to make sense of this basic idea, we have to develop a different understanding of the claim that the child's dignity should be "absolutely" respected. I would like to discuss four proposals and then present my own view.

First, we could state that the child's dignity is respected if specific "childhood goods" are secured. The idea is that there are certain goods that are valuable to children as children. This means, first, that these goods are not valuable to adults in the same way, and second, that their value for children does not depend on the fact that they bring about benefits for their adult life. They are in this latter sense intrinsically valuable for the child. It is interesting to note what Rousseau says in this context. After having stated, in *Émile*, that the child's present happiness and freedom should not be sacrificed to uncertain future benefits, he says: "Hommes, soyez humains!" (Rousseau 1762/1961, p. 62) Right after this claim to treat children in a humane way, Rousseau emphasizes the specific nature of childhood and says that childhood should be loved for its own sake.² Treating children humanely, for Rousseau, thus means not destroying the specific goods of childhood.

Speaking of childhood goods, we are concerned with the problem of the good life, in the first place. But it could be said, of course, that to respect a person's dignity means to make

¹ This might look different when we give up our everyday understanding of personal identity, that is, when we consider the view that the child is not "one and the same person" as the future adult (not "numerically identical" to the future adult).

² "Hommes, soyez humains, c'est votre premier devoir. [...] Quelle sagesse y a-t-il pour vous hors de l'humanité? Aimez l'enfance; favorisez ses jeux, ses plaisirs, son aimable instinct" (Rousseau 1762/1961, p. 61).

sure that she can live a good life. To respect a child *qua child* would then mean to promote intrinsic childhood goods. But even if the importance of childhood goods is acknowledged, it does not make sense to say that their promotion should have *absolute priority*. The goods of the future adult life should certainly not be strictly subordinated to childhood goods. If to respect the child's dignity means to promote childhood goods, there can be no absolute protection of a child's "childhood dignity".

Rousseau, of course, would reject this conclusion. According to his view, we best promote the child's future concerns by *not* interfering with his present affairs. Rousseau's fictitious educator, Jean-Jacques, establishes a comprehensive system of educational control, but he refrains from *directly* educating his pupil. According to Rousseau, this is the way to deploy the child's good nature.

Against this background, inspired by Rousseau, the "child-centred" or "growth-theoretical" movement in education has formulated the idea that the child should be respected in his *individuality*. To establish "humanity" in school, says Ellen Key in her widely read book *The Century of the Child*, means to see and treat each child as an individual (Ellen Key 1900/1911, p. 237; reference to the German edition). None of the expressions of the child's individual life should be suppressed, she claims (*ibid.*, p. 131). So here we have a *second* possible elucidation of the claim to respect the dignity of the child. It can be combined with the idea of the specific nature of childhood, but it highlights the unique character of each child. To respect the child means, according to this account, not to interfere with the child's individual process of growth.

Richard Peters (1966), the influential English philosopher of education, criticises this view on several grounds. First, he says that it operates with an inappropriate model of the human mind – it neglects the fact that the self is socially constituted. According to Peters, the child's personality evolves in the process of being initiated into a shared form of life. This is why it makes no sense, says Peters, to provide "absolute" protection to the child's present individuality. Peters agrees that children should be respected as individuals, but he says that the respect for their individual point of view must ultimately be subordinated to the aim of introducing them into worthwhile activities.

I agree with Peters' critique of the child-centred view. His own account of educational respect, however, does not allow for clear-cut normative constraints on future-oriented interferences.

We now turn to a *third* possible reading of the claim that the dignity of the child (as a child) should be respected. This proposal is based on the idea that to respect a person's dignity means to treat him in a way that is not humiliating. It is said that to humiliate someone is to

destroy his capacity for self-respect. Torture is often taken as a paradigmatic case for a kind of treatment that destroys the victim's capacity to respect himself (see especially Nida-Rümelin 2005; Schaber 2003; Stoecker 2003).

Demeaning forms of treatment are not foreign to the history of education. For instance, violent and humiliating methods of punishment – based on the intention to “break the child’s will” – are typical of traditional “authoritarian” practices of education. These probably do not have the same effects as torture, but we might say that they obstruct the development of the child's self-respect.

Thus the proposal is that respect for the child’s dignity consists in an avoidance of such educational measures. This proposal does the work that is demanded: It can function as an absolute constraint on educational interferences. Its scope, however, is narrow – it is directed against oppressive and violent practices in education. This must not necessarily be seen as a shortcoming. Let me just point to one serious difficulty of this approach: When a child is loved by her parents and respected by her teachers, her self-respect will not be damaged if she is – once or twice – treated in a demeaning way by the leader of her scout group. Nevertheless, we might be tempted to say that the scout leader has violated the child’s dignity.

We come to a *fourth* proposal: A common idea is to explicate the concept of dignity in terms of moral rights. Thus, it is not only a “right not to be humiliated” (Schaber 2003) that is at stake, but a wide range of autonomy- and interest-based rights. To respect the child *qua child*, we might say, is to respect his rights. The problem is, however, that the child’s rights might be in conflict with the future adult’s rights. In these cases, the adult’s rights may be given priority over the child’s autonomy rights. Thus, we cannot say that *these* rights provide a clear-cut normative constraint on future-oriented educational interferences. It might, however, be possible to identify a set of children’s rights that should be respected in an absolute way. To respect the child's present dignity would then mean to respect these particular rights.

Let me now outline my own proposal. I start from the idea that to respect a person’s dignity means to recognise her as someone who has the standing, as an equal, to make claims on others.³

The natural reaction to a violation of one’s claims is *resentment*. Reactive attitudes, as Peter Strawson (1962) famously called them, are based on the assumption that one is entitled to make moral claims on others. In other words, the person who feels resentment sees herself as having the normative standing to make claims. This is what it means, I think, to have

³ This view of dignity is inspired by Feinberg (1970/1980) and Darwall (2006).

self-respect – or to ascribe a dignity to oneself. Dignity, as I understand it, is a normative concept, while self-respect is an empirical attitude that persons have to themselves.⁴

We can say, then, that a violation of one's claims is *experienced* as a violation of one's dignity. Normally, such violations do not *destroy* our capacity to respect ourselves. Our reactive attitudes express our *rejection* of attacks on our dignity. Our self-respect can take a few knocks without falling to pieces. However, if we are subject to permanent and grave violations of our dignity, our capacity to respect ourselves is seriously threatened. Developing and sustaining this capacity, I assume, depends on social experiences of being respected (see Honneth 1992). Thus, by respecting a person's legitimate claims, we enable her to see herself as having the standing to make claims.

It might be asked whether persons have a "right to self-respect". Note that according to my view, having dignity is not identical with having such a right. I think, however, that if we see persons as endowed with dignity, we naturally care whether they develop a corresponding self-understanding. In the ideal moral community, every member sees himself as an equal who has the standing to make claims. So it might be seen as a moral obligation to foster the ability for self-respect in those members of the moral community who lack this ability.

Let us now turn to the case of children. To see them as endowed with dignity means, according to my proposal, to ascribe to them the normative standing to make claims. Small children are not yet aware of their dignity. They might have a basic form of self-confidence, but this is not identical with full-blooded moral self-respect. The development of their self-respect depends, as I said, mainly on their own experiences of respect.

We can consider it as an educational task to *enable* children to see themselves as bearers of legitimate claims and become aware of what they are justified to expect from others. Thus understood, fostering the development of self-respect is an educational aim. My basic idea is that the achievement of this aim should not be situated in the distant future, but in the educational situation itself: Educational situations should be arranged in a way that enables or encourages children to see themselves as bearers of legitimate claims. Children should be able to maintain and develop self-respect, *while* being educated. This is, I think, how the notion of dignity can function as a constraint on educational interferences: The educator's effort to secure the *future* autonomy, well-being or dignity of the child should always go along with the aim to secure her *present* ability for self-respect. However valuable an educational aim may be, the educator should never treat the child in a way that damages that child's capacity to see himself as having the standing to make claims. By contrast, educational decisions and communications should foster the child's ability to see himself in this

⁴ Schaber (2010), by contrast, understands self-respect as a normative notion.

way. According to this proposal, there are no intrapersonal trade-offs to be made, with regards to dignity. Securing the child's present self-respect should supersede all future-oriented educational aims.

My proposal only makes sense if certain educational and paternalistic restrictions on the child's present autonomy are compatible with her present ability to see herself as having the standing to make claims. It should be noted, first, that the view of dignity outlined here is not focussed on the protection of autonomy. The child's dignity, I assume, is also violated, for instance, when her basic physical needs are neglected, or when she is humiliated in public. Thus, by respecting these and other of the child's basic concerns that give rise to valid claims, we show her that *she counts* and thereby foster the development of her self-respect.

Freedom or autonomy belongs to the child's basic concerns. When the child's freedom is restricted for educational reasons, the child might come to feel that her desires or decisions *do not count*. This feeling is justified, I think, when 1) important decisions concerning the child's life are taken without even consulting the child, 2) the reasons for these decisions are not explained or justified to the child. Thus it is important to establish a participatory practice of decision-making. This means, 1) that the child should be enabled and encouraged to articulate her own point of view and that his desires and opinions should be taken seriously, 2) it should be ensured, if ever possible, that the child comes to understand – and maybe even accept – the reasons for educational measures that run contrary to his present desires.

Coming back to the two initial statements, I think that, on the one hand, children's dignity grounds a demand for education and is compatible with certain paternalistic interferences. On the other hand, however, it sets normative constraints on future-oriented educational measures – the child should not be treated in a way that makes it impossible for her to see herself as endowed with dignity in the present educational situation.

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