What is Common About Common Schooling? Rational Autonomy and Moral Agency in Liberal Democratic Education

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In this essay I critique two influential accounts of rational autonomy in common schooling that conceive liberalism as an ideal form of life, and I offer an alternative approach to democratic education that views liberal theory as concerned with coexistence among rival ways of living. This view places moral agency, not rational autonomy, at the heart of schooling in liberal societies—a moral agency grounded in initiation into dynamic traditions that enable self-definition and are accompanied by exposure to life-paths other than one's own. This alternative challenges the tendency in large diverse democracies (such as those of the US and the UK) to prefer common to particularistic schools, thereby placing many types of faith and secular schools on a more equal footing and providing moral justification for education in the national cultures of small liberal republics (such as Denmark, Israel and Lithuania) that maintain special relationships to particular groups while acknowledging the rights of all citizens. I call this approach the pedagogy of difference.

Many liberal political theorists believe that democratic societies require rationally autonomous citizens. A primary aim of schooling in liberal democracies, in this view, is to promote the rational autonomy of students. It follows that liberal societies should sponsor common schools for the children of all citizens and that the curriculum of those schools should emphasise at least those rational traditions that will enhance autonomy and provide future citizens with the critical evaluation skills to make personal life choices and participate in public policy debates. In this view, some sort of rationality constitutes a neutral ground on which to base these choices and debates. However, hard questions have been raised in the philosophical literature concerning this neutral account of rationality. According to one critique, rationality cannot be neutral because it serves the interests of a particular class, culture, race, or gender. Teaching students to evaluate plans and policies on the basis of reasons does not enhance their independence, in this view; it enslaves them to power interests that they have not chosen or would not choose given the

opportunity to do so. Another criticism of this position states that rational assessment cannot be justified without appeal to the rational standards in question, which means that those standards must rely on personal or communal preferences that cannot be counted as neutral. A rational approach to the curriculum can prejudice students against certain non-rational life paths such as those found within particular religious traditions, according to this position, or privilege the knowledge and skills associated with the human and natural sciences over those cultivated within the plastic and performing arts.

Yet, according to most accounts, liberal values and institutions are based on the idea that citizens are free because they have the capacity to evaluate choices rationally and that differences among rival ways of life can be adjudicated by appeal to reason as a neutral court of appeal. To challenge the neutrality of rationality, it would appear, is to call into question the very moral and intellectual sustainability of open liberal democracy, unless one can appeal to an alternative account of liberalism without neutrality. It is just such an alternative to which John Gray (2000) refers when he distinguishes between two faces of liberalism, one in pursuit of regimes that promote an ideal form of life based on universal principles and another seeking a *modus vivendi* for peaceful coexistence among different ways of living The belief that liberal democracy depends upon the cultivation of rational autonomy through a common curriculum, I argue in this essay, is grounded in the liberal doctrine that promotes identification with an ideal form of life based on universal principles. After discussing the difficulties with view, I will outline an approach to schooling in open liberal democracies based on the pursuit of coexistence among different ways of living. This alternative challenges the tendency in large diverse democracies (such as the US and the UK) to prefer so-called common to particular or distinctive education, thereby placing many types of faith and secular schools on a more equal footing and providing moral justification for education in the national cultures of small liberal republics (such as Denmark, Israel and Lithuania) that maintain special relationships to particular groups while acknowledging the rights of all citizens.

Rational autonomy is associated with schooling for both personal and public reasons. The first sort of reason has to do with the role of rational evaluation in making choices that will lead to a fulfilling life; the second with the function of autonomy in the justification of the liberal state. On the first line of reasoning, common schools should promote rational autonomy because it has a greater capacity than heteronomy to enable students to flourish; in the second account, schools should do so because the legitimisation of the liberal democratic state requires rationally autonomous citizens. Accordingly, this essay will be divided into four parts. Part I will consider personal arguments for autonomy as a basis for common schooling. The second section will discuss the role of autonomy in the justification of the liberal state. Part III will situate these arguments in what John Gray has called universal liberalism and sketch an alternative account of liberalism grounded in what has come to be called

value-pluralism. Part IV will argue that a genuine commitment to liberal pluralism requires an education rooted in dynamic traditions, not neutral rationality or prevailing dogmas, which engages opposing perspectives, reinterprets current practice and acknowledges that all people are inherently equal and worthy of respect. I have called this sort of education the pedagogy of difference (Alexander, 2005, forthcoming a).[1]

I AUTONOMY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

On the personal level, Harry Brighouse argues that education should aim at enabling people to lead flourishing lives, which are characterised by at least two criteria. First, flourishing lives are worth living which means that they contain a selection of 'objective goods.' Second, for a person *to flourish* within such a life they have to identify with it, to live it 'from the inside', as it were (Brighouse, 2006, pp. 15–16). What counts as an objective good is not a straightforward affair, but it is not very controversial that some practices and ideals are better for us than others, and that different people may be fulfilled by quite diverse combinations of goods. Nor is it a particularly contentious matter that for a life to be fulfilling one must identify with it. Brighouse uses the term autonomy— 'the opportunity to make and act on well-informed and well thought out judgements' (p. 14)—to denote how one comes to live inside a way of life and concludes not only that (1) 'the basic methods of rational evaluation are reliable aids to uncovering how to live well', but also that (2) 'they are the only aids that can be identified and taught' (p. 19).

He offers the following reasons to support these conclusions:

> Rational reflection can help us to detect inconsistencies and fallacious argumentation, and to uncover misuse of evidence. It helps us to see whether a choice coheres with our given judgements, including our judgements about what kind of person we ought to be. It also helps us to evaluate the ways we are attached to other people, and to carry out our altruistic obligations and goals more effectively ... It is important to notice that rational reflection can, and often does, lead us to affirm our existing traits, values, commitments, and attachments (p. 20).

This account is problematic for several reasons (Alexander, forthcoming a).

First, rationality cannot itself withstand the test of rational evaluation without presupposing the very rational standards one would be evaluating (Alexander, 2001, pp. 156–162). Consider a person who has had no exposure to rational discourse, such as Rousseau's Emile who was raised in the wild (Rousseau, 2003). How could one go about demonstrating to him that the canons of rational assessment are indeed valid other than by means of the very logical laws one has set out to defend? But to assume that those laws are valid is to presuppose the very point one has set out to demonstrate, which is to succumb to a form of circular reasoning that those very laws reject. Kant (2004, 2007) tried to ground the *a priori* principles of reason in the very make-up of human consciousness, and so,

as a liberal follower of Kant, Brighouse might respond that in a sense Emile already understands these principles. An education in rational evaluation, in this view, is intended to draw out of him logical capacities that are already implicit within, not to demonstrate their truth or validity. However, few today believe in such universal cognitive structures; and it was his suspicion of such a belief that very likely led Rousseau to suggest that introducing Emile to the civilised discourse governed by rational evaluation is closer to coercion than persuasion.

My second concern has been brought home by radical educational theorists—Marxists, neo-Marxists' poststructuralists—who argue that any standards one might employ to formulate judgements about the sort of person I should be, will be tied to economic, ideological, cultural, or other interests; and any attempt to liberate those judgements from such interests on rational grounds of one kind or another will itself entail the exercise of power. So while the appeal to rational evaluation may be intended to free youngsters from the undue power that their parents exercise over their lives in order to enable them to make their own autonomous choices, it may in fact merely subjugate them to other economic, ideological, cultural or other interests that may or may not be consistent with what is best for them (e.g. McLaren, 2006).

Third, as I will argue at greater length below, it is entirely unclear how we could go about determining what is best for a person other than within the context of a tradition concerning what ought to count as better or worse, and although there are many rational traditions that address this concern in productive and interesting ways, not all ethical traditions will necessarily withstand the test of reason, including, as I have indicated, perhaps even those very rational traditions themselves. This is not to say, of course, that the radical perspectives mentioned fare any better in this paradoxical terrain, for on their own account they too must be tied to economic, ideological, cultural or other interests, the liberation from which will only land them in some new set of power relations. Richard Peters (1974) was right when he noted that in order to foster moral independence we have no choice but to restrict it, and once having done so it is notoriously difficult to sort out how we can free a child from the grip of those initial acts of coercion.

My fourth difficulty with Brighouse's account of the role of autonomy in education has to do with what might get left out as a candidate for the sort of life consistent with human flourishing. I have in mind those religious traditions that call upon the faithful to believe in God and obey divine commandments even when there is no apparent rational justification for doing so. There are of course reasons why a person might choose such a path other than on the basis of valid proofs for the existence of God or logical explanations of particular religious practices, such as the promise of eternity inherent in Pascal's wager (Pascal, 2000) or of a meaningful life in James' will to believe (James, 2006). Nor is a religious way of life for everyone; indeed, for divergent thinkers in some traditions or women in others, or when imposed through force or violence, such a life can be downright oppressive. But it cannot be denied that many people

have come to lead very wholesome and worthwhile religious lives on non-rational grounds such as naïve religious faith, the homes in which they were raised or an epiphany that led to conversion. It is hard to imagine that the standards of rational evaluation would not discourage youngsters from choosing such a non-rational path, which would deny them opportunities for existential purpose that have sustained people for centuries through the joys and trials of life. Of course, this difficulty may not be a consequence of all accounts of rational autonomy, and we will consider at least two views below that attempt to address the issue, but it does seem to a problem for Brighouse's view.

My fifth problem with rational assessment as the best way to get inside a way of life is that it requires us to do just the opposite. To compare and contrast rival orientations we need to view them from without as a journalist or scientist might describe them, not from within as an insider might experience them. Indeed, the whole point of such an exercise is to gather and assess evidence objectively, without regard to the sorts of subjective attachments that characterise the life of an insider. Yet, it is the value of a just such a particular set of attachments that we are expected to judge when we rationally assess the alternatives; and to make such a judgement would appear to require the very sort of immersion into one way of life at the expense of others that Brighouse is at pains to critique as ruinous to autonomy. One is at a loss to understand how decisions of this sort can properly be called rational when the most pertinent evidence required to make them is summarily ruled out of court.

Consider the case that Brighouse discusses of 'people who experience their sexuality as fixed and unadaptable':

> A homosexual who experiences his homosexuality as unchangeable simply cannot live, from the inside, a way of life in which those who refrain from heterosexual marriage and childrearing are social outsiders. Trapped in such a way of life, he will be alienated from it. It may be a very good way of life, but it is not one that *he* can endorse from the inside, and is therefore not one that *he* can live well (Brighouse, 2006, p. 17).

But if he is old enough to experience his sexuality as unadaptable, he is already inside a life with real subjective attachments and experiences, some of which may have taught him that his sexuality is either fixed or flexible and others that it is either forbidden or permitted. The problem for him is not to choose impartially among an array of alternatives, but to determine—at least in part on the basis of his own subjective experience—whether he wants to remain in his current life or to opt for another, either by seeking to change the tradition that informs it or by abandoning that tradition altogether. Doing so, however, may put him at odds with a family or community or God that he holds most dear. I can hardly imagine a more deeply emotional choice. Reason may be helpful in sorting out some of the issues in this case (which is in fact one of the roles attributed to it by Brighouse in the passage quoted above), but it is highly unlikely that rational evaluation can on its own carry the burden of such a weighty decision.

II AUTONOMY AND THE LIBERAL STATE

Meira Levinson (1999) grapples with a number of these issues in her 'weak perfectionist' account of rational autonomy as a source of legitimacy for the liberal state. Before outlining her own approach, she identifies some of the main difficulties within prevailing comprehensive and political liberal theories by distinguishing between three commitments of liberalism: (A) an acceptance of deep irremediable pluralism in modern society; (B) a concern for public legitimisation of the state based on principles of justice; and (C) a belief that this legitimisation project yields substantive liberal freedoms and institutions. Uniting all three commitments in one coherent theory of liberalism is difficult. Joseph Raz (1986), for example, rejects legitimisation as unattainable in light of the fact of pluralism and so argues for the value of autonomy—the capacity to form, revise and rationally pursue a worthwhile human life—in a way that bridges directly from pluralism to substantive liberal institutions. John Stuart Mill (1974), on the other hand, sacrifices (or misconstrues) the depth of modern pluralism in favour of linking legitimisation directly with substantive liberal institutions via an argument for the value of autonomy (or 'individuality'). What links Raz and Mill 'is a belief in the value of autonomy for both itself and as a means of justifying substantive liberal freedoms' (Raz, 1986, p. 15). This strand of political thought, she explains, has come to be called 'comprehensive' or 'perfectionist' liberalism, since it promotes rationality as a substantive liberal value to guide personal value choices in addition to its neutral role in adjudicating between rival ways of life. As such this account of liberalism is subject to at least the first four objections raised above in connection with Brighouse's view of autonomy, which is also a case of comprehensive liberalism: the absence of a non-circular justification of rationality, the possible connection between rationality and non-rational power interests, the role of context in determining sources of value and the tendency within rationalism to delegitimise non-rational sources of value such as naive religious faith.[2]

In contrast to comprehensive liberalism, John Rawls (1993) contends that all three of the commitments Levinson highlighted can be coherently unified in a more limited 'political' liberalism. He avoids autonomy as a substantive value in favour of the two moral powers of human beings: (1) the capacity for a sense of justice, and (2) the capacity for a conception of the good. In the first instance, Rawls reinterprets pluralism through what he calls the 'burdens of judgment', the acceptance of which is one element of the sense of justice required for citizens to reach agreement on the legitimate principles that should govern the state. Reasonable people differ over what is most important in life for at least six reasons: (i) conflicting evidence, (ii) disagreement over the relative weight of evidence, (iii) the indeterminacy of 'hard cases', (iv) the influence of past on present experience, (v) the incommensurability of values, (vi) the circumscription of value within any particular society. To accept these so-called burdens of judgement as sources of reasonable disagreement, Rawls

contends, is to accept a particular account of pluralism. This leads citizens to seek principles of justice compatible with every reasonable person's conception of the good, rather than to convince others to adopt a view of the state grounded in a particular way of life. To accept the burdens of judgement, in other words, is 'to accept their consequences for the use of public reason in directing the legitimate exercise of political power' (Rawls, 1971, p. 86). The difficulty with this position, Levinson argues, is that by requiring citizens to alter their understanding of pluralism, as opposed to asking them merely to accept its existence, Rawls violates the boundaries of pluralism itself; and in so far as accepting this account requires people to realise that theirs is not the only reasonable way to live, it demands that, at least in their capacity as citizens, they exercise a rudimentary level of autonomy. This would appear to leave Rawls in much the same position as Raz and Mill vis-à-vis the neutrality of rational autonomy (p. 17).

If Rawls intended his account of the first moral power to tie pluralism to the legitimisation project via the burdens of judgement, he sought to link legitimisation to substantive liberal institutions by means of the second moral power, 'the capacity to form, to revise, and rationally to pursue ... a conception of what we regard for us as a worthwhile human life' (Rawls, 1993, p. 302). Since the liberty to pursue a vision of the good is a primary freedom protected by liberal states, and one's present way of life may require occasional if not regular revision, participants in the legitimisation process must assume that citizens can not only form but also revise their life paths. From this Rawls derives other substantive liberties, such as freedom of conscience, which is required to allow one to recognise and acknowledge mistakes, and freedom of association with like-minded citizens, which is needed for there to be meaningful freedom of conscience. But the capacity to form, revise and pursue a vision of the good, Levinson points out, is just what we mean by rational autonomy. Rawls' justification of substantive liberal institutions, therefore, does not escape reliance on autonomy as a positive, and hence non-neutral, value any better than his reading of pluralism via the prism of the burdens of judgement (Callan, 1997; Macedo, 2000; Tomasi, 2001).

To address these difficulties Levinson offers an account of liberalism that embraces a view 'which values individual autonomy, but does not discriminate against those who do not exercise autonomy in their own lives' (Levinson, 1999, pp. 21–22) provided they see themselves as what Rawls called 'self-authenticating sources of valid claims' (Rawls, 1993, p. 32) and as what Stanley Benn dubs 'autarchic persons' (Benn, 1988) who intentionally effect change in the world, take responsibility for their actions and are able to have a conception of the good (Levinson, 1999, pp. 22–24). Levinson contends that this requires more than a thin or formal account of autonomy, such as that advanced by Gerald Dworkin (1988). In his view, autonomous individuals are those who evaluate and revise first order desires, which are of the form 'I want X', by means of second order desires, which take the form 'I want to want X', in order to

insure that the desires they act upon are those with which they identify or 'adopt as their own'. Dworkin argues that formalism—the fact that an account does not distinguish between autonomous and heteronomous people based on the content of their desires—is an advantage since it allows that heteronomous lifestyles (such as those that follow divine commandments) can be freely chosen and should therefore be protected by liberal institutions. Levinson, on the other hand, thinks that it is strange to subsume heteronomous values under the rubric of autonomy, since among other reasons it allows people to enslave themselves and continue to be regarded as autonomous. Consequently, she opts for a more substantive account of the concept.

According to Levinson, an autonomous person must be situated in a coherent cultural orientation, possess a well-developed personality—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically, morally—and embrace a plurality of constitutive desires and values. Cultural coherence enables an individual to identify with a source of value other than mere personal preference upon which to base second order evaluations of first order desires; possessing a well developed personality allows a person to base autonomous choices on complex interactions among wide variety of personal abilities and commitments; and embracing a plurality of constitutive desires and values drawn from distinct, even rival, sources provides a vantage point from which to critically assess one set of desires and actions on the basis of another. Levinson's efforts to acknowledge the roles of culture, non-rational dimensions of personality, and human agency in making substantive life decisions is most welcome, but she may not have gone far enough. The difficulty with her account is that it falls prey to a version of the fifth objection raised above in connection with Brighouse's view of autonomy; it requires a person to stand inside and outside of a way of life at the same time. On one hand, the autonomous person is to be situated inside a coherent cultural orientation and, on the other, she is to embrace a plurality of values including some that conflict with the culture in which she is situated. This is thought to allow critical assessment of all or part of that cultural orientation, from the outside, but seems more likely to leave a child confused. Additionally, as I have argued, it is not at all clear how an outside perspective enables one to understand what it means to experience a particular culture as an insider, which would appear to be the crucial sort of evidence required in order to decide whether this is the sort of life one wants to lead. It is the subjective experience of a tradition from the inside that is most important in deciding whether to adopt it, and it is the exposure to a different life path as an outsider that offers the opportunity to consider whether to take a closer look, from the inside.[3]

III THE OTHER FACE OF LIBERALISM

Brighouse's flourishing and Levinson's weak perfectionism both falter because each of them conceives liberalism as a universal form of life

based on rational autonomy.[4] John Gray clarifies what sort of liberal theory this is:

> Liberalism has always had two faces. From one side, toleration is the pursuit of an ideal form of life. From the other, it is the search for terms of peace among different ways of life. In the former view, liberal institutions are seen as applications of universal principles. In the latter, they are means to peaceful coexistence. In the first, liberalism is the prescription for a universal regime. In the second, it is a project of coexistence that can be pursued in many regimes. The philosophies of John Locke and Immanuel Kant exemplify the liberal project of a universal regime, while those of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume express the liberalism of peaceful coexistence. In more recent times, John Rawls and F. A. Hayek have defended the first liberal philosophy, while Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott are exemplars of the second (Gray, 2000, p. 2).

In terms made popular by Isaiah Berlin (1953), universal liberals such as Brighouse and Levinson tend to become hedgehogs who know one big thing (rational autonomy) instead of foxes who know many things (rival traditions). Despite their avowed commitment to pluralism, they interpret liberalism along the lines of Berlin's (1990) positive concept of freedom—the idea of self-mastery, or self-determination, or control of one's destiny—rather than in reference to negative liberty—the absence of constraints on, or interference with, a person's desires and actions; and as is well-known, the difficulty with an over-enthusiasm for positive freedom is the tendency of those who endorse it to impose a way of life on people who might choose otherwise, because it is thought to be in their best interest. Put simply, by imposing rational neutrality on citizens (even in a weak form) universal liberalism runs afoul of Levinson's first liberal commitment: the irremediable fact of pluralism. Gray calls the alternative sort of liberalism exemplified by Berlin a theory of *modus vivendi*, which has no truck with ideal regimes, but seeks terms on which different ways of life can live together. *Modus vivendi*, he writes, 'is liberal toleration adapted to the historical fact of pluralism'. The ethical theory associated with this historical turn in liberal thought has been called value-pluralism—the idea that 'there are many conflicting kinds of human flourishing, some of which cannot be compared in value' (Gray, 2000, p. 6). This is much more tentative and cacophonous liberalism than that associated with the foundational aspirations of rationalism.[5]

Michael Oakeshott, who was also a pluralist according to Gray, argued that the underlying problem with universal liberalism lies in its embrace of rational rules, procedures and techniques as the exclusive basis for political knowledge, when to be meaningful all such technical knowledge must be interpreted in the context of a political tradition grounded in practice (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 1–36). Oakeshott's mistake, contends Gray, 'was to suppose that liberalism must be understood as a system of values, and to seek to replace reference to principle by the guidance of tradition—as if any late modern society ... contained only one tradition. If contemporary societies contain several traditions, with many people

belonging to more than one, politics cannot be conducted by following any one tradition. It must try to reconcile the intimations of rival traditions' (Gray, 2000, pp. 32–33). However, the fact that Oakeshott considered the political tradition of a particular society in no way infringes on his commitment to diversity, which is evident in his view that education entails the cultivation of personal identity through engagement with the many modes of understanding that comprise cultures (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 135; Oakeshott, 1989). Indeed, toleration of the very range of orientations inherent in Gray's pursuit of coexistence is possible only within the context of a political tradition of the sort Oakeshott endorses (Alexander, forthcoming b).

Moreover, I find it difficult to comprehend what value-pluralism could possibly mean without appeal to some conception of tradition. Even if we assume that there are many rival traditions and that people might adhere to more than one of them, meaningful as opposed to merely personal choices must be grounded in strong values that are embedded in one or more of those traditions. To say that the renewal of liberalism entails a *modus vivendi* for coexistence among rival forms of life, a supposition that is itself situated in a particular historical perspective, presumes that people adhere to one or more of the rivals. But to assume that democratic societies are or ought to be indifferent with regard to the orientations citizens may consider is to entertain the very mistaken view from nowhere upon which universal liberalism rests (Nagel, 1989); and to assume that traditions are necessarily fixed, as critics often do, is to attribute to them a rigidity that belongs more to rationalism than to many communities (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 31). In the absence of rational neutrality, the liberal challenge is to discern how prevailing traditions can serve as a source of, rather than a hindrance to, moral independence to ensure that relevant rights and liberties are not denied to citizens affiliated with minority cultures, or those of the weak or powerless. The question is not whether pluralistic liberalism entails initiation into traditions, but rather what sort of traditions do societies that embrace value-pluralism require.

Liberal societies that seek peaceful coexistence among rival ways of life should initiate students of both majority and minority cultures into 'dynamic' versions of the traditions to which they are heir. In addition to celebrating their own legacies, dynamic traditions are willing to engage opposing perspectives and reinterpret current practice. They are also committed to the idea that all people regardless of background or affiliation have the capacity for free agency and so are inherently equal and worthy of respect.[6] What binds the majority of citizens together in most societies is not the presumption of a neutral public square, but a shared way of life. In small liberal republics such as Denmark, Israel, and Lithuania, for example, it is extraordinarily difficult for public functionaries, from schoolteachers to heads of state, to hide behind an illusion of neutrality; they are friends of your brother or related to your sister-in-law or neighbours down the block or sometimes, enemies across the fence. The issue, however, is one of principle, not merely size—large democracies also depend upon face-to-face associations (Bellah *et al.*,

1986; de Tocqueville, 2007). Most people who acquire a commitment to the rule of law or a constitution or a system of checks and balances do so because of stories they tell about themselves and their families, about their history or destiny or mission, in their own language and through the media of their own culture (Covers, 1983).[7] There is more than one way to live such a life, to recount such narratives or speak such languages or participate in such cultures or understand such histories or conceive such destinies or grasp such missions; and there will likely be citizens whose heritages, languages' origins are different from those of the majority. To the extent that we deny citizens opportunities to participate in the process of interpretation, or restrict engagement with alternative or rival traditions, we render communal customs increasingly mechanical and limit their potential to bind people together through shared moral meanings and practices; and to the extent that we deny minority cultures, or those of the underprivileged or the oppressed, access to public expression and resources, we limit the likelihood that citizens so affiliated will choose to identify with the liberal state. Additionally, education in liberal societies should cultivate within students a proclivity for dialogue among conflicting orientations. To say that discussions within and among traditions lie beyond rational neutrality does not mean that they are devoid of intelligent discourse or critical assessment, but that such discourse and assessment may not always be readily accessible to all. Public deliberation will consequently demand communication among diverse, even incommensurable, goods without recourse to a common rationality that can serve as a neutral meeting ground.

IV MORAL AGENCY AND LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

The antidote to rampant rationalism and universal liberalism, then, is neither extreme separatism nor total anarchy, but recognition of what Jonathan Sacks calls the 'dignity of difference' which admits multiple compelling approximations of the truth and many acceptable visions of how to live. One can acquire the capacity to make independent choices given that we can never stand outside of the lives we lead by learning to be different and to respect the difference of others. This requires coming to understand myself, both past and present, and being prepared to assume responsibility for my future. It also requires coming to understand others who are different from me, both past and present, and recognising that it is they, not I, who should assume responsibility for their future. Following Sacks, and in contrast to pedagogies of the oppressed which tend to place responsibility for one's plight on social structures or power relations rather than on oneself (Freire, 2000), I call this the pedagogy of difference (Alexander, forthcoming a).[8]

The understanding that I have in mind here is not derived from the sort of evidence-based propositional or rule-based procedural knowledge discussed by Israel Scheffler (1958), although theoretical evidence and practical procedures are by no means irrelevant to it. Martin Buber (1996) would have referred to these as examples of objective knowledge, because

they are intended to serve the instrumental objectives of subject-object or I-It relationships. The understanding that the pedagogy of difference requires, however, is closer to what Buber (1996) called subjective knowledge, which is acquired through personal encounters among human subjects—husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students, friends and lovers—and between those subjects and the data and ideals that inform and give direction to their lives.

In this sort of encounter, one stands inside a way of life and receives it into oneself, rather than standing outside of it in order to compare it with others. Under these conditions, the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy is a bit misleading, since the boundaries between inside and outside the self are blurred. A way of life that on one account might have been perceived as external becomes the very content through which one achieves self-definition. The result is strong subjectivism, which supplies the values for what Charles Taylor (1985, pp. 15–44) calls strong evaluation of second order desires that govern decisions constituent of who I choose to be—should I tell the truth to help a friend even when it may bring me harm, or embrace my homosexuality even though my religious tradition teaches that I should not? On the other hand, without a foundation for the neutrality of reason, the objective comparison of one way of life to another from the outside inherent in Brighouse's critical assessment or Levinson's plurality of desires and values, too often ends up in a weak form of subjective evaluation based on a person's momentary feelings—today I will try this way of life, tomorrow another.

To make life choices intelligently, then, I need to stand firmly within a way of life that offers me guidance in doing so. Hence, when parents believe that their way of life is best for human flourishing given the alternatives, they have a solemn duty as loving guardians and teachers, not a right or a privilege, to pass it on as a legacy that will ultimately enable their children to make intelligent and independent decisions as adults (see Levinson, 1999, pp. 51–57). But what if this way of life seeks to dominate my independent judgement so completely that I will make only the narrow choices it prescribes, or in a way that precludes consideration of all other options? Brighouse asks us to consider such a case when he refers to the Amish, a quasi-separate religious community in the mid-Western US that challenged the law requiring youngsters to attend school until the age of 16 and won a reduction to the age of 14. In the famous US Supreme Court case *Yoder v. Wisconsin* the litigants argued that this requirement 'violated their right to freedom of conscience, because during the early teen years, children are especially vulnerable to secular influences, so subjecting children of that age to formal education jeopardises their belief in God and, ultimately, their opportunity for salvation' (p. 13). Brighouse worries that this decision unduly allows parents to restrict opportunities for their children to make well-informed life choices on their own, and that 'autonomy is important enough to justify a requirement that all children be subject to an education designed to facilitate it' (p. 14). But this would enable the state or some other agent to impose a comprehensive liberal view of the world on all children, even when their parents do not agree,

which as we have seen cannot be sustained on rational grounds and so is no less an act of coercion than that of the parents themselves.

The pedagogy of difference offers an alternative way of accounting for cases of this kind grounded in the recognition that education in identity is intended to initiate people into a life worth living. For such a life to be good in any normative sense of the term, we must suppose not that those who would live it are rationally autonomous beings, but rather that they are independent moral agents, free within limits to choose between several life paths and capable of distinguishing between them (Johnston, 1996). People who have the capacity to understand and interpret desires, beliefs and behaviours are at liberty to choose among them, and because of this liberty can be held accountable for the consequences of their choices (Alexander, 2001, pp. 44–48). If the Amish and communities like them want their children to assume eventual responsibility for their way of life, it is imperative that as they mature these children be encouraged to embrace this way of life, within limits, of their own free will. It is precisely for that reason that once they have reached maturity, the Amish send their young adults away for a time, to allow them to return to the community, or not, freely. Thus, the pedagogy of difference requires not only a deep immersion in the stories and practices of the tradition into which one is being initiated, but also opportunities to learn of other traditions and to experience them as well, though as something of an outsider considering whether or not to step inside. To understand myself I must encounter the other; but to genuinely encounter the other I must also understand myself. I can only freely choose a way of life, either the one offered by my parents or some other, if I have a thorough and loving grounding in one way of life, as well as an intense exposure to some of the alternatives. Exposure to traditions other than my own accomplishes the sort of critical assessment to which both Brighouse and Levinson aspire, but grounded in an initiation into the strong values of a particular tradition that does not require the embrace of two or more opposing perspectives at the same time.

Of course, some families, schools, communities, or societies are less cognizant than others of the need to prepare students to make life choices by fostering awareness of free agency. To the extent that these institutions suppress or deny human agency they limit the capacity of their members for responsible moral decision-making. Since *moral* discourse presupposes agents who can opt in or out of a way of life as they are given to understand it, suppression of agency leads to *a-moral* communities that are closed to outside alternatives and that favour indoctrination into a mechanical rule-bound existence over education in a freely chosen ethical or religious identity (Alexander, 2005). However for the state to intervene in such an instance, and to impose a comprehensive liberal or rational view on a closed community for the sake of a child, would undermine the very freedom of choice upon which human agency relies, and so would serve only to jeopardise the moral legitimacy of the state itself. This would do nothing to liberate the child from the coercion of such a community, which can only be accomplished through an exercise of her own free will.

Clearly, if a child is physically or emotionally mistreated in some way, the state has an obligation to protect her whether or not she is living in a closed or open community, although it may sometimes be difficult to reach agreement concerning what it means to be mistreated. The same would hold for any community that would seek to impose itself on another, or on the public at large—for example, through force and violence such as by means of attacks on abortion clinics or other acts of terror. Additionally, although I agree with Brighouse that the state may have an interest in providing funds to religious schools open to alternative points of view (Brighouse, 2006, pp. 77–94), my own view is much more positive about the contribution of dynamic faith traditions to liberal democracy, but more negative concerning the call of closed communities on the public purse, since it is unlikely that the alumni of their schools will possess the moral independence required for democratic decision making and responsibility. However, other than in such obvious or extreme cases, it is an entirely contestable matter whether a child would be better off living in one sort of community or another, since there is no way to conceive what might be better or worse for the child other than in the context of the religious or secular ethical traditions that govern our collective lives.

In contrast to the universal view of liberalism advanced by Brighouse and Levinson, the ethical and political philosophy most compatible with the pedagogic and educational views expressed here involves a communitarian reading of value-pluralism. It is based on the idea that since a neutral form of rational autonomy is indefensible, moral agency must be founded on the genuine relationships of students to families, communities and traditions (including of course rational traditions), provided they are prepared to consider opposing views, revise current practice and acknowledge the rights of all. Education in religious faiths or initiation into particular cultures of small liberal republics is not necessarily antithetical to liberalism in this view; nor should it merely be tolerated in a democracy as suggested by Brighouse (though not by Levinson). Rather education in dynamic traditions has a profound contribution to make to the preparation of democratic citizens who can assess the choices and assume the responsibilities required of self-governance, since there are no grounds upon which to base these decisions and responsibilities outside of the traditions of conscience that foster human agency. There are many good reasons why liberal societies might choose to support schools that offer a broad secular education to their citizens other than the pursuit of an illusive rational autonomy. However, schools affiliated with particular traditions, communities or cultures are likely to do as well, if not better, than so-called common schools at initiating students into the dynamic traditions that liberal democracies require.

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NOTES

1. Sections one and four are adapted from my essay 'Educating Identity: Toward a Pedagogy of Difference' (Alexander, forthcoming a).
2. Gray points out that Raz is a value pluralist (Gray, 2000, pp. 96–99), and that Mill's writings exhibit a tension between universalism and pluralism (pp. 29–31). Yet both argue that liberal values should play a role in the lives of private citizens beyond that of negotiating between competing perspectives. Hence they can be counted as comprehensive liberals (Galston, 2002, pp. 8–9).
3. On the idea of education in a tradition 'from the inside' and 'from the outside', see Alexander and McLaughlin, 2003.
4. Levinson states explicitly that she identifies with the liberal tradition that was transformed during the past thirty years by John Rawls, rather than that of Thomas Hobbes, though she may disagree with Gray as to whether Hayek or Raz are universal or plural liberals (Levinson, 1999, p. 6).
5. For a critique of Gray's account of value-pluralism see Appiah, 2005, pp. 36–61.
6. The Hebrew Bible has been read in this way by a number of political traditions, sometimes in dialogue with philosophers from Aristotle to Dewey, although it has also been interpreted contrary to this spirit as well (Bellah *et al*., 1986; Sacks, 2003; Walzer, 1986).
7. The narrative might include neutrality as an aspiration or ideal, but not based on *a priori* reason or common reasonableness.
8. Terence McLaughlin referred to a similar perspective in his expression 'autonomy via faith' (McLaughlin, 1984, 1985).

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