

***Antonio Millán-Puelles:
The Master Leads His Disciple to Reach the Age of Moral Majority***

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to theoretically explore the role of the educator as a guide for learners towards achieving moral autonomy, based on Antonio Millán-Puelles' work *The Formation of the Human Personality*. First, it systematizes the contributions of the Spanish philosopher regarding the educator's task as a guide. Secondly, it examines the role of the virtue of prudence as a crucial skill for attaining moral maturity, as presented in Millán-Puelles' work. Thirdly, it argues for the fundamental role of the educator in the learner's acquisition of prudence, necessary for achieving moral autonomy. This article highlights the key role of the educator in fostering the learner's autonomy and advocates for strengthening the educator's role. This study not only sheds new light on the critical influence of educators but also emphasizes the transformative impact of their guidance on the moral development of learners.

Keywords: Autonomy, Prudence, Educator, Guidance

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Introduction

In classrooms, educators have the privilege of shaping future professionals—doctors, engineers, teachers, and more. However, a recurring challenge arises; young people often lack self-direction and awareness of their own potential for autonomy. Antonio Millán-Puelles addresses this, advocating that true education leads students to govern their lives responsibly and independently, a state he calls "moral adulthood".

Millán-Puelles believes the aim of education is to foster freedom through prudence, a virtue that allows individuals to make thoughtful, independent choices. Yet in today's society, adolescents are surrounded by influences, like social media algorithms, that subtly shape their decisions, often without their awareness. This can undermine their ability to develop true autonomy and self-mastery.

As educators, we are called to guide students in developing character and self-awareness, helping them to recognize and exercise their freedom. According to Millán-Puelles, this journey requires not only instruction but also examples. By modeling virtues and offering practical guidance, educators can nurture students' growth into autonomous adults capable of moral and wise decision-making.

In this presentation, I'll explore Millán-Puelles' views on human nature, the educational task, and the educator's role in fostering freedom and self-direction, drawing on his work *The Formation of Human Personality*. I aim to demonstrate how educators have the remarkable opportunity to guide young people in shaping their character, helping them recognize their freedom and capacity to direct their lives toward personal growth. This approach is rooted in the philosophy of Thomist thinker Antonio Millán-Puelles, as expressed in *The Formation of Human Personality*.

The theme of education for freedom will be addressed through three main points, grounded in the insights of this Spanish philosopher. We will examine the following questions: First, how does Millán-Puelles define the human being? Second, what is the nature of the educational task? And finally, what role does the educator play in nurturing the student's freedom?

Characteristics of Human Beings According to Antonio Millán-Puelles

Millán-Puelles views human beings as living entities endowed with rational faculties that are perfectible. This means that, while humans are not "entirely perfect" and have certain deficiencies, they possess the potential to acquire virtues, qualities essential for operating well (Millán-Puelles, 1963). These virtues enable individuals to fulfill their capacities despite their inherent imperfections.¹

This is where education plays a vital role, complementing the incomplete nature of the human being. Millán-Puelles argues that education actualizes intellectual potential by refining our faculties, aiming to acquire perfections not innately possessed. Education thus employs a child's instinctive tendencies, working in harmony with nature to complete what nature

¹ Humans, by nature, possess both a passive power or aptitude that allows us to develop virtue, and an active power or reason that enables us to cultivate these virtuous habits. This active principle or reason generates the acts that precede the acquisition of the virtuous habit. While we have the aptitude or seed to acquire the perfecting accident of virtue, we do not have its active use yet.

leaves unfinished (Millán-Puelles, 1963). In this way, education allows rationality to guide and refine our irrational dimension.

What Is the Educational Task? Achieving Moral Adulthood

Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, Millán-Puelles describes education as "the guidance and promotion of the progeny to the state of perfection as a human being, which is the state of virtue"(Millán-Puelles, 1963, p.27).² This perfection doesn't imply flawlessness but rather the possession of everything necessary to act according to human nature. Therefore, the goal of education is not merely correct behavior but the development of virtue—the habitual inclination to do good.

Practical wisdom alone does not suffice for moral action; it's necessary to choose the right means to act correctly (Millán-Puelles, 1963). Here, we introduce prudence, the virtue governing concrete, particular actions, ensuring that behavior aligns with what is appropriate and good.

Prudence identifies the practical ways to pursue what is good. When one possesses this virtue, they coordinate reason and action, achieving the autonomy of conduct, self-mastery, and ultimately moral adulthood—an essential aspect of moral freedom. Concepción Naval, another Spanish philosopher, argues that autonomy lies in the capacity for self-determination, or freedom. How, then, is the virtue of prudence acquired? To answer this, we must consider two elements: the acts of prudence and the process of acquiring this virtue.

Prudence

The acts of prudence include deliberation, judgment, and command. The act of command, which involves choosing what to do when faced with alternatives, is prudence's principal act and must be performed by the learner themselves—an educator cannot substitute this choice.

Before reaching a decision, however, the learner engages in deliberation and judgment, the preliminary steps of prudence. Here lies the educator's true task: guiding the learner through these processes. While the learner is the main actor, an educator's support is crucial for guiding their perfection.

Young people frequently face numerous choices, often without full awareness of the long-term impact. For example, a student might decide whether to focus on their studies or check their phone during class, or they may ask, "Should I rely solely on AI for my research, or use it as a tool?" or "Is copying answers from a classmate a good idea to pass the exam?" In social settings, they might question whether having fun at a party should only involve physical pleasures or if deeper connections and conversations could bring more fulfillment.

Teenagers generally aspire to do well—whether it's excelling academically or building friendships. However, achieving these goals requires selecting the right means, which prudence helps to determine (Millán-Puelles, 1996). Before acting, young people must weigh the pros and cons of each option. Here, the educator's role is to foster freedom by helping the learner evaluate options according to their good.

² This text refers to the definition of Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, Suppl. III, q. 41, a.1.

The educator's role in nurturing virtue isn't spontaneous (Millán-Puelles, 1963) but a guided process agent (Altarejos & Naval, 2000), requiring the intervention of an external (Peñacoba, 2015). Educators don't directly instill virtue; rather, they equip learners with the tools to develop it themselves (Millán-Puelles, 1963). Education's aim is to cultivate virtue, enabling learners to grow into prudent, morally free adults. So, what does the process of educating in prudence look like?

Initially, during childhood, the learner lacks the maturity to act independently. At this stage, children rely on support to act correctly, as they cannot yet form virtues on their own. While the learner is ultimately responsible for their growth, the educator serves as an essential supporting cause.³ Thus, education is a collaborative activity that requires another's involvement to assist in maturing.

As the child grows, so does the educational approach. Initially dependent on commands like "Don't touch the socket" or "Be kind to others", the educational process transitions to one of example and advice. Eventually, the maturing individual no longer requires a tutor, reaching a point where education concludes (Martínez, 2022).

Conclusion

In summary, human beings are inherently perfectible and require education to enhance their nature. According to Millán-Puelles, education aims to cultivate prudence, a virtue that aligns reason with decision-making, fostering autonomy. Prudence involves the habit of choosing the right means for achieving worthy ends, necessitating personal maturity to ensure decisions align with reality and achieve moral adulthood.

Through prudence, individuals seek, consider, and apply sound advice, refining their moral lives. The educator's role is to accompany this journey. How does the educator provide this support? Millán-Puelles explains that prudence involves three steps, with deliberation and judgment benefiting from an assisting agent. How, then, can educators instill these qualities in learners?

Millán-Puelles highlights two effective methods: instruction and example. Instruction conveys what is morally right, while example offers tangible actions worthy of imitation. The latter is particularly effective, as it embodies the teaching.

Both methods can be applied theoretically and practically. For example, a primary student might learn about empathy's importance for maintaining good relationships, but this understanding deepens when their teacher models empathetic interactions.

This supportive role flourishes in an environment of unconditional commitment, where the teacher helps students become aware of their freedom and assists in daily choices. Whether in the classroom or during a conversation, the educator can guide, listen, and validate, allowing students to feel seen and valued simply for being human.

³ This auxiliary cause primarily refers to the parents due to their natural origin. If the situation prevents natural action, another person could act as an external assisting agent.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

For the development of this work, the ChatGPT tool was used to request assistance in translating from Spanish to English. However, the content of the writing is of my own authorship.

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