

**ON BECOMING AN ADULT:
AUTONOMY AND THE MORAL RELEVANCE OF LIFE'S STAGES**

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Abstract: What is it about a person's becoming an adult that makes it generally inappropriate to treat that person paternalistically any longer? The Standard View holds that a mere difference in age or stage of life cannot in itself be morally relevant, but only matters insofar as it is correlated with the development of capacities for mature practical reasoning. This paper defends the contrary view: two people can have all the same general psychological attributes and yet the mere fact that one person is at the beginning of a life and another in the middle of one can justify treating the younger person more paternalistically than the older one. Recognising the moral relevance of age, moreover, is crucial if one is to accommodate both the liberal moral ideal of respect for autonomy and our demanding educational aims, given that these otherwise come into conflict with one another.

I. INTRODUCTION

The right to pursue one's own good in one's own way on fair terms with others is central to the liberal outlook, and this naturally makes liberals wary of interfering with people's freedom or autonomy for their own good. Liberal scepticism about paternalism, moreover, usually extends beyond the law to personal and social relations as well. Paternalism, as the word itself suggests, seems like a fitting way of treating children, not adults. But what is it about becoming an adult that justifies our recognition of a person's authority over her own life?

The *Standard View* is that children differ from adults in lacking the ability to effectively govern their conduct by reason, where that is sometimes understood to encompass capacities

for ethical evaluation and self-control as well as instrumental rationality. On this picture, age has no independent importance, but matters only insofar as it is correlated with the acquisition of some sort of practical competence. In Locke's succinct phrase, 'we are born free, as we are born rational; not that [at first] we have actually the exercise of either: age that brings one, brings with it the other too.'¹ David Archard articulates the same idea at greater length:

It would be morally arbitrary and unjust to deny children rights merely because they were younger than adults. It would be as arbitrary and as wrong as denying rights to humans who were shorter than average, had fewer hairs or lower pitch of voice than others.... [But] the denial of rights to children is not based solely on age. It is done on the basis of an alleged correlation between age and some relevant competence.²

Michael Freeman agrees: the right to autonomy does not 'depend on the stage of life that a person has reached,' but on attainment of 'critical competence' or a 'capacity for reasoning.'³

While the Standard View provides a convincing account of our paternalistic attitude toward younger children, it is less persuasive in the case of middle and late adolescents (roughly ages 14–18). This is because the wide variation of abilities amongst both adolescents and adults makes age a dubious proxy for reasonableness past early adolescence. It might seem, then, that treating adolescents more paternalistically than 'adults' is often unjustifiable. But this

¹ J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.61.

² D. Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 85.

³ M.D.A. Freeman, *The Moral Status of Children*, (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), pp. 34–5. See also K. Henley, 'The Authority to Educate,' in O. O'Neill and W. Ruddick (eds.), *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood* (Oxford UP, 1979), p. 259; L.D. Houlgate, 'Children, Paternalism, and Rights to Liberty' in O'Neill and Ruddick, *Having Children*, p. 274; F. Schrag, 'The Child in the Moral Order,' *Philosophy*, 52 (1977), pp. 67–77.

conclusion is in serious tension with our educational aims, which strive to foster much more than the minimal competence for independence in a liberal society. To resolve this dilemma, I will argue here that, contrary to the Standard View, the morally relevant difference between adolescents and adults is not necessarily a difference in practical competence, but one in age—or more precisely—*stage of life*. That is, if we think about an autonomous life as a whole, we find that paternalism at the beginning of a life is much less intrusive than paternalism later on, and this fact about personal chronology makes it appropriate to treat youths differently than adults.

In the next section, I begin by considering and rejecting two versions of the Standard View. The main purpose is not to offer conclusive objections, but to articulate two ideas that will help frame the rest of my discussion: respect for autonomy and the Dilemma of Liberal Education. In section III, I describe a global conception of autonomy – ‘life authorship’ – which I use to explain how a person’s stage of life can be morally significant. Finally, in section IV, I highlight some of the virtues of my position, including how it resolves the Dilemma of Liberal Education.

II. THE STANDARD VIEW

II.1. The welfare approach and respect for autonomy

On the Standard View, children are appropriately treated more paternalistically than adults because, as Tamar Schapiro puts it, children ‘are as yet lacking in reason and are therefore

unfit to govern themselves.’⁴ But what precisely is the connection between lacking reason and being unfit to govern oneself? One possibility is that facility in practical reasoning matters because it promotes welfare or well-being. (I have in mind, here, conceptions of well-being that do not include autonomy as an irreducible ideal element.) Mill, for instance, argued that paternalism toward people of mature faculties is generally inappropriate because, being the best acquainted with their own goals, feelings, and circumstances, adults are usually the best judges of their own good. The paternalist, therefore, tends to interfere ‘wrongly and in the wrong place.’ Moreover, even when people are not the *best* judges of their own good, they may simply benefit from exercising their own faculties and making their own choices. Therefore, so long as they possess at least moderate prudence, interference will often do more harm than good. The argument for treating those of *immature* faculties paternalistically is just the reverse. Because of their imperfect powers of reasoning and their lack of experience of the world and of themselves, children are not yet suitably proficient judges of where their own well-being lies, and they *do* stand to benefit from paternalism.⁵

That paternalism will generally benefit children *more* than adults is quite plausible. The usual objection to a purely welfarist approach is that, on any realistic assessment of how prudent the ordinary person actually is, it would justify more paternalism toward adults than seems consistent with the liberal outlook.⁶ Mill, in particular, has been accused of exaggerating the extent to which the average adult is a good judge of his own interests,⁷ and much research

⁴ T. Schapiro, ‘Childhood and Personhood,’ *Arizona Law Review*, 45 (2003), pp. 575–94, at p. 578.

⁵ J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, esp., ch. IV, ¶¶25, 4; ch. III, ¶¶4, 14.

⁶ G. Dworkin, ‘Paternalism,’ *Monist*, 56 (1972), pp. 64–84; R. Arneson, ‘Mill versus Paternalism,’ *Ethics*, 90 (1980), pp. 470–89.

⁷ H.L.A. Hart, *Law, Liberty, and Morality* (Stanford UP, 1963), pp. 31–2.

in behavioural psychology suggests that people are neither good judges of probability nor particularly adept at predicting the intensity and duration of their own future feelings.⁸

Often underlying this objection is the sense that we have a duty to respect autonomy independently of our concern for well-being. What accounts for this duty? Some Kantians hold that insofar as paternalism fails to respect people's autonomy, it amounts to using them 'as mere props or tools in our own projects.'⁹ But this seems unconvincing, as we do not promote the well-being of a tool for its own sake. A better suggestion is that respect for autonomy involves recognising another as an agent of equal standing. This requires more than appreciation of the equal worth and inviolability of each person's well-being. Respect for autonomy essentially involves recognising the other person's *equal practical authority*. This means deferring to his jurisdiction or sovereignty over his own person and what regards chiefly himself. Practical authority is thus a content-independent notion. Another person's self-determination commands our respect, not because the person is particularly likely to conduct himself reasonably or prudently, but because the other person has a certain authority as our moral equal.¹⁰ Even when the person is not the best judge of his own interests, we should recognise him as the *final* judge (except, perhaps, where the consequence would be catastrophic). Interference with his legitimate domain of control is a kind of usurpation, an infringement of the equal standing of the other person, even if it does promote his well-being.

⁸ See the essays in: D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (eds.), *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge UP, 1982); Kahneman and Tversky (eds.), *Choices, Values, and Frames* (Cambridge UP, 2000).

⁹ O. O'Neill 'Between Consenting Adults,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14 (1985), p. 259.

¹⁰ Cf. S. Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Harvard UP, 2006), esp. ch. 6.

II.2. The agency approach

The duty to respect autonomy is usually understood to mean that ‘in every action, we are to respect others as choosers even if we disapprove of the choices they make.’¹¹ But then how could we ever justify intuitively reasonable forms of paternalism, such as that practiced toward children? According to a second version of the Standard View we do not have a duty to respect someone’s autonomy unless the choice represents the genuine will of an autonomous agent.

Although there are several versions of this argument, we can illuminate their common structure if we distinguish between *de facto* and *de jure* conceptions of autonomy. There are two main types of *de facto* autonomy. The first covers conceptions of what it means to actively govern oneself. Autonomy in this sense is a ‘condition’ or ‘state of functioning’ and might be conceived locally as a property of particular actions or globally as a characteristic of persons or lives. However, we also refer to people as *de facto* autonomous, not because their conduct is actually autonomous, but because they possess the capacity for it. As there are many conceptions of autonomy as a condition, there are likewise a number of corresponding conceptions of autonomy as a capacity. *De jure* autonomy, by contrast, is the sovereign authority, or moral right, to govern oneself within certain boundaries. On the agency approach, a person possesses a right to autonomy if he is (in some sense) either acting autonomously or at least capable of doing so.¹² Therefore, absent other reasons for attributing *de jure* autonomy to a person (e.g., welfarist considerations), paternalism does not

¹¹ T. Schapiro, ‘What is a Child?’, *Ethics*, 109 (1999), pp. 715–38, at p. 719.

¹² Cf. J. Feinberg, *Harm to Self* (Oxford UP, 1986), ch. 18.

infringe upon a person's *de jure* autonomy, if that person lacks the *de facto* autonomy which grounds that right. (Naturally, presence of *de facto* autonomy may be relevant for welfarist reasons as well.) I will now outline three versions of this kind of argument which all aim to explain why treating children paternalistically is consistent with the duty to respect autonomy.

i. Genuinely voluntary acts of will

One kind of argument holds that only actions that are suitably (*de facto*) autonomous warrant our respect. While some philosophers maintain that everyday weakness of will, unquestioning conformism, motivational ambivalence, or a lack of self-confidence can diminish the autonomy of an action, few would say that actions heteronomous for these reasons never warrant deference. Thus, a liberal theory of paternalism seems to need a rather modest account of what makes an action sufficiently autonomous. Joel Feinberg develops one such account. He holds that respect for autonomy forbids us from interfering with another's self-regarding choice unless the choice is potentially harmful to the actor and not sufficiently 'voluntary'—that is, not a genuine expression of his will. (Such involuntariness, by the way, would not necessarily absolve a person of responsibility for the consequences.) For example, respect for autonomy should not prevent a bystander from restraining a man from walking onto a bridge that, unbeknownst to the pedestrian, is about to collapse.

Because the pedestrian does not want to fall into the river, preventing him from doing so does not interfere with what he really wants to do.¹³ According to Feinberg, just as the liberal

¹³ Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. V, ¶15.

harm principle permits us to protect a person from the harmful choices of others, the same rationale licenses us to protect a person from his own “nonvoluntary choices,” which being the genuine choices of no one at all, are no less foreign to him.¹⁴ And what are the grounds for dismissing a person’s choice as insufficiently voluntary to warrant our respect? Feinberg says they boil down to two: “He couldn’t help it” and “He didn’t really know (or understand) what he was doing.” The gist of the second of these is clear enough. The first encompasses both external coercion and powerful internal compulsions like a violent passion, mental illness, or powerful addiction—something more than routine weakness of will.¹⁵

Although this is a general justification of paternalism, Feinberg and others invoke it to justify the special status of children as well, since their inexperience and undeveloped powers of self-control and reasoning make them especially prone to acting in ways that they cannot help or that they really neither understand nor intend. However, unlike the man about to cross the dangerous bridge unawares, whose simple, isolated mistake can be readily revealed to him, the incapacities typical of childhood affect voluntary choice quite broadly and cannot easily be remedied except by letting the child grow up. This helps explain why paternalism toward children has an especially pervasive and persistent character.¹⁶

ii. The capacity for reflective agency

A second argument is that, not only are children prone to bringing about unintended consequences, they are not really capable of willing at all in an important sense. On the

¹⁴ Feinberg, *Harm to Self*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 316, 162–71.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 325–32.

version of this position developed by Tamar Schapiro, to possess an autonomous will requires the capacity to stand back from one's desires and decide which ones to act upon in light of one's abiding values, principles, and preferences. Inasmuch as children lack the ability to stand back from their immediate inclinations or lack a relatively stable evaluative framework, they are not yet autonomous agents. Therefore, the autonomy-based objection to paternalism does not even arise in their case.¹⁷ Borrowing Christine Korsgaard's terminology, one might say that children lack a mature 'practical identity': 'a conception of the right and the good' bound up with one's self-conception and self-worth.¹⁸

Why think autonomy rights depend on this sort of reflective agency, and not just the simple agency possessed by even young children? Schapiro says the child resembles the seriously depressed person in being subject to unruly inclinations which constitute 'alien forces' that undermine the ability of the deliberative capacities to authoritatively speak for the person.¹⁹ But if the child has not yet established a practical identity, then how can any of her desires be *alien* to her? I believe a better answer invokes the connection between reflective agency, identity, and a sense of dignity or self-respect. Those incapable of reflective agency can certainly find restraint of their will frustrating, but because they do not have a conception of self which they express in their actions, they cannot experience the restraint as demeaning. This gives paternalism toward children a wholly different character than paternalism toward adults.

¹⁷ 'What is a Child?', pp. 730–1.

¹⁸ C.M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 122–3.

¹⁹ 'Childhood and Personhood,' pp. 585, 590

Since children do not come into the world as reflective agents, parents and teachers must use discipline and example to awaken the child's capacity to stand back from, to resist, and to choose on the basis of reasons amongst her motivations. However, as Schapiro emphasises, children cannot constitute themselves as agents all at once. In play, children 'try on' different practical identities and experiment with being different kinds of persons. To justify paternalism toward adolescents, Schapiro suggests that, inasmuch as adolescents are 'characteristically "in search of themselves,"' they are just engaged in a more earnest kind of play, toying with possible identities 'in a rather intense but provisional way.'²⁰

iii. The capacity for moral agency

A third argument appeals specifically to moral agency, a person's capacity to govern himself by moral standards. This was Locke's main argument for placing children under adult authority. The idea is that the child is not to be entrusted with full freedom until he is capable of recognising in reciprocal fashion the rights of others and his duties to them.²¹ Until then, the child is not morally accountable for his actions, is not yet a full member of the moral community, and thus lacks the full freedoms attending to that status. One of the duties of parents and teachers therefore is to raise children so that they develop the capacity to know and abide by this law. Modern versions of this argument, such as that presented by Robert Noggle, sometimes appeal to stage theories of moral development, according to which agents progress, first by internalising conventional moral norms, and then by learning to

²⁰ 'What is a Child,' p. 733.

²¹ *Two Treatises*, II.63.

take up an impartial and critical, or ‘post-conventional,’ perspective on those norms.²² Since the focus of this argument is on the young person’s recognition of the rights and interests of others, it might not seem paternalistic. But surely it is in a person’s interests to become a moral agent, since (if for no other reason) the ability to live in communities and relationships structured by law and reciprocity is a prerequisite for a flourishing human life.

11.3. The dilemma of liberal education

These three agency arguments do help explain why the choices of younger children have a different status than those of adults. It is more doubtful whether they justify existing paternalism toward adolescents, who neither lack any of the major cognitive faculties of adults nor are incapable of acting on moral principles and personal values. Of course, no one maintains that adolescents should be treated just like young children. But we do treat adolescents paternalistically, albeit sometimes in rather indirect ways. For instance, by denying adolescents the right to keep their own residence, we exercise significant control over them simply by keeping them under the gaze of adults. By restricting their freedoms to work and make contracts, we enhance their guardians’ economic power over them. And even when adolescents are not legally compelled to attend school, there is often overwhelming family and social pressure to do so. Still, since conceptions of autonomous agency can be formulated in more and less demanding ways, it may be possible to devise standards to which most

²² R. Noggle, ‘Special Agents: Children’s Autonomy and Parental Autonomy,’ in D. Archard and C. Macleod (eds.), *The Moral and Political Status of Children* (Oxford UP, 2002). Classic stage theories include: J. Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (Oxford: Harcourt, 1932); L. Kohlberg, ‘Stage and Sequence,’ in D. Goslin (ed.), *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), pp. 347–480; J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971 [rev. ed., 1999]), §§ 70–2.

adolescents do not measure up. Perhaps we don't act in a truly voluntary way insofar as we are prone to miscalculate risk or to act impetuously without real appreciation of the consequences. Or perhaps full independence should be contingent on achieving the sort of moral autonomy associated with post-conventional moral reasoning or the personal autonomy rooted in a strong sense of one's practical identity subsequent to sustained critical reflection.

The problem with invoking such demanding standards is that many apparently normal adults would not measure up to them either. After all, adults too take irrational risks, act on their passions, and fail to appreciate the possible consequences of their actions.²³ Sometimes, it is true, we think the irrational behaviour of adults warrants paternalistic interference. But usually we think it necessary that the person would welcome our interference in a clear-headed moment;²⁴ often people want to make their own mistakes, and some prefer a reckless or independent lifestyle. Moreover, while irrationality may occasionally justify paternalism to prevent a person from *harming* himself, it is seldom thought to justify interference to improve his character or confer benefits.²⁵ But these are common reasons for treating adolescents paternalistically. Turning to moral agency, one of the most consistent findings of developmental psychologists is that, while conventional moral reasoning is usually attained prior to the teenage years, post-conventional reasoning is far from universally observed in adults.²⁶ Perhaps for this reason, Noggle only requires that the individual not be a

²³ A study by S.G. Millstein and L.B. Halpern-Felsher suggests that adolescents are actually more risk-averse than young adults ('Judgments about Risk and Perceived Invulnerability in Adolescents and Young Adults,' *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 12 [2002], pp. 399–422).

²⁴ Cf. J.D. Hodson, 'The Principle of Paternalism,' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977), pp. 61–9.

²⁵ Cf. J. Feinberg, *Harmless Wrongdoing* (Oxford UP, 1988), ch. 33.

²⁶ A. Colby, L. Kohlberg, J. Gibbs, and M. Lieberman, 'A Longitudinal Study of Moral Judgment' *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 48 (1–2 Serial No. 200) (University of Chicago Press, 1983);

‘psychopath’: that is, possess the motivation to act on moral considerations without ‘direct, overt reward or punishment.’²⁷ That is a standard most adolescents easily meet. Finally, if we look at the psychological research on identity formation, we find that many adults lack firm commitments, are still in search of themselves, or have never really questioned received values.²⁸ What all this means is that, if a conception of *de facto* autonomy is to ground the equal standing of adults as members of an inclusive liberal society, then the threshold of attainment had better be, as Rawls puts it, ‘not at all stringent.’²⁹ Or, in the words of Kohlberg’s team, ‘As long as we are willing to treat those age eighteen and older equally, we must be willing to adopt a minimalistic definition of the competence necessary for moral personhood.’³⁰ And if the capacity for agency is to justify treating adolescents differently than adults, then naturally we have to hold adolescents and adults to the same standard.

Could we nevertheless find a threshold that would reliably distinguish adults from middle and late adolescents? In his review of the psychological literature, David Moshman casts doubt on this:

I am not aware ... of any form or level of knowledge that is routine among adults but rarely seen in adolescents. On the contrary, there is enormous cognitive variability among individuals beyond age 12, and it appears that age accounts for surprisingly little of this variability ... Research simply does not support categorical distinctions between

S.J. Thoma, ‘Research on the Defining Issues Test,’ in M. Killen and J.G. Smetana (eds.), *Handbook of Moral Development*, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

²⁷ ‘Special Agents,’ p. 111.

²⁸ F.D. Alsaker and J. Kroger, ‘Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Identity,’ in *Handbook of Adolescent Development*, S. Jackson and L. Goossens (eds.) (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2006), pp. 90–117; J.E. Côté and C. Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), esp. ch. 10.

²⁹ *Theory of Justice*, p. 506; rev. ed., p. 443.

³⁰ F. Clark Power, A. Higgins, and L. Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education* (Columbia UP, 1989), p. 29.

adolescents and adults in rationality, morality, or identity ... The distinction between adolescence and adulthood is more a matter of cultural expectations and restrictions than of intrinsic psychological characteristics. With the understanding that development is not limited to childhood, adolescence may best be conceived of as the first phase of adulthood.³¹

The problem, then, is not that agency is a matter of degree. We know very well that it is often necessary to make pragmatic decisions about how to carve the world at vague boundaries.³² Nor is the point that there is no difference on average in the capacity for practical reasoning between adults and adolescents. Rather, the problem is that the variation within the two populations prevents us from saying that, as a rule, adults possess a level of competence that adolescents lack.

Someone might argue that, even if age is only imperfectly correlated with the capacity for agency, it is nonetheless the best criterion available, given that institutions need easy-to-apply standards and that individualistic testing of capacity would be cumbersome, unreliable, and ripe for abuse.³³ But liberals would not generally tolerate using proxy characteristics (like race, sex, or class) to restrict basic liberties on the basis of weak correlations. Moreover, it would not justify the paternalism of parents, who generally *can* tailor their conduct to the capacities of their own children.

³¹ D. Moshman, *Adolescent Psychological Development: Rationality, Morality, and Identity*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), p. 143. Cf. D. Keating (1990) 'Adolescent Thinking,' in S.S. Feldman and G.R. Elliot (eds.), *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent* (Harvard UP, 1990); Deanna Kuhn, 'Adolescent Thinking,' in R.M. Lerner and L. Steinberg (eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, 3rd ed., v. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009).

³² Cf. C.M. Korsgaard, 'Two Arguments Against Lying' in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge UP, 1997).

³³ Feinberg, *Harm to Self*, p. 326; Archard, *Children*, pp. 85–91.

Another reply is that our practice is conscientiously conservative: we time the beginning of adulthood to coincide with the development of the minimal capacities in those who are the slowest to develop within the normal range. But this is hard to square with the liberal's usual assumptions about the burden of proof. Rawls, for example, says that 'paternalistic intervention must be justified by evident failure or absence of reason and will,'³⁴ and Gerald Dworkin claims that it would be 'better 10 men ruin themselves than one man be unjustly deprived of liberty.'³⁵ If these views are sound, then why place the burden of proof on the other side for adolescents?

Some justify treating adolescents paternalistically insofar as it protects and promotes their *future* autonomy.³⁶ However, this argument is not available on the agency approach. If the subject is judged to lack the capacities for agency now, *then* the agency theorist may argue that we should work to maximally preserve and enhance the person's future choices. But if the subject is already capable of making his own choices, then the logic of the agency approach rules out this essentially consequentialist argument. As Feinberg observes, 'When a mature adult has a conflict between getting what he wants now and having his options left open in the future, we are bound by our respect for his autonomy not to force his present choice in order to protect his future "liberty."'³⁷

³⁴ *Theory of Justice*, p. 250; rev. ed., p. 218.

³⁵ 'Paternalism,' p. 84.

³⁶ Dworkin, 'Paternalism'; Power *et al.*, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*, p. 30; Freeman, *Moral Status of Children*, pp. 39, 98.

³⁷ J. Feinberg, 'The Child's Right to an Open Future,' in W. Aiken and H. LaFollette (eds.), *Whose Child?: Children's Rights, Parental Authority, and State Power* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1980), p. 127.

Must we conclude that it is wrong to treat adolescents as a rule more paternalistically than normally competent ‘adults’?³⁸ This is not an attractive option either, for our educational aims are more ambitious than that of raising *minimally competent* individuals. Instead of trying to defend a particular philosophy of education here, it will suffice to mention a number of plausible such aims. First, there is more to the agential capacities for rationality and self-control than the minimal thresholds necessary for *de jure* independence as an adult in a liberal society. As parents and educators, we set our sights higher than fostering just enough prudence and willpower to keep individuals out of institutions as adults.³⁹ More demanding conceptions of autonomy might figure into our educational aims in other ways as well. Several philosophers defend an ideal of autonomy that involves imaginative reflection on different possible ways of life or the disposition to subject received beliefs and values to rational scrutiny.⁴⁰ Others advocate conceptions that incorporate substantive character ideals, like individual initiative, non-servility, self-reliance, or self-discipline.⁴¹ And beyond autonomy there are a host of other character virtues which an education might strive to foster, like perseverance, moderation, fidelity, and care.⁴² Then there is the arduous project of

³⁸ This is the conclusion of Henley, “The Authority to Educate”; see also H. Cohen, *Equal Rights for Children* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1980).

³⁹ But see B. Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, (Yale UP, 1980), p. 148.

⁴⁰ R.S. Peters, ‘Freedom and the Development of the Free Man,’ in J.F. Doyle (ed.), *Educational Judgments* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); D.T. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (Columbia UP, 1989), esp. Pt. II, §4; H. Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford UP, 2000), ch. 4.

⁴¹ Cf. J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chs. 14–15; P. Benson ‘Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,’ *Social Theory and Practice*, 17 (1991), pp. 385–408; S. Kristinsson, ‘The Limits of Neutrality: Toward a Weakly Substantive Account of Autonomy,’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 30 (2000), pp. 257–86; W. Galston, *Liberal Virtues* (Cambridge UP, 1991), ch. 10.

⁴² Besides the standard works of Plato and Aristotle, see the essays in D. Carr and J. Steutel (eds.), *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education* (London: Routledge, 1999) and N. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (University of California Press, 1983).

initiating the young into the traditions, disciplines, and practices that we think valuable.⁴³ And to this we may add the more prosaic aim of equipping children with the knowledge and skills that will open up a wide (and not just minimally adequate) range of options upon entering adulthood. Finally, there are specifically civic or democratic educational aims, which could include fostering competence in intelligent problem-solving, open-minded dialogue, an appreciation of the ‘burdens of judgement’ as a source of reasonable disagreement, responsiveness to the perspectives and needs of people from various backgrounds, toleration, and mutual respect.⁴⁴

We need not settle on a final list of these educational aims here, nor decide which ones are best left to families and private institutions. What is important is that all of them seek considerably more than some minimal capacity for agency. Additionally, it seems probable that achieving many of these aims requires the basic capacities for agency to already be in place. And yet, the agency approach suggests that parents and institutions should give up all authority over adolescents as soon as they have attained the minimal capacities for adult life. Agency theorists typically only evade this odd conclusion by implicitly holding adolescents to higher standards than adults are held to, which is unjustifiable by their own lights. Of course, not all educational aims require paternalism. But the uninitiated often do not appreciate the value

⁴³ R.S. Peters, ‘Education as Initiation,’ in R.D. Archambault (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis and Education* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965); Peters, *Ethics and Education* (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1967), esp. ch. 4.

⁴⁴ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), esp. chs. 7–8; A. Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton UP, 1987), esp. ch. 2; Galston, *Liberal Virtues*, ch. 10; E. Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); E. Anderson, ‘Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective,’ *Ethics*, 117 (2007), pp. 595–622.

of what is taught until it is half-learned, and the accumulated wisdom of our practices suggests that maintaining some measure of paternalistic authority over adolescents is worthwhile.

This leads us to an underappreciated tension in liberal thought. When we articulate the grounds for a person's free and equal status in a liberal society, we seek inclusive minimal standards of rational agency. But our aims in education strive to develop the potential of children as fully as possible. These two parts of the liberal outlook inevitably clash in raising adolescents, since people naturally reach the threshold for minimal competence long before our more ambitious educational ideals can be realised. Liberals therefore seem forced to choose between respect for autonomy and their educational ideals. Call this the *Dilemma of Liberal Education*.

III. RESPECT FOR LIFE AUTHORSHIP

Can we escape the Dilemma of Liberal Education without giving up either respect for autonomy or our demanding educational aspirations? I shall argue that we can, but that it requires appreciating how respect for a person's choices, or local autonomy, is related to respect for a person's right to make a life for himself, a form of global autonomy. Let me briefly sketch the argument before turning to a more detailed exposition. I have claimed that the moral significance of respect for autonomy is anchored in our equal standing and authority as agents. But a relation of equal, or unequal, standing is not fully determined in a single interaction; it depends on how the episode fits into the larger structure of the parties' lives. My position is that paternalism at the beginning of life has a special character in this respect. When paternalistic limitation of local autonomy can be understood, not as an adventitious usurpation of one agent's authority by another, but as a normal period of preparation for assuming full

authority over the direction of one's life, then such paternalism is not necessarily an affront to equal standing, since it does not question the young person's equal entitlement to eventually take charge of that life.

Therefore, insofar as paternalism respects the young person's global autonomy, limitations on local autonomy can be consistent with the core moral idea of respect for autonomy, even though it clearly does temporarily limit the young person's local autonomy. This means that when paternalism is sincerely altruistic and can reasonably be expected to benefit an adolescent, it is not necessary to demonstrate that the adolescent lacks the minimal practical competence an adult would need to make her own choice. Instead, because of the temporal position of adolescence in the ordinary lifespan, we may justifiably hold the adolescent to different standards in determining her authority to make her own choices than those to which we hold adults.

To flesh out this argument, I turn first to articulating the relevant conception of global autonomy, which I call 'life authorship' (III.1.), and then explain how this reveals the moral relevance of a person's stage of life (III.2–3.). Following that, I highlight some of the advantages of my account, including the way it resolves the Dilemma of Liberal Education (IV).

III.1. A conception of global autonomy

I have already mentioned that *de facto* autonomy, conceived of as a state of functioning, is sometimes characterised *locally* as a property of individual choices and actions and sometimes *globally* as a property of people's characters or lives. One reason to think local autonomy the more fundamental idea is that one can only lead an autonomous life, or express an autonomous character, by performing individual autonomous actions. This suggests that global autonomy is

an aggregate property, ultimately derivative of instances of local autonomy.⁴⁵ But this reductive view misrepresents at least one important conception of global autonomy. Whereas local autonomy is concerned with the question, ‘What do I really want to do now?’, one interesting conception of global autonomy is concerned with the question, ‘How do I really want to live my life?’⁴⁶ And not all of our choices and actions bear equally on how successful we are at directing our lives as a whole. A man with a successful family-life and career may be living what we would normally regard as a manifestly autonomous life, even though he is routinely manipulated by advertisements for consumer goods and spends much of each day nursing a caffeine addiction.

What, then, do we have in mind when we ask ourselves how we want to lead our lives? Often the question concerns the structure of a life—roughly what Rawls called a ‘life plan.’⁴⁷ For instance, we may be asking what sorts of familial or occupational roles we wish to play or to which other long-term projects and goals we want to dedicate a significant portion of our time. Or the question can refer to our manner of living. What values, principles, or faith will we strive to honor in our actions? What will be our ‘individual management style’⁴⁸: will we live impulsively or deliberately, indulge in risk or avoid it, go it alone or prefer collaborative efforts? Because our roles, projects, values, and styles of living do so much to shape our characters, inform our personal identities, structure the daily tempo of our lives, and shape its broad contours, the ability to make decisions about these things is central to what we mean by a self-determined life. We can refer to this kind of self-determination without too much

⁴⁵ J. Christman ‘Autonomy and Personal History,’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 21 (1991), pp. 1–24, at p. 3.

⁴⁶ Cf. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, p. 46.

⁴⁷ *Theory of Justice*, §63; see also Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, pp. 49–52.

⁴⁸ R. Double, ‘Two Types of Autonomy Accounts,’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 22 (1992), pp. 65–80.

exaggeration as ‘life authorship,’ since by making choices about these things a person exercises control over the direction of his own life story.⁴⁹ Some liberal perfectionists think of the activity of life authorship (or some similar notion) as an important element of well-being which is to be promoted as a goal. On this view, people are to be encouraged to ‘take charge of their affairs’ and discouraged from drifting through life aimlessly or adopting their way of life passively from others.⁵⁰ But insofar as we find the deontological idea of respect for autonomy compelling, we will want to take a different approach by formulating a *de jure* conception of global autonomy that ensures people the capabilities, social space, and opportunities to engage in active life authorship to the extent that they choose to do so. Respect for the right of life authorship, therefore, is not about promoting self-directed lives as a valuable goal. Whether people actually embrace the opportunity to energetically take charge of their lives is immaterial. Providing such opportunities is morally required, not because we insist that the only good life is the actively autonomous one, nor because we believe that no one could possibly lead a self-directed life without them, but because this much seems necessary to respect each person’s authority over her own life. The women’s movement is exemplary in this regard. Although obviously not unconcerned with the quality of women’s lives, what has been most striking about it is the demand that women possess the same authority and power as men over the way their lives are shaped by their occupational and familial roles.

Respecting life authorship does not, then, entail promoting autonomous lives in a *de facto* sense, but it does require society to ensure that people have adequate capabilities

⁴⁹ Cf. Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 369.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*; S. Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge UP, 1998), ch. 6; M. Oshana, *Personal Autonomy in Society* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), chs. 3–4.

and opportunities for exercising meaningful decision-making in life.⁵¹ This will presumably require such measures as providing access to education, leisure, and significant control over reproduction, as well as striving for full employment at decent wages with real social mobility. However, because most people's goals involve positional goods and make significant demands on the lives of others, a universalisable duty to respect life authorship cannot guarantee people success in their particular undertakings. It can only guarantee the basic conditions under which people possess real freedom to frame and pursue their own life plans.

But what constitutes an *adequate* range of opportunities for exercising meaningful life authorship? We cannot answer the question in purely quantitative terms, since some options are generally deemed more valuable than others, and since qualitative variety in options is ordinarily desirable. So we need at least some rough measure of the value of different option sets. Because it is not our aim to work out a perfectionist theory of *the good life*, it seems best to call on a 'thin' theory of human flourishing here. The hope is that we can work out a list of basic human capabilities, which people across cultures tend to value developing. Such a list might include capabilities like those for knowledge and understanding; for appreciation of art and nature; for religious or spiritual activity; for participation in intimate relationships, community, and the wider culture; for raising children; for creativity and productive work; and for leisure.⁵² A range of options is adequate for life authorship, then, when it provides opportunities to pursue goals that involve developing each of these capabilities to various

⁵¹ On 'capabilities,' see A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York: Russell Sage, 1992).

⁵² Cf. M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge UP, 2000), ch. 76–86.

degrees and in different combinations, though not necessarily opportunities for every possible way of realising each basic capability.

III.2. The moral relevance of stage of life

With our life-authorship conception of autonomy in hand, we can now explain the moral relevance of a person's stage of life. If we imposed on adults the paternalistic restrictions customarily imposed on adolescents, this would seriously compromise people's ability to exercise control over the kind of life they lead. This is especially clear when we consider the restraints under which women continue to live in some very conservative cultures. But things are very different at the threshold of becoming an adult. It is in adolescence that most people acquire the competence adults must have to lead lives of their own. But the fact that the adolescent is still at the beginning of life makes it possible to delay his freedom to take up adult commitments without thereby denying that he has a life of his own to lead, so long as it is public knowledge that he will acquire full authority over his life as a matter of course in a few years. During this enforced moratorium, we continue to regard the adolescent's character as somewhat provisional and do our best to keep him integrated in the paternalistic formative institutions of the family and school in order to prepare him as well as possible for adult life.⁵³

Hence, although the adolescent does not presently have the freedom adults possess, it remains the case that, from the perspective of a complete life, his opportunity to lead a self-directed life is not diminished. This is not solely because the restraints are temporary. Also critical is the fact that the adolescent has not yet integrated himself into adult roles. For this

⁵³ On youth as a moratorium, see E. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1958), ch. IV.

reason, limits on the adolescent's liberty do not typically interrupt a self-directed life already underway; in fact, they no more undermine the opportunity for life authorship than do the inevitable incapacities experienced in infancy. This differs markedly from the case of an adult whose opportunity for life authorship vitally depends on retaining control over the projects and roles out of which she has already sought to build a life for herself.

Of course, not every choice an adolescent might want to make about her life *can* simply be delayed. After all, we cannot put off the decision about what to do concerning a teenager's pregnancy, and some kinds of life (like those of professional athletes or musicians) must often be begun before adulthood. Does respect for life authorship require us to defer to the decisions of minimally competent adolescents in what we might call 'forced, momentous' choices as if she were an adult?⁵⁴ Let me set aside three types of cases that are easier to deal with. First, there will be situations where there is reason to believe it best for the adolescent to make her own decision. Paternalism is in principle indefensible in such cases. Secondly, insofar as an adolescent's goals make demands on the time and resources of others, considerations of fairness set bounds on how far others are obliged to promote them. Thirdly, since violating one's deepest moral and religious convictions can seriously undermine self-respect at any age of life, people acquire rights of conscience upon becoming capable of holding convictions. Therefore, even if forcing a teenager to procure an abortion does not deprive her of an opportunity for a self-directed life—it surely would violate her rights of conscience.

⁵⁴ I borrow the terms from W. James, 'The Will to Believe,' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Longmans, 1907).

But what about forced, momentous choices that cannot be disposed of in any of these ways? Here we should recall that respect for life authorship only requires securing an *adequate* range of options for people. We can therefore draw a distinction between two classes of restraints: (a) those that close off particular opportunities while leaving open an adequate range of other opportunities, and (b) those restraints that do not leave the future adult an adequate range of options. Respect for life authorship only forbids unnecessarily imposing the second class of restraints. Offhand, this suggests that it would be impermissible to force a teenager to carry a pregnancy to term, but permissible to deny an adolescent the opportunity to imprudently quit school to concentrate on a career as an athlete or musician. In this way, our approach provides some guidance as to what a plausible conception of the ‘child’s right to an open future’ does, and does not, involve.⁵⁵

Even if treating adolescents paternalistically does not restrict their right to global autonomy, it plainly does restrict their local autonomy. Doesn’t this itself constitute a failure to respect autonomy? If *respect for autonomy* just means, quite literally, ‘not infringing someone’s autonomy,’ then of course the answer is ‘yes.’ But it is not necessarily so if *respect for autonomy* is understood in a more substantive, moral sense. In part, this is because global autonomy is arguably more important than local autonomy. In this spirit, K.A. Appiah observes that ‘Most modern citizens are little worried by laws that take aim at self-regarding harm, so long as they do not interfere with our ability to make a life.’⁵⁶ Be this as it may, the deeper point I wish to insist upon is that the moral significance of a particular episode or period of life depends,

⁵⁵ Cf. Feinberg, ‘Child’s Right to an Open Future.’

⁵⁶ K.A. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton UP, 2005), p. 160.

not just on its intrinsic characteristics, but also on how that episode fits into the narrative arc of the person's life as a whole.⁵⁷ I have maintained that respect for autonomy is rooted in recognition of each person's equal practical authority. But the limited, yet expanding, freedom of adolescence is oriented toward preparing a person for full practical authority in adulthood. Therefore, that period of limited freedom is widely understood to be a normal and integral part of a life marked by an autonomous trajectory. As a part of an autonomous life, it is reasonable to interpret this moratorium as consistent with recognizing each person's equal authority over *his own life*. In fact, this interpretation of adolescence is a part of the 'life script' in our culture defining the conventional phases and transitions of life, which we all draw on in making sense of our own life stories.⁵⁸ One sign of this is that, though adolescents may chafe at restrictions on their freedom, they do not generally regard their imposition as personally demeaning, so long as they are applied in a sincere and judicious way. To shed more light on this argument, observe that the broader context of an interaction may also make paternalism toward adults permissible in some cases. An example might be a marriage in which the spouses have genuine respect for one another's autonomy and yet occasionally treat one another paternalistically out of genuine love and concern. Insofar as these acts are understood by the parties as arising out of a relationship built on sincere recognition of equal practical authority, they will likely be understood as consistent with the fundamental duty to respect autonomy.

Now, strictly speaking, we do not limit the liberty of adolescents because they are *younger* than adults; after all, our freedoms do not continuously increase as we get older

⁵⁷ For similar points about well-being, see J.D. Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 72 (1991), pp. 48–77.

⁵⁸ Cf. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, pp. 21–3.

throughout life. My claim is that we may treat adolescents paternalistically because of their particular *stage of life*: that is, they still stand at the beginning of life, which if treated as a preparatory stage, can be understood as a normal part of a complete autonomous life. What distinguishes adults from adolescents, therefore, is not primarily the development of a certain competence of practical reasoning. The difference does not even lie in their capacities for making the more complex and consequential choices constitutive of life authorship (this is just a version of the agency approach). Rather, the difference is that adolescents have ‘not yet reached the time in their life cycle when they are expected to make crucial choices that will define their identities.’⁵⁹ So long as adults have the minimal competence to make their own choices (however that is defined), then they must ordinarily be allowed to do so. But to hold people to more exacting standards for a limited period early in life is not inconsistent with the duty to respect autonomy.

III.2. On becoming an adult

But when does adulthood begin, if not with the advent of accountable agency? Some people are impressed by recent research suggesting that the adolescent brain is still in the process of development. Perhaps, then, we ought to mark childhood’s end at the terminus of brain maturation. But this suggestion is problematic for several reasons. First, neuroimaging shows that the brain continues to mature into the mid-20s, and ‘there is little empirical evidence to support age 18 ... as an accurate marker of adult capacities.’ Are we really obliged to push back the age of majority that far? Moreover, the connections between

⁵⁹ Power *et al.*, *Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education*, p. 30. Although this phrase nicely encapsulates the idea defended here, the authors do not follow through with it.

behaviour and images of the brain are still not well understood. Nor do we understand the relationship between brain maturation and an individual's experiences or environment.⁶⁰ For this reason, it is at least problematic to treat brain maturation as an independent variable for determining the beginning of adulthood. Finally, just what moral significance brain 'maturation' is supposed to have relative to other neural changes that occur through life is obscure. Should special significance also be attributed to neural deterioration? No one proposes substituting neuroimaging for behavioural tests when determining the competence of the elderly. Why handle things any differently in the case of the young?

I propose we give up trying to discover the natural boundary between childhood and adulthood and concede that it is largely conventional in character. The age of majority may be set at an earlier or later age according to what best suits the healthy integration of the young into the adult world in a particular society. Therefore, it is hardly surprising or objectionable that societies with economic systems requiring high levels of educational attainment often draw out the period of minority longer than societies with less advanced economies. Of course, an important consideration will be the age at which we estimate most young people will have attained a level of maturity and prudence to get along profitably without being under the direct authority of their elders. But this level is likely to be much higher than the minimal competence we insist adults must possess to make their own choices. Moreover, this level of maturity is employed simply to set the standard age at which people are recognised as

⁶⁰ S.B. Johnson, *et al.* 'Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy,' *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45 (2009), pp. 216–21, at pp. 217, 219.

adults; it is not even in principle a criterion by which individuals are judged to have reached adulthood.

So there is no confusion, let me emphasise what separates my position from the Standard View. Virtually all paternalism involves the paternalist judging that (at that moment) he knows better what is good for the subject than does the subject himself; otherwise there would be no reason to interfere with the subject's autonomy. According to the Standard View, paternalism toward children is more often permissible than paternalism toward adults, because children lack the practical competence that adults normally possess. On my view, however, different temporal positions in the normal life-cycle can justify holding minors and adults to different standards of competence. That we have good reason to believe that we know better what is good for adolescents than they themselves do may warrant imposing our will on them, even though this alone would not warrant treating an adult paternalistically. Therefore, while the person's present reasoning ability will play some role in the justification of any act of paternalism, it does not by itself explain the permissibility of treating adolescents and adults differently.

Although the duration of the moratorium of youth is conventional, there are limits on how long it can be extended while still respecting life authorship. People need sufficient time to make meaningful choices, not only about which projects and roles to pursue, but also concerning the order in which to take them up. In particular, facts about fertility rule out extending the period of minority so long as to leave only a small window of time for starting a family. Moreover, the longer we postpone the onset of adulthood past puberty, the more difficult it will be to prevent minors from bringing adult responsibilities upon themselves. It also

seems important that the period we treat people as minors is consistent with other social institutions (e.g., it seems unfair to draft people into the military before they have the right to vote). Moreover, since the moratorium assumes a normal life-expectancy, it would be appropriate to treat a minimally competent adolescent with a very short life-expectancy like an adult sooner than his peers, since we know that, unlike they, he is not still at the beginning of *his* life. And what if the normal life-expectancy greatly increased? Although we should not assume that it would be beneficial to extend the moratorium of youth proportionally, doing so could be consistent with the duty to respect life authorship, though it would depend on the sorts of considerations just enumerated. In short, for a race of Methuselahs, the period of apprenticeship in life might well last one- or two-hundred years.⁶¹

Finally, a natural question about the life-authorship account concerns the implications it might have for the elderly in the latter stages of life. Since they have already had the opportunity to make a life for themselves, it might seem less objectionable to treat them paternalistically than those in middle age. This is an important issue and it deserves more attention than I can devote to it here, but a few remarks are in order. On the one hand, the projects pursued at the end of life are not infrequently less important for self-definition than those pursued in the middle of life. To the extent that is true in the individual case, it seems correct to say that paternalism at the end of life does *less* to undermine life authorship than paternalism in the middle of a life. However, it is more difficult to generalise about the end of life than the beginning of life. Some people's careers only

⁶¹ I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify some of these points.

reach their apogee at a point when many of their peers have gone into retirement. Others may consider their retirement an opportunity to finally throw themselves into projects that they truly care about but for which they had little time when occupied with making a living. Moreover, to borrow a point made by Ronald Dworkin, the end of life may also have special significance in our life stories, 'like the final scene of a play, with everything about it intensified, under a special spotlight.'⁶² These considerations suggest that it could actually be more difficult than usual to justify paternalism at the end of life. And notice that the end of life differs from the beginning in that the limitations of old age are not usually understood as an integral part of the self-directed life. Unlike retirement, which is often understood as a well-deserved rest after the labours of middle age, a loss of freedom at the end of life doesn't seem to be essentially connected to self-determination in any way. For this reason as well, holding the elderly to *higher standards* of competence than the middle-aged is not easily construed as consistent with respecting autonomy.⁶³

IV. THE VIRTUES OF THE LIFE-AUTHORSHIP APPROACH

The life-authorship account inherits some of the strengths of the welfare and agency approaches, while avoiding their most serious shortcomings. The teleological character of the welfare approach admirably suits it to articulating educational aims. But it seems lacking in its failure to recognise a non-derivative right to autonomy. The agency approach does take respect for autonomy seriously, but it seems to pitch the aims of education too low by suggesting

⁶² R. Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*(New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 209.

⁶³ I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to expand on this issue.

that the warrant for educational paternalism expires as soon as young people attain the minimal competence for accountable agency. In doing so, it forces us into the dilemma of choosing between respect for autonomy and ambitious educational ideals. The solution to this dilemma is to recognise that our educational authority is bounded by a period of time, not a developmental outcome. That is, during a person's youth, we may attempt to prepare the young person as well as possible with competencies, skills, and virtues for adult life. But after a person reaches a certain age, she attains full independence so long as she has the necessary minimal competence which almost all adults possess. In this way we prevent our educational perfectionism from posing a danger to autonomy, while at the same time preventing our liberalism from deflating our educational aspirations.

One concrete implication of this concerns the organisation of secondary schools. Some writers, impressed by the fact that adolescents possess the minimal competence adults would need for independence, argue that this implies that respect for autonomy requires that adolescents must be granted meaningful democratic control over the governance of their schools and curriculum.⁶⁴ Set aside the question as to why this doesn't undermine the case for *all* compulsory education for adolescents, democratic or otherwise. It is still not certain that the best way to promote autonomy and democratic citizenship in adulthood is to maximise autonomy and democratic participation in educational institutions themselves.⁶⁵ My position warrants taking a broadly consequentialist approach to this issue, while accepting the

⁶⁴ Power *et al.*, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*; Joe Coleman, 'Answering Susan: Liberalism, Civic Education, and the Status of Younger Persons' in Archard and Macleod (eds.), *Moral and Political Status of Children*.

⁶⁵ Cf. Peters, 'Freedom and the Development of the Free Man.'

importance of non-consequentialist considerations in justifying democratic political institutions for society at large.

It is worth emphasising that my argument does not justify restricting the freedom of young people who would do best making their own decisions, even if only to learn from their mistakes. Nor does it justify forcing the young to receive more education and guidance than they can be expected to benefit from (though I doubt that there are many individuals in the modern world who would *not* benefit from education up through at least the secondary level).⁶⁶ Because the argument relies on a paternalistic rationale, the measures taken must actually be expected to be beneficial. What the argument justifies is treating less than optimally prudent or mature adolescents paternalistically, even though a similar level of imprudence or immaturity would not warrant any intervention in the lives of adults. It aims to make sense of the commonsense attitude of a parent who thinks she is justified in treating her sixteen-year-old more paternalistically than her twenty-two-year-old, in spite of the fact that she concedes that the younger child is really the more mature of the two.

Although paternalism generally restricts a person's liberty, an additional virtue of treating youth as a moratorium is that it makes available to adolescents a form of freedom much scarcer in adulthood, namely, a measure of freedom from having to make certain decisions with long-term consequences. We have seen that some try to justify limiting the freedom of adolescents because they are still 'in search of themselves.' But we can also reverse that proposition. One reason why adolescents do not have a more definite sense of who they are

⁶⁶ I thank an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention the need to emphasise this point.

is because they are not yet expected to integrate into the adult roles which are so crucial to shaping our practical and social identities. As psychologist Jennifer Tanner observes, '[I]t is at the end of the era of possibilities and exploration that the self consolidates around a set of roles and beliefs that define a relatively stable adult personality... [T]his consolidation into an adult self is reflected in the significance of establishing careers, getting married, and becoming parents during these first years of adulthood.'⁶⁷ By setting aside a period of life after adult agential capacities have developed, but before a person is encouraged to take on adult responsibilities, we create the social space that enables adolescents to imagine and explore various identities and futures.

Another virtue of this approach is that it clarifies the moral difference between minors and those adults with cognitive impairments. The Standard View tends to regard anyone lacking certain capacities for mature reasoning and agency as children for moral purposes.⁶⁸ On this picture, a normal thirteen-year-old and someone with the 'mental age' of a thirteen-year-old ought to have the same liberties. We should reject this assimilation. Because it is important that people have the autonomy to lead their own lives, we should be very reluctant to treat adults paternalistically, and when adults simply cannot live without assistance, we should design accommodations to enable them to direct their own lives as much as possible.⁶⁹ But we are

⁶⁷ J.L. Tanner, 'Recentring During Emerging Adulthood,' in J.J. Arnett and J.L. Tanner (eds.), *Emerging Adulthood in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006), p. 24.

⁶⁸ Cf. P. Vallentyne, 'Equality and the Duties of Procreators,' in Archard and Macleod (eds.), *Moral and Political Status of Children*, p. 196.

⁶⁹ Cf. M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 195ff.

not obliged to take the same deferential attitude toward minors, for they are not merely imperfect reasoners; they are individuals standing at the beginning of a life.

The idea that a person's age cannot be morally relevant can be traced to the profound liberal idea that our basic social standing properly rests, not on superficial or 'contingent' characteristics, but on *our common humanity*. Therefore, one of the great tasks of liberal philosophy has been to articulate what this common humanity consists in. Whereas the utilitarian tradition found it to lie in our ability to pursue a distinctively human form of happiness, the social contract tradition located it directly in our capacity for rational self-determination. Both traditions have contributed greatly to breaking down traditional status distinctions between high- and low-born, rich and poor, man and woman, white and colored. But the distinction between child and adult seemed worth holding onto. To account for this, liberals of both traditions naturally turned back to their respective theories of our common humanity. Hence, the subjection of children to adults was justified either in terms of the child's imprudence or lack of agency. One theme of this essay is that both traditions have mistakenly relied on fundamentally static pictures of the human being. An essential part of our humanity is the temporal structure of a life. While the liberal outlook is properly committed to equal respect, this does not entail that people must be treated alike at every stage of life. What matters is treating people as free and equal over a complete life.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Special thanks are due to Felix Koch, Oran Moked, Frederick Neuhouser, Jonathan Rick, Daniel Viehoff, and Katja Vogt.