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What Does Autonomy in Universities Look Like?

Introduction

A university is a learning community, dedicated to learning at 'higher' levels – levels that, typically, involve detailed and accurate description, complex analysis, sophisticated critique, and originality. It is from this simple and – I think – uncontentious description of universities that I build my argument for the autonomy of universities, for what autonomy looks like in universities, and for what universities would look like if they were exonomous. (*Exonomy* is the word I use as the opposite of *autonomy*: to be autonomous is to be self-governing, to be exonomous is to be governed by those outside the system). After describing the rather dangerous term 'autonomy', I will go on to explain why and how autonomy is important, using three explanatory concepts: care (related to justice between and beyond people), curiosity (which drives learning, even when the learning is inconvenient), and community (a group of persons in dialogue).

Autonomy in Universities

Autonomy is generally considered good. As a person, autonomy means being in control of oneself, having independence or freedom; as an institution, autonomy has much the same meaning – to be independent, to 'make your own laws'. However, autonomy is a rather dangerous friend. We are never completely autonomous, completely free, so a principle of autonomy is at best aspirational, and at worst illusionary. However, more important than this, autonomy is not always an appropriate aspiration. As an individual human being or an individual institution, is the best that we can be, to be wholly independent? The sociologist Sennett (2003, p. 101) describes it well:

> Imagine a lover who declares, "Don't worry about me, I can take care of myself, I will never become a burden to you." We should show such a lover to the door; this nonneedy creature could never take our own needs seriously. In private life, dependence ties people together.

He goes on to say that autonomy, in the public sphere, is contrasted with a 'shameful' dependency. 'At a Labour Party conference [in 1997] ... the [then] British prime minister [Tony Blair] declared that "the new welfare state must encourage work not dependency" in arguing for "compassion with a hard edge"', and this 'belief that dependence demeans derives in the liberal canon from a concept of adulthood'. There is a danger, therefore, in thinking that the 'pure' liberal model of complete autonomy is appropriate for all (or any) human beings. It is dangerous because it underplays three interwoven aspects of the human condition: genuine dependence (as in Grenberg, 2005), community, and society.

Although autonomy may be a dangerous friend, it *is* a friend. In universities, autonomy is built in to the character of higher education professionalism. Being a professor means having something to profess, a distinct and valuable tale to tell, a level of expertise and knowledge that is worth communicating. This gives professors some autonomy: professors are seen as 'experts' and worth employing as 'advisors'. And the word 'profess' and 'professor' are also related to the words 'profession' and 'professional'. Professions are communities of workers bound by a relatively exclusive expertise that may have to be 'taken on trust' by those outside the profession who lack the relevant knowledge and expertise. Professional doctors might reasonably be trusted to carry out medical procedures, professional accountants to manage financial systems, professional social workers to manage social issues. Academic staff in universities are members of a profession, as academics. This means they have some autonomy – not complete autonomy (to carry out medical procedures, to manage financial systems, or to manage social issues), but some autonomy over academic matters. This is appropriate.

The autonomy of professions can always be threatened, of course. Mitscherlich and Mielke (1949) published an account of the doctors who were tried in Nuremberg, the 'doctors of infamy'. This book is full of arguments about the boundaries of doctors' professionalism, and whether medical professional ethics could be overridden by a government at war. Although this is not a simple issue, in the case of the Nuremberg trials, breaking with professional ethics was regarded as inappropriate, even if done under military instructions. Professional autonomy was defended at this critical time. Since then, though, many governments have set requirements that challenge, over-rule or simply re-write professional ethics, such as the current UK requirements to report students (and colleagues) who are suspected of terrorist sympathies, under the *Prevent* strategy (Home Office, 2011). This tests professional autonomy.

Those of us working as university professionals have – should have, *as professionals* – a formal procedural autonomy, as professionals. We should have decision-making powers, as a result of our membership of a profession. The exercise of that autonomy is primarily, I suggest, over our own learning – the content and character of our research – and our support for others' learning – the content and character of our teaching. It is our first responsibility, as professionals, to exercise that autonomy. Autonomy of this kind is only half the story, though. Professionals' second responsibility is to give an example to oth-

ers too – those who may not have the formal autonomy, but who should be enabled to act autonomously.

> In education or medicine: we grant autonomy to teachers or doctors when we accept that they know what they are doing, even if we don't understand it; the same autonomy ought to be granted the pupil or the patient, because they know things about learning or being sick which the person teaching or treating them might not fathom (Sennett, 2003, p 122).

In such a way, autonomy becomes 'a powerful recipe for equality' as 'autonomy means accepting in the other what you do not understand', i.e. 'the grant must be mutual' (Sennett, 2003, p. 122). Autonomy is a responsibility: one that comes with mutuality built in to it.

Three Explanatory Concepts: Care, Curiosity and Community

The form of autonomy in universities that is promoted in this article is informed by three concepts that, in turn, are central to much of educational philosophy (Stern, 2018). This is not presented as a comprehensive account of the philosophy of autonomy, but as illustrative of the lived experience of autonomy in universities.

Care

Treating people as having autonomy, for me, implies and is informed by care. This is particularly because care ethics – the philosophy that puts care at the heart of all ethics (Macmurray, 1991; Noddings, 2012, 2016) – requires that ethics be mutual, so individual autonomy is never complete. 'The ethic of care rejects the notion of a truly autonomous moral agent and accepts the reality of moral interdependence' as 'our goodness and our growth are inextricably bound to that of others we encounter', so that, for Noddings' educational philosophy, 'as teachers, we are as dependent on our students as they are on us' (Noddings, 2016, p. 237). Macmurray stresses the paradoxical emphasis on both mutual dependence and intended independence. 'My care for you is only moral if it includes the intention to preserve your freedom as an agent, which is your independence of me', and 'even if you wish to be dependent on me, it is my business, for your sake, to prevent it' (Macmurray, 1991, p. 190). The danger – Macmurray says – is of care creating a dependency and therefore being a potentially oppressive form of care. Another way of describing this is to say that autonomy is critical as an intention: all should intend the autonomy of others. Autonomy is central to care, and care (for these philosophers) to all ethics.

How is care exemplified in universities? A Picasso picture, *Two Girls Reading*[1], depicts two women, who seem to care for each other. They also seem to care for the book they are

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1　See: https://theartstack.com/artist/pablo-picasso/art-washes-away-from-s.

reading. *Care for the object of study* is central to all learning, and it can also be described as curiosity. Picasso's picture therefore represents the 'essence' of care in educational communities, and links to the second of the explanatory concepts.

Curiosity

Curiosity, or 'care for the object of study', informs autonomy in universities. The difference between curious and incurious research is that the former cares for the object of study whilst the latter does not; the difference between curious and incurious teaching is that the former involves (mutual) care in the teaching-learning relationship and care for the object of study, whilst the latter does not. Incurious researchers may care for themselves and their careers, they may care for making money or becoming famous, but they do not care directly for the object of study. Incurious teaching-learning activities may care for external indicators (such as 'student satisfaction' scores, or audit outcomes or qualifications), without caring directly for each other and for the object of study. Kozyrev describes researcher autonomy as involving being 'independent' which is 'a sort of bravery'. He continues, that it is 'the possible Fall of the scientist, like the biblical Fall, when he [*sic!*] becomes oriented toward the result which... could pay' (Kozyrev, in: Stern, 2016, p. 167). Curiosity, he suggests, can seem impolite, but it is not 'uncaring' to disagree with people – colleagues or others – it is just, at times, a little awkward. Autonomy in such a context is not a matter of 'going your own way, no matter what'. It is a matter of attending to the object of study, and allowing *it* – the object of study – an appropriate degree of autonomy, rather than simply imposing your views on the world. Similarly, in a teaching-learning context, promoting curiosity will not always be comfortable: it typically involves difficult work and disagreement. Mutual care, that intends an 'autonomy' in the other (the other person, and the object of study) is characteristic of curiosity-driven research and teaching-learning alike. And exonomy in research (being driven by money or fame, for example) or in teaching-learning (being driven by external audits or measures) exemplify a lack of curiosity.

Community

The third of the values that are exemplified in and inform autonomy is community, demonstrated especially through dialogue. One person cannot be autonomous 'alone'. Of course, a person temporarily left alone may be alone, but fantasies of the kind described in *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 2001) are precisely that: fantasies, or as Marx referred to them, *Robinsonades* (Marx, 1973, p. 84). Much work in universities is dependent on the communal character of the institutions. But, as Barnett (2005, p. 107) warns, 'community is not given in university life; it has to be worked at', worked at, that is, by students and academics

alike. The autonomy we might wish for in universities is not made up of wholly-separate people 'doing their own thing' without interruption. Autonomy is achieved in dialogue, in community, combining dialogue with living people (colleagues and others within and beyond the university) and 'dialogue with the dead' (Stern, 2014, p. 11) (for example through reading books). What would exonomy look like, when it comes to communal dialogue universities? There would be either a lack of dialogue (for example if all were pursuing wholly individual ends) or the presence of only 'technical' dialogue (the exchange of information). Buber distinguishes three kinds of dialogue, genuine dialogue, technical dialogue (the necessary exchange of information), and 'monologue disguised as dialogue':

> There is genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. There is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And there is monologue disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources (Buber, 2002, p. 22).

A community is – in large part – made through dialogue. Universities as learning communities will inevitably exhibit a great deal of technical dialogue, but in the absence of 'genuine' dialogue, they will not be communities.

Conclusion

Autonomy in universities – autonomy of the kind worth celebrating and defending – is only meaningful, I suggest, when it is mutual, in community, in dialogue, and characterised by care for people and for the object of study. Such autonomy is worth defending. However, it is important to say that exonomy is not always harmful. For example, there are good reasons to take material – data, insights, advice – from other people. Exonomy is only harmful when it blocks mutuality, disables community, limits genuine dialogue or helpful technical dialogue, and/or restricts the flourishing of care and curiosity. Autonomy in universities is based, in this account, on universities being learning communities, demonstrated through an emphasis on just learning. Every academic has a personal, individual, professional responsibility to be caring and curious. Maintaining such care and curiosity is a path towards an appropriate autonomy; giving up on care and curiosity would create a barrier to autonomy – a barrier before ever an exonomous power had begun to threaten autonomy. Learning communities are made by those in the communities, albeit in social contexts that might mitigate against the achievement of such autonomy. Nevertheless, the starting point and the end point of understanding university autonomy is the care and curiosity demonstrated in a learning community. My conclusion is therefore rather simple, like my initial description of universities. Autonomy looks *like this*: When tho-

se in universities focus primarily on learning alone (they focus on just *learning*), and when the ways in which they do that is personal and therefore congruent with justice (they focus on *just* learning), universities will be able to demonstrate appropriate autonomy.

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Summary

A university is a learning community, dedicated to learning at 'higher' levels. It is from this simple and – I think – uncontentious description of universities that I build my argument for the autonomy of universities, for what autonomy looks like in universities (somewhat in contrast to official descriptions, as at https://www.university-autonomy.eu/), and for what universities would look like if they were exonomous. After describing the rather dangerous term 'autonomy', I will go on to explain why and how autonomy is important. Autonomy – infused with care, curiosity and community – is equally relevant to the two activities that dominate universities: teaching-learning and research. My conclusion is rather simple, like my initial description of universities as learning communities. When those in universities focus primarily on learning alone (they focus on just **learning**), and when the ways in which they do that is personal and therefore congruent with justice (they focus on **just** learning), universities will be enabled to demonstrate a significant degree of autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, exonomy, care, curiosity, community, Buber, Macmurray, Noddings, research, teaching

JAK WYGLĄDA AUTONOMIA NA UNIWERSYTETACH?

Streszczenie

Uniwersytet jest społecznością uczącą się, poświęconą uczeniu się na poziomie „wyższym". Z tego prostego i – jak sądzę – nieskomplikowanego opisu uniwersytetów buduję swój argument na rzecz ich autonomii, piszę o tym, jak wygląda autonomia na uniwersytetach (w przeciwieństwie do oficjalnych opisów jak na https://www.university-autonomy.eu/) i jak wyglądałyby uniwersytety, gdyby były egzonomiczne. Po opisaniu raczej niebezpiecznego terminu „autonomia" wyjaśniam, dlaczego i jak ważna jest autonomia. Autonomia – nasycona troską, ciekawością i społecznością – w równym stopniu odnosi się do dwóch działań, które dominują na uniwersytetach: nauczania-uczenia się i badań. Mój wniosek jest dość prosty, podobnie jak mój początkowy opis uniwersytetów jako społeczności uczących się. Gdy te społeczności skupią się przede wszystkim na samodzielnym uczeniu się (skoncentrują się na samym **uczeniu się**), a ich sposoby będą osobiste, a zatem zgodne z wymiarem sprawiedliwości (skupią się **tylko** na uczeniu się), wówczas uniwersytety będą mogły się wykazać znacznym stopniem autonomii.

Słowa kluczowe: autonomia, egzonomia, opieka, ciekawość, społeczność, Buber, Macmurray, Noddings, badania, nauczanie