

## **Autonomy as a Liberal Justification: Three Objections**

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### **Introduction**

In the public schools of culturally diverse, liberal democratic nations such as Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, there is a tension engendered by tenets of the liberal ideal. The essential liberal commitments to tolerance and pluralism can, in a diverse public school system, run up against opposing *illiberal* commitments held by the parents of schoolchildren in the democratic state. The liberal commitments encourage not only a recognition of, say, racial, religious, cultural, and sexual diversity, but also implicitly or explicitly support the rights of individuals—including students—to choose from these various ways of life and their associated commitments. However, because there are parents for whom such recognition and endorsement might undermine or threaten religious or cultural ideals, the public school, as an arm of the liberal state, finds itself in a difficult position. For, on one hand the liberal state is committed to the principle of tolerance and the acceptance of cultural pluralism, but on the other hand, among this plurality could be a group whose beliefs, if tolerated or accommodated in the public school, would undermine the instillation of the essential liberal ideals of which we speak. This conflict has been noted by several philosophers of education (Mendus, 1995; Burtonwood, 2000) and the tension is articulated plainly in Dwight Boyd's "Dominance Concealed through Diversity: Implications of Inadequate Perspectives on Cultural Pluralism." Summarizing what he calls the "dilemma of diversity," Boyd writes that:

[I]f one affirms both sides, one is in the position of *both* morally prescribing that individuals ought to treat each other in certain ways according to preferred moral principles or ideals *and* denying, through the acceptance of the fact of reasonable moral pluralism, that there is a moral point of view common to all cultures that would make this prescription meaningful and binding for anyone, regardless of where they are located within the diversity. (1996, p. 616)

Boyd characterises the dilemma as a general conflict within pluralist liberal societies but he also highlights its implications for public education insofar as education is part of the “public domain.” If, as Boyd claims, there is no “prescriptive leverage that could apply across the diversity,” (1996, p. 616) how does the liberal educator respond to school-home conflicts? How for example, should the educator respond to the mother who argues that the presence of books depicting same-sex families in the class or school library interferes with her right to morally educate her child? Or, the father who demands that his 10 year-old daughter be excluded from a unit on ‘Women in Science’ on the grounds that the content interferes with the role of women as decreed by his religious and cultural beliefs?

In this paper, I will argue that philosophers of education (particularly those writing from a liberal perspective) chiefly appeal to the principle of autonomy as a way of addressing the tensions outlined above. Thus, in section 2, I will cite several educationalists who address these conflicts.<sup>1</sup> I will also note their similar conclusions that the restriction on *illiberal* accommodations in the public educational sphere is justified on the grounds that such accommodations would interfere with the cultivation of autonomy. In section 3 I will go on to try to problematize the use of autonomy as a justification by presenting three objections to the ideal. The first objection to autonomy will be based on its inherent assumptions of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual. The second will highlight the assumptions of impartiality and universality vis-à-vis the ideal itself. Finally, the last objection, which will build on the assumptions made by the first two, will be to criticise the assumption of freedom embedded in the ideal of autonomy and to note some of its consequences. Finally, in section 4, I will conclude the paper by offering tentative reactions to the objections. However, given their admittedly partial treatment, these reactions might best be considered next steps for further inquiry.

### **The Appeal to Autonomy**

Since autonomy is a contested notion (Bridges, 1997), I want to explain briefly the features of the concept that are most salient for this

paper and that I think are highlighted by the authors cited in this section. To do this, I will borrow from Meira Levinson's treatment of the ideal in her book, *The Demands of Liberal Education*. She writes that autonomy can be understood as, "the capacity to form a conception of the good, to evaluate one's values and ends with the genuine possibility of revising them should they be found wanting, and then to realise one's revised ends" (1999, p. 15).<sup>2</sup> It is this genuine capacity to reflect upon and make choices about the good, or desired forms of life, that I will emphasise throughout this paper. As will also become clear, what makes this reflection genuine (according to the liberal viewpoints that I will present) is the degree to which one is exposed to, and can develop a tolerance of, various ways of life. There are, of course, a number of ways in which the connections between autonomy, tolerance, and pluralism are made. In this section, I want to focus not so much on the subtle distinctions between the ways these connections are made by the various authors that follow, but rather on their common appeals to autonomy as a way of addressing the liberal/illiberal tensions outlined in the introduction to this paper.<sup>3</sup>

Many authors who defend the principle of autonomy argue that the preservation of this ideal in the school system serves to safeguard against indoctrination and parental control.<sup>4</sup> And, further, that the ability to make autonomous decisions is construed as an essential quality for citizens in the democratic state. On this view, the cultivation of autonomy is achieved through the student's exposure to *various* forms of the good life—an exposure that the illiberal parent wishes to avoid. Eamon Callan elaborates on this point in his article, "Indoctrination and Parental Rights":

[T]he parental right to self-determination cannot include any right to indoctrinate one's children. And if liberalism entails respect for the individual as a self-determining agent, then it cannot be strictly neutral with regard to conceptions of the good because some conceptions involve treating one's children in a way which will undermine their capacity for self-determination. ... The right not to be indoctrinated is one of what Joel Feinberg has aptly called the, 'anticipatory autonomy rights.' (2001, p. 129)

Here, then, Callan appeals to the linked rights of self-determination and "anticipatory" autonomy in order to stave off exclusive parental control over education. Although Callan does not make the liberal/illiberal opposition explicit here, his commitment to student exposure to diverse world-views rather than one, exclusive view, suggests just such an opposition. This is made clear in Neil Burtonwood's article, "Must Liberal Support for Separate Schools be Subject to a Condition of Autonomy?" (2001). Burtonwood also cites Callan, this time making the connection

between autonomy and the exposure to multiple views of the good life more explicit. Although, as Burtonwood notes, Callan responds to some of the criticisms of autonomy that we will see in section 3 of this paper, he ultimately defends the preservation of autonomy conditions by claiming (in Burtonwood's words) that, "there must be an awareness of alternatives and the capability to reflect on those alternatives" (2000, p. 275).

David Blacker also addresses the subject suggested by Burtonwood's title ("Must Liberal Support for Separate Schools be Subject to a Condition of Autonomy?") in his paper, "Fanaticism and the Democratic State." He argues against the rights of those citizens he defines as fanatical to have sole control over the education of their children. Blacker argues for restrictions not only on the ideological content of the public school, but indeed, on the ideological content of any school *within the public*, or state, by appealing to the necessary conditions for the maintenance of autonomy. In Blacker's view, the state rests on a citizenry possessed of what he terms, "critical judgement." Borrowing from Amy Gutmann, he writes that this involves the capacity to "deliberate rationally among competing conceptions of the good life" (1998, p. 254).<sup>5</sup> Such a capacity is predicated upon tolerance, an appreciation of pluralism, and a certain humility regarding one's own beliefs. Moreover, he claims, members of a democracy have the right to expect that nascent citizens will be provided with an education that endows them with these skills, or virtues (1998, p. 266).<sup>6</sup> The fanatical educator, insofar as she restricts student exposure to contradictory views bars students from developing such virtues.

On this view, the liberal educator can justifiably restrict some forms of life in order to preserve democracy. As Blacker says of the Christian fundamentalists in the *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education* case: "I would agree... that the parents' belief system is indeed threatened by a curriculum that fosters critical rationality, tolerance, and so forth. But, this in itself does not require that their claims be accommodated" (1998, p. 257). In a democracy, then, parents "should be able to teach their children whatever they want, but ...they do not have the absolute right concurrently to shield them from all other views" (1998, p. 244). And, according to Blacker, it is the legitimate mandate of *all* schools in the liberal democratic state to facilitate exposure to these other views.

Like Callan, Blacker cites Joel Feinberg's notion of "anticipatory autonomy rights" as the principle that justifies the state's restriction of a solely illiberal school ideology, even if this requires the use of the coercive power of the state. Interestingly, though, Blacker's defense of this position lies not so much on an appreciation of the child's best interests and rights to self-determination, but rather on the role that critical, autonomous citizens play in the preservation of the democratic state.

Of course, not all liberal philosophers of education justify the development of autonomy by linking it to democratic citizenship. Some authors focus more on the connection between autonomy and intrinsic self-fulfillment. Susan Mendus, for example, in her article, "Toleration and Recognition: Education in a Multicultural Society," (Mendus, 1995) cites the common link made between recognition and inclusion of different forms of life in the classroom, and the development of self-understanding for its own sake. In this article, Mendus focuses on the arguments for expanding the canon as a means of recognising these varied forms of life. This curricular move is then justified insofar as it enables *all* students to understand themselves. She then unpacks self-understanding by connecting it to autonomy:

On one, very familiar interpretation of the claim, education enables us to understand ourselves by encouraging and facilitating the development of individual autonomy. We come to understand ourselves by recognising what we as individuals want and value, as distinct from what those around us (our parents, our friends, our colleagues) want and value ... On this view, education can enable students to understand themselves by facilitating the development of autonomy and the critical assessment of social and cultural circumstances. (Mendus, 1995, p. 193-94)

Mendus makes a connection between the exposure to a diverse and varied canon and the development of autonomy. Here, then, the ability to make critical, informed decisions about beliefs, "wants" and "values," is tied to the fundamental goal of self-understanding and fulfillment.

Finally, Romulo F. Magsino seems to bridge (somewhat) the links that autonomy has to citizenship and fulfillment in his article, "Multiculturalism in Canadian Society: A Re-evaluation" (Magsino, 2001). Building on the views of R.S. Peters' he notes that, "the possession of wide-ranging perspectives from the various branches of knowledge that enable individuals to understand life...and accordingly, to make intelligent, autonomous decisions" should be the aim of "curricular content and school activities" (2001, p. 377). Through such an education, Magsino claims that children from diverse ethnic backgrounds will be able to participate fully in the social and political life of their country, and, rather than accept low-paying, menial jobs will be able to take up positions of leadership. A liberal education emphasising diverse perspectives and the cultivation of autonomy is thus seen as emancipatory. The exposure to varied goods and understandings, and the consequent development of autonomy leads not only to informed civic engagement, but also to the pursuit of high-status, rewarding careers.<sup>7</sup>

The philosophical positions above are meant to illustrate three points. First, the authors establish a causal link between, on one hand,

the exposure to (and tolerance of) diverse and varied ways of life, and, on the other, the development of autonomy. Second, although there may be subtle differences among the ways these authors construe the ultimate value of autonomy (e.g. as a precondition of democratic citizenship or as a goal in itself) their aim is common: to provide and preserve the conditions that will nurture the development of this essential liberal ideal. Finally third, points 1 and 2 work together to act as a justification for the liberal educator's refusal to meet the ideological demands of the illiberal parent.<sup>8</sup>

### **Objections to Autonomy: Complicating the Justification**

In this section I will explore objections that, I think, raise problems with the concept of autonomy and thereby call into question its use as a means to resolve the tensions that arise out of the liberal/illiberal opposition. Although I will try to relate how the objections complicate the liberal justification specifically, I will be focusing more on how they disrupt the notion of autonomy itself. Thus, if one feels the force of these objections, the autonomous ideal is not only called into question as justification for rejecting illiberal parent demands, but its role as a general aim of education becomes suspect.

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, I will criticise autonomy by highlighting three assumptions that I see as implicit in the ideal: the assumption of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual; the assumption of impartiality and universality vis-à-vis the ideal itself; and finally, the assumption of individual freedom upon which the ideal rests. Although these three assumptions will be treated separately, I do not mean to suggest that there is no conceptual overlap among them; indeed, I think quite the opposite is true. However, for the ease of discussion, I will try to discuss each in turn.

#### **The Assumption of Neutrality vis-à-vis the Individual**

The first criticism of autonomy concerns the way that the autonomous individual is conceived of in the liberal framework. Because, as we have seen above, the ideal of the autonomous individual emphasises the importance of gaining critical distance on the "wants" and "values" of parents, community members, and others, some have argued that it neglects the necessary role that social and community embeddedness plays in cultivating meaningful visions of the good.

This specific critique is often associated with those in the communitarian camp. Although some liberals have responded to these criticisms, (Bell, 1993; Kymlicka, 1991) the objections persist, and thus I will briefly

sketch the oppositions and their implications. According to Daniel Bell, the criticism goes something like this:

[L]iberalism rests on an overly individualistic conception of the self. Liberal justice, above all, is intended for rational individuals who freely choose their own way of life, on the assumption that we have a 'higher-order interest' in choosing our central projects and life plans, regardless of what it is that is chosen. (Bell, 1993, p. 4)

In a later section of his text, Bell characterises this 'free choosing' as "autonomous deliberation" (1993, p. 9). The liberal view is problematic, Bell states, because it does not capture "our actual self-understandings." He then cites Michael Sandel's criticism, in which he states an alternate view of the self:

We ordinarily think of ourselves, Michael Sandel says, 'as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons or daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic,' social attachments that more often than not are involuntarily picked up during the course of our upbringing, rational choice having played no role whatsoever. (Bell, 1993, p. 4)

There are two implications of this criticism that I would like to highlight. First, although it is not stated explicitly here, the assumption that the autonomous individual can freely choose goals, commitments, wants, and values *outside* of relations to fundamental social attachments is ontologically problematic. By this I mean that the portrayal of an individual, standing in some neutral, impartial context and "free" to choose the goods and projects that she deems worthy, seems suspect. For, in order to make what can legitimately be called *choices*, the individual must be able to discriminate meaningfully among and between alternatives and, the only way that this discrimination can have any force or legitimacy is if it is *informed by* beliefs about values, desires, and visions of the good. These values, desires, and visions of the good, in turn, need to come from *somewhere* and indeed, it seems the only place they could come from is through the experiences of having been connected to, and embedded within, the very social attachments that the autonomous individual is supposed to free herself *from*. Charles Taylor discusses this point in, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. In a discussion of how we ought to fully answer the question, 'Who am I?' he writes:

[T]his can't necessarily be answered by giving name and genealogy. What does answer this question for us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us...My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I

can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose (Taylor, 1989, p. 27).

As Taylor also explains, these frames, or horizons, (although not completely inflexible and deterministic) are inherited; they do not spring from the individual alone. In this way, then, one's identity is inextricably tied to commitments that are fostered by social and community connections. To imagine an 'autonomous individual'—indeed *any individual*—outside of such commitments is ontologically flawed.

The second point that I want to highlight can be found directly within the quotation from Daniel Bell, above. Recall his characterisation of the liberal self<sup>9</sup> as having “a ‘higher-order interest’ in choosing ... central projects and life plans, regardless of what it is that is chosen.” By emphasising the capacity to *choose*, and not emphasising the social and cultural conditions that make the choices themselves meaningful (or ethical, or worthy, and so on), the ideal itself is in danger of becoming somewhat empty. Burtonwood notes that Y. Tamir lodges this very complaint against the ideal of autonomy. He summarises Tamir's position as follows:

She describes what she refers to as the 'contextual individual' who makes choices, but only within a cultural context. Against liberals ... who privilege autonomy, Tamir would argue that what they respect is the abstract capacity to choose, rather than the actual choices that individuals make. (Burtonwood, 2000, p. 275)

The communitarian criticisms above suggest two problems with the way that the autonomous individual is conceived in the liberal framework. First, by neglecting the role that social, cultural, political and historical factors play as determinants of identity, the autonomous ideal runs into ontological problems. Second, insofar as the autonomous individual is to make “choices” that are divorced from meaningful contexts that render the choices *themselves* important, the goal of autonomy lacks content, and thus loses some of its substantive and rhetorical appeal.

Although actually characterising the conception of the individual in a progressivist picture of education and not the autonomous ideal, John P. Portelli sums up these two problems in his article, “Democracy in Education: Beyond the Conservative or Progressivist Stances.” That is, the autonomous ideal “ultimately assumes a neutral context is both *possible* and *desirable*” (Portelli, 2001, p. 287). If we feel the force of this first objection (and its consequences) then, it seems, this particular conception of the autonomous ideal lacks the substance that we require of it to serve, first, as an aim of education, and second, as a justification for rejecting the demands made by illiberal parent communities.



### The Assumption of Universality

Even if the assumption of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual can be overcome, there are other objections to be offered against the ideal of autonomy. In this section, I will try to show how, embedded within the ideal of autonomy (particularly insofar as it tries to justify a restriction of illiberal parent demands), is an assumed impartiality and universality.

To see this, consider the following encounter between an illiberal parent and a school principal of a liberal democratic public school. This conversation will build on one of the questions asked in the introduction of this paper, but now, after exploring the liberal position further, I will show how autonomy functions in a justificatory role.

A parent enters the principal's office at her daughter's elementary school demanding to know why her daughter is being read to from a book that depicts homosexuality as "okay." The principal responds that, in a unit on families, this book helps to show students that there are many different kinds of loving families in Canada. The parent replies that by doing this the school is undermining the beliefs that she, as the parent, is trying to teach at home; namely that certain kinds of lifestyles are sinful and certainly *not* okay. The parent might continue that, as a citizen of Canada, she should certainly be able to send her child to public school without the fear that the school will compromise her ethical, religious, and cultural beliefs. If the principal has read her liberal democratic philosophers of education, she might then reply that, although she respects the right of the parent to raise her child in the manner she wishes, the school has a political and ethical responsibility to foster the conditions of *autonomy* in its students. And, further, to do so involves exposing students to various values, goods, and ways of life. If the school were to respond to demands such as this parent's, they would be cutting off students' "anticipatory autonomy rights." Thus, the principal would claim, she must reject any requests the parent might make to somehow shield her child from this book and the messages contained therein.

Now, my question is this: what *extra* justificatory role is played here by the appeal to autonomy? How does the deployment of "autonomy" make this any different from disagreeing with the parent's position regarding same-sex families right from the start by saying, "Well, you think the pursuit of same-sex relationships is wrong (or illegitimate, or sinful, and so on) and we don't. Thus, we will not respect your demands to shield your daughter from *our* point of view." I would suggest that what is going on in this conversation is the assumption that, if there exists what I will call a "first-level value"<sup>10</sup> disagreement between the parent and the school (i.e., the parent and the school disagree on the depiction of

homosexuality as a legitimate form of life) then an appeal to a “second-level value” can somehow resolve the issue. Here, that second-level value is autonomy. The presumption that an appeal to this second-level or “meta” value will resolve the dispute seems also to presume that at this higher level, either we can reach agreement or that the parent’s objections and disagreements are somehow less legitimate. But why would this be assumed? What is it about autonomy that we expect will reasonably satisfy, (or at least quiet) this parent?

As stated in the first part of this section, I think that what is going on here is that the liberal educator is deploying autonomy as an impartial, or universal good. That is, there is an assumption that, even if we disagree at the first-level we *ought* to agree at this second level, and, even if we don’t, the importance of autonomy is such that it may legitimately trump or push-out other values that interfere with its development.

This is a complicated point, because some who defend autonomy as a justification will also note that it is in fact *not* neutral (e.g. Blacker, 1998.) However, what I am trying to highlight here is that in order for the ideal to trump illiberal parent demands in the ways I have been discussing, it needs to legitimate the role it plays as a justification. While not necessarily stating it outright, I would argue that this legitimitative force rests on the implicit assumption of impartiality and universality.

As many are quick to point out, though, the ideal of autonomy is not universal; quite the contrary, it is a local, historically situated ideal. This point is succinctly put by Akilu Sani Indabawa in, “Pupil’s Autonomy, Cultural Hegemony and Education for Democracy in an African Society.” In this article he writes that:

Personal autonomy is a particular characteristic of a particular form of society, i.e. of a liberal democratic society and more specifically of a western model of such a society. Talk about autonomy as an aim of education has essentially rested on the demands of a liberal-democratic order. Where other forms of society different from, or even contradictory to, liberal democracy exist, the demand for autonomy as a goal of any educational encounter is less obvious, perhaps out of the question. (Indabawa, 1997)

As this quotation suggests, there are cultures for whom the liberal goal of autonomy is inimical to their own aims, ideals, and values. As Indabawa states, autonomy may, “serve as a negation of some cultural frameworks” (Indabawa, 1997, p. 194). Far from functioning as a shared, universal ideal that can be appealed to in order to resolve differences, autonomy, (according to Indabawa, for example) is firmly entrenched in a very particular way of life, one that is at odds with others’ visions of the good.

However, whether the objection to autonomy as an educational aim is contested due to economic, cultural, or religious concerns, the point is that its use as a justification for pushing out or rejecting illiberal parent requests from the public school is becoming increasingly problematic. As Burtonwood states, by insisting on the preservation of autonomy conditions, “[p]eople who want to raise their children in a particular way are prevented from doing so, and we cannot pretend that they can” (Burtonwood, 2000). Further, though, we also cannot pretend that the appeal to autonomy can act as a justification for interfering with these preferred (even if illiberal) parent desires. For, even though some liberals might admit that the ideal of autonomy rests within a specific, liberal, ideological framework, by not providing some *further defense* of autonomy itself, the ideal seems to lack the philosophical and ethical grounding that would provide it with legitimate rhetorical force. By not providing this grounding, yet still expecting an appeal to autonomy to resolve liberal/illiberal disputes, I am claiming that the ideal rests on implicit assumptions of impartiality and universality.

These implicit assumptions serve to conceal the ideological forces at play in the commitment to autonomy as an educational aim. As James D. Marshall claims, the “major thrust in education has been to divest the concept [of autonomy] of its political overtones and to represent it essentially as an ethical notion. This has led to a masking of the political as if no politics or power is intruding into the ‘construction’ of the autonomous individual” (Marshall, 1995, p. 367). Indeed, as Thomas Hill tells us, “Some suggest that, far from being the source and highest development of morality, autonomy may be the special ideal of the dominant group and in fact an ideal that serves to reinforce old patterns of oppression” (Hill, 1987, p. 130).

In my discussion of the next and final objection to autonomy, I will discuss one way that these patterns of oppression might continue to be reinforced.

### **The Assumption of Freedom**

In this last section I will try to highlight the way that the assumption of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual *and* the assumption of universality work together to create a third assumption: that of individual freedom.

First, as we have seen, an assumption of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual fosters the belief that in the pursuit of forging an autonomous identity, one can choose (most or all) religious, social, and cultural commitments. In this sense, then, one can possibly be “freed” from any ideological and ethical beliefs that interfere with a robust pursuit of the

autonomous ideal.<sup>11</sup> Second, if the autonomous ideal itself is presented (implicitly, at least) as neutral then the actual *process* of freeing oneself from certain commitments and autonomously choosing others seems to exist outside of any particular political, ideological and ethical frameworks; put another way, one need not see this as just exchanging one set of ideologically entrenched commitments for another set of ideologically entrenched (liberal) commitments. As Marshall notes above, divested of this political content, one can then believe that their identity as an autonomous individual, and the choices they subsequently make about the good life, lie outside of power, politics, and hegemonic construction, and are thus “free.”

Critics of the autonomous ideal point out that this illusion of freedom is just that—an illusion. Marshall’s interpretation of Foucault illustrates this. He writes:

From the very outset the conception [of autonomy] involves falsehoods. The particular falsehood to which Foucault objects most is that such a conception implies the *possibility of freedom*. For Foucault it doesn’t because, stripped of its political connotations, it masks the fact that the constitution of such persons is a major political act. Consequently while we believe ourselves to be free, to be acting autonomously, in general we are not. Instead we have become *governed*. ... we are not the free autonomous individuals and choosers of individual projects that the liberal framework, and liberal education would make us out to be. (Marshall, 1995, p. 372, my emphasis)

What I would like to look at is one way that a belief in the autonomous individual *as free* might serve to reinforce patterns of oppression. One way that depicting autonomous individuals as free might reinforce these patterns is by making it possible to view the individual as outside of social, cultural, and political groups. If, that is, we focus on an ideal that lays the conceptual groundwork for conceiving of the individual as autonomously (and freely) choosing goods, values, and particular ways of life, it seems possible that this same individual can then be held *ultimately responsible* for all of her “autonomous” choices. Although I hesitate to suggest a view on which individual responsibility is dispensed with altogether, what I am wondering is whether the picture of the autonomous individual as free may too easily lead to a dismissal of the essential role played by one’s membership in particular social groups as a vital determinant of the kinds of goods, values, and particular ways of life one eventually “chooses,” or becomes aligned with.<sup>12</sup>

One way to understand how overlooking one’s identity as a member of one or more social groups could reinforce old patterns of oppression, is to see how the assumption of freedom (and the consequent perception

of individual responsibility) can be linked to the way the individual is conceived of in a meritocratic ideology. George Sefa Dei and Leeno Karumanchery discuss the problems with meritocracy in, "School Reforms in Ontario: The 'Marketization of Education' and the Resulting Silence on Equity." They write that:

Although appearing consistent with liberal democratic values, the deeply ingrained ideology of *meritocracy* belies the truth of oppression and social advantage. Within this conceptual frame, skin colour is seen as irrelevant in determining status, and those who experience racism, and suffer the material or nonmaterial consequences of those encounters, are somehow responsible for their state of being. (Sefa Dei & Karumanchery, 2001, p. 189)

Although not exactly the same, I would like to argue that these same "meritocratic conclusions" that pin ultimate responsibility on the disadvantaged for their "state of being," might also be drawn by those fully committed to the ideal of autonomy. For, a belief that one can divorce herself from certain social and cultural identifications in order to freely and autonomously choose goods, beliefs, and ways of life, corresponds with the idea that children can be positioned in such a way that the disadvantages of belonging to a particular social group might be removed, and thus that they can then proceed to make choices and pursue goods where "merit" is their only determinant of success. Like the commitment to meritocracy, a commitment to the possibility of autonomy might cloak the degree to which social and political factors determine choices; indeed, these choices might be better seen as the consequences of particular social positioning. This may seem to contradict points made earlier that, indeed, no one (not just those belonging to disadvantaged groups) is in fact, free. I don't mean to suggest that those who belong to dominant groups (those, for example, who are White, male, middle-class, educated, and so on) are completely free to make autonomous choices and that those who belong to disadvantaged groups are not free. I do, though, think it is worth pointing out that there may be more choices available to those in the former group than in the latter. Thus, by suggesting that we can all be "free" the autonomous ideal might obscure the degree to which our choices about the good are not entirely open and thus holding one ultimately responsible for these choices is problematic. My further point has been that for some, these choices are even less open than for others.

If we feel the force of this last and the previous objections to autonomy, then its use as a justification for restricting illiberal parent demands is triply compromised. First, we see that the assumption of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual overlooks the role that the social and

cultural play in both constructing individual identity and in making choices themselves meaningful; second, the implicit assumptions of universality upon which the ideal seems to rest illegitimately deflect the genuine contestations of the liberal commitment to autonomy as an essential educational aim; and finally, third, by suggesting that the social and the political play no role in the construction and maintenance of autonomy, the ideal suggests that the individual is ultimately free, and I would say, ultimately *responsible* for the choices she makes and the ways of life that she aligns herself with. Far from functioning as a legitimate justification for restricting the demands of illiberal parents on the grounds of protecting student freedom, this last point would seem to suggest that a wholesale commitment to the ideal may serve to mask the ways in which students are systematically oppressed.

### **Conclusion**

Given the problems identified with the concept of autonomy we seem to be left with two choices. First, we can dispense with the idea of autonomy as a general educational aim altogether. This would mean an acknowledgement that the ideal lacks the philosophical grounding that allows us to extend its influence over illiberal cultures within the school system. How the illiberal would then be accommodated is up for debate, but one option might be for the state to publicly fund separate schools, many of which would restrict student exposure to any visions of the good that contradict home beliefs.

If one is not satisfied with this position, another option might be to recast the ideal of autonomy in a way that takes into consideration the objections discussed above. Common to all three criticisms, it seems, is the complaint that the ideal assumes that radical distance, or detachment, from social, cultural, ideological, and political influence is both possible and desirable. Thus, a “new” conception of the ideal would need to acknowledge the way in which identity projects and visions of the good are essentially linked to social group embeddedness. Tamir’s “contextual individual” (Burtonwood, 2000, p. 275) may be a version of the self that makes these accommodations. As we recall, Tamir advocates a conception of the self that can make choices, but only within a cultural context. The acknowledgement of this connected, communal, or contextual autonomy, however, does not seem to go very far in helping the liberal educator solve the kinds of disputes that started this paper. For, if we still want to retain as much self-determination, agency, and choice as possible (given acknowledged social and political limitations) we are still left with questions about where parental influence should

stop and state ‘protection’ should begin. Thus, I will conclude this paper by asking two questions. First, can autonomy be re-cast in some way that will both answer the objections outlined and still justify the rejection of parent requests to shield their children from various forms of the good? Second, if an appeal to a “new and improved” autonomy will not do the work required of it, what, if anything, can serve as an appropriate arbiter for liberal-school /illiberal-parent disputes?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I should note, perhaps, that Boyd focuses on the dilemma as a general conflict within pluralist societies and not specifically on the practical implications at the school level. At the general level, he claims that there are three “perspectives” that try to address the dilemma. One of these perspectives—the “search for universals”—bears some similarity to an objection to autonomy that I will discuss later in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Although I think all aspects of this definition of autonomy are important, the *realization* of one’s ends may be less important for school children. Rather, a liberal education that fosters the cultivation of autonomy may be thought of as laying the groundwork for this eventual realization.

<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to suggest that there are not different conceptions of autonomy that could be attributed to other philosophers of education and educational theorists. The treatment of the autonomous ideal presented in this section is, of course, a select one. However I would argue that the features of autonomy that I highlight are quite uncontroversial components of the ideal as conceived by educators writing from a liberal perspective.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, this would seem to beg the question, since a rejection of parental control might also be questioned. I will re-visit these issues later in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Although Blacker does not use the word *autonomy* in this particular section, his description of “critical judgement” bears strong similarity with common characterizations of autonomous reflection (indeed, it bears strong similarity with the description offered by Callan, above.) Further, as we can see below, later in the paper Blacker also appeals to Feinberg’s notion of “anticipatory autonomy rights” as a way of justifying state interference, thus making his endorsement of the ideal clear.

<sup>6</sup> (Quoting from Arneson and Shapiro.)

<sup>7</sup> As with Blacker, we can also note here the somewhat instrumental spin being put on autonomy. For, according to Magsino, (at least *in this section*) an education that fosters autonomy is juxtaposed against “vocational education” that leads to “low-paying menial jobs” and the “life of followership” rather than to more prestigious and rewarding jobs. The skills and dispositions associated with autonomy, then, are advocated (in part) as a means to fitting successfully into the economy.

<sup>8</sup> Although the argument to expand the canon or include various and diverse views as a means to foster autonomy may seem to support the claims of illiberal

parents for inclusion, I don't think this is the case. For, we are not addressing the conflict that arises when the liberal democratic school is asked to present the traditional, "illiberal" view as one voice among many (and, admittedly, in many cases even this would be problematic) but rather, the conflict arises when the school is asked to accommodate the illiberal by *shielding* students from experiences and content that may undercut the assumptions of one, illiberal view. Indeed, it is the very presentation of opposing views as viable "choices among many" that I am claiming is contested by the illiberal parent. Whether or not an appeal to autonomy is enough to restrict these illiberal claims, however, is what I will try and sort out in the next section of the paper.

<sup>9</sup> I realize that in this section I am mapping the notion of the 'liberal self' or 'liberal individual' directly onto the autonomous individual. I do so only because the text that I am citing makes a connection between these 'names' and the characteristics of freedom, self-determination, critical reflection, and choice that are also tied (particularly by the authors cited in section two) to the notion of the autonomous individual.

<sup>10</sup> I am using this term as an adaptation of Bell's "higher-order interest" phrase, above. I will use first-level value to refer to the value choices one makes about how to live his or her life, and I will use second-level value to refer to ideals which make those choices possible. Here, of course, that second-level value is *autonomy*.

<sup>11</sup> I realize that this point is very close the first objection made against autonomy (the assumption of neutrality vis-à-vis the individual) However, I think there is something to be gained from focusing (in this last objection) not so much on the ontologically suspect "neutral space" in which the autonomous chooser supposedly finds herself, but on the (admittedly very closely related) freedom implied by this neutrality to choose from numerous goods and ways of life. It is this assumed freedom, and as I will develop later in this section, the associated responsibility that comes with this freedom, that I want to emphasize in this last objection.

<sup>12</sup> The crucial role played by social groups is discussed in: Young, Iris Marion (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1: "Displacing the Distributive Paradigm," pp. 15-38.

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