

Autonomy and the university*

It is generally thought that being educated has a special human value. But simply put this special value of education lies in the fact that it is a process that is aimed at the enhancement of the self or – if this word is not acceptable – enhancement of the person. Education targets the human being as a whole and aims with varying degrees of success or failure to seek the enlargement of its unity and prevention of its fragmentation. In its various forms and stages, education involves engagements of different kinds – those that lead to such enhancement of the self or enlargement of the person. Such engagement requires a form of attention on the part of both the teacher and the learner that enables each to overcome the natural urge to be preoccupied with concerns about oneself, i.e. self-involved. It is not as though education alone requires the development of such a form of attention. Human relationships of certain kinds quite outside the arena of education (e.g. friendship and love), can thrive only on the basis of such attention. Education may be said to be a continuous process of engagement of this kind at various levels: the teacher's dual engagement with what she teaches and with the taught, the learner's engagement with what is being taught and with fellow learners. As we move up the levels of education, the required kind of attention is focused more and more on the world of ideas – communities of ideas (e.g. ideologies), traditions of thought, the ways in which one tradition of thought may or may not give way to another; on how creative energy within a tradition may change its course, on coherence and conflict among communities of ideas.

The underlying purpose of such engagement is the enhancement, on the one hand, of the world of ideas, and on the other, of the self both of the recipient of education and its giver. And it should be obvious that this purpose cannot be external to the process itself – the process can be fully understood only in terms of its purpose.

There are enormous challenges, given the contingencies of our world, to the pursuit of this crucial purpose of

education. These contingencies are multifarious and some of them may be specific to an era and some others may be historically more stable. But let me say a little about something, the lack of which must lead to a diminution of the character of institutions of higher learning, particularly of universities – whatever the contingencies of particular time or age. And this is the attribute of autonomy of higher educational institutions, and the related attribute of accountability.

Higher education aims at introducing the student to diverse traditions of thought and human creativity developed through man's deep engagement with the world of humans as well as the world of non-human nature. The purpose is to encourage such engagement in the student herself – and this requires, on the one hand, self-overcoming of the kind I have already referred to – an ability to attend to the other in freedom – to the extent possible – from one's self-centric interests, and, on the other, an ability for critical questioning and seeking answers for oneself – answers which must necessarily be made open to the critical look of others. Education, in other words, is really the pursuit of responsive and responsible autonomy – responsive to the needs and shortcomings of a tradition, of a part of a tradition or even of an argument and responsible, or accountable or answerable for the stance or the stand one has taken. Autonomy of enquiry or intellectual engagement is, therefore, a value that is internal to the practice of education. It is also clear that such autonomy makes sense only if it is accompanied by the right kind of accountability.

Higher educational institutions are bodies that are created for sustaining autonomous and responsive practice of the kind that I have just mentioned. It is clear that these bodies must in their turn be autonomous – free from control by an individual or a group of individuals within the institution, individuals whose own interests might easily be opposed to the internal institutional aims; free also from external and contrary political and business interests. One must here make a distinction between a higher institution of purely technical learning – an institution devoted solely to the imparting of skills – and an institution of higher education such as a university. Technical learning of this kind is subject to the vagaries of the

*Based in part on the address delivered at the XVI Convocation of the University of Hyderabad on 1 October 2014. This also forms part of an essay which is to appear in a forthcoming title from Oxford University Press.

ambitions of corporations in a globalized economy and the need of the state to respect such ambitions. Technical education is therefore necessarily subject to the interests of corporations and the political interests of the state. Such education insofar as it is solely that, does not involve the kind of engagement which is part of what I have called the core value of education. To the extent that this is so, institutions of pure technical learning cannot have the same justification for autonomy as other institutions of higher education. But even they must be free from complete control by an individual or group of individuals from within, for such control is more than likely to subvert the pursuit of the primary institutional interests.

What then about the related notion of *accountability of higher educational institutions*? Let me first say a word about freedom. Everybody knows that there can be no freedom without responsibility, and the idea of responsibility will be empty if it is not embedded in the idea of freedom. The clearest case of one having acted in freedom is when *one responds* to a situation and not just *reacts* to it, and owns responsibility for the way one has acted. To respond to a situation is to bring, in acting, one's emotional and intellectual resources to bear upon one's actions. To react to a situation is to act without thinking and, frequently, just to give vent to one's emotions.

Responsibility or accountability – particularly of institutions – is assessed in relation to the ends that they set for themselves. The accountability of a corporation is to the profits that it sets itself to earn. The norms of conduct within the corporation are a function of its primary goal. Frequently, some of these norms may indeed seem as though they are directed at different and independent goals (e.g. well-being and prosperity of its employees); but this is only apparent; all other goals are subservient to the primary goal of maximum profits for the corporation. Such accountability is clearly distinct from moral accountability. Moral accountability is assessed in terms of the exercise of virtues such as honesty, courage, unselfishness, kindness, justice – not in the framework of law, but in the very ordinary sense in which we talk about 'doing justice' to the other person in the complex day-to-day conduct of life. Corporations are not accountable in this way. They may indeed have *use* for the *apparent*, as opposed to the *real* exercise of these virtues much in the style of the Glauconian opponent of Socratic morality in Plato's *Republic*.

What about the accountability of institutions of higher learning? I shall confine myself to a remark just on the universities. Universities are paradigmatic examples of institutions which aim at, promote and are necessarily involved in engagement of the kind that constitutes what I call the core value of the practice of education. The

essential lifeline of a university is such engagement. There are, of course, goods to be achieved by this – depending on the kind of social importance that is given to education – goods such as money, fame and even power. But, as it is easy to see, these are goods which are themselves external to the practice of education. These can be achieved – and much better achieved – by means other than education, e.g. by undetected criminal activities of a very organized kind. But there are also goods that are *internal* to the kind of engagement that education necessarily promotes. Such goods constitute the excellence achieved in and through the pursuit of educational activities alone, e.g. academic research, teaching, conversations, dialogues among academic equals and between teacher and pupils, and so on. Such excellence is *internal* because it can be pursued only by someone who is well-versed in the language of the practice and it can be assessed only in terms of the language. Of course, the language of an academic practice can be more or less removed from ordinary language of day-to-day conversation and transaction. Think of disciplines such as history and its great variety, culture studies, art criticism, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, economics and then mathematics, physics, chemistry and so on; it is clear that we are moving into territories of specific practices, and correspondingly specific languages. Each practice embodies its own criteria of excellence and new standards of excellence are created. While there can be vital links between such practices, and it may be important for various reasons to move into territories of other practices, and new practices and languages are created, the criteria of excellence are never outside the domain of these practices, however flexible and porous the bounds of a particular practice might be.

The important thing to realize is that pursuit of excellence in educational practices requires the exercise of virtues such as honesty, courage, justice, an open-eyed respect for the other, whether the other is a fellow practitioner or an idea or a community of ideas. The above-mentioned virtues are an inalienable part of the moral life. They may not constitute the whole of the moral life, but they are necessary elements of it. To the extent that the practice of these virtues is required in the pursuit of excellence in the life of a university, the accountability of the university is at least to that extent moral accountability. To put it more strongly, but strictly in accordance with what I have been saying so far, the core accountability of the university is moral accountability.

Mrinal Miri

Indian Council of Philosophical Research,
New Delhi 110 062, India
e-mail: mirimrinal@hotmail.com