Philosophy Study, July-Aug. 2025, Vol. 15, No. 4, 165-175
doi: 10.17265/2159-5313/2025.04.004

Pedagogy—Autonomy—Conformity

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The problem of autonomy and conformity has suffered a harsh fate in pedagogy. The virtues of love, respect, honour, truthfulness, etc. play a major role in educational work, but it is mostly silent about the concepts of autonomy and conformity. Politics are afraid of these like the devil is afraid of incense smoke. Practising teachers complain that our entire education system is weaning school principals, teachers and students from independent thinking and striving. The basic educational goal is clear: to develop autonomous young people who are strengthened in their own being and strength, and vice versa: to suppress superficial, unconvincing conformity. An old lesson: conformity can only be realistically fought with non-conformist politics and the cooperation of non-conformist teachers.

Keywords: education, autonomy, conformity, practical pedagogy

Examining the Problem of Autonomy

The exploration of the problem of autonomy plays a significant role in political science, legal studies, historical research, psychology and social psychology—as well as in other academic disciplines—and is of equal importance in practical life, international relations, and the functioning of politics and law. In the following, I shall avoid entering the realm of such specific approaches (while not denying the need for their analysis), and will instead focus on a particular subfield. My aim is to explore the question of education. More precisely, I wish to shed some light—albeit somewhat in detail—on how the pedagogical perspective manifests itself in the phenomena of autonomy and conformity.

I propose that incorporating the pedagogical dimension into the study of autonomy and conformity can enrich the research in these areas. At the same time, it may also open new avenues for educational work, revealing connections and content that have thus far remained largely unexplored or unclarified. It is clear that considerable efforts have been made in educational theory and practice to define concepts and cultivate values and virtues such as integrity, honour, truthfulness, patriotism, love, etc. However, disappointingly little attention (in terms of both focus and endeavour) has been given to the development of autonomy. Similarly, research into the relationship between educational practice and the issue of conformity has been sorely neglected—indeed, there appears to be a lack not only of capacity, but often even of willingness to make such connections at any level or for any purpose.

To me, it is evident that the interplay between pedagogy, autonomy, and conformity represents an extremely complex and difficult-to-grasp topic—one that poses a serious challenge and can likely only be meaningfully addressed through systematic, in-depth inquiry. For the time being, we must settle for the brief illumination of a few key theoretical issues and a philosophical outlook that might serve as a starting point to stimulate specialised research in this direction in the near future.

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What Do We Educate for: Autonomy or Something Else?

The pedagogical literature on autonomy does little to indulge researchers; few studies exist, and even those tend to receive scant academic attention. Let us begin by considering the concept of autonomy itself.

In the mid-2000s, Jenő Gergely authored a three-volume work on autonomy. In it, he states:

> Autonomy belongs to those communities of citizens—small or large in number—that have come into being through self-organisation around a shared goal, interest, ideology, or religion. The functioning of these communities, based on rules they themselves have created, is ensured with a certain degree of independence from the state and the economy, within the framework of the applicable laws. (Gergely, 2006. p. 4)

In a more concise formulation: "Autonomy is responsible independence. (…) An autonomous person retains their freedom while being capable of self-regulation." (Gyarmathy, 2021, p. 280). Another definition, offered by Lajos Darai and based on the etymological root of the term, highlights that autonomy "means a custom or ability that stems from and is inherent to oneself. More generally, it signifies selfgovernance." (Darai, 2022, p. 23). It is easy to see that autonomy fundamentally implies self-organisation, self-regulation, internal lawfulness, and a distinctive ability—something that may not manifest universally, yet can emerge in nearly all significant areas of social functioning. There is also little doubt that autonomy can develop at the level of the individual. When this occurs, we often speak of someone possessing a high moral character. Thus, autonomy is not merely an ability but also a virtue, akin to its more classical counterparts such as integrity, honour, and dignity. The notion of autonomy as a virtue logically draws pedagogy into its sphere. It is no exaggeration, then, to claim that pedagogy—both theoretically and practically—can and must have a valid standpoint on the issue of autonomy.

In examining the relationship between pedagogy and autonomy, it is worth noting a special issue titled "Autonomy" in a Hungarian pedagogical journal. Editor Mari Kerényi posed questions to four prominent researchers and practising educators about the importance of autonomy. In her view, the critical question is: "What does autonomy mean from the perspective of public education?" (Kerényi, 2022, p. 6). The responses are both revealing and thought-provoking: "The aim of pedagogy can only be, ab ovo, the education of autonomous individuals. (…) A power that seeks to control everything from above renders individual autonomy impossible (…) and excludes any support for autonomy whatsoever."[1] (Kerényi, 2022, p. 11).

These statements raise another pressing question: what is the relationship between politics (more specifically, educational policy) and pedagogy (educational practice)? This certainly calls for further and separate analysis. Here, I simply wish to underscore the importance of a critical perspective. Critique, selfcritique, and the disposition or capacity for autonomy—and let me stress: autonomy as a virtue—are clearly interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Without delving into the highly complex and sensitive relationship between autonomy and politics, I must point out that if we accept the necessity of a critical attitude (as already recognised by Paulo Freire's foundational school of critical pedagogy), then we should not be shocked by the following seemingly bold assertion: "A teacher must not obey either gods or the fleeting whims of lords." (Tóth, 2021, p. 71). The phrase "fleeting whims of lords" likely refers to the frequent, ill-considered, and poorly prepared policies or decrees of education authorities.

[1] Ibid. In a different context, Katalin Törley's statement is also important: "In order for children to thrive, teachers must be enabled to thrive." (p. 11).

The recently deceased, highly respected Hungarian psychologist and educational researcher Tamás Vekerdy authored a powerful book (*Is School Making Us Ill?*) in which, in a closing interview, he firmly states that any meaningful change regarding autonomy can only occur if: "The law (…) stops trying to manufacture subjects through the school-factory (…) and begins to form citizens instead." (Vekerdy, 2022, p. 132). I believe that Vekerdy's observation holds just as true today as it did when first written. To provide a philosophical foundation for the topic, I would finally like to refer to a classical thinker—Antonio Gramsci. His work *At the Crossroads of Pedagogy*, written more than a hundred years ago, has largely been forgotten, both in philosophical and educational circles. Yet his insights are well worth revisiting. Gramsci discusses the concept of culture and proceeds to broaden its meaning. According to him, culture is:

> The organisation and discipline of our inner self, the taking possession of our own personality. (…) Man fights to destroy (…) the conformity based on authority. (…) The tendency towards conformity is broader and stronger today than in the past: the standardisation of thought and behaviour (…) has taken on continental proportions. (Gramsci, 1979, pp. 98, 167, 169)

Gramsci draws a clear distinction between "dogmatic education" (characteristic of past centuries)—and the modern age's "creative school". The former is dominated by authority, discipline, memorisation, lexical knowledge, and conformity. The latter, by contrast, should cultivate responsibility, autonomy (which, in theory, knows no bounds), the inclination and ability for critical thinking, and the dismantling of conformity (Gramsci, 1979, pp. 123, 124, 167).

Two brief comments may be offered on the above. First, Gramsci's idea—that organising our inner self and taking possession of our personality is a necessary precondition for achieving autonomy (though the reverse is not necessarily true, for one might possess oneself without wishing or being able to become an autonomous being)—is an insight worth embracing. Second, his suggestion that the problem of conformity should be integrated into the investigation of autonomy (and culture) is both legitimate and intellectually exciting. I, too, consider the issue of conformity to be highly relevant, and I shall return to it in the next section. For now, however, I continue to examine the relationship between pedagogy and autonomy.

Many have already raised the fundamental dilemma of what the ultimate goal of education truly is: what, in essence, are we educating for? There is a near-universal consensus among educators and researchers alike—something that could be considered a minimal common denominator—that education is the shaping of personality, the formation of the individual in a certain direction, for instance, to prepare the child or adolescent for adult life; to integrate them into the world of grown-ups; to help them adopt basic social norms and roles. I do not deny that this process involves an immense amount of care, concern, and effort—burdens that fall primarily on parents and teachers. The importance of this labour—both educational and nurturing—cannot be emphasised enough. We owe profound gratitude to parents, primary school teachers, and educators for their role in this.

However, I believe—or rather hope—that if we stop here and define education solely as preparation for adult life, we are simplifying both its purpose and its content. Can we articulate a further, perhaps higher aim? The question is, of course, rhetorical. Of course we can. We simply think about it less—precisely because it is so obvious. Every sensible person who engages in the act of raising a child wishes for them to become a better human being than those parts of the adult world that are, sadly, riddled with sin, frailty, malice, envy, and so forth. It is not into that kind of adult world that we wish to integrate the young. What I wish to assert is this:

education is not merely a socialisation process, not only a function of integration, but contains an additional layer of meaning—namely, the cultivation of a disposition and capacity for moral goodness.

The inner driving force of education—its sacred conviction and mystery—lies precisely in this noble element: that it serves the virtue of goodness. That is, its purpose is to create better human beings and, by extension, a somewhat better world. This wish, however, is not new; it is likely a universal desire among those engaged in genuine, devoted educational work. Let me briefly refer to a few classical and contemporary thinkers in this context. Marcus Aurelius already suggested that the human "soul is always inclined toward the good." (Aurelius, 2016, p.55)

Jumping forward in time, Immanuel Kant asserted that education, in its essence, serves "the universal betterment of humankind." And now let us read the words of Richard Pring, a leading contemporary British philosopher of education: "The aim, the soul, the function of education is to explore how a person may become more complete, a good human being—or, if they already are, how they might become better still." (Pring, 2004, p. 22). Naturally, the number of philosophical (or philosophical-spirited) references could be expanded here, but I shall refrain. Instead, in closing, I would like to call attention to a literary example.

I refer to the renowned 20th-century Hungarian writer, Milán Füst, whose diary contains a lesser-known passage that captures the mystery of education with striking precision and emotional depth. (In fact, I am convinced that a classical writer-poet, as a true "engineer of the soul", is often capable of probing the deepest layers of the human psyche—sometimes more deeply than scholars or philosophers can reach.) I discovered and published this particular passage during my earlier research, and I would now like to quote it here at greater length:

> They preach in school with no effect, there is none either when the priest, your mother or father tells you to be good, (…) you decide in your childhood you will be good, clean and unselfish for nothing… Life comes—and you have forgotten now,—you cheat, steal, live for pleasures. (…) You are tricky, pusillanimous. (…) But the education that I have got from my mother, the idealism ignorant of life that I received while being breastfed… But life is—unfortunately—not like this. (…) And do you believe your mother did not know life? She knew,—but still (…) she wanted to share the better of herself (…), faith risen up from her because her child can be—*must* be free and clean. (…) And when you will have a child:—you (…) will be careful (…) to reveal the horrible, … and you will point at life the way just like Moses did with the promised land to the hopeful. (Füst, 1976, pp.178-179)

The text may speak for itself, yet I feel compelled to emphasise its core message—one which should be considered not only by professional educators, but also by others: parents, politicians, librarians, radio and television editors, sports coaches, and so forth. It is my belief and conviction that the most sacred mission of education is to represent goodness, and to help form morally sound, virtuous human beings. One may scoff at the notion of goodness as a pedagogical virtue, downplay its importance, or even deny it altogether—but to eliminate it from the history of humanity is, in truth, impossible. Even if reality is marred by evil, suffering, and countless forms of misery, the human desire and striving for goodness can never be eradicated from our consciousness or our lives.

If we attribute such significance to the virtue of goodness, then surely we must attempt to clarify what we mean by "good" itself. This is a profound and difficult question—indeed, one that borders on the impossible. I am certain that this is no longer merely a pedagogical issue, but an ethical and philosophical dilemma. It would therefore be entirely justifiable to pursue systematic philosophical investigations in this regard. For now, I will simply draw attention to one guiding thought. I am pleased that we may turn to a Hungarian contemporary

educational theorist for inspiration. In her book on the essence of education, Mária Kovács-Németh writes that the content of education is: "that which 'elevates', enriches, and deepens a person in their humanity." (Kovács-Németh, 2017, p. 59). Yes, goodness and moral integrity may very well be understood as growth in humaneness, in values, in virtue. This perspective provides a promising foundation for any future, more precise and concrete definition.

Goodness, as a virtue, is in itself a noble thing—perhaps the highest and most valuable of all moral expressions. And we should not forget: the act of doing good can grant us strength even in the face of adversity, failure, and pain. Doing good is within everyone's reach, provided one is open to virtue. As previously discussed, autonomy is likewise a vital virtue—but one that must be fought for; it demands preparation, willpower, determination, courage, and integrity. Not every person is ready or able to attain it. Goodness, however, is more accessible. Anyone can act as a good person. It does not require special training or an arduous struggle against institutions or fellow humans. What it does require is an open heart, warmth, good intentions, and a receptiveness to moral virtue, a willingness to help others selflessly, to lead by example in humanity. (As a side note: in the Hungarian city of Veszprém, a commemorative plaque was erected—at the initiative of the philosopher Ágnes Heller—in honour of an "unknown good person".)

So, in response to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter—what is the fundamental purpose of education?—the above reflections lead me to suggest the following: It would indeed be fortunate if we could shape more and more people into autonomous individuals. But perhaps even more uplifting—more ennobling to the heart and soul, more inspiring to our fellow human beings and to ourselves—would be if we could simply strive to exist as good people, no matter where our fate may lead us.

Conformity—Nonconformity—Community

It is time to return to the earlier-quoted thought of Antonio Gramsci. The fact that the Italian philosopher repeatedly raises and touches upon the concept of conformity when discussing the relationship between education and the formation of the autonomous personality signifies two things to me above all. On the one hand, it suggests that the phenomenon of conformity may manifest itself in the educational process, whether or not we recognise and acknowledge it. Even when we are aware of it, we tend to retreat into deep silence—as though ashamed of its presence. Educational theory and philosophy do not engage with the question (certainly not to the extent it deserves) of how education may be related to conformity. Moreover, education policy and day-to-day pedagogical practice seem to shy away from this phenomenon—as if from incense by the devil. "Conformity and education" is not a recognised "theme", nor even a serious problem worth deeper consideration. Consequently, it is rarely granted focused attention or dedicated intellectual energy. In this respect, the topic of conformity suffers a similarly neglected fate in pedagogy as the problem of autonomy, a regrettable state of affairs. On the other hand, Gramsci's argument is enlightening because it implicitly contains a powerful insight: that autonomy and conformity are in essence opposing concepts. At least in the sense that a person who thinks and acts autonomously necessarily rejects conformity; whereas someone who lives as a conformist has neither the need nor the desire for autonomy. I will attempt to unpack this relationship more fully below, in the context of my analysis of conformity. (Indeed, this is one reason why I include both "autonomy" and "conformity" in the title of this paper.)

The question, then, arises quite naturally: what do we mean by conformity? And in what ways might conformity be connected to education? Let us begin by acknowledging that we are dealing with an

interdisciplinary concept—one explored by numerous branches of the social sciences, and not unfamiliar to politics or the arts either. As such, the landscape is difficult to navigate; a host of diverse, sometimes contradictory and underdeveloped approaches make the subject particularly complex. I will not attempt here to provide a comprehensive account of the vast literature on conformity, nor to catalogue its various interpretations or systematise its inherent challenges. Instead, I will briefly touch upon three specific aspects of the topic that I consider especially important:

(a) I shall introduce and support a socially critical interpretation of conformity,
(b) I shall address the particular dilemma between conformity and nonconformity,
(c) and finally, I will propose a key insight into the relationship between conformity and education.

Introduction to and Support of Socially Critical Interpretation of Conformity

There is a bewildering abundance of definitions of conformity. I do not wish to add yet another entry to this already crowded field. Instead, I will return to the historical roots of the term and draw attention to what I believe is still a valid conceptual framework: a socially critical understanding of conformity. To the best of my knowledge, the secular meaning of the term (not to be confused with its religious sense, which developed in early modern England—a subject worthy of separate study) was first articulated by William Penn, the American liberal thinker, at the beginning of the 18th century. In a text published in the early 1700s (the exact year is not specified), Penn defined conformity as: “a civil virtue, the price of which is the loss of liberty.” (Penn, 1971). Later, the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his *Essay on Self-reliance*, appears to echo and extend Penn’s thought: “Citizens surrender their freedom and their culture. Conformity is the chief virtue.” (Emerson, 1932, p. 30). It is worth noting that while “conformity” and “conformism” refer to the same phenomenon, the former describes the process, while the latter denotes the ideological stance or orientation. Even these two quotations reveal that, from the outset, conformity was perceived as a negative social force—a process through which individuals relinquish parts (or even the whole) of their freedom, independence, and autonomy, in order to adapt to prevailing social (and often political) pressures. Of course, in later research, alternative perspectives have also emerged. Some, for instance, have emphasised the functional necessity of adaptation: that without conformity, no society could sustain cooperation; or that aligning with norms and expectations may offer clear advantages—reduced responsibility, less personal effort, and even substantial rewards (Wieswede, 1976, pp. 11-12). Nonetheless, I side with the negative interpretation, partly to recall and reinforce the original critical viewpoint, and partly because it renders more clearly and convincingly why resistance to conformity is not only possible, but necessary.

Undoubtedly, the list of scholars researching conformity could be extended further, but at the very least, let me mention the name of American researcher Solomon Asch (1951), whose empirical studies carried out in the 1950s triggered a veritable boom in the field of social psychology. Tracking the general momentum of such research appears to be a timely task for further investigations. However, in what follows, I shall only draw attention to a few inevitably important philosophical and ethical approaches that are directly related to the topic.

A proper philosophical outlook can serve as a foundation for the social-scientific investigation of conformity. It can help establish a clearer and more consistent usage and evaluation of the concept. For this reason, it is worth recalling the following philosophical attempts. Nietzsche, although he does not use the term explicitly, arrives at a particularly sharp insight that could well serve as a theoretical starting point for empirical studies of conformity. He writes that the modern era (continuing well into the 20th century and our own time) becomes devoid of

subjectivity: personality becomes hollowed out, and what prevails is "external uniformity… modern man suffers from a weakened personality… a shadow who wears a mask, a costume." (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 97). Behind this disappearance of subjectivity lie processes of social depth and general extent—objective interests that simultaneously lay the groundwork for the intensification of conformity. This analysis is then deepened by Heidegger in the 20th century. At perhaps the most evocative point in his major work *Being and Time,* we read:

> The "they" is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of all. The "they" is the neutral, the anyone… The mode of everyday being is dictated by the "they", who is not someone in particular, but everyone, although not as a sum… Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The "they" to whom Dasein has surrendered itself in its everyday being-with-one-another, is the no one. (Heidegger, 1989, pp. 259-161)

This philosophical insight—reassuringly, in my view—has prompted direct responses from several researchers of conformity. The lesser-known Thomas Barfuss, in his book on the subject, interprets Heidegger thus: "Mr. and Mrs. Anyone were unable to find a way out of conformity." (Barfuss, 2022, p. 217). And sociologist Ernst Fischer, following Heidegger, provides his own, arguably philosophical, definition, which I consider both the most profound and the most succinct—a formulation any serious researcher in the field might readily accept: "The immersion in the 'Anyone'—that is conformity." (Fischer, 1964, p. 97).

Turning to ethical perspectives, one quickly sees a reinforcement of the concept's negative interpretation, one that harks back to its original philosophical understanding. Ethics scholars give the idea concrete form by raising a fundamental question: who, in fact, qualifies as a conformist? Referring to just a few characteristic sources, Peters states in his book on the psychological and moral development of the individual: the conformist is "a person who has no principles or actions of his own… He adapts chameleonlike to any group to which he attaches himself out of fear or necessity… Conformist behaviour is the suffocating degeneracy of moral life." (Peters, 1974, pp. 194-195). Later, Russian ethicist Ivanov only confirms Fischer's view. According to him, the essence of the conformist individual is "the necessary subordination to the external, to officially sanctioned templates and standards, obedience to superiors, and attentiveness to those who 'must be reckoned with'. It is the lifestyle of the 'well-planed personality'." (Ivanov, 1980, p. 84). From such and similar ethical investigations, it becomes clear that the conformist person enacts the negative—or rather distorted—form of adaptation, morally appearing in reality as nothing more than a "well-planned" individual.

Dilemma Between Conformity and Nonconformity

Equally significant is the challenge of understanding the relationship between conformity and nonconformity. One often encounters a mistaken notion: that nonconformist expression is the positive overcoming of conformity. According to this view, conformity is countered and conquered by nonconformity. In public discourse, journalism, and sometimes even in scholarly literature, a certain aura—indeed, a myth—has developed around the idea of defeating conformity. For example, youth rebellion or nonconformism is often held up as the behaviour to emulate. Sociologist Cooley had already remarked quite early that "youth is the peak of nonconformity." (Cooley, 1967, p. 304). Then, during the student movements of 1968 in the West, it was openly declared that the aim of rebellious students was "to overturn tradition, conformity, order, and formalism—they wanted passion, real life, blood." (Feuer, 1969, p. 35). Adam Michnik, a leading figure of the New Left, later described the chief lesson of 1968 as follows: "One must be a nonconformist!" (Michnik, 1998, p. 19). I do not wish to go into detail here about the problems of the students' nonconformist rebellion in 1968, nor to pass judgement upon it. I simply note the practical consequence that by the mid-1970s, youthful nonconformity had quietly reverted into conformity.

In West Germany at the time, a new saying gained popularity among the youth and young adults: “Dear God, make me spineless, so I can get a job in the civil service!” This dynamic had already been clearly described earlier by social psychologist Crutchfield, who argued that the opposition between conformity and nonconformity is a false dilemma. According to him, conformity is nothing more than the unprincipled adjustment to the opinions of one’s peers (yielding, acquiescing), while nonconformity is the unprincipled opposition to those same opinions (Crutchfield, 1955, pp. 101, 191-198). In other words, in conformity, we merely think and do what others think and do; in nonconformity, we always take a contrary stance. In both cases, our own convictions do not guide us—rather, we are directed by the dominant social manifestation, one way or another. Ultimately, both forms of adaptation spring from the same root. And this shared root is none other than—here I can again connect to the earlier discussion of autonomy—the abandonment of autonomy, and a perpetual dependence on others. In truth, then, we can say that the opposition between conformity and nonconformity is false: an illusory antithesis. Conformity undoubtedly has a genuine alternative—something I intend to elaborate on later.

Finally, I would like to touch on another commonly encountered issue related to conformity. Many people—particularly during the political transition in Hungary in 1989-1990—mistakenly equate the abandonment of one’s principles with conformity. According to this view, anyone who radically changes their beliefs or convictions (a situation any individual may plausibly find themselves in) thereby becomes a conformist. For instance, when someone’s political principles, value system, or convictions undergo a complete reversal, this is often seen as proof of their conformity. And when such transformations occur on a broader scale, people say: “There’s too much traffic on the road to Damascus.” The biblical metaphor is well known: Saul, the persecutor of Christians, following a moment of divine revelation (he falls from his horse and experiences a vision), becomes the most faithful follower—Paul the Apostle. In connection with this, it is worth recalling one of Hungary’s most significant 20th-century poets, Attila József, who believed that commitment is a noble virtue: “I am only free when my leader leads from within.” (József, 1971, p. 325). But what about those instances where a person, due to pressure or some other necessity, fundamentally alters their views and behaviour? If one renounces their former faith, intellectual world, behaviour, or actions—does that make them a sell-out, a fallen person? In this respect, philosophy once again offers some guidance. Let us consider a lesser-known but highly thought-provoking passage from Descartes’s famous work:

> Nothing in the world remains always in the same state... I would have committed a great offence against reason if, merely because I approve of something now, I were to bind myself to approve of it always, even when it may cease to be right, or I may no longer regard it as such. (Descartes, 1992, p. 37)

At first glance, Descartes’s stance appears to be the opposite of conformity. But the apparent tension between Attila József’s ideal of fidelity to inner conviction and Descartes’s insistence on continual adjustment to circumstances is misleading. We should strive for a more nuanced understanding. On one hand, the biblical metaphor of the road to Damascus (as a symbol of radical transformation) should not be unjustly conflated with the negative connotation of conformist accommodation. A person has the right to recognise their error; their complete break with their former self, in such a case, represents a sincere and authentic change. Here, they become—not just symbolically, but in every respect—a new being. Such a transformation is not only non-negative; on the contrary, it reflects immense moral courage and a high degree of ethical integrity. On the other hand, adapting to changing circumstances need not entail the abandonment of one’s self. It may simply mean responding flexibly and with rational judgement (as Descartes also emphasises) to real societal shifts.

In any case, this interpretation of the József Attila and Descartes perspectives further compels us to conduct a more refined investigation into the dichotomy of conformity and nonconformity (Karikó, 2023, pp. 409-415). (I have addressed this question in my earlier publications, which I shall not revisit here.)

Key Insight Into the Relation Between Conformity and Education

I assume that educational researchers will sooner or later begin to address this issue in a systematic manner. As a conceptual anchor—and as a kind of summary of the present study—I would like to offer three striking quotations for consideration. I have intentionally selected voices from the fields of pedagogy (as well as social psychology and, to some extent, ethics), which gives reason to hope that the relevant academic disciplines are indeed capable of rising to this challenge. The candid self-critical insight offered by the educator Mehlhorn is one that many would agree with: "Our educational system produces conformists, stereotypical individuals, instead of free, creative, and genuinely reflective thinkers." (Mehlhorn & Mehlhorn, 2003, p. 28), to which we may readily add: and instead of autonomous individuals. Their emphasis on critical and self-critical reflection deserves to be taken further. Educators must bear in mind the vital principle that the extreme forms of adaptation—whether conformity or nonconformity—must both be actively resisted. Within the process of education, neither conformity nor nonconformity has a rightful place or function. As we have seen, the conformity-nonconformity dichotomy is a false dilemma, one we should strive to transcend. The path toward resolution is well articulated by the social psychologist Petrovsky, who also displays a philosophical and ethical sensitivity. He proposes that: "The true alternative to conformism is not nonconformism, but communal self-determination." (Petrovszky, 1973, pp. 12, 75-76). In other words, the solution lies in fostering genuine communities—not those built through ideological or political manipulation (for those are pseudo-communities), but rather those that arise from the free will of individuals and the shared acceptance of values and virtues. It is this kind of cooperation that truly stands in opposition to both conformity and nonconformity. The nature of authentic cooperation is fundamentally incompatible with any distorted form of adaptation. The profound question remains: can such genuine communities exist at all—communities capable of transcending both of these flawed modes of behaviour? I consider this one of the central—if not the central—challenges facing pedagogy today. Regardless of how this dilemma unfolds in reality, the true educator continues to believe that both can be overcome.

There is no guarantee that we will succeed in curbing—or even eliminating—the distorted forms of adaptation that appear in everyday life and the sphere of cooperation. However, educational efforts should at the very least aim to promote a more differentiated development of human adaptability. In this context, I would like to refer to a third author, a Hungarian researcher in pedagogy. Ferenc Lóránd offers a nuanced formulation when reflecting on the complex relationship between education and the conformity-nonconformity dynamic. He argues that education should be shaped in such a way that young people become capable of "accepting the world while rejecting it, and rejecting it while accepting it" (*emphasis from me—K. S.*). And he continues, "if rejection of reality becomes too dominant, the individual becomes marginalised; if acceptance becomes dominant, the individual surrenders their sovereignty and becomes conformist." (Lóránd, 1999, p. 36). If this balance can be achieved, then identification with the norms of a community—more precisely, of a *genuine* community—does not constrain the individual's growth, but rather extends and enriches it. Conversely, objections, conflicts, and disagreements should not appear as gratuitous, dramatic acts of perpetual rebellion, but rather as natural and strengthening elements of cooperation.

Summary: The Conformist, the Nonconformist, and the Autonomous Person

In conclusion, I emphasise that, ultimately, this inquiry concerns the nature of the "well-behaved", the "rebel", and the "autonomous" individual. To my mind, it is clear: the "well-behaved" person becomes the conformist; the "rebel" may be identified as the nonconformist; and the "autonomous" person may serve as a positive exemplar. The autonomous individual possesses a sense of responsibility that enables resistance to both distorted forms of adaptation. The more developed and secure the autonomy of individuals and institutions becomes, the more likely it is that conformist and nonconformist patterns of behaviour will recede. We must believe that autonomy is indeed *educable*. Yet we must also recognise—though not every adult acknowledges or accepts this lesson—that only an *authentic* educator or parent is capable of fostering autonomy. In other words: only someone who is themselves neither conformist nor nonconformist.

Much remains to be elaborated, and earlier insights may need to be revisited. But I am certain of this: both pedagogical theory and educational practice must clarify their stance on the intertwined issues of autonomy and conformity.

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