

Making Room for Children's Autonomy:

Maria Montessori's case for seeing children's incapacity for autonomy as an external failing

DRAFT

“Children are not competent choosers, are vulnerable, and are dependent.”¹

Ordinary people and professional philosophers alike generally agree that the above claim about children's incapacities is, by and large, correct. In this paper, I consider in what *sense* it is correct, and in particular, in what sense children are incapable of exercising their wills, or “do not have the capacity for autonomous choices.”² For this purpose, I draw on Martha Nussbaum's important distinction between *basic, internal, and external (or combined)* capacities to better specify possible locations for children's “incapacity” for autonomy.³ I then examine Maria Montessori's work on what she calls “normalization,” which involves a release of children's capacities for autonomy and self-governance made possible by being provided with the right kind of environment. Montessori shows, in contrast to many ordinary and philosophical

¹ BRIGHOUSE (2002) 36-7, paraphrasing the views of GOODIN AND GIBSON 1997. With respect to its characterization of children, the view Brighouse goes on to develop and defend shares the features quoted (IBID, pp. 39ff.; see too BRIGHOUSE (2003)).

² VALLENTYNE (2002), p. 196.

³ As what has come to be known as “the capabilities approach” has grown, various alternative terminologies have been developed (see e.g. SEN (1999); and for an overview of various capabilities approaches, see ROBEYNS (2011)). The literature on capabilities is vast, but for the sake of simplicity in this article, I focus on the distinctions and terminology laid out by Nussbaum in NUSSBAUM (1988) (2000), and (2011).

assumptions, that children's incapacities for autonomy are best understood as due to an absence of adequate external conditions, rather than intrinsic limitations based on their stage of life.

Montessori is not the first theorist to challenge conceptions of children as utterly lacking in capacities for self-governance. A tradition of progressive education going back at least as far as Rousseau argues not only for respect for children's freedom but also the important role of environment in shaping the emergence and exercise of that freedom. Montessori engages – both sympathetically and critically – with key figures from that tradition, including Rousseau (see MM 16, 150) and Pestalozzi (AbsMind 259). Montessori emphasizes more than most such theorists – e.g. Rousseau – both the degree of genuine self-control of which very young children are capable and the need for a experimentally-determined and carefully constructed (rather than merely “natural”) learning environment. Particularly in the latter respect, Montessori's approach avoids some the “paradoxes” critics of Rousseau (e.g. R. S. Peters) have raised, such as how Rousseau's insistence on the tutor's control over his pupil's environment seemingly conflicts with his emphases on “learning from Nature” (17) and following the child's “natural” interests.⁴ While a full discussion of their relation to her thought would be beyond the scope of this paper, I note here only that Montessori's focus on the prepared environment is better reconciled with her own emphasis on children's autonomy through her recognition of children's natural desires to absorb culture⁵ and her experimental basis for pedagogical design, according to which environments are prepared in accordance with observed children's interests.⁶ That said, this

⁴ PETERS (1981), 17, 25, cf. 17-31 passim

⁵ See AbsMind, passim; and regarding Rousseau, see PETERS (1981), 25

⁶ Montessori's account of experimental psychology in relation to pedagogy is discussed in detail in FRIERSON (2015). In the present context, it is important primarily in that it provides a way for her to reconcile a prepared environment with a Rousseauian denial of the claim that “most interests arise from peers, parents, and teachers” (see PETERS (1981), 25). For Montessori, teachers can craft environments in response to recognized interests of children, and while the specific details of these environments will be culturally specific (e.g., children's interests in language will become interests in different languages in different places), they will ultimately be responsive to rather than primarily directive of children's choices.

paper will not be comparative; rather, I focus simply on clearly articulating Montessori's own contribution to thinking about the relationship between external conditions and children's autonomy.

Two important caveats are necessary at the outset. First, the conception of "autonomy" in this paper is thinner and more limited than some conceptions in discussions of autonomy among children (and adults). By "autonomy," I refer to what Nomy Arpaly has called "agent-autonomy," a "relationship between an agent and motivational states that ... is a type ... [of] self-government."⁷ Such self-government requires degree of values-responsiveness and self-control, but I do *not* require that these values or self-control be rooted in a faculty of "reason," abstract principles, or a conception of one's life as a whole. Thus the autonomy on which I focus here need not involve an "ability to follow [a] conception of a life ... deem[ed] to be suitable ... through the exercise of ... rational capacities,"⁸ but rather depends essentially only on something like Bakhurst's "sensitivity to considerations that are constitutive of reasons" where this "sensitivity is best understood on the model of perception" or Jaworska's "self-governance" in terms of "internal attitudes [as] sources of reasons."⁹ Relatedly, "autonomy" as I use the term is not *trivially* dependent upon external conditions. Joseph Raz, for instance, defines autonomy as requiring "adequate mental conditions" and also the *use* of those conditions "to choose what life to have," which use, Raz rightly points out, depends upon "adequate options available to choose from" and being "independent" of "coercion and manipulation."¹⁰ On *this* definition, the

⁷ ARPALY (2002), 118.

⁸ WINCH (2006), 1, 17; see too e.g. KORSGAARD (1996); NORMAN (1994); PETERS (1973), 16-17; SCHAPIRO (1999), (2003); WHITE (1990).

⁹ BAKHURST (2011), 125; JAWORSKA (2005), 21. See too JAWORSKA (2002a), (2002b), and RAILTON (2009) for defense of this thin concept of autonomy.

¹⁰ RAZ (1986), 372-3.

dependence of autonomy on external conditions is obvious, as Raz emphasizes.¹¹ But my claim is that the relationship of self-government that holds between oneself and one's motivational states is itself dependent upon external conditions. That is, the "conditions of autonomy" that Raz articulates are not separable components of autonomous living; adequate mental conditions depend upon adequate environmental conditions.

Second, my argument takes for granted Montessori's empirical work. Much of this work has been empirically confirmed,¹² but I do not assess the soundness of the data on the basis of which Montessori develops her account of children's (in)capacities. Rather, my purpose is conceptual analysis and clarification, drawing attention to an alternative way of understanding children's incapacity, as a failing of *external* rather than *internal* capabilities. Whether this conceptual possibility is realized in fact depends, of course, on empirical work.

The next section lays out Nussbaum's distinction between three types of capacity, refining this account in preparation for my analysis of children and briefly highlighting the widespread view that children's incapacity for autonomy is the absence of an internal (or what I will call "internally available") capacity. In section two, I show how Montessori conceives of children's incapacity for autonomy as the lack of a combined capacity (or more particularly, an "external" capacity). I sketch some conditions she thinks are necessary external conditions for the exercise of children's internally available capacity for autonomy, as well as what sorts of autonomy (and other capacities) are exercised in the presence of these conditions. In section three, I turn to an examination of a key distinction between children and adults that is relevant to the distinction between internal and external capabilities. In place of distinguishing adults from children by seeing the former as autonomous, powerful, and responsible and the latter as

¹¹ IBID. 373-8.

¹² See FOSCHI 2012, 128-47; LILLARD 2007.

incapable, weak, and dependent, Montessori proposes a model wherein both children and adults have autonomy, power, and responsibility, but over different spheres. For her, children and adults have different sorts of “work” – the child capable of and responsible for working on *herself*, the adult capable of and responsible for working on *nature* to create a human environment. This distinction provides a different perspective on children’s “dependence” and “vulnerability.” Children are vulnerable, dependent upon adults for the production of an environment that allows them to exercise and cultivate their capabilities. But adults are also vulnerable, dependent upon children – particularly the children they were, but also the children they interact with – for “the work of producing man” (Secret: 200),¹³ that is, for the establishment of the basic habits, capabilities, and structures of character that enable adults to be the adults that they are.

¹³ For texts by Maria Montessori, I use the following abbreviations (and editions) throughout this article:

- AbsMind: *The Absorbent Mind*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995 (originally 1949).
Peace: *Education and Peace*, Oxford: Clio Press, 1992 (originally 1949).
MM: *The Montessori Method*, Renaissance Classics, 2012 (originally 1912).
PA: *Pedagogical Anthropology*, New York: Frederick Stokes and Co (original 1913 translation, reprinted in 2012 by Forgotten Books)
Potential: *To Educate the Human Potential*, Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Co. 2007 (originally 1948).
SA: *Spontaneous Activity in Education* (reprinted at *The Advanced Montessori Method I*), Oxford, Clio Press, 1991 (originally 1918).
Secret: *The Secret of Childhood*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1996 (originally 1936).

1. What is a “capability”?

Children are widely regarded as lacking a capability for agency:

To remain wantonly unreflective is the way of nonhuman animals and of small children.

They do whatever their impulses move them most insistently to do, without any self-regarding interest in what sort of creature that makes them.¹⁴

[C]hildren a[re] unfinished beings who need ...teaching to become admirable human beings ... [Their] natural impulses must be controlled [by adults] and more desirable traits consciously substituted for them.¹⁵

The frenzied intensity of a young child’s demands ... is better understood as the product of unmediated desire—desire whose importance is still a direct function of its momentary strength.¹⁶

[C]hildren ... are not, and can be publicly shown not to be, competent choosers.¹⁷

A child ... [is] incapable of making her own choices, whether good or bad.¹⁸

[She] is a being who ... does not really “have” a will yet, [who] is still internally dependent upon alien forces to determine what she does and says.¹⁹

There are two forms that this critique of children’s agency generally takes. For some (such as Brighouse and Purdy), children are incapable of choice because they tend to make *bad* or ill-informed choices. Children lack sufficient foresight, information, good judgment, moral

¹⁴ FRANKFURT (2006), p. 6.

¹⁵ PURDY (1992), p. 113.

¹⁶ HERMAN (2009) p. 15. To be fair, Herman distinguishes the “co-development of their desires and rational understanding” from what she calls the “wills” of children which “are certainly not weak” (ibid.). She still seems, however, to think of “will” here as something short of the kind of will that can be a basis for real autonomy, and she seems to think that only “reason” can function as a basis for exercising control over one’s desires.

¹⁷ BRIGHOUSE (2002) p. 38.

¹⁸ SCHAPIRO (2003), p. 579.

¹⁹ SCHAPIRO (1999), p. 730.

principles, and so on, and as a result choose poorly. Others (such as Schapiro and Frankfurt) argue that children lack the requisite reflectiveness, self-control, or rationality to make choices *at all*. Children's "wills" are merely the immediate expressions of their passing desires. Even as they grow (slightly) more mature, they lack the requisite reflectiveness and sense of life as a whole to be autonomous choosers.

These discussions of children's incapacity for agency generally take for granted that the relevant lacks of reflectiveness, self-control, good judgment, and so on are a result of the developmental, biological-psychological stage of childhood. Tamar Schapiro for instance, claims that an infant or very young child is "incapable (*due to its nature or lack of development*) of engaging in anything appropriately described as deliberation or choice."²⁰ By contrast, as we will see, Montessori ascribes many failings often described as incapacities for agency in terms of *external conditions* that inhibit children's natural, developmentally-available capabilities for agency.

To highlight this disagreement, we should distinguish different senses of "capability."

Martha Nussbaum has begun the requisite work by distinguishing between

²⁰ SCHAPIRO (2003), p. 583, emphasis added. The passage in context is particularly striking for the issue at hand.

The question of paternalism does not arise in cases where the agent to be benefitted is incapable (due to its nature or lack of development) of engaging in anything appropriately described as deliberation or choice.

Infants, for example, clearly have interests that they are incapable of protecting on their own. They are also not capable of forming settled opinions about what it would be worthwhile to do for the sake of protecting those interests.

The fact that infants have interests they cannot protect on their own reflects a failure of an *external* capacity. Infants depend upon external conditions being made right in order to satisfy their interests. But this failure of *power to effect change* is used as an argument for an *internal* failing to choose at all. Even the incapacity to form opinions about how to protect their interests does not show that they cannot freely choose those interests. Consider a parallel case, say an adult with a treatable form of infertility who wants to get pregnant. She does not (on her own) know what to do, and even if she did know, she could not pursue this interest on her own. But she perfectly well has a capacity for choice and deliberation about her interests. There are, of course, important disanalogies between an adult woman and a newborn infant. But the kind of argument that reasons from weakness in effecting change in the world to an incapacity for having a will of one's own is all too familiar from arguments for the subordination of women and other oppressed groups. (The analogies between women's or worker's rights and children's rights are not lost on Montessori. See e.g. *Peace* 49.)

[1] basic capabilities, the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basis for developing the more advanced capabilities, ... [2] internal capabilities that are developed states of the person herself that are, so far as the person herself is concerned, sufficient conditions for the exercise of the requisite functions, ... [and] [3] combined capabilities which may be defined as internal capabilities *combined with* suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function.²¹

While helpful, this threefold distinction requires refinement before applying it to Montessori's account of children. First, for the present paper, Nussbaum's earlier language of an "external capability"²² better highlights the external conditions necessary for an internal capability to be adequately exercised than her newer language of "combined" capability, which is really a combination of internal and external capabilities. This distinction allows for a finer focus on what sort of incapacities children really have.²³

Moreover, Nussbaum's account of basic and internal capabilities conflates two distinctions that are importantly different in the present context. Basic capabilities are [1a] "innate" and [1b] "often ... cannot be directly converted into functioning" while internal capabilities are "[2a] developed states ... [that are] [2b] sufficient [given external conditions] ... for the exercise of the requisite functions."²⁴ Assuming that "developed" implies that these states are not innate, there are two distinctions here, first between capabilities that are innate and those that are not, and then between those that are, so to speak, "ready-to-use" and those that are

²¹ NUSSBAUM (2000), pp. 84-5, cf. NUSSBAUM (2011), pp. 22-25.

²² NUSSBAUM (1988).

²³ Nussbaum acknowledges a related point in NUSSBAUM (2011), p. 22.

²⁴ In NUSSBAUM (2011), p. 23, Nussbaum seems to identify the innate/non-innate distinction with the distinction between basic capabilities and (other) internal capabilities. There she also helpfully acknowledges that even the most basic, seemingly innate qualities depend upon "maternal nutrition and prenatal experience" (23). I would add that there is no justification for a sharp dividing line at the moment of birth. Postnatal experience (and maternal nutrition) are equally important in the formation of capabilities that later come to be (rightly) acknowledged as "basic." Differences here are matters of degree rather than of kind.

not. But these two distinctions are not identical. Some innate capacities are ready-to-use, such as our capacities for “seeing and hearing.”²⁵ And some developed capacities are not ready-to-use, such as my capacity for Spanish or piano (both of which would require some “relearning”) or a musician’s capacity to play a new instrument (which depends upon developing certain general musical abilities but requires significant further study to be ready-to-exercise). I suggest, then, two separate distinctions: first, between “innate” and “acquired” capabilities, and second, between capacities that are immediately “available” or ready-to-exercise and those that are merely potential. Finally, we should add a category of “developmental” capabilities that are like innate capabilities in being built into the biological program of human organisms but like acquired capabilities in being not always available. Whether innate, developed, or acquired; these are internal capabilities, states or conditions of the person herself.

Finally, it is useful to be explicit that whether a capability is “sufficient ... for exercise” is a matter of degree. I have internal capabilities for typing, bike riding, teaching Kant’s ethics, and cooking scones, but all of these, to varying degrees, depend upon working myself from mere capability to exercise of that capability. I would call all of these available capabilities, even though cooking scones would require consultation with my cook-book (and I might have to relearn some tricks for cutting in the butter to get the scones just right). I also have a capability for making my own pizza crust, but this would require at least some experimentation and more significant consultation with a cook-book, since I have not made my own pizza crust before. I might call this merely potential, but it is much more available than my capacity for knitting (for which even my physical dexterity and motor-visual coordination requires retraining) or for

²⁵ In fact, even these capabilities likely require more development than Nussbaum suggests. Newborns have limited visual and auditory capabilities, and the developed capabilities for visual and auditory recognition of ordinary adults are shaped by our particular experiences (such that, for instance, speakers of one language often cannot even *hear* auditory differences that are only relevant to others’ languages).

advanced mathematics (which requires a whole new kind of mental labor). Thus the distinction between an “available” capacity and a merely “potential” one is vague, though none the less real for all that.

When considering children and autonomy, theorists typically ascribe to children an innate *potential* for autonomy, a potential that depends either upon mere maturity to develop or upon a combination of biological development and appropriate external conditions. Nussbaum herself ascribes to “a newborn child ... the capability for practical reason” in the sense of a merely potential capability that “cannot be directly converted into functioning.”²⁶ Similarly, when Schapiro insists that a child is “incapable (*due to its nature or lack of development*)” of choice, she denies the child an *available* capability, not the potential to come to have one. The standard view is that children are *internally* capable of *developing* autonomy, but not yet internally capable of exercising autonomous choice.

2. Children’s Internal Capacity for Autonomous Willing

For Maria Montessori, the standard view is wrong. Children *do* have an already-developed internal capability to will, a capability that is not merely potential but an available condition of readiness to choose in a way that is genuinely autonomous. To illustrate the point, I start with two stories of children, the first of a typical child in one of Montessori’s classes, and the second of a particular child (*O*) described to her by a fellow teacher.

[1] When the child chooses from among a considerable number of objects the one he prefers ...; when he persists for a long time and with earnest attention in the same exercise, correcting the mistakes which the didactic material reveals to him; when ... he restrains all

²⁶ NUSSBAUM (2000), p. 84.

his impulses, all his movements, and ... controls [his] movements carefully ...; he performs so many acts of the “will.” (SA: 132)

[2] The children used to bring their own luncheons, which varied very much; two or three of the children were very generously provided ... *O* was seated next to one of these ... and had nothing to put upon his plate but [a] piece of bread; he glanced at his neighbor as if to regulate himself by the time the latter would take over his meal, but with no trace of envy; on the contrary, with great dignity he tried to eat his piece of bread very slowly, in order that he might not finish before the other and thereby make it evident that he had nothing more to eat while the other was still busy. He nibbled his bread slowly and seriously. What a sense of his own dignity—subduing the desires of an appetite exposed to temptation—existed in this child ... And there was further that exquisite sensibility, ... the effusion of a general tenderness which looked for no return. (SA 92)

Montessori’s conception of children’s wills, evident in these accounts, involves not only choosing items based on preference, but working with care, respecting others, persisting in work, patiently waiting, restraining impulses for the sake of greater goods, and even a sense of one’s own dignity.²⁷ She distinguishes this genuinely autonomous will wherein one “inhibits all movements which do not conduce to the accomplishment of this work ..., makes a selection ..., [and] persists” from “the disorderly movements of a child giving way to uncoordinated impulses” (SA 143-5). The latter description, which better fits the standard account of children as lacking genuine autonomy, is common but not due to children’s particular developmental stage. The preceding descriptions of children’s wills are not of mature children of ten or twelve.

²⁷ There remain elements of adult autonomy not present in (young) children, including abstraction and self-consciousness about values, but these are not essential to autonomy as such (see {Author (under review)}) and JAWORSKA (2002 a,b).

O was four, and the first description characterizes children as young as one or two.²⁸ These very young children have available capacities for love, gratitude, and even that practical reason that is “able to form of conception of the good” and govern oneself in accordance with it.²⁹

Montessori does not view her optimistic descriptions of children as typical. Children generally do not conduct themselves with self-control in accordance with considered and persistent reasons including respect for others and a genuine sense of their own proper dignity. Much more commonly, they follow the impulses of the moment, strike out in anger or “willfulness,” or placidly submit to those they fear or love. *O* himself is described in an earlier context as “violent, turbulent, spiteful to his companions, never appl[ying] himself to anything ... and intractable” (SA 91). Montessori describes “almost all” children as fitting, roughly, under one of “two simple headings, viz. ... *strong* children ... and ... *weak* children,” where “in the first [*strong*] group are capriciousness and tendencies to violence, fits of rage, insubordination,... [p]ossessiveness ... [i]nstability of purpose ..., [and] inability to focus attention or concentrate” while “children of the *weak* type are passive by nature and their defects are negative ... [T]hey cry for what they want and try to get others to wait on them. They are always wishing to be entertained and are easily bored” (AbsMind 197). These are not exclusive or exhaustive categories, and Montessori presents them here in their more extreme forms, but the lack of real autonomy in these “strong” and “weak” children seems more accurate than the apparently idyllic descriptions of children respectfully and diligently at work or *O* slowly eating his bread. For Montessori, however, the difference between more “typical” children and those

²⁸ Montessori even discusses something like a proto-will in newborns (see e.g. Secret 47-50; AbsMind 67-68, 83ff.; SA pp.111f.).

²⁹ This definition of practical reason is taken from NUSSBAUM (2000), p. 79. I’ve omitted the other aspect Nussbaum ascribes to practical reason, the ability “to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” (IBID). Children do not have a rational sense of life as a whole until later, and they also don’t yet have a *principled* or *abstract* conception of the good. But these are not needed to form and govern oneself in the context of a kind of conception of various goods, and even of “the” good for their lives at the time.

like the self-disciplined *O* or the respectful child-at-work is not a matter of developmental age or innate capabilities but an external difference; the former – whether “strong” or “weak” – are “starved mind[s]” that “lack [opportunities for] spontaneous activity” (AbsMind 199).

Montessori describes the shift to self-controlled autonomy as “normalization.” The term might seem to imply standardization or coerced normality, but she uses “normalization” to capture the fact that an appropriate environment does not transform children into something different, but merely lets them be normal. The “unique type of child” that appears “when the attractions of the new environment ... offer motives for constructive activity ... really ... is the child’s true ‘personality’ allowed to construct itself normally” (AbsMind 203). Thus normalization “is a psychological recovery, a return to *normal conditions*,” and “the child[ren] who ... prefer disciplined work to frivolities of life are *normal children*” (Secret 157). Just as one with paraplegia who lives a normal life through appropriate use of wheelchair, ramps, and other environmental conditions, children given the right kind of environment can live “normally,” actualizing their internal capabilities.

Normalization, for Montessori, involves deliberate concentration, self-discipline, active and engaged work, and various forms of sociability. At its heart lies “the fundamental fact of a prolonged attention” (SA 132), or “concentration on a piece of work” (AbsMind 206). She illustrates this with an example:

I was making my first essays in applying [my] principles ... to the ... children of the San Lorenzo quarter in Rome, when I happened to notice a little girl of about three years old deeply absorbed in a set of solid insets ... The expression on the child’s face was one of such concentrated attention that it seemed to me an extraordinary manifestation; up to this time none of the children had ever shown such fixity of interest in an object; and my belief in the

characteristic instability of attention in young children, who flit incessantly from one thing to another, made me peculiarly alive to the phenomenon. (SA 53-4)

This focused attention grounds the future “miracles of the inner life, its expansions and also its unforeseen and surprising explosions” that constitute, among other things, the autonomous will of the child (SA 56).

From this beginning follow other developments of will, such as respect for others and a more general control over one’s impulses. “[A]fter the fundamental phenomenon—of intense and prolonged interest in a task—had manifested itself,” there was significant progress in the child’s self-governance (SA 71):

After these manifestations ... a true discipline is established, the most obvious results of which are closely related to what we will call “respect for the work of others and consideration for the rights of others.” ... [W]hen discipline has been established by these internal processes, it will happen all at once that a child will work quite independently of the others ... to develop his own personality; but ... there is a mutual respect and affection between the children ...; and hence is born that complex discipline which ... must accompany the order of a community. (SA 72-3; see too SA 135, AbsMind 201-2)

The self-control of attentive work prepares the child for more socially-oriented forms of autonomy. Where concentration first involved utter absorption, now experiences of absorbed attention provide strength of will whereby children develops respect others, control their own bodily movements, and eventually exercise a whole host of dimensions of autonomous self-control. Summing up the importance of normalization, Montessori explains that “‘normalized’ children, aided by their environment, show in the subsequent development ... spontaneous

discipline, continuous and happy work, social sentiments of help and sympathy for others” (AbsMind 206-7).

As in the earlier examples, most children, most of the time, do not behave as the girl with the cylinder blocks. But Montessori insists that the reason for this is *determinate* and *external* rather than random or developmental:

This phenomenon [of attention] gradually became common among the children: it may therefore be recorded as a constant reaction occurring *in connection with certain external conditions*, which may be determined. And each time that such a polarization of attention took place, the child began to be completely transformed. (SA 54, emphasis added)

The key to the care of children thus lies in the construction of an attention-facilitating environment:

I was often asked, ‘But how do you make these tin[y children] behave so well? How do you teach them such discipline?’ It was not I. It was the environment we had prepared so carefully, and the freedom they found in it. Under these conditions, qualities formerly unknown in children of three to six were able to show themselves. (AbsMind 224, see too SA 119)

Focusing of attention becomes a touchstone of the suitability of an environment to a child’s exercise of her internal capacities for attention and self-direction (SA 119, AbsMind 206). In such environments (and only in such) “the child may live in freedom” (SA 111) and exercise the autonomy of which she is (internally) capable.

3. The Montessori Environment

Montessori proposes constructing environments (primarily schools) to provide external support for children’s already-available capabilities. With respect to autonomy in particular, she

seeks environments that facilitate two aspects of choice. First, an environment should facilitate children's self-directed, persistent, attentive interest in particular activities. With this comes that self-control involved in pursuing a chosen task to completion with order and excellence. Secondly, and equally importantly, the environment should provide occasions to cultivate the self-discipline involved in respect for others, social cooperation, and deliberate submission to legitimate authority.

For Montessori, the make-up of such an environment cannot be determined a priori but rather must "represent the result of an experimental study" (SA 57, cf. PA 14) and be "*established by experience*" (SA 66). Through decades of careful empirical study of children, she developed specific materials and classroom environments to facilitate children's expression of self-disciplined and self-directed activity. Montessori's empirical methodology will not entirely satisfy contemporary standards, in part because she preceded the development of many of the methodologies of contemporary developmental psychology, and in part because she deliberately adopted specific methods in the light of well-reasoned critiques of empirical psychology that are still worth attending to today (for discussion, see FRIERSON (2015)). Many of her claims about children's development, both in general and with respect to specifics, have been vindicated by recent empirical research, and others are still being investigated (see LILLARD (2007), FOSCHI (2012), pp. 128-47), but the purpose of this paper is not to survey empirical work relevant to assessing Montessori's claims, but to elucidate a *prima facie* plausible account of children's incapacity for autonomy as an external incapacity. Her focus on an empirical basis for the design of children's environments, moreover, provides an important way in which Montessori is able to avoid that "manipulative and implicit" "authority" that, for instance, J. S. Peters ascribes to Rousseauian education. Because they are based in observations

of children's choices, Montessori's environments, even while providing a highly contrived context for the practice of autonomy, are also essentially responsive to rather than directive of those choices. And even if the details of these specific materials are erroneous or need refinement, her general principles give a sense for how she proposes external conditions that enable children's internal capacity for (socially-situated) autonomy.

With respect to the first goal, of providing contexts where children can be engaged by and attentive to their environment, Montessori first and most basically points out that if children are going to behave freely in their environment, they need an environment that is the right *size* for them: "give the child an environment in which everything is constructed in proportion to himself, and let him live therein. Then there will develop within the child that 'active life' which has caused so many to marvel" (SA 17). Children also need access to materials that stimulate them to focused work. For children just as for adults, a world of toys that attract and distract but require no real work cannot engage focused attention and reasons-responsive activity.

Fortunately for an empirically-oriented theorist like Montessori, children have various "sensitive periods" of life during which they are capable of and interested in developing themselves in particular ways. Children's environments should provide access to materials suited to these sensitive periods, suited, that is, to the kind of work that children are ready and eager for at each stage of development. If this work is to be truly self-directed, these materials need to include what Montessori calls "control of error" (AbsMind 247-9), features that allow children to correct and improve themselves in the light of standards that emerge naturally from working with the material.³⁰ For example, in the case of cylinder blocks (see e.g. AbsMind 249), blocks vary in size from large to small, each fitting in its own cylindrical hole. A child (of a certain age)

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naturally takes them out, and then recognizes (at the right age) the need to return them to their proper place. Some mistakes simply cannot be made (putting a cylinder in a hole that is too small) and others facilitate the child's own assessment of her error (since if he puts a cylinder in a hole that is too big, he will discover the error when he seeks a spot for the larger cylinder). Thus the environment – in this case, the cylinder blocks – provides a context wherein a child *can* “persist for a long time and with earnest attention in the same exercise, correcting the mistakes which the didactic material reveals to him” (SA 132). Thereby, children's activity becomes genuinely normative; the material helps them govern themselves in accordance with standards of perfection they claim as their own.³¹

However excellent the physical environment, however, a child cannot develop self-initiated and self-disciplined choice of work if the social environment inhibits autonomy. Here the most important requirement is that “the spontaneous development of the child should be accorded *perfect liberty*; that is to say, ... not be disturbed by the intervention of an untimely and disturbing influence” (SA 56). The child must be free to choose her own material both because freedom of choice is an intrinsic part of autonomy and because material freely chosen reliably holds children's voluntary attention. Interruption – including praise and correction – inhibits autonomous self-expression (see *AbsMind* 280). While not being interrupted, however, children should still be instructed in how to use (certain) aspects of their environment and must be drawn towards the material in a suitable way. Teachers “attractive in voice and manner” can “awaken the children and encourage them to use the ... material” (MM 19-20) and “guide the child's mind on these lines” (SA 35), but the teacher “must ... never substitute his own intelligence for that of

³¹ Moreover, by providing a classroom with a rich variety of materials, each of which has its own control of error, Montessori avoids what R. S. Peters has called “the basic problem” of progressive education, “that of the pupil-teacher ratio which, in mass education, makes such individualized learning so difficult to achieve” (PETERS (1981), 26). From the start, Montessori classrooms have typically had a single teacher overseeing 25-35 independently-working students, and many have worked successfully with even higher student-teacher ratios.

the child, but rather make the child himself think, and induce him to exercise his own activity” (SA 35). Montessori carefully explains how the right sort of teaching ultimately serves as an environmental condition for children’s true liberty:

[W]e admit that every lesson infringes the liberty of the child, and for this reason we allow it to last only for a few seconds ... [I]t is in the subsequent free choice, and the repetition of the exercise, as in the subsequent activity, spontaneous, associative, and reproductive, that the child will be left “free.” He receives, rather than a lesson, a determinate impression of contact with the external world, ... which distinguishes it from the mass of indeterminate contacts which the child is continually receiving from his surroundings. The multiplicity of such indeterminate contacts will create chaos within the mind of the child; pre-determined contacts ... initiate order. (SA 34)

By presenting an otherwise chaotic world in an ordered way, teachers help children negotiate that world autonomously.

As noted earlier, normalization begins with focused attention, but also encompasses socially-oriented forms of self-control that are both independently valuable and partly constitutive of mature human autonomy. It is thus essential that even very young children be in social spaces governed by freedom: “It is by means of free intercourse, of real practice which obliges each one to adapt his own limits to the limits of others, that social ‘habits’ may be established” (SA 135). Montessori classrooms are deliberately social spaces, which cultivate respect for and solidarity with others. Respect is primarily cultivated through limiting the resources (materials, attention from the teacher, etc.) children have available to them, requiring that they share what resources are available, making “respect ... a reality that he meets in his daily experience” (AbsMind 223-4). Beyond respect, Montessori classroom environments

cultivate solidarity, social cohesion, or a sense of sharing in common activity through materials best worked on together or games like the “silence game” that require not only self-control, but *social* self-control, sharing of will with one’s companions. While this game has complex variations, its core is simply that the whole class becomes absolutely silent. Montessori emphasizes throughout her discussions of this game that the silence is an active rather than a passive silence, an encouragement to shared strength of will rather than a clamping down on the child’s (noisy) activities (see, e.g., *Secret* 129-31). In such contexts, “success...depends on conscious and united action. From this comes a sense of social solidarity Children under these conditions use their will-power [and] ... ended by forming a group that was truly admirable” (AbsMind 261-2, see too MM 65-6). Other social dimensions of the classroom are important, such as the pivotal social roles of the teacher in attracting and guiding students’ attention, facilitating social intercourse, and providing a beloved and loving authority towards whom children come to practice strong-willed obedience. And I have not discussed how the social life of the class shifts over time (particularly in the transition from preschool to elementary age children and then to adolescents). Here my focus has been on one key emphasis of the social environment, the creation of a space within which children not only exercise autonomy through prolonged attentive work but also exercise that socially-situated autonomy which balances personal goals and values with the need to respect and cooperate with others (see SA 135).

For Montessori, children’s incapacity for autonomy is foremost the lack of an *external* capability, an environment in which innate and available (or nearly-available³²) autonomy can flourish, rather than the lack of an *internal* capability, an undeveloped will. Even this distinction is a bit too simplistic, however, in a way that highlights how, as Nussbaum has put it, “the

³² As noted in section 1, the availability of a capacity is a matter of degree. Some aspects of autonomy are available to children in the way that my ability to see is available; others are available in the way that my ability to cook scones is available; others are available only in the way that my ability to make pizza crust is available.

distinction between internal and combined capabilities is not sharp.”³³ Even very young children are innately primed for the exercise of various volitional capabilities, including self-control in pursuit of activities chosen for their perceived value, respect for others, self-limitation for the sake of others’ perceived needs, and the social solidarity and obedience to legitimate authority that are key components of political autonomy. In the absence of appropriate external conditions, these capabilities cannot function. In the presence of the right environment, they come into being. In some respects, they come into being instantly, almost in a flash, when a child recognizes in his environment material that meets psychological needs:

This change [normalization] ... does not occur gradually but appears all of a sudden. In any given child, it follows invariably upon a spell of deep concentration on some activity [that arises from being] ... put in touch with various means for purposive action ... in the environment prepared for him. No sooner has he found his work than his defects disappear ... Something within them seems to break out and fasten itself to the external activity.

(AbsMind 202)

But other aspects of children’s autonomy take time to appear. Children only gradually become capable of overcoming interruptions (see SA 82), respecting others, and cooperating in social projects. Even these capacities, however, are not *developmental* but *acquired* through work in the right environment. The problem is not that children are not yet at the right age, but that they need to be in the right environment for a certain period of time. Because these capabilities are arrived at almost entirely by being situated in the right environment, it makes sense to consider the lack of them a lack of external capability, though strictly speaking, there is also environmentally-induced internal failure (see AbsMind 199).

³³ NUSSBAUM (2011) p. 23. Nussbaum’s case is slightly different than the one considered here.

4. Differences Between Children and Adults:

Montessori's "Two Tasks"

I have argued that when it comes to a capability for autonomy, the primary difference between children and adults is external. Many³⁴ adults live in environments suited to autonomy, while most children do not. The result is that children tend to be impulsive and unself-disciplined, either passively submitting to the wills of those around them or wildly following their own impulses. These differences can seem like internal-developmental differences, as though children need to grow and/or be raised up to the point where they become capable of self-regulation. For Montessori, however, children have an internal capability for autonomy, just as adults do.³⁵ Nonetheless, children are not merely smaller adults, with all the same internal capacities, appearing different only due to external conditions. There *are* autonomy-related capacities that young children do not have for internal (developmental) reasons. Relatedly, Montessori sees fundamentally different *tasks*, and correspondingly different capabilities, for children and adults. Neither the difference in task nor the differences in capabilities repudiate her fundamental claim that children have an internal capability for autonomy, but they highlight the nature of that autonomy, why environmental deficiencies are *particularly* problematic for children, in precisely what sense children are dependent on and vulnerable to adults, and even ways in which adults are correspondingly dependent on and vulnerable to children.

Montessori's essential distinction between the tasks of adults and children can be stated simply: "It is the adult's task to build an environment superimposed on nature ... It is the child who builds up the [hu]man [being]."³⁶ The adult builds a world – what Montessori calls a

³⁴ I wish I could say all adults, or even most adults, but see, e.g., NUSSBAUM (2000).

³⁵ This claim need not imply that these capacities for autonomy are identical, but only that children and adults both have some such capabilities.

³⁶ Secret 198, 200.

“supernature” (Peace 67, 91, 95) – based on his values, character, dispositions, and capabilities. The child, however, “is father to the man.”³⁷ The *child* is responsible for the work of transforming the “newborn baby, helpless, unconscious, dumb, unable to raise itself” into “the individual adult with perfected form, with a mind enriched with all the acquisitions of his psychic life, radiant with the life of the spirit” (Secret 200). Montessori draws an analogy between the physical and the psychical development of the child. The adult body is the result of biological processes of change undergone by the child. What adults are responsible for is ensuring that the child’s body has the resources that it needs to grow; we are not responsible for actually making it grow properly (see SA 5-6). The body has its own internal capability for growth. Similarly, the child’s spirit and will have their own internal capabilities for freely choosing the work that will foster the development of the adult personality.

If we are convinced of this, we must admit as a principle the necessity of “not introducing obstacles to natural development”; and instead of having to deal with many separate problems—such as, what are the best aids to the development of character, intelligence and feeling?—one single problem will present itself as the basis of all education: How are we to give the child freedom? (SA 6)

Left to themselves, in an environment conducive to freedom – which, as we’ve seen, is no small task – children construct themselves through freely-chosen work.

Importantly, neither adults nor children can do the work of the other. Children cannot effect the requisite changes in their environments for two main reasons. First, they are simply too weak, not only physically but also in terms of knowledge, foresight, patience, and abstract reasoning. Moreover, at least initially, children are unwilling to voluntarily struggle and suffer for the sake of effecting external changes. Secondly and relatedly, children are focused on

³⁷ Secret 201. Montessori often cites this famous passage from Wordsworth’s “My heart leaps up when I behold...”.

internal development, on activity rather than external ends. For adults, activities – particularly those we call “work” – are typically end-directed; for children, ‘ends’ are incidental parts of activities, and it is the activities themselves that are valuable, as “exercises” whereby the child “learns to co-ordinate his movements and absorbs from the outer world the emotions that give concreteness to his intelligence” (Secret 201). Hence a child will repeat an activity – placing cylinder blocks, washing hands, scrubbing a table, writing a letter – again and again, even when the external “goal” of the activity – say, clean hands – has been achieved. This repetition, this emphasis on effort and activity, conflicts with the adult principle of effecting environmental change, the “law of the least effort by which man seeks to produce the most he can” (Secret 198). The child is unwilling to focus on efficiency and external goals because she has a different task, a task of inner self-creation.

The adult, contrarily, is severely limited in his ability for self-creation. We adults are the people we are largely due to our childhood experiences. This is true in obvious ways, such as the near impossibility in adulthood of learning to speak a new language without accent, and in more subtle ways. Montessori discusses how various problems with character, attention, or personality in adulthood often have roots in childhood. Drawing a parallel between her own work and that of Freud, she notes that “one of the most important discoveries due to [psychoanalysis] was how a psychosis may originate in the distant age of infancy,” but putting her own interpretation on this discovery, she suggests that it is primarily “the repression of *the spontaneous activity of the child* by the adult” that brings about most such psychoses (Secret 6). More generally, she points out that even in normal life, problems such as lack of focus, weakness of will, social dysfunction and awkwardness, and even just reduced drive for excellence can be traced to the development of character in early childhood (E.g., SA 18, AbsMind 208-215). One

important insight of Montessori's work with children was her discovery that there are sensitive periods of learning, and for her, one's core character, one's strengths and weaknesses of will, one's basic affective and sensory connections to the world, and one's sense of order, are all shaped during the first six years of life. At times, she goes so far as to claim that "the hope of altering adults is ... vain," but more realistically, she insists that "no amount of higher education can cancel what has been formed in infancy" (AbsMind 65, 181; see too PA 444). Thus, for example,

The respect for life in India ... can never be acquired by people already grown up ... I might think the Indians were right: that I also should respect animals. But in me this would only be a piece of reasoning ... That kind of veneration which Indians have for the cow, for example, we Europeans can never experience. Nor can the native Indian, reason as he may, ever rid himself of it. (AbsMind 64)

Reason can change behavior and over time even change some sentiments, but there are depths of feeling that are formed only in childhood. Adults may disassociate from some such feelings, but as a whole, they provide much of the basis of our character, individuality, and even will. In terms of genuinely acting in accordance with values one gives oneself, children are in this sense *more* autonomous than adults. When "normalized" and acting freely, a child's actions are fully integrated by values to which she is thoroughly committed. Adults are always, to various degrees, governed by patterns, sensitivities, and values of the children from which they come: "it is the child who makes the man, and no man exists who was not made by the child who once he was" (AbsMind 15). Thus "the child has [a] great power... that we adults no longer possess ... that of building man himself" (Peace 52).

Montessori draws an important historical-political implication from these claims about work and environment. The world's growth in interdependence and technological sophistication proceed at a break-neck pace without comparable psychological development in human nature. Adults, who have the task and capabilities to create supernature in accordance with their values, construct artificial environments primarily to meet their own needs. But "by constructing an environment ... further and further removed from nature, and thus more and more unsuited to a child, the adult has increased his own powers and thereby tightened his hold on the child" (Peace 15). As in the classic Marxist paradox of alienated labor, as children (as a class) construct adults (as a class), their own labor is used against them, for the adult makes a world that is fast-paced, efficiency-oriented, and full of objects too big and too dangerous for children to handle. But precisely because adults cannot sufficiently form personalities on their own – for that is the child's task – psychological and spiritual development has not kept pace with technological:

[H]umanity has made great progress outwardly, but none whatsoever inwardly ... This human being who has harnessed every kind of physical power must now tame and tap his own inner powers, become the master of himself and the ruler of his own period of history. (Peace 44, 46)

For Montessori, the solution to this spiritual-psychological crisis of our time is the child. We need not – and in fact should not – "return to nature" (Peace 67). Instead, adults should "construct the supernature necessary for the life of children and young people" (Peace 69) and let those children construct the "new man" who can redeem the massive power over nature that humanity has gained.

For her, then, "The work of the adult and the work of the child are both essential for the life of humanity ... The adult perfects the environment, but the child perfects being itself" (Secret

198, 202). There is a *mutual* dependence and a *mutual* vulnerability on the part of adults and children. She compares this shared work – and the rights that correspond to it – to the “the picture of the laborer, extolled by Marxist theory, [that] has now become a part of the modern conscience” (AbsMind 16). Just as workers ought to have the basic “means and conditions needed for his work, as a matter of right,” so too we can “carry this idea over to the child ... [S]ociety must heed the child, recognize his rights, and provide for his needs” (AbsMind 16-17). Children depend upon adults to provide environments conducive to the self-formation that arises from free, self-directed activity. Adults depend upon children for the formation of the basic elements from which their characters – indeed “humanity itself” (AbsMind 17) – are built.³⁸

According to Montessori, even the most well-intentioned adults tend to fundamentally misunderstand this relationship with children. Instead of recognizing that children form the character of adults and adults should make environments within which children can create themselves through freely chosen activity, adults see their task as teaching, disciplining, and choosing *for* the child. This conception of adult responsibility is based on the perceived lack of internal capability on the part of the child:

The adult has become egocentric in relation to the child ... He considers everything from the standpoint of its reference to himself, and so misunderstands the child. It is this point of view that leads to a consideration of the child as an empty being, which the adult must fill by his own endeavors, as an *inert and incapable being* for whom everything must be done, as a being without an *inner guide*, whom the adults must guide step by step from without.

Finally, the adult acts as though he were the child’s creator ... And in adopting such an

³⁸ This dependence is primarily a dependence upon the child that one once was. I depend, that is, upon my earlier (child) self. But Montessori also thinks that adults depend upon present children in a variety of ways, such as for the attainment of broad social goals that depend upon future generations, for the psychological health and flourishing that come from loving children and being loved by them, and for that greater appreciation of the human condition that comes from observing and delighting in children. For details, see, e.g., AbsMind 287-296, Peace passim.

attitude, which unconsciously *cancel*s the child's personality, the adult feels a conviction of zeal, love, and sacrifice.³⁹

The result of our misinterpretation is an excess of misdirected efforts on the part of adults, an unjust limitation of the autonomous self-expression children are capable of even at the earliest ages, and ultimately developmental hindrances to the development of mature characters capable of fully governing themselves autonomously in a social world. By mistakenly thinking of children's incapacity as an internal incapacity, and especially by emphasizing the need to directly foster internal resources in children, we adults tend, albeit with the best of intentions, to usurp the child's task and to fail to do our own.

³⁹ Secret, 11-12.

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