

# **Re-defining an Open Future**

*The Child's Right to an Open Future revisited from a Virtue-Ethics perspective*

*Jenny Murdoch*

Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of MA by Research, March 2014.

There is much philosophical ambiguity about the concept of autonomy and, relatedly, about what it might mean to provide children with an open (or autonomous) future. This ambiguity leads to controversy about whether an agent's right of self-determination can be violated during childhood. By supplementing the deontological argument for the child's right to an open future with ideas from Virtue Ethics, I hope to illustrate the importance of autonomy, not just for well-being but also, for genuine ethical understanding. Consequently, I hope to provide a more comprehensive and satisfying account of the kind of autonomous ethical understanding that we ought to nurture in children. The kind of ethical understanding that I have in mind must include a conception of ethical life that is reflective, personally motivated, and which is able to include everything that might matter to human beings.

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....  | 4  |
| I. The Deontological Argument for the Child’s Right to an Open Future ..... | 6  |
| Rights-in-Trust & The Child’s Right to an Open Future .....                 | 6  |
| The Paradoxes of Self-determination and Self-fulfilment .....               | 7  |
| Conflicting Rights .....  | 10 |
| Expressive Liberty .....  | 11 |
| The Scope of Parents’ Educational Authority .....                           | 14 |
| Personal Liberty .....  | 19 |
| Shortcomings of the Deontological Argument .....                            | 23 |
| II. An Open, Ethical, Future .....  | 28 |
| Moral Motivation .....  | 29 |
| Autonomy & Virtuous Character .....   | 41 |
| What is Virtuous Activity? .....  | 46 |
| Which Dispositions? .....   | 51 |
| Conclusion .....  | 55 |
| References .....  | 57 |

The over-riding goal of my thesis is to supplement Joel Feinberg's (1980) argument for *The Child's Right to an Open Future*<sup>1</sup> with ideas from Virtue Ethics, in order to gain a more comprehensive and satisfying account of the kind of autonomous ethical understanding that we ought to nurture in children. According to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 'Put most simply, to be autonomous is to be one's own person, to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self. Autonomy in this sense seems an irrefutable value ...'<sup>2</sup> Feinberg's open future is defined by the 'right' of self-determination and by the 'good' of self-fulfilment.

In Part One, I consider Feinberg's argument for the child's right to an open future, which attempts to show from within a rights-based deontological framework, that children have rights to not have their future autonomy violated prior to reaching adulthood. This section includes my examination of major objections to Feinberg's argument as well as discussion of supporting argument and my own analysis of the shortcomings of Feinberg's argument. I conclude that, although I support the principle that the child's autonomy ought to be preserved, Feinberg's argument lacks attention to any kind of ethical grounding for self-determination. This leaves Feinberg's argument vulnerable to the kinds of criticisms that connect an open future with selfish egoism and moral relativism.

In Part Two, I attempt to supplement Feinberg's rights-based deontological argument by demonstrating the ethical value of autonomy. I hope to extend, or

---

<sup>1</sup> Feinberg, Joel (1980) 'The Child's Right to an Open Future' in *Whose Child? Children's Rights, Parental Authority, and State Power*, ed. William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980); reprinted in Feinberg, *Freedom & Fulfillment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 76-97.

<sup>2</sup> Christman, John. 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Retrieved online <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/autonomy-moral/02/01/2013>.

redefine, the open future by focusing on an aspect of self-determination that Feinberg largely ignores – *the capacity for* self-determination. On my extended account of the open future, the capacity for self-determination is nurtured by helping children to develop the kinds of cognitive skills that will enable them to reason well about how to live and, consequently, how to act - but which must be underpinned by virtuous dispositions if we want the child's choices to be ethically motivated, not just self-interested or arbitrary.

# I. The Deontological Argument for the Child's Right to an Open Future

## Rights-in-Trust & The Child's Right to an Open Future

Children are a special case for philosophical consideration in regard to their status as right-holders. Children are human beings, and as such they are *or will be* entitled to all the same general human rights as adults. It is right to think of children as right-holders because they do have interests which might need protecting. If children are not afforded any legal rights, for example, they have no adequate protection against adults who are willing to harm them. However, at some stages of their development children are not adequately equipped to make wise choices. To protect children from doing harm to themselves or others there are certain rights that adults hold, the right to vote for example, that are not held by children. In addition to the interest-protecting rights that children hold during childhood, such as the 'inherent right to life' or the right to not be physically abused, it has been claimed that there are some rights applicable to children that are not held by adults.

Joel Feinberg begins *The Child's Right to an Open Future* (1980) by discussing different kinds of rights: rights held only by adults (*A rights*), rights held by both children and adults (*A-C rights*), and rights usually only held by children (*C rights*).<sup>3</sup> Feinberg is not interested (at least not in the context of this article) in the kind of dependency rights that fall within *C rights* – such as the right to food, shelter, etc. The kind of *C rights* that interest Feinberg are those that are similar to adult autonomy rights – such as the *A* right to free exercise of religion. However, children who are not yet capable of judging what is in their own best interests cannot hold autonomy rights

---

<sup>3</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 76.

in the same way that adults do because children are different. As Feinberg elucidates: 'Respect for the child's future autonomy, as an adult, often requires preventing his free choice now.'<sup>4</sup> Interests are not identical to current desires, and because interests and current desires sometimes clash, the child's interests cannot be safeguarded by always permitting the child's current desires or preferences.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, because children cannot hold autonomy rights until they have reached a certain level of maturity, 'rights-in-trust' are protected for the future adult that the child will eventually become. Free choice can be exercised later when the child is 'more fully formed and capable.'<sup>6</sup>

It is the adult he is to become who must exercise the choice, more exactly, the adult he will become if his basic options are kept open and his growth kept "natural" or unforced. In any case, that adult does not exist yet, and perhaps he never will. But the child is *potentially* that adult, and it is that adult who is the person whose autonomy must be protected now (in advance).<sup>7</sup>

Feinberg states that, 'Put very generally, rights-in-trust can be summed up as the single "right to an open future ..."'<sup>8</sup>

## The Paradoxes of Self-determination and Self-fulfilment

Feinberg claims that the child's right to an open future is grounded in two principles - *self-fulfilment* and *autonomy*, the latter of which Feinberg's critics are not disposed to connect *in any way* to children. For Feinberg autonomy has two senses, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 78

<sup>5</sup> It could be argued that children are no different from adults in this respect. However, the adult has, at least in theory, reached a level of maturity and experience that affords him, or her, the capacity to make informed rational choices for his or her self.

<sup>6</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 76. It is of course questionable *when* a child can be said to have reached maturity. Because children mature at different rates, varying degrees of freedom will be appropriate for different children prior to reaching legal milestones.

<sup>7</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 78

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77

capacity for self-determination and the sovereign right of self-determination, both of which Feinberg acknowledges as ‘... notoriously likely to generate philosophical confusion ...’<sup>9</sup> He raises the potential objection that they are viciously circular resulting in paradox:

If the grown-up offspring is to determine his own life, and be at least in large part the product of his own “self-determination,” he must already have a self fully formed and capable of doing the determining. But he cannot very well have determined *that* self on his own, because he would have to have been already a formed self to do that, and so on, ad infinitum.<sup>10</sup>

Feinberg describes the paradox of self-fulfilment, which he associates with one’s own good, in similar terms to the paradox of self-determination. According to Feinberg, the child’s own good is to be understood in relation to the fulfilment of his or her own interests and propensities.<sup>11</sup> However, he then points out that a child’s parents ‘... cannot aim at an independent conception of the child’s own good in deciding how to do this [i.e., how to develop the child’s own interests and propensities], because to some extent, the child’s own good (self-fulfilment) depends on which interests the parents decide to create.’<sup>12</sup> However, Feinberg goes on to explain that the so-called ‘paradoxes’ of self-determination and self-fulfilment are not as paradoxical as they might seem.

The acquisition of both self-determination and self-fulfilment is a complex, and fluid, process whereby the child’s interests, values and character develop gradually and where the process of moving from childhood to adulthood is a gradual one. Feinberg rightly points out that it is an exaggeration to claim that there is ever a time when a

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 89

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 94

<sup>11</sup> I will consider, in a later section, whether this is a thoroughgoing conception of the child’s good.

<sup>12</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 95

child's character is *wholly* unformed, or that a child's character must be *fully* formed for that child to be self-determining. He describes the process as follows:

'... the parents in promoting the child's eventual autonomy and well-being will have to respect that initial bias from heredity and early environment. Thus from the beginning the child must – inevitably *will* – have some “input” in its own shaping, the extent of which will grow continuously even as the child's character itself does. Always the self that contributes to the making of the new self is itself the product of both outside influences and an earlier self that was not quite as fully formed ... At every subsequent stage the immature child plays an ever-greater role in the creation of his own life, ... his more or less finished character the product of a complicated interaction of external influences and ever-increasing contributions from his own earlier self.'<sup>13</sup>

Here, Feinberg provides a plausible (if only partial) picture of how a child's autonomy might develop, and it seems probable that when the child's participation in determining his or her own future is encouraged the child's capacity for self-determination is likely to be better developed than when it is overridden by the child's parents. Likewise, it seems plausible that if parents discourage the child's initial bias from heredity and early environment, as well as any potential external influences other than their own, then at every subsequent stage of development the immature child might play an *ever-diminishing* role in the creation of his or her own life. Feinberg argues that the generalisations associated with the circularity of self-determination and self-fulfilment – i.e., that a child's character must be *fully* formed for that child to be self-determining and that a child's character is ever *wholly* unformed - are only true to a certain degree.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 96

Consequently, the circle is not closed tight and therefore the concepts of self-determination and self-fulfilment are not genuinely paradoxical.

## Conflicting Rights

Feinberg might be right that the concepts of self-determination and self-fulfilment are not genuinely paradoxical but his account of the child's right to an open future remains subject to concerns about conflicts between the rights of parents, to live and to raise their children according to their own beliefs, values, and preferences, and the rights-in-trust of children. In section two of his argument, Feinberg analyses several examples where children's rights-in-trust clash with those of their parents. This discussion includes the case of *Wisconsin v. Yoder et al.*,<sup>14</sup> in which the United States Supreme Court upheld the decision to overturn the conviction of Amish parents who refused to send their children to a public or accredited private school after the eighth grade.<sup>15</sup> The compulsory school attendance law in Wisconsin requires that children attend school until sixteen years of age. The Wisconsin Supreme Court revoked the conviction against the Amish parents' on the basis that it violated their rights under the Free Exercise of Religion Clause set down in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. Feinberg does not commit to saying that the Supreme Court made the wrong decision in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. However he disagrees in principle with the majority opinion written by Chief Justice Burger. According to Burger, for the State to intervene to '... "save" a child from himself or his Amish parents by requiring an additional two years of compulsory formal high school education, the State will in large

---

<sup>14</sup> *Wisconsin v. Yoder, et al.*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972)

<sup>15</sup> Children in the eighth grade are typically thirteen or fourteen years old.

measure influence if not determine, the religious future of the child.’<sup>16</sup> For Feinberg, Burger’s implication, that State intervention on behalf of the child is an inappropriate transfer of influence from the parents to the State, misses the point. If the State were to intervene on behalf of the child it should do so, *not* to influence the religious future of the child but, to ensure that the child is given the maximum opportunity to eventually determine his or her own future. According to Feinberg, the decision delivered by Burger ‘... showed a commendable sensitivity to the parental interests and the ways they are threatened by secular public education ... [but] Burger shows very little sensitivity, however, to the interests of the Amish child in choosing his own vocation in life.’<sup>17</sup> This presumption in favour of the parents’ interests is consistent with many of the criticisms of Feinberg’s position. One of the main ways in which Feinberg’s critics challenge the child’s right to an open future is by arguing that it should not trump the rights of parents to live, and to raise and educate their children, according to their own beliefs and values.

## Expressive Liberty

In William A. Galston’s paper, ‘Parents, Government, and Children: Authority Over Education in a Liberalist Pluralist State’ (2003),<sup>18</sup> Galston identifies three widely held assumptions relating to American education.

---

<sup>16</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 85

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 83-84

<sup>18</sup> Galston, William A. (2003) Parents, Government, and Children: Authority Over Education in a Liberal Pluralist State, in *Child, Family and State* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Stephen Macedo & Marion Young, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) Kindle edition. (Retrieved online, The Brookings Institution, November 2009. [http://www.clb.ac.il/workshops/2010/articles/Galston\\_article.pdf](http://www.clb.ac.il/workshops/2010/articles/Galston_article.pdf).)

1. The government has the right (and perhaps duty) to require the education of all children up through the mid-teens and to regulate some basic features of their education.
2. Parents bear principal responsibility for seeing to it that their children meet this requirement, but they have the right to choose among a wide range of options for meeting it.
3. While government has the right to tax all its citizens to finance and operate a system of public schools open to all, it cannot create a public school monopoly that prevents parents from sending their children to non-public schools.<sup>19</sup>

Galston claims that these widely held assumptions are ‘... consistent with the most defensible version of liberal democratic theory as well as with the practical requirements of life in socially and religiously diverse liberal democracies.’<sup>20</sup> Galston’s paper is essentially an argument asserting the rights of parents to send their children to faith schools. In the course of Galston’s argument, he criticises Feinberg’s claim that every child has the right to an open future.

Galston describes Feinberg’s term “open future” as ‘... the ability to choose freely among different conceptions of good lives.’ He then attributes to Feinberg the view that, ‘To the extent that parental influences restrict that freedom, parents have acted to stunt rather than develop agency.’ Galston subsequently claims that Feinberg’s proposal is ‘... implausible, to say the least.’<sup>21</sup> According to Galston, ‘As long as families exist, they cannot help shaping children in specific ways.’<sup>22</sup> However, Feinberg does not deny that children will inevitably be influenced by their families, their communities, their spiritual

---

<sup>19</sup> Galston (2003) *Authority Over Education*, p. 1

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 6

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Claudia Mills (2003) makes a similar point, questioning whether it is either possible or desirable to keep a child’s future open.

upbringing, etc. Nor does he deny that these influences can be valuable. For Feinberg, ‘... [parents] are permitted and indeed expected to make every reasonable effort to transmit by example and precept their own values to their children. This is in fact a privileged position for parents, given their special relations of intimacy and affection with their children ...’<sup>23</sup> It is apparent here that Galston (like some other of Feinberg’s critics) misunderstands an important aspect of Feinberg’s concept of the open future. Influences from family, culture, religious affiliations, etc., are unproblematic as long as these influences do not restrict the child’s freedom to choose his or her own conception of a good life upon reaching adulthood.<sup>24</sup> A thoroughgoing interpretation of the child’s right to an open future is compatible with a religious education.

Galston’s argument, in favour of parents’ rights to give their children a religious education, and against the child’s right to an open future, is underpinned by his concept of expressive liberty, which he defines as follows:

By this I mean the absence of constraints imposed by some individuals or groups on others that make it impossible or significantly more difficult for the affected individuals or groups to live their lives in ways that express their deepest beliefs about what gives meaning and value to life. An example of such constraints is the Inquisition, which forced Iberian Jews either to endure persecution or to renounce their religious practices.<sup>25</sup>

Taking into account the context of Galston’s paper it is clear what he has in mind here. Galston’s objection to the child’s right to an open future centres on his advocacy of

---

<sup>23</sup> Feinberg (1980) *Open Future*, p. 83

<sup>24</sup> I do not think that Feinberg takes ‘choosing one’s own conception of a good life’ to entail that any particular choice is necessarily as good as another, or that we should choose based purely on personal preference. He does not explicitly address the issue of moral relativism, but he says nothing to suggest that he supports it. I take ‘choosing one’s own conception of a good life’ to simply mean that we must choose *what to believe about* what is the best kind of life - whether or not we believe that there is one particular kind of life that is (universally) best for human beings.

<sup>25</sup> Galston (2003) *Authority Over Education*, p. 18

expressive liberty, which supports the rights of individuals, and groups of individuals, to freely exercise their religion and to be free to educate their children in line with these beliefs that give meaning and value to their lives. However, the objection relating to Feinberg is unwarranted because nothing in Feinberg's account of the child's right to an open future is inconsistent with the notion of expressive liberty. On the contrary, Feinberg's account is fundamentally about making it possible for individuals 'to live their lives in ways that express their deepest beliefs about what gives meaning and value to life.' The difference between Galston's notion of expressive liberty and Feinberg's appears to be related to *whom* it applies. For Galston, expressive liberty appears to apply only to the parents; for Feinberg, it also applies to their children. I will return to this point, about whether parents' autonomy rights should outweigh a child's future autonomy rights, in my section titled *Personal Liberty*. First I will consider the objections of another prominent critic of the child's right to an open future, which relate to the scope of parental authority.

### **The Scope of Parents' Educational Authority**

Shelley Burt (2003), attempts to deny the child's right to an open future by arguing that the proper scope of parents' educational authority is grounded by the principles that underpin why adults are granted authority over children in the first place.<sup>26</sup> Burt attributes to liberal theorists the view that parents are given authority over children primarily due to the child's less developed rational capacity. She subsequently claims that the liberal view is too narrow. For Burt, authority is granted to adults over children, not just because children lack rational capacity but, because, '...

---

<sup>26</sup> Burt, Shelley (2003) 'The Proper Scope of Parental Authority: Why We Don't Owe Children an "Open Future"' in *Child, Family and State* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Stephen Macedo & Marion Young, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) Chapter 9. Kindle edition.

children are best understood as comprehensively needy adult “works in progress,” who require a tremendous amount of caring attention from adults in general and parent figures in particular to grow into mature individuals able to flourish in the communities of which they are a part.<sup>27</sup> According to Burt, the standards by which the limits of parents’ educational authority should be delineated ought to be based, not on the ‘open future’ model but, on meeting the developmental needs of the child.

My own view is that parents who seek to exercise decisive influence over their children’s worldviews and values act justly with regard to their children as long as they concomitantly fulfil the primary responsibility of parenting which is to meet their children’s developmental needs ... Once this standard for the proper scope of parental authority is accepted, deciding for or against the legitimacy of fundamentalist education requires a discussion of what children need to develop well and whether the ends of fundamentalist educations are in any way at odds with these goals.

It is far from clear that Burt is right that liberal theorists always delineate the scope of parental educational authority primarily on the basis of rational capacity or that liberal thought need necessarily neglect any of the kinds of considerations that are important to the child’s development. In the following section, I will consider John Stuart Mill’s principle of liberty and what it might mean for the scope of parental educational authority, and, in Part Two, I will discuss how ideas about virtue might be compatible with liberal thought in regard to the child’s development needs. For now, I suggest that Burt’s claim that the scope of parents’ educational authority should be determined by the child’s development needs is plausible, but we might still want to disagree with Burt about what kinds of developmental needs children might have or

---

<sup>27</sup> Burt (2003) *Parental Authority*, Kindle Location 4690.

about how these needs might be met. We might, for example, want to agree with Burt that some kind of moral or ethical education is an important development need of the child but disagree that the ends of fundamentalist educations (which Burt describes below) are consistent with nurturing ethical understanding.

The fundamentalism I reference here is one that takes fundamental truths about the good and right as given and aims to convey these truths intact to the next generation. In fundamentalist educations, children are not encouraged to choose their values or way of life in reflective contrast to their parents'. Rather, they are taught that the best way of life, the way of life they ought to adopt, is one that affirms and reproduces the faith, worldview, and moral understandings of their parents.<sup>28</sup>

Burt's suggestion that one of the child's central development needs is to develop an understanding of 'the good and right' makes sense (and I will consider this further in Part Two). However, it is not at all obvious that this moral or ethical development should be undertaken in the manner which Burt suggests above. If good parenting includes (amongst other things) helping children to develop moral understanding, then parents will understandably want to raise their children according to the values that they believe are the right values to hold. But we do not need to accept Burt's claim that it is right to expect children to adopt their values, or way of life, unreflectively.

In Burt's discussion of suicide martyrs, which she describes as 'particularly abhorrent', she attempts to show that it is not fundamentalism per se that is to blame but is instead, '... the unworthiness of the way of life glorified, as well as the deliberate flouting of legal norms that the encouragement of terrorist activity implies, not the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Loc. 4603

fundamentalist impulse itself or any supposed deprivation of a child's autonomy.'<sup>29</sup> However, I do not think that Burt can summarily dismiss the 'fundamentalist impulse' or the 'deprivation of a child's autonomy' as contributing factors in these kinds of cases. Putting aside for the moment concerns about the infallibility of judgments regarding which way of life is worthy or unworthy, exposure to unworthy goals is always possible. Consequently, individuals who are less capable of independently, and accurately, assessing the worthiness of a way of life being glorified are, arguably, more vulnerable to being seduced or manipulated towards unworthy goals. If we want children to develop into mature individuals who are capable of recognising and resisting corruption, or who are independent in any meaningful sense, then they must be free, and also well-equipped, to question and critically evaluate, not only the beliefs and values that they inherit but also, the beliefs and values that they might be exposed to from outside influences.

Burt is right that there are more distinctions to be made between adults and children than just their variance in rational capacity - and she might also be right that it is more constructive to focus on children's development needs than on their rights. But children do need to cultivate good reasoning skills and if cultivating reason is a development need of the child then Burt cannot deny its significance.<sup>30</sup> It is also worth noting that parents (or educators) cannot develop the child's rational capacity by telling them *what* to think, but do so by teaching the child *how* to critically evaluate - *how* to reason. Parents provide for the needs of their children while simultaneously teaching the children how to provide for these needs themselves. So Burt's advocacy of neediness as a primary distinction between children and adults needs to take sufficient

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Loc. 4651

<sup>30</sup> I will say more about the child's need to cultivate good reasoning skills in a later section.

account of the child's increasing maturity (and consequent diminishing neediness), which one might expect to lead to a lessening in the scope of parental authority, or influence, as the child develops.

Burt's model for defining the limits of parents' educational authority based on the development needs of the child seems coherent - providing it allows for the parents' diminishing authority in line with the increasing maturity of their children. However, although Burt makes the plausible assumption that developing the child's moral understanding is a key development need, any suggestion that developing moral understanding does not require developing the child's autonomy is less plausible. Burt might have good reason to be unconvinced by Feinberg's account of autonomy (and I'll say more about why in my section relating to the shortcomings of Feinberg's argument), however, in Part Two, I will attempt to show, not only that we can help children develop ethical understanding whilst simultaneously nurturing and protecting the child's capacity for self-determination, but furthermore, that a well-developed capacity for self-determination *is essential* for genuine ethical understanding.

A first step in my attempt to reconcile the autonomy interests of parents and children is to eradicate an underlying assumption, lurking in some of the objections to Feinberg discussed so far, about the automatic priority of parents' liberties over the liberties of their children. Neither Galston nor Burt has provided any good reason for why parents' interests should automatically outweigh the interests of their children,<sup>31</sup> and yet it is evident from their arguments, as well as from the example of *Wisconsin vs. Yoder*, that an assumption in favour of the parent's liberty is sometimes made. For this

---

<sup>31</sup> The interests I refer to here are the significant, long-term interests of children. In everyday life, parents will frequently make decisions in situations where it is not always practical or appropriate to consult children (although it can be beneficial to involve children in making decisions when it is practical or important to do so). My point is essentially that parents' liberty should not have *automatic* priority when it comes to things that will significantly affect the child's future.

reason, I think it is worthwhile evaluating whether an assumption in favour of the parent's liberty to tendentiously transmit their beliefs and values to their children is sound. I will contemplate whether an automatic assumption of the parents' liberty is sound by considering how the cogent arguments of a consistent advocate of personal liberty might impact this question.

## Personal Liberty

In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill argues that: 'The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute.'<sup>32</sup> So, for example, there is no good reason for the State to interfere with the right of the Amish people to live according to their beliefs, in so far as their doing so concerns only themselves. According to Mill's principle of liberty, the Amish, or anyone else for that matter, should have the right to freely practice their religious beliefs without interference, and 'experiments in living' should be encouraged; the only potential exception to Mill's principle of liberty being if the exercise of one's beliefs causes harm to others. Mill provides coherent arguments for this principle of liberty but he takes care to point out that it applies only to '... human beings in the maturity of their faculties.'<sup>33</sup> As such, it does not apply to children (although it does not preclude affording children freedom of thought – which I think Mill would approve of – and it does not preclude the protection of their *future* liberty). Children still require

---

<sup>32</sup> Mill, John Stuart (1859) *On Liberty*. Intro. W.L. Courtney LL.D. (London, Felling-on-Tyne, New York, Melbourne: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., Ltd.) Kindle edition. p. 6. Location 347

<sup>33</sup> Mill (1859) *On Liberty*, p. 7. Loc. 349

protection against their own actions as well as against any external injury (presumably this includes protection against harm inflicted on children by their parents).<sup>34</sup>

In the third condition of Mill's principle of liberty he states that: 'from this liberty of each individual, follows the liberty, within the same limits, of combination among individuals; freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others: ... *the persons combining being supposed to be of full age, and not forced or deceived*.'<sup>35</sup> Here is where Mill's principle of liberty moves in a direction that has salient relevance for my thesis. Mill makes the point that when people unite and combine into groups, for whatever purpose (assuming no harm to others), they should be freely entitled to do so. But this principle applies only in so far as those uniting are freely choosing adults. Consequently, children who interact within such groups or communities, but who are constrained and influenced by the authority of their parents, cannot be considered to have freely chosen to combine in the same way that their parents have freely chosen. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the life which is being protected for the children - the Amish life - is, if one accepts Mill's third condition, not a life that can accurately be said to have been freely chosen by the children - even when they take themselves to share the beliefs of the community - because they are not of full age.<sup>36</sup> It is transparent that if children do not have all the liberties that adults have, prior to reaching maturity, then they cannot legitimately enter into the same kinds of commitments to which adults can freely commit.<sup>37</sup> So, for the same underlying reasons that children are not entitled to all the liberties that adults are (i.e., due to their lack of maturity), children cannot legitimately

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 8. Loc. 391 (my emphasis)

<sup>36</sup> It is of course questionable *when* a child can be said to be of full age, or to have reached maturity, but this is a separate question. My point is that prior to this level of development, whenever that might be, the child should not *necessarily* be free to choose.

<sup>37</sup> This principle is borne out in common law, which does not generally allow children to enter into legal contracts.

be taken to be *committed* to the ideals of any particular group until they are of full age. This entails that adults are not automatically entitled to expect children to take actions that commit them to the beliefs of their parents or community, which they might, upon reaching maturity, choose to discard.

I am not suggesting that Mill's arguments for individual liberty always work in favour of children's liberty over the liberty of their parents. Mill only argues for individual liberty *for rational adults*. The point I wish to make is that children are not automatically entitled to the liberty of choosing their own lives prior to reaching maturity (although this does not entail that we should not respect their input). So, even when children believe that they want to close off future options for themselves because those options don't accord with their inherited beliefs, they should not necessarily have this right. Mill's arguments for freedom of thought, freedom to question inherited or entrenched beliefs and the opportunity to benefit from exposure to coherent opposing points of view, can all be extended to children. But Mill's arguments do not suggest that children should necessarily be entitled to liberty of action and, for the same reasons that children should not necessarily be entitled to liberty of action, parents are not entitled to potentially inflict harm on children by enforcing the child's commitment to the beliefs and values of the communities in which they live. In this way, Mill's arguments support the claim that parents should be free to raise their children according to their own beliefs, values, and lifestyle preferences, but his arguments are also compatible with Feinberg's claim that we might sometimes need to protect the child's future liberty by denying the child's liberty to act (or commit) now.

Nevertheless, fundamentalists might not care about Mill's principle of liberty if their underlying objection to the child's right to an open future is that the child's future liberty is not what matters most. If, as fundamentalists might argue, God's law or

religious doctrine provides knowledge of what 'being good' entails, then piety might be what matters most. In which case, piety must take precedence over the liberty to choose what we believe about what goodness entails. But anyone who does not share the fundamentalists' faith is unlikely to agree that piety is what matters most. If fundamentalists expect to be granted the freedom to believe (or more precisely to express and exercise their beliefs) that piety is what matters most, then they ought to grant to others (including their children) the freedom to believe that something other than piety might matter most. Any attempt to deny children the freedom to choose what to believe about what matters most, suggests claiming *special knowledge* about what 'being good' entails. But fundamentalists cannot claim that *only their beliefs* are justified. It might be objected here, that claims about the importance of liberty of thought are no more legitimate than claims about the importance of piety. But the pertinent difference is that claims about liberty of thought do not involve special knowledge. The freedom to choose for oneself what to believe about what goodness entails is important precisely because no one can make any special epistemic claim about what goodness entails. If fundamentalists want to make legitimate claims for their own freedom to believe that piety matters most, then they must help themselves to liberties involving freedom of thought which they ought then to afford to others.

Furthermore, the fundamentalist might want to claim that virtue (in the form of piety) is more important than liberty, but my suggestion, which I will argue for in Part Two, is that virtue must include liberty (at least liberty of thought, that is). Tolerant societies can only exist when people *do* value freedom of thought and expression for everyone.<sup>38</sup> Mill's principle of liberty, is consistent with the view that parents are

---

<sup>38</sup> I note that few would argue that there should be no limits on expression. Mill proposes limits based on a principle of harm. Joel Feinberg (1975) takes a broader view than Mill, claiming that, in certain situations,

entitled to live and to raise their children according to their own beliefs and values but not with the view that parents are entitled to coerce children into sharing their beliefs or with inhibiting the child's development in such a way that the child's future is restricted to living the kind of life that the parent's have chosen.

### Shortcomings of the Deontological Argument

It is borne out in much of the opposing literature to Feinberg's argument for the child's right to an open future that there is ambiguity surrounding *how* the child's future should be kept open. Feinberg's claim, for example, that we let '... the largest and most random possible assortment of influences, work equally on the child ...'<sup>39</sup> is highly contentious. Exposure to a wide variety of diverse ideas and ways of life seems valuable, but how much exposure is enough? Furthermore, it is not obvious that we should be obliged to give *equal* exposure to (what we judge to be) unworthy influences. I might, for example, allow my child to be minimally exposed to racist or sexist viewpoints – if only to help them shore up more tolerant viewpoints - but I certainly don't see why I would want to expose them to these kinds of viewpoints in equal measure.

A more important criticism, however, is that Feinberg's argument is heavily focused on the aspects of the open future that relate to self-fulfilment, and largely neglects the importance of the second sense of autonomy - the *capacity* for self-determination. Feinberg claims that:

---

where people are unable to avoid speech or behaviour deemed deeply offensive, limitations on freedom of expression should be extended to include offence. My point is to acknowledge that freedom of expression must have some limits, and how those limits should be determined is a pertinent question, but a question that is outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>39</sup> Feinberg (1980) Open Future, p. 85

Self-fulfilment is variously interpreted, but it surely involves as necessary elements the development of one's chief aptitude into genuine talents in a life that gives them scope, an unfolding of all basic tendencies and inclinations, both those that are common to the species and those that are peculiar to the individual, and an active realization of the universal human propensities to plan, design, and make order.<sup>40</sup>

Feinberg's proposition that parents respect and nurture the child's initial bias from heredity and early environment might go some of the way towards preserving the child's natural dispositions (as perceived by the child's parents), and his suggestion that we develop the child's aptitudes, tendencies, and inclinations, might help the child to achieve self-fulfilment, but these suggestions do not go far enough towards nurturing all aspects of the child's capacity for self-determination.

Although Feinberg claims (along with Mill) that the individual's advantages in *knowing his own good* are so great that he will most likely achieve this good by being free to pursue it *in his own way*, the role Feinberg ascribes to self-determination here appears to be predominantly as a means to self-fulfilment.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, however, Feinberg grounds the child's right to an open future in two interpretations of the right of self-determination, neither of which, he says, is more basic than the other: 'In any case, the two distinct ideals of sovereign autonomy (self-determination [as self-evident]) and personal well-being (self-fulfilment) are both likely to enter, indeed to dominate, the discussion of the grounding of the child's right to an open future.'<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 91

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 92

I agree with Feinberg (and Mill)<sup>43</sup> that self-fulfilment is valuable and most likely to be achieved when rational adults are left to determine their own good. I can also sympathise with the view that self-determination is important for its own sake. It seems plausible that these two interpretations of self-determination should be included in discussion about the grounding of the child's right to an open future. But it is Feinberg's claim that these two interpretations of self-determination *dominate* discussion of the grounding of the child's right to an open future that exposes his argument to the kinds of objections that connect self-determination, and the open future, with selfish egoism and moral relativism - because something important is missing from Feinberg's interpretation of self-determination.

During the course of Feinberg's discussion about what grounds the child's right to an open future, he describes 'the good and the right' of the child as self-fulfilment and the sovereign right of self-determination.<sup>44</sup> But this leaves out much of what many people think 'the good and the right' involves. Although I do not think that Feinberg necessarily supports selfish egoism or moral relativism, the most significant shortcomings of his argument for the child's right to an open future are; first, that it neglects discussion of the importance of nurturing the kinds of attitudes and skills that lead to a well-developed *capacity* for self-determination and, secondly, that it lacks attention to any kind of *ethical* grounding for self-determination. Feinberg's focus on self-fulfilment leaves his argument open to criticisms that the open future promotes egoism or relativism. I want to progress Feinberg's claim - that parents, and the State, have negative obligations to not violate the child's autonomy rights in advance of adulthood - by making the positive claim that parents, or carers, act ethically when they

---

<sup>43</sup> Mill (1859) *On Liberty*, p. 73, Loc. 1927

<sup>44</sup> Feinberg, *Open Future*, p. 92

*proactively* nurture the capacity for self-determination in children from an early age. This does not mean that parents must, or could, expose their children to *every* possible type of experience, and I do not think that an open, or autonomous, future must be achieved by neutralising family, cultural, or religious values. What it does mean is that alongside the values that we try to instil in children we ought to provide them with the means to cultivate the kinds of skills, characteristics, and attitudes, necessary to *independently* critically evaluate their understanding of how things are in the world, including their own inherited and acquired beliefs and values, so that they have the opportunity to eventually become adept at making *their own well-informed* decisions about what they believe and, consequently, about how they should act.<sup>45</sup>

However, proactively nurturing a child's capacity for self-determination is not the kind of thing that can be easily measured, and it is far from certain that all parents *will* nurture and protect the capacity for self-determination in their children. Therefore, it falls to the State to ensure that the opportunity to fulfil this development need of the child is universally met. So my positive claim becomes that parents, *and the State*, act ethically when they proactively nurture the capacity for self-determination in children from an early age. The most obvious way for the State to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to meet this development need is through education.

In *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions* (2012), Hugh Socket puts forward the notion of creating (what he calls) an 'epistemological presence' in the classroom, whereby, from an early age, subject knowledge is supplemented by an appreciation of the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge and, by this means, providing children with a sound framework for reconciling their own beliefs with whatever new ideas and information they are

---

<sup>45</sup>I will argue for this in the following section.

exposed to.<sup>46</sup> The analytical skills that children gain from this approach to learning will be crucial for the development of their capacity for self-determination because a genuine capacity for self-determination requires that one's beliefs are acquired transparently and honestly rather than blindly inherited (and I will say more about this in Part Two). So, what I advocate as a plausible path to an authentically open future, is wide-ranging changes to educational policy that will support an epistemological approach to how teaching and learning are conducted in all classrooms, as well as further investigation into how this approach might be applied, not only through education but also, to the parent child relationship and to our normative social values. In short, nurturing the capacity for self-determination in children, through an epistemological approach to child rearing and child education (which does not necessarily preclude particular kinds of upbringing), teaches the child how to develop and take responsibility for his or her own beliefs and values, and promotes the child's self-awareness and accurate knowledge about the world.

In the following sections, I want to explore a link between autonomy and virtue, which I hope will supplement Feinberg's argument (which attempts to protect the child's future autonomy from within a rights-based deontological framework) by demonstrating the ethical value of autonomy, and providing a more comprehensive and satisfying account of the kind of autonomous ethical understanding that we ought to nurture in children. In the meantime, I will be satisfied with putting forward an interim conditional conclusion that, *if* autonomy is valuable and can allow for everything that might matter to human beings then, parents, and the State, act ethically when they nurture and protect the capacity for self-determination in children.

---

<sup>46</sup> Sockett, Hugh (2012) *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions*. (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group) Kindle edition.

## II. An Open, Ethical, Future

In the previous section, I argued that if we accept that autonomy is valuable and can allow for everything that might matter to human beings then we ought to accept that, parents, and governments act ethically when they nurture and protect the capacity for self-determination in children. However, not everyone agrees that autonomy is valuable – or at least not everyone thinks that it is what matters most. Furthermore, it might be agreed that autonomy, *in adulthood*, is valuable, but still argued that parents' have no obligation to preserve an open future for their children *prior* to those children reaching adulthood. From my analysis, in Part I, of the arguments against the child's right to an open future, the salient objections seem to be that providing moral direction and preserving community values during childhood should be paramount. So, in thinking about whether we ought to value the open future, it is also worth considering whether autonomy (which includes both the capacity for self-determination as well as the right to exercise this capacity) is *all* that is required for the kind of open future worthy of consideration.

Going forward, I intend to depart somewhat from the 'rights' talk surrounding autonomy and investigate the core of my thesis, that the goal of child-rearing ought to be to raise children who will eventually become capable of independently making *wise and ethical* choices. It stands to reason that if every rational agent will eventually decide what to believe about what constitutes a good life (and, accordingly, how he or she ought to live) then we should want to prepare children to make *good* choices. We can disagree about what constitutes a good life - either in terms of happiness or well-being, or in terms of moral or ethical merit. However, it is relatively uncontroversial that we should want children to be equipped to make good (i.e., wise and ethical)

choices - whatever that might mean.<sup>47</sup> So I will assume, as a basic premise of my argument, that we want children to develop the capacity for making wise and ethical choices, and that we want them to live well, but I will not assume what making wise and ethical choices, or living well, entails. The salient question then becomes how we can provide children with things like moral direction and a sense of community, without diminishing the child's capacity to freely choose, upon reaching adulthood, what he or she believes about what a good life entails?<sup>48</sup>

## Moral Motivation

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), Bernard Williams opens his critique of moral philosophy by considering a central question of Ethics – Socrates' question of 'how one ought to live.'<sup>49</sup> Williams contends that, although the question of how one ought to live should not assume any particular end (or *telos*) for human beings, the ancients can provide us with valuable insights for answering this question. Williams makes this claim because, unlike modern moral theories, such as Kantian moral theory and Utilitarianism, that categorise actions as morally obligatory, morally permissible, or morally impermissible, the ancients directly linked the question of how one ought to live with virtue and character. The consideration of a return to aretaic notions of virtue

---

<sup>47</sup> Some radical liberals might want to argue that the goal of child-rearing ought to be to raise children who will eventually become capable of independently making *whatever* choices they feel inclined to make. But I am considering the open future in the context of Ethics, so whilst this might be one kind of liberal view, it is not the kind of liberal view that I advocate here.

<sup>48</sup> Although I advocate preparing children, from an early age, to eventually become capable of choosing their own conception of what constitutes a good life, I want to be clear from the outset that when I say that they will *choose* I am not suggesting that whatever kind of life they choose will have equal ethical validity by virtue of it being freely chosen. I do not support the idea that all moral judgements are equally valid or that moral judgements should be driven wholly by the *preferences* of the autonomous agent. I simply mean that, whether or not we can know what the best kind of life for human beings entails, every rational agent must eventually *choose what to believe* about what constitutes a good life and, accordingly, about how he or she should live.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, Bernard (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. (Commentary on the text by A.W. Moore; foreword by Jonathan Lear). London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2011.

and character in ethics was raised by G.E.M Anscombe (1958) who claimed that we cannot do moral philosophy without an accurate notion of virtue and of human flourishing, but to really understand the concept of a virtue we need a better understanding of the relationship between virtuous activity and things like human motivations and intentions. According to Anscombe: ‘... It is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking.’<sup>50</sup>

Subsequently, Williams questioned the motivational power of moral theories; if someone is determined to be bad, how can we make them inclined to be good?<sup>51</sup> For Williams, the Kantian preoccupation with moral permissibility of action, grounded solely by impartial rational deliberation, is problematic. Such theories lack plausibility, for Williams, because complete impartiality in moral theory does not allow agents to give any special preference or weighting to personal commitments with which they deeply identify. To act authentically an agent must act on reasons that are grounded by their own concrete motivations and convictions.

These concerns that Anscombe and Williams raise about the motivational power of moral theories have important implications for Feinberg’s argument for the child’s right to an open future because the key objections to Feinberg’s argument relate to issues that originate in its underlying deontological framework. In Kantian thought, the question of how one ought to live must be considered by individuals and must be considered in terms of how it is rational for any rational agent to live. Williams describes the Kantian perspective like this:

---

<sup>50</sup> Anscombe, G.E.M. (1958) ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (from *After Virtue a study in moral theory*) in Crisp, R & Slote, M. (ed.) 2007. *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, Bernard (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*. pp. 202-213.

Since I necessarily want my basic freedom,<sup>52</sup> I must be opposed to courses of action that would remove it ... So when I reflect on what arrangement of things I basically need, I see that I must claim a *right* to my basic freedom. In effect, I must lay it down as a rule for others that they respect my freedom. I claim this right solely because I am a rational agent with purposes. But if this fact alone is the basis of my claim, then a similar fact must equally be the basis of such a claim by others ... In moving from my need for freedom to “they ought not to interfere with me,” I must equally move from their need to “I ought not to interfere with them.”<sup>53</sup>

So deontological thought about autonomy is grounded in the rational position that my wish to not have my basic freedom frustrated by others (which is justified by my status as a rational agent) issues in a negative right to not have my basic freedom interfered with, as well as in a duty to not interfere with the basic freedom of other rational agents. The argument taken up by Feinberg goes one step further, claiming that this right of non-interference, and consequent duty of non-interference, ought to extend to protecting the autonomy of the agent from being violated prior to the agent reaching maturity. However, it is not only in *Feinberg’s* extra step that concerns about the child’s autonomy arise.<sup>54</sup> It is the extra step that Kant’s moral theory takes into the morality system of rights and obligations that underlies significant concerns, both for moral

---

<sup>52</sup> Williams’ discussion of the rational agent’s general want of freedom recognises that ‘sometimes we want to lose freedom, to be frustrated by others, even to be coerced – but then we do not want to be frustrated in obtaining *that*.’ (Williams, 1985, *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 63). In other words, even if we do not want limitless freedom we do at least want the freedom to not be frustrated by others in our choice of how much freedom we want.

<sup>53</sup> Williams (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> Although, Feinberg’s extra step is not likely to be popular with those who want the opportunity to indoctrinate children into their own belief system before the child is mature enough to choose what they believe for themselves.

theory generally (as Williams argues) but also, for Feinberg's rights-based argument for the child's right to an open future.

Kant's argument for autonomy, which underpins Feinberg's argument for the child's right to an open future (and which is broadly outlined by Williams below), makes important claims about the role of individual reason in ethical decision making:

In the thought of Kant and of others influenced by him, all genuinely moral considerations rest, ultimately and at a deep level, in the agent's will. I cannot simply be *required* by my position in a social structure – by the fact that I am a particular person's child for instance – to act in a certain way, if that *required* is to be of the moral kind, and does not simply reflect a psychological compulsion or social and legal sanctions. To act morally is to act autonomously, not as the result of social pressure.<sup>55</sup>

Kant's moral theory does however include controversial metaphysical claims about the nature of the rational agent's will:

Kant started from what in his view rational agents essentially were. He thought that the moral agent was, in a sense, a rational agent and no more, and he presented as essential to his account of morality a particular metaphysical conception of the agent, according to which the self of moral agency is what he called a "noumenal" self, outside time and causality, and thus distinct from the concrete, empirically determined person that one usually takes oneself to be.<sup>56</sup>

However, Williams describes the idea of being a rational agent, and no more, as unintelligible.<sup>57</sup> Human beings can only view ethical life from the standpoint of a human being.

---

<sup>55</sup> Williams (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 8

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71

Our arguments have to be grounded in a human point of view; they cannot be derived from a point of view that is no one's point of view at all. It is not, as the strongest forms of ethical theory would have it, that reason drives us to get beyond humanity. The most urgent requirements of humanity are, as they have always been, that we should assemble as many resources as we can to help us respect it.<sup>58</sup>

Williams does not accept Kant's idea of a noumenal self, distinct from the empirically determined person, but he does agree with the broader claim that any relevant considerations about how to act are answerable to reason. For Williams, however, reason is informed and influenced by the agent's particular human standpoint, and so reasons for action are personally (that is, subjectively) motivated.

But any Kantians, regardless of whether or not they accept Kant's metaphysics, who (unlike Williams) hold on to the principle (or value judgement) that moral action can be motivated only by reverence for the rationally and impartially determined moral law, must still answer the question of whether impartial rational deliberations can account for everything that might matter to human beings; and also, whether such deliberation necessarily leads to ethical outcomes. The potential problem that Williams identifies with the deontic approach to the question of how one ought to live does not repudiate Kant's claim that all genuinely moral considerations rest in the agent's will, but it does identify that a Kantian approach to considering the ethical, which commits the agent to an impartial morality of rights and obligations derived from universal moral laws, ignores the agent's fundamental humanity. That is such an approach ignores the agent's desires and interests, and deepest commitments that truthfully

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 132

reflect the agent's sense of self (i.e., the agent's identity conferring commitments)<sup>59</sup> and underpin his or her personal motivations.

As human beings who are born and raised, and live, in particular social, cultural and historical contexts, we do have identity-conferring commitments; this is part of our humanity.

'To see the world from a human point of view is not an absurd thing for human beings to do. It is sometimes said that such a view implies that we regard human beings as the most important or valuable creatures in the universe. This would be an absurd thing to do, but it is not implied. To suppose that it is, is to make the mistake of identifying the point of view of the universe and the human point of view. No one should make any claims about the importance of human beings to the universe: the point is about the importance of human beings to human beings.'<sup>60</sup>

We might extend this thought of Williams' to the individual human being: to see the world from the point of view of a *particular* human being is not an absurd thing for a particular human being to do. It would of course be absurd if this were to imply that a particular human being regarded his or her self as the most important or valuable creature in the universe, or if the individual in question regarded his or her particular point of view as the only point of view, but this is not implied. The point is about the importance of the particular human being to the particular human being. Reflective deliberation about what *I* must do in a given situation can only be viewed from my subjective standpoint. I can try to be impartial in my deliberations - to consider what any rational agent ought to do - and I can choose to act against my own desires and

---

<sup>59</sup> Cox, Damian, La Caze, Marguerite and Levine, Michael, "Integrity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/integrity>.

<sup>60</sup> Williams (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 131.

inclinations if my desires contradict how any rational agent ought to act (or if acting on my inclinations will bring about bad consequences, or if I believe that it will contradict God's law, etc.). But I must still weigh my impartial considerations (or the consequences, or God's law, etc) against my own desires and inclinations.<sup>61</sup>

If we acknowledge (as Williams does) the link between an individual's identity-conferring commitments and his or her personal desires and concrete motivations, then we must recognise that moral motivation is relative to personal circumstances, culture, and history. That is, if I had different identity-conferring commitments, which might be likely if my circumstances were different - perhaps if I had been born male, instead of female, or had been raised in a different culture or during an earlier period of history, or if I was an exceptionally talented artist - my concrete desires and moral motivations might be different. This does not however entail that all moral choices have equal validity. Regardless of my identity-conferring commitments, I can still make admirable or deplorable choices. The Kantian might say that the rational agent ought to be able to transcend his or her subjective humanity in favour of objective reason - my moral motivations would not depend upon my particular circumstances if I did what I ought and gave reason precedence over my subjective humanity. But it is not only Williams who argues that our goal should not be to get beyond our humanity. For Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), it is within the context of particular social and moral traditions that practices (that is, complex socially established human activities which enable participants to gain valuable understanding in their attempts to achieve excellence

---

<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting here that, importantly, it should not be assumed that all of an agent's desires and inclinations will be shallow or trivial preferences. Some of our desires and inclinations will relate to things that have great meaning to us as individuals. Some of our desires and inclinations will be driven by things like, love, friendship, loyalty, etc.

within the conventions of the particular practice)<sup>62</sup> provide the platform for individuals to excel (or not) at the virtues.<sup>63</sup>

MacIntyre follows Aristotle in attempting to provide motivation for ethical behaviour that specifies the importance of relating the virtues to a *whole* human life and is based on the notion of flourishing.<sup>64</sup> He gives an account of virtue in the same way as Aristotle understood the place of the virtues, that is, within the contexts of social practices, individual lives, and within communities.<sup>65</sup> In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre argues that any account of moral life needs to consider how we develop in the direction of that moral life, and that the starting point is our initial animal condition – i.e., before we learn to speak and before we become rational. He attempts to understand our initial animal condition by way of a comparison between human life and the lives of intelligent non-human animal species (primarily dolphins). For MacIntyre, a significant finding of this comparison is the importance of ‘the nature and extent of human vulnerability and disability’,<sup>66</sup> and the impact that this vulnerability has on moral life.

Although MacIntyre recognises the importance of individual autonomy in ethical life, he argues that: ‘... the virtues of independent rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by what I shall call the virtues of acknowledged dependence and that a failure to understand this is apt to obscure some features of rational agency.’<sup>67</sup> What MacIntyre means here is that human beings are social animals

---

<sup>62</sup> So, for example, the game of Chess (which can help human beings to develop valuable skills in strategic thinking) is a practice, but a Chess club (which is an institution, not a human activity) is not.

<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981) *After Virtue* (Third Edition). Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Chapter 14.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle’s term for flourishing is ‘Eudaimonia.’ MacIntyre’s eudaimonism is based on Aristotle’s ethics.

<sup>65</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair (1999) *Dependent Rational Animals*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd. Preface x.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 8

and, to be truly rational, we must recognise that every one of us has been,<sup>68</sup> could be (if we were less fortunate), and potentially will be disabled to some extent (whether temporarily or permanently) at some future point in our lives. Additionally, most of us will also be carers at some point in our lives. It would seem then that any adequate theory of moral life must account for this acknowledged dependence.

In the context of his discussion of dolphins, MacIntyre makes the conspicuous point that, in a potentially threatening environment (considering the risks that dolphins face from fishing interests, predators, inadequate food sources, etc.), dolphins survive and flourish best in social groups, and (although MacIntyre does not explicitly say so here) it is evident that this is also true of human beings.<sup>69</sup> The needs of dolphins are of course different to the needs of human beings but, for MacIntyre, the concept of what it means for a dolphin to flourish is the same concept as what it means for a human being to flourish – what any member of any species needs in order to flourish is to develop the unique attributes that it holds relative to being a member of that particular species.<sup>70</sup> For MacIntyre, motivation for ethical behaviour is based on the human good of flourishing; the individual flourishes by developing the unique attributes that he or she holds relative to being a human being, and by excelling at the virtues, which are good for their own sake and promote the human good. But it is arguable whether individuals do need to think about flourishing *only* in terms of developing the unique attributes that they hold relative to membership of the human species. The individual might think that what it really means *for me* to flourish is that I ought to develop the unique attributes that I hold relative to *being me*. This kind of view of flourishing (as consistent with

---

<sup>68</sup> In the sense that as babies we have been completely dependent on others to care for us.

<sup>69</sup> MacIntyre (1999) *Dependent Rational Animals*. p. 63

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

nurturing self-fulfilment) is the kind of view that Feinberg appears to argue for in *The Child's Right to an Open Future*.

For Williams, what a human being needs in order to live well – and more precisely, what a human being needs in order to be ethically motivated - is more personal than MacIntyre's account. For Williams, there is no universalised human motivation for action.<sup>71</sup> The notion of flourishing can be included in a particular agent's conception of a good life, but this does not necessarily require a teleological conception of the human good. And there is no good reason to think that an agent's personal notion of flourishing or living well must necessarily be based purely on preference or self-interest. In thinking about how to live, the individual human being will need to take account of his or her humanity (i.e., his or her biological vulnerabilities and needs, and perhaps social needs) but will also need to take account of the characteristics that he or she has that are not necessarily common to all human beings. The agent's personal circumstances, and historical, cultural and social context, inform all sorts of features about the agent, which are not generically human but which are not necessarily selfish or self-interested. If, for example, the agent is compassionate, or if the agent has particular feelings or loyalties towards particular people, this is not solely because the agent is human but rather because the agent is the particular human being that he or she is. Williams is not against doing what is right, but he does not accept a teleological account of ethics.

Nevertheless, human beings do (for the most part) exist in social groups, and how we relate to each other matters. According to MacIntyre, human beings, like dolphins, act in particular ways in order to achieve particular goods. But judgements must be made about how individual human beings organise the goods in their lives.

---

<sup>71</sup> I will say more about ethical motivation in the following section.

That is, judgements must be made about which kinds of goods individuals prioritise and whether these goods are good in their own right and only achievable by exercising virtues (internal goods), or whether they are only good for the sake of something else and are achievable without exercising virtues (external goods). However, because human beings exist in communities, these judgements must be considered, not only at the level of how the individual organises the goods in his or her life but also, at the level of how the community prioritises goods collectively.

According to MacIntyre, the true and constant virtues are recognisable because, when they're exercised during participation in a practice, they allow the individual to achieve the *internal goods* associated with the practice.<sup>72</sup> It is characteristic of human beings to ask ourselves why we should act one way instead of another but, according to MacIntyre, we must always question the presuppositions upon which our judgements are made; because in deciding what is good – what will best help me flourish – I must consider what is good in its own right, not simply what (I think) is good for *me* here and now.<sup>73</sup> Knowing how, and when, to exercise the virtues requires good judgement. Accurate judgement about the world and about which virtues are required when and in what measure, as well as the ability to adapt when things change, is essential to understanding how to act wisely and ethically. By engaging in this kind of practical reasoning about goods and in choosing, as *one's own* good, goods that are internal to practices, the agent is (according to MacIntyre) choosing, not only the virtuous path but, the path that will enable the agent to flourish. Both MacIntyre and Williams agree that

---

<sup>72</sup> For example, there are internal goods to be achieved through completing a university degree because education is a good for its own sake; but cheating on exams in order to get higher grades, in the hope that one can get a higher paying job, only achieves external goods, which are not goods for their own sake but instead goods directed at a particular individual's end (which can be achieved without exercising the virtues). According to MacIntyre, because the values of honesty, justice and courage, for example, need to be exercised in order to achieve the internal rewards of practices (i.e., cheating is likely to be detrimental to the goal of learning), we can be sure that these values are amongst the true virtues.

<sup>73</sup> MacIntyre (1999) *Dependent Rational Animals*. p. 67.

the individual's choices are relative to personal circumstances, culture, and history, and neither thinks that this entails an 'anything goes' morality, but each has different ideas about how ethical action is motivated.

MacIntyre, like Aristotle, holds that human beings flourish by acquiring and exercising the virtues (for MacIntyre, this means by acquiring the qualities which enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices). Taking into account MacIntyre's discussion about acknowledged dependence and the plausible claim that human beings thrive in social groups, it is here at the social level that thinking about the collective good is relevant. MacIntyre's eudaimonism, which is grounded in the personal, social, and historical contexts of human beings, provides a plausible insight into what living well or flourishing might entail and, consequently, of what kinds of characteristics a virtue might have. Furthermore, MacIntyre shows that virtues can be consistent across diverse personal, social and historical contexts. But it is not obvious that we must think about what is good with a universalised human teleology in mind.<sup>74</sup> Williams is right that: 'No one should make any claims about the importance of human beings to the universe ...' However, when thinking about the importance of human beings to human beings, it does make sense to consider the notion of flourishing from within a social context. The link that Williams elucidates between an individual's identity-conferring commitments (which are relative to personal circumstances, culture, and history) and

---

<sup>74</sup> And it is arguable whether an agent's *best motive* for ethical activity is flourishing. Human flourishing (in general) is perhaps a more altruistic motive than a particular agent's own personal flourishing but – although I agree that flourishing is important, both for the human race generally and for individual human beings - it is possible that a better motive for helping someone in need, for example, might be something like compassion or benevolence, or the simple fact that they *need* help. Nevertheless, I will not pursue the question of what are the best motives for action; my point is to agree with Williams that we have the motives that we have, so it might not make sense to insist on a universalised conception of the human good. Although we might think that it is useful to have some conception of the human good, from an individual perspective, if we are to reason well about what virtuous activity entails.

the individual's personal desires and concrete motivations, should enable us to recognise that moral motivation is a personal matter.

### **Autonomy & Virtuous Character**

Once the link between identity-conferring commitments and moral motivation is accepted, it is questionable whether completely impartial reflective deliberation about what any rational agent ought to do in moral matters can actually motivate ethical action.

Reflective deliberation about the truth indeed brings in a standpoint that is impartial and seeks harmony, but this is because it seeks truth, not because it is reflective deliberation, and those features will not be shared by deliberation about what to do simply because it is too reflective. The I that stands back in rational reflection from my desires is still the I that has those desires and will, empirically and concretely, act; and it is not, simply by standing back in reflection, converted into a being whose fundamental interest lies in the harmony of all interests. It cannot, just by taking this step, acquire the motivations of justice.<sup>75</sup>

So, according to Williams, the individual cannot, simply through rational deliberation, acquire concrete motivations to act in harmony with the collective interest. My rational deliberations can help me to understand how the world is - if I am seeking truth then I am already motivated to find truth - and I can rationally deliberate about what I ought to do - but my rational deliberations alone cannot motivate me to do it. The Kantian might say that reverence for rationally impartial moral law is what motivates moral

---

<sup>75</sup> Williams (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 77

action - but we might still ask what motivates this reverence, and why the child should care about respecting universal moral laws unless they already have a good will. If I do not care about being good - or more precisely if my motivation to be good is insufficient to outweigh any competing motivations - then it might be rational to only care about whether it *looks like* I'm being good (if I think that it is in my interests to do so).<sup>76</sup> That is, I might only do the right thing when, and because, it gets the right results for me.<sup>77</sup> Rational deliberation is a valuable tool to help us understand what right-action requires but it is far from clear that it can ground the motivation *to want* to act well.

In *The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories* (1976),<sup>78</sup> Michael Stocker claims that: 'The standard view has it that a morally good intention is an essential constituent of a morally good act. This seems correct enough. On that view, further, a morally good intention is an intention to do an act for the sake of its goodness or rightness.'<sup>79</sup> Stocker then provides us with his, now well-known, example of Smith, who goes out of his way to visit you in hospital but, in the course of conversation, he admits that, '... it is not essentially because of you that he came to see you, not because you are friends, but because he thought it his duty ...'<sup>80</sup> Knowing that Smith's motive for visiting you really has nothing to do with you at all might well make him an unwelcome visitor. Stocker's example illustrates that there seems to be something of value lacking in Smith's motive,

---

<sup>76</sup> Kant does not really think that any man is completely indifferent to moral laws but he recognises that the motivation to be good might be outweighed by other motivations. (Kemp Smith, Norman. 2007. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant. Introduction, Caygill, Howard. Hampshire: Reissued Edition. Palgrave MacMillan, p. 651, B858)

<sup>77</sup> It might be considered rational to act in one's own self-interest. Williams suggests that the rational deliberator who is in a position of strength might think it unreasonable '... to ask what rules you would make if you had none of your actual advantages or did not know what they were.' Williams (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 71.

<sup>78</sup> Stocker, Michael (1976) 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No. 14, On Motives and Morals (Aug. 12, 1976), pp.453-466 (Journal of Philosophy, Inc.).

<sup>79</sup> Stocker (1976) *Schizophrenia*. p. 462

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

and it is the externalisation of Smith's motive to which Stocker attributes the problem.

This lack is aptly summarised by Stocker in the following claims:

What sort of life would people have who did their duties but never or rarely wanted to? ... duty, obligation, and rightness are only one part – indeed, only a small part, a dry and minimal part – of ethics. There is the whole other area of the values of personal and interpersonal relations and activities; and also the area of moral goodness, merit, virtue. In both, motive is an essential part of what is valuable; in both, motive and reason must be in harmony for the values to be realized.<sup>81</sup>

For Stocker, harmony between one's motives and one's reasons, values, and justifications, is central to a good life.<sup>82</sup> Although certain types of relationships might entail certain obligations or commitments, personal relationships that *rely* on obligation to ensure commitment or consideration are not the sort of personal relationships that many of us would want. It seems then that if we want children to mature into adults who are, both capable of and, willing to independently make wise and ethical choices, then they will need more than just reason grounding their moral motivations. If Anscombe and Williams are right that deontological thought cannot motivate ethical action, then something else must be required to ground autonomy, if the open future is to include everything that might matter to human beings.<sup>83</sup>

If we accept Kant's argument for autonomy, that 'all genuinely moral considerations rest, ultimately and at a deep level, in the agent's will' but replace the Kantian idea that a good will can be motivated *only* by reverence for objective moral

---

<sup>81</sup> Stocker (1976) *Schizophrenia*. p. 455

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 453. Of course, that a harmonious life, in Stocker's sense, can also be said to be ethical does depend on the quality of the motives – Stocker clarifies this with discussion of evil motives.

<sup>83</sup> Kant would agree that a good will is necessary for autonomy but because he grounds the good will solely in pure (impartial) reason, it is questionable whether it can actually motivate ethical action.

law, with an idea of the good will as rooted in virtuous dispositions, then we ought to be able to settle a central concern that lies at the heart of the objections to Feinberg's argument for the child's right to an open future – the concern that if our reflective deliberations about how to act result in determinations of the moral permissibility of actions, grounded purely by rational impartiality, then these determinations might leave out too much of what is potentially important to human beings. With virtuous dispositions as the grounds for the autonomous good will, we have a kind of autonomy, or individualism, that can account for things like personal interests and loyalties, etc., (because the agent's will is personally motivated) but which need not be characterised purely in terms of self-interest; how autonomy turns out in a particular agent will be driven by the agent's underlying motivations and by the dispositions from which those motivations originate. The right kind of individualism – i.e., the ethical kind – must include identity-conferring commitments that are rooted in virtuous dispositions.

Nurturing and protecting the child's capacity for self-determination, with the goal of providing the child with an open *and ethical* future, therefore includes helping children to develop the kinds of virtuous traits of character that are valued by the communities in which they live, but at the same time (because it is characteristic of individualism that it respects humanity and the diversity it entails) actively encouraging and teaching the child to reflect on the values of his or her own time, place, and situation. The idea that our values are not 'facts about the world' but are social, and therefore vary from one time to another and from one place to another (together with widely held scepticism of the view that the world has teleological significance) entails the personal nature of ethical living.<sup>84</sup> For this reason, providing the child with an open future does not entail neutralising the child's values or getting them to maturity with

---

<sup>84</sup> Williams (1985) *Limits of Philosophy*, p. 142

“no one’s point of view”. No more does preserving an open future necessitate providing children with *unlimited* opportunities (which is not to suggest that it is not beneficial to provide children with a wide variety of opportunities and experiences). Nurturing the child’s potential for an open and ethical future includes (but is not limited to) helping the child to acquire and develop the kinds of dispositions that will motivate a good will. As we have already seen, the human will must develop within the context of a particular human standpoint, and so it is the dispositions of character that the child develops from within his or her particular human standpoint that will shape the way autonomy turns out for any particular agent.

At the beginning of Part Two, I posed the question of whether autonomy is *all* that is required for the kind of open future worthy of consideration. It seems that we also need a good will that is grounded by the kinds of virtuous dispositions that can provide ethical motivations for our reflective deliberations. If Feinberg’s argument for the child’s right to an open future cannot provide an account of autonomy that can *motivate* ethical action from the ground up, then the fundamentalist (or anyone else for that matter) is right to be suspicious of whether an agent’s autonomous reflective deliberations will issue in ethically motivated outcomes. Rational reflection *does* matter, but it is just one (albeit very important) factor in the equation of ethical understanding. Reason must be in harmony with motive if we are to act well, and motivation cannot simply be imposed externally upon the agent, but is part of one’s authentic self. Consequently, Feinberg’s deontological argument for the child’s right to an open future needs supplementing with ideas from Virtue Ethics because, if we want the child to be motivated by a good will, then we must help the child to develop virtuous dispositions. But, as Anscombe elucidates, we need a concept of what a virtue is before we can claim which kinds of dispositions are virtuous. Consequently, we need a concept

of what a virtue is before we can claim which kinds of dispositions we ought to nurture in children.

### What is Virtuous Activity?

If it is fundamentally the agent's dispositions of character that inform how the agent weighs his or her own desires and needs against impartial considerations, then the agent's concrete motivations must derive from *virtuous* dispositions if his or her choices are to be ethical and not just arbitrary or self-interested. Teaching children good moral habits can assist with the cultivation of good character,<sup>85</sup> but we need to consider whether good moral habits are sufficient for ethical understanding. The Fundamentalist might want to claim that there is no need for deliberation about what good living entails because religious doctrine provides the rules for living a good human life. In this way, the fundamentalist might deny that we need something akin to practical wisdom, which requires an independence of will and reason informed by experience, because we know what it means to live well according to scripture or tradition. But not everyone accepts these kinds of fundamentalist beliefs.

The Kantian might argue that the only conception of virtue we need is that it is consistent with reason; any potential for autonomy to result in selfish or egoistic individualism can be mitigated by the objective, or impartial, nature of the deontological framework because focus on individual rights is balanced by a parallel focus on individual obligations or duties. Nevertheless, anyone who does not accept the automatic priority of objective moral law over other kinds of things that individuals might value – such as, shared family or community values, or personal loyalties, for

---

<sup>85</sup> I will consider what good moral habits might entail in the following section.

example – is unlikely to be satisfied with a Kantian solution to avoiding a selfish kind of individualism. So, if we want to show Feinberg’s critics that they ought to accept that an open future is worth protecting, then we need to show that autonomy is consistent with other kinds of things that human beings care about – things like moral direction, community values, faith, love, friendship, and flourishing.

Ethical decisions are made by individuals, and the quality of the decisions rests (at least in part) upon the quality of judgement of the individual decision-maker. We need good judgement to decide what we believe, and we also need it for applying our beliefs and values to our everyday actions because acting ethically involves choice and choices always arises in particular contexts. We must be able to deliberate well about what is the good and appropriate action in particular complex situations if we are to live ethically because universalised moral laws or rules, whether derived from one’s own practical reasoning or from the traditional beliefs and values of our parents, religion, or community, cannot provide unambiguous guidance for *every* possible set of contingent circumstances. Moreover, rules are not warm, friendly, or forgiving, they are not sensitive to the varying needs of people or of delicate situations, and they do not know when they are wrong.<sup>86</sup> We cannot rely on rules to consider *all* that matters in a particular set of contingent circumstances. ‘It may be obvious that in general one sort of consideration is more important than another ... but it is a matter of judgement whether in a particular case that priority is preserved ...’<sup>87</sup> Good judgement involves *skill* at calculating what the best action is in a particular set of circumstances. Kantians and Fundamentalists alike require obedience to universalised moral laws but, the difference

---

<sup>86</sup> I do not mean to suggest that rules are never necessary, or that established rules should be disregarded lightly. But it is questionable whether our ethical understanding is likely to be developed to its fullest potential if rules are *a substitute* for wisdom.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, Bernard, quoted in Chappell, Timothy, "Bernard Williams", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved online <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/williams-bernard>.

in how they derive their moral laws has important significance for how they view autonomy.

Kant acknowledges that good judgement is required when thinking about how to live well, and that how individuals interpret and apply the principles of pure reason to particular situations can be skewed by misunderstanding, by non-moral motives, or by apathy:

*These laws certainly require in addition a power of judgement sharpened by experience, partly in order to distinguish the cases to which they apply, partly to obtain for these laws access to the human will and impetus to their practice. For man, affected by so many inclinations, is indeed capable of grasping the idea of a pure practical reason, but it is not so easy for him to render this idea concretely effective in his conduct of life.*<sup>88</sup>

Fundamentalists will not agree with Kant that the moral law derives from one's own rational nature (which exists as an end in itself), but whether or not one agrees with the grounds of Kant's moral laws, Kant is right that, as rational agents, we do conceive of ourselves as rational beings through the (subjective) recognition of our own rational nature. So, how we apply any universalised moral values we might hold to particular situations is (at least in some way) inseparable from our subjective human understanding. Therefore this worry about how individuals interpret and apply moral laws or principles to particular situations could as easily be attributed to the interpretation and application of traditional or religious moral principles.

The Fundamentalist might argue here that access to the accumulated wisdom, and community support, of a particular faith might be just what is needed for resolving

---

<sup>88</sup> Hill, Thomas E. (Jr.) & Zweig, Arnulf, ed. (2002) *Kant. Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 191, 4:389. My italics.

ethical dilemmas satisfactorily and that such wisdom and support is more valuable than the kind of practical wisdom one might gain from one's own deliberations, particular life experience, and education. It is valuable to have access to wisdom that has accumulated over many generations, and also to have the support of one's community, and perhaps (in areas of epistemic uncertainty) faith might also have a legitimate role. But I can think of no good reason why access to accumulated wisdom and community support should only be available to those of a particular faith or ideology – philosophical thought, for example, has a tradition of wisdom that goes back thousands of years, and is highly compatible with autonomy.<sup>89</sup> More importantly, the accumulated wisdom of the ages might not always be able to account for certain situations that are uniquely modern, or that are subjectively unique, and there is still the continuing problem of whether we are interpreting and applying received wisdom or advice appropriately. Accumulated wisdom and community support are valuable but they are neither singularly nor jointly sufficient for ethical understanding. Regardless of what kind of advice and support we have available to us, as mature rational agents we are still individually responsible for our own ethical choices. So, raising children to be well-intentioned rule-followers is therefore not sufficient for virtue. This kind of tractable inherited morality might entail some conditions of good character but it does not provide everything that a child needs to evolve into an adult capable of independently making wise and ethical choices.

Critically evaluating one's beliefs and values need not necessarily preclude choosing to share the beliefs and values of one's parents, religion or community, but we

---

<sup>89</sup> The Fundamentalist might argue that philosophical thought is demanding and therefore not accessible to everyone. This might be right if looked at purely from an academic perspective but I am not suggesting that everyone must read complicated philosophical texts (just as not everyone committed to religion studies theology), but I think it would be beneficial for children to be exposed to philosophical discussion (which can be simplified as needed).

ought not to discard reason to do so. So, the kind of autonomy that I advocate is consistent with appreciating the accumulated wisdom of the ages and with community values but it also requires something more. Because when individuals are expected (or indoctrinated) to *unquestioningly* adopt specific beliefs and values (and the associated duties and obligations that follow from these beliefs and values) without independent critical evaluation of what underpins those beliefs and values, this does not seem to promote personal ethical responsibility or any real depth of genuine ethical understanding. As Mill elucidates:

No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner. The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it: for, being cognisant of all that can, at least obviously, be said against him, and having taken up his position against all gainsayers – knowing that he has sought for objections and difficulties, instead of avoiding them, and has shut out no light which can be thrown upon the subject from any quarter – he has a right to think his judgment better than that of any person, or any multitude, who have not gone through a similar process.<sup>90</sup>

The depth of ethical understanding required for right action in complex situations cannot be developed sufficiently when children are encouraged to evade ethical responsibility through *blindly* following the beliefs and values of others. Every child must be raised in a particular cultural and social context, but they ought to be given the freedom, opportunities, and encouragement to examine the grounds of the beliefs and values that they inherit.

---

<sup>90</sup> Mill (1859) *On Liberty*, pp. 14-15, Loc. 503.

So, we can raise children within the context of a particular community, and we can teach them about the worth that being part of a community (and this particular community) provides. We can share with them our beliefs and values, and we can encourage and inspire them - by example and through education, and through exposure to coherent arguments and open discussion - to appreciate the beliefs and values that we hold dear. But if we want children to avoid ethical servility and to eventually become capable of making wise and ethical choices, *independently*, then we must encourage them, from the earliest opportunity, in two important ways. First, we must help children to acquire or develop the kinds of dispositions that will motivate them to deliberately act virtuously for the right reasons (and I will say more about this in the following section). Secondly, we must help children to develop the capacity for astute rational deliberation, in order to choose wisely what to believe and to recognise what ought to be done in particular situations. This kind of ethical education requires a certain openness that is incompatible with indoctrination. Good judgement must play a role in any credible conception of an ethical life. To reach adulthood without the kind of independence of will and reason required for good judgement therefore suggests reaching adulthood at a significant ethical disadvantage. Consequently, virtue must include autonomy of thought, or a well developed capacity for self-determination, grounded in the right kind of dispositions. But as we shall see in the following section, deciding which dispositions are the right kind depends upon what a good life entails.

### **Which Dispositions?**

Teaching children to make moral choices by rigidly prioritising one particular factor of decision making (such as rational imperatives, consequences, or obedience to traditional moral laws) over all others, all of the time, leaves out much of what is

important for their ethical understanding. Children will eventually need to be able to judge, independently, which considerations to prioritise when in particular sets of circumstances; when, for example, to tend towards self-preservation over concern for others (and vice versa), or when to give more weight to the potential consequences of one's actions than to maintaining conceptual coherence of rational principles (or vice versa). In particular cases, it is a matter of judgement, or practical wisdom, whether one sort of consideration is more important than another, and the motives behind how we choose impact the quality of the choices. But if the disposition to act justly must pre-exist for the agent's reflective deliberations to be *motivated by* justice then, ultimately, it is the agent's dispositions of character that are the foundations on which his or her impartial considerations rest. Consequently we will want to instil virtuous dispositions in children, of the kind appreciated by the communities in which we live, but we should also want this to include (because human beings do exist in particular contexts) the ability to reconcile the dispositions that they have with an accurate conception of how things are in the world.

However, if virtuous activity is informed by facts about the agent's own relativity to a particular set of personal circumstances (which are historically, culturally, and socially, situated), then are we committed to some form of moral relativism where all moral points of view are equally valuable? No. If, as Anscombe claims, a positive account of any disposition as a virtue is '... completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is'<sup>91</sup> then we must have an understanding of what counts as a virtue before we can understand which dispositions are virtuous. According to Anscombe, we cannot know, for example, '... that an unjust man is a bad man ... until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is – a problem, not

---

<sup>91</sup> Anscombe (1958) *Modern Moral Philosophy*, p. 30

of ethics, but of conceptual analysis - and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced ...'<sup>92</sup> To understand what type of characteristic a virtue is, we must consider what motivates virtuous action. But, in the absence of any definitive account of the human good or of what constitutes a virtue, every mature rational agent must take responsibility for what he or she believes about how we ought to live and, consequently, for his or her actions.

Nevertheless, that the agent must choose how to live based on what he or she believes about what constitutes a good life does not entail that every choice has equal ethical merit. Not many people would agree, for example, that a life solely devoted to one's own pleasure - without regard for how this was achieved or for who was hurt in the process - could count as an ethical life. We need a sound conception of virtue if we are to understand what living ethically entails, and if there is no such concept available collectively - that all agents can definitively accept - then the agent will decide individually what he or she believes. But just because there might not be universalised virtues does not entail that there are no admirable or deplorable choices in a given set of circumstances.<sup>93</sup> Given my discussion about the relativity of an agent's motivations to the agent's particular human standpoint, the agent's acquired (or inherited) dispositions and identity-conferring commitments will influence and motivate his or her beliefs and actions. But there are always alternatives from which we can choose, and even blindly, or uncritically, adopting the beliefs and values of one's parents, or community, (regardless of whether those values are religious or secular) constitutes a choice.

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> I follow Slote (1992) in preferring the aretaic terms 'admirable' and 'deplorable' over deontic notions of 'right' and 'wrong'.

So, I will not attempt to solve the controversial questions of what type of characteristic a virtue is, or of what the human good consists of (assuming that we must accept a teleological account of ethics in order to characterise virtue). Furthermore, I do not want to make claims – and I do not think that anyone else is indubitably able to do so either - about exactly how the agent’s dispositions of character come about (whether they are biologically determined, a product of upbringing and environment, or given by a supreme being, for example). My point is simply that the dispositions that the agent does have (whether innate or acquired), which reflect his or her sense of identity, will impact what the agent’s desires and inclinations are, as well as how the agent weighs those desires and inclinations against impartial considerations. Therefore, if we want to raise children who will grow up to make wise and ethical choices, that are *their own* choices but which are not based purely on their preferences, then we need to nurture in children the kinds of dispositions that we believe will motivate a good will and which can drive personal and social motivations that are in harmony with the collective interest. But we must also nurture in children the appropriate skills and attitudes that will enable them to critically assess and accurately judge the truth about how things are in the world, and to weigh their personal desires and interests against impartial considerations.

For the most part, it seems right that parents are free to raise their children according to their own beliefs and values. But this does not entail that parents, or educators (or anyone else for that matter) should be free to indoctrinate children into a particular belief system.<sup>94</sup> To do so would be to deprive the child of any chance of

---

<sup>94</sup> As one philosopher aptly comments: ‘Any child that leaves school having received a “religious education” in which all objections to their faith have been airbrushed out has, in truth, been indoctrinated, not educated.’ Law, Stephen (2006) *The War for Children’s Minds*. London & New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 166.

genuine ethical understanding, which must be honestly reflective and personally motivated. Ethical choices *are, and must be*, personal.

The deontological framework behind Feinberg's argument for the child's right to an open future provides one of the bedrock requirements – that of autonomy – for what is significant for ethical life and, consequently, for how we ought to raise children. But, at the same time, the deontological framework couples autonomy with a narrow conception of morality, based on impartial rational deliberation and its consequent rights and obligations. This conception of morality arguably does not fully satisfy legitimate questions about the role of personal motivation in ethical life. For this reason, and because he gives insufficient attention to ethical concerns, Feinberg's argument fails to eradicate the worry that autonomy is inconsistent with, and might be less valuable than, things like faith, moral direction, and community values.

Alternatively, the child's right to an open future might be better understood by considering autonomy apart from questions of moral law, rights and obligations. Preserving the child's autonomy can instead be characterised in terms of nurturing identity-conferring commitments that allow the child to identify with things like a particular culture or faith, and to prioritise personal loyalties and social commitments, whilst simultaneously encouraging the child to develop his or her own reflective, and socially conscious, values that are motivated by a good will underpinned by virtuous dispositions. In this way, individual values and interests can be pursued in harmony with the collective interest. By supplementing Feinberg's argument, for keeping the child's future open, with ideas about virtue that are not grounded in moral theory, we

gain a stronger basis for including everything that might matter to human beings into the idea of the autonomous ethical life.

## References

- Anscombe, G.E.M. 1958. 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (from *After Virtue a study in moral theory*) in Crisp, R & Slote, M. (ed.) 2007. *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1, pp 26-44.
- Burt, Shelley (2003) 'The Proper Scope of Parental Authority: Why We Don't Owe Children an "Open Future"' in *Child, Family and State* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Stephen Macedo & Marion Young, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) Chapter 9. Kindle edition.
- Chappell, Timothy, "Bernard Williams", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved online <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/williams-bernard>.
- Christman, John. 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Retrieved online <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/autonomy-moral/02/01/2013>.
- Cox, Damian, La Caze, Marguerite and Levine, Michael, "Integrity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved online <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/integrity>.
- Feinberg, Joel. 1975. 'Limits to the Free Expression of Opinion' [Online] *University of Nevada Reno, Philosophy Department*. <http://www.unr.edu/philosophy/pdf/feinberg.pdf>
- Feinberg, Joel (1980) 'The Child's Right to an Open Future' in *Whose Child? Children's Rights, Parental Authority, and State Power*, ed. William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980); reprinted in *Feinberg, Freedom & Fulfillment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 76-97.
- Galston, William A. (2003) Parents, Government, and Children: Authority Over Education in a Liberal Pluralist State, in *Child, Family and State* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Stephen Macedo & Marion Young, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) Kindle edition. (Also retrieved online, The Brookings Institution, November 2009. [http://www.clb.ac.il/workshops/2010/articles/Galston\\_article.pdf](http://www.clb.ac.il/workshops/2010/articles/Galston_article.pdf).
- Hill, Thomas E. (Jr.) & Zweig, Arnulf, ed. (2002) *Kant. Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kemp Smith, Norman (2007) *Critique of Pure Reason* (Immanuel Kant). (Introduction, Caygill, Howard). Hampshire: Reissued Edition. Palgrave MacMillan.

- Law, Stephen. (2006) *The War for Children's Minds*. London & New York: Routledge, 2007.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981) *After Virtue* (Third Edition). Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair (1999) *Dependent Rational Animals*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd.
- Mill, John Stuart (1859) *On Liberty*. Intro. W.L. Courtney LL.D. (London, Felling-on-Tyne, New York, Melbourne: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., Ltd.) Kindle edition.
- Mills, Claudia. 'The Child's Right to an Open Future?' in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Winter 2003, 199-509 © 2003 Blackwell Publishing, Inc.
- Slote, Michael (1992) *From Morality to Virtue*. (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Sockett, Hugh (2012) *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions*. (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group) Kindle edition.
- Stocker, Michael (1976) 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No. 14, On Motives and Morals (Aug. 12, 1976), pp.453-466 (Journal of Philosophy, Inc.).
- Williams, Bernard. (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. (Commentary on the text by A.W. Moore; foreword by Jonathan Lear). London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2011.

## Bibliography

- Annas, Julia (2011) *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Austin, Michael W. (2007) *Conceptions of Parenthood: Ethics and the Family*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012. Kindle edition.
- Baron, Marcia W., Pettit, Philip & Slote, Michael. (1997) *Three Methods of Ethics*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
- Jonsen, Albert R. & Toulmin, Stephen (1988) *The Abuse of Casuistry*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Kant, Immanuel (1784) *What is Enlightenment*. Translated by Mary C. Smith. Retrieved online <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>
- Lotz, Mianna (2006) 'Feinberg, Mills, and the Child's Right to an Open Future'. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 37: 537-551.

McKeon, R. (2001) *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. (Introduction, Reeve, C.D.C) New York: Modern Library Paperback Edition. Random House Inc.