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# *Shaping children's convictions*

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## abstract

This article examines the degree to which children are entitled to an autonomy enhancing upbringing of a sort that imposes constraints on the efforts parents can legitimately undertake to shape the religious and moral beliefs of their children. The article describes a conception of child-rearing, called Socratic nurturing, that places emphasis on raising children in ways that facilitate the development of robust powers of critical reflection. It is argued that the well-being of children is well-served by Socratic nurturing and that children have a right to Socratic nurturing. The article addresses and rebuts some objections to attributing such a right to children.

keywords *autonomy, children's rights, liberalism, parental responsibilities, well-being*

## introduction

Decent parents seek to promote the well-being<sup>1</sup> of their children and a just society should not emasculate the reasonable efforts parents in pursuit of this end. There are, of course, many complex dimensions of the well-being of children and in some contexts what constitutes well-being or as contributing to well-being is highly contested. I want to discuss one of these contexts. In seeking to secure the well-being of children, special efforts are often made to shape the content and character of the convictions<sup>2</sup> children may come to profess and which may play a central role in defining their very identity. Various adults, but especially parents,<sup>3</sup> seek to shape or even determine the core beliefs and attitudes of children concerning matters of religion, morality, politics, culture, nationality and community. The attempt to transmit convictions to children or to prevent exposure to 'corrupting' influences – i.e. material that might lead to the adoption of beliefs that parents or other adults

### *Theory and Research in Education*

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find objectionable – need not be exclusively driven by concern for the well-being of children. After all, the success of a parent's life can be affected by the degree to which children embrace or reject certain beliefs, values, or practices. More insidiously, some adults, such as unscrupulous advertisers, seek to shape the desires and beliefs of children with the more dubious aim of advancing their own interests at the expense of the interests of children. (Of course, that is not the official story.) For the purposes of this discussion, I will set aside the vexing problem of how to respond to cynical attempts to manipulate children by adults who are concerned to advance their own interests rather than the interests of children. Instead, I shall assume that the nurturing activities of parents and others are rooted in a concern to promote the well-being of children. Against this background, I want to examine the degree to which children are entitled to a particular kind of autonomy enhancing upbringing of a sort that imposes constraints on the efforts parents can legitimately undertake to shape the convictions of their children. Towards this end, I will sketch what I take to be an attractive and perhaps familiar conception of child rearing.<sup>4</sup> I shall present some reasons for thinking that children have a right to be raised in ways compatible with this conception and I shall rebut some objections to attributing such a right to children.

### socratic nurturing

A short anecdote drawn from my family history may help to set the stage for conception of child rearing I wish to explore. On his 14th birthday, my father received a copy of Alexander Cruden's concordance to the bible from his father. My grandfather was a deeply religious man who hoped and probably anticipated that his son would embrace the Christian faith to which my grandfather and grandmother had devoted their lives. No doubt with the end of encouraging my father's adoption of Christianity my grandfather wrote the following dedication in Cruden's concordance:

'Search the Scriptures'

Make it your life's chief aim:

i To acquire 'the knowledge of the Truth' (I Timothy 2.4)

ii To cultivate 'the love of the Truth' (II Thessalonians 2.10)

iii To yield 'obedience to the Truth' (I Peter 1.22)

My mother recently correctly remarked that my father has in fact been faithful to his father's injunction, but not exactly in the way envisaged by my grandfather. Throughout his career and life my father has sought truth and knowledge. Yet, my father's pursuit of wisdom has not yielded the religious

commitments that my grandfather hoped it would. My father's 'obedience to the Truth' has led to atheism not Christianity. And, on many matters, his moral and political convictions are markedly different and divergent from those of his parents. Like many parents, my grandparents attempted to secure allegiance by their children to a distinctive creed. And like some parents, their attempts to shape the core convictions of their children were not successful.

As far as I am aware, my parents did not expressly set out to instill in me or my sisters a commitment to any specific comprehensive religious, political or moral doctrine or even to a particular vocational aspiration. This is not to imply that my parents were indifferent to the character of the views we espoused or that they sought, in their child-rearing practices, to feign a stance of neutrality between competing religious, moral or political ideals. But the dominant message I recall, even from a young age, is that reasoned reflection ought to guide our choices about such matters. As it turns out, the views and ideals that I have embraced as an adult are parallel to those of my parents in many important respects. Like my parents, I am an atheist with strongly egalitarian political convictions. Of course, I like to think my convictions are not directly the product of nurture but rather reflect my responsiveness to the persuasive arguments that justify them. Others might think differently.

In some important respects, the child-rearing objectives of my grandparents and my parents were quite different. Whereas, my grandparents sought to raise children who would be committed Christians, my parents eschewed this objective. However, despite the divergence in the doctrinal content of their child-rearing objectives, there is an interesting parallel in the child-rearing strategy employed by my parents and grandparents. Both encouraged and invited informed, critical deliberation by their children about the ends or commitments they might adopt. Although they would probably not have articulated the point in quite this way, my grandparents expected (erroneously as it turned out) that the development of autonomy was allied with the project of getting their sons to embrace Christianity. But like many parents, whether religious or secular, they seemed to think that fostering the capacities for examination of important life commitments was an appropriate and important element of child-rearing. This kind of child-rearing approach has many adherents. Many parents believe that children should be encouraged to 'think for themselves' and that education, both at home but especially in school, should equip children with the materials and skills necessary for critical reflection on important matters. In light of its attention to the importance of the examined life, I shall label this dimension of child rearing 'Socratic nurturing'. Of course, some parents evidently harbor suspicions about the value of an examined life. They express their concern for the well-being of their children by employing various strategies that limit their children's capacities

and opportunities for reflection on life commitments.<sup>5</sup> They believe that children's interests are better served by securing a kind of commitment to ideals that neither requires, nor is well-served by, wide ranging reflection on the worth of competing ideals. They eschew Socratic nurturing. My question is whether their eschewal is reasonable.

Socratic nurturing aims at developing within children the capacity for reasoned reflection on the meaning, nature, and value of ends and commitments. Socratic nurturing also aims at fostering enthusiasm or at least receptiveness to the actual exercise of these capacities. So, to a degree, Socratic nurturing aims at the promotion and not mere facilitation of autonomy.<sup>6</sup> I cannot offer a full depiction of this ideal or its implications. (I am, for instance, setting aside the crucial issue of how the age and maturity of children should affect their access to various kinds of 'adult themed' material.)<sup>7</sup> However, some of the broad contours of Socratic nurturing can be identified. First, Socratic nurturing places special emphasis on the development of wide-ranging reasoning skills. Second, alongside the development of critical faculties, children need to be encouraged to use these faculties not merely instrumentally in the pursuit of given ends but also in the investigation and appraisal of the worthiness of ends. Third, since meaningful deliberation about such matters cannot take place in the absence of information, there must be reasonable access to decent deliberative materials that present a wide variety of perspectives on religious, moral, political and other salient matters. Fourth, Socratic nurturing entails constraints on the kinds of efforts that parents (and others) can make to secure allegiance to particular favored ends. The idea is that no end should be inculcated in children in such a way that meaningful contemplation of the end, including whether it is worth adopting, abandoning, or radically changing is effectively foreclosed. For example, a child raised in a Christian household should be equipped, by the time she reaches maturity, to deliberate not only about how Christian convictions might guide her conduct but also about whether Christian convictions merit adoption. This is only the barest of sketches of Socratic nurturing. To some, the depiction I have offered may conjure up images of an over intellectualized conception of family relations in which philosophical argument is the staple of proper family life. Some receptiveness on the part families to examination of commitments is part of the ideal but it need not be the most important facet. Ensuring that children have access to rich educational resources outside the home will typically be more important than, say, household debates on religion. Nonetheless, Socratic nurturing does require that parents be supportive of autonomy-facilitating education and that they be reasonably open to the possibility of their children entertaining ideas or attitudes that are transgressive from a parental point of view.

We can distinguish between a weak and a strong interpretation of Socratic nurturing. On the weak interpretation, Socratic nurturing is deemed appropriate because, but just insofar as, it is conducive to getting children to embrace certain putatively valuable ends favored by parents (or other interested adults). This is to value Socratic nurturing merely as a device for securing commitment by one's children to certain ends. What ultimately matters here is not the cultivation of deliberative capacities *per se*, but rather the successful transmission of ends. On the weak view, Socratic nurturing can be abandoned by parents if it is not conducive, or indeed proves hostile to, parental aspirations to mold the character and convictions of their children in particular ways.

On the strong interpretation the commitment to Socratic nurturing is less contingent because its value is located partly in the importance of expressing respect for the autonomy potential of children *per se*. This does not imply that parents should be indifferent to the content of the ends their children adopt. But parents must promote ends without compromising the development of robust autonomy in their children. This means that Socratic nurturing is not neutral with respect to all possible 'constructions' of the self. I assume that there are different possible configurations of the self – i.e. variations in the way in which different potentialities of the self can be developed (or stifled). The particular configuration of any given self is partly a function of a person's upbringing and education. The underlying conception of the self that Socratic nurturing promotes is, in effect, the autonomous liberal self. The liberal self is not, as some communitarians would contend, unencumbered by ends but rather is capable of adopting a deliberative stance towards constitutive ends.<sup>8</sup> Much liberal theory proceeds from the assumption that people have liberal selves. But whether or not individuals come to have a liberal self is arguably a contingent matter. Some forms of nurturing can render meaningful deliberation about important constitutive ends all but impossible. We can, it seems, raise children so that they are irrevocably encumbered by particular ends and thereby create non-liberal selves incapable of deliberative reflection. Socratic nurturing, by contrast, facilitates the emergence of mature liberal selves who can, and to some degree do, engage in critical appraisal of their ends.

### is there a right to socratic nurturing?

The strong interpretation implies that Socratic nurturing is good for children in a special way. Of course, something can be good for a person without them having a special entitlement to it. The liberal self is an attractive conception of the self but perhaps there are other equally valuable conceptions of the self that parents may reasonably set out to construct. Must we favor nurturing conducive to the construction of liberal selves over other more thickly encumbering forms

of nurturing? Do children have a right to Socratic nurturing?<sup>9</sup> I think the answer to these questions is a qualified 'yes'.

In outlining the case for a right to Socratic nurturing I shall rely upon a proposal, made by A.M. Macleod, about the justificatory framework that appropriate for vindicating rights claims in general (Macleod, 1990). Macleod's approach is a version of the so-called 'interest' model of rights in which rights function to protect fundamental interests. On this approach, a key element in establishing that A has a right to X involves demonstrating that X contributes, in some rather significant respect, to the securing or promotion of a fundamental interest of A's. We can call this the 'interest' condition. Satisfaction of the interest condition is not, however, sufficient to establish a right to X. Macleod insists that two supplementary conditions must also be met. There is also a 'non-responsibility' condition – 'the securing of X is not something for which, in fairness, we ought to hold A responsible' – and a 'fairness to others condition' – 'the securing of X for A is not inconsistent with the securing for persons other than A of the comparably fundamental conditions of their well-being or interest' (Macleod, 1990: 201). It is obvious that children cannot be expected to assume responsibility for their own nurturing and hence the non-responsibility condition will not present an obstacle to the establishment of a right. Whether the 'fairness to others' condition is satisfied is potentially contentious. Here the principal obstacle to vindicating the right is the claim that Socratic nurturing unfairly encumbers the interests that adults (but especially parents) may have in implementing valued ends that require for their realization circumscription of the autonomy of children. Of course, whether it would be fair to allow parental interests to circumscribe development of autonomy in children depends crucially on the nature of the interest that children have in acquiring autonomy in the first place. So in determining whether children have a right to Socratic nurturing we must turn our attention to the interest condition. What is the case for supposing that children have a substantial stake in Socratic nurturing?

## the case for socratic nurturing

### *Fallibility and revision*

A cluster of considerations seem to ground the fundamentality of the interest in Socratic nurturing. First, there is an argument that emphasizes the instrumental advantages that Socratic nurturing can confer on children. Whether or not we value autonomous endorsement of our basic commitments or ground projects as such, we all have an interest in leading a good life. We have an interest in ensuring that, given the available options, our current ground

projects, whether inherited or chosen, are genuinely worth pursuing. In this context, we must surely acknowledge that our convictions about value are fallible. Ends we currently value, or which we simply find ourselves drawn to in light of our upbringing may, on reflection, turn out to be worthless or ill-suited for us. Equipping children with robust deliberative capacities will assist them, as they mature, in identifying ends that are valuable and worth pursuing and in discarding or revising ends that are insufficiently valuable. This argument supposes, reasonably in my view, that the value that we seek for our lives is fairly translucent to reflective reasoning. It supposes, in other words, that developed deliberative capacities can track value reasonably well. To be sure, our capacities to track value are imperfect. Even highly autonomous persons can make poor choices. But we have a better chance of identifying errors and effecting revisions to our life plans if we have developed powers of critical reflection.

The fallibility and revision argument can be supplemented with the observation that goodness is, at least to some degree, individually indexed in the sense that the ends that are conducive to one person's leading a good life can be quite different than those that contribute to the success of the life of another person. In general, each of us has some privileged epistemic access to the ends that best suit us. Socratic nurturing augments this epistemic advantage by providing children with the rational capacities with which to better identify the ends that are indexed to them.

### *Authenticity*

A second consideration emphasizes the way in which the development of deliberative capacities can lend authenticity to the ends we ultimately choose to pursue. By authenticity I mean a warranted sense of the fittingness of ends for a person. Socratic nurturing increases the degree to which we can view important ends as volitionally sanctioned and this can give us greater confidence about their actual value. An end that is volitionally sanctioned is an end that we can represent to ourselves as choice-worthy in the sense that we recognize considerations that recommend its adoption. Socratic nurturing allows us to see our ends as ones which we have freely committed ourselves to but might not have if we judged the reasons for adopting different ends more compelling. The grounds of freely embraced and reflectively endorsed ends<sup>10</sup> are typically better than merely nurtured ends for the following reason. If the principal source of the fact that I value a given end is that I have been raised a certain way then my grounds for supposing that what I value is actually worth valuing are diminished. If, for instance, I believe that I am an atheist simply because my convictions were deliberately cultivated by my secular humanist parents



and that I would almost certainly have been a Christian if they had raised me to be one then my grounds for thinking that atheism as opposed to Christianity is correct, are poor. By contrast, if I think that good reasons, not mere nurture, ground my beliefs then I can be more confident that my beliefs are sound. The authenticity of my ends seems sensitive to the degree of confidence I can have in them. Socratic nurturing can enhance authenticity by expanding the degree to which ends are volitionally sanctioned rather than merely nurtured.

It is worth noting that this argument is not hostile to the possibility that tradition can furnish a reason for thinking that one's ends are authentic. There is a difference between a person thinking they have reason to embrace tenets of a given faith merely because they were raised in that faith and a person thinking that the longevity of a religious tradition in which they were raised and its ability to keep or win adherents provides a reason to adhere its tenets. The latter but not the former can provide a good reason for adherence to the tenets of the faith. The evidentiary weight of appeal to tradition of the latter sort is, of course, enhanced if we have reason to think that the tradition has endured because of, rather in spite of, the critical reflection of its adherents. In other words, if other reflective people have endorsed traditional commitments then we may have reason to endorse their value too. By contrast, we have reason to doubt the value of traditional commitments if these commitments have been sustained partly by denying adherents the wherewithal to reflect critically on the commitments.

### *Valuing rational nature*

Third, more general considerations about the inherent value of rational nature seem relevant to establishing the importance of Socratic nurturing. Although children are not fully rational beings, they are, even at a very young age, reason sensitive beings. They are naturally inquisitive and they often seek and respond to reasoned explanations and justifications. Frequently, of course, they simply defer to adult authority or are moved spontaneously by unreflective desires and emotions. Often, they fail to comprehend fully or respond to reasons appropriately. Nonetheless, at the point of development at which we face questions about how we may shape children's convictions, our questions concern human beings who already display a distinctive and valuable rational nature. So in the spirit of Kant and T.M. Scanlon, we may ask: What is the appropriate response to the value of rational nature even in its underdeveloped and immature forms? In the case of adults, Scanlon argues that we have reason to honor rational nature by engaging it in processes of justification (Scanlon 1998: 103–7). The degree to which we can honor rational nature in

our dealing with adults will be affected by the degree to which the rational capacities that render mutual justification intelligible have been developed. This suggests that a precondition of honoring adult rational nature is that we make efforts to facilitate the full blossoming of rational nature in children. And this, of course, is the aim of Socratic nurturing. But even if we focus solely on children *qua* children rather than as prospective adults, we have reason to respect their rational nature. Even quite young children can be offered reasons for doing and believing things. The most obvious ways of displaying respect for them as reason-sensitive beings is to engage, rather than ignore, their rational capacities and to develop fledgling reasoning capacities. So there is, I think, a perfectly intelligible sense in which children have vested stake in realizing the distinctive value of human life so construed. Of course, almost everyone is in favor of some development of the rational capacities of children. The point about which there is likely to be controversy is whether it is necessary or appropriate to assign such a high priority to the extensive development of rational nature if this comes at the expense of the realization of other human goods for children.

### some challenges to socratic nurturing

In my view, the foregoing considerations go some way to showing that the interests of children are served in a powerful way by Socratic nurturing. Is this sufficient to ground a right to Socratic nurturing? Before we can answer in the affirmative, we must consider three related challenges to such a right. Each concedes that the interests of many children can be well served by Socratic nurturing but each points to a potentially significant normative loss for children that can accompany Socratic nurturing. If there are other dimensions of children's basic interests that are better served by different forms of nurturing then perhaps it is more appropriate to view Socratic nurturing as a permissible form of nurturing but not one mandated by a right.

#### *Autonomy and commitment*

The first challenge suggests that Socratic nurturing privileges one facet of autonomy, namely the capacity to evaluate and revise basic ends, at the expense of a different facet, namely the capacity for enduring commitment to valuable ends.<sup>11</sup> Autonomy is not merely about evaluating and selecting suitable ends for oneself, it also involves a disposition to stick with worthy ends even when doing so is demanding and other ends seem more alluring. Encouraging children to focus on the array of possible ends they might select dilutes their capacity to commit to ends and thereby jeopardizes the special value that can

be realized through enduring commitment to an end. For example, even if guitar is my 'true' instrument, it might be better for me to persevere with the challenge of mastering the piano if I am apt to dabble shallowly with various instruments in the search for my true musical vocation. Similarly, perhaps we can advance the well-being of children by raising them to have deep and unshakable religious commitments even if we acknowledge the possibility that a life of faith is not necessarily the best life for children. The life of a person equipped with such deep devotion to a plausibly valuable faith would arguably be better than the life of a person who has greater opportunity to revise ends but who cannot sustain commitment to worthy ends, even those that are, in fact, more valuable than those associated with an implanted faith.

There is, I think, an important lesson here but not one that really undermines the case for Socratic nurturing. The lesson is that care must be taken in the manner in which deliberative resources and opportunities are introduced to children. Presenting children with a bewildering array of options of the sort present in a shallow consumer culture runs the risk of trivializing the very project reflective deliberation about ends. It is not likely to enhance capacity for autonomous commitment either. Consequently, it is reasonable for parents to play a substantial role in filtering resources and privileging their own conception of worthwhile ends over others. Similarly, parents may reasonably insist that children persevere, at least to some reasonable degree, in the pursuit of ends deemed valuable by parents. Parents may, moreover, provide a model of integrity for their children to emulate by scrupulously displaying commitment to their comprehensive ideals in the conduct of their own lives. Such strategies for the cultivation of a capacity for commitment can work in concert with facets of Socratic nurturing aimed at facilitating capacities for the appraisal and revision of ends. However, recognition of the importance cultivating commitment does not legitimize efforts to manufacture commitment of children to ends favored by parents. After all, what matters is not mere unwavering adherence to an end – that kind of commitment can be created through indoctrination. Rather we value deep commitment of the sort that reflects free endorsement of ends by a thoughtful person.

### *Threats to intimacy and community*

The second challenge suggests that Socratic nurturing can have a corrosive effect on important goods for children that are independent of autonomy. Some forms of human community arguably achieve a kind of solidarity, intimacy and profound emotional attachment that seems predicated on shared adherence to traditions and rituals that have powerful authority for those who are part of the community. Within these authoritative traditions children can

be loved, cherished and ushered into distinctive practices that viewed in themselves are not objectionable. Against this background, Socratic nurturing can seem problematic because it threatens to alienate children from sources of love, affection and community. Socratic nurturing encourages children to entertain doubts and perhaps press potentially awkward questions about the authority of traditions but by doing so it may rob children of goods that depend upon full immersion within these traditions.<sup>12</sup>

My principal reservation about this challenge is that it seems to rest upon an unduly pessimistic assessment of the robustness of the values in question. Love, solidarity and the meaningful participation in community practices are not directly impeded by the sort of open mindedness Socratic nurturing seeks to develop. It is true that parents or communities can threaten to shun or to withhold affection from children who harbor dissenting views or who express interest in different ways of life. But this is not because conformity is an actual prerequisite of being loved, cherished and included. In my view, the source of normative loss in these cases is to be located in the failure of parents and communities to think imaginatively about how to express love and a decent sense of belonging to non-conformers. It is implausible to suppose that a decent community can be corrupted by children who reflect upon and issue challenges to its authority. Love and community are more robust. Perhaps there are traditions or practices whose survival depends on unthinking servility and hostility to dissenters. But such traditions are of dubious value at best. That their survival of practices might be threatened by Socratic nurturing is not a source of normative loss.

### *Doubting the value of reason*

The third challenge takes more direct aim at the value of the conception of autonomy on which the case for Socratic nurturing is predicated. According to this critique, it is a peculiar liberal philosophical fetish that sees human well-being as essentially bound up with the development and exercise of reason directed at the evaluation of commitments. Rational nature is only one aspect of human value and it has no special claim to be exalted over other credible sources of value such as those achieved through faith or unquestioning submission to tradition. Why must we favor the creation of reflective and questioning liberal selves over the creation of obedient and deferential non-liberal selves, if non-liberal selves can lead lives that are fulfilling when appraised from a non-liberal stance? From this perspective, there is no special priority in cultivating the rational nature of children *per se*. The liberal focus on the development of rational autonomy arbitrarily ignores other ideals. It need not be denied that children have rational capacities which merit some kind of respect.

But, so the suggestion goes, we can adequately respect rational nature by channeling those capacities solely towards thoughtful pursuit of authoritatively given ends. According to the critic, this is a different but adequate form of respect and it falls well short of the requirements of Socratic nurturing.

I am not sure what kind of argument can be provided in response to such a broad rejection of the overarching value of rational autonomy. However, the challenge may founder on a dilemma. On the one hand, if the proponent of this view acknowledges the importance of respecting rational nature then it is difficult to see why we should find attractive a mode of honoring it that aims at narrowly circumscribing the reach of reason. This would be an arbitrarily stultifying conception of the range and value of human reason. On the other hand, if the perspective rejects the overarching value of reason altogether then the perspective has little to recommend it. A different difficulty with the challenge is that it erroneously assumes that there is a genuine competition between the cultivation of rational nature and other sources of human value. One reason to doubt that the existence of such competition is located in the fact that it is extraordinarily difficult to devise examples of worthy ends whose pursuit is actually foreclosed by rational autonomy. After all, the very process of identifying an end as valuable seems to involve advancing considerations that recommend the end of the sort to which autonomous persons are or can be responsive.<sup>13</sup>

### conclusion

If the foregoing is plausible, then the main work for establishing a right to Socratic nurturing is complete. I have not directly addressed the 'fairness to others' condition that is part of Macleod's analysis of rights. I cannot supply the needed argument here but I do not anticipate that it would be difficult to satisfy. There are various ways in which the fairly abstract right to Socratic nurturing that I have defended could be refined and developed. I have not indicated what implications it might have for the proper resolution of particular disputes about the precise scope of parental authority or the appropriate content and character of education. However, it seems likely that the child rearing practices of *some* insular religious groups and conservative parents violate the right to Socratic nurturing. On this basis, I think we can view those practices as objectionable. But I also doubt that mainstream North American liberal culture provides educational and deliberative resources of the sort required to realize the right fully. Liberal critics of insular minorities and fundamentalist parents should guard against complacent smugness.

By way of conclusion, let me note three qualifications concerning the right to Socratic nurturing. First, even if there is a right to Socratic nurturing we

need not suppose that it provides a full account of nurturing or that it has equal standing with other rights of children. Children also have rights to nutritious food, decent clothing, shelter and medical care, and to the love and affection of those charged with their care. In too many parts of the world these rights are not respected. Ensuring that the right to Socratic nurturing is respected is likely to have less urgency than protecting some of the other rights of children. Second, the fact that the right to Socratic nurturing is less important than other rights may mean that coercive enforcement of the right is not always be politically appropriate. For the sake of protecting children's other interests, it may be necessary to tolerate *unreasonable* efforts by parents or others to subvert Socratic nurturing. Given the vulnerability of children and their close dependency on adults, we can, in some contexts, make life worse for them by insisting that all their rights be respected. Note, however, that this does not amount to a justification of autonomy-denying child-rearing practices. Third, even those who are sympathetic to the idea of Socratic nurturing must interpret its implications with suitable acknowledgment of the fact that there are inevitably non-volitional elements of a child's identity. Some unavoidable and reasonable parental choices will more or less irrevocably fix some dimensions of their children's identity. Socratic nurturing does not aim at eliminating the non-volitional elements of identity. Rather it aims at creating persons for whom some significant elements of identity can be volitionally sanctioned and who are equipped to negotiate volitional elements of identity successfully.

Parents who acknowledge and respect the right to Socratic nurturing do not thereby give up special prerogatives to attempt to shape the convictions of their children. Parents remain free to express their deeply held convictions to their children, they may guide important facets of their children's lives in accordance with these convictions and they may make special efforts to ensure that children come to adopt convictions by extolling – in word and deed – the putative value of particular convictions. But on the view defended here, these efforts to shape the convictions of children should take place in concert rather in competition with the cultivation of children's autonomy.

#### acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this paper to my father. An earlier version of this paper was presented to 'Principles of Justice: A Symposium in Celebration of Alistair Macleod' held at Queen's University on 28 September, 2002. I would like to thank the members of the audience for their helpful questions and I would also like to thank Sue Donaldson for providing me with extremely insightful written comments and criticisms. I regret that I have not been able to address all of her points here.

notes

1. The term 'well-being' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'happiness', where happiness is understood in a fairly narrow welfarist or even hedonistic sense. I shall, however, adopt a broader understanding of well-being that is compatible with the possibility that a person's well-being is not reducible to their happiness. Well-being, in effect, refers to the goodness or success of a person's life. The best life might not be the one in which a person is maximally happy. So to the degree that there are non-welfarist components of well-being, parents could promote their children's overall prospects for well-being without necessarily promoting their maximal happiness.
2. For the purposes of this discussion, convictions refer not only to propositional beliefs but also to attitudes held by persons. Parents often try to shape not only what children believe but also the attitudes they take towards their beliefs and the attitudes they have towards others. We can shape children's convictions not only by influencing what they believe but also how they believe it.
3. The influences on children's convictions are diverse but parents typically have special prerogatives to monitor and control non-parental efforts to shape the convictions of children e.g. those by teachers, religious authorities, or community groups. Thus religious parents often elect to send their children to denominational schools with the hope that the schools will impart particular religious beliefs to their children.
4. There has been quite a bit of discussion of the degree to which children have a claim to be raised to be autonomous. Most commentators accept that fostering autonomy is a legitimate objective of child rearing. Dispute tends to turn on whether it is a required objective.
5. Two of the most widely discussed cases that touch on parental efforts to limit children's autonomy are *Wisconsin v. Yoder* and *Mozert v. Hawkins*. I shall not address the details of these cases here.
6. The point of promoting autonomy is not to inculcate a disposition that leads to constant interrogation and revision of one's values and commitments. The unexamined life may not be worth leading but the merely examined life is not much good either. Nonetheless, Socratic nurturing does aim at ensuring that children can recognize the value and purpose of reflecting seriously on one's ends. I do not think we can extol the value of having the capacities constitutive of autonomy without also supposing that the children we seek to equip with these capacities should understand their value and hence be favorably disposed to exercising them. Harry Brighouse defends the slightly more modest objective of facilitating children's autonomy but he acknowledges the difficulty of actually facilitating autonomy without also promoting it (Brighouse, 2000: 81).
7. From a practical point of view, successful implementation of an ideal of Socratic nurturing will turn, in part, on various matters in developmental psychology. The degree to which it makes sense to encourage children to exercise critical judgment about important matters is sensitive to facts about cognitive and emotional development. Just as the particular pedagogical strategies and

objectives that are appropriately adopted in teaching children literacy and mathematical skills are sensitive to different stages of psychological development, the most appropriate strategies for facilitating the development of autonomy in children must be similarly sensitive. At certain ages, it may be pointless or even self-defeating to encourage children to reason about their basic beliefs. My aim here is not to sort out, as it were, an age and developmentally appropriate curriculum for the cultivation of meaningful autonomy. Rather, I wish to defend the appropriateness of the objective of facilitating the development of autonomy in children. The argument of the paper does rest of two widely held assumptions. First, it assumes that children can be taught the skills necessary for autonomy. Second, it assumes that in the absence of suitable instruction and encouragement, development of meaningful autonomy can be impeded. With respect to the issue of curriculum content, I agree with the proposals made by Harry Brighouse about the dimensions of an autonomy facilitating education (Brighouse, 2000: 74, 75, 78, 79). The defense of Socratic nurturing I develop here parallels in some respects and, I hope, complements Brighouse's defense of an autonomy facilitating education.

8. On this point, I find Kymlicka's influential criticisms of communitarian accounts of the liberal self entirely persuasive (Kymlicka, 1989).
9. I should note that there is some controversy within rights theory as to whether it is ever appropriate to attribute rights to children. Sponsors of the 'choice' or 'will' theory of rights are generally skeptical about the possibility of assigning any fundamental rights to children. On this analysis rights are properly understood as devices for the protection of the choices of autonomous agents. Since infants and young children lack the capacities requisite for autonomy on which the very concept of a right is allegedly grounded, it makes no sense to ascribe rights to children. Of course, the fact that the choice theory cannot comfortably accommodate children's rights is often taken to be a decisive strike against it. For recent discussion of the possibility of ascribing moral rights to children, see Brennan, 2002; Brighouse, 2002; Griffin, 2002.
10. I do not assume that only those ends that we voluntarily select can display authenticity. Authenticity is not directly a function of the choosing of ends. After all, I can choose ends unreflectively and ends that I have not chosen can be authentic.
11. Although he endorses the appropriateness of raising children to be autonomous, Eamon Callan (2002) discusses worries about the way in which certain kinds of autonomy emphasizing child-rearing strategies can diminish children's capacities to adhere to valuable ends. Shelley Burt (1994) discusses a similar concern about how mandating a liberal, autonomy promoting education can undermine the possibility of commitment to demanding faiths.
12. Shelley Burt (1994) raises these sorts of concerns.
13. Even radical depictions of the value of faith, such as those offered famously by Kierkegaard, as beyond the reach of reason seem, albeit some paradoxically, seemed aimed at providing reasons for embracing faith.



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biographical note

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