

An Alternative Approach to Justifying Education for Autonomy

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The potential of public education to contribute to the robust functioning of liberal democratic societies is compromised when groups remove themselves from public schools and its curriculum. James Bigari argues that one of the reasons that conservative religious groups are retreating from public education is their objection to public education's attempt to educate students for autonomy. Some religious communities view such education as a threat to their existence as it exposes children to the "fact of plurality" and, in so doing, implies that there are multiple rational comprehensive worldviews. Such religious groups fear that an education that presents competing worldviews as viable choices for a fulfilling life may compromise the very salvation of those children. Bigari constructs an argument intended to appeal to these religious groups that ties education for autonomy to the survival of the religious community. In this response, I would like to suggest further directions for conversation that might encourage religious groups to accept a type of education for autonomy and maintain their presence in public education.

As a starting point, it is interesting to explore whether adding a historical perspective strengthens or weakens Bigari's argument. Many religious traditions, including those of the conservative Christian parents in *Mozert v. Hawkins*, can be traced back for thousands of years.¹ These traditions have encountered numerous epistemic crises as their ideas and ideologies faced both internal and external challenges. The responses to these epistemic crises have varied. From ancient to modern times, some groups have sought isolation as a solution as evidenced by the emergence of certain monastic traditions and of sects such as the Amish. At other times, the response to epistemic crises has been violence, as seen in the Crusades and the Inquisition. Yet another solution has been the splintering of the religious tradition into varying sects in an attempt to lay claim to the purest form of the tradition, demonstrated by the split of the church into the Catholic tradition associated with the West and the Orthodox tradition associated with the East, the division between Catholic and Protestant, and the fracturing of Protestantism into innumerable denominations.

Interestingly, however, one could point to dialectical discourse as one of the original responses to epistemological crises in the Christian tradition. Chapters 10 and 11 of the Acts of the Apostles record one of the first epistemological crises in the church. The crisis arose when Peter challenged the Jewish traditions that were part of the emerging Christian church by eating with non-Jews. Also, in Acts 15, an epistemological crisis arose over the degree to which non-Jewish people who chose to follow the new Christian traditions would need to engage with the ancient Jewish rites. How were these resolved? One could argue that the church leaders engaged in dialectical discourse as they considered various arguments and eventually reached what could be characterized as a position that satisfied the criteria of wide reflective equilibrium.

Although this interpretation of Acts would provide support for religious groups to address epistemological crises through dialectical discourse, it is clearly not enough. The interpretation itself is subject to critique, and, even if Christian groups could agree on such an interpretation, I think Bigari would want his argument to extend beyond Christian groups to a wider range of religious groups within society. So, what more does a historical perspective provide to arguments claiming that children in a liberal, democratic society should be educated for autonomy? First, it signals that many traditions are robust and adaptive as they endure across time. Epistemological crises are not new or unique, neither are they avoidable, particularly in a liberal, democratic society. This should be comforting to those who are part of longstanding religious traditions, and spur reflection on the question of how best to engage with epistemological crises rather than on how to avoid them. However, it also raises issues for Bigari's argument in that he must confront the historical survival of the tradition and make an argument for why, in spite of the varied responses to epistemic crises in history and the survival of the traditions even though dialectical discourse was not the favored response, that dialectical discourse always provides the best hope for survival in the face of epistemic crises or that, in this unique historical moment, engaging in dialectical discourse is the response that provides the most hope for the survival of the tradition.

The second thing that the historical perspective does is highlight the root of religious groups' objections to education for autonomy. If there is confidence in the robust nature of the religious tradition, the issue with education for autonomy is that *children* are the focus. The argument Bigari makes for education for autonomy assumes that the requisite skills and experiences required for engaging in dialectical discourse should be obtained, or are best obtained, through public education that includes education for autonomy. Bigari notes that parents see this as a risky option. His argument must expand so that it can address parents' arguments that exposure to different ideas at a young age and in the public school context is the best way to develop the skills needed to engage in the dialectical discourse essential to the survival of the tradition. Parents may argue that a foundation in one's own tradition is necessary for children (both for salvation and for effective engagement in dialectical discourse), and that this foundation must be laid *prior to* their exposure to other perspectives that might precipitate epistemological crises. In other words, how does one respond to the parents who say children should not be exposed to education for autonomy that might precipitate epistemological crises until students are sufficiently grounded in their own tradition? It is necessary for Bigari to address this issue if his argument to tie education for autonomy to community survival is to be successful.

To suggest a slightly different perspective on how to engage with this question, I draw on the work of Robert Talisse and the idea of folk epistemology.² This perspective considers how people understand the idea of truth in their everyday lives, and provides a foundation for justifying practices that lead to education for autonomy for children. This argument follows some of the contours of Bigari's arguments around epistemological crises and dialectical discourse, but moves that argument out of the

realm of paradigms and worldviews into the world of everyday encounters with the notion of truth, which apply to both children and adults alike.

Talisse argues that we share a folk epistemology concerning truth that has several tenets. The first is that when people believe a particular proposition, they hold that proposition to be true (*DMC*, 88). Second, to hold that a proposition is true is generally to hold that the best reasons support that proposition (*DMC*, 91). In other words, people's beliefs about what is true are supported by reasons and therefore those beliefs are reason-responsive. Third, because our beliefs about what is true are supported by reason and reason-responsive, our beliefs are assertable (*DMC*, 104). At this point, Talisse argues that if these propositions accurately describe how religious groups understand truth, that they commit themselves to the process of social exchange of reasons, which in this case can be equated to dialectical discourse. In turn, this social process of reason exchange means that people "at least implicitly adopt certain cognitive and dispositional norms related to one's epistemic character (*DMC*, 105)."

Talisse's argument supports an education for autonomy for children in two ways. First, it addresses some of the objections to education for autonomy related to the exposure of children to other worldviews. The parents in *Mozert* objected to the exposure of their students to readings that contradicted their worldview because it implied, as Rawls's "fact of pluralism" claims, that there are multiple reasonable worldviews.³ Talisse's perspective provides a new way of understanding what it means for worldviews to meet the criterion of reasonableness. Talisse argues that truth is reason-responsive in folk epistemology, but folk epistemology does not dictate what "reasons" must underpin a reasonable truth. In other words, being exposed to the ideas of others does not mean that those ideas must be accepted as truth, but only understood as being supported by a set of reasons by those who hold it to be true. Autonomy dictates that each person can determine what constitutes a reason to believe something is true, and mere exposure to other beliefs does not require their acceptance as reasonable or true within their own comprehensive understandings of truth. This perspective asks instead that people view others who disagree as reasonable, even if they do not accept as reasonable their truth claims when judged on their own criteria of reason. Second, it asks people to be good epistemic actors and to identify their reasons for accepting or rejecting a premise.

Talisse's argument also provides a foundation for asserting that children (and adults) of all traditions are engaged in the process of folk epistemology in their day-to-day lives. Children are constantly encountering new information and ideas that they evaluate in terms of folk epistemology for their veracity. In other words, engaging in dialectical discourse about matters that could impact salvation may appear threatening, but it is in fact a particular iteration of a process that occurs in all aspects of life. Our ability to do this well depends in part on developing the cognitive and dispositional skills needed to engage in these exchanges. Education for autonomy, properly done, focuses on helping students develop the cognitive and social skills necessary to being what one might call a good epistemic actor.

Perhaps we need to look for the opportunity to engage with groups who oppose education for autonomy in discussions about what it means to train children to be good epistemic actors. If children are engaged in a process of discerning truth, what cognitive and dispositional skills are necessary to aid them in this process? This could lead to fruitful conversation that would provide new insights into what education for autonomy might look like that is acceptable to all involved.

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1. Bob Mozert v. Hawkins County Bd. of Education, 827 F.2d 1058 (6th Cir. 1987).
 2. Robert Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). This work will be cited in the text as *DMC* for all subsequent references.
 3. Bob Mozert v. Hawkins County Bd. of Education.