Non-ideal Autonomy: Dewey and Reframing Educational Authority
Terri S. Wilson

University of Colorado Boulder

Matthew Ryg

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

INTRODUCTION

To what extent should parents be able to choose educational approaches that affirm particular cultural values or ethical convictions? How should the interests of families in choosing distinctive approaches of schooling be balanced against the prospective rights of students? These questions — ones long considered by philosophers of education — have received renewed attention alongside the growth of school choice reforms such as charter schools, voucher programs and homeschooling. A number of these reforms create mechanisms for the state to support educational approaches that recognize particular cultural or ethical values. For example, certain voucher programs allow students to attend various private schools and certain charter schools focus on specific cultural, ethnic, and linguistic communities.

While the basic rights of parents to “opt out” of public schools (in favor of private alternatives or the decision to homeschool) are well recognized, many choice theorists argue that the public school system should provide educational options that recognize and support different ethical convictions. Here, theorists frame the issue in terms of balancing the state’s interests in providing both basic and civic education against parents’ interests in passing on a particular way of life to their children. Dianne Gereluk has summarized this as a balance between “alternative choice programs” that “may foster a particular educational ethos,” and the responsibility of the state to ensure “that all students receive an education that will allow them to flourish in making informed judgments about how to lead their lives, and also have an understanding about their concomitant responsibility as civic equals in a pluralist society.” As such, Gereluk emphasizes the future autonomy of students as a key criterion in evaluating choice reforms.

Rob Reich has also argued that school choice offers a potential way to accommodate pluralist preferences within common ideals, rather than seeking to assimilate families to any one particular ideal. At the same time, Reich contends that children — not just parents and the state — have an independent interest in education: an interest in becoming autonomous. He defines autonomy as: “a person’s ability to reflect independently and critically upon basic commitments, desires and beliefs, be they chosen or unchosen, and to enjoy a range of meaningful life options from which to choose, upon which to act, and around which to orientate and pursue one’s life projects.” Other theorists take different positions on how much parents’ convictions should be protected, but their arguments generally echo Reich’s focus on autonomy-facilitating education. These theorists pair a focus on autonomy with other values: with equality of opportunity (Harry Brighouse), tolerance (Amy Gutmann),
“critical rationality” and “deliberative excellence” (Eamonn Callan) or the capacity for “critical enquiry” and “sympathetic reflection” (Meira Levinson). However defined, these scholars contend that autonomy is a central aim of education, and caution that education should not privilege promoting a particular conception of “the good” over developing students’ ability to define and eventually choose their own conception of that good.

Many of the debates in this field revolve around the conflict between the “comprehensive” cultural values held by families and the demands of a liberal democracy. Yet, as Judith Suissa has argued, the assumption that families hold a “comprehensive conception of the good” relies on a reductive view of the shifting and multifaceted values held by actual families. Suissa argues against the conflation of a family’s “substantive commitments,” with an ideal of “cultural coherence.” Paula McAvoy makes a similar argument in examining children’s exit rights from insular religious groups. She contends that, “justice requires actors to consider the specifics of the group, the social conditions in the larger culture, and the foreseeable costs to accommodation and nonaccommodation.” Reich also sees theoretical answers as inadequate: “A precise institutional blueprint for education, and the distribution of authority over it, cannot be generated from philosophical principle.” In different ways, Reich, Suissa, and McAvoy all point to the need to translate an ideal of educational autonomy to the specific circumstances facing children, the values held by real families, and the actual legal and institutional contexts around schools.

While they do not explicitly use this language, these theorists thus gesture to the value of thinking of autonomy in non-ideal terms. In contrast to ideal theory — which, very generally, outlines principles for a fair and just society — non-ideal theory focuses on how ideals are translated into actual social mechanisms, institutions, and practices. Elizabeth Anderson’s work offers an example of such an approach. Drawing on social science evidence, Anderson begins her recent inquiry into questions of race among the non-ideal “injustices in our actual world.” As she argues, “Knowledge of the better does not require knowledge of the best. Figuring out how to address a just claim on our conduct now does not require knowing what system of principles of conduct would settle all possible claims on our conduct in all possible worlds, or in the best of all possible worlds.” Here, Anderson endorses a broadly Deweyan view of inquiry. Drawing on his notion of unreflective habits, she notes, “we are not jarred into critical thinking about our conduct until we confront a problem that stops us from carrying on unreflectively.”

While Anderson’s inquiry addresses the moral problems of increasingly segregated social institutions, her methodological approach offers insights into other debates. Non-ideal theory might be particularly relevant for debates about autonomy in education. As Reich, McAvoy, and Suissa note, these debates are difficult to settle on a theoretical level. They often hinge on the practical development of autonomy in young people. For example, under what circumstances could young people develop a critical appreciation of their own — and other — cultural values? What specific curricular practices might help young people develop critical self-awareness?
As these questions suggest, multiple lines of inquiry might be explored in non-ideal terms, and in ways that combine theoretical and empirical inquiry. In this essay, we take up a more limited (and conceptual) task: to reconstruct a Deweyan conception of autonomy. We argue that John Dewey offers key conceptual resources to guide non-ideal inquiries into educational autonomy. Dewey productively frames questions about an autonomous self, in part because he avoids — and, in doing so, reframes — conventional notions of autonomy. In the remainder of the essay, we outline a Deweyan view of autonomy, paying attention to how this view might reconstruct autonomy in non-ideal, educational contexts. To conclude, we outline what such a view might offer debates about the proper scope of educational authority.

**Reconstructing Autonomy in Dewey**

How does Dewey understand autonomy? This is not an easy or straightforward question, since autonomy was not a central concept for Dewey. Indeed, the word is found only sporadically throughout the thirty-seven volume set of *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*. On one level, this absence may be historical. One shouldn’t expect the terms of contemporary debate to have the same presence or purchase in historical texts. Yet, in our inquiry, we’ve come to believe that Dewey’s relative inattention to the term is significant. While not a key term for Dewey, autonomy was not absent from key philosophical sources of the time. In particular, the term plays a central role in Immanuel Kant’s ethical and political philosophy and in subsequent philosophical scholarship on Kant. While Dewey employed the term, he did not develop it as a philosophically significant concept, nor prioritize it within his own ethical theory. We believe this omission is suggestive. Dewey preferred terms like *self*, *individual*, and *person*, ones more easily integrated and situated in experience, over more abstracted concepts like *autonomy*. While there are relatively few explicit mentions of autonomy in Dewey’s work, we contend that an implicit conception of autonomy might be valuably reconstructed in Dewey’s thought, in ways that speak to — and indeed challenge — contemporary debates about autonomy in education. In this section, we undertake such a critical reconstruction. Guided by similar conceptual studies of Dewey, we first outline his relevant explicit mentions of autonomy. We then reconstruct an implicit conception of autonomy by drawing on three related concepts more central to Dewey: *self*, *interest*, and *habit*.

**Explicit Mentions of Autonomy**

The term ‘autonomy’ is found in twenty of the thirty-seven volumes of *The Collected Works of John Dewey*. While the term is mentioned in a variety of places, it is rarely treated as the subject of philosophical analysis. In the vast majority of these instances, autonomy is employed to briefly specify the meaning of a phrase. For example, Dewey employs the term in the 1920s to explicate the “constructive parts” of Bertrand Russell’s socialism: “[he] favors public ownership of the land, of mining, and of transportation facilities … and in advocacy of full autonomy for professional groups.” He uses the term in similar ways in discussions of teacher professionalism, provincial and local sovereignty, political and cultural autonomy, and industrial autonomy. In these cases, autonomy is a descriptive adjective, not a term of inquiry in its own right. However, in our reading, there are two significant
places where Dewey develops autonomy as a concept: in connection with Kant, and in concert with his discussion of inquiry.

In the first case, an explication of Kant’s deontology, the term is also employed more descriptively than philosophically. Summarizing Kant’s argument, Dewey writes: “in obeying the law of reason man is not obeying an outside authority; he is obeying a law imposed by himself. Autonomy, i.e., a law which is self-given, is the same as freedom.” While glancing, this passage demonstrates, first, that Dewey is aware of Kant’s conception of autonomy, and also that he sees modern autonomy as synonymous with freedom. However, freedom, like autonomy, is not merely negative or found in the absence of constraint. Kant’s conception of freedom — which Dewey employs — is positive and enabling. Like freedom, autonomy is a self-given, necessary, and universal law by which we live our moral lives. In his own ethical theory, Dewey adopts certain moral presuppositions found in Kant, but situates them in the lived experience of persons. Dewey does not reduce ethics to mere duty to the categorical imperative, for example. Unlike Kant, Dewey no longer understands philosophical *eidos* as subject to universality, necessity, or immutability. Any meaningful conception ought not be fixed, final, or ready-made, but be evolving, dynamic, and mutable.

The second example of Dewey’s use of the term is the most intriguing. In his *Logic*, Dewey uses the term autonomy in describing inquiry: “[l]ogic is autonomous,” he claims. He expands: “The position taken implies the ultimacy of inquiry in determination of the formal conditions of inquiry. Logic as inquiry into inquiry is … a circular process; it does not depend upon anything extraneous to inquiry.” Crucially, while Dewey uses the term autonomy to describe how logic is independent from the “extraneous,” he does not mean to imply that logic is “independent” from the world. This is a subtle, but important, distinction: logic does not rely on external aims or foundations, yet it cannot be separated from experience. Similarly, as we show in the next section, autonomy for Dewey is not mere “independence,” but one dimension of experience constituted through habit and interest.

Because logic is autonomous, “[i]t precludes resting logic upon metaphysical and epistemological assumptions and presuppositions. The latter are to be determined, if at all, by means of what is disclosed as the outcome of inquiry; they are not to be shoved under inquiry as its ‘foundation.’” To be autonomous, then, logic must exclude appeals to foundations, first principles, and ready-made definitions; it is not, for example, judged against an external ideal of rationality. For Dewey, the formal conditions of logic are determined within the process of inquiry itself. Logic is, however, what makes inquiry go well: what makes it consistent, productive, and generative. But these criteria are found within the process of inquiry; they are not external ends.

While Dewey still employs autonomy as a descriptive term in this example, his conception of autonomy might be similarly non-foundational and pragmatic. Crucially, autonomy — in a Deweyan sense — could only be realized through the process of its own construction. Here, we can start to see how Dewey reframes autonomy as an ideal. Rather than asking what autonomy is, or what ideals it rests upon, Dewey
draws our attention to questions like, How does one become autonomous? Under what conditions — and through what processes — can a sense of autonomy be built? Dewey asks that concepts both emerge from actual experience and are directed back to guide experience. Non-foundational and non-ideal, a Deweyan conception of autonomy becomes a particular quality of experience. As such, it must be understood in light of Dewey’s broader account of experience, interests, and habits. We develop this account in the next section.

**Connected Concepts: Self, Interest, Habit**

In this reconstruction, we draw on three interrelated terms that we see as central to a Deweyan perspective on autonomy: self, interest, and habit. Rather than focusing on the individual, Dewey emphasizes a transactional account of the self. This self interacts with — and is shaped by — environments through the interstices of interest and habit.

**Self.** Despite that fact that the self is ambiguous for Dewey, he thinks our varied habits constitute our selves. Our social relationships, interests, and ways of acting define who we are as people. Dewey’s conception of “self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action.” The autonomous self is naturally social and constituted within and by natural organisms interacting in environments. We do and act, undergo, and are acted upon. In this sense, the autonomous self is what we become through acting in the world. In addition, Dewey’s view of the self is not positioned against the social world. He concedes that “an individual existence has a double status and import,” but denies any kind of metaphysical or epistemological “dualism erected between the ego and the world of things and persons.” The autonomous self for Dewey is both the individual and social; it is continually reconstituted in the world with and by persons.

**Interest.** For Dewey, “self and interest are two names for the same fact.” On a simple level, interest means that, “self and world are engaged with each other in a developing situation.” Interest describes how an actor is “bound up with what is going on” and is — literally — interested in his world. Terms like self, interest, and world are not separate entities, but functional elements in the larger processes of experience. We cannot take for granted a preexisting self that “has interests.” In this sense, Dewey pushes back on the language of state, family and children’s interests that frame debates over educational authority. For Dewey, interest implies that an actor is concerned with the consequences of a given situation, and “bound up with the possibilities inhering in objects.” In doing so, Dewey rejects two narrower versions of interest. It isn’t an attitude or internal state; nor is it simply an object or goal. Interest is the situation that encompasses both. There is “no separation in the facts of the situation” between the objects we are interested in (for example, curriculum) and our concern with such objects.

In emphasizing such a specific and concrete situation, Dewey questions sharp distinctions between the individual and the social world. The self does not simply pass through the world, choosing aspects to focus on from diverse options. Nor does it “react” to the world like classic models of stimulus and response. In contrast, Dewey’s
situation is transactional: self and world are constantly modifying each other. In this account, “when we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences.” Dewey’s conception of autonomy is thus dynamically situated in experience. An actor is always in transaction with a situation, but in ways that are conditioned by practices, environments, and habits.

HABIT. Habit for Dewey departs from our common understanding of the term. Habits are social and come in myriad kinds and qualities. Habits are natural social functions in social endeavors like education, business, civic life, and friendship, and thus help construct Dewey’s social conception of an autonomous self. Habits “may be profitably compared to [natural] physiological functions like breathing, digesting. The latter are, to be sure, involuntary, while habits are acquired.” Not mere routine or repetition of individual, social, or natural processes, habits are “things done by the [natural] environment by means of organic structures or acquired dispositions.”

Our habits, then, are the result of a social interaction with the environment; they are of not just in the environment. In this sense, Dewey’s perspective on autonomy is social: we learn autonomy to the extent that it becomes habitual.

As modes of response, habits are ways of interpreting dynamic situations. They represent possible ways of selecting focus for our attention, behavior, and action. Habits contribute to the construction of autonomy insofar as they enable selection and focus in social environments. Habits are intimately and etymologically connected to habitation, or, our ways of being-in-the-world. Bad habits, for example, are blocks to further self-inquiry and growth. Any hope of ethical education relies upon our ability to engage and reconstruct habits by working on environments where students live their lives. As Dewey said: “[W]e cannot change habit directly: that notion is magic. But we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions, by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfillment of desires.” Social habits then, with both interest and self, play a role in the continuous construction of autonomy for Dewey.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, this view of self, interest, and habit is suggestive for how we might understand autonomy in Deweyan terms. Interests are expressions of the self; habits constitute the self. Most crucially, the self is transactionally constituted in interaction with specific environments. In this way, an autonomous self is not an independent self. Autonomy may be a critically reflective dimension of the self, but the self always remains constituted by specific habits, practices, and environments. Dewey thus draws attention to the kinds of environments and situations that make experiences of autonomy possible.

Likewise, autonomy is a dimension of experience, not a discrete kind. For Dewey, any experience can have multiple dimensions: civic, aesthetic, moral, physical, and the like. Dewey would also caution that autonomy is not an external ideal to cultivate. Concepts and ideals — such as autonomy — can be useful, but only to the extent they are understood as refinements of experience. Following Dewey, we might evaluate autonomy as an ideal to the extent that it “works” for experience. That is, to what extent does autonomy draw from the realities of lived experience?
In what ways might it subsequently refine and guide experience? Here, a Deweyan conception of autonomy would emphasize criteria to evaluate experience. That is, to what extent are young people able to develop greater control over — and find greater meaning in — their present and future experience? Dewey might also ask about the broader goals served by autonomy. Does pursuing and prioritizing autonomy allow individuals to grow and society to become more democratic?

While Dewey outlines an interesting conception of autonomy, he also offers resources for questioning the meaning, priority, and significance of the term. To conclude, we outline three potential contributions of this conception of autonomy for educational authority: as a (1) non-ideal methodological approach, (2) challenge to the term’s priority, and (3) potential critique of the term itself. First, a Deweyan view of autonomy offers methodological and conceptual resources for directing non-ideal inquiry into autonomy. Analogous to Anderson’s work, a Deweyan framework draws our attention to conditions where autonomy matters. It also points, methodologically, to collaboration between conceptual studies of autonomy and empirical social science that focuses on the experiences of young people, families, and insular communities. A Deweyan framework is particularly well suited to such situated and non-ideal philosophy. Ideals — like autonomy — are not abstract standards. In contrast, they are ends-in-view, aims that grow out of the imperfect circumstances of here and now.

In this sense, a Deweyan view of autonomy directs attention to the fundamentally transactional processes of civic education that occur between young people and formal and informal learning environments. It focuses attention on the processes of self-formation that occur within specific educational spaces. Armed with a Deweyan view of the self, we might study the habits inculcated by the formal and informal curriculum, or opportunities students have to engage with different views of the good life. Dewey’s understanding of the self also points to the educative role played by environments. He employs the term interest in asking how children — with their limited, emerging experiences — might come to share in the outcomes and consequences of a complex, shared social world. For Dewey, this is not the result of rational reflection. His view emphasizes the key role played by environments — families, schools, and communities — in shaping the self. Rather than emphasizing critical distance from a home environment, Dewey highlights the importance of participating in multiple, diverse, and overlapping environments. Autonomy is not independence from circumstances; it is critical engagement with diverse environments. The interests of children are not merely in future autonomy, but in continual, wide participation with the diverse contacts of life.

Second, Dewey challenges both the singularity and priority given to autonomy in debates about the proper scope of educational authority. As noted earlier, autonomy is given a central place in debates about educational authority. A Deweyan framework offers two potential challenges. Autonomy cannot be abstracted or singled out from a range of other relevant values. Nor should it be afforded ethical priority over other values and dispositions. Autonomy may indeed be important, but insofar as it is considered alongside other civic values and dispositions (for example, sympathy, cooperation, and so forth).
Third, Dewey more directly challenges the value of autonomy itself. On one level, Dewey’s transactional self offers a critical perspective on the very idea of an autonomous individual. For example, take the relationship between habit and thought. Dewey claims that action precedes thought, in that “the act must come before the thought, and a habit before an ability to evoke the thought at will.”

This view poses potential questions for some of the rational foundations of autonomy. How, for instance, does a young person get enough critical distance to reflect on their own values? Conversely, how might habits of thinking create spaces for the cultivation of critical autonomy? Are there ways of asking questions that might help young people critically reflect on their lives?

We imagine, too, that Dewey would question the relatively individualistic and atomistic self implied by some — although certainly not all — accounts of autonomy. At the same time, it is important to note that autonomy is rarely as simple as this critique may imply. No reasonable conception of autonomy argues that children need become entirely self-reliant and independent. Yet — insofar as autonomy is prioritized in the literature — it does focus attention on certain kinds of civic dispositions. In emphasizing Dewey, we offer alternate frameworks for exploring how an ideal of autonomy might be translated into non-ideal practices and environments. In doing so, we also hope to show how autonomy might be just one among many important civic values, and perhaps one that does not warrant the ethical priority suggested by these debates.

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2. Rob Reich, Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).


4. Reich, Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education, 42.


9. There is no unified definition of non-ideal theory; indeed, the term encompasses a variety of situated and naturalized approaches to philosophy. The field generally pivots on the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory made by John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).


11. Ibid.

12. While Anderson doesn’t draw on John Dewey extensively, she does cite two passages from John Dewey’s 1910 version of How We Think (MW 6) in her footnote number 12, in support of this view of unreflective habit (see ibid., 194). (Note that Dewey published a revised version of How We Think in 1933
All references to Dewey’s works will be to the multivolume series comprising *The Early Works, 1882–1924*, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, and *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published by Southern Illinois University Press. These will be cited in the notes as *EW*, *MW*, and *LW*, respectively. For instance, the citation *MW* 7, 102, refers to *Middle Works*, volume 7, page 102.


15. To a certain extent, every concept is an abstraction. Our claim is that autonomy, as a term, involves an additional layer of abstraction from experience, in contrast to terms that Dewey preferred, like self and interest.


17. The exact number of times Dewey uses the word “autonomy” in his *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953* is seventy.


22. Ibid., 290.


28. Ibid., 28.

29. Ibid.


34. Ibid., 131.


37. Ibid., 132.


40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 18–19.