Teaching Children How to Think:

Rational Autonomy as an Aim of Liberal Education

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Abstract: Some philosophers think that fostering children's autonomy—in the sense of critical, rational reflection on our beliefs and goals—is an appropriate aim of public educational policy. Critics say that this amounts to championing an Enlightenment outlook over ways of life rooted in faith and tradition. The most common response to the critics is to assert that children have an interest in autonomy, not because autonomy is intrinsically worthwhile, but because it is instrumentally valuable in discovering how to lead a good life. Finding fault with this Instrumental Argument, I argue that the best case for autonomy is that critical, rational reflection is something we all already rely on in everyday life to figure out which beliefs are worthy of our assent and which goals are worthy of our pursuit. The question is not whether children will reason, but whether they will reason well or poorly. Teaching children how to think critically is, thus, best understood as helping them meet their own emerging standards of rationality. And, given that we have a duty to respect others as reasoning beings, we in turn have a collective duty to foster young people's capacity to distinguish good reasoning from and bad.

Keywords: Children, Autonomy, Education, Critical Reflection, Critical Thinking, Political Liberalism

I. Introduction

An important question intersecting political theory and the philosophy of education is whether a proper *public* "aim of education is to prepare children for lives of rational autonomy."[1] "Autonomy," of course, can refer to different things, but in this debate the most salient sense involves the "rational revisability" of one's beliefs, values, and aims (or simply "beliefs" for short).[2] As Richard Arneson and Ian Shapiro put it, since the autonomous person is capable of "standing back from her values and engaging in critical reflection about them and altering her values to align them with the results of that critical reflection," what "marks education for autonomy is development of skills and habits of critical thinking."[3] Similarly, Harry Brighouse identifies autonomy with the "careful and rational weighing of the reasons for one belief or another,"[4] which he says assumes competence in the "basic methods of rational reflection" and "exposure to alternative views."[5] Critics, however, claim that making autonomy a public aim of education would be sectarian, for though autonomy may be celebrated by cultural liberals, it is rejected or deemphasized by some cultural conservatives. A prominent response concedes that insisting on autonomy's *intrinsic* value would be sectarian but maintains that autonomy still has a rightful place in public education on account of its *instrumental* value in improving people's ideas about how to live a good life—a goal we all have.

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[1] Richard Arneson and Ian Shapiro, "Democratic Autonomy and Religious Freedom: A Critique of *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, NOMOS 38 (1996): 365-411, p. 388.

[2] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 213.

[3] Arneson and Shapiro op. cit., p. 393

[4] Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 67. Brighouse says autonomy does not require that we originally adopted our convictions by rationally weighing the reasons, but that we *become* autonomous only once we do so on reflection.

[5] Brighouse op. cit., p. 72.

This is a difficult issue. While liberals usually favor a policy of "live and let live," this slogan creates puzzles when children are involved. Is society obliged to let parents raise their children according to their own ideas about the good life? Or are parents bound to ensure that their children are free to formulate their own conceptions of the good? I have some sympathy with both sides. I think that public educational goals should be non-sectarian, and I agree that some formulations of liberalism are sectarian. Further, as I will suggest, the Instrumental Argument remains vulnerable to that charge. But I also believe that, suitably interpreted, rational autonomy is an important public aim of education. My central claim is that, since respect for others as reasoning beings imposes a duty on us to interact with others in the space of reasons, as opposed to coercing or manipulating them, we also have an underlying collective duty to foster young people's abilities to distinguish good from bad reasoning.

Discussions of education and autonomy have often focused on the American Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, in which Amish parents argued (ultimately successfully) that, on religious liberty grounds, they ought to be allowed to withdraw their children from school at age fourteen, as had been their custom, two years earlier than permitted by state law.[6] Critics of the *Yoder* decision have argued that withdrawing children from school at such an early stage threatened their autonomy, their "right to an open future."[7] But it is dangerous to dwell so much on this one case. For, while not unique, the Amish are unusual in seeking such radical separation from the modern world and, hence, in not wanting an education that offers their children broad

[6] *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).

[7] Joel Feinberg, "The Child's Right to an Open Future," in William Aiken and Hugh La Follette (eds.), *Whose Child?: Children's Rights, Parental Authority, and State Power* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980).

occupational opportunities. For this reason, *Yoder* raises special concerns about the realistic ability of young people to exit a community they want to escape—concerns which really do not pertain to those raised in more mainstream conservative cultures. The disagreements I am most interested in, by contrast, relate to questions about how the curriculum ought to approach young people's ideas about morality and religion, where there is background agreement that schools should open up vocational opportunities.

I will proceed as follows. First, in Section II, I will canvass some of the different conceptions of freedom playing a role in this debate and articulate the objection that autonomy is a sectarian ideal. In Section III, I discuss the Instrumental Argument for autonomy and explain why I think it doesn't escape the charge of sectarianism. In Section IV, I distinguish between conceptions of reason and reflection that are, and are not, reasonably ecumenical. Then, in Section V, I lay out a "Respect-Based Argument" for autonomy that avoids the problems that face the Instrumental Argument.

II. A Debate about Freedom

The debate about the ideal of autonomy in education is essentially one about the appropriate public meanings of freedom in a liberal-democratic society. If we think of freedom as *non-interference*, it might seem that parents ought to enjoy broad latitude to decide for themselves how their children should be educated, so long as they neither abuse nor neglect them.[8] But, when we ask what it would mean to neglect a child's education, we could think that freedom

[8] Though compare Mill: "A person … ought not be free to do as he likes in acting for another, under the pretext that the affairs of the other are his own." John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty," in J.M. Robson (ed.), *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Volume XVIII, Essays on Politics and Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 116.

must also involve acquiring the skills that will afford young people real *opportunities* to carry out their own conceptions of the good, whatever those should turn out to be.[9] But then we might wonder how people *get* their conceptions of the good. For do we really treat young people as free and equal persons if we assume they will just inherit the beliefs and values of their parents or communities? Perhaps the value of freedom requires that we should impart to children *rational autonomy*, which is to say, the abilities and dispositions to use their own rational faculties to freely decide for themselves how best to live. But now a fourth conception comes into view, as we might also embrace a broadly Rousseauean conception of *political autonomy* and think that our freedom as citizens involves being subject only to those laws that we could, in some sense, have imposed on ourselves. This might persuade us that public educational policy should steer clear of controversial ethical ideals that deeply divide reasonable, fair-minded people. And, if that is right, then perhaps public policy championing autonomy in education would be just another manifestation of sectarianism since not everyone values it.

Philosophers hewing to this last line have mainly objected to the rational autonomy interpretation of freedom. John Rawls, in distinguishing his theory from the "Enlightenment Liberalism" that "attacked orthodox Christianity," maintains that the autonomy associated with "critically examining our deepest ends and ideals" is not an appropriate political value for liberalism, since "many citizens, especially those holding certain religious doctrines, may reject it."[10] That, according to Rawls, would be inconsistent with the principle that political power must be exercised in accordance with a constitutional order that "all citizens as free and equal may

[9] Cf. Feinberg op. cit.

[10] John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64, 3 (1997): 765-807, p. 778.

reasonably be expected to endorse."[11] His own *political liberalism*, he contends, "requires far less," aspiring only to prepare children for their roles as free and equal citizens of a fair society. It is enough, then, if young people learn about their legal rights and acquire the skills necessary for economic cooperation and the political virtues for sustaining a just society over time.[12]

Similarly, William Galston links rational autonomy to what he calls the "Enlightenment Project" of "liberation through reason from externally imposed authority":

> Within the Enlightenment Project, reason is understood as the prime source of authority; the examined life is understood as superior to reliance on tradition or faith; preference is to be given to self-direction over external determination; and appropriate relationships to conceptions of good or of value, and especially conceptions that constitute groups, are held to originate only through acts of conscious individual reflection on and commitment to such conceptions.[13]

Autonomy is, therefore, an inappropriate policy aim, since this "in effect takes sides in the ongoing struggle between reason and faith, reflection and tradition."[14] The proper moral aims of education, Galston claims, are simply those of promoting tolerance and social unity between groups. To this end, children need to acquire "at least minimal awareness of the existence and nature of those [other] ways of life." But what the state "may not do is prescribe curricula or

[11] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 137.

[12] Rawls 1993 op. cit. pp. 199, 194.

[13] William Galston, "Two Concepts of Liberalism," *Ethics* 105 (1995): 516-534, p. 525.

[14] Galston op. cit., p. 526.

pedagogic practices that require or strongly invite students to become skeptical or critical of their own ways of life."[15]

I think this allegation that an education for rational autonomy would be sectarian is of the highest importance. But the objection raises a puzzle. Just how do we tell whether a policy *is* sectarian? It cannot be that a policy is sectarian just in virtue of being controversial, for the whole point of a political system is to handle disagreement.

It is helpful to approach this issue historically. A core idea emerging from the liberal tradition is that the state cannot sincerely act in the name of all its members, and avoid treating some as "second-class citizens," unless it separates itself from religious confession. This has given birth to the more expansive idea that public policy ought to remain as neutral as possible with respect to religious disagreements. But, as politics has secularized, there has also been a process of *cultural* secularization, whereby people have increasingly sought their personal ideals and convictions outside of traditional religious faiths. Now, you might, at first, think that nothing would be more fitting than for the politically secular state to embrace these culturally secular ideals. But, on further reflection, this seems to betray the core idea, for these culturally secular ideals play much the same role in people's lives as traditional religious faiths. Better, then, to say that the state must prescind from commitment to these secular cultural ideals, just as it does with respect to religious doctrine. It's for this reason that Rawls's notion of "comprehensive doctrines," which refers to religious faiths *and* their secular counterparts, is so important. Rawls's appealing idea is that the political order ought to be freestanding with respect to the various comprehensive

[15] Galston op. cit., p. 529.

doctrines that divide people in society so that it can genuinely represent everyone as free and equal citizens.

But it would be absurd to claim that the state can remain neutral between *every* comprehensive doctrine. As Locke argued, a commitment to religious toleration does not make it illegitimate to forbid human sacrifice, even if some religious sects practice it. And that is because the proper concern of government is with the protection of certain "civil interests," like life, liberty, and property. So, religious sects that threaten these interests need not enjoy full toleration.[16] Similarly, Rawls says that government should be justifiable to people from all *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines, but need not be justifiable to those whose beliefs are not fair-minded toward others—that is, who are "unreasonable" in Rawls's sense of the word.

And yet how do we fairly pick out what those civil interests are? What are the bounds of the reasonable? We cannot simply appeal to whatever is valued by people of every comprehensive doctrine, for there may be nothing in that intersection of sets, and we have just conceded that there are unreasonable groups that don't respect intuitively important civil interests. On the other hand, it would seem cheap to just define a set of goods as "civil interests," and then brand as "unreasonable" any comprehensive doctrine that fails to respect them. Surely the identification of civil interests must have something to do with the fact that these interests are widely valued by the adherents of different comprehensive doctrines.

The key to unraveling this knot is to recall that our motive for seeking toleration and avoiding sectarianism is a commitment to treating individuals as free and equal participants in a fair system of social cooperation. We trust that this is an ideal that people from most comprehensive

[16] John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).

doctrines could at least be brought to accept. We then define our civil interests with reference to that ideal. Of course, people may disagree about what follows from the fact that we are free and equal. But that shouldn't surprise philosophers. Disagreements about how to understand key concepts are ubiquitous. The point is that we recognize the difference between appealing to ideas that aim at achieving overlapping consensus and those that derive more particularly from our distinct comprehensive doctrines. In this light, the debate about autonomy in education is in no small part a question about which side of that line autonomy belongs on. Is it an integral part of treating others as free and equal? Or is it a more parochial value associated with some comprehensive doctrines but not others?

III. The Instrumental Case for Autonomy

The criticism that autonomy is sectarian might seem most compelling when we focus on autonomy's intrinsic value. Mill, for example, encourages us to take a dim view of "the comparative worth as a human being" of one who "mechanically" follows a path laid down by others, rather than by employing "all of his faculties" to discover his own way.[17] While this kind of mental independence does not specify the content of the good life, it does tell us the valuable *way* to relate to that content. And the Rawls-Galston objection is that, while some people may conceive of this as a necessary condition of a good life, others don't, and the liberal state should avoid taking sides.

An important response, articulated by several prominent authors, urges us to rethink the nature of the individual's interest in autonomy. From a political point of view, they say, the value

[17] Mill op. cit., pp. 262-263.

of autonomy is chiefly instrumental.[18] Although there are slight differences in the way these authors make this case, I think the following composite formulation is representative:

> Justice requires that everyone has a fair opportunity to live a good life. And to live a good life, one needs not only liberty and resources, but also some sense of what the good life consists in. It might seem as if all one needs, then, is induction into some conception of the good or other. But this won't suffice for two reasons. First, some people will be brought up with beliefs, values, and aims that are not, in fact, good. And people don't merely wish to lead a life that they presently *regard* as good; they want to lead a life that is good in fact. Second, even if a person is brought up in a generally valuable form of life, a person's constitution may be such that that life does not resonate with him. And a person cannot flourish if he cannot endorse his life "from the inside." For these reasons, if a young person is going to have a fair opportunity to live a good life, she needs the ability to choose intelligently among different ways of life. And to do this, a person needs an epistemically reliable way of evaluating different beliefs, values, and aims, and there is no more reliable method available than rational reflection.[19]

What are the curricular implications of this argument? Some writers, because they focus on the *Yoder* case, have little to say about this beyond rejecting the bid of parents to shield their

[18] See Kymlicka op. cit., Arneson and Shapiro op. cit., and Brighouse op. cit.. Compare the similar view in Feinberg op. cit., pp. 143-144. Another response says that fostering critical reflection is crucial to education for democratic citizenship and that an autonomous orientation to personal beliefs is just a spill-over effect. The appeal, thus, is not to the child's *interests* as an individual, but to her *responsibilities* as a citizen. But this argument doesn't tell us whether we should try to minimize that spill-over effect. See Amy Gutmann, "Civic Education and Social Diversity," *Ethics* 105 (1995): 557-579.

[19] Eamonn Callan, "Autonomy, Child-Rearing, and Good Lives," in David Archard and Colin MacLeod (eds.), *The Moral and Political Status of Children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

children from the external influences they may encounter in high school. Thus, Feinberg says that the ideal is to "let *all* influences, or the largest and most random possible assortment of influences, work equally on the child."[20] Brighouse's position is more sophisticated. He identifies four important curricular elements for facilitating autonomy: (1) the traditional academic "content-based" curriculum, which presumably includes such things as literacy, mathematics, science, history, and social studies; (2) critical thinking skills, including the ability to identify fallacies, deductive and inductive reasoning, the nature of evidence, etc.; (3) an introduction to "a range of religious, non-religious, and anti-religious ethical views"; and (4) the diverse ways that "secular and religious thinkers have dealt with moral conflict and religious disagreements," and how people have experienced "conversion experiences, losses of faith, and reasoned abandonment of ethical positions."[21]

What should we make of this argument? A key premise is the appeal to the epistemic merits of rational reflection. Brighouse says that the "basic methods of rational evaluation are reliable aids to uncovering how to live well" and that "no other known device is so reliable in this area of understanding."[22] Arneson and Shapiro, similarly, claim that "critical reflection on one's present values," being "a reliable guide to a valuable and worthy life," can "improve the quality of the values one eventually affirms."[23]

[20] Feinberg op. cit., p. 136.

[21] Brighouse op. cit., p. 75.

[22] Brighouse op. cit., pp. 69, 71.

[23] Arneson and Shapiro op. cit., pp. 399-400.

But what exactly is meant by rational, or critical, reflection here? We may be told that it refers to *actively considering the warrant or worth of a belief*. But, considering the warrant or worth *according to what criteria*? How should we continue that definition? Here are three possibilities.

> **The Formal Objective Sense:** …according to the proper criteria for deciding such things, whatever they happen to be.
>
> **The Substantive Objective Sense:** …according to the proper criteria for deciding such things, specifically … [where the author fills this out for us].
>
> **The Subjective Sense:** …according to what the individual regards as the proper criteria for deciding such things.

Which sense is appropriate for understanding the claim about the epistemic merits of critical reflection?

If it's the formal objective sense, then it should be pretty uncontroversial that, in principle, critical reflection can improve our beliefs. For that is just to say that we can achieve more warranted beliefs if we consider the warrant of those beliefs in the light of the criteria (whatever they are) that establish their warrant. However, with the criteria of critical reflection left open in this way, this turns out to be an uninformative claim and provides little help in thinking about the contours of education, since we might disagree about what the relevant criteria are.

On the substantive objective construal, the proper criteria are identified for us. For instance, champions of autonomy sometimes equate critical reflection with known methods of "critical thinking,"[24] "evidential justification,"[25] or the "norms of critical inquiry."[26] So perhaps the correct criteria are those we find in a critical thinking textbook: principles of deductive logic, inference

[24] Arneson and Shapiro op. cit., pp. 393-394, Brighouse op. cit., pp. 74-75.

[25] Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 61.

[26] Levinson op. cit., p. 58.

to the best explanation, scientific method, rules of probability, standards for evaluating testimony, etc. This does, indeed, give us much more curricular guidance, but it will be more controversial that these criteria are sufficient for "uncovering how to live well." The frailty or ultimate inadequacy of human reason is, after all, a common theme in many religious traditions. Some liberals might assume that education is sufficiently non-sectarian if it doesn't take a stand on ultimate metaphysical or ethical questions. But conservatives are going to think the deck is stacked against them if school officials announce, "Look, we don't teach your children what to believe; we just teach them the correct, rational methods of arriving at those beliefs."

But maybe our authors are endorsing, instead, the subjective reading: that what's important is that each individual reflect on his own beliefs with his own standards. For instance, Arneson and Shapiro say that "the practical alternative to subjecting one's fundamental aims to critical scrutiny is to accept uncritically whatever aims socialization during one's childhood has instilled."[27] This makes it sound like what's important is just that a person assumes a critical attitude toward his beliefs, not that he relies on any particular criteria. This interpretation has the advantage of not imposing alien standards on anyone, but it has two problems. First, it's again unclear how much curricular guidance it gives us, beyond encouraging people to think hard, since we are not told the proper standards for good critical reflection. Second, it's a little surprising if it's true that critical reflection tends to improve our beliefs regardless of the criteria we use to check their warrant. Is the idea just that people are more likely to get things right if their beliefs are more coherent? But this could use some defense, for one might think it's just as likely that a person would "correct" his good beliefs so that they fit in with his bad ones.

[27] Arneson and Shapiro op. cit., p. 400.

At the end of the day, the strongest version of the Instrumental Argument probably relies on the substantive objective reading. That makes the most sense of the claim that the methods of rational reflection are the best means that we have for uncovering how to live well and improve our beliefs. But, setting aside our concern that this is a controversial epistemological thesis, we run into a second problem once we note a second distinction: that there is a difference between the norms, methods, or criteria of critical inquiry and the actual activity of critical reflection carried out by some flesh-and-blood individual. For, by way of analogy, just because there is a known, reliable procedure for calculating, say, the drag coefficient on a wing, it surely does not follow that I should be urged to design my own airplane. Likewise, even if there are reliable methods for discovering what we ought to believe or how we ought to live, it does not follow that we will also all agree that every Dick and Jane ought to try to figure these things out for him- or herself. We defer to experts in many spheres of life; maybe we should also defer to epistemic authorities in deciding what to believe and how to live. Now, you may say that we would be taking a gamble in that case, since the authorities we are relying on might be in error. That is true but only half the equation. We must also factor in the chance that the individual's own reasoning will go astray. That, too, involves a gamble. So, on this way of looking at it, it all depends on where error is more likely to come from.

The Instrumental Argument, however, contains a reply of a broadly Millian character to this challenge. Brighouse is the clearest on this point, so let's take a closer look at his reasoning, which I reconstruct as follows:

1. **Endorsement Thesis:** "Living well has two aspects": "The way of life must be good; and the person living it must endorse it 'from the inside.'"[28]

2. **Value Pluralism:** "There are … many diverse ways of life which human beings are capable of living well."[29]

3. **Constitution Pluralism:** "[P]eople have different personalities, characters, or internal constitutions, that suit them differently well to different ways of life."[30] In other words, not everyone is so constituted to endorse just any valuable way of life.

4. **Conclusion 1:** Therefore, each person is in a privileged position to figure out which way of life is best suited for her.

5. **Conclusion 2:** Since, as parents and educators, we don't know which way of life will be good for the children in our charge, and since justice requires that each child have a fair opportunity to live a good life, we can only offer them a range of options and enable them to make an informed choice for themselves about which to pursue.

Assuming we accept the premises, what does the argument really establish? I think it shows that individuals must have the external freedom to pursue different kinds of life, that people won't flourish if they are forced by others or by circumstances to live in a way which they experience as alienating. It does not show that it's important that young people be taught how to bring methods of rational inquiry to bear on beliefs that they happen to already accept.[31] The argument asserts that the individual is in a privileged epistemic position inasmuch as she best knows what kind of life resonates with her. This certainly requires introspection, but it does not clearly involve the kind of rigorous critical thinking that our authors emphasize as so important.

[28] Brighouse op. cit., p. 69.

[29] Brighouse op. cit., p. 72.

[30] Brighouse op. cit., p. 73.

[31] Unless "endorsing a belief from the inside" implies a strong condition of "procedural independence," such that a person hasn't really endorsed a value from the inside unless she critically reflects on it. But then we wouldn't need the rest of the Instrumental Argument.

Indeed, we are given no reason to think that the individual is in a good position to evaluate the objective merits of different kinds of life or the validity of certain beliefs.

A second problem is that some of the argument's premises seem at least as controversial as the claim that autonomy is intrinsically valuable. The most obvious sticking point may be the Endorsement Thesis, but this is a complex question, so I shall set it aside.[32] I think there are problems at least as serious with Value Pluralism and Constitution Pluralism. I would guess that most people do accept, as abstract propositions, that there are different valuable pursuits in life and that some people are better suited to some ways of living than others. But people differ radically in *how much* value pluralism and constitution pluralism they think there is and what domains they think it affects. And the Instrumental Argument must assume that both kinds of pluralism are very wide-ranging if it's to do the work its proponents seem to have in view. This issue comes out clearly when we see how Arneson and Shapiro attempt to provide an argument that's supposed to convince reasonable Amish parents to refrain from withdrawing their children from school after the eighth grade. They argue that, since "individuals differ in their traits," it will turn out that "for some individuals, the secular way of life is better, and for some, the traditionalist way of life is better." From this, they conclude that, as parents don't know which "type of person" their children will grow up to be, they ought to choose an education that presents both ways of life as options about which the children can eventually make their own choice.[33] Now, virtually all Christians would agree that, for example, not everyone is called to the ministry, and that there are other valuable vocations. But why think that conservative religious

[32] See, for example, Steven Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 189-197; T.M. Wilkenson "Against Dworkin's Endorsement Thesis," *Social Theory and Practice* 23:34.

[33] Arneson and Shapiro, pp. 401-402.

believers are going to readily accept the claim that some people are cut out for a devout life, while others are better suited to godlessness?

The fundamental problem is that an argument that appeals to the idea that different people are suited to different kinds of lives invites Shelly Burtt's criticism that a liberal education frames "the world as presenting 'a menu of spiritual possibilities'" that young people are then encouraged to choose from in a "purely consumerist fashion."[34] Perhaps Burtt's rhetoric about consumerism is too polemical, but there is a real question here about how liberals are thinking about the value of encountering diversity. One is reminded of George Carlin's quip that "Religion is like a pair of shoes. Find one that fits you… but don't make me wear your shoes!" I suspect one reason this framing is tempting to many liberals is that we have almost all come to think about occupational freedom this way. We do want young people to know about the wide variety of kinds of work available, so that they can make an informed and intelligent choice about which would be the best match for their goals, propensities, and capacities. But it would be overreaching to expect everyone in a liberal society to think about the variety of religious and ethical views in a like fashion, as a matter of selecting the way of life, among the many fine options a liberal society has on offer, that best suits her individual character.

IV. Are Reason and Reflection Sectarian Values?

I think this debate has suffered from two oversimplifications. The first is that we are dealing with a clash between Reason and Reflection on the one side, and Faith and Tradition on the other.

[34] Shelley Burtt, "Comprehensive Educations and the Liberal Understanding of Autonomy," in Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (eds.), *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 187, 192.

While this framing has *some* merit, it tends to obscure the fact that we all rely on reason and reflection in our lives. The opposite oversimplification is the idea that everyone can be fairly expected to accept "the sovereignty of rational criticism" over all their beliefs.[35] This, I believe, could be taken in different ways, some sensible, some less so. So, what I want to do is offer a more nuanced understanding of the senses in which reason and reflection are, and are not, sectarian values. Then, in the following section, I lay out a positive argument for our duty to foster a form of rational autonomy.

What do we mean when we speak of "reason"? Sometimes the word is understood in this debate in a very substantive way, where it's defined in opposition to superstition, custom, and authority, and identified with Enlightenment values. This is the sense the word has, for example, in the title of Thomas Paine's deistic polemic *The Age of Reason*. But this is to pack quite a lot into the notion. It is more useful to think of "reason" as simply referring, first, to sound principles of inference, including rules of deduction and induction, principles of probability, standards of causal reasoning and scientific method, considerations for evaluating testimony, and so on, and second, to the cognitive capacity that enables us to abide by those norms. These principles of reason make inference possible and are, I venture to say, incipient in ordinary thought. That is why students in critical thinking courses don't have to accept on the teacher's authority the validity of *modus ponens* or the good sense of inferring to the best explanation. Once brought to mind, the soundness of these principles is apparent to everyone. This is the sense in which we are, indeed, "rational animals": not that we always reason well, but that our thinking is rightly

[35] Cf. Callan op. cit., p. 116.

judged by the rational standards internal to it.[36] Of course, to say these principles are *incipient* in untutored thinking is not to say that they are fully worked out there. The more formal parts of education—mathematics, logic, scientific method—are all concerned with developing our ordinary reasoning in systematic, sometimes highly sophisticated, directions. In this way, our reasoning abilities can be dramatically expanded and deepened. But since these more complex forms of thought are rooted in everyday reasoning, no one should consider this kind of education sectarian. And though there are certainly philosophical disagreements about the finer points of rationality, these do not tend to divide people from different worldviews.

Now, what is critical reflection or reflective thought? John Dewey identified it with the "[a]ctive, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends."[37] As he emphasized, we typically engage in this deliberate and self-conscious thought when our more habitual ways of thinking have struck us as problematic or questionable. Hence, just as reason is native to ordinary thought, so too is reflective thinking. I show up to a meeting and no one is there. What's going on? Is it plausible that everyone's late? Maybe my watch is wrong? Could I have confused the date? Did I miss a message cancelling the meeting? Come to think of it, did I even see the announcement of the meeting, or was I just relying on what my colleague told me? In short, faced with this puzzle, I start reviewing my assumptions. I consider the grounds for each of these, consider the comparative likelihood of various possibilities, think of ways of gathering

[36] Ronald, de Sousa, *Why Think: Evolution and the Rational Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 6-9.

[37] John Dewey, *How We Think, revised edition* in *John Dewey: The Later Works, Volume 8* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 118.

more evidence to check some of my beliefs and hypotheses, and so on. We all do this kind of thing in our day-to-day lives, though some of us are better at it, and do it more often, than others. Of course, critical reflection may involve more momentous beliefs, and require much more sophisticated forms of inquiry, but this simple example communicates the essence of it.

Critical reflection is important because sometimes we make errors of inference. In recent decades, psychologists have been developing an impressive picture of how these common errors stem from the ways our minds are put together.[38] The complete catalog of biases is far too vast to outline here, but some more notable for us include the tendencies to overgeneralize, to promiscuously assume causal connections, to seek confirmation of our current beliefs and ignore countervailing evidence, and to uncritically accept whatever propositions we hear. Turning our attention to practical reasoning, we find that our preferences are surprisingly influenced by how the choices is framed and that we are unsurprisingly biased toward the short-term. The point is that these are errors are pervasive in human cognition; they have nothing to do with our particular worldviews. So, if education could improve our ability to either avoid or catch these errors, it's hard to see how anyone could reasonably allege that such training is sectarian. And, fortunately, there is some evidence that education can make us better at reflective thinking.[39] For instance, it's hard to avoid certain biases if we don't have concepts for them or don't have mental representations of sound reasoning patterns. And practice in critical reflection can make such reflection more routine for us and enhance our confidence in employing it.

[38] See George Ainslie, *Breakdown of Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), and Keith E. Stanovich, *Rationality and the Reflective Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[39] Stanovich op. cit., ch. 10.

If there's nothing particularly sectarian about an education that teaches us to reason more soundly and reflect more effectively on our own thinking, does it follow that it's fair to expect everyone to recognize, as Eamonn Callan puts it, the "sovereignty of rational criticism" over *all* their beliefs?[40] I don't think there is a simple answer to that question because there are multiple meanings which that phrase might plausibly bear.

A strong claim would say that people ought to rely on the ordinary principles of reasoning to ground all their beliefs, *rather* than relying on faith, tradition, intuition, and so on. This is a form of what we might call "rationalism." Dewey may have taken this position. We find him extolling the experimental methods of science as "the best tools which humanity has so far devised for effectively directed reflection." Without them, he says, a person "not merely conducts inquiry and learning without the use of the best instruments, but fails to understand the full meaning of knowledge," for "he does not become acquainted with the traits that mark off opinion and assent from authorized conviction."[41] And our contemporary proponents of an education for autonomy sometimes seem to be taking this line as well. For example, we have already seen Brighouse describing rational reflection as our most reliable "device" for improving our beliefs about how to live.[42] But, of course, Galston and Rawls would be on firm ground in pointing out that opposition to the proclaimed sovereignty or self-sufficiency of human reason is at the core of many conservative outlooks. If we are trying to avoid sectarianism, then surely making this strong claim goes too far.

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[40] Callan op. cit., p. 116.

[41] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Volume 9* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 197.

[42] Brighouse op. cit., p. 71.

But we could be making a weaker claim. Here, there is no insistence that reason is superior to tradition, faith, or intuition, but only that our existing values and beliefs, or those that others recommend to us, may rely on mistaken inferences of ordinary reasoning which critical reflection can alone identify. Sometimes this is all that the defenders of autonomy seem to be saying. Arneson and Shapiro point out that reflection might reveal that some of our beliefs depend on a "confusion of thought,"[43] and Brighouse extols the power of critical thinking to "detect inconsistencies and fallacious argumentation" and "uncover misuse of evidence."[44] It's hard to see how anyone can reasonably object to reason's authority to police *itself* in this way. If a person is making inferences, after all, he is already reasoning, and so he seems committed to thinking his reasoning is sound. This is consistent, however, with accepting certain "articles of faith," a term I use expansively to just mean beliefs that allegedly cannot be confirmed by ordinary modes of rational inquiry.

Does the acceptance of articles of faith exclude critical reflection on those beliefs? If we identify critical reflection with directly subjecting those beliefs to evaluation by the ordinary modes of rational inquiry, then presumably it does. But a person might think he has good reasons, which themselves stand up to rational reflection, to recognize the limits of reason in some domains. One might, that is, accept Pascal's maxim that "reason should submit when it judges it ought to submit."[45] Someone like this can critically reflect on articles of faith in an indirect way. Or a person might think that he should scrutinize some of his beliefs according to standards

[43] Arneson and Shapiro op. cit., p. 399.

[44] Brighouse op. cit., p. 71.

[45] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées,* A.J. Krailsheimer (trans.) (London: Penguin, 1966), §174.

different than those of ordinary reasoning. For instance, a believer might think that he should critically examine his religious beliefs in the light of Scripture. Finally, and most fundamentally, someone can "reflectively endorse" his articles of faith, even though he believes that they cannot really be supported by reason. That is, a person might say something like this: "I cannot ground my beliefs in logic or evidence, and I cannot prove to *you* that they are valid, or even especially plausible, but when I take everything into consideration, including who I understand myself to be, my experiences, my history, the traditions of my family, *this set of beliefs* just makes the most sense to me." This "making sense" is a very broad notion. It is consistent, as I see it, with someone who thinks, "My beliefs are as absurd as anyone else's, but I must have beliefs, so these will have to do." Sometimes we identify such reflective endorsement with reason, since it aims at reaching a conclusion after taking all considerations into account. But such reflection hardly constitutes a "method." Although we may, at bottom, all have to rely on *what makes sense to us all things considered*, this is too unstructured a process to support strong claims about its epistemic merits. It is important, therefore, to separate this kind of "reflection" from the kind of reflective thought that's identified with more rigorous "rational modes of inquiry."

The point of all this is, first, that there are different forms of rational or critical reflection and, second, that a person might well readily acknowledge the "authority" or "sovereignty" of some of them, even while he denies that some of his beliefs are directly answerable to ordinary principles of reason. I think that philosophers discussing autonomy and education have tended to neglect these distinctions. While it is not sectarian to train students in the well-established methods of rational inquiry, nor to encourage them to inspect their reasoning for fallacious

inferences, it would be sectarian to insist that all our fundamental beliefs must be grounded in such rational inquiry.

But what about people who think that they must never even ask themselves whether they can reflectively endorse their basic beliefs? To even entertain that question, they might think, is presumptuous, sinful, or shameful. Is this radical rejection of reflective thought a "reasonable" position that we ought to respect in designing our educational policy? I think the answer is *no*, but to explain this, I need to turn first to my positive argument for the duty to foster rational autonomy.

V. The Respect-Based Argument for Autonomy

Perhaps an education can foster some forms of critical reflection without being sectarian, but is there a *duty* to provide children with such an education? I think there is and here is why. It is common to hold that we have a duty to treat others as befitting agents who act and believe for reasons. This is often what philosophers mean when they speak of a duty to respect persons. Thus, when we interact with others, the respectful approach is to engage with them in the space of reasons through rational persuasion, explanation, and justification. The flipside is that we should try to avoid using coercion, deception, and manipulation to get people to do what we want them to do, because these undermine the person's ability to make up her own mind about the merits of the relevant reasons.

My contention is that, if we have a duty to treat others as reasoning beings, then we also have a responsibility to ensure that people develop the capacity to discern good reasoning from bad. For what is the point of offering reasons to someone, if he isn't any good at evaluating them. Does this mean that we have a duty to foster the capacity for rationality in beings who have only

the bare potential to be rational? Maybe, but the present argument does not depend on that claim. I assume that all normal people in every culture develop their capacity for rationality to a significant degree. The question is not whether the young will grow up with the capacity for rationality, but whether they will develop good reasoning skills or not.[46] Of course, if you thought that there was no such thing as common human reason, if we all had our own very different standards of what good reasoning involves, you might think there is nothing we can do of a non-sectarian nature to improve a person's reasoning. But I've just been making the case against that radical subjectivism. We are not, I think, particularly divided in our recognition of the main contours of ordinary rationality.

Who has this duty? It is not really feasible that I should take it on myself, in my individual capacity, to make all my neighbors more reasonable. Like many positive duties, the duty to educate, and thus to foster young people's powers of critical thinking, is best understood as falling on us collectively as a society.[47] So, I fulfill my duty in this regard when I support institutions that promote this end.

Does this argument rely on objectionably controversial ethical ideas? Maybe it is sectarian to represent people as reasoning beings. But I don't see how this objection could work. For, first, we have already established that everyone relies on reason and reflective thought. No one thinks without making inferences and without at least occasionally reflecting on the warrant of their inferences. Second—and this is an essential point—the argument for avoiding appeal to sectarian

[46] My thanks to an anonymous referee who suggested that I should emphasize that my argument does not depend on the more contentious claim that we have a duty to beings to develop their completely latent potentials.

[47] Onora O'Neill, "Children's Rights and Children's Lives," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 445-463.

ideals itself relies on the idea that authority can only be justified if we can give people reasons that they can accept from within their own comprehensive doctrines.[48] So, although one could reject the characterization of persons as reasoning beings, one would then have forfeited the basis of the sectarianism objection. The present argument, therefore, seems about as ecumenical as we could hope for. There is, I admit, still room to debate the best *interpretation* of what it means to respect reasoning beings, but this is the kind of controversy that is unavoidable in any philosophical account.

But don't we still have to insist on the epistemic merits of critical reflection? Why else think this is an important part of treating people as our equals or that anyone has an interest in becoming a good critical thinker himself? And, in that case, how is this approach really different from the Instrumental Argument? As I see it, the main claim we make as a society is that reasoning is unavoidable for us and that bad reasoning, absent some lucky fluke, is probably going to lead us in an undesirable direction. Since we cannot but make inferences, effective critical thinking can help us correct our errors. So, in that sense, we do say that critical thinking can help us improve our beliefs about how to live. But the essence of that claim is that good reasoning is better than bad reasoning. We don't need to insist, in addition, that rational modes

[48] In connecting children's autonomy to claims about public justification, this argument might seem similar to that defended in Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 3. In fact, the arguments, while potentially compatible, are quite different. Clayton argues that parents ought to raise their children in a way that is justifiable to people holding all reasonable comprehensive doctrines, since parents don't know which comprehensive doctrine their children will ultimately endorse as adults. This, he says, further implies that parents ought to refrain from "enrolling" their children in any particular comprehensive doctrine until children have the autonomy to make their own choice. Autonomy is thus treated as a precondition for giving a child a comprehensive education. By contrast, my thesis is that the duty to relate to others as reasoning beings grounds a collective duty to foster children's autonomy as a desirable outcome of education. Clayton also thinks that education ought to foster autonomy as an outcome, but that is not his main focus, and he does not offer this argument for that conclusion. For my own critical discussion of Clayton's view, see my "What Parents May Teach Their Children," *Social Theory and Practice* 45, 3 (2019): 371-396. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify the relationship between Clayton's position and my own.

of inquiry are the best methods we have for discovering what we ought to believe in all domains. In this way, we avoid embracing the kind of rationalism that seems most problematic to Rawls and Galston: we don't claim that reason is superior to faith, tradition, or intuition in settling our most fundamental convictions. Nor do we say that a person must never rely on moral or religious authorities. We simply observe that everyone must inevitably use his own reason in deciding whether to trust in an authority or not. And we hold that it's inconsistent with respecting others as reasoning beings to obscure that fact.

This brings us to that most basic form of "reasoning," that connected to reflective endorsement. At the end of the last section, I mentioned that there may be people who accept the importance of critical thinking with respect to mundane matters, but who want to discourage their children from reflecting on whether their deepest beliefs make sense to them. Is this something that public educational policy should tolerate as reasonable? I think we can now see why the answer has to be *no*. We have conceded that, beyond teaching children how to avoid bad reasoning, public education should not teach children *how* they should reflect on basic beliefs. But we cannot discourage young people from asking themselves if their beliefs make sense to them, nor abet others in doing so, if we are going respect them as beings who are owed reasons. The moral principle of respect that forbids us from politically imposing foreign beliefs and values on those who cannot accept them also forbids us from foreclosing the youth's opportunity to consider which beliefs and values seem to her worthy of her acceptance. It is, as it were, each person's birthright in a free society to ask herself what beliefs make sense to her. But, again, this is consistent with a person deciding that it makes most sense to her to rely, in some domains, on tradition, or certain authorities, or her unreflective feelings. Therefore, it

would be very misleading to say that we are, in virtue of this, enthroning some Enlightenment conception of Reason.

But if we don't teach children the correct method to reflect on their most basic beliefs, then what are the curricular implications of this commitment? Keeping in mind that we have already established the importance of teaching the methods of ordinary critical thinking, I think the most notable is that we must not manipulate or otherwise distort the youth's process of reflective thought by giving her an incomplete or misleading understanding of the world she inhabits. Thus, I agree with Brighouse that it is vital that young people learn about different philosophical and religious systems and the different ways that people have dealt with conflict, uncertainty, and changes in their own views. But I am suggesting a different rationale for thinking that this knowledge is essential.

According to the Instrumental Argument, such knowledge is valuable chiefly because young people need a wide array of options, so that they can make an informed choice about which way of life best suits them. As I've explained, I think this way of framing things, as though we were presenting youths with a lifestyle catalog, is inappropriately biased toward individualism. But, more fundamentally, I think it's just the wrong way to think about the value of knowing about other ways of seeing the world. We don't teach history mainly because we think that young people might want to choose as their own the lives of, say, Spartan warriors or Puritan settlers. Most ways of life we encounter in history are no longer possible for us. But we think it's important to understand something about the lives of the past to think intelligently about the present. Something similar is true of learning about contemporary diversity. To be ignorant or misinformed about other beliefs and values is to lack the context for forming a realistic sense of

our own place in the world and the broader significance of our own views. Indeed, it's not just that an appreciation of this context is desirable, it's that we all, at least implicitly, draw on our own beliefs about the range of human belief and experience in relating to our own commitments. It is, after all, a very different thing to be a Christian today than it was when virtually everyone in one's society professed the faith. The real question is just whether our beliefs about the world and its history are going to be reasonably accurate.

Of course, exposure to other perspectives will open up new options for some students. But we don't need to pre-interpret these perspectives as *options*. What each student regards as a live option for her is something she can work out on her own. Moreover, there is a danger that presenting the diversity of human life as an array of options will obscure the more nuanced ways that a person may reflect on the meaning of her own commitments in the light of someone else's beliefs, even if the person never considers wholesale "conversion." Much interfaith and intercultural dialogue has this character.

I remember a conversation between a family friend and her grandson who attended first grade in a Jewish school in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood of New York City. In response to something the boy had said, the grandmother reminded him, "Not *everyone* is Jewish you know." "I know," the boy conceded, "but *most* people are." Such parochial misconceptions are inevitable in children, but an education that left a person in such ignorance, much less cultivated it, would be deeply inconsistent with the duty to respect others as reasoning beings. And an upbringing that informed students that there are other creeds, but conveyed nothing of their character, or worse, misrepresented them, would hardly be much better. Even if limited horizons

really would enable the person to live a happier life, aiming to keep someone ignorant of the real facts of the world is ultimately an objectionable form of paternalism.

VI. Conclusion

Let me summarize the main points of this essay. I have raised two objections to the influential argument that the critical reflection involved in autonomy is instrumentally valuable in discovering how best to live—a goal we are all said to have, regardless of outlook. The first is that, if the argument identifies critical reflection with ordinary methods of rational inquiry (which, I have said, is not altogether clear), then the argument seems to depend on a sectarian form of rationalism. The second is that, in contending that each person is in the best position to figure out what kind of life best suits his particular character, the argument assumes a contentious form of value pluralism.

The central claim of the Respect-Based account I have offered in place of the Instrumental Argument is that, since we are obliged to respect others as reasoning beings, we also have a collective duty to ensure that young people develop the ability to distinguish good reasoning from bad. The ecumenical appeal of this argument is that it is rooted in the same moral idea as the claim that we must avoid justifying public policy in sectarian terms. As for its implications, I have suggested that it is not sectarian for public education to teach young people to think critically about their own reasoning, and that it is important to enable their informed reflection on whether their beliefs make sense to them. However, a non-sectarian education will avoid

strong rationalism, declining to take a stand on whether all our convictions must be justified by ordinary rational modes of inquiry.[49]

[49] A distant ancestor of this essay was written for the Autonomy and Education Conference in 2018 held at the Akademie für Politische Bildung in Tutzing, Germany. Special thanks are owed to the organizers Alexander Bagattini and Monika Betzler. I also benefited from conversations there with Matthew Clayton, Andrée-Anne Cormier, Anca Gheaus, Agnieszka Jaworska, and Amy Mullin. Finally, the paper has been greatly improved thanks to the advice of two anonymous reviewers for the journal and Laura Franklin-Hall.