

# Schools, Identity and the Conception of the Good. The Denominational Tradition as an Example

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**ABSTRACT:** The Dutch education system relies upon a large number of publicly-subsidized, denominational schools. The authors defend the importance of schools that educate children within a specific – including denominational – conception of the good by arguing for the importance of such a conception for the development of the child's identity. An essential component of this developmental process is critical reflection, conceived as crucial to the formation of moral autonomy.

**KEY WORDS:** Denominational schools, identity, private education, Dutch education, liberalism, Rawls

## I. INTRODUCTION

The existence of Christian schools and Christian education is widely discussed in Dutch society. The strategy of dividing schools according to different denominations, a practice which started with the Pacification Law of 1917 and has continued for so many decades, is losing its impact. Given the condition of contemporary Dutch society, the enormous decline in the number of church members and the pace at which Christian organisations and institutions disappear, the reasons for the existence of denominational schools are questioned, too. The discussion about the need for denominational schools is not unique to the Netherlands, but takes place in almost all Western countries. In many countries, it is, for instance, questioned whether the state is obliged to subsidize private or denominational schools.

In this article, we will defend the importance of schools that educate pupils within a specific conception of the good by illustrating the importance of this kind of education for the development of a child's identity. Though our focus is more specifically on denominational schools, we regard our conclusions as valid for all kinds of private schools as well as public schools in which a specific conception of the good is explicitly actualized. In the second and third sections, we will deal with the problem of defining identity and then give some thought to the development of identity and the role and function of schools in the development of the child's identity. Finally, the fourth section sketches two conceivable problems certain denominational schools will meet in their contribution to the child's identity development.

## II. IDENTITY

A person's self-image and identity cannot develop without others. Psychologists, for instance, Mead (1934), as well as philosophers such as Taylor (1989), have

demonstrated that a person's sense of herself requires significant others. It is only within the mirror of the other that one can learn and see what kind of a person one is. Only within an intersubjective or dialogic relation can one develop one's subjectivity. As Taylor claims, the development of one's identity needs inescapable horizons, and only those characteristics that gain importance against inescapable horizons become part of one's identity (Taylor, 1992, p. 37). But what is meant by a person's 'identity'?

The concept 'identity' is not only widely used within scientific as well as common sense language, but it also has a wide variety of meanings. Different conceptions of 'identity' are proposed by philosophers and psychologists. Our analysis is based on Flanagan's definition of 'actual full identity', which he distinguishes from self-represented identity (1991). Actual full identity "... is constituted by the dynamic integrated system of past and present identifications, desires, commitments, aspirations, beliefs, dispositions, temperament, roles, acts, and actional patterns, as well as by whatever self-understandings (even incorrect ones) each person brings into his or her life" (Flanagan, 1991, p. 135). This identity is not static, but can alter due to changes in the centrality of the different aspects or due to changes in the aspects themselves. It is "the self as seen from the point of view of a certain class of theoretical perspectives that admit the reality of the self as an emergent phenomenon and try to give an objective account of what it, in general and particular, is like" (*ibid.*, p. 137). Within the enumeration of the different elements of actual full identity, we can distinguish three clusters of aspects. Though these clusters can be discerned theoretically, in practice, they influence one another and form a dynamic system.

The first cluster of identity aspects consists of the characteristics related to the person himself, that is, of his biological and psychological characteristics. These include the characteristics of his body, for instance, being big or fat; the characteristics of his temperament, for instance, being hot-tempered, shy or melancholic; and psychological characteristics, such as being aggressive. Secondly, the person will have ideals regarding these characteristics concerning the kind of person she wants to be or concerning the kind of looks she would like to have. These ideals influence her evaluation of her own characteristics and thereby form her identity.

A person's identity consists, in the second place, of the self-ascription of characteristics, values and ideals derived from the different communities the person is part of, for instance, a family, a peer group, a group of friends, working community, church, ethnic group. The communities that a person is part of and that constitute her identity can thus be larger and more general, as well as small and highly particular. An example of the relevant characteristics are those a person ascribes to herself in relation to the roles she has in these communities; examples include being a mother, a scientist, a church-member, or a member of a soccer team.

Within the communities to which she belongs, there will be (moral) values and (moral) ideals that will form her identity, such as the values that rule her profession or the values of the particular church of which she is a member. She will also have certain ideals regarding her role in a particular community in relation to which she evaluates herself and which become part of her identity. These

may include being a good mother, because she is always at home for tea when the children arrive from school.

The values and ideals of the various communities that a person endorses constitute his conception of the good. According to Rawls, a conception of the good consists of “a determinate scheme of final ends and aims, and of desires that certain persons and associations as objects of attachments and loyalties should flourish. Also included in such a conception is a view of our relation to the world – religious, philosophical or moral – by reference to which these ends and attachments are understood” (Rawls, 1987, p. 16).

The third cluster of identity aspects consists of characteristics, values and ideals which a person derives from the society of which he is a part. A person in a liberal democratic society, for instance, will regard himself as being a free citizen who has the possibility of voting for and, thereby, influencing the government and who has certain rights and duties relating to the government and fellow citizens. His identity will also be influenced by the values and (non) moral ideals of the society of which he is a member. In a liberal democratic society, the moral values a person as a citizen can ascribe to himself are part of the so-called public morality. Public morality consists of basic rules and basic rights. Basic rules are the necessary foundation for every livable society. Basic rules are necessary due to the natural characteristics of human beings, for instance, limited altruism and human vulnerability, and to the world in which we live (Hart, 1963). In order to be able to live well together, people have to follow basic rules such as not to steal, not to murder, to help people in distressing situations if the costs are not detrimental to the helper’s situation. Basic rights are constitutive of a liberal democratic society. They include the classic civil liberties, for instance, the right to freedom of speech and the right not to be discriminated against as well as the basic political democratic rights, such as the right to vote and the right to run for public office (cf. Spiecker & Steutel, 1995).

We have stated that the aspects of identity can influence one another. This is not to be thought of as a self-governing or subconscious process. Not only can a person observe changes, she can also reflect critically on either of the aspects. The reflection “. . . involves articulating tensions between our ideals and other aspects of identity; it involves evaluating the aims and attachments that are embedded in the social aspects of identity” (Rorty & Wong, 1993, p. 30). Though it is not necessary for having an identity that persons can contemplate every aspect, from the perspective of personal autonomy, we conceive of a critical reflection on the aspects of identity as an ideal worth striving for in education. So, this ideal of critical reflection brings us to the ideal of autonomy. The ideal goal of a child’s development and the aim of education is to become autonomous. In the next section we will elaborate on this aim and the way in which this can be achieved.

### III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY

The aim of a child’s development within a liberal society should be the development of an autonomous person. We describe an autonomous person as someone

who pursues self-chosen goals and relationships. An autonomous person lives a life freely chosen (cf. Raz, 1989). One of the defenses that can be given for this ideal aim is that, in our liberal, pluralistic society, being autonomous is necessary for one's well-being. Such a society is so arranged that being able to make autonomous choices and act autonomously is necessary for flourishing (cf. Raz, 1989; White, 1990). Since autonomy or autonomous identity is heavily debated and has received divergent interpretations, we will explicate our conception of the identity of an autonomous person and the way in which it develops.

A necessary condition for having an autonomous identity is that one is able to reflect critically on the aspects of one's identity, also on the traditions or frameworks in which one has been raised. We have stated that a person's subjective identity can only arise in an intersubjective situation, that is, in a community. Stating that a person has to reflect on this critically by no means implies that the person should abandon the community or that he could not be related to any community or tradition at all. Being part of a community or society allows a person's life to flourish. However, the way in which he or she is a member of the community should not be all-encompassing or non-critical, but reflective. Our ideal is, thus, not a kind of unencumbered self, which Sandel attacks (cf. Rorty & Wong, 1993), but the ideal of an autonomous person which liberals such as Kymlicka (1991) and Flanagan (1991, 1993), and critical sociologists such as Habermas (1973) describe.

Parents are the first persons in relation to whom a child can develop its identity. The way in which they respond to the child and emphasize certain characteristics of the child is the first and, probably, the most important step in a person's identity formation. By their responses, they influence the first cluster of identity aspects. Clearly, parents influence the second cluster of aspects of the child's identity as well. By imparting to the child the values and ideals of the family and those of the communities of which the family is a member, parents influence the ideal identity of the child. Thirdly, parents will influence the formation of the citizenship cluster of identity aspects.

What role can or should schools have in the development of the child's identity? Schools are communities in which the child participates for at least twelve years, for about seven hours a day. Therefore, it is not an understatement to claim that the school community has an important influence on the development of a child's identity. Within schools, fellow pupils and the formation of peer groups contribute to a child's identity. Teachers, however, will have as much influence, not only by direct education, but also by the way in which they behave in social situations, the way in which they support the child if he is outcast or the way in which they correct a child's behavior in relation to other children.

Teachers, especially in primary schools, will have an influence on the development of the child's identity with respect to biological and psychological aspects. Not only should teachers be aware of this, they should also take a professional attitude in this matter. A primary school teacher who constantly humiliates pupils he does not think bright by referring to their stupidity or mistakes is unprofessional in the execution of his pedagogical task. Instead of enhancing the

positive identity and the self-esteem of these pupils, he endows them with a negative sense of themselves.

In the formation of the second cluster of identity aspects, various philosophers (of education) claim that a child needs a stable primary culture or framework (see, for example, Taylor, 1989, 1992). A child needs values and ideals with which it can identify or which it can reject in the formation of her identity. So, the child has to be raised within a situation in which parents and teachers hold a conception of the good, live according to it, and share that conception with the child. Teachers and the school community can and will influence the child's formation of his conception of the good, that is, the values and ideals the child comprises within his identity. This claim is valid not only for denominational schools, but for all schools that educate explicitly within a specific conception of the good. Within our multicultural society, it is all the more important that children are provided with frameworks within which they can form their identity. It is true for adults that "with total freedom, there can be no individual freedom . . . because an excess of choice impairs the will" (Frankfurt, 1993, p. 19). Thus, Frankfurt claims, adults need ideals that restrict their freedom. If this is true for adults, as we think it is, it is especially true for children. Moreover, loss of ideals can lead to the disappearance of the meaning of life. This could lead young people to end their lives, because a meaningless life is a senseless life.

One of the core concerns of the school is to teach children the values and ideals of society and the characteristics of citizenship. We will describe this task of the school within the range of our liberal democratic society. Following Rawls, citizens in a liberal democratic society should have two moral powers. The first is having a capacity for a sense of justice, that is, "the capacity to understand, to apply and normally to be moved by an effective desire to act from the principles of justice as the fair terms of social cooperation". The second is having a capacity for a conception of the good, that is, "the capacity to form, to revise, and rationally to pursue such a conception" (Rawls, 1987, p. 16). We claim that these two capacities should be part of a citizen's identity in a liberal democratic society. This means that, in schools, children should be introduced into contents and competencies needed for the capacities mentioned.

#### IV. FOCUS ON DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS

Now that we have shown that schools contribute to the development of a child's identity, we will finally give some thought to two possible frictions between the aim we think education should strive for, namely, an autonomous person and the denominational character of a school.

The first friction is that between the crucial aspect of being an autonomous person, that is, critical reflection on the aspects of one's identity including one's conception of the good, on the one hand, and the opinion within some religious traditions that doubt or the revision of religious principles, values and norms is blasphemous and, hence, could not be part of education at all, on the other. A

specific conception of the good will be present in denominational schools, and could even be dominant. However, teachers should also encourage children to think critically about the conception of the good in which they are raised. At least, teachers should make children aware of different kinds of conceptions that exist within their society and for which the children ought to have respect. This means that teachers should start a dialogue between themselves and the pupils and should encourage the pupils to discuss with their peers their conception of the good. Children have to acquire a disposition to be interested in the conception of the good of others, at least the ones with which they are confronted in their own society. This means that children need to have a notion of what a conception of the good is. Only at a later age will children be able to have this concept reflectively, but, in primary schools, teachers can already start to encourage children to listen to stories of other cultures and religions, to tolerate children with other conceptions, and to learn to respect them. Thus, while at an early age, due to the cognitive and psychological tools of the child, education will consist primarily of initiating children into the ideas and practices of a certain conception of the good. This has to be done with the aim of autonomy in mind.

In 'closed' denominational schools, education obviously does not meet this standard; critical reflection on the specific conception of the good is not regarded as a valuable aim at all. On the contrary, instead of striving for autonomy, these schools strive for heteronomy, that is, for a non-critical, self-contained person.

The second friction is that of the school's duty to contribute, simultaneously, to the formation of a conception of the good and to the education of a child's identity as a citizen in a liberal society. Within a liberal democratic society, a citizen's identity has to consist of the characteristics of a liberal democratic citizen. This implies that children should learn about and be stimulated to follow the basic rules and basic rights of such a society and that they should be able to develop a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good. This presupposes that in schools the basic rules and basic rights are upheld and that the two capacities mentioned are actualized by the teachers as examples for the children. In schools in which a very conservative conception of the good is stimulated, for instance, in fundamentalist Christian or Islamic schools, there will be a tension between communitarian values and societal values. For example, in the Netherlands, some highly traditional denominational schools teach girls that they have to fulfil a certain role, that their identity should be one of being a housewife and mother and, most certainly, not one of being a political citizen. This, of course, is a violation of the basic right not to be discriminated against. Also, in these kinds of schools, the child's possibility for developing the second moral power, that is, to have the capacity for a conception of the good, is restricted because, as we mentioned with respect to the first friction, these schools condemn reflection on the specific conception of the good.

Towards both frictions we take a position similar to that of Amy Gutmann, who wrote, "The same principle that requires a state to grant personal and political freedom also commits it to assuring children an education that makes those two freedoms both possible and meaningful in the future" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 30).

Thus, the Dutch government has to reflect on the freedom of education in our country. It is doubtful whether schools that cannot resolve the frictions in a way that meets the criteria for a development towards autonomous identity, which we have said to be in the child's interest in our society, should be granted – without further discussion – freedom and full subsidy as they have them today.

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