MORAL PLURALISM AND SEX EDUCATION

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Abstract. How should common schools in a liberal pluralist society approach sex education in the face of deep disagreement about sexual morality? Should they eschew sex education altogether? Should they narrow its focus to facts about biology, reproduction, and disease prevention? Should they, in addition to providing a broad palette of information about sex, attempt to cover a range of alternative views about sexual morality in a “value-neutral” manner? Should they seek to impart a “thick” conception of sexual morality, which precisely articulates how individuals should lead their sexual lives? In this essay, Josh Corngold cautions against the adoption of each of these various approaches. He argues that schools should instead adopt an “autonomy-promoting” approach, which will aim to empower students, cognitively and emotionally, to exercise sovereignty over their own sexuality.

Deep and abiding disagreement about sexual morality is a fact of life in liberal pluralist societies. As some scholars suggest, this disagreement reflects an ongoing clash of two or more divergent sexual “ideologies” — unified systems of thought that structure people’s sexual beliefs and behavior.1 Alexander McKay, for instance, writes that debates over sexuality in Western culture can be framed in terms of a pitched battle between “restrictive” and “permissive” sexual ideologies.2 The former, so named for its overarching view that the only legitimate form of sexual conduct is coitus between a man and his wife, diametrically opposes the latter, which is rooted in the conviction that, whatever form it takes, consensual sex between mutually respecting persons is morally acceptable. McKay concedes that these two categories represent general, “ideal types”: they do not, in other words, capture the “specific, multifaceted belief systems of unique individuals” that “often have complex and sometimes contradictory origins.”3 Viewed as opposing poles on a continuum, however, the two categories become useful indicators of just how wide-ranging our views — and how fundamental our differences — concerning sexual morality are.4


3. Ibid., 38.

4. Our differences run so deep that even moral judgments that appear to be uncontroversial and to elicit substantial agreement in society — the wrongness of rape, for instance — turn out to be, upon further reflection, sources of underlying discord. David Archard, citing a book by Keith Burgess-Jackson, outlines three distinct theories of rape: the so called “conservative,” “liberal,” and “radical” theories. He notes that the adherents of these various theories all regard rape as wrong, but for widely divergent and incompatible reasons. They also define rape differently, in ways that accord with “their own theoretical
The fact that we disagree so profoundly about sexual morality makes deep disagreement about sex education all but inevitable. Different views about the basic nature and purposes of sex — and about what kinds of relationships and behaviors are morally legitimate and why — lead inexorably to different views about what, how, and when children should be taught about sex. Should children (and young children especially) be protected from too much information, or is keeping them in the proverbial dark liable to do them, and the general public, more harm than good? Should they be given detailed lessons in the use of contraceptive technology, and if so, at what age? Should they be instructed to abjure sex outside of marriage, or told that healthy, respectful sexual relationships can take place both in and outside the marital context? What, if anything, should children be taught about sexual orientation and same-sex relationships? The urgency of these (and many other) questions pertaining to sex education is exacerbated by our sense that how we answer them will have a substantial effect on the quality of individuals’ lives and the welfare of society as a whole. Yet our intuitions about which answers are the right ones vary in accordance with our diverse outlooks on sexual morality. Little wonder, then, that sex education is such an enduring source of discord and passionate debate.

The question at the heart of this essay is how K–12 common schools should approach sex education in the face of such unremitting discord. The central argument is that common schools should equip children with a range of developmentally appropriate information, skills, and dispositions that further their prospective interest in sexual self-determination. To set the stage for this thesis, the first section of the essay considers a variety of alternative approaches to sex education, highlighting the shortcomings of each. The second section outlines and defends an “autonomy-promoting” approach, the primary aim of which is to prepare students to exercise sovereignty over their own sexuality. The essay concludes by affirming the justifiability and importance of autonomy-promoting sex education, while also registering a caveat about its power to influence young people’s attitudes and behavior.


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Inadequate Approaches to School-Based Sex Education

In the face of enduring moral pluralism, there are a number of possible approaches to sex education that K–12 common schools could adopt which, upon reflection, prove unsatisfactory for one reason or another. In this section, I critique four such approaches: the so-called “outright avoidance,” “plumbing and prevention,” “value-neutral,” and “morally univocal” approaches. In focusing on these four (as well as the “autonomy-promoting” approach discussed in the next section), I do not mean to suggest that they exhaust the theoretical possibilities. Rather, I aim to convey a sense of the array of conceivable options open to sex education policymakers as they grapple with deep disagreement about sexual morality.

One option is to direct educators to steer clear of discussion of human sexuality. Eschewing this potent source of discord may be considered the only practical or adequately respectful way of dealing with ineliminable moral pluralism. An insistence on keeping the subject of sex out of formal school curricula is the characteristic feature of the “outright avoidance” strategy. Before the early decades of the twentieth century, this was the default strategy for schools in the United States. To the extent that the sex education of youth even took place in that earlier time, it was considered the exclusive province of families and churches. For the most part, however, in keeping with nineteenth-century Victorian sensibilities, “sexuality was a subject ... cloaked in euphemism and silence,” and sexual restraint and sublimation were the order of the day. What finally prompted Progressive Era reformers to begin pushing for school-based sex education was their growing sense that the “conspiracy of silence” surrounding sex was insufficient in the face of rapid urbanization, the breakdown of close-knit communities, and the pressing social problems accompanying these dramatic changes. In particular, concerns over creeping moral decline and the spread of “venereal diseases” (namely syphilis and gonorrhea) buttressed the case for bringing explicit instruction about sex into the classroom.

Of course, if disease control and prevention constituted a good reason for instituting formal sex education in the early twentieth century, it does so all the more today in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic. Generally speaking, lack of sexual awareness — along with a complex of other factors including low self-esteem, undeveloped empathy, deficient interpersonal and decision-making skills, and pessimism about one’s future prospects in life — contributes to a host of problems: from manipulation and abuse, to regrettable sex, to unintended pregnancy, to the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). All of these

6. By way of example, historian Jeffrey Moran directs his readers to a recollection from G. Stanley Hall — the pioneering American psychologist, educator, and author of the landmark study Adolescence (1904) — who described being taught as a child to refer to his genitals as “the dirty place.” See Jeffrey P. Moran, Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3.

7. Ibid., 25.
problems can have dire consequences for individuals and for society; yet all of them, there is cause to believe, can be ameliorated by evidence-based sex education programs.8 Granted, if families, churches, or other nonschool institutions could be counted on to implement these kinds of programs on a wide scale, it would obviate the need for school-based sex education. But there are reasons to think that they cannot. Because education is compulsory, programs implemented in schools — as opposed to in other civic institutions — have the potential to reach a very broad swath of the youth population. Furthermore, while parents and guardians are properly regarded as essential partners in the task of teaching children about sex and relationships, most lack the resources, training, and capacity to provide adequate sex education on their own. In sum, if certain programs are effective in elevating sexual awareness, promoting concern for others, and reducing risky behavior, and if at least a significant majority of children are to enjoy the benefits of said programs, then schools will need to be the major player in their implementation. “Outright avoidance” simply will not do.

Perhaps schools could somehow meet their obligation to teach children about sex and relationships without becoming embroiled in contentious debates about sexual morality. What one scholar aptly calls the “plumbing and prevention” approach operates under this assumption.9 The organizing principle of “plumbing and prevention” is that school-based sex education should focus on empirical facts about biology, reproduction, and disease prevention while explicitly avoiding more controversial, value-laden terrain. Why conflict-averse policymakers might be attracted to this particular strategy is plain to see: it promises to provide children with the information they need without alienating parents and other taxpaying citizens. Everyone wins.

Yet there are grave doubts as to the coherence and desirability of this purportedly value-free “plumbing and prevention” approach. To begin with, sex education is, by nature, saturated in values; as Mark Halstead and Michael Reiss note, it is an “inescapably value-laden activity.”10 Even the most assiduously “fact-focused” sex education curriculum is bound to communicate implicit or “hidden” values to children. The design and implementation of such a curriculum inevitably involves decisions about coverage and emphasis — decisions about which facts and bits of information to stress, which to mention in passing, and which to set aside altogether. These decisions, in turn, convey value-laden messages to those who are exposed to the curriculum: they leave students with the impression that


certain questions pertaining to sexuality are worthy of careful consideration while others are not, that certain behaviors and practices are normal while others are deviant, that certain identities are privileged while others are subordinate, and so on.11 Thus, while sexual values may go undiscussed and thereby unexamined in the “plumbing and prevention” approach, this does not clear those schools that adopt such an approach of the charge of imparting sexual values to children.

Furthermore, even if we set aside the feasibility of teaching children the basics of biology, reproduction, and disease prevention in a value-free manner, serious questions remain as to the wisdom and relative benefit of this strategy. Consider some of the topics that are liable to be circumvented in the pursuit of such a strategy: the affective dimensions of sex; the profound intimacy involved; the different ways in which people can experience sexual pleasure; the interpersonal obligations people assume (or ought to assume) when they engage in sexual activity with others; the roles communication, trust, mutual respect, and empathy all play in developing and maintaining healthy sexual relationships. When educators focus exclusively on “plumbing and prevention” without so much as broaching these other topics, the picture of sex that emerges is a decidedly reductive, emotionally barren, starkly mechanistic one. At best, the students involved will come away realizing that this is an incomplete picture; at worst, they will develop warped, excessively negative views about something that is, for many people, a key component of a happy and fulfilling life. All of this is to say that, in evaluating the “plumbing and prevention” approach, the apparent pragmatic advantages of averting especially delicate topics need to be weighed against the potential costs to individuals of perpetuating partial or distorted views of human sexuality.

Finally, those who continue to see some appeal in the value-free “plumbing and prevention” approach would do well to consider that children pick up value-laden messages about sex from a variety of sources — including from parents and other adults in their lives, from peers on the playground or in the hallway, and from the omnipresent and hypersexualized mass media — not all of which are necessarily well-informed or have children’s best interests at heart. Schools cannot seal themselves off from these influences, but they can (and arguably should) help children sift through and critically examine the discrepant messages to which they are exposed. Particularly if they can secure the cooperation of parents, schools are well positioned to help children engage in more purposeful and reflective

11. Sharon Lamb critiques “evidence-based” (EB) sex education programs along these lines. Proponents routinely commend EB programs for focusing squarely on “the facts” about adolescent sexuality, and for providing students with a breadth of up-to-date, medically accurate information about pregnancy and STI prevention. Yet Lamb contends, “The suggestion that all the facts are being discussed [in these programs] is deeply problematic and represents a hegemonic normalization that makes invisible those facts that do not fit into the model of sex or sexuality that is presented in such a neutral or scientific way.” To illustrate the point, Lamb notes how an otherwise factual presentation of the “arousal response,” replete with scientific-looking diagrams of the genital area, may neglect other sites (for example, the breasts, perineum, or anus) and means (for example, oral contact, caressing) of sexual arousal — thereby revealing a clear bias toward reproductive heterosexual intercourse. See Sharon Lamb, “Just the Facts? The Separation of Sex Education from Moral Education,” in this issue, 451.
value formation. On the other hand, when children are not invited to examine and discuss sexual values in the classroom, they become more susceptible to potentially negative influences and are “more likely to develop their values in a haphazard manner.”

In sum, even if it were coherent, which is doubtful, the value-free “plumbing and prevention” approach is pedagogically undesirable, and schools should not adopt it.

The preceding considerations highlight an exceedingly difficult dilemma that sex education policymakers face. On the one hand, there are good reasons to think that schools should teach children about sex, and in so doing, they should not attempt to sidestep discussion of sexual values. On the other hand, given the breadth and intensity of disagreement about sexual morality in society, discussing sexual values in school is bound to be a highly disputatious endeavor. How, then, should schools approach sex education, if outright avoidance or a “plumbing and prevention” strategy is not the answer? Perhaps, in addition to providing a broad palette of information about sex, schools might also attempt to cover a range of alternative views about sexual morality in a “value-neutral” manner. In keeping with this strategy, they might offer nonjudgmental descriptions of a wide variety of sexual practices — masturbation, contraceptive use, premarital sex, homosexual sex, and so on — while evenhandedly presenting different moral perspectives on the activities in question. At first glance, the value-neutral approach may be thought to have a few distinct advantages. To begin, schools that adopt this strategy appear to remain impartial and unbiased in the face of intractable disagreement about sexual morality. For this reason, and because parents’ and other educational stakeholders’ own moral perspectives are more likely to be acknowledged in the classroom, such schools may seem less likely to alienate significant segments of the population. Furthermore, value neutrality may appear advantageous from a liberal perspective insofar as it grants space for students’ own beliefs and values to take shape; it seems to minimize the threat of moral indoctrination.

I think, however, that these purported advantages are vastly overstated. To begin, questions about feasibility and propriety bedevil the value-neutral strategy, just as they do the value-free “plumbing and prevention” approach. Is it possible to present a range of differing views about sexual morality in a value-neutral manner? What sacrifices are educators likely to make — in terms of accuracy, candidness, attention to detail, and so on — in the pursuit of such a strategy? And are these sacrifices morally and pedagogically warranted, all things considered?

What seems apparent is that besides being inordinately hard to implement, the value-neutral approach is apt to put educators in the compromising position of concealing pertinent details and otherwise misleading or befuddling students about moral issues that beg for clear and forthright analysis. David Archard, himself an

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13. Archard alternately calls this the “conjunctive-disjunctive” and “comprehensive and neutral” approach. My discussion of this particular approach draws from his work. See Archard, “How Should We Teach Sex?,” 444; and Archard, _Sex Education_, 31–33.
unyielding skeptic of this approach, observes that even “supplying information about who holds a given evaluative belief and why they do so may amount to a prejudicial or preferential characterization of the belief.” 14 To concretize Archard’s point, consider how a well-informed and well-intentioned American teacher might describe alternative moral perspectives on birth control — an issue that generated a political firestorm during the 2012 United States presidential election. 15 With an eye to explicitness, the teacher might make either or both of the following statements: “Nowadays, a large majority of Americans believe that birth control is morally acceptable, though this view continues to be challenged by a small but vocal minority of religious conservatives”; or “Some religious organizations and their Republican allies contend that private health insurance plans should not be required to cover the cost of birth control, but a majority of Americans disagree.” Both statements have some empirical justification. 16 Yet needless to say, their “neutrality” is very much in doubt.

Perhaps, then, in the interest of balance and impartiality, teachers such as the one just described might withhold information about who exactly holds the beliefs in question and about the varying levels of social support for those beliefs. Perhaps they might stick to a standard formulation of the different moral perspectives along the lines of, “Some people believe x; others believe y; and others believe z.” Of course, to use this formulation is to suggest that all of the beliefs in question are equally defensible; and depending on the issue being discussed, this may well be the wrong suggestion to make. It would be wildly inappropriate for sex educators


15. Specifically, the debate centered around a provision associated with President Barack Obama’s signature health care law, the Affordable Care Act, which requires employer-based health insurance plans to cover sterilization procedures and a full range of Food and Drug Administration–approved contraceptive methods (including emergency contraceptives such as Plan B) for women free of charge. Health insurance plans sponsored by houses of worship have always been exempt from the “contraception mandate,” but initially, plans sponsored by religiously affiliated institutions (such as Catholic hospitals and universities) were not exempt. Catholic and evangelical groups as well as conservative politicians decried the mandate as an affront to religious liberty and conscience, and sought to overturn it, or at least reduce its scope, in Congress and in the courts. Democrats on Capitol Hill as well as reproductive rights advocates, on the other hand, excoriated Republican efforts to block the mandate as an infringement on women’s rights. On February 1, 2013, in the face of ongoing criticism and dozens of lawsuits challenging the mandate, the Obama administration announced that health insurance plans sponsored by religiously affiliated institutions will not be required to cover contraception. Instead, health insurance companies must provide the employees of such institutions with birth control coverage through a separate plan. See Robert Pear, “Senate Rejects Step Targeting Coverage of Contraception,” New York Times, March 1, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/us/politics/senate-kills-gop-bill-opposing-contraception-policy.html?src=twr; and Robert Pear, “Birth Control Rule Altered to Allay Religious Exemptions,” New York Times, February 1, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/us/politics/white-house-proposes-compromise-on-contraception-coverage.html?hp.

to entertain different views of and remain neutral about the permissibility of pedophilia, for instance. The broader point is this: there are at least some issues pertaining to human sexuality about which educators are warranted in giving students clear moral guidance, and there are some views (for example, the view that adults are morally justified in having sex with young children) that ought unambiguously to be condemned in the classroom. Thus, even if we accept that it is possible for teachers to present a range of alternative views about sexual morality in a value-neutral manner, questions abound about whether or when they should adopt this approach.

Along with the aforementioned normative questions come additional questions about just how palatable the value-neutral approach will be to parents and other educational stakeholders. Consider what legal scholar Stephen L. Carter has written in regard to the sex education of his own children:

As a religious parent, I would not dream of sending my children to a school that felt itself constrained not to reinforce the message of abstinence that my wife and I teach, but instead, offered “safe sex” instruction without the repeated caveat that adolescent sexual activity is wrong.18

In drawing attention to this comment, I do not mean to suggest that K–12 common schools should adopt an abstinence-only form of sex education [more on that in a moment]. I simply mean to illustrate that parents with strong moral views are likely to be deeply dissatisfied with a value-neutral approach to sex education — or a “plumbing and prevention” approach, for that matter — precisely because these approaches refrain from endorsing the parents’ views.

Finally, educators who uniformly employ a value-neutral approach run the risk of encouraging intellectually cavalier or cynical attitudes in their charges. As a number of commentators assert, students stand to gain significantly by witnessing teachers carefully weigh the relevant arguments, evidence, and considerations and subsequently arrive at a principled conclusion about a controversial topic.19 The

17. This is one of a few examples [the others being necrophilia and bestiality] that Archard raises in his critique of the “conjunctive-disjunctive” approach. Ultimately, Archard dismisses the idea that teachers should remain neutral about pedophilia, on the grounds that such a stance is at odds with a liberal commitment to personal autonomy. However, he also concedes earlier in his article that pedophilia, among other disturbing sexual practices, “can, in principle, be given rational defences [sic].” See Archard, “How Should We Teach Sex?,” 440. Michael Hand sharply criticizes Archard’s contention that pedophilia is, in principle, rationally defensible. Hand argues, among other things, that this contention rests “on an unwarranted epistemic skepticism about moral questions.” See Michael Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion,” Educational Theory 58, no. 2 (2008): 226.


value-neutral approach, however, demands that teachers remain strictly impartial and consciously refrain from favoring, much less endorsing, a particular side in a dispute.\textsuperscript{20} Granted, in the arena of sexual morality, certain issues are subject to ongoing \textit{reasonable} disagreement;\textsuperscript{21} and whenever they are called upon to present competing views on these issues, educators should strive do so as impartially as possible. Yet other issues do not fall into this category: they are rationally resolvable, even if people continue to disagree about them.\textsuperscript{22} Blanket adoption of a value-neutral approach constitutes a failure on the part of educators properly to distinguish between these two types of issues, and it potentially hampers the development of students’ moral reasoning abilities. If teachers constantly frame moral questions as unresolvable, this may just lead students to lose confidence in reason; for if reason always seems to justify two or more incompatible answers to moral questions, it does not seem to be very useful as a decision-making tool. This loss of confidence can, in turn, engender an intellectually weak moral relativism (\textit{“it all depends on how you look at it”}), apathy or cynicism (\textit{“since reason can’t establish which position is better, I might as well not care or simply choose the position that serves my interests”}), and an overreadiness to submit to external authority (\textit{“it must be right because my parents, pastor, or favorite celebrity said so”}).

Given all of these problems with the value-neutral approach, perhaps K–12 common schools should focus on imparting a \textit{“thick”} conception of sexual morality, which precisely articulates how individuals should lead their sexual lives. Perhaps, for instance, schools should focus on sending children the unambiguous message that abstinence is the correct standard of conduct for all teenagers and unmarried persons, which of course, would require schools to shy away from, or outright condemn, any subject or point of view that seems to deviate from that message. This is a characteristic feature of abstinence-only and abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education programs — a subspecies of what I am calling the \textit{“morally univocal”} position. These programs continue to be offered at many common schools in the United States today.\textsuperscript{23} To the degree that they

\textsuperscript{20} Of course, as I suggested earlier, this requirement raises serious questions as to the feasibility of the value-neutral approach, since strict impartiality is apt to be as elusive for teachers as for anyone else.

\textsuperscript{21} An example might be the moral status of pornography. Moral and religious traditionalists have long objected to pornography on the grounds that it is obscene, offensive, and morally corrosive. In recent decades, they have been joined in their opposition by some feminists who argue that violent and degrading forms of pornography are oppressive and harmful to women. On the other hand, other feminists and many liberals defend the right of consenting adults to produce and consume pornography, and question whether it is harmful (or harmful enough to warrant governmental restriction). For a recent overview of the debate, see Caroline West, “Pornography and Censorship,” in \textit{Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy}, ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pornography-censorship/.

\textsuperscript{22} Michael Hand argues, convincingly in my view, that pedophilia is rationally indefensible, and thus falls under the category of a resolvable moral issue. See Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial?” 226.

\textsuperscript{23} According to the most recent review of state laws concerning sex education, “nineteen states require that instruction on the importance of engaging in sexual activity only within marriage be provided.” In many states, decisions about whether or not to institute abstinence-only sex education are made at the
serve to keep children uninformed about contraception, pregnancy, and the spread of STIs, we all have reason to be concerned that these programs fail adequately to protect the welfare interests of individuals and society at large, as well as squander limited public resources. Such concerns are especially warranted given a recent government study that found that abstinence-only programs are ineffective when it comes to delaying the age of first coitus, reducing the number of sexual partners, and encouraging sexually active teens to return to abstinence.24

Moreover, from the standpoint of liberal political and educational theory, there is something deeply troubling about programs in common schools that respond one-sidedly to issues about which there is deep and pervasive disagreement in society. Simply put, the morally univocal approach fails adequately to respect the multiplicity of views about sexual morality that exist in liberal pluralist societies. Whereas the value-neutral strategy depicts rationally resolvable moral issues as unsettled, the morally univocal strategy makes the converse mistake: it depicts rationally unsettled moral issues as definitively resolved. Both approaches can be faulted for setting out to address exceptionally thorny subject matter without the appropriate measure of complexity and nuance.

In reviewing the “avoidance,” “plumbing and prevention,” “value-neutral” and “morally univocal” approaches to sex education, I have uncovered significant problems with each. I conclude that K–12 common schools should not adopt any of these four approaches. In the following section, I outline and defend an alternative strategy that I believe schools should adopt — a strategy that honors children’s morally compelling interest in developing a capacity for personal autonomy.

**The Autonomy-Promoting Approach**

What are the characteristic features of an “autonomy-promoting” approach to sex education, and what reasons do we have to believe that it is any more palatable than the four approaches outlined previously? The answers to these questions depend upon the particular conception of personal autonomy one has in mind. Clarity is needed here because autonomy is a vigorously contested concept: it has long been, and continues to be, understood and defined in different ways by moral, political, and educational philosophers.25 Drawing from the work of some contemporary liberal theorists of education including Eamonn Callan, Meira Levinson, and Rob Reich, I propose that the most defensible and desirable conception of autonomy is a “minimalist” conception: one that equates autonomy

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not with relentless critical reflection, atomistic individualism, and an aversion
to deep and lasting commitments, but with “personal sovereignty” and “self-
determination.”26 In the pages that follow, after describing this conception in
a bit more detail, I suggest why the promotion of minimalistic autonomy is an
appropriate aim for formal education in a liberal pluralist society, and why it is
an appropriate aim for school-based sex education in particular. I then sketch the
contours of an autonomy-promoting approach to sex education, distinguishing
it, in the process, both from the four approaches already discussed and from the
deaftively similar approach recommended by Archard.

Let me begin, then, with a preliminary definition: the “minimally
autonomous” individual is self-determining in the sense that he or she is able to
make informed decisions about the shape and course of his or her own life without
compulsion from others. What this ability entails, more precisely, is a matter of
some debate and the subject of a vast and growing literature; yet there are a few
things that I can and should say here in the interest of further elaboration. To wit,
the minimally autonomous individual is attuned to the deep cultural, religious,
and ethical diversity that characterizes modern liberal societies. Specifically, he or
she has become aware of and has learned to examine some of the very different ways
that people who live in these societies conduct themselves, the different commit-
ments they assume, the different projects they undertake, and the different values
and beliefs they hold dear. In addition, the minimally autonomous individual pos-
sesses the critical and imaginative faculties needed to reflect upon the direction his
or her life already has taken, as well as to explore and evaluate a significant variety
of future life options. Such an individual also has latitude to pursue those options
that accord with his or her considered judgments about how he or she should act
and live — consistent with the freedom of others to do the same. And beyond all of
that, the minimally autonomous individual maintains enough strength of charac-
ter, in the face of countervailing pressure, to adhere to the plans, goals, and commit-
ments that he or she has come reflectively to identify with and wishes to uphold.

To be sure, developing and exercising one’s capacity for minimalistic autonomy
involves a certain, though not excessive, degree of critical self-examination. The
minimally autonomous individual is able and (on occasion) inclined to reflect
upon his or her current values, priorities, and aspirations — many of which are
likely to be inherited and unchosen — and subsequently either reaffirm or revise
them according to the dictates of his or her own conscience. However, such
individuals are not so relentlessly self-critical that they begin to second guess
every life decision, effectively becoming paralyzed by uncertainty, self-doubt,

26. “Minimalist autonomy” is the phrase Reich uses in reference to the particular notion of autonomy
that he spells out and defends in his work. It is, in his words, “a decidedly modest conception of
autonomy,” and in this and other key respects resembles the conceptions of autonomy advocated by
Eamonn Callan and Meira Levinson, respectively. See Reich, Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism,
99–107. See also Eamonn Callan, Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147–157; and Meira Levinson, The Demands of Liberal
and anomie. Nor are they prone to excessive isolation and detachment as a consequence of their penchant for episodic self-scrutiny. Developing and exercising one’s capacity for minimalist autonomy entails intermittently examining one’s particular commitments and attachments — to other people; to a set of common values, beliefs, and practices; to a shared way of life; and so on — from some measure of critical distance. It does not, however, involve engaging in an (inevitably fruitless) attempt to abstract oneself entirely from faith, family, community, and tradition. And it does not dispose the individual to regard him- or herself as the “atomistic” or “unencumbered” self conjured by communitarian critics of liberalism.27

Indeed, as Reich and Levinson emphasize, not only is minimalist autonomy entirely consistent with social and cultural attachments; it also depends upon them for its realization.28 Such attachments, Levinson writes, “are simply necessary for the construction and maintenance of the self”; they are preconditions for the development of personal identity and agency “and therefore also for [the development and exercise of] autonomous agency.”29 Actual human agents do not make informed decisions about the shape and direction of their own lives from some kind of wholly freestanding position. They always make such decisions — if they make them at all — as persons embedded within particular relationships, communities, and cultural contexts. Thus, rather than “unencumbered” selves, minimally autonomous persons are much more appropriately conceived as “revocably encumbered” selves.30 They are no more equipped than anyone else to extricate themselves from all social ties. Nor are they wont, by dint of their

27. Michael Sandel famously faults autonomy-based liberalism for conceiving persons as unencumbered selves who have been “freed from the sanctions of custom and tradition and inherited status” and are “unbound by moral ties antecedent to choice.” According to Sandel, this version of liberalism — whose lineage can be traced from Immanuel Kant to John Rawls — has become America’s “reigning public philosophy” in the past half century, and it can be linked to various moral and social ills, including a growing tendency to view moral values and obligations as matters of mere personal preference, as well as an eroding sense of community and declining civic engagement among the American people. See Michael Sandel, Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3–24; see also Michael Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 54–59. In a nuanced response to Sandel’s thesis, Callan concedes that “the idea that all values are no more than objects of desire is a familiar piece of foolishness in contemporary Western cultures.” Yet, at the same time, Callan disputes that this “debased notion of autonomy” is actually associable with the liberal political theory that Sandel repudiates: “The conception of autonomy that Sandel’s argument addresses is not the one that inheres in Rawlsian or any other morally credible liberalism.” See Callan, Creating Citizens, 52–55.


penchant for occasional self-examination, to regard themselves as capable of such a feat. Granted, all of their ends, projects, and commitments — even those considered at present to be indispensable — are subject to potential reexamination and revision in the future. And minimally autonomous persons will be disposed to discard any particular end or commitment with which they once identified if, after due consideration, they come to see it as unworthy of continued allegiance. On the other hand, they also will be disposed to reaffirm their existing ends, projects, and commitments if they conclude that this is the right course of action. In short, minimally autonomous persons occasionally are given to reflect upon their basic values, motivations, and obligations in life; but ongoing identification with these values, motivations, and obligations may well be the ultimate outcome of such reflection.

One of my main points of emphasis in this section thus far has been that personal autonomy need not and should not be defined in such a way that it denies or opposes deep social and cultural embeddedness. But while the conception of minimalist autonomy that I have begun to outline here is not so strong that it requires persons to forewear close and enduring connections to faith, family, community, and tradition, neither is it so weak that it condones habitual deference or servility. To assert that someone could still count as an autonomous agent whose life decisions and aspirations are largely dictated or controlled by others is to depart grossly from the ordinary usage of the concept. An individual certainly need not abnegate all loyalties, allegiances, and interpersonal ties that bind in order to be considered autonomous. This person must, however, be willing and able, after duly considering various alternatives, to make key judgments and life decisions for him- or herself. This capacity for independent judgment and decision making is not inborn, and it is unlikely to be acquired spontaneously or effortlessly. Instead it is something that must be developed, with practice and encouragement, in the course of one’s education.

I want to suggest that the promotion of personal autonomy — understood in the minimalist sense just outlined — is a justifiable and important aim of formal education (and, by extension, of school-based sex education) in liberal democratic societies. While space does not permit me to offer anything close to a full-throated defense of autonomy-promoting education, there are a few justificatory points that I can at least touch upon here. First, providing children who are reared in liberal democratic societies with autonomy-promoting education enhances their opportunity for participation as civic equals in collective self-rule. If someday they

31. Here I take a page from Callan’s book, in which he outlines and defends a modest conception of personal autonomy understood in terms of the supersession of “ethical servility.” According to Callan, the ethically servile individual, though she fails to realize it, lacks a basic capacity to make independent judgments and decisions about her life. This is because her caretakers have instilled in her a predisposition to reject any alternatives to their vision of how she should live and conduct herself. Thus, even when she becomes aware of other life options and possibilities, she is utterly disinclined to give them serious consideration due to “the choices [her caretakers] made in moulding her character.” Callan, Creating Citizens, 152–157.
are to engage thoughtfully and effectively in democratic decision making, future citizens must learn to deliberate with others about public problems that may not have clear-cut solutions. They must develop the capacity and the inclination to stay informed about socially significant current events. They must learn to attend carefully to, and evaluate the arguments for, different perspectives on the public good and the public interest. They must learn to formulate and defend their own well-reasoned views about matters of genuine collective concern. And they must develop the inclination to reconsider those views in light of new evidence or unforeseen considerations. In short, they must acquire some of the same information gathering and critical thinking skills and attributes that autonomy-promoting education endeavors to cultivate in children.

Second, the liberal state has a powerful reason, for the sake of its own legitimacy, to ensure that children have access to autonomy-promoting education. As Harry Brighouse observes, in order to count as legitimate, the state must faithfully seek the "free and authentic" (in other words, uncoerced and unmanipulated) consent of at least a significant majority of its citizens. But the very possibility of citizens’ free and authentic consent is negated if they lack the capacity to examine, critically and independently, the structure and policies of the state. This is why autonomy-promoting education — with its focus on cultivating critical reasoning skills and dispositions — has an important role to play in the state’s pursuit of legitimacy. By broadly instituting autonomy-promoting education — duly supplemented with the relevant humanistic and social scientific content — the state equips future citizens independently to evaluate its claims to power and authority. It thus goes a long way toward enabling the free and authentic consent that undergirds liberal legitimacy.

Third, and more importantly for present purposes, children who are reared in liberal pluralist societies should have access to autonomy-promoting education because the eventual exercise of minimalist autonomy is necessary for flourishing in such societies. To be sure, under conditions of personal freedom, social

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33. Here, I diverge from Brighouse’s argument. Brighouse contends that for the sake of its own legitimacy, the liberal state should ensure that children have access to a character-neutral, autonomy-facilitating education [as opposed to a character-forming, autonomy-promoting education]. See Brighouse, “Civic Education and Liberal Legitimacy,” 719–745; and Brighouse, School Choice and Social Justice, 76–82. In contrast to Brighouse, Callan argues (convincingly, in my view) that the state must institute autonomy-promoting education if it is to have good prospects of legitimacy. See Eamonn Callan, “Liberal Legitimacy, Justice, and Civic Education,” Ethics 111, no. 1 (2000): 141–155. For more on the distinction between autonomy-facilitating and autonomy-promoting education, see Josh Corngold, “Autonomy-Facilitation or Autonomy-Promotion? The Case of Sex Education,” Theory and Research in Education 10, no. 1 (2012): 57–70.

34. For a brief, helpful sketch of the relevant content, see Brighouse, “Civic Education and Liberal Legitimacy,” 735–736; and Brighouse, School Choice and Social Justice, 78.
opportunity, and civic equality, people lead very different kinds of lives, and
many find joy, fulfillment, and success insofar as they are able to do so. They
subscribe to different values and beliefs. They participate in different kinds
of relationships. They pursue different plans (not always straightforwardly or
calculatedly). They undertake different projects. They prioritize their various
ends, goals, and commitments in different ways. And ultimately, many thrive, in
key part, because they can carry out these kinds of significant life tasks freely and
of their own accord. On the other hand, those who reach maturity and yet are
unable to make independent decisions about the shape and direction of their own
lives effectively remain subject to the will and caprice of others and lack equal
standing in the moral and political community. 35 Whether their ongoing inability
to exercise minimalist autonomy stems from social or educational deprivation,
from the development of a servile disposition, from manipulation or coercion
at the hands of others, or from some combination thereof, it constitutes a sure
barrier to the realization of their human potential and to their achievement of
fully flourishing lives in a free and diverse society.

Fourth, and finally, state provision for autonomy-promoting education is
warranted because, without such provision, many children’s chances of becoming
autonomous are likely to be diminished. If children were naturally endowed with
the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for self-determination — or if
they all grew up in settings perfectly hospitable to its development and exercise
— then the widespread institution of autonomy-promoting education probably
would not be necessary. But in the real world, neither of these conditions applies.
Human beings are not “hardwired” to be autonomous (to borrow Brighouse’s
terminology): 36 they must be explicitly taught and encouraged to use the reflective
and deliberative capacities upon which personal sovereignty depends. Furthermore,
as they mature, all children encounter impediments to the development and
exercise of their capacity for minimalist autonomy. For far too many — it must
be noted — poverty, abuse, and neglect pose the greatest and most immediate
threats to their prospective autonomy, not to mention their present and future
well-being. 37 Undeniably, absent protective intervention and ongoing provision for
their health, security, and basic welfare, such children are unlikely to derive much

benefit from autonomy-promoting education. That said, even for those fortunate enough not to find themselves in such dire circumstances, other hurdles of a cognitive and dispositional sort must be overcome if someday they are to achieve self-determination. Brighouse identifies a cluster of “familiar non-autonomous processes” — including cognitive manipulation, coercive restriction, and “adaptive and accommodationist preference-formation” — to which all persons are exposed and youth, in particular, are vulnerable. These processes threaten to undermine the prospective autonomy of children in various ways: by, for instance, restricting their access to pertinent information, inhibiting their development of critical faculties, or (perhaps more typically) disinclining them to make independent decisions about the shape and course of their own lives even if they develop the intellectual capacity to do so. Whether children eventually succeed in surmounting these ubiquitous nonautonomous processes depends crucially on whether they develop countervailing mental powers and emotional propensities. In short, it depends on whether they acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that autonomy-promoting education aims to impart.

Having indicated why the cultivation of autonomy is a pivotal aim for formal schooling writ large, let me briefly turn to the more specific question of why school-based sex education should promote minimalist autonomy. Of the points outlined in the preceding paragraphs, the latter two are particularly germane to this more specific question. As I noted previously, developing and using one’s capacity to make independent decisions about the direction of one’s own life is necessary for flourishing in a free and democratic society. Of course, few decisions individuals face are as important, as personal, and as potentially life-altering as decisions about World’s Rich Countries (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, 2012), http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc10_eng.pdf. Recent findings on child maltreatment in the United States paint a similarly grim picture. In 2011, approximately 3.4 million referrals were made to child protective services agencies on behalf of 6.2 million children, and an estimated 1,570 American children died as a result of abuse or neglect. In terms of international comparisons, the United States is reported to have one of the highest child maltreatment death rates in the industrialized world. See Children’s Bureau, Child Maltreatment 2011 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ch/cm11.pdf; and Peter Adamson, Giorgia Brown, John Micklewright, Sylke Schnepf, and Anna Wright, A League Table of Child Maltreatment Deaths in Rich Nations (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, 2003), http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/repcard5e.pdf.

38. Brighouse asserts that autonomy-facilitating education — which aims to impart critical thinking skills without simultaneously shaping children’s characters and inclinations — can help young minds avoid or overcome these ubiquitous nonautonomous processes. See Brighouse, “Civic Education and Liberal Legitimacy,” 728 and 733–734; and Brighouse, School Choice and Social Justice, 66–67 and 80–82. In my view, while Brighouse very astutely outlines some of the more ubiquitous autonomy-inhibiting pressures and influences that all individuals (to varying degrees) face, he ultimately misconstrues the workings of these pressures and influences, and wrongly suggests that a character-neutral education can empower students to overcome them. As I have argued elsewhere, an autonomy-promoting education — which attends to students’ cognitive and psychosocial development — is necessary to protect their prospective interest in personal autonomy. See Corngold, “Autonomy-Facilitation or Autonomy-Promotion?”, see also Callan, “Liberal Legitimacy, Justice, and Civic Education,” 146–147.
sex and sexuality. It follows that preparing future citizens of liberal democracies for the exercise of autonomous sexual agency is a crucial component of helping them to flourish. Moreover, given that many will begin exploring, experiencing, and expressing their sexuality at a young age, there is good reason to believe that such preparation should begin — gradually and age-appropriately — in the early stages of formal schooling.39 This is not to deny that young children, especially, lack the cognitive and emotional attributes necessary for mature understanding of matters pertaining to sex and sexuality. Nor is it to deny that trustworthy and responsible caretakers are properly vigilant about children’s premature exposure to and involvement with such matters. It is to suggest, however, that these legitimate and sensible concerns must be reconciled with the social reality of early sexual experience among young people of all backgrounds and social classes.40 And it is to affirm that properly cultivating children’s capacity for future sexual autonomy requires significant educational attention, the involvement and commitment of various stakeholders, and a substantial amount of time.

Another point that I raised earlier — namely, that nonautonomous processes abound in the social world in which children grow up — bolsters the case for why school-based sex education should promote minimalist autonomy. Particularly in the absence of educational countermeasures, these processes have the potential to shape young people’s lives, and their nascent sexuality, in disquieting ways. From

39. Of course, the question of when exactly sex education should begin — like the question of what form it should take — is a source of substantial, ongoing disagreement among policymakers and the general public. Recently, however, proponents of early sex education have been particularly vocal and have made some notable inroads. In 2012, a consortium of sex education advocacy organizations — including Advocates for Youth, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), and Answer — issued a report recommending that “developmentally appropriate” sex education commence in kindergarten and outlining standards for student learning by grade level and topic area. See Future of Sex Education Initiative, “National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K–12” (a special publication of the Journal of School Health, 2012), http://www.futureofsexeducation.org/documents/josh-fose-standards-web.pdf. Partly on the basis of this report, in February 2013, the Chicago School Board approved a new policy requiring that all schools in the nation’s third largest district “annually provide developmentally appropriate and medically accurate sexual health education” beginning in kindergarten and proceeding through the twelfth grade. See Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual, “Sexual Health Education,” §704.6, Board Report 13-0227-PO1 (February 27, 2013), http://policy.cps.k12.il.us/download.aspx?ID=57.

their earliest days, for instance, countless children are subject to the pervasive
manipulation of the advertising and mass media industries, whose seductive,
omnipresent messages routinely reinforce rigid gender stereotypes, propagate
unhealthy and unrealistic standards of beauty, and impress upon viewers and
listeners of all ages that human sexuality (particularly female sexuality) is
just another marketable commodity. Almost inevitably, the peer groups to
which many children belong champion these same messages and ridicule those
who would dare to think and behave differently. Parents and other authority
figures, whether intentionally or not, can be a significant source of stereotyping
and misinformation as well; collectively, they, too, bear responsibility for
impeding the development of children’s sexual autonomy. And to make matters
exponentially worse, setting aside the everyday pressures and influences just
mentioned, a distressing number of young people are subject to more extreme
forms of sexual maltreatment — including incest, rape, and molestation — at the
hands of peers, adult relatives and acquaintances, and, less commonly, complete
strangers.

I in no way mean to imply that education is a panacea for widespread sexual
manipulation and coercion in society. However, I do want to suggest that school-
based sex education — ideally in conjunction with a range of other measures,
such as tighter regulations on advertising and media directed at children as well
as prevention and intervention programs for families at risk of abuse — has an
important role to play in helping young people overcome ever-present obstacles
to their sexual autonomy and overall well-being. In developmentally appropriate
and personally meaningful ways, children can be presented in the classroom with
alternatives to the narrow gender and sexual scripts, not to mention the distorted
views of human sexuality, that they encounter in the media and in their day-to-
day interactions with others. They can be assured and reassured that all persons
have an inviolable moral right to sexual integrity and self-determination. They
can be informed about the dangers of exploitation and abuse and alerted to their
own susceptibility to these dangers in various social settings. And they can be
cognitively and emotionally equipped to make thoughtful, independent decisions
about their sexual lives while dutifully respecting the right of others to do the

41. See Juliet B. Schor, Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture (New
York: Scribner, 2004); Sharon Lamb and Lyn M. Brown, Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters
from Marketers’ Schemes (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006); and Lyn M. Brown, Sharon Lamb, and
Mark Tappan, Packaging Boyhood: Saving Our Sons from Superheroes, Slackers, and Other Media

42. The prevalence of childhood sexual abuse is difficult to estimate because definitions of abuse vary
and underreporting is widespread. By many accounts, child sexual abuse has declined significantly in
the United States since the 1990s. Nevertheless, nationwide in 2011, child protective service agencies
confirmed over 61,000 cases of sexual abuse of children under the age of 18. See David Finkelhor, “The
Wurtele, “Preventing Sexual Abuse of Children in the Twenty-First Century: Preparing for Challenges
and Opportunities,” Journal of Child Sexual Abuse 18, no. 1 (2009): 1–18; and Children’s Bureau, Child
Maltreatment 2011.
same. These various educational objectives are achievable, and, by definition, autonomy-promoting sex education will strive to accomplish all of them.

In this section of the essay, I have sought to explain why the promotion of minimalist autonomy is an appropriate aim for formal education in a liberal pluralist society, and why it is an appropriate aim for school-based sex education in particular. Now, before bringing the section to a close, I must concisely address two additional questions: (1) What differentiates the conception of sex education that I have endorsed here from the four approaches I critiqued in the previous section? (2) What differentiates it from the deceptively similar conception of sex education that Archard defends in his own work? To begin with the more obvious contrasts, unlike the “outright avoidance” and “plumbing and prevention” approaches, autonomy-promoting sex education will not eschew the subject of sex altogether, nor will it narrow its focus to empirical facts about biology, reproduction, and disease prevention. If it is to meet its central aim of preparing students to exercise sovereignty over their own sexuality, then autonomy-promoting sex education must provide them with a much broader palette of information — about alternatives to the sexual beliefs and attitudes they are exposed to through the mass media, at home, and in their various social circles; about different pressures and influences that are liable to impinge upon their decision-making and conduct; about their vulnerability to maltreatment in various situations and contexts; and so on. Furthermore, autonomy-promoting sex education must do more than provide students with a breadth of information: it also must help them develop the emotional strength, as well as the critical thinking and social skills necessary to resist manipulation and coercion. Accomplishing all of this will involve addressing difficult and awkward topics in a straightforward way and creating a safe social environment for active student participation in a range of classroom activities, including lectures, group discussions, live skits, simulations of risk, and condom demonstrations.43

The conception of autonomy-promoting sex education that I have been defending here also differs in significant ways from the “value-neutral” and “morally univocal” approaches that I described in the previous section. Unlike the “value-neutral” approach, it will not attempt to remain strictly impartial in the face of deep disagreement about sexual morality. Instead, it will unequivocally endorse the value of sexual autonomy. In plainspoken terms, it will convey to students that all persons have a right to sexual integrity and sexual self-determination. It also will condemn beliefs and practices that deviate from this message. On the other hand, unlike the “morally univocal” approach, autonomy-promoting sex education will not seek to impart a “thick” conception of sexual morality, which precisely articulates how individuals should conduct their sexual lives. Granted, as I just acknowledged, autonomy-promoting sex education is not value neutral: it will denounce practices that abridge individuals’ right to

43. Douglas Kirby cites each of these methods in his recent meta-analysis of effective, curriculum-based sex education programs. See Kirby, Emerging Answers, 2007.
sexual self-determination. But in assuming this particular ethical stance, it will, nevertheless, leave individuals a great deal of room to explore, express, and experience their sexuality in various ways — so long as they show due regard for their own sexual autonomy, health, and well-being, and adequately respect the sexual autonomy, health, and well-being of others. In sum, autonomy-promoting sex education, by definition, will espouse a decidedly “thin” conception of sexual morality.

Finally, autonomy-promoting sex education, as I conceive it, also differs from the conception of sex education advanced by David Archard in a pair of influential articles. As I have done here, Archard posits that preparing students to exercise sovereignty over their own sexuality is an important aim for formal schooling in a liberal pluralist society. Yet he also makes clear that his favored approach to sex education is predicated on “maximizing the future citizen’s autonomy.” What “maximizing” individual autonomy means, or what it entails as far as education is concerned, are not questions that Archard addresses in any detail (at least not in the pair of articles being considered here). He does assert, however, that it will involve “the provision of the maximum amount of information relevant to the making of sexual choices.” I have reservations about this particular prescription for sex education. Whatever providing the “maximum amount of information” might mean in this context, it runs the risk of stunting, rather than enhancing students’ capacity for sexual self-determination. Exposure to a “maximum” number of possible options, in any sphere of their lives, is liable to overwhelm children, to provoke angst and indecision as a result of having too many choices, and thus, paradoxically, to impede their development and exercise of personal sovereignty. With all of this in mind, the conception of sex education that I have endorsed here will not seek to provide students with a “maximum amount of information” for the purposes of “maximizing” their autonomy. Instead, it will promote their autonomy in the “minimalist” sense — gradually exposing them to a significant range of information about human sexuality and otherwise empowering them, cognitively and emotionally, to make ethical, responsible, and independent decisions about their sexual lives.

Conclusion

In the face of ineliminable disagreement about sexual morality, no approach to sex education is capable of attracting universal support in a liberal pluralist society. And to be sure, the autonomy-promoting approach that I have defended here is no more likely to elicit blanket approval than the four approaches described earlier in this essay. Many individuals, social groups, and local communities place

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44. See Archard, “How Should We Teach Sex?”, and Archard, Sex Education. In her thought-provoking contribution to this symposium, Paula McAvoy critiques Archard’s conception of sex education much more extensively, and from an entirely different angle, than I do here. See Paula McAvoy, “The Aims of Sex Education: Demoting Autonomy and Promoting Mutuality,” in this issue.

45. Archard, “How Should We Teach Sex?,” 447; see also Archard, Sex Education, 37.

46. Archard, “How Should We Teach Sex?,” 447.
little [if any] value on personal autonomy and are apt to view its cultivation among children as a threat to those children’s present and future well-being, to the maintenance of cherished cultural beliefs and traditions, and to the preservation and advancement of the greater social good. Nevertheless, there are powerful reasons, both principled and prudential, why liberal democratic societies should ensure that all children have access to autonomy-promoting sex education. Among the most pressing reasons are that this particular approach to sex education stands to contribute significantly to children’s individual flourishing and to help them overcome some of the more ubiquitous obstacles to their prospective sexual autonomy.

To be sure, implementing autonomy-promoting sex education, and implementing it well, will require significant investments of time and resources in schools, considerable parental and community support, and the participation of highly trained and conscientious educators. These educators will need to be well-versed in a panoply of information about human sexuality and about differing views of sexual morality, and they will need to be able to present this information in a way that is meaningful to students. They will need to be carefully attuned to the discrepant messages children receive about sex and sexuality outside of school, and prepared to help children sort through and reflect on these messages in the classroom. And beyond all of that, they will need to be able to facilitate difficult and awkward discussions with a deft touch. Policymakers would do well to make adequate provision for the training of these educators and to give them the support they need properly to undertake this vitally important work.

Finally, lest I leave readers with the impression that I am overly sanguine about the reformist potential of autonomy-promoting sex education, let me end with a note of caution. Throughout the latter half of this essay, I have been emphasizing the positive role formal schooling stands to play in equipping children to exercise personal autonomy. But of course the capacity of many young people — particularly low-income youth — to make a range of autonomous decisions about their lives is liable to be hampered by social constraints that are beyond their own and their schools’ immediate control. To take one example, as a number of scholars observe, children’s level of access to social opportunity and their outlook for the future weigh heavily in their decisions about whether to engage in precocious sexual activity and whether to take certain precautions when they do. All else being equal, middle- and upper-income youth, who enjoy significantly better prospects for educational and career success, are more averse to sexual risk taking than their less advantaged peers. Furthermore, recent inquiries into the sexual attitudes and beliefs of inner-city youth reveal that many view teenage


pregnancy as “inevitable,” or at least much more plausible than “abstaining from sex, getting married, or having a successful future.”\textsuperscript{49} None of this is to suggest that schools are powerless to challenge such limited (and limiting) perspectives. To be sure, sex education has a significant role to play in helping to convince youth that early parenthood is not a foregone conclusion and that “other life scripts [are] attainable.”\textsuperscript{50} Nevertheless, any sober and fair-minded appraisal must acknowledge that there are limits to what sex education can accomplish in this regard, particularly in communities where poverty and social inequality persist at high levels.

\textsuperscript{49} McClain, \textit{The Place of Families}, 265 and 266.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 268.