

2012

An Education for Personal Autonomy in an Era of Standards-Based Reform

Josh Corngold
The University of Tulsa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Corngold, Josh (2012) "An Education for Personal Autonomy in an Era of Standards-Based Reform," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol6/iss1/14>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

ARTICLE

An Education for Personal Autonomy in an Era of Standards-Based Reform

Josh Corngold

The University of Tulsa

Introduction: “A Nation at Risk” and the narrowing of educational aims

In 1983, then-President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report called *A Nation at Risk*, which as the name would suggest, painted a grim picture of education in America. The report opened ominously: “Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.” And the dismal tone only intensified as the report’s authors placed the blame for the nation’s troubles squarely at the foot of its educational institutions:

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.

As a number of critics have since established, the evidence used to back up the report’s claims about declining academic achievement was flimsy at best (Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Graham, 2005; Sandia National Laboratories, 1993). Yet in spite of, or more accurately because of, its misleading assertions and hyperbolized rhetoric, *A Nation at Risk* struck a chord with the American public during a time of heightened economic uncertainty. From 1981-1982, America was mired in a severe economic recession; Japan and Germany were showing new industrial strength; and fears about America’s economic competitiveness were running high. *A Nation at Risk* gave voice to these anxieties, while also suggesting a way for America to regain its ascendancy in the global marketplace: “If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system.”

A Nation at Risk set in motion the standards-based reform movement in American education, with its emphasis on setting high expectations for all learners, implementing periodic, high-stakes standardized tests, and holding students and educators accountable for the results. Today, this movement shows no signs of abating, even as the federal government rethinks the No Child Left Behind Act. Another legacy of *A Nation at Risk* is a widespread tendency to view the basic purposes of schooling in narrowly economic terms. This is perhaps most accurately described as an unintended legacy, given the report’s acknowledgement that “education is important not only because of what it contributes to one’s career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one’s life.” In another particular passage, the report’s authors alluded to the civic purposes of schooling:

Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society...A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.

These passages are not what caught the attention of the press and the general public, however. It was the report’s dire warnings about the economic consequences of a supposed decline in educational achievement that struck, and continues to strike, the loudest chord. To this day, and especially in the wake of the most recent recession, pundits and politicians routinely pay homage to the crisis rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk*—highlighting threats posed by new economic superpowers (i.e. China, India), while in the same breath calling for higher standards and greater accountability in the nation’s school systems. In the public discourse around school improvement, increasingly faint is the voice that registers the value of education in anything but economic terms. Thus, as the education historian Patricia Graham recently lamented, “Schools and colleges today principally justify their existence by how well they are preparing their students to participate in the economy” (2005, p. 249).

There is no denying that educational institutions have an important role to play in preparing students for (hopefully meaningful) work and economic self-sufficiency, and that this contributes to the economic health of the nation as a whole. But to conceive of the goals of education in exclusively, or even primarily, economic terms does a disservice to children, and to the world they will inhabit as adults. Schooling in a free and diverse society should be about much more than job preparation; it should be about equipping children to lead flourishing lives, in which career success is but one element,

and to participate as civic equals in democratic decision-making.

In this essay, I argue that children have a morally compelling interest in developing a capacity for personal autonomy, and schools should help them develop this capacity. I begin, in the next section, by discussing the value of personal autonomy in modern pluralistic societies. I then outline some of the educational prerequisites for the exercise of personal autonomy, focusing in particular on what an education for critical thinking entails. In the penultimate section, I consider how educational authority should be structured in order to honor children's interest in developing a capacity for autonomy, while simultaneously critiquing William Galston's "liberal pluralist" theory of education (1991; 1995). And in the conclusion, I argue that the state must have the authority to establish and enforce rigorous educational standards aimed at the cultivation of autonomy in children, even if this makes it more difficult for some parents and local communities to pass their particular values, beliefs and ways of life onto their children.

The value of personal autonomy in modern pluralistic societies^[1]

Personal autonomy generally refers to one's capacity to be self-governing, to develop one's own views, and to make important decisions about the direction of one's life without external manipulation. The value of personal autonomy has to be understood within the context of a certain kind of society, with certain structural features. As Joseph Raz asserts, personal autonomy is

an ideal particularly suited to the conditions of the industrial age and its aftermath with their fast changing technologies and free movement of labour. [These conditions] call for an ability to cope with changing technological, economic and social conditions, for an ability to adjust, to acquire new skills, to move from one subculture to another, to come to terms with new scientific and moral views. (1988, pp. 369-370)

In a society that does not fit this kind of description—a simple agrarian, or hunter/gatherer society, for instance—the capabilities and dispositions associated with personal autonomy will not have the same relevance for individuals. But in modern societies characterized by rapid social and technological change, where different creeds and visions of the good life proliferate and where individuals occupy different social roles, it is critical that individuals learn to adapt to changing circumstances, grapple with different ideas and perspectives, and reappraise their lives in light of new discoveries about themselves and/or their surroundings. Individuals who lack these capacities are less likely to lead flourishing lives where such complex social conditions predominate.

But why should individuals necessarily decide for themselves how to live their lives? Why shouldn't others—parents, religious authorities, or other trusted figures—decide for them? Even assuming that such authority figures will always have their charges' best interests at heart—an assumption that is by no means safe—the fact of "constitutional pluralism," to borrow Harry Brighouse's phrase (2000, p. 73), provides a powerful rationale for why individuals should exercise personal autonomy and direct the course of their own lives in a social context characterized by value fragmentation and the specialization of social roles. The idea behind constitutional pluralism is that "people have different personalities, characters, or internal constitutions, that suit them differently well to different ways of life" (p. 73). As a consequence, the life that a person's family or community may wish her to lead may not be the life for which she is best suited. Consider a teenager whose parents insist that she dedicate her life to the practice of law, even though she is cognitively ill-equipped for and wholly uninspired by such a life. Unless the teenager in question has the ability to reject the plans that have been laid out for her, her chances of leading a happy, flourishing life are greatly diminished. This is why personal autonomy is so important. In a world in which there are many different avenues to the good life, and in which everyone's internal constitution is different, individuals should have the ability and the opportunity to determine their own best course in life, and they should have substantial freedom to pursue that course.

Thus far, I have been emphasizing the personal interest that children have in developing the capacity for autonomy, but as a number of recent philosophers have affirmed, there is also a compelling democratic rationale for helping children develop this capacity (Brighouse, 2000; Callan, 1997; Levinson, 1999; Reich, 2002). As Harry Brighouse observes, "many of the skills involved in [reflecting on political issues] are the same as those involved in reflecting on how to live one's own life" (Brighouse, 1998, p. 735).^[2] In order to participate as civic equals in collective self-rule, future citizens must learn to deliberate with others about public problems that may not have clear cut solutions. They must develop the capacity and the inclination to stay informed about current events of public concern. They must learn to attend carefully to, and evaluate the arguments for, different perspectives on the issues. And they must learn to formulate their own well-considered views, and reconsider those views in light of new developments or new evidence. Some future citizens freely will elect not to exercise their right to participate in democratic politics, and their lives and their society may be none the

worse for it. Yet for many others, exercising this right will be considered a civic duty, and will constitute an important contribution to society, as well as an important source of personal fulfillment.

Educational prerequisites for the exercise of personal autonomy

Thus far, I have been discussing the value of personal autonomy without going into much detail about how individuals develop a capacity for autonomy, and what kinds of educational arrangements support that development. Needless to say, that development is not automatic. Autonomy is not simply inscribed in our DNA. To become capable of exercising autonomy, we must be equipped with a range of “inner capacities”—some cognitive, some affective, some volitional—that enable independent thought and decision-making (Raz, 1988, p. 408). Some of these inner capacities, though not all, fall under the domain of critical thinking or critical reasoning.

In this section, I begin to consider some of the educational prerequisites for the exercise of autonomy by focusing, more narrowly, on what an education for critical thinking entails. But before undertaking this task, it is important to emphasize that critical thinking is a necessary but not sufficient condition for personal autonomy. Autonomy has to do with how we live our lives, the choices we make, and the beliefs that we form on the basis of our own evaluation of the evidence. Critical thinking connects, first and foremost, with the latter subtask. It has to do with the intellectual activity we exercise or fail to exercise in belief formation and revision. Therefore, an education for critical thinking is a part, but certainly not the whole, of an education for autonomy.

It is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper to offer a detailed account of an education for critical thinking. In the pages that follow, I offer a brief outline instead, touching upon certain knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with critical thinking.

Knowledge

In the field of education, acquisition of facts and information sometimes is regarded as miseducative. It is associated with pedagogical approaches (such as memorization and regurgitation) that deaden rather than inspire creativity and critical thinking. This is a legacy of the longstanding progressive attack on traditionalist education. The traditionalists, to invoke a recurring Deweyan metaphor, view children as empty receptacles into which a body of organized facts, lessons and disciplines should be stuffed. But Dewey’s metaphor speaks more to the method of imparting the content, and the position of the student vis-à-vis the educator, than it does to the content itself. His criticisms were directed at authoritarian approaches to content delivery characterized by “impositions from above and outside,” as opposed to facilitative approaches that help children build upon their existing capacities and experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 18). Students, he thought, would be better able to internalize academic subject matter if they could connect it to their own experiences. This, of course, is very different from saying that the acquisition of knowledge is of secondary importance.^[3]

Prior knowledge is a building block for education. One cannot hope to read a book or hear a lecture with any comprehension without having internalized a great deal of information (see Hirsch, 1987, p. 75). Nor can one hope to develop higher-order mental capacities, like critical thinking, without having internalized a great deal of information. Under no plausible account of the development of critical thinking will the acquisition of a very considerable amount of knowledge not be part of the equation. It is of course true that it is also important for students to learn how to retrieve information (which falls under the category of skills), since none of us can ever hope to internalize more than a small fraction of the total amount of information that is available. But students cannot hope to become critical thinkers without having acquired an extensive amount of knowledge. As Harry Brighouse argues, “the idea that they might develop the more complex skills of reasoning about information without having a good deal of it instantly available is silly” (2000, p. 75).

Skills

Knowledge is the building block, but it is not sufficient. One must know how to apply the knowledge in the service of critical thinking. A critical thinker, according to Harvey Siegel, is someone who “is appropriately moved by reasons” (1988a, p. 32). In other words, a critical thinker must be able to evaluate reasons, determining how well they support particular beliefs, claims and actions. What does this ability to evaluate reasons entail, and how does one acquire this ability? Siegel suggests that it entails having a firm grasp of, and facility with certain principles that govern the assessment of reasons, what might be called *criteria of assessment*. These principles can be divided into two broad categories: “subject-specific principles” and “subject-neutral, general principles” (p. 34).

Subject-specific principles, as the name suggests, apply to “particular sorts of reasons in particular contexts” (Siegel, 1988a, p. 34). There are principles specific to a great variety of human endeavors, from architecture to journalism to zoology, and even the most widely educated individual cannot hope to grasp all of them. This is why the modern world requires specialists—some of whom will gain expertise with principles governing the assessment of medical treatments, and others with principles governing the assessment of monetary policy. Yet it is also important to recognize that in order to become autonomous adults in a complex and changing world, each of us needs to gain familiarity with subject-specific principles in a range of fields. Each of us, on a fairly regular basis, must make a wide range of decisions that require us to evaluate claims specific to different domains of knowledge. How can we be confident that we are making informed decisions about how to proceed in particular situations, or whom to consult when we encounter the limits of our own understanding?^[4] Ideally, during years of exposure to a range of subjects in school, we develop an understanding of principles that are specific to those subjects, and we gain experience in using the principles to make appropriate assessments. Only a few of us can hope to gain expert knowledge of math, biology or history. Yet many of us can develop some idea of what it means to think like a mathematician, biologist, or historian, and how to go about evaluating claims that relate specifically to those disciplines.

Critical thinking also requires an ability to utilize subject-neutral, general principles in the assessment of reasons. Unlike subject-specific principles, subject-neutral principles “apply across a wide variety of contexts and types of reason” (Siegel, 1988a, p. 34). Rules of logic, such as the principles of appropriate inductive and deductive reasoning, fall under this category of subject-neutral principles. Broadly speaking, to grasp subject-neutral principles is to have a handle on the general criteria for a good argument, no matter the domain. Subject-neutral principles help us address questions such as the following: Does the conclusion follow from the premises? Does the argument rely upon circular reasoning, or other logical fallacies? Has the arguer resorted to *ad hominem* attacks, or other misleading rhetorical devices? Does the arguer simply appeal to his own or another’s position or authority without presenting adequate evidence? We all need to be able to answer such questions in order to be intelligent, critical consumers of information of all kinds, and in order to sort through the claims we encounter everyday in the mass media, politics, civil society, and our day-to-day interactions with others.

To summarize, in order to become autonomous individuals and equal participants in public life, we all need to be able to assess the reasons that are leveraged in support of various beliefs, claims and actions. This involves understanding and applying both subject-specific and subject-neutral principles that govern the assessment of reasons. Without developing such skills, we have no way of judging whether avowed experts should be believed, or whether particular claims are warranted. We become highly susceptible to manipulation and effectively surrender our prospective autonomy.

Dispositions

The aforementioned skills are necessary but not sufficient for the exercise of critical thinking; for an ability to assess reasons will not lead to critical thinking if the agent lacks a desire to make use of that ability. A critical thinker also exhibits certain inclinations and habits of mind—what Siegel (1988a) calls the “critical attitude” or “critical spirit” (p. 39). Those who possess the critical spirit are reluctant to assent to claims without sufficient proof. They are wont to weigh evidence carefully and impartially before reaching particular conclusions. In sum, they “value good reasoning” and are “disposed to believe and act on its basis” (p. 39).

A certain epistemic humility—a belief in one’s own fallibility and an accompanying recognition that certain propositions that one thinks are true may not be true—is consistent with the critical spirit. Critical thinkers have an appreciation for the complexity and ambiguity of many questions about life, and an accompanying recognition of the limitations of their own as well as others’ knowledge about such questions. This kind of attitude is not to be confused with rigorous skepticism, or a denial that it is possible to arrive at justifiable conclusions about complex matters. One need not agree to suspend judgment and remain in a constant state of intellectual limbo with regard to issues about which there is substantial disagreement. Yet critical thinkers do subject their own judgments, as well as others’, to a wide range of criticism. They also prove willing to revise those judgments in light of new evidence or compelling counterarguments.

On the flipside, a belief in the infallibility of one’s own perspective, or the perspective of another, is contrary to the critical spirit. Those who refuse to accept contrary evidence, listen to alternative viewpoints, or take those viewpoints seriously clearly lack the critical spirit. Those who too readily determine that the case is closed, so to speak, on a given matter, particularly a matter of substantial disagreement, cannot be considered critical thinkers.

Before outlining some of the knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with critical thinking, I took care to emphasize that an education for critical thinking is a part, though not the whole, of an education for autonomy. It is worth reiterating

this point out of respect for the concern, expressed by some in the philosophy community, that the cultivation of personal autonomy encourages relentless rationalism, skepticism, and atomistic individualism. The educational philosopher Francis Dunlop (1986) gives voice to this concern in a provocative article, “The Education of the Emotions and the Promotion of Autonomy: Are They Really Compatible?” In his view, an education for autonomy sacrifices students’ emotional and social development before the altar of reason. It encourages “an aloof detachment from and disdainful mistrust of society,” “of self,” and “of life” by instructing the individual “*always* to reflect upon his motives and reasons, and the social arrangements he finds about him” (pp. 154-55).

The dichotomy that Dunlop sets up between autonomy-promotion and an education of the emotions is a false one. Preparation for the exercise of independent thought and decision-making need not involve the suppression of one’s feelings and natural impulses, detachment from self and society, and radical skepticism of any and all beliefs grounded in cultural or religious tradition. Nothing that I have said thus far about autonomy, critical thinking, and their cultivation should suggest otherwise. Furthermore, while a grounding in the knowledge, skills and dispositions outlined above may go a long way in empowering students to form their own beliefs and make their own decisions about life, it will not, in and of itself, turn students into the perpetual doubters that Dunlop decries.

The way I have described the knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with critical reasoning admittedly sets the bar high for students. Teaching such knowledge and skills, and cultivating these dispositions in students will require educators to rethink the back-to-basics curriculum that is on offer at so many schools today. It will also require educators to consider replacing the machine-scored, multiple-choice tests that abound in schools today with more authentic, albeit more difficult to grade, forms of assessment. While it is not intended to provide definitive answers to questions about what makes an individual autonomous, the above summary does provide helpful guidance in thinking about some of the educational pre-conditions for the exercise of autonomy. It also provides some important background for thinking through normative questions about the scope of parental authority over education—questions I address in the following section of this essay.

Educational Authority in the Liberal State

In considering what the basic aims of education should be and how educational authority should be apportioned to realize those aims, contemporary liberal theorists give different weight to the child’s prospective interest in personal autonomy. William Galston’s views of how far the state should go in imposing common educational standards, and to what ends, clearly distinguish him from liberals who call for the cultivation of autonomy in children. Galston argues that in determining objectives for mandatory civic education, the state must balance civic imperatives with respect for “wide parental rights” (1995, p. 529). In his view, the imposition of civic education requirements on recalcitrant minorities can only be justified by recourse to “compelling state interests” (p. 529). The promotion of toleration, according to Galston, constitutes a compelling state interest, and to that end, the state may require that students develop a “minimal awareness” of ways of life that differ from their own (p. 529). Yet Galston does not believe that the state is justified in requiring more substantial engagement with alternative ways of life, and he adamantly denies that the state has the authority to “foster in children skeptical reflection on ways of life inherited from parents or local communities” (1991, p. 253).^[5] By his account, requiring a rudimentary knowledge of alternative values, beliefs and practices should suffice to promote mutual toleration, which constitutes a compelling state interest and shared liberal purpose. But if it requires more than this, the liberal state exceeds its rightful authority and transgresses the rights of parents.

Thus, in Galston’s view, the liberal state is not justified in instituting an education that facilitates and encourages critical evaluation of different ways of life. To require such an education is to force all citizens—including citizens whose lives are structured around firm moral and religious commitments—to conform to an autonomy-based vision of the good life that he believes should not be associated with liberalism (Galston, 1995, pp. 521-527). Instead, a liberal society must protect and defend citizens’ “right to live unexamined as well as examined lives—a right the effective exercise of which may require parental bulwarks against the corrosive influence of modernist skepticism” (Galston, 1991, p. 254). By Galston’s account, parents and local communities should be free to discourage their children from engaging in critical reflection of different ways of life, and to structure their children’s education accordingly. Again, in his view, a modicum of exposure to alternative ways of life is all that is required for the promotion of toleration, and when the state institutes educational demands that go above and beyond this purpose, it exceeds its rightful authority.

Galston’s arguments against the cultivation of autonomy, and his support for policies aimed at the protection of deep diversity, are motivated by a Millian concern over the homogenizing and despotic tendencies of the modern bureaucratic state. In his famous essay, “On Liberty,” Mill argues that absent alternatives, state-run schools become “a mere

contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another,” an instrument of indoctrination and oppression for the party in power, be it “a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or [a democratic] majority” (1859/2002, p. 110). It is just this kind of concern that animates William Galston’s strong presumption in favor of parents’ rights and his corresponding criticism of extensive state mandates in the educational realm (1991, pp. 241-256; 2002, pp. 93-109). In light of the far-reaching claims that sometimes are made by contemporary liberals in the name of securing civic interests and promoting the common good,^[6] this kind of concern is not unfounded, and should not be given short shrift.

But it should be remembered that Mill also warned against giving too much authority to parents in directing their children’s education, and he was keenly sensitive to the specter of parental despotism. Mill observed that in Europe during his day, public sentiment leaned so heavily in favor of the supposed right of parents (and fathers, in particular) to exercise “absolute and exclusive” dominion over their children that “one would almost think that a man’s children were supposed to be literally, and not metaphorically, a part of himself” (1859/2002, p. 109). Mill flatly rejected the premise that absolute control over one’s children (and their education) is simply an extension of one’s own basic rights and freedoms as a parent. Such a premise, he argued, rests upon “misplaced” ideas about liberty. For although the harm principle suggests that the individual should be free to carry out any action that concerns himself only, it does not suggest that the same individual should “be free to do as he likes in acting for another under the pretext that the affairs of another are his own affairs” (Mill, p. 108). Mill argued that in spite of their nonage, children ought to be respected as individuals in themselves, with rights and freedoms that are independent of their parents and others. Among the rights children retain, by Mill’s account, is a right to an education that adequately prepares them to reason and make informed decisions on their own, and to exercise their rights and freedoms as adult citizens.

In elucidating some of his concerns about absolute parental control over education, I do not mean to suggest that Mill was a proponent of relieving parents of all discretion over their children’s education. Mill acknowledged that providing an adequate education for their children “is one of the most sacred duties of the parents... after summoning a human being into the world” (p. 109). It is a defining duty—one which makes parenting such a profoundly meaningful experience—and he felt parents should have some latitude to fulfill that duty in a manner consistent with their particular vision of the good life. Yet at the same time, Mill asserted that when parents deprive their children of an adequate education, they commit “a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society” (p. 109). He argued that if the father, either through neglect or poor decision-making, should fail in his sacred duty, then the state must see to it that his children receive the education they will need to exercise independent thought. Thus, it must be acknowledged that in addition to his misgivings about state control over education, Mill also voiced deep misgivings about parental control over education, and he believed that the state had a critical role in ensuring that parents make adequate provision for their children’s education.

I do not mean to suggest that this latter concern over parental despotism and neglect is completely missing from Galston’s account, but it often feels as though he underestimates it. He does not seem to be attentive enough to the various ways in which parents and local communities can become microcosms of the tyrannical state that he finds so troubling. Denying children the opportunity to receive the kind of education that enables them to think and act for themselves is one fairly obvious way that parents exercise despotism over children. Shaping their character so that they are disinclined to exercise independent choice is another. The policies and educational proposals that Galston advances do not seem to be nearly robust enough to counter the kinds of conformity that some families and groups exact on their children. In negotiating the Scylla of state tyranny and the Charybdis of parental and community despotism, Galston’s theory of education drifts too closely to the Charybdis, and the potential moral costs to children are great.

Conclusion

Like Galston, I believe that in the interest of respecting parental autonomy, the liberal state should tolerate diverse educational institutions and practices. In a free society, parents must have wide latitude to rear their children in ways that are consistent with their particular conceptions of the good life. The state acts unjustly when it establishes overly exacting standards for civic education, effectively stripping some parents of their right to an authentic educational choice for their children.

However, unlike Galston, I believe that the state should not set the bar so low for mandatory civic education that it gives parents and local communities license to practice despotism over their children. If the state is adequately to protect children’s interests—including their prospective interest in autonomy—it must do more than require that they develop a “minimal awareness” of other ways of life. It must have the authority to establish and enforce more rigorous educational standards aimed at the cultivation of autonomy in children. These include standards for the development of the kinds of

critical thinking skills and dispositions to which I alluded previously—such as the ability to evaluate reasons, determining how well they support particular claims or beliefs, and the inclination to value good reasoning and act on its basis. I acknowledge that the enforcement of these more rigorous educational standards will make it more difficult for some parents and local communities to pass their particular values, beliefs and ways of life onto their children. Yet I contend that such standards are justified, nevertheless, because of the important contribution they make to the child’s development of a capacity for autonomy.

One final set of issues needs to be addressed here. The ongoing debate among liberal theorists over whether personal autonomy should be a guiding principle of educational policy has tended to focus rather narrowly on the perceived threat posed by parents and cultural groups who seek to limit children’s exposure to other ways of life, and to forestall their development of the critical faculties associated with autonomy. As the preceding pages indicate, I have no doubt that this threat is real for some children and that, as a matter of justice, they, like all children who are capable of receiving it, are entitled to an autonomy-promoting education. That said, it is important to recognize that many other children encounter entirely different impediments to their prospective autonomy. As Harry Brighouse (2005) has argued, for many children who grow up in the United States, a “deeply materialistic and monodimensional” (p. 539) mainstream culture poses the most persistent threat to their prospective autonomy.^[7] To the extent that schools outfit these children with the critical faculties discussed above, and to the extent that they present them with genuine alternatives to the dominant consumerist ethos, schools can help them overcome these threats. Still, for an increasing number of other children in the U.S., poverty is the most immediate obstacle to their development and exercise of the capacity for autonomy. As Meira Levinson (1999, p. 33) points out, “the achievement of autonomy requires that individuals’ basic needs be fulfilled, including the provision of food, shelter, clothing, affection, and self-esteem.” Obviously, an autonomy-promoting education does little to address the most pressing problems faced by children who are surrounded by poverty. And so long as we, as a society, fail to provide adequately for these children’s basic needs, their prospects for living autonomously—not to mention their general wellbeing—will suffer as a result.

References

- Berliner, D. C. & Biddle, B. J. (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America’s public schools*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Brighouse, H. (1998). Civic education and liberal legitimacy. *Ethics* 108(4), 719-745.
- Brighouse, H. (2000). *School choice and social justice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Brighouse, H. (2005). Channel one, the anti-commercial principle, and the discontinuous ethos. *Educational Policy* 19(3), 528-549.
- Callan, E. (1997). *Creating citizens: political education and liberal democracy*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Corngold, J. (2011). Misplaced priorities: Gutmann’s democratic theory, children’s autonomy, and sex education policy. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30(1), 67-84.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1997). *Experience & education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Dunlop, F. (1986). The education of the emotions and the promotion of autonomy: Are they really compatible? *British Journal of Educational Studies* 34(2), 152-160.
- Galston, W. A. (1991). *Liberal purposes: Goods, virtues, and diversity in the liberal state*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Galston, W. A. (1995). Two concepts of liberalism. *Ethics* 105(3), 516-534.
- Galston, W. A. (2002). *Liberal pluralism: The implications of value pluralism for political theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Graham, P. A. (2005). *Schooling America: How the public schools meet the nation’s changing needs*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gutmann, A. (1995). Civic education and social diversity. *Ethics* 105(3), 557-579.

Hare, W. (1995). Content and criticism: The aims of schooling. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29(1), 47-60.

Hirsch, E. D. (1987). *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Levinson, M. (1999). *The demands of liberal education*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Macedo, S. (1998). Transformative constitutionalism and the case of religion: Defending the moderate hegemony of liberalism. *Political Theory* 26(1), 56-80.

Mill, J. S. (1859/2002). On liberty. In *The basic writings of John Stuart Mill: On liberty, the subjection of women & utilitarianism*. New York, NY: The Modern Library.

National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. US Department of Education. Available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>

Raz, J. (1988). *The morality of freedom*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Reich, R. (2002). *Bridging liberalism and multiculturalism in American education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Sandia National Laboratories (1993). Perspectives on education in America: An annotated briefing. *Journal of Educational Research* 86(5), 259-310.

Schinkel, A., De Ruyter, D., & Steutel, J. (2010). Threats to autonomy in consumer societies and their implications for education. *Theory and Research in Education* 8(3), 269-287.

Siegel, H. (1988a). *Educating reason: Rationality, critical thinking, and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Siegel, H. (1988b). Rationality and epistemic dependence. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 20(1), 1-6

Notes

[1] I have elaborated on some of the ideas contained in this section elsewhere: see Comgold (2011).

[2] Amy Gutmann makes a similar point when she writes, “Most (if not all) of the same skills and virtues that are necessary and sufficient for educating children for citizenship in a liberal democracy are those that are necessary and sufficient for educating children to deliberate about their own ways of life, more generally (and less politically) speaking” (1995, p. 573).

[3] For a concise account of how Dewey as well as his early-twentieth-century contemporaries, Russell and Whitehead, have been misinterpreted as being hostile to the transmission of knowledge in the classroom, see Hare (1995, pp. 47-50). Hare attests that the three philosophers consistently regarded academic content and critical thinking as inseparable, even while their less discerning colleagues and admirers tended to dichotomize the two.

[4] As Siegel (1988b) points out, though occasions inevitably arise in which we must yield to expert opinion on a given matter, we do not thereupon abdicate responsibility for thinking through the matter for ourselves. “Even on such occasions,” he writes, “we must do plenty of thinking to be rationally justified in holding that the occasion in question is one in which we are epistemically dependent, and that the expert upon whom we propose to be dependent is a legitimate authority, and the opinion offered appropriately expert and authoritative” (p. 3).

[5] Earlier in this essay, I distinguished between critical thinking and skeptical reflection and took pains to emphasize that personal autonomy need not and should not be associated with the latter. Yet Galston, here, conflates skepticism and autonomy, and in so doing, stacks the deck against the argument for cultivating autonomy in children. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing this point to my attention.

[6] Some of the claims that Stephen Macedo makes in his essay “Transformative Constitutionalism and the Case of Religion”—and the language that he uses to advance those claims—are a good example. Macedo says that to ensure its own survival, a constitutional regime “must constitute the private realm in its image.” He calls for a “transformative liberalism” in which the state imposes mainstream liberal ideals on constituent communities (1998, pp. 56-80).

^[7] For another recent examination of the autonomy-inhibiting aspects of the mainstream culture of consumer societies like the United States, see Schinkel, De Ruyter, and Steutel (2010).