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That schools are not terribly effective in teaching autonomy should not surprise us. Since moral autonomy means doing what is right because it is right and not because any authority or law requires it, some of the most effective lessons in moral autonomy may result from the opportunity to disobey commands that are neither perfectly just nor repressive. At least we cannot assume — nor does empirical evidence suggest — that autonomy is best taught by lessons that are planned to develop autonomy by those who teach them. Even if the morality of association is (as Rawls suggests) a subordinate philosophical ideal, it still may be a primary political ideal for democratic moral education within schools.

Moral education begins by winning the battle against amoralism and egoism. And ends—if it ends at all—by struggling against uncritical acceptance of moral habits and opinions that were the spoils of the first victory.

If by virtue we mean moral autonomy, then the role of schools in moral education is necessarily a limited one. We know of no way that schools (or anyone else)

can teach virtue in this sense. But democratic virtue can be taught in many ways — by teaching black and white students together in the same classrooms, by bringing all children up to a high minimum standard of learning, by respecting religious differences, by teaching American history not just as a series of elections, laws, treaties, and battles, but as lessons in the practice (sometimes successful, sometimes not) of political virtue. In these and other ways, schools can teach respect among races, religious toleration, patriotism, and political judgment — lessons which hold out the promise of bringing us closer to a more just democratic society.

— Amy Gutmann

Amy Gutmann is Associate Professor of Politics at Princeton University and was recently a Rockefeller Resident Fellow at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy. This article is part of her forthcoming book entitled *Democratic Education*. The Miss Manners column quoted appeared in the *Washington Post* on October 21, 1984; the information on practices in Japanese schools is taken from William K. Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); John Rawls's three-stage theory of liberal moralist education is outlined in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); Kohlberg's studies are reported in Moshe M. Blatt and Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Effects of Classroom Moral Discussion Upon Children's Level of Moral Judgment," *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 4 (1975) and Kohlberg and E. Turiel, "Moral Development and Moral Education," in G. Lesser, ed., *Psychology and Educational Practice* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1971).

Why Life Is Disappointing

Everyone knows that life is disappointing. We learn this early and remember it long. Or as one cheerful pundit observed: "We are born crying, live complaining, and die disappointed." Why this should be is somewhat of a puzzle, however. Any explanation must focus, not on why things generally turn out badly, but why they generally turn out so much worse than we expected. Disappointment is the gap between expectations and reality, between hope, the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and the egg that, more often than not, it lays.

The Bible seems to suggest that a routine confounding of expectations (the first shall be last, the last first, and so on) is useful in cutting man down to size, keeping him on his toes. The book of Job, which should have something to say about disappointment if anything does, pronounces that men are disappointed "because they were confident" (Job 6:20). Jehovah looks on Job's dashed hopes with a lofty satisfaction: "Behold, the

hope of a man is disappointed" (Job 41:9). The guiding principle seems to be that man appoints, God disappoints, a perpetual reminder of our place in the scheme of things. The New Testament allows human hopes, properly directed, a somewhat brighter outlook ("... and hope does not disappoint us" — Romans 5:5). But "hope against hope," that is to say, hope of the most apparently perverse sort, is the favored variety.

Enjoying a more worldly perspective, contemporary economists approach our question in a different framework. Why is it, they ask, that when we assess the projected costs and benefits of some undertaking, we end up overestimating the benefits so much more often than we end up overestimating the costs? Why do our cost-benefit analyses, measured against the subsequent unfolding of events, so often err on the side of optimism?

Harvard economists Richard Zeckhauser and

Herman Leonard suggest this answer. It's not that economists are a particularly starry-eyed lot. Instead, "the crucial realization is that we do not observe a random selection of all projects analyzed. Rather, we choose to go ahead only with those projects whose net benefits are estimated to be positive. This will include some projects whose true net benefits — which we observe on completing the project — are negative, but which we overestimated. On the other hand, some projects with true net benefits will have been estimated to yield negative net benefits and will have been scrapped." The only way to achieve parity between pleasant and unpleasant surprises would be to go ahead with *every* enterprise, whatever its initial promise. Most of the dismal-looking ones will indeed turn out dismal, but we'll end up with a greater percentage of sleepers, as some turn out to be not quite so bad as anticipated. Disappointment is avoided, but at the price of a general increase in sorry outcomes.

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Psychologists speculate that life is disappointing not because our hopes are thwarted more often than they are fulfilled, but because we feel the former more keenly than the latter. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, studying the psychology of how people form preferences, found that "the threat of a loss has a greater impact on a decision than the possibility of an equivalent gain." In repeated experiments, people show themselves willing to take a considerable gamble to avoid a loss, but are less willing to take the same gamble to reap an analogous gain. In their terminology, "preferences between gains are risk-averse and preferences between losses are risk-seeking." Unexpected gains,

then, do not thrill in the same measure as unexpected losses gall.

The philosopher Schopenhauer explains this asymmetry by the gloomy postulate that "pleasure is only the negation of pain" and "pain is the positive element in life." In his view, "to live happily only means to live less unhappily. . . . The happiest lot is not to have experienced the keenest delights or the greatest pleasures, but to have brought life to a close without any very great pain." He joins with the stoics in offering this simple prescription for avoiding disappointment: "The safest way of not being very miserable is not to expect to be very happy."

But most of us would rather change the world than change ourselves. In this spirit, John Rawls offers a theory of justice motivated by the desire to produce a society that, whatever our expectations, will not disappoint us too deeply. He asks us to imagine that we are choosing the principles that will govern society — but without knowing what our own identity in that society will turn out to be. In such a situation, he proposes that we should use a "maximin" rule: rank alternatives by their worst possible outcomes, and pick the one whose worst possible outcome is least awful. In other words, design a society such that, whoever you are when you emerge from behind the "veil of ignorance," your disappointment will be least unbearable. The principle points to an egalitarian theory of justice, which makes some sense: disappointments are easier to bear if we are all disappointed equally.

Another alternative is to look on the bright side of disappointment, as a spur to run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . Inevitable disappointment may be, but not necessarily without its redemptions. Mark Twain once wrote, "I believe that our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey": feminists joke (or is it a joke?) that God created Eve because he (he?) was disappointed in Adam. Even Schopenhauer saw disappointment as the path to the highest good of experience, insight, knowledge, wisdom. A disappointing harvest, perhaps, but what else, really, should one have expected?

— Claudia Mills



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