

Autonomy as a Task for Education: Hermeneutics and Pragmatism in Dialogue

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to develop some pivotal reflections on the application of Paul Ricœur's concept of autonomy in school education. Since Paul Ricœur did not explicitly refer to formal education in his work, I decided to place him in dialogue with John Dewey's philosophy of education as a means of applying his thought to this field. This comparison is motivated by the similarity between the two philosophers on the issue of autonomy, which Dewey also approaches in the framework of a philosophy of formal and informal education. This cross-reading of Ricœur and Dewey leads to the conclusion, first, that autonomy is a fundamental task for democratic education, and, secondly, that this task can be pursued by educating to and through narrative.

Keywords: Ricœur, Dewey, Autonomy, Education, School, Narrative

Introduction

In this contribution, I will formulate some reflections on the implications of Ricœur's concept of autonomy (intended as self-direction based on self-awareness) in school education (Berka et al., 2000; Gewirtz, 2007; Dworkin, 2015; Wermke, 2013). These short reflections are far from being exhaustive, but I hope they will constitute a first step for a further investigation of how Ricœur's idea of autonomy can be applied in that field when it is brought into contact with other philosophies.

To develop this suggestion, I will first refer to John Dewey's claim that autonomy is one of the crucial aims of education in a democratic society. I chose Dewey because, as will be shown, his idea of education matches Ricœur's philosophy of autonomy in many respects, and Dewey could therefore be the missing bridge connecting this latter to school education. Indeed, on his part, Ricœur explicitly referred to education briefly and only

in a few texts published in the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, as Luca Alici stressed in his preface to the Italian translation of those texts (Alici, 2014), Ricœur, who happened to be the dean of the University of Nanterre in the 1960s during the students' social movement and mobilization, was rather interested in the significant social changes that were affecting the French university as an institution. When, in those texts, he discusses the role of institutions in education, he mainly refers to universities rather than to schools and focuses on the dialectic of recognition between the individual and the community that is one of the concepts directing university activities. Furthermore, in the few texts that Ricœur dedicated to child pedagogy, he does not explicitly refer to autonomy (Ricœur, 1948, 1953).

This contribution will thus take a path through Dewey and eventually come back to Ricœur to show that Ricœur's notion of autonomy, which is not far from the one developed by Dewey, helps to understand exactly how the education for autonomy advocated by Dewey can be pursued in concrete terms. Even though Ricœur makes only a few explicit references to Dewey, and this always in a critical way, stressing his distance from the idea of action as always instrumental (Ricœur, 1991, p. 287), the two philosophers have something in common when they reflect on autonomy and its value in human life. I believe that they are close enough to each other to establish a dialogue that can adjust some aspects of both philosophies without betraying their spirit.

Today, the dialogue between pragmatism and hermeneutics is at the receiving end of a non-negligible level of attention. What pragmatism and hermeneutics share are, first, their interest in the philosophy of action and, second and more importantly, their rejection of, on the one, any metaphysics, and, on the other hand, any relativism and nihilism. On this basis, promising attempts to intertwine pragmatism—namely the philosophies of Dewey, Peirce, and Joas—with hermeneutics—Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricœur's thought—have been pursued in the last few years (Begby, 2014; Allen, 2017; Busacchi et al., 2022). This research, which cuts across the fields of aesthetics, philosophy of action, ethics and epistemology, opens new perspectives that have not yet been fully explored, and that have almost not been explored at all in the field of pedagogy (one exception being G. E. Haley, 2013). As previously stated, the aim here is to take a step in this direction, shedding light on Ricœur's and Dewey's thought on autonomy and education.

Ricœur's philosophy of action has its roots in French existentialism (Sartre) and French phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty). In *Freedom and Nature*, action is analyzed as one of the fundamental structures of human will from a phenomenological point of view. In later works such as *Semantics of Action* (1977) and *From Text to Action* (1986), Ricœur mixes the phenomenological perspective with hermeneutics. In these texts, the analysis of action stems from the idea that action can be considered a "quasi-text," which has semiot-

ic and symbolic features that can be interpreted (Ricœur, 1991, pp. 144–168). To develop this idea, Ricœur refers to the pragmatic philosophy of language of Searle and Austin, i.e., to the idea that speech acts can be interpreted as actions having a concrete impact on reality. The relation between action and text, as well as between action and speech, will be further developed in *Oneself as Another*. The aim here is not to analyze Ricœur's use of linguistic pragmatism but rather to show how Dewey's pragmatism as a theory of life experience can be fruitfully intertwined with Ricœur's philosophy of autonomy to reflect on the role school education has in supporting autonomy as a human capacity.

Autonomy in Democracy and Education

John Dewey (1859-1952) is considered to be not only one of the most important pragmatist philosophers but also one of the most important pedagogists of the last century. Through his work, he suggested and in part realized an actual revolution in education, which can only be summarized here in a few words as the fundamental switch from *what* it is learned to *who* learns (Fiorucci, Lopez, 2017, p. 9). For Dewey, schooling must be learner-centered. This means that learning must be intended as a process of growth that has nothing to do with absorbing notions and subject-matter. Learning means becoming who we are, in the sense of becoming aware of our capabilities and interests and growing according to them, in an interaction between ourselves and the other—the teacher, the community of learners and the community of citizens.

One of Dewey's most important works, and the one in which he advocates for an education for self-direction and self-awareness—i.e., for what I call autonomy—, is *Democracy and Education*. In this book, first published in 1916, Dewey develops a theory of what education should be in a real democracy and, circularly, of what a democratic society should be to make it possible for individuals to be the actors of a real, lifelong education process.

For Dewey, life is a continuous process of renewal (in this regard, he is influenced by Darwin's idea of evolution). Renewal is a necessity for a living being and is therefore impossible to avoid. As human beings, we cannot but renew ourselves in response to inputs from the environment surrounding us. As living beings, we act upon the environment to perpetuate our life. In this process of adapting ourselves to the world around us, we grow. According to Dewey, education is precisely this act of growing and thus it is a necessity, corresponding to the act of living itself.

However, for humans, this process is a conscious rather than a mechanical process. Dewey tries to intertwine Darwin and Hegel, naturalism, and historicism. For him, nature and culture can be distinguished on an abstract

level only. Human beings are conscious living beings; thus, through their intelligence and through culture, they can *orient* and *direct* their growth, they can be *autonomous* (in the etymological sense of "self-directed") in the process of growing. According to Dewey, proving this point is exactly philosophy's aim in education. Giving a direction does not mean giving specific goals to our life, nor does it mean that we must determine from the outset what specific results our education (and so our life) should achieve. Giving a direction to the living process means living a meaningful life, a life we are aware of and in which we always grow in personality.

Autonomy can be defined as this way of conducting life. Since, as already noted, humans are conscious growing beings, for Dewey, democracy is a society that gives all humans equally the possibility to fully realize their nature, to grow in a meaningful way, to direct their life towards being happy and satisfied with themselves. In short, democracy is a society that gives all humans equally the possibility to be autonomous. Education performs a crucial role towards this purpose. In a paragraph entitled "The Place of Vocational Aims in Education," in the twentieth chapter dedicated to "The Vocational Aspects of Education," Dewey says that:

To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness. Nothing is more tragic than failure to discover one's true business in life, or to find that one has drifted or been forced by circumstance into an uncongenial calling. A right occupation means simply that the aptitudes of a person are in adequate play, working with the minimum of friction and the maximum of satisfaction. With reference to other members of a community, this adequacy of action signifies, of course, that they are getting the best service the person can render. Slavery only illustrates on an obvious scale what happens in some degree whenever an individual does not find himself in his work. (Dewey, 1997, p. 217)

In this quote, Dewey says that the role of schooling is to prevent persons from being slaves, from doing something in which they do not recognize themselves. Dewey here talks about work as one of the most important aspects of society; "Finding oneself in one's work" means working in a way that is consistent with one's personal dispositions. Education plays a key role in constructing the bridge that connects one's personal disposition with society, in order to avoid the schizophrenia of being split between what we are in our personal growth and what we are in the/a social world. For Dewey, dualism is the real enemy of a joyful life and of an education that must perceive continuity and therefore joyfulness in life.

Living according to our dispositions does not mean being determined by them. On the contrary, they can be adjusted according to our projects and our habits must be the instruments of our will. In the paragraph entitled "Habits as Expression of Growth," Dewey writes that:

A habit means an ability to use natural conditions as means to ends. It is an active control of the environment through control of the organs of action. We are perhaps apt to emphasize the control of the body at the expense of control of the environment. We think of walking, talking, playing the piano, the specialized skills characteristic of the etcher, the surgeon, the bridge-builder, as if they were simply ease, deftness, and accuracy on the part of the organism. They are that, of course; but the measure of the value of these qualities lies in the economical and effective control of the environment which they secure. To be able to walk is to have certain properties of nature at our disposal—and so with all other habits. (Dewey, 1997, p. 51)

In this second paragraph, Dewey reflects on the importance of building habits in education. By habits, he does not mean automatic and mechanical responses to the environment, but, on the contrary, the organs humans use to direct their life in the natural and social environment. Ricœur says something similar in *Freedom and Nature* about habits as instruments of the will. For Dewey, this instrument of the will is fully effective only when connected to the environment and so, again, to the social context.

I thus introduce here a third theme. One must be autonomous in society and not isolated from the intersubjective world. “There is no greater tragedy,” Dewey writes, “than that so much of the professedly spiritual and religious thought of the world has emphasized the two ideals of self-sacrifice and spiritual self-perfecting instead of throwing its weight against this dualism of life. The dualism is too deeply established to be easily overthrown; for that reason, it is the particular task of education at the present time to struggle on behalf of an aim in which social efficiency and personal culture are synonyms instead of antagonists” (Dewey, 1997, p. 128).

Indeed, to be autonomous does not mean being independent and detached from the other:

From a social standpoint, dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness; it involves interdependence. There is always a danger that increased personal independence will decrease the social capacity of an individual. In making him more self-reliant, it may make him more self-sufficient; it may lead to aloofness and indifference. It often makes an individual so insensitive in his relations to others as to develop an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone—an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world. (Dewey, 1997, pp. 48–49)

In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricœur claims in a different framework that “the self as radical autonomy, not only moral but ontological, is precisely the fault” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 29).

In the previous paragraph, Dewey indicated that, in a democratic society, the idea of an absolute independence of the subjects is not only inconceivable from a theoretical point of view, but also, on this basis, strongly undesirable. Educating to autonomy thus means supporting students in their *social* growth, beside any illusion of being self-sufficient. This idea perfectly fits Ricœur's conception of the self as another and therefore of the intersubjective dimension as primordial and necessary from an ontological perspective.

To summarize, I find in Dewey the idea that autonomy, which is meant as a way of living and growing in the society according to our personal "calling," is one of the most important purposes of schooling. However, besides this crucial contribution for a philosophy of education, what is missing in Dewey is an analysis of the concrete means through which schooling can realize such a purpose. In other words, Dewey's thought of autonomy in education is rather normative. Ricœur's idea of autonomy could be the operating part, consistent with the normative one which is missing in Dewey's philosophy of education.

Ricœur's Idea of Autonomy

It is mainly in the texts collected in *Reflections on the Just*, first published in French (*Le juste 2*) in 2001 and in David Pellauer's English translation in 2008, that Ricœur discusses autonomy. This collection of essays and presentations delivered in the 1990s includes the short contribution "Autonomy and Vulnerability," on which I will mainly focus.

In this essay, Ricœur decides to approach the issue of autonomy starting from a previous definition of the human condition from the perspective of philosophical anthropology. He thus introduces his reflections on autonomy with his famous definition of the human being as a capable being. Humans, he writes, are capable in the sense of Aristotle's *hexis* and Spinoza's *conatus*. For Ricœur, this means that humans share specific capacities, such as the capacity to speak, to act, to narrate their own life's experience. These can clearly be recognized as the same capacities that Ricœur has assigned to the Self in *Oneself as Another*, which are translated here in an anthropological framework. These capacities are not something that can be considered to be metaphysical aspects of humans. We cannot establish their existence, rather we attest them, i.e., we *trust* in their existence. This attestation, or belief, can be supported by others. As Ricœur writes:

Attestation/sanction thus upholds the ability to act in language. Its contrary is not doubt but suspicion – or doubt as suspicion. And we overcome such suspicion only by a leap, a sursum, that other people may encourage, accompany, assist by having confidence in us – by an appeal to responsibil-

ity and autonomy, which we shall rediscover later to be the place of all pedagogy, all education, be it moral, juridical, or political. (Ricœur, 2008, p. 75)

In this quote, Ricœur states, as Dewey does, that autonomy, which is related to the conscious attestation of one's capabilities, must be supported by education. However, it does not go deeper in explaining how education and pedagogy should take care of and support the autonomy of the self. It is nevertheless possible to clarify this point by interpreting the following paragraphs of the text, starting with the claim that it is hard, for Ricœur, "to speak of autonomy without also talking about identity" (Ricœur, 2008, p. 78).

Narrative, Autonomy, Education

For Ricœur, personal identity results from the construction of one's life narrative. In this text, he associates the capacity to configure this narrative with autonomy. He writes:

One German author likes to say, '*Die Geschichte steht für den Mann*'—a person, a human being, is his or her history. The handling of one's own life, as a possibly coherent narrative, represents a high-level competence that has to be taken as one of the major components of the autonomy of a subject of rights. In this regard, we can speak of an education for narrative coherence, and education leading to a narrative identity. To learn how to tell the same story in another way, how to allow our story to be told by others, how to submit the narrative of a life to the historian's critique, are all practices applicable to the paradox of autonomy and fragility. Let us say therefore that a subject capable of leading his or her life in agreement with the idea of narrative coherence is an autonomous subject. (Ricœur, 2008, p. 80)

These lines fit well with what Dewey writes about the role of education and schooling for autonomy in the sense of self-direction of one's life. Furthermore, they suggest ways in which education could concretely perceive this purpose, i.e., by educating to narrate. Ricœur's idea is that what is referred to as autonomy is the capacity and the possibility to organize one's own life in a narrative and to direct this life according to that narrative. Narrative is indeed the means that we have to re-interpret our past, our character, dispositions and habits, and reconfigure our future, as Ricœur argues in *Time and Narrative* and in *Oneself as Another*.

This process clearly involves the other, and this point is even clearer in the following quote:

The identity of each person, and hence his or her autonomy, is constructed between these two poles [i.e., the effort to think for oneself and the domination or rule by the other]. It is the task of education to bring about an interminable negotiation between our seeking singularity and the social

pressure that is always capable of reconstituting those conditions that the Enlightenment called a state of minority. (Ricœur, 2008, p. 82)

The means for this negotiation is the construction of narratives; this is the “pragmatic solution” to the paradox of autonomy as the autonomy of a self always tied to the other and always vulnerable (Ricœur, 2008, p. 90). This pragmatic solution “rests on a practice of mediations” which “stem from a kind of education” (Ricœur, 2008, p. 90). It should be underlined that this narrative also has the capacity to counterbalance the tendency to utilitarianism that an education inspired to pragmatism could have. Making narratives is indeed a way to make sense of action even in cases where this action does not have a clear purpose or aim (a “use”). According to Ricœur, narrative is indeed the act of configuring a plot in which actions find their meanings in the way they connect to each other. Furthermore, for Ricœur, the meaning of an action is retrospective, and this means that their motives appear when a decision is already made. Thus, to conclude, a cross-reading of Dewey and Ricœur leads to the claim that schooling not only must have the purpose of supporting learners in being autonomous as a never-ending process of the realization of the self with the others in democratic institutions, but also that it can actually do that by educating to and through narrative.

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