I would like to start by thanking Doret de Ruyter for her fair and thoughtful review of my book, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, as well as thanking *Studies in Philosophy and Education* for allowing me the opportunity to respond to her comments. It’s always exciting for an author to engage with others who have read one’s work carefully and who take one’s ideas seriously. De Ruyter is an ideal reader in this respect, insofar as she is simultaneously sympathetic and critical. Hence, my disputes with her stem almost entirely from substantive disagreements with her positions rather than from any sense that she has misunderstood or inaccurately described my aims or arguments. The only exception is one small quibble with the introduction, in which de Ruyter characterizes my purpose as exploring “whether it is still possible to develop a position with regard to education and the role of the state which has sufficient plausibility that will be acceptable to most people, even given the differences in opinion.” I just wish to clarify that I’m developing this position within the context of liberalism, and that I don’t expect all people are or will become liberals. Since nothing in the rest of de Ruyter’s review contradicts or takes issue with this approach, I don’t think anything else in the review rides on this slight mischaracterization; I mention it only to clarify my purpose to readers who may not have read (or remembered) that part of my book.

Although de Ruyter and I do have points of agreement, I will focus my reply on some significant and substantive disagreements we have about the nature of autonomy, about parents’ duties or privileges concerning their children’s education, and about the characteristics of the school community that are required to ensure that all children develop their capacities for autonomy. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will follow de Ruyter’s organization of these topics, including using her headings to indicate at which section of her review each of my responses is directed. I diverge from this approach only at the end of my response, at which point I pick up on two points she makes in two different sections of her review in order to explain the extent to which I agree with her and discuss the
implications I think these criticisms have for my theory of liberal education provision.

AUTONOMY

I begin, as de Ruyter does, with the concept of autonomy. In her discussion of the ideal of personal autonomy, de Ruyter notes this ideal “does not mean that every option should be open or can (psychologically) be considered by an autonomous person.” Although I think that this is generally right, I suggest that the examples she gives fail to uphold her point, and in fact reveal a significant shortcoming in her understanding of autonomy, critical self-evaluation, and value hierarchy. Although she rescues her analysis to some extent in noting that autonomous people may subscribe to “ultimate values” that necessarily guide the plurality of lower-level values to which they adhere, I show that she again gets off track by emphasizing that such ultimate values could not be reevaluated on “an equal basis” with others.

First, while I agree with de Ruyter that some (even many) actions and life options may rightly be “beyond the pale” even to autonomous people, de Ruyter’s examples both fail to illuminate this point and misconstrue the relationship between autonomy and constitutive values. Many autonomous people might rightly consider it unthinkable to abuse a child, to collaborate in a scheme that defrauds poor people, or to destroy the environment. These are plausible bedrock (or as she terms them, “ultimate”) beliefs, and even if a person holds a number of these (and hence has a plurality of values), it would be reasonable to say, as de Ruyter does, that “changing them or losing them would imply a profound change of her identity.” There may nonetheless be times, however, when such an individual is forced to rethink these bedrocks. Under a particularly cruel dictator, for example, she may have to weigh her opposition to abusing a child or destroying the environment against her interest in remaining alive. To some extent, her ability to weigh these two options is a measure of her autonomy, even though her effective autonomy is obviously extremely restricted under these conditions, and even though no matter what she decides, she would probably say that her sense of self has been profoundly changed.

More to the point, our autonomous exemplar must also be able to face up to potential conflicts among or reformulations of her values under less drastic circumstances. For example, a lottery is arguably one means of defrauding poor people. But it is also a windfall for government revenues, and hence promotes government expenditures – including on social services, children’s services, and the environment. No matter which