

## **“I Want Them to Have the Right”: John Holt’s Seven Arguments for Curricular Libertarianism**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I list and examine seven arguments John Holt gave for curricular libertarianism (CL), the idea that learners should be free to choose what they learn. I group these arguments into three groups by type of reason they employ; Holt offers three epistemic, two moral, and two practical arguments for CL. After listing and examining each argument, I suggest that while each may be vulnerable on its own to obvious counterarguments, these seven reasons mutually reinforce each other to make a more compelling overall case for CL.

*Keywords:* John Holt, philosophy, unschooling, self-directed learning

## **“I Want Them to Have the Right”: John Holt’s Seven Arguments for Curricular Libertarianism**

John Holt is a powerful advocate of learner freedom generally and, specifically, curricular libertarianism (CL)—the idea that learners should be free to choose what they learn and what learning they engage in. While Holt’s writings are forceful and stimulating, they are arguably less systematic and methodical in argument than one would expect of academic writing. Holt wrote exclusively for a popular audience, and whatever the virtues of this approach, it has arguably served to obscure the theory latent in his work. As Dickerson notes, Holt “narrates as much as he pontificates,” (Dickerson, 2019, p. 6) often offering his arguments only in passing and employing “a rhetoric that scrupulously avoids addressing us from a position of... expert authority” (p.7). This article is partly an attempt to remedy this oversight of Holt as theorist by examining the several theoretical arguments he uses to justify his CL.

In what follows, I list and examine seven arguments John Holt gave for CL.<sup>1</sup> I count seven different arguments Holt uses to justify the idea. For clarity, I place these seven arguments into three broad categories by the type of reason Holt is employing. Holt gives three epistemic arguments, centering around why learners (rather than teachers or curriculum writers) are best situated to decide what they (the learners) should learn. Holt’s two moral reasons deal with arguing on the moral grounds about why learners should not be coerced into learning what others decide for them to learn. Holt gives two practical reasons arguing that CL is practically feasible and will yield impressive learning results. One I’ve explained Holt’s arguments, I finish by

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term (and focus on) “curricular libertarianism” (rather than something like “learner freedom”) deliberately. I am focused on Holt’s argument for a very particular kind of learner freedom having to do with giving learner’s full choice over what to learn with what materials. This is an arguably more precise focus than “learner freedom” generally (which could cover things this article is not concerned with, like Holt’s justifications for allowing learners to choose *how* to learn a given thing.)

suggesting that while Holt's seven reasons for CL are all distinct, they mutually support each other. Each argument on its own will be less compelling than when each is taken in light of the others.

While too few scholars engage Holt's work, there are writers who have seriously engaged them. The existing literature, however, has been sparse and partial, often engaging only one (of many existing) themes in Holt's work. For instance, in his work on "libertarians" in education, Smith (1983) engages exclusively with Holt's arguments that the power of a learner's internal motivation justifies CL. In an intellectual history of the "free school" movement, Graubard (1972) engages (skeptically) with Holt's appeals to human diversity and epistemic humility as a justification for CL—that as we are all different and will need/want to know different things, the most suitable judge of what should be learned is the learner. In a book-length philosophical analysis of Holt, Dickerson (2019) compares Holt's rationale for CL to Aristotle's philosophy of well-being (*eudaimonia*) and its insistence that well-being is best achieved through autotelic (intrinsically rewarding and sustaining) activity.

The analysis in all of these works is prescient and interesting, but I would argue that they are all partial. My aim is to show that far from containing one overriding argument for CL, Holt's works contain seven distinct but mutually reinforcing arguments. Each argument on its own may encounter obvious objections, but the arguments taken together make Holt's case for CL stronger.

Before moving on, I should address why I am attempting to put Holt's CL into theoretical form, given Holt's very non-theoretical style of thinking and writing. If Holt didn't strive to package his own work in theoretical language, why should I? First, Holt's own words indicate that any lack of theoretical argument in his work came from both a personal (rather than a

principled) aversion to theory, and from a concern that theory is often a substitute for empirical analysis rather than a compliment to it.<sup>2</sup> Even if Holt's aversion to theory was more principled, I'd argue – and hope to show in what follows – that his work can't avoid relying on theory or having theoretical implications. For instance, as I will show below, Holt makes claims about both the moral status of coercion and the epistemology of what knowledge anyone can claim regarding what children should learn for their futures. That Holt doesn't sustain theoretical arguments in support of these claims does not mean they are not claims that rely on theory of some sort. As I will show, I think Holt makes several arguments for CL that deserve to be treated in a more theoretically sustained manner than Holt supplies.

In the three sections that follow, I will list and describe each of Holt's seven arguments for CL. I will group the arguments (by the type of reason it employs) into three groups: epistemic reasons (arguments premised on what we can know), moral reasons (arguments premised on the moral dimension of education) and practical reasons (arguments premised on the practicality of CL).

## **Epistemic Reasons for CL**

### ***Argument from Disagreement***

One argument Holt invokes for CL is what I will call the *argument from disagreement*. Here, Holt points out that people (even very educated and circumspect people) disagree over what people should be taught (hinting that there may be no objective or final way to resolve

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<sup>2</sup> As to Holt's personal lack of interest in theorizing, Holt writes in a letter to a friend about why he will not pursue either a graduate degree or a university appointment. He writes: "[M]y way of working would not suit the university world. Universities like to have research projects, with clearly defined goals and methods, and a beginning and end to them. What I am trying to do can't be done that way" (Holt, 1990, p. 27.) My sense is that Holt isn't averse to others doing this university-style work – theory included – as much as that he isn't interested in it himself. As to Holt's concern that theory is often misused, he writes: "I should add, too, that I am not trying to deny the importance of close, deductive, analytical, logical reasoning. In its proper place, it is a useful, powerful, often essential tool. I am only trying to say that out of its place it is likely to be not only useless but harmful, and that its place is not everywhere" (Holt, 2017, p. 271).

these disputes). For instance, Holt recalls a swim teacher who bragged that he had made a student learn to swim (against the student's will), because the teacher thought it was an important skill. Holt's answer to the swim teacher included the following:

I love swimming, and in a school where nothing else was compulsory I might see a case for making swimming so. But for every child in that school there are dozens of adults, each convinced that he has something of vital importance to "give" the child that he would never get for himself, all saying to the child, "I know better than you do what is good for you." (Holt, 1970, p. 388)

In *How Children Fail*, Holt (1964) invokes the argument from disagreement again, elaborating on it further. He argues that:

We don't and can't agree on what knowledge is essential. The man who has trained himself in some special field of knowledge or competence thinks, naturally, that his specialty should be in the curriculum. The classical scholars want Greek and Latin taught; the historians shout for more history; the mathematicians urge more math and the scientists more science; the modern language experts want all children taught French, or Spanish, or Russian; and so on. Everyone wants to get his specialty into the act, knowing that as the demand for his special knowledge. (p. 278)

Holt further argues that we *can't* know what is best for others to learn in the face of this disagreement, presumably because all participants will be partial and biased. Historians want history taught, presumably because they find history to be valuable and interesting and the linguist wants everyone to study language. Even the most ostensibly impartial judge of what others should learn is still partial in that she is apt to conflate what she has found valuable and important to know with what others will need to know. Holt speculates that while the bias could

be sheer personal interest in a subject (that one mistakes for a universal specialness in the subject), these biases could also come from having a financial stake; as “demand for his [the specialist’s] special knowledge rises, so will the price that he can charge for it” (Holt, 1995, p. 290). Each party cannot (or will not) imagine that the subjects they find value in and assume will be valuable to others) are no more than their preferences among many sets of preferences.

Disagreement between people, of course, need not be a sufficient reason for throwing up our collective hands and suggest that there is no right answer to be found regarding what is best for all learners to learn. While Holt doesn’t explicitly argue it, he hints at the idea that if we accept that all people (even or especially curricular experts) are (at least potentially) biased in their views on what everyone should learn, then any declaration of a final word should be viewed with skepticism if not rejection, as the attempt of some to represent their preferences as binding truths.

### *Argument from a Changing World*

Another argument that Holt provides is that since the world changes in ways that cannot be predicted in advance by curricular authorities, we should be skeptical of curricular decrees telling people what learning will be best for their futures:

The idea of the curriculum would not be valid even if we could agree on what ought to be in it. For knowledge itself changes. Much of what a child learns in school will be found, or thought, before many years, to be untrue. (Holt, 1995, p. 278)

Holt recalls his own experience learning physics, geology, and economics in college. In these cases, Holt reports that things he learned that were then-current had become out-of-date only years later (or were likely thought true by instructors but turned out not to be accurate). Holt (1995) goes on: “Moreover, we cannot possibly judge what knowledge will be most needed

forty, or twenty, or even ten years from now” (p. 279). Holt uses learning Latin and French as examples. Unlike the previous examples, it was not that the knowledge of French and Latin conveyed to Holt proved wrong, but that the school’s and instructor’s retrospectively false conviction that these (rather than, say, Spanish) were the important languages for US kids to master.

Thus, even if we could agree on what people need to know (solving the problem of disagreement), we can only make educated guesses about a future that may or may not look like the present. Therefore, any attempt to impose a fixed curriculum onto learners will do learners a disservice, first, by misrepresenting the landscape of knowledge as fixed rather than fluid, and second, by invariably asking students to learn things that will later become obsolete and refrain from learning today what the future might make valuable.<sup>3</sup>

### *Argument from Diverse Lives*

Holt further supports his CL by appealing to the fact that we all have diverse lives that will require diverse skills and knowledge. For Holt, the problem of knowing what others need to be taught is made more difficult (or impossible) when we recognize that different lives will require different skills.

Holt (2017) writes that “with the possible exception of knowing how to read..., it cannot be proved that any piece of knowledge is essential for everyone. Useful and convenient, perhaps; essential, no” (p. 291). Here, Holt seems prepared to admit that certain pieces of knowledge may

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<sup>3</sup> This argument is not unique to Holt. The argument about the fluctuating nature of knowledge was present, albeit with a much less libertarian conclusion, in the works of Dewey (1938; see also Graubard, pp 190-208). It has also been made more recently by Richardson, who called all set curriculum “a guess,” (Richardson, 2016). Technologists Seely-Brown and Thomas plead for a “new culture of learning,” arguing that the major pitfall of the twenty-first century’s teaching model is “the belief that most of what we know will remain relatively unchanged for a long enough period of time to be worth the effort of transferring it” (Thomas & Brown, 2017, p. 40). While none of these thinkers quite came to the CL conclusions Holt did, all used the argument from a changing world as a way to justify more flexibility and learner freedom in deciding what to learn.

prove useful to know (or convenient, in the sense that those who grow to need them might not have to relearn them). But in the face of not knowing what knowledge and skill will be required by the diverse lives we are deciding how to educate, we must stop short of saying that any piece of knowledge is essential for everyone to have.

In *Learning All the Time*, Holt (1991) ends a section giving advice to families on how learners might encounter history and math with the following:

I am not saying that what I have written above about properties of [the number] 6...are things that every child should know, or parents must be sure to tell their children... And there are many people who are right now leading interesting, useful, satisfying lives who do not know any arithmetic at all. (p. 59)

It is impossible to project into a given person's future (in a changing world) to know with any certainty what skills and knowledge will prove valuable. Yet, Holt is reluctant even to say that we can know with any certainty what will be valuable for people (say, all students of a given age or in a given classroom). Because individual learners will invariably have different interests, aptitudes, and preferences, Holt (1976) argues the undesirability of standardized learning in the face of such diversity of learning paths:

Somewhere we got the crazy notion that a class would learn most efficiently if everyone was learning the same thing at the same time. As if a class were a factory. So we have these flocks of school children, twenty-five or more of them that we are trying to lead or drive down a chosen road. They don't all want to go down that road; maybe none of them do; they have other things they would rather do or think about. So we continually have to round them up and move them along, like a sheepdog herding sheep. (p. 82)

For these reasons—that different people at the same moment will have different interests—Holt



advises that the best teaching acknowledges this epistemic caution, providing students with options they can take or leave rather than deciding what any individual child will be made to learn. For instance, when talking about how children might discover math through matters of money, Holt (1991) recommends the following:

As with everything else, some children will be much more interested in the money matters than others. If children are not interested, let it go, and just keep the information where they can get it if they want to. But some other children may even want, at least for a while, to keep the family books, records of all the money that comes in and goes out. Here again, I wouldn't turn such a project into a compulsory chore, some quite young children might well start such a project, only to lose interest in it after a while. Let them drop it. (p. 82)<sup>4</sup>

With all of these epistemic reasons for CL Holt paints an epistemically stark picture about our ability to justify imposing a set curriculum on learners. People seem irreducibly to disagree on what things are important for people to know with no likelihood that the matter can be settled from an unbiased “view from nowhere.” Even if we could agree on what children will need to know for the future, that agreement may be a false one, based on the bad assumption that the future (and the skills it demands) will resemble the present. Moreover, even if we did have reliable knowledge of the future and what will need to be known in it, each person lives a different life where they will have different interests and experience different things as valuable to know, and will take a different life course that might demand few pieces of learning to be held

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this reason for CL has become more germane in the decades since Holt wrote. In the ensuing decades, sociologist Zygmunt Baumann (2000, 2017), anthropologist Grant McCracken (2008), and technologist David Weinberger (2014) have argued that the proliferation of information and the diversification of everyday life means that individuals are increasingly able, and likely to, traverse the world in increasingly heterogeneous and individualized ways. In other words, the (industrial and postindustrial) world seems to be supporting more diversity in ways of life. If true, that makes Holt's argument from diverse lives even more pertinent today.

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## **Moral Reasons for CL**

### ***No Grounds for Authority Argument***

In several works, Holt distinguishes between coercive authority and natural authority, clearly depicting the former as illegitimate and the latter as legitimate. Coercive authority is the right to give orders to others that they must obey for promise of reward or avoidance of punishment. Natural authority is authority that comes from gaining another's voluntary attention or esteem (maybe by convincing others with words or actions that one's judgment should be deferred to). Coercive authority is held together by blatant coercion or, at very least, problematic manipulation. Natural authority, for Holt, is held together by a respect for the autonomy or voluntariness of all involved. In this passage below, Holt (1972) suggests that coercive authority is unnatural to proper teacher/student relationships:

It [coercive authority] does indeed wear us out, for the same reason that being a cop in the classroom (except for people who like being cops) wears teachers out. *It is not a proper task or a right relationship.* It is not a fit position for an adult to be in. We have no more business being entertainers than being cops. Both positions are ignoble. In both we lose our *rightful adult authority.* (p. 70)

Why is coercive authority not rightful adult authority, especially for a teacher wishing to form a "right relationship" with learners? Holt suggests it is because coercive authority prevents both teacher and learner from playing the roles they should be playing in the relationship as allies rather than adversaries. Holt (1970) argues that for learners to learn as well as they can, they need to be free to do things like make (and own) mistakes, ask spontaneous questions, admit confusion, and believe that they are efficacious enough to learn, all things that coercive authority

make more difficult:

[W]e cannot be in the business of education and at the same time in the business of testing, grading, labeling, sorting, deciding who goes where and who gets what. It is not just that when we are being judged we think only of the judge and how to give him what he wants. It is not just that when we have been made enough afraid of failure we may think that the surest way to avoid failing is never to try. To do this much damage to children would be bad enough. But a child who has been made to think of himself as no good soon becomes unable to meet the world on any terms. (p. 347)

Similarly, Holt fears that coercive authority by teachers will often mean that learners will focus on satisfying teacher demands more than learning. “[W]henever a student knows he is being judged by the results of tests, he turns his attention from the material to the tester” (Holt, 1976, p. 57). By contrast, teachers who rely on natural authority leave learner freedom intact, thus allowing learners the freedom to learn without fear or felt need to satisfy the teacher.

On curricular matters, Holt (2003) also suggests that governments have no “business” using coercive authority to tell people what they may and may not believe or learn:

Anyone who thinks seriously about these questions will surely agree that no one in government should have such power. From this it must follow that people have the right not only to believe what they want, but to try to pass their beliefs along to their children.

*We can't say that some people have this right while others do not.* (p. 30, my italics)

Here, Holt does not suggest that the problem is epistemic—that governments simply cannot determine what is right for everyone to know—but moral—that even if they could, they have no legitimate authority to do so.

### ***Right to Autonomy Argument***

If Holt does not believe coercive authority is legitimate, the flipside is that he believes people have a right to be free of such coercion. In *Escape from Childhood*, Holt argues that children similarly have a right to be as free from relationships based on coercive authority as they'd like to be. (Holt argues there that children should have the freedom to choose their own forms of education, own property, live on their own if they think they are able, etc). “We must learn to recognize and respect whatever distance the child has chosen to put between us. We do not have with him, any more than with anyone else, the right to move into his life space without his permission” (Holt, 1974, p. 1236).

What does it mean to give children the right to control their learning? To give children (just as adults) rights means to grant children a protected space—in this case, to make certain decisions—that are protected by law, that “the law will take action *against* anyone who interferes with young people’s rights to do such things” (Holt, 1974, p. 149).

What protected space enforced by law is entailed in a right of children to control their education? In this right, Holt (1974) includes the right to:

Decide what they want to learn, and when, where, how, how much, how fast, and with what help they want to learn it. To be still more specific, I want them to have the right to decide if, when, how much, and by whom they want to be taught and the right to decide whether they want to learn in a school and if so which one and for how much of their time. (p. 240)

Holt’s justification for children having this and other rights (like the rights to drive if they can pass a licensure exam, vote, and work) comes by invoking a certain symmetry between how society and the state should look at children and adults:

[By rights,] I mean what we mean when we speak of the rights of adults. I urge that the

law grant and guarantee to the young the freedom that it now grants to adults to make certain kind of choices, do certain kinds of things, and accept certain kinds or responsibilities. (Holt, 1974, p. 149)

While he doesn't directly argue the point, Holt implies that whatever principle we use to refuse giving children certain rights can easily be applied to adults (and fail to apply to all children). For instance, if we refuse certain rights to children from a belief that children will use those rights irresponsibly or that they must be protected from exploitation, it becomes difficult to see why we think this rationale should not apply to adults (who can also be irresponsible and vulnerable to exploitation), or that all children would benefit from such protections. Holt (1974) rhetorically asks:

If compulsory education is a good thing, how can there be too much of it? Why should we allow anyone, of any age, to decide that he has had enough of it? Why should we allow older people, any more than young, not to know what we know when their ignorance may have bad consequences for all of us? (p. 242)

These are surely rhetorical questions, but there is a seriousness to them. Holt is essentially justifying children's rights to control their learning by suggesting that the traditional rationales for denying this right to children could easily extend to adults. (Elsewhere in his writings, he challenges whether schools are really the remarkable places of learning and world-preparation that advocates of compulsory education for children claim they are.) Holt, therefore, advocates for a significant space (protected by government) for children to make choices about their learning and does so by appealing to a moral symmetry between how we should treat children and adults. Any different treatment is best justified on grounds entirely other than age.

Holt's moral arguments for CL consist of his belief that coercive authority is illegitimate

(favoring forms of natural authority), and that children (as all people) have a corresponding right to be (as) free (as possible) from coercive relationships. People may be legitimately free to persuade others of what those others should learn within the confines of relationships of natural authority. But deciding what others will be made to learn is always an exercise of impermissible coercive authority.

## **Practical Reasons for CL**

### *Argument from Internal Motivation*

One of Holt's most frequent arguments for the idea that learners should be free to choose what and how to learn is that learning is more effective when the learner has this type of control. Holt directly states his thesis thus:

I believe that we learn best when we, not others, are deciding what we are going to try to learn, and when, and how, and for what reasons or purposes; when we, not others, are in the end choosing the people, materials, and experiences from which and with which we will be learning; when we, not others, are judging how easily or quickly or well we are learning, and when we have learned enough; and above all when we feel the wholeness and openness of the world around us, and our own freedom and power and competence in it. (Holt, 1970, p. 1089)<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, Holt pairs this argument with an invocation of an epistemic argument we saw earlier. If it is true that people will learn best what they are most interested in, it is also true that the individual is best suited to appraise what they (at least at that moment) are interested in. Of course, a child may not know what he may need to know in ten years (who does?), but he

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<sup>5</sup> The idea has been corroborated by more current theoretical and empirical research (Dickinson, 1995; Ryan & Powelson, 1991; Shernoff et al., 2014). These findings suggest that when learners have control over their learning, they are likely to learn in ways most productive to them.

knows, and much better than anyone else, what he wants and needs to know right now, what his mind is ready and hungry for. If we help him, or just allow him, to learn that, he will remember it, use it, build on it. If we try to make him learn something else, that we think is more important, the chances are that he won't learn it, or will learn very little of it, that he will soon forget most of what he learned, and what is worst of all, will before long lose most of his appetite for learning anything (Holt, 2003).

The student is the only one that can directly experience their internal appraisals of what is valuable and interesting for them to learn. In this passage, and others, Holt writes as if since this is so, the individual can never be wrong at any given time when appraising what their interests are. (Holt never suggests, though, that individuals can't be wrong about what learning will aid their *future* interest.)

But even if this were not true—even if it is possible that introspection could misguide the individual in judging their present interests, or that an astute other could more accurately discern our interests—Holt's argument still has force. Suppose that an astute teacher sees that we are pursuing x and believes (correctly, it will turn out) that y would be more interesting to us. Even so, what matters for Holt's argument is that we must experience that interest in y. The astute teacher can suggest to us that we might find y more interesting, but unless or until we ultimately judge them correct and *experience* y as more interesting (which can only happen in an atmosphere of CL where we are free not to refuse the suggestion), effective learning will not happen. Learners will learn best when they are motivated by their own interests, not by coercion based on what even the most astute others believe learners will be interested in.

### ***Argument from a Better Alternative***

If learners learn best what they are interested in, the question becomes how to organize

schools (or places of learning) to accommodate this inconvenient truth. As early as Holt's first book—*How Children Fail*—he envisioned the possibility that school could “be a place where children learn what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know” (Holt, 1995, p. 278).

In a later book, *Instead of Education* (1976), Holt explicitly imagined the type of school he thought was both possible and in line with his CL. He distinguished “S-schools” (conventional schools with conventional methods and curricular plans, the capital “S” presumably to signify their formal nature) with “s-schools” (his imagined non-coercive and freedom-respecting alternative). In the following passage, Holt (1976) describes what he sees as the difference between S-schools (and T-teachers) and his desired s-schools (and t-teachers):

As with S-chools and s-chools, the difference between T- eachers and t- eachers has nothing to do with philosophy, methods, or personality, whether the teacher is easy or demanding, kindly or harsh, interesting or dull, friendly or cold. It has to do with the degree to which the students are free to choose to spend their time with him or not, do what he is doing, use his help, listen to and accept or reject his ideas. (p. 23)

A s-school, as described by Holt, would be a place where there are resources learners can use to do interesting things and learn about the world, t-teachers who can help students do or learn what they'd like, but no obligation to do or learn any particular things in any particular way. Additionally, Holt envisioned a world of radical educational choice where formal educational institutions could exist and students may choose to attend them, but only insofar as those schools meet students' varied educational wants and needs. Students would attend S-schools only if (and when) the S-school offered the student what the student wanted. “S-chools could no longer tell children what they had to learn. Any given school could say, as language or typing or



karate schools do now, "If you want to come here, this is what you must learn, because this is what we teach" (Holt, 1976, p. 198). But the student could choose to go or not to go there.<sup>6</sup>

Out of all Holt's arguments, this argument is the least sufficient on its own, and is less a main argument as an accompanying. That there is an alternative to something is not sufficient to demonstrate that the alternative should be pursued unless it can be shown (as Holt attempts with other arguments) that the alternative is superior in the face of the original something's deficiencies.

Regardless of whether we have epistemic reasons not to impose curricular mandates onto learners, or the ethical dimensions of the dilemma, Holt provides us with two wholly practical reasons for CL. Holt argues that leaving learners free to learn what and how they want is good practice, as it leads to the most effective learning. Additionally, Holt provides what he thinks is a workable model of how we could design institutions that respect the right of learners to be free of curricular coercion.

### ***Putting the Arguments Together***

Rather than focusing on and developing one or two primary arguments to justify CL, we can see that Holt employs seven different arguments grouped by three types of reasons (epistemic, moral, and practical). Moreover, Holt appeals to different arguments to justify CL even in the same book. Nor does Holt develop any of these arguments with the kinds of elaborate support one would expect to find from, say, an academic philosopher. All of this could lead critics to conclude that Holt is more a disorganized rhetorician (providing an assortment of

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<sup>6</sup> As with several of Holt's other arguments for CL, this argument—that there may be a better, more libertarian, way to organize school—is probably more compelling now than when he originally offered it. When Holt wrote, there were already democratic free schools operating on a similar principle of allowing children freedom to spend their time how they wanted (Neill, 1960; Greenberg, 1991; Miller, 2002). Since then, variations on this libertarian theme have proliferated (McDonald, 2019; Boles, 2020), arguably making this type of curricularly libertarian model of schooling more realistic than when Holt wrote.

underdeveloped arguments to support a pre-established conclusion) than a principled reasoner. A critic might even accuse Holt of employing the “Gish gallop,” an argument strategy where a person “attempts to support their stance by bringing up, in rapid succession, a large number of vague claims, anecdotal statements, misinterpreted facts, and irrelevant comments: (“Gish Gallop,” n.d.).

Whether or not it was Holt’s intent, I will argue that these seven distinct arguments for CL turn out to be mutually reinforcing. Each argument on its own at best is narrowly convincing and at worst fails. Yet, when taken together, the arguments make a much stronger collective case that amounts to something like the following: *we have no right to coerce others to learn certain things, and partially, this is because we cannot know what others should know. Given that, there are reasons why not coercing others is a feasible alternative to coerced learning.*

As mentioned above, the appeal Holt makes to children’s rights is the most plausible self-contained argument. We call a possible activity (say, free speech) a right precisely as an acknowledgement that it be immune from or strongly resistant to countervailing concerns like consequentialist or practical concerns. To call free speech a right is an acknowledgement that its status as a right need not depend on whether its use will strengthen the common good, lead to bad consequences, is costly to enforce, etc. Conversely, the more susceptible free speech is to those latter concerns, the less strength it has as a right. If CL is a right, its status as a right need not depend on any of the cognitive or practical reasons/justifications for it that Holt also provides.

Of course, those other justifications can’t hurt and can only serve to bolster the case that CL should be a right. When philosophers and legal theorists justify free speech as a right, they often do so on grounds that appeal to things like free speech’s production of good consequences,

free speech's role in respecting human autonomy and flourishing, etc. Holt's other arguments for CL can similarly serve as ways to justify CL's status as a right.

Lastly, courts sometimes find (rightly or wrongly) reason to abridge rights owing to some countervailing interest it finds more compelling, such as when free speech is balanced against the need to protect marginalized groups from hatred. In a similar way, we could imagine a government seeking to abridge a right to CL on, say, practical grounds that since children are immature, refusing to force them to learn what we know will be good for them in the future is akin to neglect. In this way, the epistemic reasons (that we simply do not know what will be good for every learner) or practical reasons (intrinsically motivated learning works better!) can serve as a buttress to CL's status as a right.

In other cases, Holt's arguments from CL might not be self-sufficient, their force instead coming when taken together as complimentary. For instance, the epistemic arguments for CL seem to fail when given on their own. It may be true that diverse people will always disagree on what everyone needs to know, that people are so diverse that they will require different knowledge, and that the future can change in a way that means present ideas about what everyone should know are little better than guesses. Yet someone could argue that there can still be reasons to force people to learn certain things. One could argue, for instance, that even if we can't know what others will in fact need to know in adulthood, forcing children to learn certain things gives them practice for a world where they will have to learn things they do not want to learn. Or, per an "essentialist" position illustrated by thinkers like Bagley (1938) or Hirsch (1988), one could argue that since culture benefits from each member knowing certain knowledge in common, what matters is that we all learn certain things in common, and *that* commonality of knowledge—not whether the knowledge is "the right" knowledge—is what

creates curricular value. We could also imagine an argument that fully acknowledges that we cannot know with any certainty what others will need to know, but as a practical matter, a coerced curriculum is most feasible, either because there is no practicable alternative to contemporary methods of coercive schooling, or there is reason to think that, as a practical matter, kids will not be able to remedy areas of ignorance in a “learn if when you need it” way.

In these cases, both the moral and practical reasons for CL can come in to play a supporting role. It may not matter whether we can figure out what all learners need to know. Forcing learners to learn from a set curriculum may be immoral in both violating the child’s right to freedom and adults overstepping their legitimate authority. Also, if learning is best done when a child is doing it from interest, forcing a curriculum will simply be counterproductive.

As mentioned in a previous section, the practical reasons for CL are the weakest when given on their own. Evidence may show that learning is most effective when driven by student interest rather than coercion. There may be feasible ways to design schools around this principle, and even ones that have been shown to produce good learning. Some will still argue, however, that these concerns are outweighed by our need to teach children things in common, and teach them the right things. Here, we can invoke the epistemic reasons for CL to challenge whether we can know what the right things for all children to learn are, as well as whether it is a coherent idea that different learners with different lives could be said to require knowledge of the same things. Also, while the practical reasons for CL might not work on their own, both the epistemic reasons and the moral reasons naturally invite a question: “If all that is right—if there are cognitive and moral reasons why forced curriculum isn’t a good option—how should learners be educated?” The practical reasons—especially the Argument from a Better Alternative—will go far toward an answer, making CL appear more practically feasible.

Scattered throughout his writings, Holt offers seven distinct but related arguments in support of CL. Per Holt's informal and nonsystematic writing style, Holt did not offer any of these arguments in a systematized way, often moving abruptly from one to the other in the same book. My goal has been to offer a more systematic treatment of each argument and to explain how each argument should be seen as reinforcing others in Holt's attempts to justify CL.

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