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School's Out Forever: Making Room for Unschoolers in Political Liberalism

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SCHOOL'S OUT FOREVER:
MAKING ROOM FOR UNSCHOOLERS IN POLITICAL LIBERALISM

by

Brita Ager-Hart

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ABSTRACT

SCHOOL'S OUT FOREVER: MAKING ROOM FOR UNSCHOOLERS IN POLITICAL LIBERALISM

by

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor Blain Neufeld

If citizens in a politically liberal society are truly to be free to order their lives as they desire, it is important that the society contain as many acceptable methods of education as possible. I examine a method of education that I am almost certain has never been considered by political liberals: a type of homeschooling known as “unschooling.” Unschoolers believe that children should largely be in charge of their own education. I contend that this makes unschooling well-suited to promote the development of political autonomy. Unschooling’s self-directed approach to education gives children a sense of their own agency and independence. It also encourages children to develop their own conceptions of the good, to be aware of their educational rights and resources, and to practice deliberating with others. For these reasons, we should consider unschooling to be an acceptable method of education in a politically liberal society.

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Introduction

Imagine a scenario in which children are allowed to take charge of their own education. They are not compelled to take tests, write essays or “study” at all. Instead, they are encouraged to view learning as a way of life and allowed to largely determine how they would like to spend their time. They may plant flower gardens, write poetry, and build art sculptures out of recycled materials if they choose. If they prefer, they may conduct science experiments of their own design, build elaborate mechanical contraptions, and while away many hours reading biographies of scientists. Regardless of the specific details, the point remains the same: how these children choose to fill their days is, for the most part, up to them.

This method of education, known as "unschooling," is a little-known type of homeschooling that I am almost certain has never been viewed through the lens of political liberalism. The defining feature of this method of education is the belief that children should largely be in charge of their own education. I will argue that this makes unschooling especially well-suited to promote political autonomy, which is a crucial part of any political liberal education program. For this reason, we should consider unschooling to be an acceptable form of education in a politically liberal society.

I will make this case by first making it clear why it matters whether a given method of education is compatible with political liberalism (section one). In section two, I explain why political liberals may find homeschooling in general problematic in light of political liberalism’s commitment to realizing citizens’ political autonomy. In section three, I explain in some detail what unschooling entails before, in section four, providing the specific reasons that unschooling’s largely self-directed educational approach promotes political autonomy. Section four includes an

explanation of the distinction between political and ethical autonomy and a brief overview of why unschoolers are likely to also possess ethical autonomy. In the final section, I discuss how we can be sure that unschooled children will be adequately educated about the political system and the public culture, which is a requirement for becoming politically autonomous. All of these sections work to support my ultimate conclusion: that unschooling is compatible with political liberalism.

The Politically Liberal Society and Education

This paper operates on the assumption that most individuals would value living in a politically liberal society. To see if this is a reasonable assumption, let's very briefly review what political liberalism is. It differs from more "comprehensive" conceptions of liberalism (for example, that put forth by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*,¹ as well as conceptions presented by J.S. Mill in *On Liberty*,² Joseph Raz in *The Morality of Freedom*,³ and Amy Gutmann in *Liberal Equality*,⁴ among others) in several respects. For one thing, political liberalism is concerned only with the "basic structure" of society. According to Rawls, the basic structure consists of "a society's main political, social, and economic institutions, and how they fit together into one unified system of social cooperation from one generation to the next."⁵ In addition, political liberals hold that while the ideals of liberalism dictate how individuals conduct themselves as citizens, these ideals need not extend to the nonpolitical aspects of their lives. Indeed, political

¹ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

² See John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty," In *Utilitarianism and On Liberty: Including Mill's 'Essay on Bentham' and Selections from the Writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin*, 88–180, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003)

³ See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009).

⁴ See Amy Gutmann, *Liberal Equality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 11.

ideas should be “freestanding.”⁶ In other words, the answers to such questions as what it means to be a citizen and what principles are considered to be just should not depend on or presuppose the truth of any particular comprehensive value system or set of ideals, such as Buddhism or Methodism, for example. This means that these ideas and principles are compatible with a wide range of worldviews and can be embedded in a variety of comprehensive doctrines.⁷

This is important, as at the core of political liberalism is the conviction that individuals should largely be free to order their lives as they see fit, that they should respect others’ rights to largely order *their* lives as *they* see fit, and that society must be structured in a way that makes this possible for everyone. I believe that these ideals are ones that most reasonable individuals will indeed consider valuable.

However, one might grant that political liberal ideals are important but remain unconvinced that it matters whether unschooling is compatible with those ideals. After all, there are other methods of education that seem likely to satisfy political liberal requirements—properly-ordered forms of public education, for example—and it might seem that even one such method is enough. But this is not so. Anyone who values living in a politically liberal society should welcome any and all methods of education that will both 1) produce future citizens who will respect the ideals of political liberalism and 2) allow citizens to raise their children in accordance with their own worldviews to the fullest extent possible. The greater the number of acceptable methods of education in a politically liberal society, the more likely it is that a given citizen will be able to find a method of education that allows him or her to raise children in the way he or she sees fit. This means that each additional method of education that is found to be

⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 10.

⁷ Ideally, all reasonable citizens will integrate the conception of justice into their comprehensive doctrines. This justifies the conception. For more on this point, see John Rawls, “Political Liberalism: Reply to Habermas,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, March 1995, pp. 132-180, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203723869-8>, 143-144.

compatible with political liberal ideals significantly increases the viability of a politically liberal society, as it increases the chances that citizens will both support political liberal institutions and principles and truly be free to order their lives as they desire.⁸

According to Rawls, any suitable method of education in a politically liberal society will be focused on students “acquiring the capacity to understand the public culture and to participate in its institutions,” as well as becoming “economically independent and self-supporting members of a society over a complete life, and in ... developing the political virtues.”⁹ Yet, it is not enough that children merely understand the political system, the public culture, and the political virtues. Crucially, they must also learn to be politically autonomous if they are to become truly free and equal citizens.

A bit of explanation is required to make it clear why citizens must be politically autonomous. Rawls states that political autonomy is realized not only by “participating in society’s public affairs and sharing in its collective self-determination over time,”¹⁰ but also by, “affirming the political principles of justice and enjoying the protections of the basic rights and liberties.”¹¹ This can be viewed as boiling down to two main components, which Blain Neufeld terms “institutional autonomy” and “justificatory autonomy.”¹² In order to possess institutional autonomy, citizens must both hold and understand the rights and resources that allow them to participate in and shape society on equal grounds with their fellow citizens.¹³ When important

⁸ For a discussion of this point, see Gordon Davis and Blain Neufeld, “Political Liberalism, Civic Education, and Educational Choice,” *Social Theory and Practice* 33, no. 1 (2007): pp. 47-74, <https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract200733135>, 67-73.

⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 200.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Blain Neufeld, “Political Liberalism, Autonomy, and Education,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 1-17, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

political decisions are made using reasons that citizens understand and deem acceptable, then those citizens are also autonomous in the justificatory sense.¹⁴

Although it may be difficult at first to visualize what justificatory autonomy entails, this component of political autonomy is vital. One of the most fundamental questions in political liberalism is how we can exist as free and equal citizens and still be able to deliberate effectively with one another. The difficulty arises because such freedom entails, *inter alia*, that we will often have different “comprehensive doctrines.”¹⁵ A doctrine is comprehensive if it informs many or all aspects of our lives in important ways. These are our most deeply held views and are religious, philosophical, and/or moral in nature. For example, Islam and Utilitarianism are both comprehensive doctrines.

Rawls believes important political questions can be decided successfully and fairly if citizens adhere to something he calls public reason.¹⁶ The idea here is that the reasons citizens give for their political proposals should be drawn from political conceptions of justice rather than from their comprehensive doctrines.¹⁷ These reasons are public in the sense that they do not rely on individual citizens’ particular worldviews, but rather are based on a conception of justice that is acceptable to all citizens.¹⁸ Because this system is based on mutual respect for one another as free and equal citizens, it is important that the reasons individuals give for the proposals they present are ones they can reasonably expect other reasonable and rational citizens to accept. Rawls refers to this idea as the “criterion of reciprocity.”¹⁹ Endorsing the idea of public reason is

¹⁴ Blain Neufeld, “Political Liberalism, Autonomy, and Education,” 8.

¹⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xvi.

¹⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 448.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

¹⁸ Although Rawls also gives us “the proviso,” which allows that we may give reasons that are based on our comprehensive doctrines so long as we at some point give public reasons to support those same points. See *Political Liberalism*, p. xlix-l.

¹⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 446.

what allows citizens to satisfy this criterion. If this system works correctly, then citizens will achieve justificatory autonomy, as they will understand and consider acceptable the reasons that are given for significant political decisions.

If citizens lack political autonomy—in either the institutional or the justificatory sense—they cannot be truly free and equal. It is entirely possible for children to acquire knowledge of the political system, the public culture, and the political virtues and yet become adults who are passive participants in the political process, citizens only in name. In contrast, possessing political autonomy means that individuals have assumed responsibility for their own political fates. They understand the political rights and resources that they hold (institutional autonomy), and are aware of the full implications of the political positions that they endorse (facilitated by justificatory autonomy). Vitaly, as Rawls notes, if individuals are politically autonomous they do not simply act in accordance with the principles of justice. Instead, they act from them *because they are just*.²⁰ That is, it is not an accident that their actions accord with these principles, but the result of critical reflection and informed choices on their part.

It has been part of my intention in this section to make it clear why it matters whether a given method of education is compatible with political liberalism. However, one might still wonder why I focus on unschooling (that is, on one little-known type of homeschooling) rather than on homeschooling in general. In the next section I explain how homeschooling in general faces concerns about political autonomy that unschooling does not.

²⁰ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 77.

Why Political Liberals are Likely to be Dissatisfied with Homeschooling in General

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, while little work has been done in regard to analyzing the compatibility of homeschooling and political liberalism, political liberals might well object to homeschooling on political autonomy grounds.

One important reason political liberals might be concerned about the political autonomy of homeschool graduates is that homeschooling parents are often in a position to exert an unusually strong influence on their children's views. For example, let us suppose that "Oliver" is a homeschooling parent and that he is a devoted supporter of a particular party. Let's call his party of choice the "Roundhead" party. Because Oliver's three children are young, they must accompany him all day, every day, and so have many chances to observe the political process firsthand. For years they tag along as their father participates in protests, volunteers for campaigns, and casts his vote against the candidates from the dreadful "Cavalier" party.

The main problem here is that if Oliver's children admire and respect him, they are likely to adopt his political positions. Even if Oliver does not attempt to shape his children's views to mirror his own or prevent them from learning about other political platforms, his children cannot help but be affected almost *exclusively* by his beliefs and values. School children, on the other hand, may have more opportunities to encounter alternative views. And if Oliver's children do end up becoming Roundheads, it seems likely they will make their choice at least partly on the basis of familiarity, rather than because they understand and approve of how the Roundhead platform differs from those of all other parties.

Further (so the argument against homeschooling might go), not all homeschooling parents are as open-minded as Oliver. Some parents who choose to educate their children at

home do so with the primary—or sole—objective of preventing their children from being exposed to views that conflict with their own. Not surprisingly, these children's social circles will often be quite narrow. They may be prevented from interacting with some members of the community and only allowed to associate with individuals approved by their parents. This makes it improbable that they will be exposed to many views that are different from those of their parents. While this type of restrictiveness is most often seen in parents who are ideologically extreme and so does not describe the typical homeschooling parent, it reveals homeschooling parents' ability to exercise a great degree of control over their children's education.

In addition, the fact that many homeschoolers are not in daily contact with a considerable number of their peers in the way that most conventionally educated children are provides a second reason one may be concerned about the political autonomy of homeschool graduates. It is a common criticism of homeschooling that children who are educated at home are not “socialized” properly. The concern here is that because homeschooled children are not educated with their peers, they may not learn how to easily relate to and interact with others their age. If this is so, perhaps these children will become adults who have more trouble deliberating effectively with others than will graduates of conventional schools. In addition, if children educated at home are not exposed to a sufficient variety of alternative worldviews, they may struggle to respect citizens who subscribe to comprehensive doctrines that differ from their own.

So, one may worry about homeschoolers' being able to be politically autonomous in the institutional sense, as they may not make full use of their rights and resources as citizens, instead adopting their parents' views without critical reflection. In addition, homeschool graduates may lack the ability to deliberate effectively, which has the potential to negatively impact the

justificatory autonomy of *all* citizens in a politically liberal society that sanctions homeschooling.

I want to be clear about two points before moving on. First, homeschoolers would likely dispute these claims.²¹ Second, I am not contending here that homeschooling in general is incompatible with political liberalism. (Whether or not this is the case would, however, be an interesting topic to explore in another paper.) The purpose of this section is to introduce some political autonomy concerns that may confront homeschooling in general but that do not apply to unschooling to the same extent, as will shortly become clear.

Unschooling Explained

In 2016, the most recent year for which data is available, approximately 3% of children in the U.S. were being educated at home.²² The concerns described in the previous section apply most strongly to the segment of the homeschooling population known as “structured” homeschoolers. Some structured homeschooling parents designate a room in their homes the “school room” and require their children to sit at desks while they teach for certain periods each day, effectively doing “school at home.” Others who take a structured approach may not be quite as strict. For example, they may require their children to follow a curriculum and complete a certain number of lessons each day but allow the children to choose the time of day they sit down to study. The majority of homeschooling families educate their children in a structured manner.

²¹ It is also possible that some homeschoolers would grant these claims but maintain that they are not primarily concerned with ensuring that their children develop political autonomy. As I say, however, I believe that most homeschoolers would take issue with these charges.

²² “Digest of Education Statistics, 2018,” National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education, accessed December 15, 2020, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp.

However, some of those who travel the homeschool highway choose to turn off the main road of using a structured method of education onto the byroad of homeschooling in an unstructured way.²³ Homeschoolers who do not use a structured approach, especially those who do not adhere to a fixed curriculum, are often called “unschoolers,” although this practice also goes by many other names, such as “interest-driven,” “child-led,” “natural,” “organic,” “eclectic,” or “self-directed” learning.²⁴ Estimates suggest that 10% to 20% of homeschooled children can be classified as unschoolers, which would place the percentage of children in the U.S. who are unschooled at 0.3% to 0.6%.

The scarcity of unschoolers can be partly attributed to the way that homeschooling is regulated in the U.S. The movement has been legal in all 50 states since 1993, but regulations vary a great deal from state to state. The website for the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) lists four levels of regulation: high, low, moderate, or no regulation.²⁵ States with no regulations do not require parents to submit notification of their intent to homeschool, while those with a “low” level of regulations do require notice. States with a “moderate” designation require test scores and/or professional evaluation of student progress, while homeschoolers in states with the highest level of restrictions must also submit to additional regulatory measures such as having their curriculum approved by the state or allowing home visits from state officials.²⁶

²³ Ari Neuman and Oz Guterman, “What Are We Educating towards? Socialization, Acculturation, and Individualization as Reflected in Home Education,” *Educational Studies* 43, no. 3 (2016): pp. 265-281, 4.

²⁴ John Caldwell Holt and Patrick Farenga, *Teach Your Own: the John Holt Book of Homeschooling* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub., 2003), 238.

²⁵ Five states are high regulation: New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. 18 have moderate regulations: Maine, New Hampshire, Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio, Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. 16 are classified as low regulation: Delaware, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Wisconsin, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, Wyoming, and Montana. The remaining 11, Connecticut, New Jersey, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Idaho, and Alaska, do not require parents to give any notice of their intent to homeschool.

²⁶ HSLDA (2015), In A. B. Kolenc, (2017), *Legal Issues in Homeschooling*. In M. Gaither (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of home education* (pp. 59-85), 75.

One of the defining features of unschooling is the belief that children should largely be in charge of their own education. This means that while some unschoolers take classes or use a curriculum—if the parents and child decide together they want to use that approach²⁷—other unschooled children go through their entire school careers without completing any graded assignments or evaluations. Given this fact, it is unsurprising that unschoolers are few and far between in states that have a moderate or high level of regulation.

While the term “unschooling” is intended to convey the laid-back nature of this educational approach, the label is unfortunately something of a misnomer. It may suggest to some that children are not being given any education at all, which is not the case. Indeed, unschooling must be differentiated from what might be called the “no schooling” approach, in which parents remove their children from school and do not provide them with any or adequate instruction or educational guidance, civic or otherwise. While most unschooling parents provide little formal instruction, parental guidance is a vital part of the unschooling process. Typically, parents will strongly encourage their children’s interests and use these interests to help their children develop into well-rounded individuals. This can be accomplished by using many different educational resources, including libraries, museums, mentors, extra-curricular classes, clubs, and even public television. The following example illustrates how this might work.

Let us suppose an unschooled child—let’s call him “Erik”—becomes fascinated by polar expeditions. Because young Erik is an avid reader, his parents buy him biographies of such explorers as Peary, Amundsen, and Shackleton. Erik is less interested in biology, but his parents know that scientific literacy is important, so Erik’s family also makes a trip to a natural history museum that houses taxidermied specimens of penguins, polar bears, and other arctic and

²⁷ Holt and Farenga, *Teach Your Own: the John Holt Book of Homeschooling*, 239.

antarctic creatures. Erik's parents also encourage him to study the effects of hypothermia on the human body. In addition, Erik decides that he wants to prepare a dinner modeled on a meal polar explorers might put together from their provisions and calculates how much funding an explorer would need for an expedition that lasted a given length of time.

While this example demonstrates how unschooling parents use their children's interests to help guide their education, it is important to understand that unschooled children also learn from many experiences that are not directly related to their specific interests. In fact, most parents who unschool believe that children should learn simply by living. This means that they help their children to take the most that every experience has to offer in terms of education. For unschoolers, learning is not something that is confined to specific hours or to certain places, and education is not a means to an end, but a way of life. To picture what this looks like in practice, let's imagine another unschooled child: "John," and his brothers, "Mick" and "Brian." The three boys have a keen interest in music and spend many hours writing and practicing their own songs. Their song-writing experiments allow them to hone their writing skills, but their love for music also gives them a familiarity with some basic mathematical concepts, and their exploration of music history opens for them a window into history in general.

John also learns from many informal activities not directly tied to his interest in music. He adds to his scientific knowledge as he explores at parks and nature centers, stargazes, and watches *Nova* and *Nature*. He finds that opportunities for becoming more proficient in mathematics arise as he helps his parents with home remodeling and maintenance projects, measures out the ingredients for making his favorite desserts, and plays Monopoly with Mick and Brian. John becomes acquainted with the concepts and acquires many of the skills covered in English classes as he reads whatever strikes his fancy from his family's large selection of books,

newspapers, and magazines, and as he discusses what he reads with his parents and siblings. He also practices his writing skills by crafting real-life letters, contest entries, and the like. John's knowledge of history results from watching such PBS programs as *American Experience* and *Finding Your Roots*, reading historical fiction, doing genealogy with his parents, and visiting museums and cemeteries.

One may wonder whether children will be prepared to pursue higher education or enter the workforce if they are educated in this informal way. This is an understandable concern, but it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of unschooling is for children to develop a love of learning and be equipped with the tools to educate themselves about any subject. The hope is that if this is achieved, students will of their own accord identify the subjects and fields about which they care mostly deeply and be inspired to take the necessary steps to pursue those interests. Indeed, unschooling parents rarely pressure their children to follow a specific life path. Instead, most unschooling parents encourage their high-school- age children to develop their own next-step goals. Because these are goals that the children have set for themselves, the parents reason that the children will be motivated to carry out the preparations for achieving their goals. The above examples involving Erik and John are typical of elementary or middle-school-age unschoolers. While high-school-age unschooled children will continue to do many of the same types of activities as their younger counterparts, they will usually also engage in more formal self-directed studying if doing so is necessary to meet their higher education or career goals.

Why Political Liberals Should Welcome Unschooling

Unschooling requires a considerable degree of confidence in both oneself and one's child. However, it is just this quality of trusting one's child with his or her own education that makes unschooling attractive from a political liberal perspective. For one thing, having a sense of one's own agency is a prerequisite for developing political autonomy. Unschoolers are largely in charge of deciding what, when, how, and for how long they will learn. This highly individualized approach to education gives most unschooled children the sense that they are unique individuals who have both the freedom and the responsibility to direct their own education in the way that is of most benefit to them. The result is that unschooling strongly promotes autonomy, as it encourages children to view themselves as persons capable of making important decisions for themselves.

While having a sense of one's own agency is a necessary condition for becoming autonomous, it is not a sufficient one, as it is possible to have a sense of one's own agency and still allow oneself to be influenced and controlled by others to an excessive degree. To be fully autonomous, children must also exercise their agency by submitting external influences to critical reflection. They must make their own choices, certainly, but they must also be adequately cognizant of and endorse what those choices entail. Unschooling children will most likely do excellently on this front as well, as they are continually encouraged to seek out information for themselves instead of having material taught to them. This makes it likely that they will be active participants in their political lives, rather than passive nominal citizens who are content to let others make decisions for them or to follow others' lead without first considering the implications of doing so.

Indeed, because unschooled children are used to thinking of themselves as independent individuals with distinct preferences and ways of viewing the world, there is considerably less likelihood relative to other homeschoolers that they will blindly accept their parents' political positions. Granted, some unschoolers will surely adopt their parents' views without either critically reflecting on these views or giving due consideration to alternative positions. But because unschoolers are raised to be lifelong learners who seek out information for themselves, it seems likely that such cases will be the exception rather than the rule.

Unschooling also gives students practice deliberating with others. As I mentioned earlier, unschoolers are permitted to regularly deliberate with their parents about their education in a way that no other system of education that I am aware of allows. Presumably, both parent and child have an important stake in such educational debates and, most likely, they respect each other as reasonable individuals. Unschooled children then have a unique opportunity to practice the sort of respectful deliberation about significant issues that is essential in a politically liberal society.

One might have doubts about this point. Indeed, one might wonder whether it may in fact be harmful for future citizens to cut their teeth debating with their parents in this way. Given the closeness of the unschooling parent/child relationship and unschooling parents' desire to let their children take the lead in terms of education, perhaps unschooled children are easily able to manipulate their parents to get what they want, educationally speaking. If that is true, unschool graduates might go on to employ similar techniques when deliberating with their fellow citizens. That would be a serious concern.

I think, however, this type of manipulation is unlikely for two reasons. First, precisely *because* unschool children are, for the most part, in charge of their own education, they are more likely to see their parents as helpful guides rather than opponents. An unschooled child is aware

of her ability to chart her own educational course and so has little incentive for educational manipulation. Much less, certainly, than do children who are conventionally educated, or children who are non-unschooling homeschoolers. (Many such children will still sometimes engage in educational debates with their parents—such occasions are simply much more frequent in the case of unschoolers.) In addition, it would be a mistake to view unschooling parents as pushovers. Parents seldom choose to unschool to indulge their children. Instead, such a decision is usually the result of a determined desire to help children develop into individuals who value learning and are capable of acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in any area they wish. Because most of those who unschool have a well-defined vision for what they want for their children, they are unlikely to be individuals who can be easily swayed from their educational objectives.

True, there are some ways in which deciding educational questions with one's parents is undeniably different from taking part in the debates that shape a politically liberal society. In addition to the dissimilarity between a parent/child relationship and the way in which free and equal citizens relate to one another, the educational topics under consideration in such discussions are not political issues. Yet, educational questions have a special importance to most children, as the business of becoming educated takes up a considerable portion of a child's time. For this reason, engaging in regular debates about educational issues has the potential to give unschooled children a unique sense of what may be accomplished through reasoned deliberation about an issue that is of great real-life significance to them. (While school children may practice engaging in reasoned deliberation with their peers about a variety of issues, the outcome of these debates is unlikely to have the real-life consequences for them that such educational debates would.)

There are a few other reasons to feel optimistic about the likelihood that unschoolers will learn to practice the tolerance and respect for others that is necessary for effective deliberation. For one thing, Kyla Ebels-Duggan contends that contrary to what many seem to believe, the model of education that political liberals should prefer is one that exposes children to a variety of worldviews while still treating their parents' views as true or best.²⁸ One important reason that Ebels-Duggan holds this view is because she believes that children will be more likely to adopt the virtue of intellectual charity if they are educated in an environment that gives a particular view primacy over other views. Teachers who are compelled to present all views as equal (i.e. maintain a neutral stance) cannot model intellectual charity toward views with which they disagree or respect for citizens who hold such views, as students will not know to which comprehensive doctrines the teachers personally subscribe.²⁹ Unschooling children will surely be aware of their parents' worldviews, and so will be in a position to recognize the significance of any situations in which their parents exhibit intellectual charity. Of course, unschooled children have no advantage in this respect if their parents do not in fact possess or do not model this virtue. Still, at the very least it is unlikely that unschoolers will be worse off in this regard than will students who attend other types of political liberal-sanctioned schools.

There is a second reason that unschooling can help children become reasonable citizens: growing up as an unschooler encourages the development of self-respect. This is significant, as *self-respect* is a prerequisite for *respecting others*, at least in the Rawlsian sense.³⁰ Such respect entails an acknowledgment of mutual reasonableness and rationality, a recognition of the fact that other individuals are, *like us*, capable of making informed decisions about their own lives,

²⁸ Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Moral education in the liberal state." *Journal of Practical Ethics* 1, no. 2 (2013), 42.

²⁹ Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Moral education in the liberal state," 54.

³⁰ Although this particular claim is my own, Rawls places great value on self-respect. For example, see p. 386-391 of *A Theory of Justice*, in which Rawls discusses why self-respect is perhaps the most important primary good.

even if those decisions differ from the ones we would have made in the same circumstances. Unschoolers grow up learning to rely on their own judgment instead of deferring to authority figures such as teachers and parents. And if unschoolers recognize, as most surely will, that they are capable of making informed decisions without relying on the judgments of authority figures, then they are likely to accept that their fellow citizens are similarly capable of making considered decisions under their own power.

Moving on from the topic of effective deliberation, there is yet another way in which unschoolers' high degree of control over their own education is significant. Rawls tells us that part of being a reasonable and rational citizen is being able to, "form, revise, and to pursue a conception of the good, and to deliberate in accordance with it."³¹ Indeed, having a capacity for a conception of the good is fundamental. It is one of the two moral powers (the other is the capacity for a sense of justice) that Rawls believes together constitute one prerequisite for being free and equal citizens.³² Conceptions of the good comprise citizens' final ends, i.e. the ideals that they value the most, as well as their attachments and loyalties to both individuals and groups.³³ One's conception of the good is informed by one's comprehensive doctrine,³⁴ and it is not fixed. Indeed, a citizen's conception of the good may change significantly over the course of his or her life.³⁵

Unschooling is uniquely suited to giving children practice in forming, revising, and pursuing their own conceptions of the good. This is because unschoolers are allowed to choose from a range of educational approaches and explore their interests in a way that conventionally

³¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 72.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ A citizen's comprehensive doctrine provides a touchstone for which ends and commitments he or she ought to value and maintain. See *Political Liberalism*, 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

educated children and even most other homeschooled children are not. Children who are able to consider, determine, and pursue what is truly important to them in the realm of education will be well prepared to assume their adult responsibilities of considering, determining, and pursuing what is truly important to them in life as a whole.

The process of forming their own conception of the educational good also makes unschooled children aware of their educational rights and resources. This is significant, as children who are aware of their educational rights and resources are more likely to become adults who realize the importance of understanding their rights and resources in every area of their lives, including in the political sphere. And saying that unschool graduates are likely to realize the importance of understanding their political rights and resources is really equivalent to saying that they are likely to possess the other moral power that Rawls describes: the capacity for a sense of justice.³⁶

According to Rawls, citizens who possess a sense of justice will have, “the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from the public conception of justice which characterizes the fair terms of social cooperation.”³⁷ The reason that citizens’ possession and understanding of political rights and resources is important is because it helps to ensure that they are and remain free and equal individuals, a state which is *only possible* if the majority of citizens act from the public conception of justice. This tight connection between understanding the significance of possessing political rights and resources and realizing the importance of understanding, applying, and acting from the conception of justice is the reason that unschool graduates are likely to possess the capacity for a sense of justice.

³⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

All things considered, unschooling fosters institutional autonomy for several reasons. For one thing, it encourages children to become aware of the educational rights and resources they hold. Further, it allows children to develop into individuals who have a strong sense of their own agency, independence, and what they value in the realm of education, which makes it likely that they will make full use of those rights and resources. In addition, unschooling promotes justificatory autonomy by giving children crucial practice deliberating effectively with others. Once unschooled children reach adulthood, it stands to reason that the skills and awareness gained during the course of their education will inform how they conduct themselves in all areas of their life, including in the political sphere. For example, as mentioned above, children who understand the importance of being aware of their educational rights and resources will likely become adults who value understanding their political rights and resources. All in all, the factors detailed in this section make it extremely likely that unschooled children will develop political autonomy, which is a vital component of any political liberal education program.

Unschooled Children and Knowledge of the Political System and Public Culture

While unschooling's self-directed approach to learning promotes political autonomy, it also opens this method of education up to some criticisms. One thing that might be troubling is this: it seems that unschooled children could simply decide that they do not wish to learn anything. And if they do make that choice, then it appears one would have to abandon all hope that they will become independent, self-supporting adults.

My response is this: one must be careful not to fall into the trap of confusing unschooling with the “no schooling” approach mentioned above, in which parents leave their children completely to their own devices. It is essential to remember that while unschooling children are largely in control of what they learn, they do not stand truly alone at the helm of their education. To picture unschooling children as flying solo is to ignore the vital guidance that unschooling parents provide their children. And while it is quite true that most unschooling children are not required to learn anything *in particular*, unschooling parents almost without exception consider education highly important. After all, as I mentioned earlier, the main goal of unschooling is that children develop a love of learning and continue to learn throughout their lives.

Yet, there does seem to be one thing in particular that unschooled children must learn if unschooling is to be an acceptable method of education in a politically liberal society. If they are to be truly *politically* autonomous, then they must be familiar with the political system and the public culture. But what is to ensure that unschooled children will choose to learn about these subjects? This is a difficult question, and I must concede that there is little to guarantee that they will. While unschooling parents have the ability to encourage their children to learn about these subjects, they may not do so.

However, there are several considerations that will help to allay potential fears about this important point. For one thing, the decision to unschool is not one that can be made lightly, politically speaking. Homeschooling in general is politically contentious in the contemporary United States, and the strength and vigor of the homeschooling lobby is universally acknowledged in the homeschooling literature. At a minimum, committed homeschooling parents must be aware of the homeschooling regulations in their state and keep abreast of any political developments that have the potential to affect those regulations. This is presumably

even more true of unschooling parents, as unschooling is more controversial than is homeschooling in general and so is more subject to being restricted by political means. It is implausible that children raised in such an environment will graduate without having learned at least the basics of the political system and public culture.³⁸

One might argue here that if a politically liberal society allows unschooling, then at some point in the future unschooling will cease to be an unusual education choice. And if that does happen, unschooling parents will no longer feel a compelling need to be politically aware. However, unschooling requires such a degree of confidence in oneself and one's child that it is unlikely to ever be embraced by more than a minority of the population. Unschooling appears to involve risking the future success of one's child in a way that few parents would be willing to accept, even if they were acquainted with successful unschooled children. Unschooling also requires a level of commitment and dedication that many parents would likely be reluctant to undertake. After all, as I discussed earlier, unschooling is not just a method of education. It is a way of life.³⁹ And if unschoolers remain an educational minority, then unschooling parents will still need to be on their political guard, as all members of any minority group must be.⁴⁰

The fact that unschooling is a way of life provides another reason to feel confident that unschooled children will in fact learn about the political system and public culture. Unschoolers are encouraged to be curious about the world and to see every experience as a chance to learn something new. It is difficult to believe that there will be no opportunities for such children to

³⁸ Although it is also worth noting that this particular claim, while applicable to the case of the contemporary U.S., may not apply to a politically liberal society in which important political decisions are made using reasons that all citizens can deem acceptable.

³⁹ While it would likely be going too far to say that unschooling is itself a conception of the good, we *can* tell a great deal about unschooling parents' conceptions of the good from their decision to educate their children in this way. For example, the conception of the good of an unschooling parent would most likely include high regard for the values of independence and education.

⁴⁰ It is true that political minorities could breathe easier in a well-ordered society than in the contemporary U.S., but they would most likely still need to be vigilant in a well-ordered society, and their children would still be politically aware.

learn about these subjects before they graduate, and that they will not take advantage of at least some of those opportunities. Perhaps a grade-school-aged unschooler picks up a child's biography of Abraham Lincoln while browsing at the library. Or, as a middle schooler, she visits a cemetery with her family and, glancing down, sees the grave of a revolutionary war veteran. Or perhaps as a high schooler he makes a trip to an art museum and pauses in front of a painting such as Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*, which depicts Ruby Bridges on her way to desegregate an all-white school. As anyone who loves to learn knows, acquiring one piece of information leads very easily to more questions and more subjects one wishes to investigate. Given the education-as-a-way-of-life nature of unschooling, it is extremely likely that unschooled children will have at least a few experiences that spark their civic curiosity during the course of their childhoods.

These claims are somewhat speculative, however. Another possibility for ensuring that unschoolers develop adequate knowledge of the political system and public culture is the following. Gordon Davis and Blain Neufeld suggest that teaching children to be reasonable citizens might require shared civics classes at various stages in students' education.⁴¹ These classes would bring children from a variety of backgrounds together to learn about the basics of the political system and public culture. Students would also practice debating with one another about a number of socially and politically contentious issues without referring to their respective comprehensive doctrines.⁴²

While unschoolers are generally resistant to any form of educational regulation, there are several mitigating factors that may make such a requirement tolerable. Such civics classes would

⁴¹ Gordon Davis and Blain Neufeld, "Political Liberalism, Civic Education, and Educational Choice," *Social Theory and Practice* 33, no. 1 (2007): pp. 47-74, <https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract200733135>, 73.

⁴² Gordon Davis and Blain Neufeld, "Political Liberalism, Civic Education, and Educational Choice," 59.

1) cover only one subject, unlike regulations that issue guidelines for how multiple—or all—school subjects are to be taught, and 2) occur over a relatively short period in a student’s life. Unschoolers would be more likely to submit to such a requirement if these classes occurred at the high school level (rather than at a younger age). If that were the case, such classes would almost certainly be of too little duration and come too late in childhood to diminish the intellectual curiosity and love of learning that unschooling parents hope to cultivate in their children with their laid-back approach to education. (Many unschooling parents believe that the surest way to make a child dislike learning is to *compel* him or her to take in new information, especially at a prescribed time and in a prescribed way.) The likelihood that unschoolers would take issue with such requirements would also be lessened by the fact that these classes would not single out unschooled students, but instead would be required for all students regardless of educational background.

It is also important to remember that there is no ideal educational method from a political liberal perspective. Each acceptable method will have its strengths and its drawbacks. And unschooling’s most significant drawback—that it is difficult to regulate for knowledge of the political system and public culture—is arguably no more concerning from a political autonomy standpoint than are the limitations associated with conventional schooling. Despite what the standardization present in traditional schooling would suggest, conventional schools also have difficulty ensuring that children learn certain subjects and skills. Autonomy is a prime example, as it is not something that can be taught, but something that children must develop for themselves. While conventional schools can provide resources that facilitate the development of a sense of one’s own agency and independence, unschooling’s *inherent* autonomy-promoting features should make us considerably more confident that the average unschooled child will

develop a strong sense of his or her own agency and independence than that the average school child will do so.

My point here is that it would be inconsistent for political liberals to exclude unschooling from consideration simply because it will be difficult to ensure that unschooled children learn about the political system and public culture. Other methods of education, some of which political liberals sanction, find it difficult to ensure that children develop a strong sense of their own agency and independence. And having a strong sense of one's agency and independence is no less a prerequisite for being politically autonomous than is possessing knowledge of the political system and public culture. In addition, as I discussed above, there are several good reasons to think that unschoolers *will* in fact develop an adequate understanding of the political system and public culture.

Ethical Autonomy

This paper would be incomplete without an acknowledgement of the distinction Rawls makes between political autonomy and what he calls “ethical” autonomy. Individuals who are ethically autonomous enjoy a type of autonomy that is not confined to the political sphere but instead extends to all aspects of their lives. According to Rawls, a politically liberal society should prepare children to be politically autonomous, but it “leaves the weight of ethical autonomy to be decided by citizens severally in light of their comprehensive doctrines.”⁴³ Part of the rationale here is that certain individuals, e.g. some of the highly ideological homeschoolers mentioned earlier, consider it vital that their children are raised to have a particular set of beliefs

⁴³ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 78.

and values. Teaching all children to be ethically autonomous would have the potential to disrespect such individuals' comprehensive doctrines, as it would likely result in their children questioning the beliefs they were raised to hold.⁴⁴ Rawls did not believe that there was anything inherently wrong with children questioning their parents' beliefs, but he maintained they need not be taught to do so.⁴⁵ However, if parents wish their children to possess ethical (or, as it is also called, "comprehensive") autonomy and choose to educate them accordingly, that is also perfectly acceptable.

While Rawls did not consider it necessary that children develop ethical autonomy in the course of their education, a number of others who work in political liberalism hold that comprehensive autonomy education is an essential part of the political liberal education program.⁴⁶ Additionally, some believe that educating students to be politically autonomous will have the inevitable result of their becoming comprehensively autonomous as well.⁴⁷ This is known as the convergence thesis. In arguing for this thesis, Amy Gutmann contends that the skills and virtues that children must possess as future citizens in a liberal democracy are the very same skills and virtues that will prompt them to reflect on how they wish to live their lives.⁴⁸

There is considerable debate about this issue.⁴⁹ Fortunately, it does not have direct bearing on the question of whether unschooling is compatible with political liberalism. Because the development of comprehensive autonomy is *acceptable* even to those political liberals who

⁴⁴ Although it is worth noting that Rawls grants that this may also happen in cases of children who are only encouraged to develop political autonomy. See *Political Liberalism*, 199-200.

⁴⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 199.

⁴⁶ For example, Gina Schouten. See "Political Liberalism and Autonomy Education: Are Citizenship-Based Arguments Enough?," *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 5 (February 2018): pp. 1071-1093, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1071-1>.

⁴⁷ Notably, Amy Gutmann. See "Civic Education and Social Diversity," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 557-79.

⁴⁸ Amy Gutmann, "Civic Education and Social Diversity," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 557-79, 573.

⁴⁹ For example, Victoria Costa ("Rawlsian Civic Education: Political Not Minimal,") and Stephen Macedo (*Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*) advance views that resemble Gutmann's, while Gordon Davis and Blain Neufeld ("Political Liberalism, Civic Education, and Educational Choice"), and Kyla Ebels-Duggan ("Moral Education in the Liberal State") reject the convergence thesis.

reject the convergence thesis, and because some political liberals believe that children *must* develop comprehensive autonomy in the course of their education, it is important that I show why there is reason to think that unschooled children will become comprehensively autonomous. To that end, I will briefly sketch some points that illustrate why one should feel confident about just that question. But, as will shortly become clear, these points are largely independent of the reasons that unschoolers are likely to possess political autonomy. This means that unschoolers have their bases covered in terms of comprehensive autonomy regardless of whether the convergence thesis is in fact true.

There is a great deal of discussion about what comprehensive autonomy education requires. But, most fundamentally, it seems that if children are to become comprehensively autonomous adults, then they must be both exposed to a variety of worldviews and taught how to critically reflect upon those views. The first thing to note is that because unschooled children largely chart their own education, unschooling does not lend itself well to restricting children's access to alternative beliefs and values. But one might worry that even if unschooling parents are willing to expose their children to a diversity of viewpoints, unschoolers will still encounter comparatively few distinct worldviews simply because they are absent from the school classroom and so cut off from its attendant possibilities for social interaction.

A closer look reveals that this is not a given. These types of arguments seem to assume that children will only have opportunities to be exposed to other worldviews in a school setting. This is simply not true. Many extra-curricular or leisure activities have this potential as well. And because homeschoolers save a great deal of time by eliminating school-related preparation and commuting, they have freedom to engage in these types of activities. This is even more true of unschoolers, given their free-form approach to education.

The most obvious example of the type of comprehensive autonomy-promoting activity I am describing is reading. Children who enjoy spending their recreation time in this way will most likely encounter books featuring characters whose beliefs and values differ from those of their parents. Indeed, one might argue that reading about different points of view is in some ways superior to encountering such views via in-person interactions. Reading allows, and, in fact, often compels children to imagine themselves in the place of those about whom they read. Children “try on” alternative views while losing themselves in the pages of books, an act which significantly increases the chances that they will critically reflect upon such views. Both fiction and nonfiction grant a degree of access to the innermost depths of others—and by extension to their motivations for holding the beliefs and possessing the values that they do—that is not easily experienced during in-person interactions.

There are many other pastimes that can allow unschooled children entry to the wider world and the diversity of the individuals who inhabit it. One girl profiled in *Real Lives: Eleven Teenagers Who Don't go to School* recounts her engagement in one such activity. She writes that she became interested in having pen pals and—at the time of writing—had more than fifty correspondents, exchanging letters with friends on every continent except Europe.⁵⁰ It is difficult to believe that such extensive correspondence would not result in this student encountering a variety of beliefs and values, a number of which differ from those of her parents.

Other activities and interests have similar possibilities. A boy with a budding interest in a career as a chef may come across recipes that stipulate the preparations must occur in a kosher manner, prompting him to research Judaism. A girl who lives and breathes art may become curious about the history of the complex relationship between religion and artistic expression. A

⁵⁰ Grace Llewellyn, (1993), *Real lives: Eleven teenagers who don't go to school*, (Eugene, OR: Lowry House), 166.

child who collects stamps as a hobby may well acquire pieces depicting a variety of philosophers and religious figures, and so on. I contended in the previous section that unschoolers' learning-as-a-way-of-life mindset all but guarantees that they will receive an adequate civic education. Similarly, there are an abundance of potential bridges to learning about other worldviews if one views every activity as an opportunity to learn something new, as most unschoolers are encouraged to do.

Of course, it is not sufficient that unschoolers merely be exposed to alternative viewpoints. They must also critically reflect on those viewpoints if they are to become truly comprehensively autonomous. It is undesirable (and likely impossible) to force students to engage in critical reflection, but one prerequisite for engaging in such reflection is surely having enough free time and mental space to do so. Most unschoolers have a fair amount of free time, time that can be used to consider the significance and implications of the alternative worldviews they encounter. Is it reasonable to think that unschoolers will indeed use some of their leisure time to consider the merits and drawbacks of viewpoints that differ from their own or those of their parents? I think it is. As I discussed earlier, unschoolers are encouraged to forge their own educational paths. Not only does this encourage them to see themselves as independent individuals who are responsible for their own lives, but it also requires that they practice weighing such important decisions as what might be the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing particular subjects and interests, whether they ought to favor one approach to learning a subject over another, and so on. Unschoolers then possess not only the mindset to engage in critical reflection about the worldviews they encounter, but also the skills to do so.

Conclusion

As a final point, it is important to acknowledge the lack of data about unschooling. Little is known about how unschool graduates fare in the real world—what percentage are economically independent, go to college, pursue graduate studies, and so on—much less how many of them follow in their parents’ political footsteps. As a result, I do not have the kind of evidence to back up the claims I make in this paper that I would like to be able to provide, and I certainly do not come close to *proving* that most unschoolers will become politically autonomous. My argument is just that—an argument. Still, I think it is a compelling one. Unschooling’s autonomy-promoting aspects are an inherent part of its very structure, as one of the *defining* features of this method of education is that children largely direct their own education. As a result, it seems clear that the majority of unschoolers cannot help but form a strong sense of their own agency and learn to think independently. While it is less certain that they will become aware of their political rights and resources and learn to deliberate effectively with their fellow citizens, as I have noted, there are reasons to think that they will be at least adequate in those regards as well. If nothing more, the points I have raised in this paper make it clear that unschooling is worthy of much more attention from political liberals than it currently receives.

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