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## RE-THINKING AUTONOMY AS RESISTANCE

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Autonomy is stressed as a major educational aim in liberal society. It is promoted as a social good that one is able to learn independently and make choices and decisions for oneself.<sup>1</sup> In developmental psychology autonomy is core to the ideal of moral reasoning, where one makes moral decisions according to self-legislated principles rather than a reasoning structure that has been imposed from without.<sup>2</sup> Autonomy's intrinsic worth is justified on the grounds that it is preferable to be governed by internal reason rather than by the purposes of another. The emphasis on autonomy is situated in response to learning environments characterized by passive students who are subject to a teacher's unquestioned authority.<sup>3</sup> The aim of promoting autonomy in education is thus based upon an ideal of student activity that is connected with an emphasis on adult private life, the choices made available by consumerism, and a desire for a classroom experience characterized by student activity and teacher facilitation.

The brief description above situates the aims of autonomy from a liberal individual's or student-centered perspective. Suppose, however, that the aims described above are reversed and students' work is theorized in terms of criticizing the liberal ideology inherent in the state's interests and institutions. From a perspective that is critical of liberal ideology, Louis Althusser argues that besides learning the 'know-how' that maintains their place in the apparatus of society, school children learn to conform to the norms of society's "rules of morality, civic and professional conscience," which engender respect for the predetermined "socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of order established by class domination".<sup>4</sup> The problem of ideology is that students who gain autonomy as scholars, workers, and moral reasoners do so at the price of learning according to the "forms which ensure subjection *to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice,'" and such a price is indicative of liberal society's injustices. Attaining competence or discovering 'truth' will not set one free from injustice, for 'truth' has already been determined by the ruling ideology. Autonomy is a misnomer according to Althusser because it only assesses how well the student has independently and unwittingly acquiesced to the ruling ideology's illusions. This reversed consideration represents post-liberal criticism. If ideology so constitutes individuals, institutions, and 'truth' in society, does autonomy remain a realistic educational goal? How does student-centeredness fare against post-liberal assertions that autonomy is illusory because one's life is determined through the social practices of institutions like the school, state, mass media, politics, church, and family?

While the above questions assert problems with the prevailing liberal ideology, they also open the opportunity for liberalism to re-examine itself *vis-*

*à-vis* ideology. To the extent that post-liberal critiques are germane to the reform of educational systems and institutions, institutional interests must be considered alongside the individual student interests if any reasonable project of educational reform is to succeed.<sup>6</sup> Modern systems of education are so imbued with liberal assumptions and have such commitments to the liberal individual that for practical purposes any critique of education must take seriously both liberalism and critiques of liberalism. Post-liberal criticisms are valuable insofar as they demonstrate liberalism's shortcomings, but they fall short of providing a constructive means of reforming liberal-influenced institutions. The possibility of reform, therefore, begins by informing, reforming, and re-thinking liberalism in light of post-liberal critique.

This paper contends that autonomy is an internal mechanism within liberalism that protects liberal ideology from its own problems. Post-liberal criticisms are significant, however, for their perspectives on liberalism's shortcomings because they inform and describe autonomy's role as the moderator of liberal ideology. Post-liberal criticisms are therefore incorporated into a revitalized articulation of liberal autonomy that re-conceptualizes it as resistance to ideological forces. These propositions are not intended to conflate fundamentally incongruent perspectives. I emphasize instead the importance of their non-antithetical dialectic, for, although vitally different, both perspectives postulate how ideologically-induced oppression can be challenged. For this reason I retain a liberal concept of autonomy, but depart from its traditional transcendent notions. I propose replacing autonomy's transcendent ideal with a reconsidered concept that posits autonomy as a form of resistance to ideological injustices. The caveat resonating within this re-articulation, however, is that liberal autonomy carries irrevocable ideological problems of its own. I acknowledge these problems and contend that autonomy can be retained as an ideal if it is not considered a *dormant* ideal. An evolving framework for reform is hence the context from which I re-think autonomy.

My argument begins by briefly introducing psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development as an exemplary and influential liberal theory of autonomy. The middle stages of Kohlberg's model represent how autonomy is adopted into educational practice, even though those stages describe forms of reasoning that are substantially different from and only approximations of the ideal stage. Kohlberg's ideal stage represents a form of autonomy that I interpret to be conceptually congruent with resistance because it points to ways in which issues of oppression and social justice can be addressed. My interpretation of Kohlberg's theory re-considers his autonomous ideal as a kind of resistance. The second part of my argument raises critiques that liberal autonomy is seriously suspect as an educational aim because it depends upon models of rationality that are inherently exclusionary and biased. Given the strength of these criticisms, in the third section I use them to argue that liberal

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autonomy ought to be re-interpreted as a continuously refining ideal that is the form of resistance to ideology, including even liberalism's own ideological framework. In the final section I assess and evaluate my re-characterization of autonomy in anticipation of criticisms that it might be a naïve description of a wolf in sheep's clothing, or, to employ Dwight Boyd's metaphor, akin to the insidious liberal "glass snake" that shakes off its vestigial "body" while under attack, leaving the head safely intact to slither away and reform a new body elsewhere under a different guise.<sup>7</sup>

#### LIBERAL NOTIONS OF AUTONOMY

The liberal understanding of autonomy rests upon a Kantian formulation that the autonomous person is one who governs his or her self according to self-constructed, reasoned principles, and who possesses the fortitude to act according to these internalized rational principles.<sup>8</sup> It is not to be confused with unimpeded freedom or license. The liberal aim of autonomy emphasizes self-direction, self-activity, and being a chooser in the sense of learning for one's self and being able to make appropriate choices.<sup>9</sup> Autonomy is achieved by taking or being granted independence from authorities and, with the spirit and intent to discover truth for oneself, deliberating, forming intentions, and choosing according to the normative justifications of principled reason.

In communion with Kantian rationalism, Kohlberg posits six stages for the development of autonomous moral reasoning. Although Boyd warns that short descriptions of Kohlberg's model can lead to distortions and caricatures of his theory,<sup>10</sup> the constraints of space here allow only a brief overview. One should consult Kohlberg's *Essays on Moral Development* for the most accurate and comprehensive description of his theory.<sup>11</sup>

Kohlberg's model explicitly uses Kant's rationality as the ideal of development in moral reasoning.<sup>12</sup> The model ranges from the heteronomous Stage One to the fully autonomous Stage Six. Each intermediary stage represents an increasingly adequate approximation of fully autonomous reasoning. Stages One and Two are called the *pre-conventional* level because one's view of moral rightness depends upon fear of punishment or upon an ego-centric view of freedom as irresponsible license. Stages Three and Four are called *conventional* because the person reasons according to the expectations of social roles or according to the necessity of the rule of law for maintaining society. The autonomy at this level is characterized as a competence with the usual expectations of one's family, work, and lawful civic life. I emphasize this level as encompassing the norms by which the ideological apparatus works in our society, for it upholds social roles and laws even though they might contribute to and perpetuate injustice. Stages Five and Six are called *post-conventional* because they attempt to coordinate diverse and multiple perspectives into a social contract, as at Stage Five, or because they use principled, prior-to-society reasoning to determine

what is right, as in Stage Six. The ethical principles inherent to post-conventional reasoning contrast with acquiescence to conventional social roles and laws merely for their own sake, and for the sake of social cohesion ‘as is’. Although disagreement exists within liberal circles as to whether one achieves rational autonomy through unaided individual means, as Kant describes, or through cooperative means, as Piaget describes, rationality remains the ideal.<sup>13</sup> I contend that within Kohlberg’s theory lies an embryonic consideration of autonomy as a rational critique of conventional society’s oppressions and injustices by rationally standing apart from those conventions in order to propose solutions. Critiques of liberalism, however, charge that rationality and autonomy are illusions.

#### NOTIONS OF IDEOLOGY: A CRITICISM OF AUTONOMY

In terms of contemporary educational practice, James Marshall’s discussion of unchallenged business-oriented convention seriously troubles the rational foundations of autonomy. The autonomous choosers R.F. Dearden describes are not free choosers, but have their subjectivities shaped by “busnocratic rationality and busno-power” of the modern corporate environment so that they will conform to consumer society”.<sup>14</sup> According to Marshall, “busno-power” molds the autonomy of these subjects “through forms of educational practice and pedagogy” that covertly appropriate their choices.<sup>15</sup> *Autonomy* is merely used to *suggest* that subjects in such an ideological system have choice, when in reality their internal control and compulsion remain under the command of an external force. Educational settings are not immune from these powerful discourses. It is often taken for granted that students, teachers, parents, and administrators are capable of ethical-rational deliberation and choice according to their individual needs and interests. The intrinsic worthiness and validity of these choices, however, is often assumed to be true and is left unchallenged, which leaves open the possibility that the notion of choice is illusory.

Marshall’s critique of autonomy finishes by pointing to Jean-François Lyotard’s proposition that a Dearden-like conception of autonomy, at its best, offers false independence from others: an independence that allows the state to isolate individuals and allot them, one by one, to “slot[s] in the technocratic structures of the capitalist state”.<sup>16</sup> The notion of personal choice is reductive to the individual and conceptually isolates one from the community and his or her obligations to social justice. The reductive sense of individualism that potentially underwrites this conception of autonomy is even more dangerous because if

there is no need to consider the other, to converse and to consult, and to enter into dialogue, then the independent autonomous chooser is further cut off from a shared community form of life and more liable to be “picked off” by the information systems, consumer products and media, through which the individual choices increasingly come to be policed.<sup>17</sup>

The success of ideological determinism, therefore, lies in its ability to isolate and misinform persons, thereby nullifying or abating their resistance.

Liberal claims about autonomy are either subsumed or precluded by this hegemony, which takes the form of oppression by race, class, sex, gender, and religion. The failure of liberal perspectives to locate themselves and their situated biases,<sup>18</sup> according to the partial list above, is a major problem that must be overcome in order to address post-liberal criticism. Two feminist objections highlight the importance of this challenge. Elizabeth Ellsworth contends that the fundamental objectives and practices that are central to a critical or transformative pedagogy—terms like “‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’”—are misnomers because they represent the “repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination ... [and thus] consistently strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position. What remains are the [terms] cited above, which operate at a high level of abstraction”.<sup>19</sup> Insofar as empowerment, student voice, and dialogue remain problematically abstract expressions of the intent to nurture students’ rational autonomy, the justification for upholding such an ideal is very shaky. Valerie Walkerdine’s critique of the rationality-autonomy coupling introduces an examination of how practices in the institutional school “position the participants”—most especially the learners and teachers whose intersection symbolizes and instantiates the institution’s mandate within the community. These practices, she contends, “aim at producing an autonomous and rational individual, who is class and gender-neutral, while at the same time ensuring that these categories assume a built-in deviance, a problem to be dealt with and corrected”.<sup>20</sup>

#### INTERPRETING AUTONOMY AS THE FOUNDATION OF RESISTANCE

Given that post-liberal criticism has so thoroughly de-stabilized the liberal ideal of autonomy, I propose a rejoinder that accommodates post-liberal critics and re-articulates the ideal in improved terms. If current understandings of autonomy are illusory because they are limited by the constraints of ideology, including the slippery and covert beast that is liberal ideology itself, then I propose that autonomy be re-situated as an ideal of *resistance*. That new beginning constitutes entering and re-entering positions of resistance to the ideological constraints that inform conventional society. In the above view, liberalism is de-centered from claims to universality, and from that de-centered position attempts to connect at certain points with theories that describe and resist ideological hegemony.

Recall that Kohlberg’s scale of moral reasoning is based upon a norm of *conventionality*. I contend that Kohlbergian conventionality represents ideologically-shaped social norms. If *pre-conventional* moral perspectives are inadequate because they are inferior to conventional morality, what is implied by Kohlberg’s use of the term *post-conventional* to describe principled moral

reasoning? It means, essentially, that one is freed from the dependence upon instrumental obedience to authority and the limitations of social roles or the strictures of law in order to discern what is right. Renouncing injustices requires both rejecting the structural harms of conventionality, especially insofar as conventionality represents an inferior, less-than-ideal liberalism, and also a more serious ideological shift that itself requires a reformulation of the ideal to which conventionality points. But is it safe to presume that if everyone reasoned at the post-conventional level that injustice would vanish? A consideration of Kohlberg's autonomous ideal standing in contrast to ideologically-shaped personal relationships and socio-civic organizations arouses the curiosity to revisit what exactly constitutes ideology and resistance. That is, how does the liberal ideal of autonomy sit *vis-à-vis* resistance?

Placing autonomy in terms of resistance recalls Socrates' inquisitive confrontation of Athenian social practices: a challenge that was based upon his insistence for principled justifications to the answers he was given during his challenges to the political hegemony of ancient Athens. Socratic resistance underlies a questioning attitude that takes no claim at face value and that upholds rational principles over the assumed natural worthiness of the social conventions that emphasize what is right and good for society. Socrates' emphasis on principles is the revolutionary act that brought him up on trial for corrupting Athenian youth, and his principled resistance to unjust social conventions is highlighted in his words at the climax of the *Apology*:

I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of the soul. ... Now if by saying this I corrupt the youth, this advice must be harmful, but if anyone says that I give you different advice, he is talking nonsense. On this point I would say to you, gentlemen of the jury ... "whether you acquit me or not, do so on the understanding that this is my course of action, even if I am to face death many times".<sup>21</sup>

From Socrates' persistence, I contend that Kohlberg's Kantian foundation remains viable insofar as it stands for an expression of justice that critiques the prevailing ideology. Kohlbergian autonomy is legitimately reconsidered as an expression of resistance because its principled reasoning represents a consistent norm of justice that is not always congruent with conventional social norms. Marshall's critique of a technocratic social hegemony therefore stands as an example of how ideal liberal autonomy is equipped to be a self-correcting concept as long as it does not fall dormant. Marshall's critique, it must be remembered, also stands as a warning of what liberalism should avoid lest it arrest its ideal's continued improvement. Should "busno-power" be reified in the autonomous ideal, for instance, the dangers of liberalism's reductive abstraction will re-emerge.

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Kohlberg himself equates Socrates' persistent principledness with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s reasons for questioning unjust social structures and validating disobedience of unjust racial segregation laws in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Kohlberg describes King as a moral leader because "[h]is words and deeds were primarily designed to induce America to respond to racial problems in terms of a sense of justice, and any particular action he took had value for this reason, not just because of the concrete political end it might achieve."<sup>23</sup> Both Socrates and King were powerful critics of the prevailing ideologies of their day who persuaded people to re-think their relations with others. Their calls for justice were so powerfully contrary to the prevailing conventions, however, that both men were killed by those whose personal and group interests and privileges depended upon those conventions. King's cause was subject to reaction from those whose position of dominance was at risk if equal rights were granted to African and other non-white Americans. In today's terms, resistance to corporate power, economic oppression, and the multifarious ahistorical repressive myths of domination that depend on assumptions of difference and deviance—including continued struggles for racial and sexual equity—count in the same class as Socrates' and King's acts because they employ principled responses to the technocratic social forces and structures that unjustly reinforce relations of dominance.

#### EVALUATING RESISTANT AUTONOMY *VIS-À-VIS* IDEOLOGY

Given the strong criticisms of rationality in terms of its ideological bias against race, gender, and class, uncritically holding reason as the cornerstone of autonomy is a problem endemic to liberalism. However, even the problematic liberal reason I have retained carries promise as a way of resisting current practices that have unsavory philosophical foundations: a promise which reveals that liberalism has not lived up to the potential of its own ideal, and also makes plain the lag between practice and theory in a world dominated by the limited scope of liberal theory. *Autonomy-as-Resistance* can work if faith in reason is retained as a desirable goal, and as a meeting place between individuals and institutions. While a critical stance like Kohlberg's works well with problems of irrational interaction and promotes the acquisition of rationality as a promising solution, that same stance assumes away, disregards, or is ignorant of the violence that has been inflicted upon those against whom the rational ideal has been constructed. From a perspective informed by Ellsworth's and Walkerdine's research, insofar as pedagogies influenced by Kohlberg's theory are based upon a limited definition of rationality, students are forced to subject themselves to the logics of rationalism and scientism which have been predicated on and made possible through the exclusion of socially constructed irrational Others—women, people of color, queer folk, the working class, and so forth. As Audre Lorde writes, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".<sup>24</sup> I postulate that that same house and tools can be transformed or renovated instead of dismantled; I contend that it is a corruption of rationality, rather than an inherent flaw, that has led to the

problems post-liberal critics identify. Liberalism has so far been insufficient and inadequate as an address to injustice, but has the tools to address some specific problems in the conventional world.

The project of *Autonomy-as-Resistance* is to re-appropriate rationality from the hegemony its critics signal. Although Kant's and Kohlberg's works are the current objects of this criticism, recall that both men in their historical context embarked on a project of challenging conventional ideologies. Kant expressed autonomous morality in secular terms and therefore freed individuals from the conventional institution of Christian hegemony, while Kohlberg expressed moral autonomy as a non-relativistic and non-culturally chauvinistic response to Nazism. Therefore there exists an established history of resistance under the rubric of autonomy, and as our part in that history it is our task to accept and challenge current problems. I acknowledge that faith and hope in *Autonomy-as-Resistance* depends upon the definitive belief that rationality is a self-correcting concept that can adequately address and resolve the challenges presented to it.

But does this solution cheerfully uphold a naïve and sophomoric blind faith in rationality as the solution to a problem of incommensurable theories? As an interim solution to the problem of naming this state of being between two sets of theories, I use 'faith' and 'hope' to describe the development of a common meeting ground between a progressive liberalism and its post-liberal criticism much the same way as a parent might use the same words to describe his or her aspirations for a developing child. The parent has faith and hope that the child will grow, but the only real proof of the parent's belief comes in time when the child actually *does* grow. This meeting ground is a crucial point of contact between liberalism and post-liberalism because it marks a particular spot where both theories of human association adopt a stance of resistance to the ideologically-wrought social conventions that perpetuate injustice. While the possession of a common enemy is probably the least preferable reason or means to form friendships, unite a community, galvanize a nation, or secure allies, from a developmental perspective the mere fact that there is something—even anything—in common between two selves, organizations, or, in this case, theories, suggests that there are grounds for further relations based upon more mature reasons. For that matter, while I am on the topic of 're-thinking' liberalism, the conventional expression 'common enemy' might appropriately be turned around and re-expressed in terms of a common moral interest, which in this case is resistance to conventional patterns of ideologically defined injustice.

The presence of a point of contact between liberalism and post-liberalism does not suggest the wholesale marriage of two disparate ways of thinking. The strength of the partnership I propose between liberalism and post-liberalism obviously stalls and breaks at the point where each set of thoughts considers what counts as ideology. While liberalism and post-liberalism are permanently

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in dispute over the key understandings of what counts as ideology and whether ideology or ideological conventions can be transcended, I contend that liberalism and post-liberalism are not absolute antithetical opposites. I postulate a relationship between liberalism and post-liberalism that emphasizes their shared aims and entertains a more thoughtful comparison than has been traditionally afforded. It is acknowledged that conceptual problems arise if one is to talk of ‘overcoming’ ideology. However, this problem remains less of a barrier to further communication if liberal rationality is viewed developmentally rather than dormantly: that is, if the aims of liberal rationality are reconsidered as continued attempts to reformulate the ideal of autonomy as an address to ideological constraints. The boundary between liberalism and post-liberalism thus becomes less rigid when one considers *the attempt at autonomy* as an end in itself as more realistic than *the attainment of autonomy* as a fixed end.

‘Faith’ and ‘hope’ are also employed for the reason that the end product of *Autonomy- as-Resistance* seems to be an impossible attainment given the likelihood that solving one problem at one stage on the journey to attainment will merely open the way to address new unforeseen problems. Boyd’s “glass snake” represents this slippery liberal entity that, when threatened by predators, manages to shed any troubling “tail” and have its “head” escape, only to grow another tail and return later in newer and more egregiously harmful guises. Nonetheless, I retain an appeal to reformed rationality that locates itself and resists the hegemony that tacitly covers its assumptions. The potential for such rationality to uncover and make transparent the assumptions that have oppressed ‘Others’ offers the most hope for a solution to a system that might otherwise maintain an oppressive grip on us. Currently, the dialectic between liberalism and post-liberalism merely leaves a description of autonomous rationality in a perpetually self-revising state that on a case-by-case basis corrects the problems that taint its ideal. Writ large, however, the aggregate of these singular problems presents a discouraging challenge like the one presented to Hercules by the mythical Hydra monster in ancient Greek myth. When challenged by the Hydra, Hercules found that knocking one of its heads off merely meant another would grow in its place and the dread creature would remain a threat. Hercules was only able to finish off the monster by cauterizing the wounded neck with fire before a new head could grow in place of the old one.

The Hydra myth is relevant in the scope of this essay because it appears that the partnership between liberalism and post-liberalism presents a meta-problem that is infinitely irresolvable for lack of an appropriate cauterizing agent, even though several comparatively ‘minor’ problems of injustice might be addressed and resolved one-by-one, if only to reveal a new sets of problems awaiting their turn for attempted resolution. However, if each of the Hydra’s heads is imaginatively considered to represent an injustice that threatens the dignity and well-being of persons, I defend the continued address of these

comparatively ‘minor’ problems with an attitude of ‘faith’ and ‘hope’ on the grounds that doing nothing in the face of social injustice constitutes a worse injustice. One is not excused from action merely for want of an available ideal, but is responsible to act with the best available knowledge and skills, even if they are less than ideal.

*Autonomy-as-Resistance* is an educational reform project that is constantly on guard against the misconceptions and blinkered assumptions about student-centered autonomy as an educational aim. However inadequately the problematic liberal ideal is applied to educational settings, its promise as a means toward addressing social injustices must not be overlooked. While the liberal project to promote autonomy and rationality has laudable aims, it must maintain persistent vigilance against social forces—whether explicit, implicit, tacit, voluntary, or involuntary—that corrupt its inclusiveness and moral adequacy. An interpretation of liberalism that fairly addresses structured inequality and is adequately self-reflective is a good solution to the inevitable social problem of struggling to cope with the effects of hegemonic practices that permeate institutions and individuals because at its best it destabilizes current ideals in a way that accommodates to critiques, while respecting the inevitability of a society and schooling system steeped in liberalism. However, liberalism’s potential goodness must not overshadow its limitations. Liberalism must resist dormancy and work toward an ideal of personal, communal, and institutional strength, cohesion, justice, and benevolence that is constantly on guard against abuses. It cannot fall into the sleep of reason.

#### NOTES

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23. Kohlberg, “Education for Justice,” 38.

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