A Gadamerian Critique of the Liberal Notion of Autonomy

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Introduction

The notion of autonomy is one of the core concepts of the traditions of liberal education and political liberalism. Nevertheless, even within liberalism, there is no single definition of autonomy that all the advocates of the concept would find acceptable. It is quite commonly agreed upon that autonomy is closely related to freedom and self-government (autos = self, nomos = law, rule), but there is disagreement concerning what is meant by these notions and what is required for their realization. One conception of autonomy that is held by many liberal theorists is the notion of rational autonomy that derives from Kantian moral philosophy: as Hanan Alexander (2007, p. 610) and John Gray (2000, p. 2) suggest, there is a branch of liberalism in pursuit of regimes that promote an ideal form of life based on universal principles or standards of rationality.

In this form of liberalism, the idea of neutral, context-independent rationality constitutes the foundation upon which personal life choices and political debates can be justifiably resolved in pluralistic societies: it is argued – implicitly or explicitly – that underlying the variety of different cultures, value commitments and preferences there is a commonly held understanding of shared criteria or standards of rationality, which guarantees that rational agreement can be reached concerning what counts as a worthwhile life and what principles should be accepted as the guidelines of the liberal state (e.g. Brighouse, 1998). In my view, this contemporary, liberal conception of rational autonomy is based on a profoundly Kantian idea according to which the choices and ends of an autonomous individual must be determined in accordance with universally binding standards of rationality recognized and accepted by all rational beings. The decisive feature of this liberal, Kantian-inspired notion of autonomy is the dualistic distinction between universal principles of rationality and different cultural or traditional orientations of particular individuals and communities. Such distinction is taken to be indispensable, because it enables detachment from, and rational assessment of, context- or culture-dependent values and beliefs, and thus allows them either to be held or rejected autonomously – that is, on the basis of reasons – without the inference of any external force such as the state or the cultural tradition.

In this contribution, my aim is to present a hermeneutical critique of the aforementioned conception of rational autonomy. The point of departure for my examination is Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and his critique of the Enlightenment. In this critique, Gadamer demonstrates that the tradition of the Enlightenment is characterized by a problematical dichotomization between reason and tradition that leaves unheeded the structure of historical prejudices that governs understanding (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 274–285). According to Gadamer, this dichotomization conceals that all rational acts are conditioned by the historical situation in which these actions take place (Gadamer, 2004, p. 277). Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment challenges the dualistic distinction between context-independent standards of rationality and historical traditions that is at the core of the liberal notion of autonomy, and which is parallel – albeit not identical – to the dichotomy that can be found in the tradition of the Enlightenment, and in Kantian philosophy in particular. My argument, deriving from Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment, is that this distinction creates and artificial, idealized understanding of individual autonomy, and sets aside the actual historical, cultural and situational factors effecting the choices and actions of an individual. My suggestion is that Gadamer's hermeneutics might provide an alternative way of perceiving autonomy, which takes into consideration the fundamental historicity of human existence, and thereby avoids some of the problems that can be associated with the liberal conception of autonomy.
The essay is structured as follows: in the next section, I will briefly introduce the Kantian notion of autonomy, which, in my view, has strongly influenced the “rationalist” line of thinking within the tradition of liberal education. In the third section, I will move on to the discussion concerning the notion of rational autonomy in liberal education, with the aim of indicating the Kantian roots of this conception. The fourth section focuses on Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment and its critical implications for the liberal notion of rational autonomy. In the fifth section, I will introduce an alternative conception of autonomy deriving from Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and his re-appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* in particular. I will also contrast Gadamer’s notion of *phronesis* with the neo-Aristotelian interpretation of the concept in order to indicate the differences between these two conceptions and, ultimately, to demonstrate that they offer very different remedies to the problems encountered in liberalism. The sixth and final section is dedicated to concluding remarks and especially to the educational relevance of the Gadamerian interpretation of autonomy.

**Kant’s Concept of Autonomy**

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant initially outlines the foundations for his moral philosophy, he places special importance on the *a priori* or “pure” – as opposed to empirical – nature of moral philosophy (*GMM*, 4:388–9). According to Kant, the aim of moral philosophy is to identify and establish the unconditional, supreme moral principle that is categorically binding and which should not be confused with conditional truths, such as desires, conventions, or specific accounts of happiness (*GMM*, 4:388–392; see also Sensen, 2013, p. 12). Kant famously expresses this supreme moral principle in the form of the categorical imperative, which he states as follows: “Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (*GMM*, 4:421). For Kant, the unconditional, *a priori* nature of the moral principle is crucial, because inclinations and other empirical influences may vary from person to person and time to time, whereas the fundamental laws of morality must be the same for all and at all times: namely, even if certain inclinations are shared by all human beings, it cannot be inferred from that alone that it is rationally necessary to pursue the things that would satisfy them. According to Kant, *autonomy* is an integral part of morality, as the moral principle is binding to agents only in so far as they are rational and have *autonomy of the will* (*GMM*, 4:440). Therefore, Kant argues that the autonomy of the will is a property that all rational beings must practically assume that they and other rational beings have (*GMM*, 4:440; see also Formosa, 2013, p.195). In this context, the will is “the kind of causality” (*GMM*, 4:446) that human beings have as rational beings, which primarily refers to the ability to act intentionally and on the basis of reasons. For Kant, acting on the basis of reasons is synonymous with acting in accordance with laws and principles (see *GMM*, 4:412) and, therefore, *autonomy* of the will points toward the idea of acting on the basis of laws and principles that are chosen freely. As Korsgaard (1996, p. 98) explains, the problem faced by the autonomous will is that, according to Kant, the will must have a law, but because the will is simultaneously free, the logical conclusion is that the will must be its own law. Therefore, Kant’s notion of the autonomy of the will implies two different senses of freedom: firstly, it presupposes negative freedom from the causal laws (physical, psychological and other empirical forces) that might affect the person’s actions and choices. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, autonomy refers to freedom positively.

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1 Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* will be cited as *GMM* in all subsequent references. All the references are taken from the German-English edition edited and translated by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, Cambridge University Press (2011).
conceived: Kant argues that even a negatively free will cannot be ‘lawless’ but, because its negative freedom implies that it is not determined by empirical causal laws, it must be capable of making its choices in accordance with laws of another kind – i.e. laws of pure practical reason (GMM, 4:446–7; see also Hill, 2013, pp. 18–19; Reath, 2013, pp. 32–33). Autonomy is thus “the characteristics of the will by which it is the law to itself (independently of any characteristic of the objects of willing)” (GMM, 4:440). To put it differently, at the core of Kant’s concept of autonomy is the idea that an autonomous agent is able to choose its own maxims on the basis of the moral law, and recognize this law as its own standard, which has not been imposed upon it by any (external) authority or force.

Underlying this Kantian definition of autonomy is a form of metaphysical dualism that divides human existence into two distinct spheres or dimensions: Kant describes human agents as having both noumenal (rational) and phenomenal (empirical) selves or being members of both the intelligible and the sensible world. Within the phenomenal sphere, Kant argues, (empirical) human beings are subject to causal laws of nature, whereas within the noumenal sphere they are “free” or subject only to the laws given by pure practical reason which they, as rational beings, recognize and accept as their own standards (see GMM, 4:452). Accordingly, as noted above, autonomy does not refer to self-legislation or freedom of choice in any unqualified sense, but it is rather the ability of authoring and being subject to laws that are given by our noumenal, intelligible self, which Kant identifies as the “proper self” (GMM, 4:448, 458 and 461). This robust notion of transcendentally free agency is a central element of the Kantian conception of autonomy. The important question for philosophy today is, however, whether the issue of autonomy must be resolved through Kantian metaphysical dualism, or whether it is possible to understand our freedom as a part of the equipment that we as contingently evolved, historical and cultural beings have.

The Liberal Notion of Autonomy and its Debt to Kantianism

The concept of autonomy has been integral to the liberal tradition since the Enlightenment, and it has also played a central role in the defence of liberal education. Especially the line of thinking that Michael Bonnett and Steefan Cuypers (2003, p. 327) refer to as the “rationalist” tradition of liberal education owes an explicit debt to the Kantian understanding of autonomy. Bonnett and Cuypers (2003, p. 327) primarily associate this line of thinking with the so called “London School” represented by Robert Dearden, Richard Peters and Paul Hirst, whereas Hanan Alexander (2007, p. 611) identifies Harry Brighouse as the most important contemporary representative of this tradition. For these thinkers, autonomy, broadly speaking, refers to the ability to make choices concerning one’s values and ends on the basis of independent criteria of judgment provided by the public forms of reason (Bonnet & Cuypers, 2003, p. 327). One of the crucial aspects of this notion of rational autonomy is the idea that an autonomous individual should be able to act and make choices on his own and on the basis of reasons, and therefore without the interference of any external forces. This profoundly Kantian idea is clearly stated in Dearden’s definition of autonomy:

A person is autonomous […] to the extent that what he thinks and does in important areas of his life cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind. That is to say, the explanation of why he thinks and acts the way he does in these areas must include a reference to his own choices, deliberations, decisions, reflections, judgments, plannings or reasonings (Dearden, 1972, pp. 453–454).
Dearden emphasizes that the reasoning of an autonomous individual must be based on “independent criteria” (Dearden, 1972, p. 459) which, however, do not pose a threat to individual autonomy, as it still remains to the agent to employ those criteria and govern the activity of his or her mind by reference to them, and it is precisely this self-government in which his or her autonomy lies. As Bonnett and Cuypers (2003, p. 327) point out, Peters’s conception of autonomy involves a similar emphasis on the independent criteria of rationality as the foundation of autonomy: Peters rejects the populist notion of autonomy as ‘doing one’s own thing’, and argues that an autonomous person should be capable of adopting the impartial position of ‘the generalized other’ when assessing different choices and ends. Peters concludes that “in estimating anything rationally identity is as irrelevant as time and place” (Peters, 1974, p. 428), thereby implying the existence of ahistorical and context-independent rationality.

In the works of the later representatives of the tradition of liberal education – Harry Brighouse among others – the Kantian conception of autonomy is brought into connection with the central themes of political liberalism. For Brighouse, autonomy refers to the individual’s ability to choose, on the basis of rational assessment, his or her way of life from the range of possible alternatives. According to Brighouse, the flourishing of an individual is dependent upon his or her ability to rationally assess different ways of life and decide upon that evaluation what kind of life he or she wants to lead. Therefore, children should have the opportunity to learn about different life choices outside their own immediate cultural and traditional milieu (Brighouse, 1998, pp. 727–728; Brighouse, 2006, pp. 14–16). Furthermore, Brighouse sees this kind of autonomy as necessary for the legitimacy of the liberal state: the legitimacy of liberal institutions depends upon the rational consent of the citizens, and this legitimacy evidently counts only in the case that the citizens can be regarded as sufficiently autonomous and thus capable of rational assessment (Brighouse, 1998, p. 720). Therefore, according to Brighouse, education should facilitate the development of such skills of rational assessment, which enable participation in the public debate concerning the legitimacy of social institutions. However, Brighouse believes that rational consent of all citizens can never be reached as some citizens cannot be expected to be autonomous enough to give their consent, and thus he concludes that a sufficient criterion for legitimacy must be a hypothetical one: “it must be true that citizens would give their consent if they were reasonable, informed, and not overly self-interested” (Brighouse, 1998, p. 720). Therefore, Brighouse’s view strongly implies that a rational consent between different groups in possession of different comprehensive and normative doctrines could be reached if all citizens were autonomous – that is, capable of rational assessment on the basis of independent criteria of judgment.

As Alexander (2007) suggests, the notion of rational autonomy outlined above involves the idea of consent to universal, context-independent principles or standards of rationality, which enable the evaluation of different values, commitments and ways of life from a detached, neutral and impartial viewpoint. Although the aforementioned liberal educators no longer endorse the Kantian transcendental philosophy in its full sense, it is clear that the strong division between one’s given historical and cultural tradition and the way of life chosen on the basis of independent rational principles owes a great debt to Kantian philosophy, and especially to the ideal of autonomy as self-legislation purified from all empirical – i.e. personal, cultural and historical – contingencies. In a similar vein as in Kantian philosophy, the thinkers of the aforementioned rationalist tradition imply that autonomy presupposes the ability to set aside the personal, historical and cultural inclinations and influences in order to adopt one’s ends and commitments on the basis of rational standards common to all human beings.
Although Alexander, Bonnett and Cuypers among others have pointed out several difficulties involved in the previously described conception of autonomy (see Alexander, 2007; Bonnet & Cuypers, 2003), I will not repeat these arguments here but, instead, I will approach these issues from the viewpoint of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. I suggest that Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment brings forward the central problems of the Kantian-oriented conception of autonomy and, moreover, Gadamer’s hermeneutics also gives rise to an alternative approach to the concept of autonomy, which brings to awareness the historicity of human existence without, however, sacrificing the fruitful aspects of the contemporary liberal notion of autonomy.

Gadamer’s Critique of the Enlightenment and its Implications to the Liberal Notion of Autonomy

In his main work *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer presents a forceful critique of the Enlightenment notion of rationality, focusing especially on the strict distinction between reason and historical traditions established by the Enlightenment. Although Gadamer primarily refers to Descartes in his critique, it is evident that the critical arguments against the basic tendencies of the Enlightenment also apply to Kant’s philosophy. In the most well-known passages of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer rehabilitates the notions of prejudice, tradition and authority as an antithesis to the Enlightenment’s demand for the objectivity, impartiality and certainty of knowledge (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 273–285). Gadamer’s central argument is that all human understanding is based on an inherited historical pre-understanding, which cannot be fully dispelled by reflective means, and which therefore governs all further attempts to understand ourselves, the world and our tradition (Gadamer, 2004, p. 282). With respect to the topic of this essay, the most striking of Gadamer’s arguments is that the fundamental historicity of human existence extends into the very structures of rationality. In other words, for Gadamer, rationality does not exist independently of the medium of historical tradition but, rather, it manifests itself in particular historical situations and through the concrete actions of individuals within these situations (Gadamer, 2004, p. 277). Gadamer further elaborates this idea in his analysis of the hermeneutic relevance of Aristotelian ethics, where he introduces his notion of *application*, taking its model from Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*. Rationality understood as *phronesis* or application is a radically historical mode of reasoning in which the person always already finds him/herself in the situation that demands action and where what is demanded of human beings in general cannot be distinguished from the concrete circumstances in which deliberation takes place (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 310–311).

As Gadamer argues that there is no alternative for the historical mode of being of humans, he does not take the interconnected nature of reason and tradition to be a limitation to freedom or autonomy. Rather, Gadamer’s argument is that by perceiving rationality as something external from and opposite to historical traditions, the Enlightenment merely obliterates the inescapable historicity of all human understanding and therefore, for him, the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudices” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 274) appears as the greatest disabling bias of our modern self-consciousness, which prevents human beings from seeing what kind of rationality and autonomy is nevertheless possible on the basis of their historical mode of being. Furthermore, according to Gadamer, the historicity of human existence prevents the person’s being from ever becoming totally transparent to him/herself, the therefore the Enlightenment’s overestimation of the capacities of critical reflection is itself vulnerable to dogmatism: namely, according to Gadamer, only the recognition of the historical finitude of understanding enables perceiving the norms and
laws that have initially been taken to be objective or absolute as challengeable and open for revision (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 277–278).

Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment poses a serious challenge to the Kantian concept of autonomy, as it questions the very foundation upon which this notion is based: namely, the strict distinction between principled rationality and the historical conditions of human existence. Gadamer’s critique is thus useful for pointing out the difficulties of the contemporary Kantian-oriented liberal notion of autonomy: firstly, as Georgia Warnke (1987) argues, Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment implies that the standards of rationality are themselves historically developed conceptions of rationality, and thus they cannot provide any absolute, impartial or neutral basis for the evaluation of different values, commitments or ways of life. Furthermore, as Alexander (2007, p. 611) suggests, the universal conception of rationality cannot itself withstand the test of rational evaluation, as it presupposes the very standards it is set out to demonstrate. Kant’s strategy to solve this problem was to ground the *a priori* laws of reason in the transcendental subjectivity, which led him to the metaphysical dualism described in the second section of this paper. However, Kantian transcendentalism is incompatible with any philosophical view that regards itself as post-metaphysical, and thus it is rarely endorsed in its full sense in contemporary philosophy – at least not without some significant modifications. Also, the attempts to demonstrate the empirical existence of universal cognitive structures – such as in the case of Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of morality – have also proven to be problematical.

Secondly, Gadamer’s argument that our historical existence is never completely transparent to us profoundly challenges the idea that formal autonomy-related skills of rational assessment could be educated without the inference of substantial cultural and historical values and beliefs. As Shaun Gallagher (1992, p. 181) argues, education cannot escape from initiating students into traditions to which educational institutions and practices themselves belong: even when the teacher tries to control the students’ access to information or guide the students’ processes of learning, there are aspects of the process of tradition, which cannot be brought under control. Even the teacher’s attempt to control the process is something defined and justified within the larger process of tradition, which may be external to the teacher’s conscious control, but not external to the process of education itself.

Accordingly, as human beings always already find themselves within a pre-interpreted network of meanings that they have acquired through processes of socialization and education, the idea that the historical identities that have been formed in these processes could, as totalities, be placed under rational evaluation is completely foreign to the idea of historicity as described by Gadamer. Gadamer’s argument is that there are always historical prejudices that are not fully transparent for us, and thus not available for rational evaluation (Gadamer, 2004, p. 301). We do not have an objective, impartial stance to our historical lives or identities but, rather, our perspective to them is always one of a participant and an insider. The issue for a socialized human being is not to choose impartially among an array of alternatives, but to determine – at least in part on the basis of his own historical experiences – what can be done in those concrete circumstances in which the individual already finds him/herself, and which choices are possible for him/her within that situation. Although this inescapability of historical influence is recognized by some of the aforementioned theorists of liberal education, the full impact of this historicity remains unacknowledged: for instance, Harry Brighouse (1998, p. 728) argues that although many of our commitments are formed non-autonomously – for instance, through
processes of socialization – once the autonomy-related skills are acquired, these commitments can be placed under rational evaluation, and thus they can come to be held autonomously.

Thirdly, it is questionable, in what sense the choices made on the basis of universal standards of rationality can be regarded as the person’s own? It seems that such understanding of autonomy presupposes the robust notion of transcendental self that is at the centre of Kantian philosophy, as only this notion seems to be able to explain how adherence to universal standards of rationality could be identified with personal autonomy. For the historical self, whose being is constituted by historical prejudices rather than his or her rationality, autonomy becomes a matter of being true to one’s historical heritage – not by adopting it as such but, rather, establishing one’s own, unique relationship to that heritage. This does not involve neutrality or the extinction of one’s self – rather, it involves the appropriation and fore-grounding of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices, as Gadamer (2004, p. 271) puts it. As Bonnett and Cuypers (2003, pp. 327–328) argue, such dimension of authenticity is something completely disregarded in the Kantian-oriented notion of autonomy. For Gadamer, to be autonomous and therefore authentic means to discover anew and redefine one’s historical heritage in a manner that enables the realization of the best possible life within a given historical situation. For Gadamer, what counts as one’s own, is fundamentally inseparable from the historical conditions that constitute one’s existence.

The Gadamerian Concept of Autonomy

I have already shed some light on the nature of the hermeneutical notion of autonomy through the Gadamerian critique the Enlightenment. It must be pointed out that Gadamer himself does not provide a definition for the concept of autonomy, and he also rarely uses the concept. Hence, this section of the paper should be understood as an attempt to outline what a Gadamerian notion of autonomy would look like, if Gadamer had formulated such a conception. As I have implied above, the starting-point for the Gadamerian notion of autonomy is the historicity of human existence. Therefore, defining the notion of autonomy from a hermeneutical perspective requires taking our belongingness to tradition and history into account, and determining what it means to be autonomous within the framework of dependency relations that characterize our being as humans. From a Gadamerian viewpoint, autonomy does not require neutrality or impartiality in regard to the historical preconditions of our being but, rather, as Brice Wachterhauser (2002, p. 62) points out, autonomy can coexist with our de facto belongingness to tradition.

The interrelatedness of freedom and dependence that is characteristic to Gadamer’s philosophy is established in his re-appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of phronesis. Briefly, in Aristotle’s philosophy, the concept of phronesis refers to a mode of moral-practical reasoning, which is required for knowing how to act in a particular situation that requires moral deliberation. Phronesis combines knowledge of the universal – i.e. what is demanded of human beings in general – and knowledge of the particular circumstances of a given situation (see Gadamer, 2004, p. 311; Vilhauer, 2010, p. 122). Aristotle formulated the concept of phronesis as a correction to Plato’s equation of virtue with theoretical knowledge. According to Aristotle, theoretical knowledge of some absolute and abstract idea of “the Good” does not itself enable making decisions and bringing about some good in the particular, concrete situations in which we find ourselves; rather, the good that we are seeking to establish is a human good achievable through practice, and not an eternal, metaphysical Good that lies beyond being (see Vilhauer, 2010, p. 123).
The Aristotelian concept of \textit{phronesis}, however, is intimately associated with the pre-established laws of a \textit{polis}: a person possesses \textit{phronesis} if he or she has been educated and habituated by the laws of a well-ordered polis, and if the person is able to utilize the knowledge established in these laws in his or her practical deliberation (see Bernstein, 1983, p. 157). Aristotle’s notion of \textit{phronesis} has inspired the neo-Aristotelian philosophers, most eminently Alistair MacIntyre and Michael Sandels, to argue that autonomy cannot be founded on the idea of an unsocialized, “unencumbered” self freely choosing one’s way of life without reference to one’s social and historical circumstances (Wringe, 1997, pp. 115–116). According to the Neo-Aristotelians, what counts as a good life for the individual is always pre-determined by the society, and therefore the communally shared way of life should be perceived as constitutive for autonomy. For them, autonomy refers to the ability to find one’s place and role within a pre-given social order (Wringe, 1997, pp. 115–116).

Although Gadamer’s formulation of the concept of \textit{phronesis} can be regarded as Neo-Aristotelian in some sense of the concept, it gives rise to a significantly different notion of autonomy than the one introduced by MacIntyre and Sandels: although Gadamer suggests that we always already find ourselves within a pre-interpreted world which, to some extent, determines what is within our range of possibilities, for Gadamer, the significance of \textit{phronesis} is precisely in demonstrating that the tradition can never be understood or grasped independently of the interpreter’s particular historical situation (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 309–310). Therefore, in regard to autonomy, the good of an individual cannot be directly derived from the communally shared ethos or the inherited tradition. Rather, each person in the possession of \textit{phronesis} must determine for him/her what counts as good for him/her, right here and right now. Therefore, in Gadamer’s view, being autonomous does not mean finding one’s place in a pre-given community and tradition but, rather, \textit{redefining} the meaning of one’s tradition, and re-appropriating it in a manner that opens new, previously unknown possibilities within one’s particular historical situation. To put it differently, being autonomous does not mean simply adapting to and supporting the stability of the tradition that one inherits, but taking an \textit{active} role in modifying and transforming one’s relationship with that tradition in the light of one’s historical situation. Importantly, this does not only transform the person and her relationship with the tradition, but also the shared medium of tradition itself. Gadamerian autonomy thus implies mutuality and interdependence between the individual and the community — that is, the individual does not merely adapt to the pre-given order, but has a significant role in establishing and re-creating that order.

Importantly, in Gadamer’s philosophy, the idea of \textit{phronesis} is closely associated with his conceptions of \textit{dialogue} and \textit{otherness} (see Gadamer, 2004, pp. 352–353; 356). That is, \textit{phronesis} – and therefore autonomy – does not take place in the solitude of individual consciousness but, rather, it requires dialogical encounters with different others who occupy different perspectives and viewpoints into some subject matter or matters that belong to one’s historical horizon. Gadamer sees a non-autonomous person as someone who is captured within one’s pre-given historical horizon, who lacks the ability to see what lies beyond it and thus overvalues what is nearest to him or her (Gadamer, 2004, p. 301). Gadamer’s argument is that, as historical beings, we do not have independent or impartial viewpoints to our traditions and identities at our disposal, and therefore the only possibility to gain autonomy and freedom in regard to our pre-given historical existence is our openness to others, and our readiness to let others teach us something about ourselves and our world (Vilhauer, 2010, p. 83). These encounters with others allow us to risk our initial prejudices, put them into play in the dialogues with others, and to see our prejudices
in a different light, so that we can eventually integrate our new awareness of ourselves and the world into our self-understanding in a manner that increases our possible ways of defining our tradition and ourselves within that tradition. For Gadamer, encountering otherness is constitutive for autonomy, as it enables us to establish a new, more meaningful and more conscious relationship with our historical heritage, and thereby it also allows us to determine, at least to some extent, which dimensions of that heritage we wish to embrace within our historical situation.

One of the important implications of the Gadamerian notion of autonomy is that it finds reconciliation between autonomy and otherness/alterity. Since Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) critique of autonomy, it has been common to think that autonomy is fundamentally antagonistic to alterity, otherness and difference, as it neutralizes the other and reduces it into the sameness represented by universal modes of rationality. In Gadamer’s conception, however, the other is constitutive for my autonomy, and I am constitutive to the autonomy of the other, and although we may establish an understanding on a given matter through dialogue, we nevertheless sustain our fundamental differences. This conception of autonomy opens interesting possibilities for perceiving autonomy as an educational goal within pluralistic societies, where the ideal of a rational consent or rational agreement of all citizens seems utopic, and where some form of consent and agreement is nevertheless, despite fundamental differences, required for both the stability and legitimacy of the society.

Conclusions: The Educational Relevance of the Gadamerian notion of Autonomy

As we can see, the Gadamerian notion of autonomy maintains the liberal insight that autonomy is deeply associated with one’s ability to choose one’s way of life or, more specifically, to establish one’s own relationship with one’s tradition. Therefore, any form of education that prevents or hinders the development of such ability can be seen as undesirable and dogmatic from Gadamer’s viewpoint. In this sense, Gadamer’s notion of autonomy is in agreement with liberalism, and stands in opposition to the neo-Aristotelian insight according to which individual autonomy is subordinate to the pre-established way of life of a community. However, the liberal aim of fostering such skills of rational assessment that will enable the students to make their choices and determine their ways of life entirely on their own and on the basis of independent standards of rationality is, from Gadamer’s viewpoint, highly unrealistic, as it fails to take into account the processes of tradition and history that condition both educational practices and the formation of individual identities. As I have emphasized above, education inescapably initiates students into traditions, as there are always aspects of the process of tradition that are beyond the teacher’s conscious control. Furthermore, as historical, socialized beings, human beings do not have the ability to place their inherited ways of life or their cultural identities under rational scrutiny – at least not as totalities – as some dimensions of them always remain hidden and thus beyond rational control.

Therefore, Gadamer’s philosophy implies a more modest approach to the concept of autonomy which, nevertheless, sustains some of the dimensions of the liberal idea of autonomy as self-determination or self-legislation: namely, Gadamer suggests that despite the lack of impartial, independent or universal standards of rationality in accordance to which we could choose our identities and ways of life, we nevertheless have the possibility of forming our own relationship with our tradition and historical heritage, and thereby we may increase our possibilities to think and act in ways that enables us to lead more fulfilling, authentic lives. In this context, forming a new relationship with our tradition means
becoming aware of the different possibilities that our historical situation enables, and determining which parts of our heritage we wish to endorse through our actions. This does not mean that all the dimensions of our tradition would be in our conscious control – that we could simply ‘exit’ our inherited way of life, as Brighouse (1998, p. 730) suggests – or that our choices would necessarily count as rational in other historical situations. Rather, at the core of Gadamer’s notion of *phronesis* is the idea that there simply is no general or universal guideline that could be grasped independently of our historical reality, and therefore it remains our task, as autonomous and historical beings, to discover what counts as good and right within our historical situation.

Hence, from Gadamer’s viewpoint, the task that education faces is not to foster adherence to impartial principles of rationality in choosing one’s way of life. Rather, the purpose of education is to enable the students to become aware of the actual historical circumstances that condition their being. This, as I have suggested, may be reached through encountering different others, which, however, does not mean merely learning about different ways of life and alternative life choices on a cognitive level. Rather, it means encountering others as moral beings who possess their own, different views into the world and from whom the students may therefore learn something about themselves and their own world. The possibility for such encounters depends on empathy, humility, openness and curiosity rather than rationality in a Kantian sense, and these capacities can be acquired only through realizing that one’s view into oneself and into the world is fundamentally limited by one’s historicity. “That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being”, as Gadamer (2004, p. 278) states.

**References**


