# The Missing Faculty

My son came home from school yesterday with a worksheet that had me staring at it long after he'd gone to bed. It wasn't the content that bothered me - a standard third-grade conflict resolution exercise - but what it revealed about what we're not teaching.

The worksheet asked students to identify emotions in various scenarios and suggest coping mechanisms. "When someone takes your toy, you might feel angry. What could you do instead of hitting?"

Beside it sat a math worksheet, meticulously teaching step-by-step division. And in his backpack, I found carefully structured spelling exercises with clear progression of difficulty.

I found myself wondering: Why do we teach math and spelling as systematic skills requiring step-by-step mastery, but treat the governance of mind as a series of disconnected tips and tricks?

## The Fragmented Mind

Last week, I attended a parent-teacher conference where I heard about:

- Emotional regulation techniques

- Mindfulness moments

- Conflict resolution protocols

- Positive affirmations practice

- Growth mindset concepts

All valuable tools. All taught in isolation.

When I asked about how these pieces fit together - how children learn to integrate these practices into a coherent approach to self-governance - I received puzzled looks. The question seemed to make no sense to the educators. "They're all about helping kids manage themselves better," one teacher offered, as if that answered the question.

But it doesn't. Teaching isolated techniques without addressing the faculty that must implement them is like teaching individual piano notes without ever mentioning music.

## What We're Missing

Later that evening, I watched my son struggle with a simple decision - whether to finish his homework now or after dinner. I saw his face contort with competing desires: the immediate wish to play, the learned knowledge that homework comes first, the fear of disappointing me, the anticipation of freedom after completion.

What struck me was that nothing in his education had prepared him for this fundamental task: how to notice competing impressions, evaluate them against values and goals, and grant or withhold assent to action. Nothing had explicitly named and trained the faculty that must perform this function.

We teach him to recognize emotions, yes. We teach him strategies to calm down when upset. We even teach him to "make good choices."

But we don't teach him about the choosing itself - the faculty that stands between impression and action. The space where freedom actually lives.

## A Different Approach

I found myself imagining a different kind of education:

What if, alongside math workbooks and spelling lists, children received systematic training in what the Stoics called the hegemonikon - the ruling faculty?

What if we taught them not just what to think but how to think - not as a collection of tips but as a coherent skill?

What if the core curriculum included exercises specifically designed to strengthen the muscle of discernment - the capacity to:

- Notice impressions before automatically accepting them

- Evaluate multiple impulses against internalized values

- Grant or withhold assent to action

- Monitor one's own thought processes

What if we recognized that this adjudicative function isn't just another skill but the meta-skill that governs all others?

## The Dinner Decision

Watching my son's struggle over the homework timing, I realized he was being asked to perform a sophisticated mental operation without ever having been taught how it works. He was expected to adjudicate between competing impulses without training in adjudication itself.

So I tried something different.

"Can you feel the part of you that's deciding right now?" I asked him.

He looked confused.

"There's a feeling that wants to play now, right?" He nodded. "And there's a thought about finishing homework first." Another nod.

"But neither of those is you," I said. "You're the one noticing both those things and deciding between them."

His eyes widened slightly - the first glimmer of recognition. "I'm the decider?"

"Exactly. You're not just your feelings or your thoughts. You're the one who can see them and choose."

We spent ten minutes exploring this distinction - the difference between having an impulse and being that impulse. Between experiencing a thought and being defined by it. Between feeling a desire and automatically following it.

It was the first explicit lesson I'd ever given him in identifying and strengthening his ruling faculty.

## The Missing Center

That night, I realized how strange it is that we have no common language for this most essential human capacity. We have endless vocabulary for what flows through the mind - emotions, thoughts, desires, fears - but almost none for the faculty that governs them.

Our psychological frameworks fragment the mind into competing parts without acknowledging the necessity of a functional center. Our educational systems teach techniques without addressing the faculty that must implement them. Our parenting advice focuses on managing behaviors rather than strengthening the capacity for self-governance.

The result is a peculiar blindness to what should be the primary focus of human development: training the faculty that trains everything else.

## What Might Be Possible

I imagine a world where:

- Children learn to identify their ruling faculty as early as they learn to identify emotions

- Schools devote as much structured attention to strengthening this faculty as they do to math or reading

- Psychology recognizes the development of this function as central to well-being, not just an emergent property of other interventions

- We have a rich, common vocabulary for discussing and developing this capacity

I imagine education that treats the hegemonikon not as an abstract philosophical concept but as a practical capacity to be systematically strengthened.

I imagine therapy that directly addresses and trains this faculty rather than just managing its outputs.

I imagine a culture that values the development of this function as much as it values any external achievement.

Because ultimately, what determines the quality of a life is not what happens to you, or even what skills you possess, but the strength and clarity of the faculty that governs how you respond to everything.

## The Worksheet

Looking back at my son's conflict resolution worksheet, I can't help but see what's missing. It teaches him to recognize emotions and suggests alternative behaviors. But it never addresses the faculty that must perform the actual governance - the part of him that must notice the anger, evaluate it against values, and grant or withhold assent to action.

It's as if we're teaching children to drive by explaining the gas pedal and brake separately, without ever mentioning that someone needs to choose between them.

Perhaps it's time we stopped assuming this faculty will develop on its own. Perhaps it's time we recognized that the capacity for self-governance is not just another skill but the meta-skill that determines how all other skills are deployed.

Perhaps it's time we named and directly trained the faculty that makes us human.

When my son woke this morning, I asked him if he remembered our conversation.

"About being the decider?" he said.

"Yes, exactly. The decider."

"I am the decider," he said with a small smile.

It's a start.