



STUDENT AUTONOMY AS A UNIVERSITY OBJECTIVE

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The story in a recent issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* about an Afghan woman who had appeared as a young girl on the *Magazine's* cover seventeen years ago and who was recently rediscovered in a refugee camp, now married, a mother and ordinarily inaccessible to Western scrutiny, troubled me, as it probably did many of you. On the one hand here is an example of a person loyal to a distinctive, traditional way of life that places her culturally and socially within a community; on the other hand that placement denies her autonomy over the major conditions of her life. The Afghan woman poses compellingly a tension that can exist between cultural membership and autonomy. I do not plan to defend in this short paper the claim that they—cultural membership and autonomy—are each valuable. That I take for granted. Rather, I want to address the tension between these two values and the implications of the tension for us as academics.

That the values of cultural membership and autonomy have influenced our thinking about curricula here at Oakland University there can be no doubt. For example, in our general education we always maintain that we aspire to foster in students a critical mind, relatively proficient in scientific and humanistic ways of problem solving, so that students can make up their own minds on important issues of life and politics. We are saying here that we wish our instruction to enhance

the students' autonomy. Also, we contend that general education should foster respect for membership in diverse cultures because we appreciate the relevance of such membership to being a human person. We aspire to foster respect for forms of membership that would otherwise seem to the uneducated as bizarre if not flawed. No, there can be no doubt that autonomy and cultural membership are predictable objects of our curricular attention. But how can it be coherent for us to see them both as worthy objectives of our teaching when there can be tension between them? Is our commitment to them both unreasonable? To forecast my answer to this question, I contend below that autonomy depends upon a particular kind of cultural membership. Hence, the tension is between autonomy and some cultures, not all.

One might respond to the question I pose above by claiming that I have exposed the tension by citing an especially egregious example, that of the Afghan woman, in which an individual is obviously repressed by her immersion in a form of Islamic life. That such life is especially repressive is obviously true. Yet, observe that membership in any culture involves acquiescence to certain conditions of membership, whether it be an ethnic culture, a sub-national culture like that of the Dead Heads or NASCAR enthusiasts, or a professional culture like that of the American College of Surgeons or the American Philosophical Association. Whatever may be the conditions of membership, one must defer to them because such deference is the mark of a member. Now, I concede that men and women choose to pursue admission into something like the American College of Surgeons, whereas the Afghan woman may not have made an explicit choice to continue the practice of Islam that she experienced as a young girl. I also concede that people who are members of something like the American College of Surgeons have many choices to make in the course of practicing their membership. Surgery is not like following a cook-book; choices have to be made at many points in the practice. The deference that is always linked with membership varies in its breadth. The rules

of membership in a surgical organization address only part of a surgeon's life, whereas the Islam practiced by the Afghan woman reaches across virtually every aspect of her life. This is indeed an important difference which illustrates the fact that tension between cultural membership and autonomy will vary in its intensity and reach, depending upon the type of membership in question. Nevertheless, as soon as one is a member of a culture, whatever that culture may be, certain actions become prohibited, certain options are ruled out. There are always certain duties accompanying membership. If they are violated or ignored, the membership may be revoked or lost.

Philosophers are notorious for their skepticism toward the reality of a human self. For example, in his *Treatise* (1739) Scottish philosopher David Hume asks 'from what impression could this idea of a human self be derived?' He responds: "If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives, since a self is suppos'd to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea." So, Hume reasons, there actually is no self because no impression has the self's properties of constancy and invariability. Our idea of a human 'self' is, he concludes, a fiction, a fiction manufactured by our imagination because the imagination mistakenly confounds the idea of an uninterrupted and an invariable sensation of a self with a succession of sensations related to one another through resemblance and causation.

If Hume's analysis of the human self is correct, any tension between autonomy and cultural membership collapses. If there is in truth no 'self' then there can be no autonomous self; hence there can be no demand that a human self defer to conditions of cultural membership. Consequently, the tension that I am posing between autonomy and cultural membership presumes that Hume is wrong, that it is not a fiction to talk of

a human self as an autonomous entity challenged to defer to conditions of membership.

Since skepticism that there are human selves makes the tension evaporate, what is it that animates the tension? Well, we have observed that some cultures demand more of us than others, and the breadth and depth of such demands certainly animate the tension. Also, from the other direction, the tension can be animated by a type of self that regards all forms of membership as amendable, as grist for its mill as it proceeds with fashioning itself into a distinctive type of person. Such an instrumental attitude toward cultural membership is voiced by writer Salman Rushdie in a defense of his novel *The Satanic Verses*: “*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Melange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.” Rushdie admires those who view themselves as members of no culture in particular. He admires those who claim to be self-generated persons who by design have selectively adopted traces of many cultures in a unique amalgamation. Here it is not a culture’s demands upon a member that captures our attention but a person’s instrumentally motivated manipulation of cultures that is noteworthy. Rushdie would have us believe that people can attain a radical degree of autonomy such that they can address any culture provisionally. If this is indeed his view, I maintain that he is mistaken. I explain below that autonomy is itself grounded in a particular type of cultural membership that cannot be treated provisionally. I propose that appreciation of this relationship between autonomy and culture should be reflected in our thinking about fostering student autonomy through teaching.

In his investigation of the political conditions for individual liberty (I take Mill’s ‘liberty’ here as equivalent to ‘autonomy’) J.S. Mill refers periodically to custom’s despotism over individuals: “The despotism of custom is everywhere the

standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress and improvement.” Mill understands, however, that custom is not without value. Anticipating Rushdie, he explains that people can use custom (or customs) to fashion themselves as they wish: “Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way.” Here, once again, the relation between the free, autonomous person and culture is characterized instrumentally. So, it would seem unpromising that one seek from Mill insight that autonomy is itself non-instrumentally dependent upon membership in a particular kind of cultural community.

Yet there are hints in Mill that there are limits to instrumentalism. He advises, for example, that ‘despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians.’ Some readers of Mill interpret this comment to mean that Mill is condoning England’s rule over her colonies: individual liberty is a basic value for the English, but not a value for those living in countries ruled by England. Mill is endorsing, such readers say, two standards: one for his fellow English and another for the colonized living abroad. Yet there is certainly more substance to Mill’s comment than mere hypocrisy. Elsewhere he says that moral indignation is an important regulative mechanism for life in a state devoted to individual liberty. He explains that individual liberty is the result of a state’s obedience to the ‘harm’ principle, a principle that prohibits a state from interfering in the thought and action of persons that do not threaten others with harm. The state, Mill insists, is not authorized to compel persons to do things for their own good. Such political constraint should, nevertheless, be augmented by the disposition of persons to express their moral indignation toward conduct that is offensive even though it does not

expose others to risk of harm: “A person who shows rashness, obstinacy, self-conceit—who cannot live within moderate means; who cannot restrain himself from hurtful indulgence; who pursues animal pleasures at the expense of those of feeling and intellect—must expect to be lowered in the opinion of others, . . . Cruelty of disposition; malice and ill-nature; that most antisocial and odious of all passions, envy; dissimulation and insincerity, irascibility on insufficient cause, and resentment disproportioned to provocation; the love of domineering over others; the desire to engross more than one’s share of advantages (the *pleonexia* of the Greeks); the pride which derives gratification from the abasement of others; the egotism which thinks self and its concerns more important than everything else, and decides all doubtful questions in its own favor—these are moral vices and constitute a bad and odious moral character; . . .” The idea that there is a distinction to be made between ‘animal pleasures’ and pleasures of ‘feeling and intellect’ might strike some as implying an indefensible standard of valuation. Indeed, when in his short book *Utilitarianism* Mill refers to ‘competent judges’ of alternative kinds of pleasure, he seems to suffer from circular reasoning: quality as well as quantity matters, he says, when comparing alternative pleasures that a person might pursue because it is self-evident to competent judges that pleasures accompanying use of our ‘higher faculties’ are superior. Yet, to be a ‘competent judge’ is to be the kind of person whose life is infused by the ‘higher faculties’. Mill has failed to prove to us here the superiority of one kind of pleasure to another. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that Mill would be reluctant to endorse a liberal state that restrains its power over individuals by practice of the ‘harm’ principle yet is disconnected from a moral community of citizens who express their disapprobation toward that which they find offensive. A lawful liberal state is inadequate when it is not augmented by active moral evaluation of non-harmful but odious conduct. Living as a free person, that is, living as an autonomous person, is dependent upon membership in a moral community where citizens disapprove of conduct that is

bad even though it is not harmful to others. Mere lawfulness is not enough.

Even though Mill's doctrine of quality is inadequate and therefore needs to be corrected by a better theory of value, his insight that a community of autonomous persons is preeminently a community of persons morally engaged with each other is relevant to our inquiry into the relation between autonomy and culture. As members of a moral or cultural community we are capable of learning a mode of valuation by which we distinguish between the despicable and the admirable. Without standards provided by the community our autonomy under law would have no moral ground. Autonomy in legal terms requires membership in a moral community of those who express their approval and their disapproval of that which they find worthy or unworthy. Mill's insight for us is really quite simple: if we ignore one another because of our respect for autonomy, if we are indifferent toward one another because we think toleration requires it, then we cannot be free.

Mill rejects a social contract argument for a legitimate state, and now it is easy to understand why he does so. Take Thomas Hobbes's contract argument, for example. In his book *Leviathan* Hobbes proposes a pre-political situation in which inhabitants are motivated to transform themselves into citizens within a state because of persistent threat of death. But, Mill responds, political order cannot emerge from a pre-political situation without any morality. The rule of law must be grounded upon moral sensibility. Toleration of anything and everything not overtly harmful is not the fulfillment of a liberal state but its undoing.

Specifically, why is it that people could not be autonomous in the absence of membership in a moral (or cultural) community? One reason why this would not be possible has already been hinted. A system of law is an instrument of the state, implemented by judicature and enforced by state sponsored sanctions. Law is an instrument for coordinating the affairs of citizens in such a way that their vital interests are

fairly protected. People cannot be free in absence of such coordination; they cannot be free in an anarchy. Yet, however essential law is to freedom, there is a limit to what law can accomplish. Evaluation cannot be nuanced when the only possibilities are guilt or innocence. What morality loses in enforceability because of the absence of state-sponsored sanctions it gains in nuance. Our moral evaluations address features of life ignored by law but nevertheless important for our living with one another in a companionable, if not elegant, manner. In this way membership in a moral community augments the coordination function of a system of law.

Additionally, people who are autonomous adopt a normative point of view toward themselves. The autonomous determine or rule themselves rather than be ruled by others. And, they determine or rule themselves by evaluating their options in order to select the most worthy one: "These are my options; now, which of them is the best for me?" An amoralist cannot be autonomous because she cannot adopt a normative perspective toward herself. Yet, could a person who aspires for autonomy develop her own idiosyncratic values for herself, such that she would be autonomous in her eyes but not in the eyes of others? Can there be a system of values which means something only to one person, an as it were Nietzschean system of value that emerges from the rejection of and movement beyond all values of others? I think not. The coordination function of a system of law could not be augmented and further nuanced by a morality that applies only to one person and to no one else. Aristotle is correct: we are all ineliminably social; we cannot invent a code that applies only to ourselves without losing our humanity. We cannot invent only for ourselves the norms upon which we base our autonomy. The only way we can acquire such norms is through initiation into an already existing moral community. Moral membership feeds autonomy.

That there can be tension between autonomy and culture has been acknowledged; nevertheless, with Mill's assistance, the point has been made that we cannot live our lives as

free persons if we are free from one another's attention. Although we celebrate the individuality of people adopting their own life plans for themselves, we should, Mill advises us, find ways of letting one another know when we see something that is odious or noble, unworthy or worthy. If we keep quiet because we believe there is no interpersonal standard of value applicable to everyone (relativism), we undermine the cultural basis of our own freedom. If we are to be free persons in our academic culture, then we must take one another seriously through valuation.

The type of culture that facilitates autonomy instead of hinders it might be called a 'liberal' culture or a community of people who live by 'liberal' values. In such a culture people institutionally sanction only that conduct which is harmful to others, yet they balance such institutional restraint with moral engagement with one another motivated by a commitment to let others know the value of what they do. Members of a 'liberal' culture tolerate difference so long as difference is not perverse; they accept alternative ways of life so long as they do not assault human dignity.

It is not easy to practice liberal community in a university of faculty specialists and commuting students. It is not easy to acknowledge the moral underpinning of free inquiry and consequently to object to perverseness when we see it before us. It is more pleasant to retreat behind our office doors and to relish the solitude that academe makes available to us. Yet, when we live as if we are a community of the alone, we harm the practice of mutual, moral engagement with each other that makes it possible for our lives as autonomous, independent thinkers to continue.

Historian Lawrence Cremin once observed that we Americans have a penchant for trying to solve our social problems by creating courses of study. I think this is true, and I think that we often carry problem solving by creating courses much too far. Learning in school is for much more than just solving the problems of life, although it is for that too. I have presented above my view of autonomy's dependence upon

cultural membership (or moral membership) not in order to motivate you, my Oakland colleagues, to require of students a course in 'ethics'. That would be misguided. 'Ethics' is a course of study and, just like any other course of study in, for example, mathematics or psychology or English, it is possible for a smart but bad person to do well at it. Study of ethics can help those already of good heart become better at problem solving, but it can hardly transform a bad heart into a better one. Students cannot be taught in an ethics course in a way that matters to the heart that autonomy requires membership in a liberal moral community. They must be brought into such membership by doing business with faculty and staff who are already members. If we faculty and staff do not evidence by the way we work with each other that we are members of a liberal moral community then there is little we can do for students in behalf of their own autonomy.