



External Assistance to Autonomy: A Fundamental Conundrum in Human Affairs

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Conceptual Article

Volume 8 Issue 1

Received Date: December 27, 2024

Published Date: February 04, 2025

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000345

Abstract

Kant's notion of autonomy is not only a central concept in pure moral philosophy; it is also a key organizing concept in applied moral philosophy. Across the whole spectrum of human endeavors, there are helping relationships wherein some helpers (e.g., doctors, teachers, social workers, advisors, managers, or organizers) try to help their counterparts (e.g., patients, students, clients, workers, and so forth) to help themselves. But there is a fundamental "helping self-help conundrum" in the very idea of helpers giving *external* assistance to others to become more autonomous, i.e., to become independent of external assistance. This conundrum makes genuine autonomy-enhancing help very subtle, difficult, and scarce. There is, however, a golden thread in applied moral philosophy running from Socrates, Stoics, and Augustine down to modern philosophers such as John Dewey, Leonard Nelson, David Hawkins, and Gilbert Ryle. This tradition appreciates the limitations highlighted by the fundamental conundrum and which argues that genuine help must be *indirect* to create the preconditions and catalyze the processes of the others taking an active and constructive role in helping themselves. The analysis also highlights the "yin and yang" of unhelpful help as social engineering (yang) and "rapacious benevolence" (yin). Iven Illich in particular developed a general critique of the "helping profession," with their professional cartels always finding more "needs" and "disabilities" that need to be attended to, that thereby generate more learned disabilities and disabling help.

Keywords: Autonomy; Helping self-help conundrum; Social engineering; Benevolence

Introduction

The thesis of this paper is firstly that in addition to being a central concept in pure moral philosophy, the notion of autonomy, developed primarily by Immanuel Kant, should also be a key organizing concept in applied moral philosophy. In all the fields of human endeavor, there is some form of a helping or assistance relationship wherein some persons try to help others. A widely accepted norm is the goal of helping

others to become more autonomous as in the common phrase "helping people help themselves." The same idea is expressed in the oft-quoted Chinese proverb that to help others, it is best not to give them fish but to teach them (or rather, help them learn) how to fish for themselves.

The idea is standard fare in the field of economic development. The World Bank, the leading multilateral development agency, begins its Mission Statement with

a dedication to helping people help themselves [www.worldbank.org], and Oxfam, a leading non-governmental organization working on development, states that its “main aim is to help people to help themselves [1].” Perhaps the most successful example of development assistance in modern history was the Marshall Plan which “did what it set out to do—help people help themselves”. American official assistance to developing countries began with Harry Truman’s “Point Four” program in 1949 which was conceived as a worldwide “program of helping underdeveloped nations to help themselves [2].”

But behind this idea—which borders on being a platitude—there hides a conundrum which might be called the *fundamental helping-self-help conundrum*. The second part of our thesis is that this conundrum makes genuine autonomy-enhancing help very subtle, difficult, and scarce. Theories and social programs concerned the helping relationship in any field of human affairs which do not recognize the limitations imposed by this conundrum are “pre-critical” (to adopt a Kantian phrase) and are ultimately unhelpful (in the sense of not enhancing autonomy). The best thinkers in applied moral philosophy, e.g., in the philosophies of education, management, counseling, social work, or community development, are those who recognized the conundrum, who eschewed the naïve or pre-critical direct approaches to help, and who embraced the more subtle, limited, and indirect approaches to helping relationships that could indeed enhance the autonomy of those being helped.

The Fundamental Conundrum

The conundrum is that effective external sources of influence tend to be heteronomous so they will contradict the potential autonomy of those being influenced. The more effective external help is in a direct sense, the more it will override or undercut self-help. In that sense, the cliché “helping people help themselves” borders on being an oxymoron that tries to marry the conflicting notions of heteronomy and autonomy.

Perhaps the most basic field of applied moral philosophy is the philosophy of education. And it is in the philosophy of education where one finds some of the clearest and forceful statements of the fundamental conundrum—such as the statement by the Kantian philosopher, Leonard Nelson.

Here we actually come up against the basic problem of education, which in its general form points to the question: How is education at all possible? If the end of education is rational self-determination, i.e., a condition in which the individual does not allow his behavior to be determined by outside influences but judges and

acts according to his own insight, the question arises: How can we affect a person by outside influences so that he will not permit himself to be affected by outside influences? We must resolve this paradox or abandon the task of education [3].

The analytic philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, was not known for developing Kantian themes but he gave a particularly clear statement of the same conundrum or paradox in education.

We started off with the apparent paradox that though the teacher in teaching is doing something to his pupil, yet the pupil has learned virtually nothing unless he becomes able and ready to do things of his own motion other than what the exported to him. We asked: How in logic can the teacher dragoon his pupil into thinking for himself, impose initiative upon him, drive him into self-motion, conscript him into volunteering, enforce originality upon him, or make him operate spontaneously? The answer is that he cannot—and the reason why we half felt that he must do so was that we were unwittingly enslaved by the crude, semi-hydraulic idea that in essence to teach is to pump propositions, like ‘Waterloo, 1815’ into pupils’ ears, until they regurgitate them automatically.”

John Dewey, perhaps the most influential philosopher of education in the twentieth century, expressed the conundrum as the learning paradox.

It is that no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought [4].

Another example was provided by the Deweyian philosopher of education, David Hawkins.

If we ask how the teacher-learner roles differ from those of master and slave, the answer is that the proper aim of teaching is precisely to affect those inner processes that, as Hegel (and the Stoic philosophers before him) made clear, cannot in principle be made subject to external control, for they are just, in essence, the processes germane to independence, to autonomy, to self-control [5].

The same conundrum or paradox will occur in the helping relationship in other fields of human endeavor. Writing on social and economic development, Julie Fisher elaborates [6] on the conundrum as the “central paradox of social

development,” a phrase she attributes to David McClelland [7]. David Korten also terms it the “central paradox of social development: the need to exert influence over people for the purpose of building their capacity to control their own lives.” And anthropologist and development-assistance practitioner, Thomas Dichter, refers to it as the “Classic development dilemma—how can you help people become self-sufficient?”¹

Unhelpful Help: Autonomy-Thwarting Assistance

The Yin and Yang of Unhelpful Help

It may be useful to establish some general terminology to describe the helping relationship across the many areas of human assistance. On the one side are the *helpers* who are the teachers, social workers, managers, counselors, advisors, or organizers, and on the other side are those who are being helped or assisted who will be called the *doers*. The problem is how can the external helpers provide assistance in such a way that with enhance rather than hinder the autonomy of the doers.

Due to the conundrum involved in external assistance to autonomy, much help or assistance is “unhelpful” in the sense of having the unintended consequence of thwarting self-help and autonomy. These forms of help that override or undercut people’s capacity to help themselves will be called *unhelpful help*. There are similar critiques of “help [that] does not help” which emphasize the demeaning psychological effects of most help [8]. Ivan Illich developed a general theory of how the “helping professions” (e.g., doctors, nurses, lawyers, psychologists, teachers, ministers, aid workers, and social workers in general), each with its cartel of professional associations, can counter-productively generate “needs” to be administered to by the “helpers” and thus lead to learned disability [9-12]. These ideas have been further developed by John McKnight [13] using the notion of “disabling help.”

Broadly speaking, there are two different ways that the helper’s will can supplant the doer’s will to thwart autonomy and self-help:

- the helper, by social engineering, deliberately tries to impose his will on the doer, or
- the helper, by benevolent aid, replaces the doer’s will with her will, perhaps inadvertently.

“Override or undercut” are shorthand for these two conceptually distinct “yin” and “yang” forms of unhelpful help (which may be combined as when benevolence hides the desire to control).

¹ For more on these themes in economic development assistance, see Ellerman 2005.

The Overriding Form of Unhelpful Help: Social Engineering

The “overriding” form of unhelpful help is a form of social engineering. In the field of international development assistance, the intellectual basis for social engineering is usually neo-classical economics. The “helpers” supply a set of instructions or conditionalities about what the doers should be doing and they supply the external carrots and stick “motivation” to follow the blueprint as various forms of aid to *override* the doers’ own motivations. If we use the metaphor of the doers as trying to work their way through a maze, then the helpers as social engineers see themselves as helicoptering over the maze, seeing the path to the goal, and supplying directions (“knowledge”) along with carrots and sticks (“incentives”) to override the doers’ own motivation and push the doers in the right direction.

The social engineering approach has had many critics starting with father of classical economics, Adam Smith.

The man of system...seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chessboard; he does not consider that the pieces upon the chessboard have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chessboard of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might choose to impress upon it [14].

In the modern field of development economics, Albert Hirschman called the social engineering attitude, the “visiting-economist syndrome; that is, ... the habit of issuing peremptory advice and prescription by calling on universally valid economic principles and remedies—be they old or brand new—after a strictly minimal acquaintance with the ‘patient.’”

In the context of a developing country, the mental attitude that Kant called “Tutelage...man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another”, Hirschman called “*dependencia*—perhaps best translated as lack of autonomy—...”. For instance, with

the brightest members of the younger generation almost all going abroad for graduate studies, they assume upon returning (if they return at all) that, having sat at the feet of true knowledge in the university of some advanced country, they no longer need to bother with what their elder compatriots have to offer as a result of experience and mature reflection. ...[Hence they] continue to rely in policy-making on economic and social ideas imported from abroad. It is not an accident that the style is often abetted by the foreign expert who is one of its principal

beneficiaries [15].

The Undercutting Form of Unhelpful Help: Benevolent Aid

The second “undercutting” form of unhelpful help, benevolent aid, occurs when the helper undercuts self-help by inadvertently supplying the motivation for the doer to be in or remain in a condition to receive help. One prominent form is long-term charitable relief. There are always situations that call for various forms of short-term charitable or humanitarian relief. The point is not to oppose short-term relief but to understand how charitable relief operates in the longer-term to erode the doers’ incentives to help themselves—and thus it creates a dependency relationship. Charity corrupts; long-term charity corrupts long term. Such help creates a generalized form of “moral hazard”—a phrase that originally referred to the phenomenon where excessive insurance relieves the insured from taking normal precautions so risky behavior might be increased. The phrase is now applied generally to opportunistic actions undertaken because some arrangement has relieved the doers from bearing the full responsibility for their actions. Benevolent help softens the incentives for people to help themselves.

In the area of international development assistance, Jane Jacobs [16] has noted the failures during the 70s of the World Bank “basic necessities” loans.

The policy has converted client countries into vast charity wards. While this may or may not be justifiable as philanthropy, it is not my definition of meaningful economic development. Nor is it what was ostensibly offered to poor countries, told as they were that money they borrowed to carry out World Bank programs was money to buy development of their economies.

Today this type of development aid-as-disaster-relief is even more prevalent due to the AIDS and malaria crises. Over the course of time, this relief becomes the “unhelpful help” that undermines self-help and can convert countries into “vast charity wards.”

All aid to adults based on the simple condition of “needing aid” runs this risk of displacing the causality. The working assumption is that the condition of needing aid was externally imposed (e.g., a natural disaster); the aid recipient shares no responsibility. But over the course of time, such aid tends to undermine that assumption as the aid becomes a “reward” for staying in the state of needing aid, all of which creates dependency and learned helplessness.

Communities, especially poor ones, can benefit from external assistance, but to rely very much on it creates

a dependency that may prove to be counterproductive. The concomitant paternalism is likely to inhibit self-help and even undermine long-standing patterns of community initiative [16].

Not surprisingly, the debate about moral hazard and dependency in international development assistance had strong parallels with the debates about welfare reform, e.g., see Murray 1984 or Ellwood 1988 on the “helping conundrums” [17,18]. Orlando Patterson [19] noted that the American welfare system has in the past “created serious moral hazards for certain groups” and that “the challenge is to find ways to support individuals in their efforts to reform themselves.”

Kant was emphatic that benevolence could undercut autonomy and lead to a form of despotism.

If a government were founded on the principle of benevolence toward the people, as a *father’s* toward his children—in other words, if it were a *paternalistic government (imperium paternale)* with the subjects, as minors, unable to tell what is truly beneficial or detrimental to them, obliged to wait for the head of state to judge what should constitute their happiness and be kind enough to desire it also—such a government would be the worst conceivable *despotism*.

John Stuart Mill proposed a test to guard against this sort of unhelpful help. He supported help “always provided that the assistance is not such as to dispense with self-help, by substituting itself for the person’s own labour, skill, and prudence, but is limited to affording him a better hope of attaining success by those legitimate means. This accordingly is a test to which all plans of philanthropy and benevolence should be brought [20].

Echoing the notion of “rapacious benevolence” in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* [quoted in Dichter [21]], John Dewey developed a strong critique of paternalistic benevolence.

To ‘make others happy’ except through liberating their powers and engaging them in activities that enlarge the meaning of life is to harm them and to indulge ourselves under cover of exercising a special virtue....To foster conditions that widen the horizon of others and give them command of their own powers, so that they can find their own happiness in their own fashion, is the way of “social” action. Otherwise the prayer of a freeman would be to be left alone, and to be delivered, above all, from ‘reformers’ and ‘kind’ people [22].

Dewey’s thinking about the controlling aspects of paternalism was prompted by the Pullman Strike of 1894

and by the critique of Pullman's paternalism in the Chicago reformer Jane Addams' essay *A Modern Lear* [1965], an essay that Dewey called "one of the greatest things I ever read both as to its form and its ethical philosophy [23]."

As its title suggests, Addams's essay was based on an extended analogy between the relationship between King Lear and his daughter Cordelia and that of Pullman and his workers. Like Lear, Addams suggested, Pullman exercised a self-serving benevolence in which he defined the needs of those who were the objects of this benevolence in terms of his own desires and interests. Pullman built a model company town, providing his workers with what he took to be all the necessities of life. Like Lear, however, he ignored one of the most important human needs, the need for autonomy [24].

Indirect Enabling Help to Active Doers

The Indirectness of Autonomy-Enhancing Help

The norm and thus the rhetoric of "helping people help themselves" is widely adopted in the helping professions and by most aid agencies. But a failure to appreciate the subtlety and difficulty of genuine autonomy-enhancing assistance (due to the fundamental conundrum) leads to an almost equally widespread practice of the various forms of unhelpful help. Hence the *via negativa* of focusing on the forms of unhelpful help is often a useful way to try to improve the helping relationships in the various fields of human interaction.

But at some point, a more positive theory is required to describe what would be an autonomy-enhancing approach to the helping relationship. This theory could not take the form of a "12 point program" that could be "implemented"; otherwise we are back to the social engineering form of unhelpful help. The *via positiva* must be based on more general guidelines and methods, rather than blueprints, and illustrated with examples (like the old Chinese fish example).

From the side of the helpers, the basic point is that autonomy-enhancing help must be indirect, not direct—as it is the directness of much help that runs afoul of the fundamental conundrum.

The best kind of help to others, whenever possible, is indirect, and consists in such modifications of the conditions of life, of the general level of subsistence, as enables them independently to help themselves [22].

In order to be consistent with the doer's autonomy, the help must be enabling but not directive; it should put fuel in the gas tank but not try to take over the steering wheel.

For instance, in the field of development assistance, Thomas Dichter emphasizes this indirectness and contrasts it with the doing-projects mode of so much conventional social-engineering development assistance.

The keys to development increasingly lie in the realm of the policies, laws, and institutions of a society, and to change these requires indirect kinds of approaches—stimulating, fostering, convincing—rather than doing things directly. Why is it, then, that the majority of development assistance organizations continue to "do" things? And why do more and more come into existence every day with funding to do still more things [21]?

The philosophical basis for this indirectness is the basic fact that minds cannot be manipulated like physical objects. For instance, development projects may have started by engineering hydroelectric dams and roads, but as development assistance moved on to the more subtle matters of "policies, law, and institutions", the latter are based on human beliefs, attitudes, and habits which cannot be directly engineered in a similar manner.

The necessity of the indirect approach is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the ideas of the best thinkers on strategy—even military strategy which one might expect a direct physical approach to predominate if anywhere. Liddell Hart's classic book *Strategy* evolved from a 1941 book entitled *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*. Hart saw the indirect approach that he recommended in military strategy was in fact part of a much broader indirect approach which could be applied elsewhere in human affairs.

With deepening reflection,... I began to realize that the indirect approach had a much wider application—that it was a law of life in all spheres: a truth of philosophy. Its fulfilment was seen to be the key to practical achievement in dealing with any problem where the human factor predominates, and a conflict of wills tends to spring from an underlying concern for interests. ...The indirect approach is as fundamental to the realm of politics as to the realm of sex. In commerce, the suggestion that there is a bargain to be secured is far more potent than any direct appeal to buy. ... This idea of the indirect approach is closely related to all problems of the influence of mind upon mind—the most influential factor in human history [26].

Hart traces these ideas back to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (circa 400 B.C.): "On reading the book I found many other points that coincided with my own lines of thought, especially his constant emphasis on doing the unexpected and pursuing the indirect approach [27]."

Another unexpected source is the study of biological learning mechanisms, where the idea of the indirect approach emerges at a more basic level than in the philosophy of human education. There are two very different ways in which teaching and learning can take place. Both ways occur biologically if we view what is transmitted through the genetic mechanism from an organism to its offspring as the biological version of what is transmitted from the teacher (helper) to the learner (doer). For many organisms, insects being a good example, the specific behaviors (that are fitted to certain stable environments) are transmitted by the genes from parents to offspring. The individual organism does not engage in learning from the environment as the appropriate behaviors are already determined or “hard-wired” by the genes. Thus any learning takes place only at the species level, not at the individual insect level.

Norbert Wiener called that type of learning “phylogenetic learning” as opposed to “ontogenetic learning” [28,29]. For instance, insects essentially have only phylogenetic learning whereas the mammals (“higher animals”) have both phylogenetic learning and ontogenetic learning.

The very physical development of the insect conditions it to be an essentially stupid and unlearning individual, cast in a mold which cannot be modified to any great extent.... On the other hand, ... the human individual [is] capable of vast learning and study, ...[and] is physically equipped, as the ant is not, for this capacity. Variety and possibility are inherent in the human sensorium—and are indeed the key to man’s most noble flights—because variety and possibility belong to the very structure of the human organism [29].

In animals capable of ontogenetic learning, the genes do not transmit only the specific behaviors that might be fitted to certain environment; the genes also transmit learning mechanisms to the offspring. The animal then interacts with, adapts to, and learns from the environment. In this manner, the animal can learn much more complex activities in a wide variety of environments than could possibly be transmitted directly by the genes. Indeed, the adjectives “direct” and “indirect” can be used to describe these two approaches to learning.

[The learning mechanism’s] peculiarity is that the gene-pattern delegates part of its control over the organism to the environment. Thus, it does not specify in detail how a kitten shall catch a mouse, but provides a learning mechanism and a tendency to play, so that it is *the mouse* which teaches the kitten the finer points of how to catch mice.

This is regulation, or adaptation, by the indirect method. The gene-pattern does not, as it were, dictate, but puts the kitten into the way of being able to form its own adaptation, guided in detail by the environment [30].

The direct method (where genes transmit behaviors) and the indirect method (where the genes transmit a learning capacity) are essentially the genetic versions of two basic pedagogies of passive or active learning.

These two methods are also described in the old Chinese story that giving a man a fish only feeds him for a day while helping him learn how to fish feeds him for a lifetime. Ashby develops a similar illustrative story. Suppose that a father only had ten minutes to teach his child the meanings of English words. Using the direct method, the father would teach the child the meaning of a certain small number of words.

The indirect method is for the father to spend the ten minutes showing the child how to use a dictionary. At the end of the ten minutes the child is, in one sense, not better off; for not a single word has been added to his vocabulary. Nevertheless the second method has a fundamental advantage; for in the future the number of words that the child can understand is no longer bounded by the limit imposed by the ten minutes. The reason is that if the information about meanings has to come through the father directly, it is limited to ten-minutes’ worth; in the indirect method the information comes partly through the father and partly through another channel (the dictionary) that the father’s ten-minute act has made available [30].

The Doer’s Active Constructive Role

For autonomy-respecting help in general, one key is, as we have noted, that the helper needs to adopt an indirect approach. On the doer’s side, the key is for the doer to be active and constructive, rather than passive and receptive.

In the indirect method, the teacher fosters and awakens an intrinsic desire for learning on the part of the learner who then takes the active role in (re)discovering and appropriating knowledge.

The aim of teaching is not only to transmit information, but also to transform students from passive recipients of other people’s knowledge into active constructors of their own and other’s knowledge. The teacher cannot transform without the student’s active participation, of course. Teaching is fundamentally about creating the pedagogical, social, and ethical conditions under which students agree to take charge of their own learning, individually and collectively [31].

In the indirect method, the teacher does not transmit knowledge, but transmits or arranges the learning experience that “puts the [learner] into the way of being able to form [the learner’s] own adaptation, guided in detail by the environment.” Rousseau said the teacher “ought to give no precepts at all; he ought to make them be discovered [32].” Ortega Y Gasset makes a point similar to Ashby’s: “He who wants to teach a truth should place us in the position to discover it ourselves [33].”

In the area of community organizing, Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School makes a similar point: “one of the best ways of educating people is to give them an experience that embodies what you are trying to teach [34].”

Classical Roots of Autonomy-Respecting Assistance

The Socratic Method

Socrates is perhaps the best starting point. Socrates did not teach, but those who engaged him in dialogue were engaged in learning. Socrates was the quintessential cognitive helper whose aim was to help others, the doers, to learn to think for themselves. Many people think rather passively reflecting conformity to external opinions and values. Socrates exemplified critical reason that could take up the common opinions and values, and critically examine them to see if they could qualify as knowledge and virtue. But he did so in an indirect way by asking questions which would spur the learners to re-examine their own thoughts. Knowledge, for Socrates, was not opinion that happened to be true.

What distinguishes knowledge from opinion is neither its truth nor belief in it but simply the knower’s ability to account for the truth of what he holds to be true. For Socrates, to know something means to be able to give reasons for it, to defend it by rational argument and to demonstrate it to others. It means to hold something not as an unconnected isolated piece of information unsupported by anything else, but to hold it as a conclusion fastened by a long chain of reasoning to an unshakable foundation in first principles whose truth cannot be questioned. In contrast to opinion (right or wrong), knowledge is something reflected upon, something reasoned, criticized, and argued, something that is not merely accepted on someone else’s authority but appropriated by the knower himself through rational reflection, made his own by questioning and accepted on his own authority as a reflective human being [35].

It is only by such critical examination that a true belief can be appropriated as knowledge and made one’s own. And only by the relentless examination of acquired values could

one expect to find and appropriate the knowledge of virtue. By living the examined life of reason, the learners would come to know themselves and to be autonomous.

The Path of Stoicism

Many paths diverged from Socrates and Plato: Aristotle and his school, the Sceptics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. For the purposes of understanding indirect autonomy-enhancing approaches, the golden thread runs through the Greek and Roman Stoicism of Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius (although the thread of neo-Platonism will be picked up later).

In this example of the helper-doer relationship, Socrates is replaced by the Stoic teacher who functions as a physician for the soul of his interlocutors, the doers who seek to follow this path. Yet a problem did arise in the transition from Socrates to the Stoics, a problem that has and perhaps will always tend to undermine the strengths of the indirect approach to teaching.

Epigrams, sayings, and writings accumulated from the sages of the past. Instead of developing their own critical facilities or the autonomy of their wills, students could now memorize the “lessons” of Socrates and the previous Stoic philosophers (e.g., like the “checklists” or “blueprints” for “doing the right thing”) and then regurgitate them with flourish and skill to become ‘sages’ themselves. For this *modus operandi*, no indirect pedagogy was needed; the direct approach of indoctrination in the “lessons” and “great books” of the past would suffice. Thus one finds Epictetus going to great lengths verbally lambasting his students for these pretensions. Seneca likewise chides his correspondent Lucilius on the desire to accumulate sayings.

It is disgraceful that a man who is old or in sight of old age should have a wisdom deriving solely from his notebooks. ‘Zeno said this.’ And what have you said? ‘Cleanthes said that.’ What have you said? How much longer are you going to serve under others’ orders? ...

To remember is to safeguard something entrusted to your memory, whereas to know, by contrast, is actually to make each item your own, and not to be dependent on some original and be constantly looking to see what the master said [36].

The goal of the indirect method is the self-transformation of the learner, not to make the learner into “an instrument for what others have to say” [36]. But the written word (or remembered spoken word) always provides the temptation to revert to the easier direct method of teaching so that the pupils might at least display some of the outward behaviors (e.g., passing tests) that might accompany learning.

Learning in Neo-Platonism

There is a stream of thought supporting indirect methods that comes from Plato more than Socrates. Plato argued that, as is seen most clearly in mathematics, concepts do not come from experience but arise within the mind itself. The Platonic Ideas or Forms are innate in the mind and arise in consciousness through a process of recollection or reminiscence perhaps prompted by our sense experience. The theme of innate mental structures and mechanisms triggered—but not controlled—by experience has percolated down through Western thought (e.g., Plotinus, Augustine, the Cambridge Platonists, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, and Humboldt) to find modern expression in the school of generative linguistics [37].

For our purposes, it is sufficient to see how the theory of the mind as an active generative organ supports the indirect approach, while the opposing theory of the mind as a passive *tabula rasa* or wax block supports the direct approach. Plato had some passive images of the mind as a wax block [*Theaetetus* 191-5] or a mirror or reflector [*Timaeus* 71]. But Socrates [*Symposium* 175d] noted that wisdom was not the sort of thing that could flow as through pipes “from the one that was full to the one that was empty.” In a direct statement about education, Plato uses the cave allegory where the soul turns away from the shadows to see the Forms.

If this is true, then, we must conclude that education is not what it is said to be by some, who profess to put knowledge into a soul which does not possess it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes. On the contrary, our own account signifies that the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with; and that, just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendour which we have called the Good.

In Plotinus the Platonic process of recollection becomes an explicitly active process represented by metaphors such as an overflowing fountain or a radiating light.

In discussing the human perception of the divine overflow, Plotinus explicitly rejected the concept of sensations as ‘imprints’ or ‘seal-impressions’ made on a passive mind, and substituted the view of the mind as an act and a power which ‘gives a radiance out of its own store’ to the objects of sense [38].

The opposing metaphors of the mind as a passive mirror or as an active lamp correlate with two opposite pedagogies. The supporters as well as the critics of the passive ‘mirror’

pedagogy used various models of the student as being essentially passive: a wax tablet on which knowledge is stamped, a mirror or reflector for knowledge (Plato, Locke), a vessel or cistern into which knowledge is poured (Cudworth, Coleridge, Dewey), a phonographic record onto which knowledge is recorded (Dewey, Gramsci, Ryle), and now in the computer age, “a sort of printout in the minds of students” [5]. The teacher supplies the knowledge that is imprinted into the student, crammed into the student as into a bag (Jacques Maritain), forced into the student through a funnel (Martin Buber), drilled into the student as into hard and resisting rock (Dewey), or forced into the student using a grease gun (Douglas McGregor).

For instance, the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth writing in the late 1600’s noted that “knowledge was not to be poured into the soul like liquor, but rather to be invited and gently drawn forth from it; nor the mind so much to be filled therewith from without, like a vessel, as to be kindled and awakened.” Cudworth [39] also saw clearly the active nature of learning: “knowledge is an inward and active energy of the mind itself, and the displaying of its own innate vigour from within, whereby it doth conquer, master, and command its objects.”

The active-learning ‘lamp’ pedagogy sees the student’s mind as taking a more active role represented by metaphors such as lamp, fountain, or projector—or often by organic metaphors of a growing plant. The teacher then has a more subtle indirect role of a guide, coach, or midwife to foster and nurture the student’s active search for and appropriation of knowledge. Some of the subtlety of the teacher’s indirect role can be expressed using the metaphor of the internal fountain. Impediments can obscure or block the flow of the fountain (like turning off a faucet or hose). External enabling help can then unblock the fountain or open the faucet but the subtle point is that external help cannot directly supply the pressure to make the fountain flow. That pressure has to come from within. This is often expressed with the can’t-push-on-a-string idea or the metaphor: “While we may lead a horse to water we cannot make him drink [4].”

The Learning Paradox and Augustine

The insights of a philosophical tradition are sometimes expressed in a deliberately provocative slogan, epigram, or paradox. One of the striking epigrams of neo-Platonism is the thesis that “no man ever does or can teach another anything [40].” This epigram is a variation on Meno’s paradox or the learning paradox, which are cognitive versions of the fundamental conundrum. In the *Meno* dialogue, Socrates attempts to indirectly ‘teach’ a slave boy some truths of geometry. Socrates claims that people cannot be directly taught such truths, they must recollect them.

One interpretation of Meno's paradox is that *a priori* truths such as the truths of geometry must be recollected since no amount of empirical investigation can verify the truths of mathematics. But that is a paltry interpretation; Augustine (who 'Christianized' neo-Platonism) and others gave a stronger interpretation to the claim that "no man ever does or can teach another anything."

In *De Magistro* (The Teacher), Augustine developed an argument (in the form of a dialogue with his son Adeodatus) that as teachers teach, it is only the student's internal appropriation of what is taught that gives understanding and knowledge.

Then those who are called pupils consider within themselves whether what has been explained has been said truly; looking of course to that interior truth, according to the measure of which each is able. Thus they learn,.... But men are mistaken, so that they call those teachers who are not, merely because for the most part there is no delay between the time of speaking and the time of cognition. And since after the speaker has reminded them, the pupils quickly learn within, they think that they have been taught outwardly by him who prompts them.

The basic point is the active role of the mind in *generating* understanding. This is clear even at the simple level of understanding spoken words. We hear the 'auditory sense data' of words in a completely strange language as well as the words in our native language. But the strange words 'bounce off' our minds with no resultant understanding while the words in a familiar language prompt an internal process of generating a meaning so that we understand the words.

Nothing can be present in the mind (*Seele*) that has not originated from one's own activity. Moreover understanding and speaking are but different effects of the selfsame power of speech. Speaking is never comparable to the transmission of mere matter (*Stoff*). In the person comprehending as well as in the speaker, the subject matter must be developed by the individual's own innate power. What the listener receives is merely the harmonious vocal stimulus [41].

Augustine gave a clear expression in the neo-Platonist tradition of that point which has been reproduced in modern neuroscience; what first looks like a direct transmission or instruction is really a process of triggering or selecting an internal process to be differentially amplified.

According to this analysis, extrinsic signals convey information not so much in themselves, but by virtue of how they modulate the intrinsic signals exchanged within

a previously experienced neural system. In other words, a stimulus acts not so much by adding large amounts of extrinsic information that need to be processed as it does by amplifying the intrinsic information resulting from neural interactions selected and stabilized by memory through previous encounters with the environment [42].

Thus the visual stimulus of a Chinese character can be meaningful to one and meaningless to another "even if the extrinsic information conveyed to the retina is the same."

This simple example provides one of the most accessible examples of an autonomy-respecting intervention. Instead of transmitting or disseminating understanding from the helper to the doer, the actions of the helper (speaker) stimulate and catalyze internal processes in the doer to re-produce the understanding. The direct approach misrepresents this process using the metaphor of "transmitting" the material from the teacher to the student.

These examples also serve to illustrate that autonomy does not imply isolation from any external influences. The common element in the various interpretations of the general learning paradox, "no man ever does or can teach another anything," is that the external influence from the speaker-teacher to the listener-learner is not controlling and yet serves to stimulate the active role of the mind in generating an understanding of what was received. The external transmission prompts and guides the internal process; the internal processing appropriates what is received in terms of prior experience and makes it our own.

Concluding Summary

We have argued that Kant's notion of autonomy is not only a central concept in pure moral philosophy but also provides the golden thread running from Socrates down to the present in the applied moral philosophy of what is broadly termed the helping relationship. Again and again, pre-critical thinking consciously or unconsciously models the helping relationship along engineering or paternalistic lines—both of which run afoul of the fundamental conundrum of external assistance to enhance autonomy. The "golden thread" is based on an appreciation of the basic conundrum which calls for indirect and enabling approaches to helping people help themselves across the whole spectrum of human relationships.

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