

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Authority: On the revaluation of a value

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Abstract

This paper, while not presenting a general discussion of authority in education, attempts to uncover some of the anomalies, paradoxes and tensions in the concept. It will argue for a revaluation of authority as an educational virtue, as a form of participatory guidance that is an aid to growth. The paper intends to help provoke continued debate over our perceived educational virtues and vices. I argue that virtuous authority is authority exercised from the point of view of a *larger experience and a wider horizon*. If teachers' 'pedagogical imperative' is to bridge the gap between forms of knowledge and their pupils, then their practice will involve authority. I suggest here that such authority should be repositioned as participatory, immanent and democratic. As Dewey says, 'The need for authority is...constant...[I]t is the need for principles that are both stable enough and flexible enough to give direction to the processes of living in its vicissitudes and uncertainties.' In answer to this, I suggest that teachers practice their authority in order to create stable yet flexible, open and indeterminate, but not chaotic situations that combine with pupils' experiences in such a way as to enable educational growth. Authority practised as a form of participatory guidance, to pursue this Deweyan line of argument, can be 'an aid to freedom' and not freedom's enemy. This paper will argue that authority, so revalued, ought to be cultivated in our educational thought and practice.

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Eds: This paper forms part of a Special Issue titled 'Beyond Virtue and Vice: Education for a Darker Age', in which the editors invited authors to engage in exercises of 'transvaluation'. Certain apparently settled educational concepts (from agency and fulfilment to alienation and ignorance) can be reinterpreted and transvaluated (in a Nietzschean vein) such that virtues become vices, and vices, virtues. The editors encouraged authors to employ polemics and some occasional exaggeration to reimagine educational values that are all too readily accepted within contemporary educational discourses.

KEYWORDS

authority, democratic, freedom, practice

INTRODUCTION

My goal in this paper¹ is not to present a general discussion of authority in education but rather to attempt to uncover some of the tensions in the concept, while contributing to the ongoing reevaluation of the 'value' of authority as a distinct, if multifaceted, issue in the philosophy of education.² The questions that arise when considering the role of authority in education are intimately connected to the very idea of teaching since authority is often conceived to be equivalent to a 'right to limit the freedom of children pursuant to certain goals and subject to certain constraints' (Curren, 2007, p. 151). Still, it is not immediately obvious that authority is to be conceived in wholly negative terms. Context will always play an important part. As such, when we pose questions about authority, we venture into the realm of 'our' educational values, particularly those ascribed to notions of freedom and the justified distribution of authority in general in liberal democracies. The problem of authority is also intimately linked to the question of indoctrination in education more generally: the worry is that authoritative education is, at best, mildly restrictive on the freedom of learners and, at worst, coercive and a support to indoctrination (which is an affront to autonomy).

Here I will argue for a reevaluation of authority as an educational virtue, one that ought to be cultivated in our educational thought and practice. I will argue for reconceiving authority as a form of participatory guidance that is an aid to growth. Following John Dewey, I will argue that 'virtuous authority' is authority exercised from the point of view of 'a larger experience and a wider horizon' (Dewey, 1938, p. 71). If we can agree that, minimally, a teacher's pedagogical imperative is to act as a go-between and guide to powerful codified forms of knowledge and experience and students' prior experience and motivation, then this will involve a certain deployment of authority in practice. As Dewey says, 'The need for authority is a constant need of man. For it is the need for principles that are both stable enough and flexible enough to give direction to the processes of living in its vicissitudes and uncertainties' (Dewey, 1959, p. 7). Educators must practice their authoritative role in order to create stable yet flexible, open and indeterminate, but not chaotic situations that combine with experiences to form what Hildebrand has called the 'existential nexus' of all meaning-making: they ought to do so in such a way as to enable pupils' growth by '*doing and undergoing*' (Dodding et al., 2018, p. 285). Authority, practised as a form of participatory guidance, to pursue this Deweyan line of argument, can be 'an aid to freedom' (Dewey, 1938, p. 71) and not freedom's enemy. I will explore this in what follows.

Education is a practice that is central to our various inherited moral and religious values and institutions. But what is education? The term itself has an 'ambiguous and uncertain' origin coming from either *educere* ('to lead out' or 'to train') or *educare* ('to train' or 'to nourish') or both (Winch & Gingell, 1999, p. 63). Generally speaking, 'education' currently receives quite minimalist definitions, such as 'a preparation for adult life' or sometimes even more minimally as 'upbringing'. That this is the case owes a great deal to the fact that previous more substantive definitions of education

are often now taken as examples of what to avoid rather than as examples of what to emulate.³ Consider, for example, the mid-20th-century English analytic philosopher, R. S. Peters's view, that the term 'education' 'lays down criteria to which activities or processes must conform' (Peters, 1966, p. 25). For Peters, whose work was important in setting the terms of these conceptual and terminological debates, to call something 'education' was to imply that a worthwhile, cognitive and voluntary practice was occurring, one that would change the individual(s) being educated for the better because they would know what intrinsically valuable subjects should be pursued as a result of the practice. One such subject that Peters had in mind was philosophy itself, the arch-enemy of authority and indoctrination, possessed of the aim to "question everything and assume" nothing' (Baggini & Southwell, 2012, p. 1).⁴ Education in general was for Peters the 'initiation of members of a society into a form of life that is thought to be worthwhile' (Peters, 1966, p. 237). Substantive definitions of education, it is argued, will remain contested since they will tend to involve various conceptual commitments to particular sets of values and to particular types of life.⁵ Such considerations led Peters to distinguish between a 'thin' analytical concept of education (committed to the learner participating in a preparation for life by learning something worthwhile) in contrast to 'thicker' substantive definitions.⁶

Despite any residual problems with the definition of the concept of education, the 'value' that it represents is not undergoing a process of reevaluation; but, the concepts that compose the various minimalist definitions that might be put forward for it are.⁷ Contributing to this task by focussing attention on the concept of authority is important because, as Curren states, 'The education of children is an enterprise predicated on some *authority* or right to determine within limits the aims to be achieved, the content to be taught, and the manner in which the enterprise is to be carried out' (Curren, 2007, p. 151). Education, howsoever it is defined, it is suggested, could not take place were it not for some form of authority but the very notion of the 'authority of teachers and of educators more generally [to deploy their teacherly authority] has come to be questioned' in modern Western liberal democracies at large (Winch & Gingell, 1999, p. 16). So, it is to the concept of authority that we will now turn.⁸

AUTHORITY

The questions surrounding authority are complex. They include questions like 'When is influence by an authority legitimate?', 'When do we have a duty to obey an authority?', and 'Who has the right to be in authority?'⁹ Owing to this complexity, we should distinguish at the outset 'educational authority' from 'authority in education'. Authority in education, as I use it here, refers to the 'bearers of authority' in educational contexts and to questions relating to bearers of authority: It is this dimension of authority that I will be concerned with in this paper. Bearers of authority are, primarily, teachers, although there are situations, such as in home-schooling, where the role of the teacher and that of the parent is combined (see Reich, 2009, p. 3).¹⁰ In this regard, the term 'educator' might be preferred to 'teacher', but as I use them here, they refer to the same thing. I will suggest that bearers of authority can deploy their authority virtuously when acting educationally from the perspective of 'a larger experience and a wider horizon' (Dewey, 1938, p. 71).

'Educational authority' is a broader category and encompasses authority in education. Educational authority refers to the general exercise of authority in society and so will involve the wider question of the rightful distribution of authority in liberal democracies. Both parents and the state have interests in the education of children and it is in these interests that their right to educational authority is grounded. Educational authority is distinct from parental authority and is usually balanced between the authority of parents and the authority of the state (Reich, 2009, pp. 1 and 3). Reich (2009) argues for the extension of educational authority to children as well as to parents and the state on the grounds that they too have interests in education. I agree with this and with Reich that the concept of educational authority can be seen to span three interest groups: parents (including guardians and carers), the state and children themselves. Parents, children and the state are all bearers of authority, but only parents and the state assume positions of authority over the education of children. Teachers, of course, can be representatives of the state, but they can also be employees of various kinds of commercial concerns as well as participants in voluntary pursuits.

Adopting a narrow focus, we can speak of authority in educational systems or institutions in two principal senses: being-in authority and being-an authority.¹¹ Being-in authority entitles the agent to have their wishes acceded to while being-an authority is to be in the possession of reliable knowledge or experience with regard to some discrete epistemic domain. To be-in authority at any point in time is to have *practical authority* while to be-an authority, in general, is to have *theoretical authority*. In both cases, authority implies the possible subordination of at least one individual's will or judgement to that of another, the authority, in a way that somehow binds and is independent of the content of the will or instruction of the authority. Constructing authority in this way can raise 'ethical' (Curren, 2007, p. 327) concerns. If an individual's authority is recognised, then it is referred to as *de facto* or effective authority: such authority is non-normative; it is a descriptive category. If an individual's authority is justified or legitimate, then it is referred to as normative or *de jure* authority. Authoritative teaching, as understood by its advocates, issues from normative authority. Normative authority is the primary and desired sense of authority because, as Green reminds us, it is this form of authority that *de facto* authorities claim, and are generally believed, to have.

Authority, on this framework, differs from power as power concerns the authority's ability to ensure others act in accordance with their will even when they resist: such a conception of power operates in the domain of 'threats and offers' (Christiano, 2013, p. 2). Power, in this sense, does not involve any form of pro-attitudinal or judgemental dimension on the part of the subject to power; nor does it involve effectiveness nor justification on the part of the authority. Yet, authority does involve obedience, and attempts to justify it have been central to political philosophy since its inception. Teachers have traditionally been considered authorities in both the *practical* and *theoretical* senses: 'Teachers are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced' (Dewey, 1938, p. 18).

There are two independent but related arguments against authority in education: the first is that 'authoritative teaching' involves indoctrination, and the second is that authoritative teaching will contravene a pupil's autonomy (Winch & Gingell, 1999, p. 17). Now, the concept of indoctrination did not always carry the pejorative associations that it currently does in educational discourse. Bailey (2010a, 2010b) reminds us that, until the second half of the 20th century, the term itself was no more offensive than the terms 'education', 'teaching' and 'instruction'.¹² Now, however, it is regarded as 'the antithesis of the sort of educational practices considered appropriate in a modern, liberal, democratic society' (Bailey, 2010a, p. 136).

Indoctrination involves the distorted teaching of a subject that produces a similarly distorted belief or value in a learner, and it is motivated by the teacher's zealous adherence to the indoctrinated belief or value. The charge of indoctrination has been levied at those who would teach subjects as diverse as left-wing politics, free-market economics, citizenship education, peace studies and women's studies, whether the indoctrination proceeds deliberately or without the indoctrinator's own knowledge.¹³ (Bailey, 2010a, 2010b). In fact, the current use of the term 'indoctrination' in the pejorative sense can be seen to be similar to historic uses of the term 'heresy', where both terms are used to pick out whatever it is that those levelling an accusation do not like, the objection being to a belief or standard that is held to be undesirable from their vantage point. As such, terms like 'indoctrinate' and 'heretical' serve to describe (the idea) and to condemn (the agent) in one single blow.¹⁴ The concept of indoctrination, then, serves this dual function: to describe and to denounce, and in this respect it is a 'thick' ethical term, at once descriptive and judgemental.¹⁵ If indoctrination, in the pejorative sense, occurs (and given its similarity to the vague term 'heresy' there may be serious problems in its characterisation and identity), then it may be reprehensible. In any case, I will not pursue its analysis here any further and will instead focus on the separate problematic of authority and autonomy.

The criticism of authority from progressive and child-centred educators has, in the first instance, centred on the role of the will: one objection is that when teachers are in authority and they stem the will of a young child, harmful and long-lasting psychological effects may follow. Yet, as we are arguing, some form of authority is necessary to the educational act. As such, the task is to find a source of 'non-authoritarian authority' (Riley & Welchman, 2006, p. 98). This is the modern arena for any reevaluation of the notion of authority, which has included, to date, the voices of Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori, although Rousseau and Dewey are often taken to be the two key figures of progressivist educational philosophy in the Anglophone world.¹⁶

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

The 'movement' of 'new education' or 'progressive education' as it came to be known involved a general move away from authoritative teaching methods, methods that could be characterised by the use of 'threats and rewards'. As Dewey remarks in 1915, the general trend or movement towards a more progressive approach to the education of children involved a move towards recognising and promoting 'greater freedom and an identification of the child's school life with his environment and outlook; and, even more important, the recognition of the role education must play in a democracy' (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. iii). Schools that were adopting progressive approaches had woken up to the realisation that 'their work ought to prepare children for the life they are to lead in the world... one which shall be truly representative of the needs and conditions of a democratic society' (Dewey, 1915, p. 288). Dewey recognised the continuity of change in life and that 'each generation must reinvent democracy' to 'respond to novel conditions, needs and challenges' (Hildebrand, 2018, p. 299). Educational complacency was the enemy, and the approach that Dewey himself came to advocate would chart a middle way between the excesses of what the Putnams have described as 'undirected progressivism' (which failed in terms of its curricular provision) and 'authoritarian traditionalism' (which failed to take the experiences and interests of the child seriously). His approach would rise to the challenge of becoming a practice 'worthy of the name *education*' (Dewey, 1938, p. 90; see Putnam & Putnam, 1993). This practice would contribute to the building of a meaningful life while embracing the challenge of educating-and-letting-go.¹⁷ This new educational philosophy would be 'an educational philosophy that would transcend the traditional/progressive dichotomy while yet being [an] education for a more democratic society' (Putnam & Putnam, 1993, p. 363). Of course, critics might well still ask what to do when individual and societal wishes clash.

The crucial point that Dewey recognised was that a school, or any other social arrangement that remained 'vitality social, or vitality shared...[.], remains]educative to those who participate in it' (Dewey, 2016, p. 4). This point holds true for teachers as much as it does for pupils: participation and education are ongoing in the social world and in smaller social formations for all involved. If such formations are to be democratic, then 'every individual must be consulted... actively not passively... [so that] he himself becomes a part of the process of authority, [part] of the process of social control' (Dewey, 1988, p. 295). This emphasis on taking part in authority shifts the ground decisively away from a model of 'authoritative teaching' towards better conceived in terms of a 'participatory non-authoritarian authority'. All members of the group would participate in normative authority by virtue of being bound by the decisions of the group: In such contexts, debate and persuasion would be the central guide to the rationality of the educational decisions taken and consensus their instrument.

AUTHORITY REVALUED

The revaluation of authority results in its repositioning, rather than in its abandonment. Authority repositioned is authority as a form of 'being-with'; it is being-an authority by participating in the constitution of a democratic group. As we saw above, Dewey's view is that teachers can operate with 'a larger experience and a wider horizon' so that their activities amount to 'an aid to freedom' (Dewey, 1938, p. 71). This formulation, of course, might be said to beg the question: does not that larger experience and wider horizon, from which authority is deployed, have to be 'virtuous' in order for the resultant exercise of authority to be virtuous? It is important to problematise this, for the asking of this question indicates that the one who asks it is still thinking in terms of 'authoritative teaching', and that the exercise of authority will be in the form of an extra-participatory command. Such a view is, in fact, quite far from the repositioned conception of authority that I have been arguing for here by way of Dewey's thought. In contrast to the starting-point of the authoritative teacher, who stands apart from their pupils, the starting-point for the kind of teaching that would speak authoritatively from a 'larger experience and a wider horizon' would be participatory: it would begin from the repositioning of authority in terms of 'a co-operative enterprise' (Dewey, 1938, p. 72). In fact, we may agree with the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who has suggested that our only (real) teachers are those that 'tell us to "do with

me”, and [who are] able to emit signs to be developed in heterogeneity rather than [those who would only] propose gestures for us to reproduce’ (Deleuze, 1968, p. 23). For Deleuze, such teachers practise education as a letting-go so that their pupils might develop in heterogeneity, but they do so from having worked through their educational problematics *with* their charges.

For both Dewey and Deleuze, the teacher’s starting-point is participatory and educational experiences ought to be developed ‘through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 72). Teachers and pupils can ‘select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise and potentiality of presenting new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment [will] expand the area of further experience’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 75). Doing this will enable the ‘opening [of] new fields which make new demands upon existing powers of observation and of [the] intelligent use of memory’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 75). ‘Growth’ is the ‘watchword’ for the educator, and when authority is exercised by the teacher in such participatory, communal circumstances, they exercise it ‘as the representative and agent of the interests of the group as a whole’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 54). Authority takes the form of authority-within-the-group.

Being part of a group will undoubtedly involve its members’ implicit or explicit (depending on circumstances) commitment to particular sets of values, and possibly even to particular types of life trajectory (although this is not necessary). Authority remains, on the model developed here, ‘inseparably connected with a rule-governed form of life’ (Peters, 1966, p. 238), but the exercise of authority is not ‘extra-worldly’. As Dewey says, ‘When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 21). That more effective source of authority will be participatory and immanent: It will be authority-with.

The revaluation of authority that I have argued for here by drawing on Dewey does not attempt to do away with authority: rather, it suggests that authority is better to be rethought as occurring immanently during participation in a group or form of life, and further that authority is not solely the province of the teacher: by virtue of the fact that authority itself is participatory and democratic pupils are able to participate in its working. This general revaluation, which amounts to a reorientation, moves towards a conception of the teacher as a ‘fellow traveller’, albeit one with ‘a larger experience and a wider horizon’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 71). A teacher is one who has ‘been here before’ and so is, to that extent, an authority, but they are an authority who is a participatory guide for all that. Such guides are still themselves in a state of growth.

CONCLUSION

Despite the almost ever-present revaluation of the key component concepts and values of education amongst many citizens of modern liberal democracies, there is an ultimate presupposition: education is valuable; it is perhaps even ‘intrinsically valuable’. Brighouse (2006) expands on this presupposition in connection to his own hope that the principles that he argues for—that children have a right to an education that enables them to be open-minded and to be able to reflect freely on the life that they want to live, that enables them to become economically self-sufficient while also being able to flourish in their private lives, and that will enable them to contribute effectively and reasonably within a just society—‘will seem obvious to many’ (Brighouse, 2006, p. 3).

Whether or not it is obvious—and Brighouse points out that, for portions of at least three classes of individuals, it is not (some parents’ rights lobbyists, some employers and some politicians)—it is the case that such a model of education will be one that resonates with liberal–democratic models of education that do in fact foster open-mindedness and that pursue autonomy as a goal for their pupils. Such an approach to education will preserve what Feinberg has referred to as the ‘child’s right to an open future’ (Feinberg, 1992, p. 82). I suggest that the revalued concept of authority that I have argued for here is compatible with such liberal–democratic models of education. And further, I suggest that it is worth revisiting some well-trodden philosophical ground in pursuit of such revaluations. Thinkers such as Peters and Dewey still have a lot to tell us today, whether

on their own terms or in combination with newer strands in the debate in connection to thinkers like Gilles Deleuze.

Virtuous authority, authority that is immanent, participatory, distributed and guiding rather than extra-participatory and commanding, ought to be cultivated in our educational thought and practice. Virtuous authority is authority exercised from the point of view of 'a larger experience and a wider horizon' and it functions as 'an aid to freedom' (Dewey, 1938, p. 71), not as freedom's enemy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author thanks David Lewin, Karsten Kenkies, and William Tonner.

WEBSITES

Education Scotland: [https://education.gov.scot/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/policy-drivers/cfe-\(building-from-the-statement-appendix-incl-btc1-5\)/What%20is%20Curriculum%20for%20Excellence?](https://education.gov.scot/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/policy-drivers/cfe-(building-from-the-statement-appendix-incl-btc1-5)/What%20is%20Curriculum%20for%20Excellence?)

ENDNOTES

¹ This paper is primarily concerned with the education of children, hence the language employed in it.

² As a contribution to a Special Edition of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, I have limited myself to a focussed discussion in response to the problematic set out by the editors for the issue. This paper is essentially a short provocation and should be read as such. Given this, I have not attempted to provide a general account of authority in education, nor have I attempted to provide encyclopaedic reference to the wider literature on the concept. Instead, readers will find in this article a focused response to the possibility of revaluing authority as an educational virtue. Any more general attempt to relate to the wider debate surrounding authority would need to take heed of recent contributions by a range of scholars (see for example, Charles Bingham's *Authority Is Relational* (2008) and various contributions by Geoffrey Hinchliffe).

³ See Winch and Gingell's entry on 'education' (in Winch and Gingell, 1999, pp. 63–66). The definitions of education as 'a preparation for adult life' and 'upbringing' belong to Winch and White, respectively, and are quoted in this book (p. 66).

⁴ Baggini and Southwell's example is phrased in the plural. For Peters's criteria, see Peters (1966, p. 45).

⁵ See Carr (2003) on the contestability of the concept of education and of the desirability of nevertheless pursuing a 'rationally coherent and defensible interpretation of the term' (Carr, 2003, p. 3).

⁶ An interesting parallel to draw here is with the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, who distinguishes between 'weak' (*pensiero debole*) and 'strong' thought, where strong thinking seeks to grasp reality and truth substantively and where weak thought is hermeneutic and operates with reference to history and the social world (see Caputo, 2018).

⁷ Especially important is the critique of state-sponsored values, or 'educational virtues', such as 'confidence', 'responsibility' and 'effectivity', which in Scotland are lauded by the Curriculum for Excellence with its desire that pupils become 'confident', 'responsible', 'effective' and 'successful' learners and citizens.

⁸ One thing I have not done in this paper is to address broader issues of compatibility on epistemological or metaphysical levels between the various thinkers whom I bring into this debate over authority. I believe that doing so is important and developing the lines of argument in this paper would involve such an analysis.

⁹ I am paraphrasing the questions that Christiano lists in his article on (political) authority in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁰ Recall here that the focus of this essay is the education of children.

¹¹ I follow Winch and Gingell in this division. See also Green (2005) for the division of theoretical and practical authority.

¹² The following remark of Mill (1852), quoted by Callan and Arena (2009, p. 17), is suggestive, ho of an earlier genesis of the pejorative sense of indoctrination: 'What the poor as well as the rich require is not to be indoctrinated, is not to be taught other people's opinions, but to be induced and enabled to think for themselves.'

¹³ See Bailey (2010a, pp. 141–142) for a discussion of the teacher as 'both victim and perpetrator' of indoctrination and of the notion of 'unintended indoctrination'.

¹⁴ I am drawing on my discussion of heresy in 'Between Medieval and Modern Beholding: Heidegger, Deleuze and the Duns Scotus affair' (Tonner, 2013).

¹⁵ I am drawing on the French philosopher François Laruelle's discussion of heresy (Laruelle, 2010, pp. 35–36) and on the notion of 'thick ethical terms' as discussed in Bacon (2012, p. 113). See also Stout (2008, p. 868).

¹⁶ In this assertion I follow Winch and Gingell. See Reese (2019) for a discussion of progressive education from a historical point of view.

¹⁷ I follow Hildebrand (2018) in this reading.

¹⁸ Recently, Tim Ingold, in his *Anthropology And/As Education* (Routledge, 2018), engages with Dewey and Deleuze, if not Peters, in developing his new philosophical anthropology of education.

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How to cite this article: Tonner, P. (2022) Authority: On the reevaluation of a value. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 56, 593–600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12701>