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The Demands of Liberal Education. [Review]

Sarah M. Stitzlein

University of New Hampshire

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Levinson, Meira. (1999). *The Demands of Liberal Education*. New York: Oxford University Press

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Reviewed by Sarah M. McGough
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Oxford-trained liberal theorist and practicing teacher, Meira Levinson, offers a well-articulated argument for her vision of the ideal liberal education in *The Demands of Liberal Education*. Particularly helpful for those of us who struggle to convey the aims of liberal education to our children and students, she provides an eloquent explanation as she describes her ideal school and the steps necessary for its realization:

The aim of liberal education is to teach children the skills, habits, knowledge, and dispositions for them to be thoughtful, mature, self-assured individuals who map their path in the world with care and confidence, take responsibility for their actions, fulfill their duties as citizens, question themselves and others when appropriate, listen to and learn from others, and ultimately lead their lives with dignity, integrity, and self-respect—i.e. to be autonomous in the fullest sense of the word (1999, p. 164).

As her words paint a portrait of an educated individual, we can see that it is colored by autonomy, a central tenet throughout her work.

Striving to fill the literature gap existing between specialized writings on liberalism and the slew of commentary on liberal civic education, Levinson sets out to clarify the more general connection between contemporary political theory and education policy. She endeavors to dispel false intuitions about liberalism adopted by theorists and practitioners as they shape education policy so that she can make liberalism a more coherent theory with an integrated understanding of education as essential to its success. This stated intent made me a bit uncomfortable from the outset, for I feared that she may focus too much on improving education as it relates to strengthening liberalism, rather than giving sufficient attention to improving education itself so that liberal goals can be actualized in citizens. Though this doubt lingered with me as I read, I began to see that, for Levinson, these two goals should not and cannot be separated, for their achievement is codependent.

Her first chapter begins with a methodical defining of liberalism which may be of little interest to those already familiar with the political theory, but eases newcomers into her argument and acquaints them with its position in the history of liberal talk. From the beginning, she explicitly states that she will not defend liberalism and its principles, which is an acceptable omission given that the topic of her book already assumes their recognized importance. Other exclusions in her initial defining of liberalism are not as acceptable, however. Although she briefly justifies scholars who have influenced her preferred understanding of contemporary liberalism from a small list of well-knowns (Rawls, Locke, Hobbes, Mill, and the like), she does not bother justifying that list as opposed to one of more recent, perhaps lesser-knowns, who further or challenge the liberal frameworks uttered by these men. Similarly, she tends to simplify liberalism into a political/autonomy-based divide. Surely liberalism is more nuanced than these alternatives, such that one cannot be judged superior to the other without being influenced by or paying respect to third-party liberal voices or critics. Inclusion of these others would make her portrayal of liberalism more accurately complex and might make the liberalism she favors more convincing.

Nonetheless, she aptly defines the three elements of contemporary liberal theory as (a) the fact of pluralism, where there are many conceptions of the good life; (b) the legitimation process, whereby free and equal citizens consensually adopt governing principles and institutions; and (c) substantive liberal institutions, which form a constitutional democracy respective of individual liberties and conceptions of the good life. As she rightly claims, liberals of varying types struggle to unify these elements. Picking on political liberals who are not as supportive of the centrality of autonomy as she is, Levinson tries to show that political liberalism requires at least a rudimentary level of autonomy in order for unification to be achievable by way of justifying liberal freedoms and institutions. She challenges Rawls and others from his political camp by arguing against their claim that autonomy is just a capacity. Instead, she asserts that it is a good that is a necessary and central part of contemporary liberal theory. She proposes that liberal freedoms and institutions are best grounded in a weakly perfectionist sense of autonomy, which she initially defines as the ability to form, evaluate, revise, and realize one's own conception of the good. An alternative to political liberalism, Levinson defines a weakly perfectionist state as one that "(1) values individual autonomy and provides citizens the means and freedoms to exercise it; (2) treats all responsible, self-authenticating individuals as equal citizens; and therefore (3) does not discriminate against non-autonomous citizens in protecting their rights or fulfilling its obligation toward them" (p. 22). Her disagreement with political liberalism, however, lingers throughout the book, popping up here and there as she adopts some of its claims while persistently trying to show the superiority of autonomy-based weak perfectionism. Even after its initial overturn in this first chapter, she brings it up repeatedly, just to shut it down, seemingly beating a dead horse.

As she defends autonomy-valuing liberalism, she tries to fashion a conception of autonomy that is substantive, yet as minimal as possible, and with wide appeal. In the spirit of her liberal predecessor, Eamonn

Callan (1988), she points out that autonomy is a word used by people in many different ways and that philosophers cannot define it out of thin air to serve their purposes. Appropriately, then, she attempts to define autonomy without diverging too far from its commonly used sense of “self-rule.” While this gives her project a grounded feel and makes her argument comprehensible to the lay person, it goes against her intent to shatter uncritical intuitions which are widely held about liberalism. This should include scrutinizing the common use of a liberal term such as autonomy before adopting that use as pivotal to her seemingly more thorough employment, Callan’s warning notwithstanding.

Insofar as her version of liberalism is committed to the adult exercise of autonomy, Levinson believes liberalism must be held to the corresponding commitment of developing autonomy in future adults, i.e., children. She rightly identifies necessary preconditions for autonomy in terms of first achieving personhood. Autonomy requires personality which enables one to be a choosing agent by virtue of having an identity from which to begin considering alternatives. She describes this in terms of “cultural coherence” in that one’s culture provides the values and identities necessary for one to identify one’s self. Being embedded in a culture also allows a person to use the normative framework of that culture to consider alternative lifestyles found elsewhere. An individual’s autonomy is also dependent on a plurality of constitutive values and beliefs. By aligning one’s self with some values and not others, one is able to have a standpoint from which to consider certain values one holds as well as those of other’s without putting one’s identity as a whole in jeopardy. They also allow an individual to introspectively consider the criticisms others make of him or her. Interestingly, the liberal “fact of plurality” becomes quietly transformed into the “good of plurality” as the book develops. It is a good because it contributes to the good, autonomy, by requiring individuals to defend their chosen conceptions of the good against a range of others available to them. Sufficient justification for its elevated status in her particular understanding of liberalism seems lacking and its skewing effect on the three elements of liberalism that she is trying to unify is overlooked. Moreover, her differentiation between the existence of many, often competing, conceptions of the good amongst peoples and the existence of a variety of substantive values held by an individual is problematically unclear.

To my delight, however, plurality as an autonomy-promoting good is linked to an autonomy-promoting community, for whose interest she argues that liberal freedoms and institutions must be designed to protect. Hence, she moves liberalism from its commonly known emphasis on individuals to its lesser appreciated concern for communities, along the way unveiling the tedious co-dependency of liberalism on a plural public culture for its own survival. But while plural communities provide the conditions for the exercise of autonomy, schools offer the best space for its development. And it is to this which she turns in chapter two. There, she provides a lengthy paragraph which lists personal qualities needed for developing and achieving autonomy. These range from clear self-expression to imagination and from literacy to being culturally socialized. While her sense of autonomy is admittedly demanding and difficult to fully achieve, the characteristics she lists are admirable and capable of being fulfilled in a supportive context. Her sense of autonomy fits with

the idealistic spirit of the book and is reasoned enough to prevent contenders from claiming it should be more simple.

The second chapter also argues that liberal theory is compatible with state obligated coercion in the form of paternalism, where the coherently defined liberal state has the best understanding of the child's interests, i.e., the development of autonomy, in mind. Coercion with the intent of such development is permissible because the capacity it fosters can later be used to overcome future coercion. Coercion by parents, however, is often problematically geared toward the actualization of parents' own particular, content-driven, conceptions of the good improperly imposed on children who are not yet capable of choosing the good for themselves. She tackles parental rights claims to dictating the educational interests of children well by explaining that the child's interest in the development of his or her own capacity for autonomy should be privileged over the muscle-flexing exercise of parental autonomy. She suitably uses the case of religious fundamentalist children who are raised to be heteronymous and to uphold one narrow view of the good life as an example of unjustified parental control which limits the child's development of autonomy. She draws on James Dwyer briefly as she differentiates parents' privileges to guide children from mistaken claims to parents' rights to control them. It seems that more of his work could provide empirical cases in which state-controlled education for autonomy must make significant demands in order to ensure the well-being and autonomy of its students. Expanding on this distinction could also bolster her later discussion of school choice.

Levinson contends that schools whose structure is autonomy-oriented through their privileging of critical reflection, reasoned argument, toleration, and other self-legislating endeavors are locations where, when immersed, children would most likely develop their own capacities. She suggests the opposite of most liberals' intuitions about schooling, a school detached from the particular values and commitments held by parents or democratically chosen by the local community. In such a school, parental involvement would be welcomed, but parental voices could not shape the aims and content of the school. Levinson believes that this demand of liberal education would free children from parental tyranny which requires strict adherence to a particular conception of the good, bringing them into a plural community of culturally imbedded others where autonomy and defensible notions of the good life can be fostered. Although respectful of the developmental appropriateness of such activity, I fear she underestimates the strain children may feel when torn between the visions of life and education they receive from their state school and those upheld at home, if they have a home life stable enough to pass down a vision at all. Perhaps this is a negligible first generation effect that would be overcome once those children, schooled in the value of autonomy, themselves become parents. Nonetheless, the pain for students in the present is certainly hard to overlook. There is also another knotty future issue that Levinson does not sufficiently address. Following a few generations of schooling under her liberal educational ideal, many now viable ways of life would no longer be tenable because they would be in conflict with fully developed autonomy. This loss is detrimental to rich pluralism and diversity, as fellow liberal William Galston (1991; 2002) would most likely agree.

Levinson's work is particularly interesting when read in conjunction with William Galston's latest release, *Liberal Pluralism* (2002). The contradictions between the two make the demands Levinson is articulating clearer and shed light on their intensity. Galston argues against educational policy like that advocated by Levinson which places the coercive power of the state in the specific direction of upholding one specific, autonomy-driven, view of the good life. He contends that such an act violates the negative liberty of citizens. Galston also disagrees with Levinson regarding parental rights. With two key liberal commentators struggling over such a monumental topic, the reading of both is worthwhile and intriguing. Levinson would most likely contend that liberalism is not about maximization of choices, but about fostering good options which are in accord with liberal citizenship. This is a hard sell to make to those who see narrowly defining the good life in terms of autonomy as antithetical to liberalism itself. Inclusion of her thorough response to this matter would make her argument for implementation more robust.

Unlike many liberal commentators, Levinson gives more than just a cursory nod to the arguments of "deschoolers, functionalists, and other radical theorists" (p. 82) regarding the hidden curriculum that would most likely continue to operate in the detached school she suggests. Instead of shrugging off their critique, she adopts their insights, overtly including the hidden curriculum, though renaming it the "informal curriculum". She claims that the open discussion of this aspect of schooling would be a valuable, knowable, and recognizable lesson in her ideal school. She hopes that it can be used to overcome "autonomy-inhibiting, capitalist-driven education reform" (p. 86) when explicitly used to unveil these underpinnings typically functioning in schools.

She turns next to discussing civic education. Though the transition feels a bit awkward, the topic's inclusion is necessary to making her portrayal of autonomy in a weak perfectionist state more thorough and to position her work amongst others who have recently considered civic education, though typically (as in the case of Amy Gutmann) more narrowly discussed in terms of democratic education. Levinson argues that education for autonomy and education for citizenship are not only compatible, but are also mutually reinforcing. Because civic education ensures the maintenance of a healthy liberal state which protects liberal freedoms and institutions, it is a prerequisite for the exercising of autonomy which depends on those very freedoms and institutions. There is also a considerable overlap of the skills and habits needed for both. She claims that civic education alerts students to their liberties, showing them how and to what extent they may act on them. She draws on the commonality of civic demands placed on all political actors to argue that the ideal liberal school should be common, with mutual language, common civic history, and some shared values. Schools should be a place where the private-public distinction of political liberalism is blurred (though not relinquished) through the minimally discriminatory incorporation of private commitments into the public identity cultivated in the school. She analyzes the treatment of private identities and public character within English, French, and American schools as she reaches this conclusion. She also contends that civic education offers a stable, 'thick' cultural identity which can be adopted by those students who are

unable to achieve embeddedness within the culture of their private home. It also provides the necessary shared and stable conditions for agency. This common identity arising from civic education can in some ways resolve the conflict between the development of choice and the development of cultural coherence which lingers in her autonomy-driven liberalism, though some may contend that is a homogenizing solution.

The final chapter deals with some steps and conditions necessary for the implementation of her ideal. One of these is granting parents and children a controlled choice in selecting which school to attend from a range of viable options. Levinson warns that choice here should not be understood in terms of an educational marketplace where a service is provided to consumers, a mistake many liberals intuitively make which is itself illiberal because it ranks market over political and social values. Rather, choice should be among student-centered, not consumer-driven schools. Choice should be an active process guided by free advice from academic professionals and not constrained by school-dictated admissions criteria. Levinson adds that no potential option should be a school which reflects a “fundamental or socially divisive” (p. 157) conception of the good, for fear that such a school would fail to fulfill the requirements of commonality or detachment. Therefore, religious schools, as purveyors of divisive visions of the good life, could not fulfill her liberal ideal. She does not, however, deny the functioning of private schools, but does suggest that they would require more extensive regulation to ensure that they meet liberal educational aims. She does a superb job of complicating the school choice debate through the use of conflicting empirical data and pinpointing theoretical differences between opposing positions. This discussion is timely in the United States given fresh evidence from test programs such as that in Cleveland and concerns with national assessment following President George W. Bush’s recent education mandates. It is also relevant to U.S. concerns with illiberal and intolerant teachings occurring in some fundamental religious schools. Although the discussion partially fulfills her aim of making liberal theory tenable through responding to empirical issues that affect it, its inclusion does not fit comfortably with the flow of the rest of her more theoretical argument.

One liberal education demand which may not sit well with many readers is that the aims of autonomy-developing liberal education should be constitutionally enshrined, thereby obligating the state to achieve them, though limiting public debate regarding them. Fixing educational aims in this way is a bold assertion, as I am sure Levinson is well aware. Such a suggestion limits the liberal ideal of public deliberation which won over many liberals following its expression by John Rawls a decade ago (1993). While she admits that debate about the elements of autonomy and the curriculum most successful for its achievement could continue following constitutional appointment, I am concerned about the publicly perceived futility of such debates. The populous may feel that their opinions are trivial in comparison to the will of a state already made more powerful through Levinson’s assigning it even more control. Throughout the book, she echoes and confirms many of the democratic points of the more widely read Gutmann, but, more true to liberalism, she argues that democratic deliberation, though important, should never be able to override the essential aims of education. Republican controlled

government and growing numbers of libertarians make talk of more state controlled schooling unlikely in America. Though seemingly untimely given its release in 1999 at the end of democratic presidential reign, perhaps the book is even more pertinent to liberals who feel more compelled now than ever to ensure that autonomy-based aims are being met in schools free from false-consciousness. And to this I toast Levinson and those encouraged to join her.

In her concluding remarks, Levinson insightfully recognizes that legislation regarding and constitutional inscription of the aims of liberal education are not enough to achieve her ideal. Political, legal, and cultural reforms are required. Rigorous teacher training in the importance and methods of developing autonomy is necessary, amongst other things. Most of all, an “autonomy-valuing liberal culture” (p. 165) is essential. To this end, she concludes by offering a challenge to citizens who have been swayed by her argument, to act on the very dynamic notion of liberalism which she has articulated. Her well-organized, clear arguments which require only minor understanding of philosophic methodology are likely to convince many already liberally persuaded readers, as well as some skeptics, to heed her call. Her tone carries conviction, which is not lost even when she admirably admits uncertainties or potential objections to her views, and this may convince even her more staunch critics to at least collaboratively join the discussion.

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About the reviewer

Sarah M. McGough is a doctoral student in philosophy of education in the department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her interests revolve around feminism, pragmatism, political theory, and ancient philosophy.



