

RECONCILING THE CONFLICTING FACTORS OF DEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY IN DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S CRITICAL THINKING FOR QUALITATIVE TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The notion and theoretical complexity of critical thinking are used for epistemological critique of the model of children's dependency on overstated learning outcomes. The rationale underlying this paper is that there exists a lacuna in analyses of philosophical discussions relating to children; doubts and uncertainties about fundamental traits and characteristics that are solely dependent on developmental issues have led to ambiguity in claims about children's competence, intelligence, rationality, and maturity. The argument that children don't have equivalent life experiences as adults and are thus, in some ways, less able to deal with the complexities of life than adults is one that makes sense. This being found to be the case, then children's vulnerability to policies that put them in situations where they are totally dependent on adults will prevent them from having the freedom, self-esteem, and critical thinking they need. In order to advocate for children's increased freedom, self-determination, and critical thinking, the article examines the children's earlier years of worldly experience as well as how factors of dependency and autonomy can be balanced. It focuses on children's capacities and competence to be autonomous to obtain the flexibility to participate in critical thinking centred education. Changes in the way society functions and how children learn have been created by advances in technology. To match these innovations there must be constant search in the field of education for improved ways of ensuring that children of basic education level, are equipped with learning tools which will be functional in preparing them for qualitative tertiary education.

Keywords: Dependence: Autonomy: Critical Thinking

Introduction

In our own cultures, it is not uncommon for something akin to the Platonic presupposition to be accepted. It is assumed that the only place where students may learn to be critical is at universities. The idea that even at the university level students should be encouraged to think critically about the conventional values and the recognised institutions of their communities is not generally accepted; in fact, it is sometimes suggested that such critical reflections should only be allowed for "mature minds." Additionally, there is an increasing propensity to postpone critical discussion and the confrontation of real problems to post-graduate levels as the mass of intractable rules grows in volume.

Many people would concur that independent, critical thought is suitable in academic contexts but argue that it is inappropriate at lesser levels. One example is that it's commonly said that the majority of people, especially those who are younger, cannot be educated and cannot take part in the effort to confront and solve problems. There is no way to decide a priori whether this hypothesis is true. However, it is inappropriate to debate. Thus, the following subheadings of the chapter analyses the issue of critical thinking in relation to childhood and rationality; child/adult years of experience; autonomy and dependence.

Critical Thinking: Childhood and Rationality

Evidences from experiments in psychology reveal that young babies have a natural ability to reason regarding certain laws of nature. The studies indicate that newborn infants appear to have a fundamental understanding of the physical world's fundamental principles., such as solidarity, causality, trajectory, and number ... Infants appear to know that solid objects should not pass through each other, should not hang in mid-air without a visible support .. , (Brenner et al, 1997) Researches also claim that infants are able to reason with their representations and can generate new information about an event, even when that event has not been perceived directly (Spelke, et al, 1992). Likewise, it has been established that the abilities to represent and reason about the external reality emerge early in tandem with the capacities to sense and act. (Hill, Thomas, 1991).

However, according to Kant's earlier writings as referred by Thomas Hill: Kant once wrote that he had been inclined to think that dignity and respect should vary with intellectual achievement and that therefore professors should be accorded the highest dignity, presumably vastly superior to that of common labourers. Rousseau saved him from this error later, he said, and taught him that the important ground of dignity is in every human being (Hill, Thomas, 1991).

Thus, the concept of a 'common humanity' in all human beings later replaced Kant's aristocratic views on equality of respect. Obviously, Kant's amended ethical position is based on a fact that the meaning of respect must be extricated from selective standards of appreciation such as the respect one may feel for a professional artist, or a person in some position of authority, or a person of high intellectual achievement. Kant's amended thesis holds that human dignity as

rational beings is unconditional and uncomparable, which means that human beings are to be respected because of their being human beings and not by what kind of human beings they are (Kant cited in Clegg, 2001). Therefore, it would be wrong, to disrespect children simply because it is wrong to disrespect any human being and not because a human being is young and small.

Different conceptions of rationality are based on varying criteria. Lipman, for instance, writes about a concept of rationality which places reasoning on meaningfulness at the centre of justification by asking questions such as 'If children were not rational how else could they make sense of newly acquired experience?' 'How else could they learn?' 'How else could adults find them intelligible?' (Lipman, 1988) On the other hand, Kant rejects investigations that do not separate the empirical reasons that the understanding raises to general categories simply by the comparison of experience from the motives that, as such, are provided totally a priori by reason alone and are truly moral (Kant, in Hill, Thomas 1993).

According to Kant, our rationality is innate to who we are as people because all moral notions have their roots entirely a priori in reason, both the most basic human reason and the most complex. (Kant, 1993) By inference, if children are human beings they are rational, and if rational they are capable of independent thinking and having moral concepts. However, to regard practical uses of reason as more fundamental than theoretical ones Kant requires a higher-order approach than this, because instrumental rationality is dysfunctional as regards "the pure thought of duty and of the moral law generally." (Kant, in Hill, Thomas 1993),

There is a power to think and act in a reasonable way using cognitive reason, but with practical reason one can use disciplined reason in choosing how to think and act in a way which not only accords with duty but is done from duty and acquires moral worth. For that, "such duty can be expressed only in Categorical Imperatives". (Kant cited in Clegg, 2001) Thus, application of a Categorical Imperative is necessary in order to be regarded as an autonomous moral agent. The capacity which extends beyond the cognitive into the practical creates a distinguishing mark to differentiate between animals and human beings, according to Kant, but it is unclear whether that mark can differentiate between children and adults.

According to Kant: "in as much as morality serves as a law for us only insofar as we are rational beings, it must also be valid for all rational beings", (Kant, in Hill, Thomas 1993) morality is therefore grounded in ascription of rationality. Kant is presumably referring to practical rationality because a limited mode of rationality would be a capacity to only reason instrumentally. From the view of Kant, it is the being rather than the rationality of 'finite rational beings' that is limited. This is entailed in his strong belief that rationality is not limited to humans on earth and that other worlds are inhabited. Kant laments that: there can only be single and the same reason, which differs only in how it is applied. Since reason has been given to us as a practical faculty, its ultimate purpose must be to foster a will that is good in and of itself rather than just as a means to an end. (Kant cited in Clegg, 2001)

It can be argued from the above remark that, accepting the existence of a mere degree of rationality would prompt considerations of a mere degree of 'goodness-in-itself' and this would be unintelligible. Fraught with notions of incompleteness and imperfections, a degree of rationality could be said to be a problematic concept. This holds that the effect is only measurable in analogy with a concept of 'happiness'. To think that one adult should have a power to reason different from another adult seems absurd as it is equally to think that the same discrimination should exist between children and adults.

Although the learners cannot be taught Judgement by their teachers but they may help them to improve their power of judgement by widening and encouraging greater experiences. Children must belong not only to a sensible world but also an intelligible world if they are to be regarded as both cognitively and practically rational. They are obligated to act on "practical principles of morality which are present a priori in our reason", and which serve to protect morals from "all kinds of corruption." ((Kant, in Hill, Thomas 1993) Children would be left at the mercy of maxims which may include common rules of moral salience if the Categorical Imperative is not linked with autonomy to provide the ability to choose generalisable maxims. Kant never intimated that universalisation of maxims which may be viewed as a monolithic task for children would be an easy task for anyone because it may also be a monolithic task for adults in general. Children's lesser years of experience represent a factor for a child/adult split in terms of freedom for independent and autonomous thinking. Hence, the argument for children's discrimination on the basis life experience.

Critical Thinking: Experience as a factor for the child/adult split

One may ask whether the extra years of adult experience over and above children's lesser years of experience represent a factor for discriminating children from adults? Whether greater amounts of experience in terms of amount and quality can be beneficial and in what ways? It is a commonly held view that through extra years of experience one becomes wiser as he grows older. For instance, According to Hursthouse, wisdom is a component of our conception of adulthood and the kind of wisdom it delivers is not the kind that can be learned but rather the kind that results from experience in life (Hursthouse, 1987). However, life experience and its subsequent wisdom could not be prerogative of adults alone. Many children, particularly those in the third world countries (where such wisdom is frequently essential for survival) have wisdom about life. Children quickly assimilate what is right or wrong by enlightened understanding, and there is much to be said of children's ordinary common sense and children's ability to cope rationally with life's situations (within the boundaries of their territories), although knowledge and its effective use is easily seen to apply to older people.

Lipman refuted the argument which claims lack of experience as a factor adversely affecting children's capacity to cope rationally with life's situations. Experience shared by children and adults presents compatible perspectives. According to him, "The very intensity of childhood

experience could well compensate for the handicap of not having confronted the world over an extended period." (Lipman, 1988) Differences in intensity of experiences does not indicate instances of different worlds and emotions, when quality of experience is shared by young and old, and ordinary reactive attitudes in children elicited from reactions to situations would be similar to those elicited in adults. It can be acknowledged that some adults will react with less sophistication than some children, even though, some children's reactions may be less sophisticated than those of adults.

The classical distinction between "rationalism and empiricism" is represented by the opposition between "deductivism and inductivism", in considering the quantification of experience to some respects (Popper, 1957). For instance, it is an impossible task and unnecessary to examine all instances in order to obtain knowledge of general propositions when a process of deduction allows one to conceive of universals from experiences of certain particulars.

The common sense assumption is that we do not need to reach the maturity of adulthood experience in order to think and judge rationally of most everyday situations. For instance, to meet life's challenges strongly depends on power of deduction; inference by reasoning and induction (by reasoning from the particular to the general). Likewise, as maturity is approached, affectation from experience gives one's ability to responded with growth through expansion of territory. However, there are limitations during the expansion process and children must live and understand how it is possible to live and survive rather than simply understand how life ought to be lived in order to survive.

Children must live within a boundary of needs and capabilities and they must reason with the varied limitations, within these boundaries, during maturation processes (Popper 1957). Estimating time and motion factors correctly, for instance, when a vehicle approaches in preparing to cross busy roads is an example of the benefits of extra years of experience in developing skills in computation of distance and speed correlation. The high rate in traffic accident figures in respect of children no doubt illustrates the necessity for supervision of young children regardless of their competences in areas such as rationality. Although children may prove competent in themselves but they must find it difficult to adapt that competence to the adult-structured world in which most things are oversize for them. Element of paternalism would be difficult to eradicate from law terminologies dealing with children's rights for these reasons. According to Berne, the purpose of the 'adult' in the personality of a person is to process data and compute probabilities which are essential for dealing effectively with the outside world. (Berne, 1964) Therefore this computational skill which develops with years of experience could be said to have well represent an important factor in discrimination of a child from adult.

Critical thinking: autonomy and dependence

Liberationists and Paternalists, with opposing principles on child-rearing, are divided into two distinct and polarity groups. Respect for freedom, non-interference and self-determination is the

major claim of the liberationists, leading to states of autonomy and independent thinking among children. Paternalists on the other hand will argue that children are not as competent, rational, or as matured as adults in general and, therefore, should not be treated as autonomous and independent thinkers, instead, they respect protective measures of care and obligations. The philosophy that 'admits children have a right to care and protection but that they do not have a right to self-determination. As Archard, thinks that self-determination is too important to be left to children' (Archard, 1993) He therefore assumes a right to intervene in matters which require the making of sensible informed decisions relating to children's lives, and children are restricted in exercising autonomy until considered competent to make such decisions on their own behalf.

The position however denies children the opportunity to defend their position as competent members of society. The caretaker thesis assumes a position of authority and justifies proceedings as being in children's best interests. The choices of the adult for children are therefore justified as better choices by a criterion of competence. The principles of autonomy and paternalism feature strongly in the duties of parenthood and how they evaluate the child's competence. However, contingencies deny consistency in competences and whether in children or adults, neither complete competence nor complete incompetence features in their capacity to think autonomously and take informed decisions. Adults may know better than children because of longer years of experience, but sometimes a child shows greater wisdom than that shown by an adult (Willingham, 2007).

Generally, children are eager to be considered competent and enthusiastically seek for independence. Margaret Donaldson claims that "there is fundamental human urge to be effective, competent and independent, to understand the world and to act with skill", but, she says, "in some ways we do not encourage competence." (Donaldson, 1978) Children are forced into dependence as contended by John Holt. (Holt, 1974) Dependence is not only an acceptable state of affairs within the family circle but is a necessary one. Choices may be better or worse as regards meeting needs, wants and desires in respect of those affected by the chooser's choice, not just in respect of the chooser. These choices are regulated by policies which may intermingle with tension between love and respect and between dependence and autonomy. (O'Neill, 1989)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarded dependence as a form of weakness and claimed that "man is made sociable by his weakness ... " (Rousseau, 1916) on the other hand John Dewey had the opposite view and saw dependence as a form of social coherence, which he argue from a social standpoint, claiming that dependence denotes a power rather than weakness; it involves independence. However, from the traditionalist perspectives, there is a constant risk that a person's capacity for social interaction will decline as their level of independence rises. Meaning to say, by making him more independent, it can likewise render him more self-sufficient, which could cause him to become distant and indifferent because it would make him so perceptive in how he interacts with others and give him the impression that he can stand and act alone.

(Dewey, 1916) Dewey believes that, dependence on other people need not engender helplessness nor lack of self-esteem. This can be recognised as a truism when the Principle of Respect for Persons which includes care and protection in respect of all human beings, young and old is considered.

Critical thinking is a skill that almost everyone possesses and employs regularly, and as the conditional probabilities research (Willingham, 2007) showed, this ability has existed since a very young age. The challenge is not in exercising critical thought; rather, it is in understanding when to do so and having the knowledge necessary to do it effectively. The ability to think critically is not a set of abilities that can be used at any moment or in any situation. Even 3-year-olds have this form of cognition, and even professional scientists often struggle with it. (Willingham, 2007).

According to Kant (cited in Clegg, 2001), the only way individuals can develop as mature persons is to use the power of autonomy granted to them as rational beings. A self-incurred immaturity results when one prefers not to think for oneself but relies on guidance from others. However, according to him, emergence from a state of immaturity is dependent on a certain kind of freedom: one cannot achieve maturity whilst one is discouraged from thinking for oneself. It appears that immaturity cannot be regarded as self-incurred when authoritative measures are taken to intercept this freedom. In this case, immaturity is inflicted on children by those whose authoritarian views lead them to think for children rather than with them (Clegg, 2001). Since choices, discussions, decisions, reflections, judgements, and other activities that are necessary for exercising autonomy are to provide the justification for one's thoughts and actions,

Dearden appears to presume the conceptual relationship between autonomy and rationality. The rationalistic model of autonomy might therefore be used to describe his idea of autonomy (Dearden, cited in Yoo, 1999). If we want autonomy as an educational goal, it should be quite evident that we need to have a knowledge concerning the methods, curricula, and organisational patterns which will best promote it (Yoo, 1999). Early papers by White and Dearden are the best place to go for the claims of the rationalistic model of autonomy and its underlying educational claim is.

According to White, who was cited by Yoo (1999) a central educational goal should be to nurture students who think independently for themselves, those who rely on reason instead of authority to support their points of view, and those who, precisely because they think independently for themselves, creating out their own life plan in accordance with their own knowledge, without being influenced by the opinions of the people around them. Their reasoning appears to be as follows: autonomy can only be exercised if a person has the skills necessary to think and act in accordance with their own mental activity.

Implications

By implication, the above arguments suggest, it would be wrong to assume that Critical thinking is just for advanced students. For the top students, critical thinking activities form an excellent enrichment activity, according to many teachers and administrators, but struggling students should only be expected to comprehend and grasp more fundamental content. This reasoning undervalues the less gifted kids and runs counter to what cognitive psychologists know generally about how people think.

Rationality should have unconditional value (unconditional on age or biological development) if unconditional value exists among rational beings and if value is placed in their rationality. Children think because they are rational beings and do not need to develop into rational thinkers as they get older. It may be argued by some sceptics of indivisible rationality that logicians may be better in reasoning compared to artists {Kant, in Hill, Thomas 1993}. However, this is to confuse what one reasons 'on' with what one reasons 'with'. It is agreed, the fact that abilities may vary in using reasoning power, but reasoning itself is indivisible.

This could be supported by O'Neill's interpretation of Kant which supports that "either human beings must lack even instrumental capacities to reason or they must have more than instrumental capacities to reason." (O'Neill, 1989) That is to say if children are to be regarded as beings with capacities beyond those of non-humans then either they have capacities beyond those of 'problem solving' and have a capacity for practical reasoning or they have no reason at all. But we commonly believe the latter notion as inconceivable.

Conclusion

The paper examines the interconnectivity between the concepts and factors of dependence autonomy and critical thinking as conflicting factors in educational goals as it relates to children education. The paper concludes that despite the limitations of children's capacity to think as adults probably because of their level of experience it would be wrong to make them over dependent on over stated learning outcomes which deny them the power to practice the independent thinking corresponding to their level of rationality and experience and these should have unconditional value in education for us to prepare them for a qualitative and autonomous education at the subsequent levels of higher/ tertiary education.

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