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# AGENCY, ETHICS AND FAMILY: THE STORY OF THE STUMBLING STARLING

*“Where there is freedom of choice, our capacity to exercise agency grows with our comprehension of relevant laws and consequences.”*

Ronald K. Mitchell | August 13, 2015 | [Print](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Google+](#) | [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Email](#)



**W**eather in West Texas is highly variable, and such weather often produces the unexpected. From one of these unexpected events, I recently had re-emphasized to me the relationship between agency and ethics, as it applies in our families.

In West Texas, juniper trees have berries that starlings and many other birds love to eat as winter deepens and other food sources dwindle. Apparently, however, as our temperatures last winter fluctuated from freezing juniper

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MITCHELL



berries to almost cooking them (15°F. to 80°), the sugars in these berries became alcoholic – but this condition was, of course, unknown to the starlings which fed on them.

So one day earlier this year, Allan, a good friend of mine – an artist at a nearby college – was increasingly diverted from work in his home studio by a crescendo-chorus coming from the juniper trees along the driveway. It was a warm day, and the starlings feasting on the juniper berries were becoming progressively more inebriated as their feast wore on. Eventually, some birds would fall from one branch to another; others directly to the ground. Those on the ground attempted to wobbly-walk with wings spread ... not for flying (which was out of the question in their state) but just for balance.

Thus Allan’s driveway was littered with stumbling starlings. And when he left for an appointment, it was only with the greatest care and the help of a broom that he could gently clear a path for his car from the junipers to the street. As luck would have it, however, just after driving away he remembered one more item he needed for the appointment, and so returned home. To his shock and dismay, Allan arrived to find a hawk in the driveway consuming an ill-fated starling – too drunk to realize its danger or to seek safety from marauders. Hence: the story of the “stumbling” starling, and its application to agency, ethics, and families.

When is it right to intervene and restrict agency?

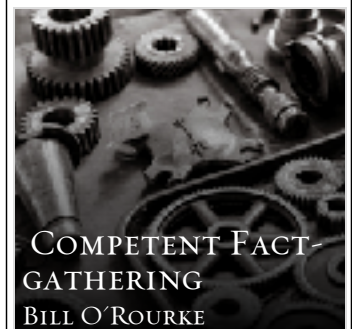
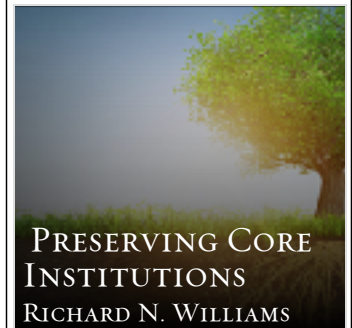
Many of us have confronted the question: when is it right to intervene and restrict agency when it is clear that someone is on a path to potential destruction? Both ethics and agency are implicated in this question; and both are especially pertinent when we think of the relationships among parents and children.

In our own case, Cynthia and I – in raising our four sons – found ourselves considering

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this question quite conscientiously. We wanted to teach our sons agency: *how they could – as agent-decision makers for their future selves – learn to choose actions in the present that could liberate rather than constrain them in their future.* Over several months and years, as we counseled amongst ourselves (both parents and children together), we arrived at four conclusions:

1. Agency is not available unless there is: (a) an understanding of the governing laws applicable to a potential action, (b) an understanding of the consequences of actions governed by that law, and (c) the unfettered ability to choose.
2. Where there is freedom of choice, our capacity to exercise agency grows with our comprehension of relevant laws and consequences.
3. Thus as we mature, there is an ever-growing “playing field” of freedom to act; but there is also a boundary to that field beyond which agency cannot exist because beyond that boundary freedom of choice is eliminated (e.g., where substance-abuse dependence destroys the unfettered ability to choose, because it limits comprehension, and redirects priorities).
4. Parents, as guardians of their children’s agency, are ethically bound (that is, they have both the right and the duty) to do all in their power to restore when compromised or lost, the privilege of unfettered choice essential to the agency of their children.

On this basis we were able to communicate amongst ourselves as family members the expectations regarding the boundaries of behavior. We relied upon the familiar saying that: “... important people are told ‘why’.” And in our reasoning, who could be more important to each other than our family members? We used the four conclusions just noted as the basis for “why” in decision making.

Thus I believe, as re-emphasized in the story of the starling, that: when judgment is impaired, and when danger lurks, we as parents are empowered to come to the rescue. While we all can agree that children are not starlings; we all can also see the manner in which children can be compared to the starlings in the story. Where our children – even unwittingly, or in response to natural motivations, for example – imperil their agency, we as their parents are ethically bound to do more than sweep their inconvenient actions from the driveway of their and our lives. There are hungry

hawks lurking, which can destroy children both physically and spiritually, just as happened to the stumbling starling. Thus, I suggest that we are ethically bound to rescue those who are in this peril, even if it means taking firm action with which a child may disagree due to their compromised agency. We may therefore reason: How can we be taking away the agency of children who have already abandoned it?

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So, for example, according to this logic, Cynthia and I expected all members of our family to attend church. We rejected as a compromise of their agency, the notion often expressed as: “Well, we’ll wait until they are older and then they can decide for themselves.” We asked ourselves: Without children having a church-attendance-supported understanding of law and consequences, do children have unfettered choice; or, instead, is their choice in fact “fettered” by ignorance? [\[1\]](#) We communicated this expectation through persuasion, example, gentleness, meekness, and love on our part. We believed that if this course were to be followed from their earliest age, our sons would in very fact be enabled to decide

for themselves – as informed and unfettered agents throughout their youth and the ensuing adult years.

We applied the same logic to teaching how to make physical decisions: choices concerning food, drink, drugs, the settings for recreation and entertainment, etc. When boundaries were crossed, we all sacrificed to enable the freedom of agency to be restored – justified by the ethical principle that we are empowered to act to restore agency when it has been abandoned. Thus, our actions with respect to ethics and agency are based on a common family commitment to enabling and preserving the core value of understanding law and consequence, and of the preservation of unfettered choice.

ADDENDUM:

As I was preparing this Note, I invited Allan to review an earlier draft. In the process, he shared my draft with a friend who is an avid bird watcher. This friend wrote the following back to Allan (shared with permission):

“I am impressed by the logic and heart evidenced in the ethical weighing of individual agency and justifiable interventions that restrict agency. I was raised with a tolerance that allowed self-exploration at will; this insured painful lessons from predictable, and often damaging consequences. I regularly suffered pain, cried tears of frustration and anger as a result of harmful choices.

I honestly questioned why my parents didn’t care for me enough to caution, warn or disallow certain explorations. I remember yelling at my Dad after crashing my first car, receiving a citation and hospitalizing my best friend, ‘You should have warned me! You never help me!’

I was just 15. I had a license, had taken driver’s training, but I didn’t know how to drive. My parents bought me a red-hot car. I did know how to show off. What did my parents think would happen? I needed limits and rules upon my behaviors.

In matters of religion, I was told that there was ‘no intellectual basis upon which to justify a religious belief system.’ [Allan], you can imagine that this paper struck a personally painful cord in me.

I am jealous of clearly intelligent parents who reason with their sons, believe that there are principles important enough to provide limits upon the entire family’s choices. Not all the lessons I received came from my hard knocks. I saw my hung-over parents after parties. I saw firsthand the cost of addiction. I don’t blame my parents. In their own way, they cared for me. I feel sorry for them, but I do not admire or really love them.

As I grew and matured, I set my own rules for conduct. There is another applicable truism, ‘Birds of a feather flock together.’ I’ve now learned not to follow the flock into juniper berry feeding frenzies. Thank you for sharing. When can we go bird watching?”

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[1] In his January 12, 2015 Wheatley Note entitled “Education & Agency,” Teryl L. Givens asserts: “Severing consequences from choice provides a powerful illusion of freedom, even as agency is radically undermined.”