Julian Culp*
What Can we Learn from 'Postmodern' Critiques of Education for Autonomy?

Abstract: Lyotard defines being postmodern as an 'incredulity toward meta-narratives'. Such incredulity includes, in particular, skepticism vis-à-vis Enlightenment ideals like autonomy. Motivated by such skepticism, several educational scholars put into question education for autonomy as it is practiced in the formal settings of national school systems. More specifically, they criticize that practices of autonomy education can have certain normalizing and ideological effects that undermine the aim of creating autonomous subjects. This article examines these critiques of education for autonomy and argues that they are best understood as calls for reforming educational practices, and not as outright rejections of education for autonomy. Thus, since the allegedly 'postmodern' critiques of autonomy education cannot be plausibly understood as radical ruptures with Enlightenment ideals, the article concludes that these critiques represent (merely) constructive self-critical reflections on what Habermas dubbed the 'unfinished project of modernity'.

Keywords: Autonomy, education, post-modernism, ideology, schooling

1 Introduction

My first academic paper in the area of philosophy of education dealt with peace education in the context of the Israeli-Palestine and other intractable conflicts (cf. Culp 2017). In this paper, which I presented at Al-Quds university's Abu Dis campus in the West Bank, I argued that peace education could be an apt instrument for resolving intractable conflicts, at least in the long run. Peace education, I argued, could help cultivating in the younger generation virtues such as tolerance and forgivefulness—virtues that would be helpful for at last resolving conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian one. I considered my argument to be so obvious that the only objection that I expected to receive was that the argument did not contain anything counter-intuitive. However, the reactions from the audience, the great majority of which were Palestinians, were extremely critical of my argument,

*Corresponding author: Julian Culp, Goethe University of Frankfurt, e-mail: culp@uni-frankfurt.de

and—to my surprise—precisely because they found my argument to be counter-intuitive.[1] Rather than viewing peace education as the obvious solution to an intractable conflict, several scholars criticized my view on the ground that such an education would actually keep the conflict going. They argued that peace education would be an ideology that helped covering up the further entrenchment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their critique, more specifically, was that it contributed to a false understanding of the conflict, according to which serious efforts were being undertaken to find ways of solving the conflict. This false understanding, the Palestinian colleagues argued, would help perpetuating the existing power asymmetries, because it prevented the concerned parties to take truly effective steps for addressing the conflict. For by being taught that peace will come about soon, the conflicting parties would fail to decry properly the injustice of the status quo. If normative theorizing about education were at all appropriate under the highly non-ideal condition of an occupation that has lasted for half a century, then discussions of education for resistance would be the only suitable candidate. In other words, in an unjust society justice-promoting education must somehow teach *opposing* the values or norms that the socio-political order affirms. Peace education allegedly fails in this regard, however. It suggests that compliance with these socio-political values or norms is legitimate, because they instantiate a just or peaceful order that should not be resisted. Thereby the (normative-theoretical) promotion of peace education under unjust socio-political conditions overlooks the authoritarian threat of education as indoctrination, which, in its most extreme version, involves the formation of a character that uncritically complies with the given norms of a socio-political order.

Whatever the merits of this critique for my argument in defense of peace education may be, it certainly has triggered in me a caution vis-à-vis simple-minded accounts of education that regard it as panacea for existing social problems.[2] In particular, it occurred to me that not only peace education, but also *education for autonomy* could potentially be self-undermining. That is, even an apparently innocuous education for autonomy may involve or engender a certain type of authoritarian indoctrination, despite its explicit and decided claims to the contrary. If education for autonomy suffered from this problem, then this would be quite remarkable indeed. For, on the one hand, the capacity for autonomy is widely considered to be a core characteristic of the self-understanding of members of liberal

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1 Among these scholars were George Giacaman (Birzeit University), Mudar Kassis (Birzeit University), Muhammad Ali Khalidi (York University/Canada), Sari Nusseibeh (Al Quds University) and Said Zeedani (Al Quds University).

2 The problem of exaggerating the importance and potential of education is a familiar one, in particular in educational studies in German language; cf. Bollenbeck 1996.

societies (cf. Taylor 1985; 1991). On the other hand, ever since the Enlightenment period education for autonomy has been regarded as one of the most important, if not the most important, normative end of education.[3] Therefore, if it turned out that the actual practices of education for autonomy had certain side effects that undermined rather than promoted the realization of autonomy, then this would be a very serious challenge to many of the formal educational practices of liberal societies.

In my search for philosophical reflections on such side effects, I eventually encountered several works of educational scholars who publish almost exclusively in German. These scholars critically reflect upon the practices of autonomy education and, indeed, primarily regard them as problems for the realization of autonomy.[4] These scholars include Meyer-Drawe (1990; 1996), Masschelein (2003), Brinkmann (1999), Rieger-Ladich (2002), and Ricken (2006).[5] Their critiques of autonomy education are 'postmodern' to the extent that they take up a critical stance vis-à-vis the ideals of the Enlightenment and Western modernity, and hold that there is no way in which one could come up with a universally binding true or right account of autonomy education. Insofar as they take up such a stance, they pursue a *negative* critique of Enlightenment ideals, where this means that they offer reasons for doubting their validity, but do not suggest any alternative, 'true' or 'right' way of conceptualizing and realizing these ideals (Burbules 2009, 525; cf. also Lyotard 1984; Uscher/Edwards 1994, 29, 31). Thus they display an "incredulity toward meta-narratives", which is the attitude that Lloytard defines as the core characteristic of being postmodern (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). This understanding of postmodernism thus consists of a rupture with the Enlightenment ideals that have characterized the normative aspirations of modernity (cf. Jameson 1984).

This way of understanding postmodernism is contested, however, since another potential understanding does not center on the negative critique of Enlightenment ideals, but simply refers to a self-critique of the Enlightenment (Bauman 1992, 102–103; 1991, 272). The point of such a self-critique is a more constructive one, as it does not purport to put into question the Enlightenment ideals without providing any sort of guidance as to how one could replace them. Rather, the mo-

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3 For an overview and categorization of arguments in favor of compulsory autonomy education in contemporary Anglophone philosophy of education, cf. Schinkel 2010.

4 These scholars also find the very idea and conceptualization of autonomy problematic, but in this article I focus on the ways in which they criticize the *practices* of autonomy education.

5 Further articles that articulate this kind of critique can be found in the volumes Marotzki/ Sünker 1992; 1993; Koch/Marotzki/Peukert 1993; Ricken/Rieger-Ladich 2004; Ricken/Balzer 2012. For an overview of the quite limited reception of postmodern theorizing in Anglophone philosophy of education, see Burbules 2009.

tivation is to improve these ideals by way of drawing out certain limitations, and then proposing conceptual and practical ways in which to conceive and realize them in a more compelling manner. In that sense the 'post' in 'postmodernism' merely refers to a *late* or *advanced* stage of modernity (cf. Toulmin 1990). In this late or advanced stage of 'modern' normative thinking, by which I simply mean normative theorizing that is informed by Enlightenment ideals, modernity itself becomes the subject of critique relative to its own internal standards. However, such a self-critique does not result in a rejection of the project of the Enlightenment and its internal standards, because it seeks to improve them. Thus it seems more fitting to conceive such a critique as an attempt to complete—to put it in Habermasian terms—the unfinished project of modernity (cf. Habermas 1987). I therefore reserve the term postmodernism to the first meaning according to which it means to imply an aporetic rupture or break with the Enlightenment and its normative standards.

In the remainder of this paper I pursue the aim of distilling constructive insights that can be gleaned from the arguments of postmodern educational scholars against education for autonomy. In that manner I mean to transform negative postmodern critiques into constructive self-reflexive critiques. More specifically, I will discuss two problematic ways in which autonomy education can miss its target and undermine rather than promote autonomy. In *section 2* I will discuss the problem of *normalization*, which is the concern that education for autonomy can render mandatory a certain way of relating to oneself and to the world. Thereby, the critics argue, education for autonomy coerces individuals to understand themselves in particular ways, and fails to achieve its actual point of enabling individuals to decide for themselves how to conceive of their personal identity. In *section 3* I examine the further problem that education for autonomy can become an *ideology*, namely by inoculating false beliefs about socio-political reality in the younger generation. As such, so the critical argument goes, it can function as an instrument of the powerful to further their interests. *Section 4* concludes.

2 Normalization

Education for autonomy in the way it has been conceived by Enlightenment thinkers is meant to be a liberating practice. The Enlightenment motto 'sapere aude'—according to which one should have the courage to think by oneself—expresses the *epistemic ideal* that individuals should not subject themselves

unreflectedly to others' normative authority.[6] Individuals should become able to consider themselves whether claims regarding what constitutes a good life, what is morally right, and which empirical facts hold true withstand their own critical scrutiny. This does not exclude the possibility that within certain circumstances individuals can and perhaps even should defer their judgment to certain authorities.[7] The epistemic ideal does mean, however, that the reference to the mere fact that a certain belief forms part of a certain tradition of belief—whether of a religious, a scientific, or some other kind—is by itself insufficient to ground the normative validity of that claim.

This epistemic ideal is also tied to a particular *social ideal* that holds that the place of an individual within the socio-political order should not be regarded as fixed or natural (cf. Taylor 1985; 1991). It should be up to the individual herself to determine which particular social role she will eventually occupy within the social hierarchy.[8] Hence education for autonomy pursues the purpose of enabling individuals to think for themselves and reflect in an unbounded manner which social role they would like to occupy.

Postmodern educational scholars argue, however, that despite its emancipatory goal, education for autonomy can have normalizing effects that undermine the realization of autonomy. On a descriptive level, the normalizing effects refer to the fact that education for autonomy presents the autonomous life as the 'normal' or 'standard' way of leading one's life. That is to say that the preparation for an autonomous life suggests that this way of living is 'right', 'correct', or 'best'. In particular, it regards the self as one that is confronted with the unavoidable choice of determining the relative value of her personal ends. Education for autonomy thus has the effect of rendering other ways of life that are not autonomous in this sense as 'wrong', 'incorrect', or 'suboptimal'. Thereby, paradoxically, education for autonomy unfolds a heteronomous pressure to lead an autonomous life.[9] This heteronomy results from the fact that through such education individuals learn—as if it were a matter of fact—that they *must* lead autonomous lives; they have no choice but to think of their ideal individual personalities as ones that they

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6 Cf. Kant 1996[1784], who relies on Horace's saying in the *Book of Epodes*.
7 The conditions as to when such deference is justified or mandatory, concerns the so-called novice-expert problem in social epistemology.
8 Education should thus facilitate the right to an open future; cf. Feinberg 2007.
9 Another way of putting the critique is that education for autonomy always proceeds in a culturally specific way, which means that the cultural context will always influence the way in which autonomy is exercised. This, in turn, puts into question the idea that an individual could determine independently, from the bottom-up, so to speak, which particular ends to value and to pursue.

have autonomously chosen. Masschelein therefore argues that autonomy education is *not* the "anti-thesis of domination", but rather the "most advanced form of social power".[10] Education for autonomy contributes to a form of social power that is exercised not through force, but through the diffusion of a certain normative idea—namely that of autonomy—as to how individuals should behave.[11] In that way education for autonomy represents a "soft disciplining" that has the goal of transforming as early as possible "external into internal regulation" (Pongratz 1990, 305, trans. J. C.). Educational institutions become dispositives of power that govern individuals.

This critique is compelling since it is indeed the case that education for autonomy puts pressure on individuals to accept the idea that an individually chosen life plan is of intrinsic value for leading a flourishing life. Some members of liberal societies, however, might not want to ascribe (eudaimonistic) value to a way of life on the ground that it has been individually chosen. This is why the late Rawls (2001, 156), for example, argues that educational practices should not teach this particular understanding of individual autonomy. I agree with Rawls that there is indeed a convincing case against this kind of autonomy education to be made. After all, why should everyone *have to* lead an autonomous life in order to render their lives flourishing ones? Consider that some individuals of a 'traditional' cultural background embrace a conception of the good according to which their flourishment does not consist of striving to realize their individually selected, *personal* ends. Rather than pursuing the ends that individuals associate with the core of their personal identity, individuals may want to pursue those ends that they already find developed in their religious community, their family or in some other group. MacIntyre (1981, 205), for one, argues that such an individual might hold that "the story of my life […] is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity". While individuals that reason like this endorse their ends on reflection, they also recognize the contingency of embracing these particular ends rather than others. Yet they do not believe that this contingency implies that they have to choose individually between these and some other ends. As Sandel (1982, 52) puts it, they do not "choose" or "invent" their identity; they "discover" their identity. They acknowledge that rather than trying to articulate an individual conception of the good themselves, they simply recognize as valid that particular conception of the good to which they already have

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10 Masschelein 2003, 130, my trans. In light of this 'social power' it is necessary to think of a "practical attitude that allows retrieving oneself from the imperative to relate oneself in a particular way to oneself and to others" (Ibid., 130, trans. J. C.).

11 On the way in which power is exercised through the articulation and diffusion of reasons, cf. Forst 2015.

found themselves being committed by virtue of their membership within their particular, 'traditional' communities. MacIntyre (1981, 204–205) explains that an individual that ascribes special value to such traditional communities may reason as follows:

> "I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be good for someone who inhabits these roles. As such, I inhabit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations."

If education for autonomy would engender a kind of normalization that would deprive individuals of the liberty of such a traditional way of life, then, indeed, this provided a good reason for questioning this sort of education for autonomy.[12] This is because, I maintain, thinking otherwise would constitute a certain kind of autonomy *perfectionism*, according to which there is an intrinsic value in pursuing an individually chosen way of life that involves distancing oneself from traditional or communal values.[13] But such autonomy perfectionism would thereby downgrade those conceptions of the good that do not consist of such a distancing. Therefore it is incompatible with the recognition of what Rawls (2005, xvii) has called the 'fact of reasonable pluralism' about the good life, which I do not defend but simply take for granted here. In that way I follow Christman (2004, 152) who also emphasizes the importance of endorsing a conception of autonomy that is not excessively critical of traditional or communal values:

> "Liberation from oppression must be undertaken within a normative framework that leaves the most room for disparate voices, even those who endorse traditional and authoritarian value systems, for it must be accepted, in principle at least, that many women and marginalized people will embrace traditional conceptions of social life and cultural roles that offend western, liberal ideals of individual self-sufficiency."

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12 If, as it is often the case, certain traditional forms of life reproduce certain injustices, however, then it is indeed problematic not to object from a normative point of view to individuals' adherence to such traditional values or norms. For example, traditional forms of life might maintain a certain division of labor along gender lines that women have reason to object. But in such a case the critique should concentrate on the specific problem of unjustifiably imposing an objectionable form of life upon women. The fact that some individuals embrace the ends of their traditions instead of developing anew their individual conception of the good is not objectionable per se. It is an impermissible inference to maintain that all traditional forms of life are objectionable simply because some of them are.

13 By 'perfectionism' I mean the view that values (about the good life) can be (objectively) valid for a person irrespective of the judgment of that person about these values. Cf. Christman 2004, 152, who refers to Hurka 2003, 3.

Hence I agree with the postmodern educational scholars that it is problematic to criticize autonomy education on the ground that it is based on a contested, highly individualistic understanding of the good life that identifies human flourishing in the pursuit of individually chosen life plans. But there is an important difference between criticizing this particular form of education for autonomy, and criticizing the practice of autonomy education in general, whatever the particular understanding of autonomy is that it aims at realizing. Thus consider, for example, that education for autonomy may not have the furthering of *personal ethical autonomy* in the sense just described as its goal, but *personal moral autonomy*.[14] Personal moral autonomy means the capacity to act on moral reasons and follow moral norms and thus, like personal ethical autonomy, is an instance of the concept of autonomy, which I understand as the capacity to follow reasons (cf. Forst 2012, ch. 6). When differentiating between 'moral' and 'ethical' autonomy, I employ a distinction that Habermas (1993) and Forst (2002, 258–263) articulate and emphasize. As Forst (2012, 15) explains, "while morally answering the question 'What should I do?' requires considering the legitimate claims of all morally affected persons, in ethical contexts it is posed as a question about the values, ideals, and 'final ends' that constitute a good life and how this is then to be realized". Accordingly, by personal ethical autonomy I mean to refer to the capacity of reflexively identifying and pursuing one's personal ends—either as an individual or as a member of a certain association. According to this understanding of autonomy individuals are autonomous when they determine the ends that are constitutive of their identity or their conception of the good and then aim at realizing these ends. By contrast personal moral autonomy refers to the capacity to act morally in the sense of being able to act according to moral norms that are justified by the criteria of reciprocity and generality (cf. Forst 2002, 268). The criterion of reciprocity can be defined more concretely by distinguishing between the *reciprocity of content* and the *reciprocity of reasons*. The former requires accepting the duty to fulfill oneself the specific claims that one also expects others to meet. The latter forbids stipulating that others must endorse the same interests and values as one's own, and it also forbids postulating some objective ethical truth about the good life that is in fact not intersubjectively accepted (cf. Forst 2012, 6, 20, 49; 2002, 39). The exercise of personal moral autonomy does not pursue the realization of a particular conception of the good. It aims at avoiding immoral behavior, which consists of arbi-

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14 In this article I argue that the normalization critique fails when applied to education for moral autonomy. By doing so, however, I do not mean to suggest that education for moral autonomy is the only form of autonomy education to which this critique does not apply successfully. For example, I believe that this critique also does not affect education for public autonomy, which I understand as the preparation to participate in democratic decision-making.

trary interferences in one's own life and that of others, where interference counts as arbitrary when it cannot be justified by the criteria of reciprocity and generality. Hence the point of personal moral autonomy is not a 'positive' one, according to which personal moral autonomy matters for pursuing one's individual ends. Rather, its point is a 'negative' one, according to which education for personal autonomy is necessary in order to reduce and perhaps even eliminate instances of immoral behavior in the form of arbitrary interpersonal interferences.[15]

Now, if education for autonomy has the realization of personal moral autonomy as its goal, then the normalizing effects of this kind of education can no longer be criticized in the way that they can when education aims at facilitating personal ethical autonomy. This is because this form of normalization merely prepares individuals to act morally. Such preparation is necessary for avoiding interpersonal arbitrary interference in their own and other individuals' lives. Therefore, the normalization that results from this sort of education for personal moral autonomy does not require individuals to follow an individually chosen conception of the good. It does not demand of individuals to conceive of themselves in a way such that they *have to* come up with individualistically developed conceptions of the good life. Since education for personal moral autonomy does not involve normalization of this sort, but, by contrast, is meant to enable individuals to exercise their moral autonomy in a way that allows them to resist the imposition of such a self-understanding, this kind of autonomy education does not suffer from this deficiency.

In response to this way of reasoning, however, some postmodern educational scholars might want to object that any form of normalization is problematic, simply because it involves the setting of a particular norm with which all are expected to comply. It is very questionable, however, whether it makes sense to criticize an educational practice simply because it has such a normalizing effect. Consider, for example, an educational practice that effectively taught everyone to be honest. If being honest thereby turned out to become the default norm, would that be something problematic? Indeed, as the default norm it would restrict individuals' liberty by putting justificatory pressure on them whenever they are or would like to be dishonest. But is it problematic to restrict in this manner individuals' liberty of being dishonest? And wouldn't allowing this kind of liberty also imply accepting those restrictions of liberty that resulted from individuals' dishonest behavior?

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15 My distinction between ethical and moral personal autonomy is similar to that between 'autonomous' and 'authentic' forms of positive self-determination, which differentiates between an individual normative orientation towards moral norms, on the one hand, and an individual normative orientation towards realizing one's subjectively identified needs; cf. Taylor 1992, 28, and Menke 1996, ch. 4.

Assuming that widespread dishonest behavior would result in cooperation and coordination failures, it seems clear that failing to promote honesty through education would also limit individual liberties in profound ways. The upshot of this is that a restriction of certain liberties through the normalization that education involves is not per se problematic.

Of course postmodern educational scholars, along with some communitarian thinkers, could question that the norm of honesty should override family or other traditional values. Under certain circumstances they might want to argue that the violation of an honesty norm is permissible in order to protect or promote certain family values. They might be right. But that could simply mean that, under certain conditions, there is a universal right to pursue certain personal prerogatives regarding one's family by violating an honesty norm. It need not imply that traditional values of the kind associated with the family are always more important than the norm of being honest. Accordingly, an education that would have the normalizing effect of socially institutionalizing this norm in a way that allowed for certain discretions in cases of conflict with family values should be unproblematic.

Thus, since normalization per se is not necessarily problematic, the question for those who support education for personal ethical autonomy is whether the restriction of the liberty not to lead an individually chosen life can be rightfully criticized as being unjustifiable. As I have argued above, there are good reasons for criticizing the restriction of such a liberty. However, education for personal moral autonomy cannot be criticized in a similar manner. Hence it is wrong to regard education for autonomy in general, rather than merely the particular form of education for an individualistically conceived form of personal ethical autonomy as problematic.

Before moving on to the next critique of autonomy education, which says that it is ideological, let us briefly consider to what extent this critique of the normalizing effects of autonomy education truly expresses a 'postmodern' critique. When fleshing out the problem of normalization in terms of an exercise of power that undermines the liberty not to lead an autonomous life in an individualistic, ethical sense of that term, we came to see that a commitment to the normative importance of liberty underlies this critique. From a point of view that is internal to postmodernism itself, however, such a normative commitment is problematic, because postmodernism claims not to adhere to any universalist normative standards. Otherwise postmodernism cannot be plausibly understood as a break or rupture with the Enlightenment project. Thus such a move is not available for a postmodern scholar, because, by definition, she denies the validity of context-transcending normative values or norms. This suggests that the critique that education for autonomy involves normalization is understood best in terms of a *reflex-*

ive critique of modernity, rather than a genuinely postmodern critique that implies or represents the abandonment of Enlightenment ideals such as that of a context-transcending form of critique.

3 The Ideology of Education for Autonomy

A further critique of postmodern educational scholars is that the theory and practice of education for autonomy are ideological. According to this critique, the theory and practice of education for autonomy serve the reproduction of a false social understanding of the actual functioning of socio-political practices. They promote the de facto or sociological legitimacy of such an illegitimate socio-political order by supporting a false perception of that order in light of which it appears legitimate. Several theorists and practitioners of education for autonomy might themselves act in good faith and believe that education for autonomy supports a legitimate socio-political order. Yet it is precisely this belief that prevents them from reflecting self-critically about the ways in which they themselves are entangled in forms of exercising power that reproduce the de facto legitimacy of a socio-political order. Meyer-Drawe (1996, 656–657, trans. J. C.) puts this point as follows: "The failure to problematize relations of power covers the pedagogical focus on self-determination with the thrust of humanism [...], which prevents a thorough-going critique of the dominant dispositives of power."

One example of this critique of the theory and practice of education for autonomy concerns the role that education for autonomy might play in schools in courses such as history or civic education. In these courses the past and present of socio-political institutions might be presented in a way that suggests that autonomy already has been realized to a considerable degree, or that this is about to happen soon.[16] By representing socio-political history through the lens of a progressive account of the continuous fulfillment of autonomy, the younger generation is led to view the current socio-political order as legitimate. Education for autonomy thereby becomes an instrument of power, as it skews the students' perception of the actual lack of autonomy that several individuals have to suffer due to economic hardships, political exclusion or social marginalization. This failure to notice the ways in which autonomy is curtailed and constrained means that, as Meyer-Drawe (1990, 90, trans. J. C.) puts it, "the claim for autonomy [...] has lost its oppositional force". This loss, as she goes on to argue, "is not grounded in

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16 Cf. Brighouse 2006 for a critique of teaching patriotism in an uncritical manner in schools; cf. also Espíndola 2016 on the importance of teaching historical injustices.

the fact that the self-determination of the members of […] society has grown to a satisfactory degree; rather, it is intelligible due to the fact that the heteronomous influences have become less transparent and have thereby lost their provocation." Based on this insight Balzer (2004, 19–20, trans. J. C.) suggests pursuing deconstructive analyses of the current and historical forms of the theory and practice of autonomy education:

> "[What is needed is a] view that is critical of ideology, by enabling the deconstruction of the history of pedagogy as progressive and emancipatory processes, and by highlighting that and how pedagogy has been complicit in the implementation of disciplinary power and has gained its particular meaning through that disciplinary power."

Another example of the way in which education for autonomy functions as ideology is through its contribution to privatizing responsibility (cf. Leist 2017). The privatization of responsibility occurs when education for autonomy intensifies 'processes of autonomization', which are processes that disseminate the idea that individuals themselves are *entirely* responsible for how well their lives are going. Indeed, as I have explained earlier, the ideal of personal ethical autonomy refers to the different idea that individuals should choose themselves the ends that they want to pursue. It simply does not follow that just because individuals set their own standards regarding how well their lives are going that individuals are therefore individually responsible as to whether, or to what extent, they realize these standards. Yet in the practice of furthering such an ideal of personal ethical autonomy through education this ideal often times takes on a different shape. The ideal of personal ethical autonomy turns into the demand that responsibility for the enjoyment of several goods should be privatized.

Consider, for example, that politicians maintain that retirement benefits should depend to a lesser extent on collective insurance schemes, and should, instead, stem from individual efforts of investing and saving. Likewise, they hold that individual claims to health care benefits should reflect to a greater extent the individual contributions to insurances. Moreover, in cases of unemployment individuals' failure to behave properly by showing sufficient initiative is said to be the cause of the unemployment, rather than structural issues such as the politically motivated de-industrialization of the economy. This focus on the "individual possibilities for action and responsibilities carries the danger", Meyer-Drawe (1990, 38–39, trans. J. C.) argues, "to belittle the insurmountable social restrictions of the individual for the sake of lowering the burdens of the otherwise accountable institutions at the cost of the already disadvantaged societal members". In a similar manner, Ricken/Rieger-Ladich (2004, 12, trans. J. C.) point towards such problematic forms of processes of autonomization through education for autonomy

when they argue that "neoliberal discourses on school development that employ a rhetoric of self-learning and autonomy are the tool of a flexible control society, […] which confronts students with the logic of competition".

Now, the point of the postmodern theorists' critique of education for autonomy is that this kind of privatizing of responsibility is realizable precisely because it occurs under the banner of the ideal of autonomy. After all, this banner veils the ways in which such privatization nourishes social injustices by involving, so the argument goes, the amelioration of the well-to-do and the worsening of the disadvantaged. Thereby, according to this critique, education for autonomy helps legitimizing a development that favors the more privileged much more than the less well off.

The critique of education for autonomy as ideology is a powerful one. It is hard to deny that teaching moral progressive accounts of the historical development of socio-political institutions idealize the actually existing societal status quo and thereby cover up socio-political injustices. Likewise, education for personal ethical autonomy can indeed support the legitimacy and intensify the privatization of responsibility that has potentially problematic distributive effects. However, the critique of education for autonomy seems to throw out the baby with the bath water, so to speak, when it claims that *any kind* of education for autonomy has this ideological aspect. Teaching society's historical development in a critical manner that emphasizes the violations of autonomy in the past and present, for one, seems an apt way of avoiding autonomy education's potential to become an instrument of ideology. Therefore this ideology critique can also be turned into a constructive one, one that encourages distinguishing between those modes of education for autonomy that are ideological and those that are not.[17] Thus, what I am suggesting is that theorists and practitioners of education for autonomy can critically reflect upon the problem that autonomy education can become ideological, and then pursue strategies through which this problem can be avoided or lessened.

Arguably, this does not imply that in any situation this kind of critical self-reflection will succeed in determining an emancipatory educational theory or practice. Within particular educational contexts such as schools the situation might be such that avoiding the ideological aspects of autonomy education is impossible. Consider, for example, teachers who are assigned to teach courses in civic education with a particular textbook. Possibly this textbook contains mostly

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17 Further questions to be considered include whether autonomy leads to political alienation, or to a greater skepticism regarding solidarity, or the rejection of political parties. More generally, empirical analyses that study the relation between processes of autonomization and responsibility would be relevant.

idealizing and hardly any critical content. Even if teachers tried to offer a critical perspective on such content, they might still be unable to prevent the ideological effects that education for autonomy can have in such cases.

What is more, realizing that education for autonomy confronts these problems, educators may come to realize that education for autonomy plays only a minor role in realizing autonomy. For example, it might be the case that unless changes in the economy occur, the efforts at bringing about more autonomy through education might be insufficient, no matter how these efforts are carried out. As long as the economy does not offer sufficient employment that allowed those who are willing to take on jobs, for example, autonomy might not be realizable. This insight can be a relieving one for educators, because it can help and encourage them to give up the pursuit of an ideal of autonomy that they cannot achieve by themselves. But is the advice to give up on the pursuit of effectively teaching autonomy really congruent with a commitment to autonomy? Arguably, it is congruent, because avoiding the pursuit of unrealizable goals can be psychologically healthy. After all, it helps avoiding the motivationally perhaps even more destructive disappointments that the non-realization of a goal that one has very hard tried to achieve brings about. Hence in terms of mere efficacy it might be better to focus on realizable—albeit more mediocre—goals.[18] In addition, understanding that under certain conditions autonomy cannot be achieved through education might encourage scholars and educators to bring about the economic and other conditions that an effective education for autonomy must presuppose.

Further elaborating on this point, the ideology critique might be helpful in recognizing the importance of certain *social conditions* that need to be in place in order for education for autonomy to succeed. Unless certain kinds of social, economic, cultural and political conditions obtain, it seems unlikely that individuals will develop the capacity for autonomy solely through their interactions with their teachers and co-students. This is also similar to the point of feminist critiques of 'hyper-individualist' liberal conceptions of autonomy that exaggerate the individual efforts for autonomy and neglect that relations of care and (inter-)dependence are crucial for the development of autonomy.[19]

When confronted with these constructive extensions of the ideology critique, however, the postmodern educational scholars could reply that power asymmetries necessarily reproduce themselves and that due to the existence of such asymmetries the attempts to pursue liberating forms of education for autonomy are

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18 For the difficulty of determining an adequate level of aspiration, see Nussbaum 2015.

19 Cf. Nedelsky 1987; Baumann 2008; Christman 2015 on the social dimensions of autonomy; for a profound, Hegelian notion of social autonomy, according to which individuals intentions must be 'interlaced' for social autonomy to emerge, cf. Honneth 2014, 125.

bound to fail. After all, the reproduction of power asymmetries occurs at a structural level—behind people's backs, so to speak. Negative deconstruction, Balzer (2004, 20, trans. J. C.) remarks, "is tempted to point towards allegedly 'buried' ideals of (humanistic) pedagogy as well as better aspects and intentions of pedagogy and school, while being unable to recover their power-theoretical [problems]". Despite their best intentions those who possess powerful positions cannot but act in ways that re-enforce such asymmetries. The educators' and scholars' self-understanding according to which they are capable of challenging the existing asymmetries through education is an illusion. Even if these educators have realized that due to their possession of greater power they are prone to re-enforce rather than change the existing power structures, they are incapable of doing the latter rather than the former.

More specifically, postmodern educational theorists might argue that there are motivational and epistemic limitations that hinder efforts of this kind.[20] A *motivational* limitation, for example, could consist of the fact that conceiving a truly emancipatory education for autonomy requires regarding as possible that the more powerful would change the power structures in ways that were to their own detriment. Among other things, such a loss of power would mean that the more powerful were less capable of having their interests satisfied, including their interests in power. Therefore, so the motivational objection goes, it seems questionable that the more powerful are capable of promoting such changes on a long-term basis. The *epistemic* limitation concerns the limited understanding of the more powerful of the ways in which the autonomy of the less powerful are constrained. Due to the differing epistemic standpoints of the more and the less powerful, the more powerful could be incapable of providing an education that would effectively help realizing autonomy.[21]

The problem with the objection that refers to the motivational limitation, however, is that it presupposes an anthropology according to which individuals possess a permanently *dominant* motive of preserving or perhaps even expanding their political power. Yet both the past and present of domestic and transnational

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20 Freire 1970 argues that because of these limitations social change occurs only bottom up.

21 Anderson 2007 makes this point by arguing that the political elite cannot serve the interests of those it governs unless this elite is sufficiently socially integrated. Unless it is socially integrated, the political elite lacks the social and cultural capital necessary to identify and communicate properly the needs of those it is meant to govern. Yet by rendering the political elite's effective and legitimate conditional on its social integation, Anderson already accepts the possibility that the political elite is capable of appropriately discharging its obligations. The postmodern theorists could argue once again, however, that the political elite is motivationally incapable of integrating socially in this manner because that took away their privileges.

politics provides us with several examples in which individuals have acted out of a moral concern for greater justice, although their success in that regard did not result in an increase of their political power. A case in point is perhaps Angela Merkel's decision in September 2015 not to close the German borders for those refugees that have not yet been registered in other EU countries. It is widely believed that Merkel decided on the basis of her conscience and that she was cognizant that her choice would lessen her political power, at least within Germany.

Moreover, once one recognizes the shortcoming of the reply to my objection that relies on the motivational limitation, the other reply that relies on the idea of an epistemic limitation also loses its force. For once the powerful are recognized as motivationally capable of giving up some of their power, they can pursue policies of social integration in order to overcome the epistemic limitation of the more powerful.[22] For this reason it seems plausible to assume that emancipatory uses of power exist and that power need not necessarily involve the reproduction of power asymmetries.

In addition, consider the following internal argument why the ideology critique must not regard it as a social necessity that asymmetrical power relations reproduce themselves. As a critical reflection upon the practice of autonomy education, the postmodern critique of this practice must presuppose itself that its own claims *do not* simply reflect instances of power through which power asymmetries are maintained. For if that were the case, then the critique would lose its character as a critique of the way in which autonomy education—despite its intention to the contrary—maintains an illegitimate socio-political status quo. This is because if proponents of this critique would have to concede that its own critique ultimately also serves the reproduction of the existing power structures, then they could not convincingly be criticizing the theory and practice of education for autonomy for doing just that, too. If the theorists insisted that there is no way of avoiding to reproduce the given structures of domination, then their contribution would also lose its critical edge. It would end up merely describing social reality.

But perhaps, from an even more abstract point of view, the constructive extension of the ideology critique that I have proposed so far might misinterpret the very point of the postmodern educational scholars. Such a use, after all, presupposes that the dominant understanding of socio-political reality need not (and must not) represent a false consciousness, which in turn implies that there is a true account of that reality. This presupposition, however, involves a truth claim of a universal kind about the actual socio-political order that postmodern theo-

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22 Cf. Anderson 2007 for concrete proposals of social integration through higher education for the sake of reducing the political elite's epistemic limitations.

rists reject. What is more, the point of uncovering an ideology is to identify how an illegitimate socio-political order reproduces itself over time, which also seems to imply the possibility of differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate socio-political orders. But given their denial of a universally valid account of normative rightness, theorists of a postmodern kind seem to be incapable of drawing such a distinction. Like the normalization critique, the ideology critique should thus be understood in terms of a *reflexive critique of modernity*, rather than a critique that manifests a break or rupture with the norms and values of the Enlightenment. It nevertheless remains a powerful critique, of course, even if it is not a negative one, but one which it is possible to transform in a constructive manner.

4 Conclusion

I began this article by highlighting the importance of self-critically examining potential problems of autonomy education, given that such education might undermine rather than promote the realization of autonomy. I then initially suggested that such a critique could plausibly be understood as 'postmodern', because it is characteristic of postmodernism that it challenges the validity of Enlightenment ideals. Further differentiating alternative forms of such critiques of the Enlightenment, however, I suggested that only those critiques that involve a break or rupture with Enlightenment ideals should be regarded as postmodern. By contrast, those critiques that aim more narrowly at further improving these ideals by revealing certain challenges that arise in their implementation are better understood as reflexive critiques of modernity that continue belonging to the 'unfinished project of modernity'.

In *section 2*, then, I offered the first reconstruction of a critique of education for autonomy by assessing the normalization that occurs through such educational practice. While I recognized that education for autonomy might have normalizing effects, as any other educational practice, I questioned that normalization per se is morally problematic. Furthermore, I argued that the restriction of certain liberties that normalization brings along is unavoidable, and that the important question is therefore the restriction of which liberties is morally justifiable. In other words, while it is correct to point out that education is a form of social power that influences individuals' behavior, it is inadequate to suggest that any exercise of social power would necessarily be unjustifiable. Thus recognizing the normalization that occurs through education for autonomy is necessary for understanding properly the social power that is exercised through this educational practice. Yet

this recognition does not entail that education for autonomy is necessarily morally problematic, since there are also justifiable uses of social power.

In *section 3* I moved on to analyze critically what I dubbed the ideology critique of education for autonomy. My analysis revealed that it is indeed crucial for practitioners and theorists of education to reflect self-critically on the ways in which they might reproduce rather than help overcoming an illegitimate socio-political order. The point of such a self-critical reflection, I argued, should be to find ways of responding properly to the potential danger of contributing to the maintenance of such an order. While I conceded that education for autonomy *could* have ideological effects, I maintained that it does not necessarily have them. In order to avoid such effects, I argued that, among other things, the particular practice of education for autonomy in courses such as civic education must be pursued in a critical manner that points at the failures of realizing autonomy in the past and present. Hence it is correct to point out that education for autonomy can have ideological effects. But since theorists and practitioners of education for autonomy can reflect upon these effects and find ways of avoiding them, autonomy education is not necessarily ideological.

Finally, in this article I also explained as to why both the normalization and the ideology critique are best understood as a reflexive self-critique of modernity rather than a postmodern critique properly speaking. To that effect I pointed out that—according to the definition that I proposed in the beginning of this article—postmodernism involves a break or rupture with Enlightenment ideals. But given that the normalization critique contains at its core a commitment to the Enlightenment value of liberty, it seems inappropriate to deem this critique as postmodernist. Likewise, since the point of the ideology critique is to contribute to emancipation by uncovering how an illegitimate socio-political order reproduces itself over time, this critique also clings to the Enlightenment ideal of social emancipation and therefore does not seem to fit the bill of postmodernism. It is tempting to infer from these observations of how allegedly postmodern critiques of autonomy education are unable to maintain their postmodern character that postmodernism is not a useful theory for grounding normative critique. This might indeed be the case, but cannot be discussed any further here.

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