The Fourth Foundation Day Lecture

of the

National University of Educational Planning and Administration
(NUEPA)

on

Education, Autonomy and Accountability

by

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Delivered on August 11, 2010 at IIC, New Delhi

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EDUCATION, AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Education is not a unitary concept. Diverse kinds of practices go by the name of education: gurukul in ancient India, the gymnasium and academies in ancient Greece, monasteries (Buddhist and Christian), madrasas and pathsalas, the murung in much of tribal India, the modern west-inspired schools, colleges and universities are all institutions which are [were] meant to sustain educational practices. But think of the differences among them. It might, however, be said that in spite of the differences, there is yet what may be called a core idea that these diverse practices share – the idea that any educational practice must involve teaching and learning. While this may be true – although there may be legitimate doubts about its being so – it may at best be thought of as a necessary condition and certainly not as a sufficient condition. For, think of the teaching and learning in practices such as the pursuit of a variegated sex life, or banditry or, to take an example from our time, cyber criminality, or driving a tractor, or being an air hostess or even playing chess. Teaching and learning involved in such practices, taken just by themselves, would not, in most people's book count as education.

We think of education as an extremely important and a very special human value; this value may have diverse aspects corresponding to the diverse practices and their aims that go by the name of education. It is, moreover, a value that is shaped by the historical contingencies of a time, and which, in its turn, helps shape these contingencies. As Bernard Williams, one of the leading philosophers of our time, says about another very special human value, freedom, "We will not understand our specific relations to that value, unless we understand what we want that value to do for us – *wh*at we now need it to be in shaping our own institutions and practices, in disagreeing with those who want to shape them differently, and in understanding and trying to coexist with those who live under other institutions." (Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press, 2008, p. 153)

In this lecture, I shall be concerned with the value of education as we conceive it, given our specific human condition. But this is not to say that there are no historical continuities between our conception and the conception, say, of the ancients; still less is it to say that we have nothing to learn from educational practices of other times. Howsoever unique our own human condition might be, something that we consider to be of great

human value – it is reasonable to suppose – might not have escaped the attention of the ancients who were also engaged in the task of understanding the human predicament; and quite possibly, they might have had insights, which, given the density and consequent opacity of our own condition, might remain beyond our view; it is also reasonable to suppose that our conception of education will transcend the bounds, in some measure, of the contingencies of our time and location.

But who are the "we" of the first sentence of the preceding paragraph? The "we" certainly refers to a human collectivity? But, which human collectivity? I use it to refer to us Indians – Indians as a collectivity that upholds certain values as of supreme importance in the life of the nation. There are, of course, important questions to ask here, such as: What does it mean to say that we constitute a nation? Is the idea of a nation state a viable idea anymore? What is the moral-political authority of the idea of nation-building? These are extremely difficult questions; and I make no attempt to answer them in this lecture. I simply assume that the idea of a nation state is something that, given the historical contingencies of our human condition, cannot walk away from. Given all the difficulties of articulating the idea of India, and of making clear the idea of a nation, our sense of the Indian nation is linked up – at least

politically with our commitment to certain values – values which necessarily feed into the kind of education we want for ourselves. These are values such as: a democratic way of life (freedom of speech and expression as cognates of this value), economic progress with one eye firmly on the principle of equity, equality of races, castes and genders, secularism based not on rejection of, but respect for all religions, respect for cultural and linguistic plurality and diversity of traditions, communities as sustaining different forms or ways of being human. This is a daunting list of values, and we have to remind ourselves ceaselessly of our commitment to them. It is also reasonable to suppose that a serious pursuit of these values may require us to radically rethink the political arrangement that we have created for ourselves. However, these are matters far beyond the scope of this lecture. The important question to ask is how are these values to be inducted into the practice of education at various levels?

It will be said that this way of putting the matter suggests that education is necessarily an instrument in the hands of the nation, if not quite in the hands of the nation state. There are many ways of showing that this will be wrong. Perhaps the best way to do so would be to relate what I called the special value of education to the values I have just listed.

But, first a word about the special value of education that I had mentioned at the beginning. Very simply put, the special value of education lies in the fact, that it is a process aimed at the enhancement of the self – 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 in its various stages, education involves engagements of different kinds – engagements 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, urge to be 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 can thrive only on the basis of such attention. Take friendship and love. Friends must pay attention to one another beyond any selfish, ego-centric preoccupations. And love, when it arises in us, moves us outward from the self to the other, as we aspire to connect in a desired manner with the object of love. It is the energy of engagement, whether that engagement is with an individual,

with a community, with a form of art, with an activity, or with the public good; and it is a developmental force, a way for the self to become more. The process of education may be said to be a continuous process of engagement at different levels. The teacher's dual engagement with what she teaches and with the taught and 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 the course of the tradition, 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 of its giver. And it

* A community of ideas is a group of ideas more or less coherent with each other and bound by a network of connections. Marxism for instance is such a community of ideas; so is, in many people's view, Liberalism. In other words a community of ideas is frequently what we call an ideology. An ideology may be a more or less closed community of ideas such as Marxism frequently turns out to be or it may have boundaries that may be porous and flexible. Religious theologies are almost always closed ideologies.

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. Of course, after a certain stage the role of the teacher gradually merges into that of the taught, but the purpose of the two way enhancement – of the world of ideas and of the self – remains.

The teacher-taught frame might, as I suggested earlier, be thought to be a necessary condition for the process of education. But it is important to recognize that both at the very early stages of human life, and at a later stage when the role of the teacher fades away, much learning that is part of the process of enhancement of the self takes place without any identifiable teacher. Most learning in very early childhood is spontaneous and unself-conscious and, therefore, is not the result of a process of communication specific to the teacher-learner relationship. Learning one's native language is a very special case. Language teaching is, of course, an extremely important educational activity; but one cannot begin teaching a language to a child who does not yet have a language. The child cannot be taught the meaning of a word, unless it already knows what it is for a sound emanating from someone's mouth to be a word and what it is for a word to mean something; and for the child to know this it should already have a language. The child simply picks up its

native language in the course of its interaction with language wielding others – its parents, siblings and so on. There is no *teaching* involved at this stage. And yet learning language is perhaps the most momentous learning for the child; it is this that marks its entry into the world of humans. Similarly, at a much later stage, when a person has acquired a degree of maturity of intellect and self confidence, the place of the teacher is taken over by fellow travelers in the enterprise of what is called research.

Let us then look at how this special value of education relates to the values that I listed above. But before that, let us look at something about the historicity of these values. It is clear that these values are an inalienable part of our particular ethical environment. The ethical environment of a time is characterized by the primacy given to what is thought to be the preferred values of the time – an idea that is conveyed very nicely by the phrase, “times have changed”, or by the old Indian concept of *yuga dharma*. We only have to look at the situation about a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago to see how “times have changed” for us. The fact that these values have become a part of *our* specific perspective on the world, is a consequence not just of a cerebral and abstract debate about relative acceptability of values of yore and our contemporary values; while such

debates have undoubtedly taken place, and still persist, the change of perspective is the result primarily of the spectacular changes that have taken place in our political, economic and social arrangements and the consequent impact of these on human relationships and our understanding of these relationships. Nor is it the case that a change of ethical environment is a mark of progress, whatever that word might mean. It is certainly not the case that the story of change in ethical environment is a story of continuous and steady improvement of our moral outlook. To take an example: Think of the white man's attitude to slavery two centuries ago and the attitude of the early Greeks to the same practice. For the white man the practice of slavery was morally justifiable – the slave was inherently less than human, and, therefore, he was not part of the moral community which was necessarily human. Slavery as an institution was thus not morally unjust, given the literal minded Christianity driven moral outlook of the time. What then about the early Greeks? Here I borrow an argument from Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity*. "The early Greeks too were not particularly disposed to think of slavery as unjust, but that was not because they thought of it as a just institution. If they had thought of it as a just institution, they would also have thought that the slaves themselves - free people captured into

slavery for instance - would have been mistaken to complain about it. So, it is now with judicial punishment: those who regard it as just institution think that those who are properly subjected to it have basically no reason to complain. The earlier Greeks thought no such thing about slavery. On the contrary, being captured into slavery was a paradigm of disaster, of which any rational person would complain; and by the same token they recognized the complaints as indeed complaints, as objections made by rational people. Slavery in most people's eyes was not just but necessary. Because it was a necessity; it was not as an institution, seen as unjust either: to say that it was unjust would imply that ideally, at least, it should cease to exist, and few, if any, could see how that might be. If as an institution it was not seen as just or unjust, there was not much to be said about its justice, and it has often been noticed that in extant Greek literature there are very few discussions at all of the justice of slavery." (ibid, pp 116-117). It is arguable that the early Greek attitude to slavery was perhaps morally a trite superior to the white man's attitude to it a couple of centuries ago. The point to be made is that to talk about the ethical environment of a time is not to commit oneself to a progressivist account of morality. But the fact remains that insofar as we are part of a modern society, the values I have listed are our, modern

India's, proclaimed values; and this fact is compatible with two other facts, namely, 1) that there is no final justification of any particular set of values, and 2) that there is no guarantee that our ethical environment will not, in future, be replaced by a radically different one.

How, then, do our proclaimed values relate to the core value of education? To take them in turn: Democracy or the democratic way of life rests on the assumption of self-respect informed by respect for the other; the individual having a well formed point of view, owning it up with responsibility and being open to the scrutiny of the other, and attending to the other's point of view with seriousness, recognizing the possibility of its impact on one's own point of view. Democracy then demands the very same kind of attention beyond oneself that it is a fundamental aim of education to develop. It may be thought that economic growth is best served by selfish preoccupation with one's own interests; it requires attention to others or the interests of others only to the extent that they have an impact on one's own interests. But economic growth driven solely by overwhelmingly selfish motivation is bound to produce disparities not only between a big corporation and a smaller one; between a global trader and a small time local trader; but between all of these and the economy's castaways – the so-

called unemployable, therefore, poverty-stricken men, women and children. Such men, women and children do not simply have the wherewithal to develop the kind of attention to the other and the critical view of oneself that is required by the democratic way of life and that is the aim of education. A determined eye on equity is, therefore, a value that must be part of the educational practice.

Distinctions of gender, caste and race are not only totally irrelevant to the core value of education but they can, in fact, be a serious hindrance to it.

Respect for community, cultural diversity and plurality of language is particularly interesting. To begin with, the three – community, culture and language are very intimately connected with each other. There are, of course, communities and communities. But the idea of a community that education must pay special attention to is the one which is united by the bond of culture, by a particular form of life, by a special way of being human; and it is in its native language that it finds its natural and authentic expression. To learn one's native language is to get inducted as a member of the community, into its rights and wrongs, good and bad and, therefore, into its unique perspective on the world. To thus become a part of the community is to acquire a sense of the self and of

the kind of person one ought to be – a sense, in other words, of one's identity. Of course, one's sense of identity may undergo quite radical changes as one goes through life and may lose its connection with the life of the community. But it is in one's early give and take of human relationships within the community that the beginnings of what might be called a moral character take shape. Any reshaping of this character takes place with reference to these early beginnings. Memory, forgetfulness and reawakening of memory are inextricably linked up with self-identity. One's humanity – or if you like – one's personhood is thus deeply encumbered in one's community. It is extraordinarily important, therefore, that community, diversity of community, diversity of ways of being human persons, find a central place in educational practice. Listening with serious attention to different human voices demands exactly the kind of engagement from which education gets its core value. Respect for linguistic diversity is a correlate of respect for diversity of community and culture. Language is the embodiment of the form of life of a community or a culture. There cannot be respect for cultural diversity without corresponding respect for linguistic diversity. Respect for different religions is, in my view, a special case of respect for cultural diversity. What complicates matters is that some

religions have outgrown their cultural moorings, and have become closed, self-justifying, other-denying ideological systems – abstract theological systems – plagued by circularity of reasoning and, therefore, dogmatism. Religions thus decentred from culture are of a piece with ideologies and open to the same critical viewing as any other ideology might be. But religions which constitute, as it were, the springs of action of the life of a culture and the bounds of its meaning and understanding – like some of our tribal religions still are – are in a different category and deserves the same respect as the culture it informs. No authentic understanding of such religions is possible without, minimally, an attention that is free from distorting, self-centric prejudgments – precisely, attention of the kind that it is the aim of education to develop.

Let me now make some remarks about autonomy. I leave school education out of this discussion. First, because I am not competent and secondly, because, in any case, education of the child is a much more complicated business and thinking about it is very heavily laden with theory and finding one's way about through the mass of theories cannot be an easy enterprise at all. Discussion of autonomy in relation to school education must, therefore, involve a theoretic discussion of a kind for which I do not have the

expertise. Autonomy in relation to higher educational institutions, on the other hand, is a much more straightforward business. 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 one-self – 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. I might have a little more to say about accountability, presently.

Higher educational institutions are bodies that are created for sustaining autonomous and responsive practice of the kind that I have 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 ambitions of corporations in a globalised 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 accountability of higher educational institutions? Let me first say a word about freedom. Everybody knows that there can be no freedom without responsibility. This is not just a moral cliché, but a truth, if you like, in logic. Perhaps the depth of its truth will be better conveyed if we add the word "responsiveness" to "responsibility": There can be no freedom without *responsiveness* and responsibility. The most clear 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 it. To react to a situation is to act without thinking and, frequently, just to give vent to one's emotions; emotions such as anger, fear, hatred, jealousy and so on. But giving vent to one's emotions is different from responding with emotion. To say something like I was far too angry to think and do otherwise, is to suggest that one was merely reacting to a situation and is often a plea for attenuation of one's responsibility and answerability for what one did, to, in a sense, rescind from full ownership of the action; but in most cases it will nonetheless count as a failure of responsibility. To *respond* in anger is, on the other

hand, to accept responsibility for one's action, to own it up fully, as it were. A teacher is expected not just to give vent to his anger at a pupil's laxity, but *respond*, if necessary, in anger, and thus be responsible for his action. To be responsible for an action is to be answerable for it – to be open to questions such as, "Why did you do it?", "How could you have done it?", "Why did you not do Y instead?" And so on. To be answerable in this way is to be able to produce answers to questions such as these in justification of one's action. To be accountable likewise is to be able to *account* for one's action in just this way. [The topic of responsibility, guilt and shame is one of the most fascinating topics in the philosophy of mind and moral psychology. Unfortunately, I cannot spare any more space on it here. For those who might be interested, I recommend Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity*, which takes the topic forward more than any other book I know of in recent times.]

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 morally accountable. 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*. Imagine, after Glaucon, the Socratic immoral person clever enough to enjoy all the rewards that the *appearance* of morality gives, but with the added benefit of being able to profit from his immorality whenever he can get away with it. Clearly, this person has the richer, more successful, better rewarded life than the truly moral person, who, because of adverse contingencies (e.g. successful conspiracies against his reputation of moral uprightness) has fallen on bad days. "In Greek theology it is even suggested that the gods smile on him, since being wealthier he can offer them better sacrifice" (Simon Blackburn, *Plato's Republic: A Biography*, 2006, Atlantic Books, p

44). Many of us of course do believe that Lord Tirupati does smile on many corporations and the successful person of the Glauconian variety. Corporations are obviously Glauconians. They do not consider themselves as serious candidates for moral accountability.

It would be interesting here to reflect on the nature of the accountability of the State. But obviously, it is not possible to do so here. What then 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 called the core value of the practice of education. The essential life-line of a university is such an 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 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 pupil 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 the discussion of a literary work or, as we say, a popular work of history. Language of these may not be far removed from our ordinary conversational language; but as we move from here to what we might call the heart of the practice, say, of literary criticism or of history, the distance from the language of ordinary conversation is obvious enough. Think now of disciplines such as 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 [E.g. Wittgenstein, Einstein and so on]. 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. A Glauconian can never achieve excellence, say, in academic research. It is impossible to keep up the *pretence* of honesty, courage, or justice within a community of serious researchers, i.e. persons who are engaged in the serious pursuit of excellence that is internal to the practice of research. In any event, the Glauconian's primary aim is to achieve success not in the pursuit of excellence internal to a practice, but in the pursuit of external goods such as wealth, fame and power. A Glauconian will, therefore, never be a serious researcher. Now the virtues that I have mentioned – honesty, courage, justice, respect for the other – are inalienable part of the moral life. They may not constitute the whole of the moral life, .but they are its necessary elements. To the extent that the practice of these virtues is required in the pursuit of excellence in the life of the 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