

## Personal Autonomy for the Survival of Community in Pluralist Liberal Democracies

James Bigari

*University of British Columbia*

### INTRODUCTION

This essay will provide a new approach to the much-discussed tension between education for personal autonomy and the educational concerns of conservative Christian communities. One can find a wide variety of interpretations of “personal autonomy” in political, ethical, and educational literature. The conception of autonomy I wish to address here is autonomy as one’s ability to make inquiries into various conceptions of the good life, and choose to pursue that life which seems to speak most deeply to one’s fundamental needs and interests.<sup>1</sup> Some have critiqued this account of autonomy on the grounds that one cannot inhabit a “god’s eye view” outside of socio-historical contexts and traditions in order to “autonomously” choose a given conception of the good life.<sup>2</sup> However, there have been compelling responses to this objection.<sup>3</sup> The autonomous self is not one that is somehow divorced from social attachment and influence, rather it is “a cluster of substantive attachments and projects.”<sup>4</sup> Such a self is “revocably encumbered.”<sup>5</sup> All deliberation is bound by the particulars of language and socio-historical context. However, regardless of this boundedness, one can still rationally reflect and revise commitments in a piecemeal way by critiquing some commitments in the light of others. Rather than being an obstacle to autonomy, these “encumbrances” provide the context and tools with which to pursue knowledge.

Just as there are various conceptualizations of autonomy, so too are there various accounts of what is pedagogically necessary for its development. Common to many of these conceptions is the notion that education for personal autonomy includes neutrally exposing students to various worldviews and lifestyles, and developing the rational abilities necessary to judge the merits of these views in relation to one’s perceived needs and interests.<sup>6</sup>

I have elsewhere argued that many of the arguments offered by philosophers of education for autonomy as an educational goal rely on premises not shared by conservative Christian groups, and hence are not compelling to those groups.<sup>7</sup> Why is it important to offer arguments for autonomy promoting education that are acceptable to conservative Christians?<sup>8</sup> The case of *Mozert v. Hawkins* sheds some light on this concern.<sup>9</sup> In *Mozert*, a group of conservative Christian families sued the Hawkins County School Board over the Holt Reading Curriculum. The families claimed the reading series interfered with their right to the free exercise of religion by undermining the religious education they were seeking to provide their children. The courts ultimately ruled against the plaintiffs, denying the parents the right to exempt their children from the reading curriculum. After losing the case, many conservative Christian parents chose to homeschool or send their children to parochial schools as a way to avoid the curriculum. Regardless of one’s stance on

the final ruling, one important lesson should be taken from this case: in any liberal democratic state that allows for a wide breadth of school choice, the inability to give a compelling justification for controversial educational initiatives will likely result in dissenting parents removing their children from the public school system and into an educational context more conducive to their values and beliefs.

Recent work on group polarization gives us some reason to believe that the removal of conservative Christian students from public schools may have troubling social consequences. Group polarization is a phenomenon in which “members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members’ pre-deliberation tendencies.”<sup>10</sup> Group polarization is exacerbated by what Cass Sunstein calls “enclave deliberation,” “deliberation among like-minded people who talk or even live, much of the time, in isolated enclaves”;<sup>11</sup> Sunstein stresses that enclave deliberation and the resulting polarization can be a threat to social stability. Given this, I worry that home or private conservative Christian schooling could constitute just such a deliberative enclave, and hence might lead to polarization, radicalization, and social instability. For this reason it seems worthwhile to retain pluralist public schools. As the *Mozert* case demonstrates, if we seek to retain conservative Christian students in public schools, it is important that we give reasons for public educational goals — such as personal autonomy — that are compelling to conservative Christian parents.

#### THE CONFLICT

To understand and speak to the concerns of conservative objectors, it is important to understand not only the conceptual aspects of their position, but the emotional aspects as well. Again, the *Mozert* case offers some insight. The plaintiffs presented a number of complaints: that the reading curriculum taught “value relativism, disrespect toward parents, the theory of evolution, humanistic values, and the idea that any belief in the supernatural is adequate to attain salvation.”<sup>12</sup> At the heart of these complaints was an objection to the neutral exposure of their children to alternate religions and worldviews. The plaintiffs claimed that a neutral portrayal of alternative ways of life constituted an interference with the free exercise of their religion.<sup>13</sup> So, it is not exposure *per se* that the plaintiffs were averse to, but rather *neutral* exposure. They wanted to ensure that exposure to diverse worldviews took place in a context that made clear the righteousness of their own views.

In order to respond effectively to the concerns of conservative Christian groups, it is important to understand what motivates their strong desire to thoroughly inculcate their children into conservative Christian beliefs. Part of the answer to this question lies in the strong emphasis on the belief-based soteriology of Christianity that can be found in conservative Christian groups.<sup>14</sup> A belief-based soteriology emphasizes the role of proper belief in salvation, that is whether one attains final salvation depends to a large extent on holding the proper beliefs. The potential conflict with an education that aims to neutrally exposes children to alternative worldviews is clear: neutral exposure increases the likelihood that the student might decide that an alternate belief structure is more compelling. Such a conversion would be seen as disastrous as without proper belief one cannot be saved.

One contributing factor to the emotionality of conservative objections to education for personal autonomy is their belief in eternal damnation. If we do not come to proper belief in this brief life, we will be lost to eternal torment. To get some idea of the power that the concept of damnation holds, consider the graphic rhetoric employed in descriptions of hell:

It is as if a stream of fire were being poured down my throat, passing right through my body, while at the same time I am pressed between the fiery planks.... The pain is intolerable, and beyond description; my eyes seem to be starting out of their sockets, wrenched out, my nerves strained, my body wracked and doubled in two, incapable of stirring, and over and around the nauseating and offensive stench, infecting the air.<sup>15</sup>

This powerful rhetoric serves as a strong motivator to avoid any educational initiative that might alienate one's children from the very beliefs that are key to salvation. Any argument for the value of education for autonomy that seeks to be compelling to such groups must speak to this concern of salvation and eternal damnation, for what other value could possibly outweigh the eternal good of salvation, or the eternal horror of damnation?

There is a second primary source of tension between conservative presuppositions and education for autonomy; namely, education for personal autonomy presupposes a faith in the guiding power of reason. Conservative Christian groups do not necessarily share this faith. Commenting on epistemological pluralism, Michael Bacon argues that the Christian doctrine of original sin "impacts upon epistemology by determining how reason and evidence is viewed. If one believes in original sin, one believes that the mind is compromised from birth and is therefore incapable of rational appraisal of evidence and reasons."<sup>16</sup> For the conservative Christian, we cannot, through the mere use of our rational faculties, come to moral knowledge. Rather, moral truths must be revealed to us through divine intervention as passed on through tradition. Thus, it is tradition that is the reliable guide to how to live well, not our own personal musings about the good life and how to best pursue it. An education for autonomy is seen as misguided by conservatives insofar as the tools such an education claims are central to living the good life are broken, and as such the very mechanisms through which children will likely be led astray.

In short, those who wish to promote the development of autonomy as well as social stability must provide a justification for education for personal autonomy that is compelling to conservative Christian groups. Such a justification must speak to the overriding concern of such groups (that is salvation), and must not hold as a justificatory premise that one's rational abilities are the most reliable guide to identifying the right or the good.

#### NEW REFLECTIONS ON THE AUTONOMY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP

I suggest that an exploration of the relationship between education for personal autonomy and the survival of community may provide a new basis for garnering consensus on personal autonomy as an educational ideal.<sup>17</sup> If conservative Christian groups see tradition as the basis for salvation, then showing how education for personal autonomy contributes to the survival of tradition might provide a compelling reason for such groups to embrace autonomy as an educational ideal. While some

have observed the importance of community for the development of autonomy,<sup>18</sup> the literature is largely silent on autonomy's role in the survival of community. In what follows I will argue that, within pluralist liberal democratic societies, the personal autonomy of a community's members can actually facilitate the survival of that community.

The positive role of personal autonomy for the survival of community is first and foremost a function of what John Rawls called the "fact of pluralism." Rawls observed that liberal democratic politics necessarily leads to a wide variety of reasonable views on the big questions of ethics, politics, and religion.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the free and open inquiry promoted by liberal democratic politics facilitates discourse between various traditions. Such discourse is often competitive insofar as one tradition — for moral, political, economic or religious reasons — seeks to demonstrate how it is superior to another. This process of critique is, at heart, a process of making salient the other tradition's problematic aspects. If these problems are substantial, such a process of critique will likely bring about what Alasdair MacIntyre calls "epistemological crisis," or "a systematic breakdown of enquiry in the face of a certain set of intractable problems within a particular scheme of belief."<sup>20</sup> Commenting on this phenomenon, Daniel Vokey observes "[t]he inability to make progress within a particular conceptual scheme results in a loss of confidence in all or a significant part of its assumptions."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the epistemological crisis must be overcome for the tradition to flourish.

How does a tradition overcome an epistemological crisis? MacIntyre<sup>22</sup> and Vokey<sup>23</sup> argue that the way such crises are overcome is through dialectical discourse. Vokey describes dialectical discourse as consisting of two distinct tasks. The first is to demonstrate that one's conceptual framework has the resources to

- a) make progress on one or more theoretical and/or practical problems that representatives of the alternate position recognize as important, but cannot adequately address within the limitations of their conceptual framework; b) identify what is lacking in the alternative scheme that accounts for their failure; and c) offer some explanation for the alleged blind spots ... within the alternative scheme.<sup>24</sup>

The second task is to show that one's position shares all the advantages of the rival view and is not vulnerable to an alternate and similar critique from another position.

The above process is undertaken according to the criteria set out in the notion of wide reflective equilibrium. Vokey defines the search for wide reflective equilibrium as a process of investigation in which the goal is to "achieve the most satisfactory set of agreements in a given context of enquiry and practice."<sup>25</sup> The term satisfactory here implies that the elements of a given framework

- a) are internally consistent and mutually supporting, b) contribute to and are consistent with the world view and way of life of the larger socio-historical context in which they are embedded, c) they assist in the accomplishment of the aims and objectives of the members of that community, and d) they are defensible in dialectical encounters with competing paradigms of inquiry.<sup>26</sup>

In short, wide reflective equilibrium is established when the greatest degree of coherence, consistency, and effectiveness has been achieved in a given conceptual framework.

MacIntyre<sup>27</sup> and Vokey<sup>28</sup> cite two conditions of dialectical discourse that are particularly relevant for the purposes of this essay. First, one needs to be able to empathically engage with the rival tradition, so as to understand and critique that tradition on its own terms.<sup>29</sup> Such engagement is only possible if one has a deep and sophisticated understanding of the rival tradition. Secondly, one needs robust reasoning abilities to identify and draw out the promises and problems of both one's own tradition, as well as the rival tradition. These two preconditions point to a fundamental requirement of dialectical discourse; namely, the ability to engage in robust inquiry about one's own, as well as other, philosophical and religious traditions, as well as the ability to engage one's rational capacities toward the end of elucidating a given belief system's state of wide reflective equilibrium.

I submit that an education for the above two preconditions of dialectical discourse is indistinguishable from an education for personal autonomy. Recall, two core aspects of education for personal autonomy is the neutral exposure of students to various worldviews, as well as developing the rational abilities necessary for inquiry and debate about those worldviews. Given this, the first way such an education facilitates one's ability to engage in dialectical debate is in its offering of substantial knowledge of the various traditions that make up a pluralist society. It is the neutrality of this project that is important here. Recall, dialectical discourse demands that one engage adherents *on their own terms* to demonstrate how their position is in some way deficient in coherence, consistency, or effectiveness. It is an education that does not couch its treatment of a given tradition in terms of a critique from an alternate tradition that best enables one to encounter the other tradition on its own terms. Secondly, debate is fundamentally about an exchange of reasons. As such, education for autonomy's emphasis on developing reasoning abilities facilitates one's ability to engage skillfully in debate with rival traditions.

If the above observations are correct, then it seems that education for personal autonomy plays an important role in the survival of one's tradition in pluralist liberal democratic contexts. The argument can be summed up in the following way:

1. Liberal democratic politics inevitably leads to pluralism.
2. In turn, pluralist liberal democratic societies facilitate inter-traditional debate.
3. Such debate leads to an increase in epistemological crises as competing interpretations of reality make salient substantially problematic aspects of one's tradition.
4. If the tradition is to survive, such crises must be overcome by finding wide reflective equilibrium through a process of dialectical discourse.
5. Finding wide reflective equilibrium through dialectical discourse requires the knowledge of other traditions on their own terms, as well as the rational abilities necessary to engage in debate.
6. It is education for personal autonomy that develops this knowledge and ability.

7. Therefore, education for personal autonomy facilitates one's ability to defend one's tradition in pluralist liberal democratic societies.

This argument aims at being compelling to conservative Christians by appealing to their fundamental concerns: the survival of their tradition in pluralist liberal democratic contexts and, ultimately, salvation. Furthermore, this argument does not hold any rationalist presuppositions about reason as a reliable route to truth. Rather, all it requires is that conservative Christians acknowledge that knowledge of other traditions and possession of the reasoning abilities necessary to engage in dialectical discourse facilitate one's ability to defend one's tradition in public debate. The argument here is that they will embrace an education for autonomy not because it enables one to make inquiries more effectively into the nature of the good life, but because it will give their children the means to engage more effectively in intertraditional debate for the sake ensuring the survival of their tradition over time.

#### POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS

The above argument is rather protracted and draws upon a number of theoretical and empirical assumptions, all of which can be challenged. I put forward this argument merely as an initial basis for a new discussion on the relationship between personal autonomy and community, one that acknowledges the potentially positive relation between education for autonomy and the survival of community. However, I want to consider briefly two issues that have been drawn to my attention.<sup>30</sup> First, one could question the validity of MacIntyre's account of how traditions overcome epistemological crises and survive over time. MacIntyre derives this account from his critique of the work of Thomas Kuhn, his historical account of western ethics, and his attempt to refute ethical relativism. One could argue that such historical and philosophical methods are insufficient grounds upon which to make such a sociological claim. While I believe that MacIntyre's work offers compelling reasons to believe such a processes does indeed occur, the survival of a tradition over time is surely enmeshed in a host of other factors (for example emotional, political, economic, and so on), and his account could gain a great deal of credibility from further sociological support.

Secondly, one could argue that it is the continuation of beliefs that sustain a community, not the community that sustains the beliefs. In other words, beliefs are primary. I imagine the worry here is that if beliefs are primary, then protecting those beliefs will trump all other concerns, even the continuation of the tradition in which those beliefs are couched. I do not believe it is possible to say that either beliefs or the tradition in which they are couched are primary. Without the tradition to sustain and pass on core beliefs, the beliefs will quickly disappear, and without the beliefs, a tradition will merely be a series of empty gestures, or disappear altogether. In this sense, a tradition and its beliefs are interdependent, one is not primary and the other secondary. If this is so, then ensuring that members of the tradition have the ability to defend the tradition is tantamount to defending the beliefs that the tradition embodies.

#### PROMISES AND PERILS

The argument I have presented here is double-edged. First, if it can foster greater consensus on the kind of education we as a society wish to provide our children, it

will help combat isolationist tendencies within K-12 education, which may lead to polarization and social instability. However, recall that the initial social conditions that make necessary this risky educational project are those conditions secured by liberal democratic politics. If a conservative Christian group were to accept my argument about the interrelation between education for autonomy and the survival of community in pluralist liberal democracies, but continue to hold that such an educational project is too risky, then there would be only two options left for such a group. One is to redouble their efforts toward isolationism so as to avoid epistemological crises being made salient in the consciousness of community members. However, this may be problematic for such groups for two reasons. First, as information technology becomes more widespread, such isolationism is going to become evermore difficult. Secondly, if isolationism tends to result in radicalization, than any group that believes the current formulation of their tradition to be the correct one should be wary of isolationist agendas; isolationism will likely lead to changes within the tradition toward more radical stances that do not necessarily fit within the tradition as it currently stands. Recognition of these two problems on the part of conservative groups might lead to a troubling line of reasoning: if liberal democratic politics creates conditions in which a highly risky educational project is needed to sustain one's tradition, and isolationism is not a feasible option, than the only remaining option seems to be some form of revolt against liberal democratic politics. It is here where we can see the hegemonic nature of liberal democratic politics, and how this hegemonic influence can sow the seeds of radicalism. In short, the conditions that liberal democratic politics secure end up demanding education for personal autonomy if one wishes one's tradition to survive. Thus, regardless of whether or not a government imposes an education for personal autonomy on the population through a given educational policy, the very structure of liberal democratic politics and the nature of the processes that contribute to the survival of a tradition naturally manifest the demand for education for autonomy. If such an education is seen as striking at the very foundation of a given tradition, then that tradition will likely not survive in liberal democratic contexts. Because of this, it is possible that members of that tradition will see their only option as open revolt against liberal democratic politics.

It is my hope that this essay will provoke new discussions on the potential role of education for personal autonomy in the survival of tradition; a discussion that acknowledges the strong hegemonic forces at play in liberal democratic politics, and attempts to construct justifications for educational ideals that are compelling to conservative Christian groups.

---

1. For example, Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London: Routledge, 2006); John White, *The Aims of Education Restated* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1982); and Christopher Winch, "Strong Autonomy and Education," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 27–41.

2. For example, Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

3. For example, Eamonn Callan, "Autonomy and Alienation," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 28, no. 1 (1994): 35–53; and John White, "Five Critical Stances Toward Liberal Philosophy of Education in Britain," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 1 (2003): 147–84.

4. Callan, "Autonomy and Alienation," 37.

5. *Ibid.*, 39.
6. For example, Brighouse, *On Education*; and Winch, “Strong Autonomy and Education.”
7. James Bigari, “Robert Talisse’s ‘Social Epistemic Liberalism’: An Inclusive Justification for the Liberal Civic Virtues as Educational Ideals” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Victoria, BC, Canada, June, 2013).
8. The labels “conservative,” “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” or “religious right” have been used to denote a wide variety of different social, economic, and religious positions (see the work of Robert Woodberry and Christian Smith for discussions of these complexities). This diversity problematizes any straightforward discussion of “conservative” Christianity. I will not delve into these debates here. Rather, I draw upon the term “conservative” heuristically in order to denote those Christian groups that stress what they see as the error of the liberal emphasis on personal autonomy, and prefer rather to focus on the authority of tradition.
9. *Bob Mozert v. Hawkins County Bd. of Education*, 827 F. 2d 1058 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987).
10. Cass Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 175–95.
11. Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” 177.
12. Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 157–58.
13. Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*.
14. David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).
15. Sister Josefa Menendez, *The Way of Divine Love* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books & Publishers, Inc., 1959), 147.
16. Michael Bacon, “The Politics of Truth: A Critique of Peircean Deliberative Democracy,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 9 (2010): 1083.
17. While there exists some debate about the nature of communities and traditions, I will here use the terms “community” and “tradition” interchangeably to refer to a group that shares “a set of interrelated beliefs, attitudes, interests, norms, priorities, and practices.” Daniel Vokey, “Reasons of the Heart: East–West Dialogue and the Search for Moral Truth,” University and Diversity Conference, n.d., <http://midline.net/nfp/PDFs/Vokey.pdf>.
18. For example, Aharon Aviram, “Autonomy and Commitment: Compatible Ideals,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 61–73; and Valery I. Chirkov, “Dialectical Relationships Among Human Autonomy, the Brain, and Culture,” in *Human Autonomy in Cross-Cultural Context: Perspectives on the Psychology of Agency, Freedom, and Well-Being*, ed. Valery I. Chirkov, Richard M. Ryan, and Kennon M. Sheldon (New York: Springer, 2011), 65–91.
19. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
20. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 120.
21. Daniel Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 53.
22. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
23. Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World*; and Daniel Vokey, “‘Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better’: Dialectical Argument in Philosophy of Education,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 3, no. 1 (2009): 339–55.
24. Vokey, “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better,” 341.
25. Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World*, 92.
26. Vokey, “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better,” 92–93.
27. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; and MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*.
28. See Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World*; and Vokey, “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better.”

29. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

30. I wish to thank the PES reviewers for their helpful comments on these issues.