

In Defense of *Real* Choices? Faith and Autonomy in the Liberal Polity

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In “In Praise of *Parens Patriae*,” Jason Blokhuis defends the right of liberal states to supervene in the education of children. Blokhuis marshals both legal and philosophical justifications to support a variety of different claims — some controversial — concerning the status of parental authority over the education of children. He defines *parens patriae* as a “generalized means by which the state can protect the present and future interests of children and other legally incompetent persons,” and argues that it is advantageous to a child’s development to be subject to both the influence and authority of the state through public schooling and parental authority. Blokhuis’s focus upon those parents whom he considers religious extremists (rather than religious moderates) permits both a sharp critique of religious excess — “children who attend diverse, well-funded public schools are more likely than children who stay at home with malevolent parents...not to be tortured or killed” — and a theoretical justification for state oversight.

Blokhuis provides a spirited defense of the concepts of individual well-being and autonomy, one that he regards as necessary for human flourishing. Indeed, he is critical of those libertarian and religious arguments that do not provide adequate opportunities for children to determine their proper ends, autonomously chosen. The state, in Blokhuis’s account, is clearly nonneutral, and pursues or should pursue an openly political agenda: reducing harm by ensuring that parents do not foreclose children’s opportunities to flourish, while simultaneously instilling a shared sense of identity that is required if society is to function. As Blokhuis notes, “it takes a *polis* to raise a child.”

At work here are empirical claims that lend support to a substantive conception of autonomy: that autonomy is more likely to be achieved if educational authority is shared between parents and the state. However, Blokhuis relies mainly upon theoretical justifications rather than empirical ones to further defend his notion of autonomy, one that is similar to elements found in John Stuart Mill (himself home schooled),¹ the early work of John Rawls,² and more recently Harry Brighouse’s rigorous defense of autonomy found in *On Education*.³

Indeed, at work here is a highly controversial notion of autonomy and an equally controversial phenomenology of religious belief that Blokhuis details toward the end of his essay. A desire on the part of religious parents to shelter children from public schooling reflects, in Blokhuis’s opinion, a “lack of confidence in their faith and/or their children.” “Genuine faith,” he suggests, requires autonomy: “it will be truly theirs if the product of critical reflection and reasoning.” Only if a person can imagine an alternative lifestyle and give reasons for why they chose their particular version of the good life can it properly be said to be a genuine choice rather than the

result of indoctrination. And, he adds finally, what is true for unreflective religious belief is also true for the more thoughtless kinds of nationalism.

For Blokhuis, autonomy-enhancing activities enable “genuine choices.” Yet, is this critique of religious extremism and religious choice really appropriate for modern, multicultural, and highly diverse societies? According to William Galston, liberalism is a distinctive and nonneutral political philosophy. It is minimally perfectionist by providing “the functional basics” for living in a modern liberal society falling short of a full definition of the good life.⁴ While liberalism does possess a theory of the good, it may be defined by identifying the *summum malum*, those things within a society that nearly all would agree ought to be reduced. The question of how one should live is left entirely up to the individual, and any move beyond what is functionally required by the state is, in Galston’s opinion, unacceptably intrusive. Hence, the promotion of autonomy, the quintessential liberal ideal that we find in Blokhuis’s essay, would be ruled out of Galston’s program. He states:

Liberalism is about the protection of diversity, not the valorization of choice. To place an ideal of autonomous choice at the core of liberalism is in fact to narrow the range of possibilities available within liberal societies. It is a drive toward a kind of uniformity, disguised in the language of liberal diversity.⁵

What liberalism is about, in Galston’s account, is the protection of diversity. By taking this idea as definitive he argues that it is just and fair to respect and tolerate an individual or group who considers the heteronomous or unreflective life worth living. While we might reasonably say that the views of the religious extremist, particularly those that harm their children mentally or physically, rightly call for the intervention of the state — this is not the kind of diversity we would wish to defend — it is surely much harder to make a similar charge against the religious moderate. Indeed, advocating substantive autonomy of the kind found in Blokhuis’s essay might actually drive moderate parents away from public education.

If someone is to achieve their full potential, asserts Blokhuis, s/he must not only be left alone to exercise her/his capacity to choose (negative liberty), but be provided with those opportunities that enable “genuine choice” (positive liberty). Her/his choices may be incorrect according to some standard or other, but even in making undesirable choices, people develop important parts of themselves. A person who simply and blindly follows choices other people make might “do the right thing,” but will not achieve her/his full potential.

Advancing a similar case, Mill noted that this substantive conception of autonomy, in addition to focusing upon how choices are made, invariably made a claim about the kind of people that should inhabit an enlightened, liberal democratic state. So, in addition to what people do, Mill was concerned with what people are: “It really is of importance,” he says, “not only what men do, but also *what manner of men they are that do it*.”⁶ This is a controversial claim, an essentialist one that few contemporary theorists would want to make.

Yet, Blokhuis seems to echo these sentiments by discussing the nature of religious belief in the following manner: “Unless and until children have made an

autonomous decision to accept it, their parents' faith cannot be ascribed to them." However philosophically interesting this view of belief might be, it invariably leads us to conclude that the majority of those individuals within a faith tradition in advanced societies are not autonomous in the manner in which Blokhuis desires. Such a view threatens to alienate religious moderates, let alone religious extremists. In short, if there is a problem here, it is that Blokhuis sets the conceptual bar too high. If children can only be said to have adopted a faith once they have genuinely considered sufficient alternatives, few can be said to have done so.

Many thinkers, acknowledging this very point, have steered away from the full autonomy argument precisely to avoid sectarian conflict between the secular and the religious. Indeed, in the later work of Rawls and his followers, liberal citizens are assumed to share a minimal understanding of political institutions, the ideals behind them, a sense of where they came from, and a common understanding of justice. The advantage of what has been termed "political" over comprehensive liberalism is that the former, by appealing to the notion of an "overlapping consensus," seems to avoid the undesirable consequences of applying the principle of full autonomy to lifestyles of citizens within liberal democracies.

What begins as an attempt to defend the capacities of children ends by looking increasingly unsympathetic to those ways of life that are not thoughtfully liberal. Indeed, in the more strident passages, Blokhuis sounds like Richard Dawkins, who considers faith a kind of cognitive virus.⁷ Precisely because of these difficulties, many theorists have followed the later Rawls in assuming that "the functional basics" of a liberal society develop as a result of living in a liberal culture.⁸

If a minimal sense of autonomy is sufficient for the purposes of liberal citizenship, why consider the demands of the more controversial, substantive notion? If it is not sufficient, however, then Blokhuis's claims about the failure of liberal society to encourage autonomy may be addressed more broadly to the culture at large and not just to religious parents. As Brighouse notes:

Much more troubling for the vast majority is a public, and particularly a popular culture, that is governed by commercial forces, that dedicate considerable resources to undermining children's prospective autonomy, aiming to inculcate a life-long and unreflective materialism in as many children as possible.⁹

1. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin, 1984).

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

3. Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London: Routledge, 2006).

4. William Galston, *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

5. *Ibid.*, 359.

6. Mill, *On Liberty*, 123 (emphasis added).

7. Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 136.

8. Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

9. Brighouse, *On Education*, 23.