



Questioning the Meaning of Educational Responsibility

Mariette Hellemans

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

In recent years efforts have been made in different countries of Europe and North America to work out a new legal status for the youngster. A plea is made for the recognition of the youngsters' capability for personal responsibility. Past legislations have denied the young person self-responsibility and have made the parents substitutively responsible; the alternatives claim the need for self-responsibility for young people and question the relevance of substitute responsibility.

The reason for our interest in this controversy is that the discussion has become exemplary of the controversy in present-day theory about the role of the child and the educator in the educational situation. The content of the concept "responsibility" regarding the educator is the point actually being disputed.

124

The Meaning of Educational Responsibility Within the Traditional Model

In the legislation concerning child and youth protection, we find embedded the basic principles of a traditional model of education. Two basic principles of such laws include:

1. The juridical non-responsibility of the child: the reason why the child is not punishable and can only be protected. The child's non-responsibility is correlative to the incapability to act *freely*.
2. The substitute responsibility of the educator. The educator is responsible to the extent that the child is unable to act in a self-responsible manner.

The tutelage practice of the educator is based on *the right* of the child to adulthood. The transient irresponsibility of the child is only the negative formulation of a positive right.

The traditional model of education is treated by Kant in his short article *Über Pädagogik*.¹ Kant describes the task of the educator in a negative and in a positive way. Negatively formulated, the educator must prevent children making prejudicial use of their powers. Positively formulated, the educator must develop the natural bent of children. The first activity is designated by Kant as a mechanical

coercion resulting in a passive obedience. The second activity, education in its proper sense, is designated by Kant as a moral coercion. According to Kant, this coercion is justified because of the educational aim: moral autonomy, the ability to respond to the requirements of reason, *Vernunft*. This is the goal of the “natural” development. In contrast with animals, which by their instinct faultlessly find their ways in the world, human beings have to draw up plans for their actions. If a person is not capable of doing this, and the child is not up to this yet, then others have to do it for him or her. Obedience to human norms and laws, in this case the educator’s, is just an intermediate stage in living up to the precept of reason. The coercion exerted on the child is, according to Kant, not opposed to the liberty of the child because the coercion exerted is in line with the objectives of the child’s freedom. In other words, the educator has a “substitute” function. In the life of the child, the educator represents the future of the child, the moral autonomy, the demands of *Vernunft*. The educator acts where the child cannot yet act; the educator decides where the child cannot yet decide. To say it differently, the educator acts in the name of the child’s freedom as long as the child is not yet free. In the same way, parents take the responsibility for young people as long as the young person is not capable of doing this. Parents embody substitute responsibility as long as the child is not “free.”

So educational responsibility applies to the actions committed on behalf of someone else. All meanings of “responsibility” hold in common that they bear upon the consequences of actions.² In a moral and juridical sense, “responsibility” means freedom of the actions which cause these consequences. The fact that the educator is responsible implies that he or she is the author of the actions which determine the future of the child. Being educationally responsible is being the author of someone else’s actions.

This formulation makes it clear that, for someone like Kant, education is a serious problem. According to him, education is a form of violence. It is exerting coercion on an essentially free individual. This is also the point where the traditional model is actually being disputed by individuals such as Rogers and Maslow.

The Present-Day Model of Educational Responsibility

According to present-day theories, education cannot consist in making decisions on behalf of the child. Instead, an educator has to create the possibility for children to make their own decisions. Thus, independence and self-responsibility are not aims for the future but for the present. According to this view, children are able to find within themselves the criteria for thought and action. Children are not helpless. They have their own problems and can find their own

solutions. The helplessness of children is really created by adults. It is a result of the predominance of the structure of *our* lifeworld. The only help children need is that they be offered the opportunity for help.

So it has become the modern responsibility of the educator *not* to take the child's place. The concept of educational responsibility has acquired a meaning contrary to traditional thought. It is important to note, however, that in both cases the aim is the autonomy of the child. Only the means are different. The changed concept of freedom seems to be the turning point. Freedom in contemporary philosophy is not seen as a capacity of the will but as the existential situation of human beings.³ Freedom in the latter sense is synonymous to "project." Being human is indefiniteness; humans make themselves through thousands of decisions. They make themselves by acting. The direction of this action is by no means previously fixed. Humans are their own project. As guidelines for this project, there are no other "signs" than the invitations emanating from an historically grown human reality.

The logical conclusion is that no person can lead another person the *right* way. Each way is a possible way. To be oneself means to act: that is, to decide here and now, taking into account the elements of one's situation. From this point of view it is absurd to decide for someone else. One cannot take the responsibility in place of the other. The command of the educator becomes tyranny as soon as the universality of the norm is abandoned.

126

The Paradox

So the old paradox, peculiar to education, continues to exist: namely, that the autonomy of an individual depends on the autonomy of another individual. Taking responsibility means that I *give* the child the opportunity for self-determination, either, as in traditional thought, by eliminating the power of the child's own nature or, as is claimed by modern children's rights advocates, by eliminating my actual power over the child. The traditional model puts subordination on the side of the child; the present-day model puts subordination on the side of the educator. Thus, the difficulty which confronted Kant remains—but now it is situated on the other side as it were.

A difficult question is raised: What motives can be given for subordinating a free individual to another free individual? Applied to education, it becomes even more problematic because within education reciprocity is not guaranteed. The opportunity given to the child does not automatically return to the educator. The categorical imperative of Kant, "treat the other as you wish to be treated yourself," is not adequate.

Up to the present we have sought the motive for subordination on the side of the subordinating subject. But should we not reverse the question? In people's experience educational responsibility is not related to their own initiative. Their experience is one of being claimed by the child. They feel obliged—but obliged by the child. Parents feel less that they *take* responsibility for a child than that they are *made* responsible. But how can I be *made* responsible? It is true that during the war, on numberless occasions, people were imprisoned for acts committed by others. They were made responsible. We call this unfair and unjust because, as we know, we can only be responsible for our own acts, the acts originating in our freedom.

And yet, we might say that we experience our children from the outset as if we owed them something. We feel obliged toward our children. In this sense educational responsibility shows a similarity to the condition of being imprisoned out of some debt.

What then is the problematic nature of educational responsibility? It is the subordination of an autonomous subject to the interest, the autonomy, of another subject. How can this subordination be reconciled with autonomy? We could also ask: How can the autonomy concept be reconciled with the fact of this subordination? Implicit in our question is a certain subjective notion. It is this implicit subjective concept which is the ground of our problem. Being autonomous, says Kant, is being a law to oneself: in other words, is being the origin of one's actions. The subject is autonomous when he or she is the origin of actions or of meanings; that is, the subject has intentional involvement with the other-than-self. This involvement is sense-making. Each meaning is being restored to its origin: the subject. As long as the subject is considered to be the origin of any meaning, the subordination of a subject to another subject is, then, either a meaning established by the subordinating subject, a form of autonomous self-determination, or a violence against the subordinating subject.

If, as it appears, educational responsibility does not find its grounding within the structure of a sense-making subjectivity, should not this subjectivity itself be questioned? Is the concept of being human, which we implicitly used, the only possible concept? Or is this concept itself related to certain experiences?

At this point in our questioning the consequences of educational responsibility, we join the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' in his critical examination of Western philosophy.

Philosophy is always an attempt to understand reality. Evidently this attempt starts with the relationship of human beings to reality. This relationship can have many forms. It can take the form of a practical interference or of a loving concern. Our Western philo-

sophic tradition has, according to Levinas, made one particular relationship to reality an exclusive relationship: the relationship of knowledge. Philosophy has become a reflection on knowledge. When it speaks about the subject, it only speaks about the subject of knowledge: in other words, about the epistemological consciousness.

The subject of knowledge is a self-referential subject. It is the subject who projects his or her own world and adjudges a meaning to the other from the project of the self. Then, what is understanding? Understanding is grasping the particular individual being from a general horizon. Understanding is grasping; it is a grasp for power. The relationship with the other has the structure of understanding. The subject of traditional thought is a subject who, in fact, is never beyond self. The other, human or thing, is just an intermediate term in the return to self. The subject which emerges from the analysis of the relationship of knowledge is the autonomous self which takes up everything in his or her own identity. Even Husserl does not escape this criticism. The intentional consciousness, or, in its enlarged version, the "*In-der-Welt-sein*" ("being-in-the-world"), is world-creating. The subject is the sense-making subject who *makes* the object appear within the intentionally constituted horizon.

How is responsibility given in experience? In experience we are trying to think "the experience of responsibility." In experiencing children the educator seems to be *confronted* with a meaning: a meaning that exists independently of his or her initiative. So the educator's experience of responsibility does not originate from a sense of freedom. Only after already feeling responsible can an educator decide to take this responsibility or not. The responsibility for the child cannot wait for the freedom of the engagement. I already *am* that responsibility. It is the basic structure of being a subject. It is as radical as the intentionality of phenomenology. In the same way that Heidegger describes the subject as "being-in-the-world," Levinas describes the subject as "being-the-hostage-of-the-other."

Levinas' analysis of responsibility makes clear that the paradoxical character of the educational relation (the educator's ambition to make the child an equal partner) is tied to the Western priority of the subject with regard to the other-than-oneself. He also makes clear that this subject is a construction of a certain philosophy. And this philosophy can be contradicted at the level of experience.

Thus, substitution remains an adequate definition for the concept of educational responsibility. But the basic idea of education gets a new meaning in the light of Levinas' philosophy. The concept of "substitution" stands for a fundamental, human way of being.

Responsibility as initiative is not the primary datum. Rather, what is primary is the expression of a fundamental way of being which

was already constituted in the meeting with the child. Before I can *take* responsibility, I am already “called” by the child “by my most intimate name.”

Notes

1. Kant, I., ‘Über Pädagogik’, *Werke Bd. XII. Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, p. 697-707.
2. Lalande, A., *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1968, p. 926-928.
3. See: Sartre, J. P., *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Hagel, 1970.
4. His principal works are: *Totality and Infinity*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979; and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.