Broadening Education for Freedom

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Philosophers have long concerned themselves with freedom and, unsurprisingly, freedom figures prominently in discourses about educating citizens in a liberal democratic society. Indeed, freedom insinuates itself into discourses in a liberal democracy concerning the relationship between citizen and government. What is the appropriate relationship between government power and individual freedom? What freedoms must be maintained if democracy is to function? Is freedom necessarily an individual concept in a democracy? Although philosophers have pondered these questions and more, there is much work more work to do if this is to impact our understanding of what educating citizens for freedom means.[1]

A brief examination of current discourses in civic education indicates that it would be beneficial to attend to the connection between our understandings of freedom and how we educate citizens. As a starting place for examining the benefits of connecting philosophical conceptions of freedom to discourses in civic education, I argue that clarity about educating for freedom can be gained by considering not only our philosophical understandings of freedom, but also by connecting those understandings to the political system within which freedom is understood.

Civic education today reflects a variety of discourses about what it means to be a free citizen with different understandings of what is required to educate free citizens. One could argue that it is good to have multiple discourses about citizenship that reflect diverse philosophical understandings of freedom. I assert that these conflicting discourses confuse teachers and students and prevent citizenship education from being effective.

As an example, consider the teaching practice of deliberating about controversial issues in the classroom. It is not difficult to connect this pedagogy in civic education to concepts of freedom. It reflects the importance of freedom of expression to democracy and that an inability to participate in deliberation (to the extent that one considers this essential to democracy) is a potential limit to one's freedom. A strong philosophical understanding of what freedom is and the democratic system in which freedom is exercised should provide guidance to teachers regarding what topics are appropriate for deliberation and how the deliberation should be structured. However, educators struggle to identify the boundaries of appropriate topics for deliberation and whether and when teachers should participate in deliberation or reveal their opinions regarding the topic of deliberation.[2]

In this essay I provide a thumbnail sketch of two philosophical conceptions of freedom. I then connect philosophical understandings of freedom to political systems by examining what it means to educate for freedom within an aggregative democracy and within a deliberative democracy. This will illustrate how both the political system and the construct of freedom interact in creating our understanding

of educating for freedom. I conclude by identifying why this full understanding of freedom is important and how it can aid in resolving thorny questions in civic education such as those surrounding deliberation.

Three Understandings of Freedom

Freedom is a much-contested concept in political philosophy, and this essay is not intended to provide an overview or representative sampling of how freedom has been understood. Instead, for illustrative purposes, I briefly sketch two different understandings of freedom. The first is based on the influential nineteenth-century understandings of John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Constant. For comparative purposes, I outline a more modern aesthetic account of freedom.

John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Constant

In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill paints an expansive portrait of individual freedom. He sets forth the key principle that "the sole end for which mankind are [sic] warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection."[3] Flowing from this statement is the core idea that people should have wide latitude for individual freedom because the state has no legitimate authority to interfere with one's freedom except to prevent harm to others. Therefore, people are given latitude to determine their own ends within a wide swath of freedom bounded only by the injunction not to injure others.[4]

This means that the citizen's political concerns focus on the enjoyment of their freedom. Mill identifies certain rights, such as the right to free expression, which are essential to freedom. Therefore, individual rights become a way to preserve the freedom necessary for autonomous actions.

From this understanding of freedom, one can envision what it would look like to educate free citizens. Mill was wary of state involvement in the provision of education, fearing that state-provided education would result in "despotism over the mind."[5] Key to educating for freedom was educating citizens about the appropriate limits of government and how one acts politically to check the actions of a government that extend beyond its legitimate reach.

In a similar vein, Benjamin Constant identified liberty that balanced the political freedom that he associated with ancient societies with the individual freedom characteristic of modern societies.[6] Much like Mill, he identified an aspect of individual freedom that allowed individuals, among other things, to "occupy their days or hours in a way most compatible with their inclinations or whims."[7] Like Mill, this freedom to determine one's conception of the good life involved the ability to exercise rights of self-expression and association.

Constant distinguished himself from Mill by claiming that individual freedom and the rights associated with it must include a type of political liberty associated with the ancients. This political liberty was the involvement of people with the affairs of government. He claimed that such political freedom required a moral education if such influence was to be properly exercised. Political liberty is connected to a person's moral self-development. Constant does not clearly define

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this moral education or the outlines of self-development, but it involves an understanding of history and an awareness of the need to ensure that the government acts only within its limits. Constant indicates that political liberty draws people together, but not necessarily for the sharing of ideas. Political liberty involves "choosing with discernment and resisting seduction."[8] This implies that political liberty is less concerned with reaching a shared moral consensus and more with guarding one's individual liberty against encroachment by the state.

Educating citizens for Constant's version of freedom entails many of the same ideas as Mill. Citizens need to know the mechanisms for participation in the political system. Also, citizens must be diligent about the rights necessary for the exercise of both their individual and political freedom. However, Constant adds a communal aspect to educating for freedom. Love of country and patriotism draw people together to exercise their political freedom. Also, Constant implies that self-betterment results from exercising political freedom and such betterment results from tempering the selfish drive for pleasure with concern for the communal.

Aesthetic Conception of Freedom[9]

In contrast to the views of freedom elaborated by Mill and Constant, Ajume Wingo posits that freedom can be best understood as "an aesthetic act through which actors represent themselves and the world in a special way."[10] Freedom viewed through the aesthetic lens sees freedom as a product of the imagination and the will of actors on the political stage. Therefore, freedom relates to the way in which the concept of freedom has been constructed and embodied by those who have shared the political stage before one's arrival on it. That is, freedom is the representation of the world to oneself in one's own way that occurs in a communal realm where freedom is completed and fulfilled. Those in communal spaces constantly negotiate freedom, and therefore freedom is not stagnant but ever changing.

An implication of the aesthetic view of freedom is that the political beings that participate in creating our understanding of freedom are created and shaped for their role on the political stage. People are trained by society to participate on the political stage and, to some degree, must be enticed to participate in the political process that constructs the meaning of freedom. Political freedom as envisioned by Wingo is something to which people must be called or enticed. Because the political process, which creates or defines freedom, competes with other aesthetic pursuits, the political process must be made sufficiently appealing to draw people to the political stage where freedom is negotiated.

An aesthetic understanding of freedom provides some guidance for what educating for freedom entails. First, education for freedom must be something that entices people to participate on the political stage. As political theorist Aaron Wildavsky points out, with so many pursuits competing for attention in the lives of citizens who live in places developed enough to be concerned with freedom, it is surprising that anyone would pay attention to political pursuits at all.[11] After enticing citizens to the political stage, the content of freedom education will depend on how society has developed its understanding of freedom and the degree to which it is

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committed to maintenance or revision of that understanding. For example, in a proposal for civic education, Wingo states that societies committed to social reproduction may need to engage in promulgating myths regarding heroes who embody the society's values and present versions of history consistent with such values.[12] It is also possible to imagine a society that determines to make citizens conscious of the negotiation of freedom on the political stage. In this society, educating for freedom would not involve myths but rather aiding citizens in understanding the negotiation of freedom and how best to participate in that process.

Political Systems and Freedom

Just as philosophical understandings of freedom can vary, understanding what it means to be free and how to prepare people for freedom can vary depending on the political system that provides the context for the exercise of freedom. In the United States, our understanding of the nature of democracy impacts what it means to educate citizens to be free within that system. For simplicity, I outline two competing visions of democracy — aggregative democracy and deliberative democracy.[13] In doing so, I argue that these understandings of democracy lead to different understandings of how one educates citizens for freedom within that democracy.

Aggregative Democracy[14]

Aggregative democracy understands democracy as the accounting of individuals' preferences about any particular public issue through various mechanisms for aggregation. This is a vote-centered democracy that sees people as autonomous individuals who develop their preferences in the private sphere. The public sphere provides means of expressing those preferences in ways that they can be tallied in accordance with society's determination of the appropriate way of aggregating the preferences to reach a decision.

What is required to educate a citizen for freedom is profoundly influenced by this vision of democracy. It gives rise to an understanding of citizenship education that has been termed the liberal conception of citizenship.[15] It is characterized by the right of individuals to form, revise, and pursue their definition of the good life and the ability to exercise one's freedom in society. Education for citizenship in this form of democracy requires citizens to understand the mechanisms required for expressing one's preferences in society. One would expect to see an emphasis on the duty to vote and how the mechanisms of government work. Additionally, citizens would need to know the rights that are necessary for them to function as free and autonomous in the determination of the good life, such as the right to free speech and association.

Deliberative Democracy

In contrast to aggregative democracy, deliberative democracy is a discourse-centered understanding of democracy.[16] This understanding of democracy does not take individual's political preferences as given. People's political preferences are shaped through discourse about political issues. Given that citizens' understandings of the good life will conflict and lead to moral conflict, deliberative democracy relies on communication between people to inform decisions within democracy. This is

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not to say that mechanisms for aggregating political preferences are never used to reach a decision, but the emphasis shifts to the communicative process that occurs before any aggregation of preferences occurs.

This places stringent demands on citizens if they are to be free within this understanding of democracy. It is not difficult to imagine how one's freedom would be curtailed (under any philosophical understanding of the term) if one was unable to engage in political deliberation. Critics of deliberative democracy point out this concern. Iris Marion Young notes that those who are not privy to the modes of rational discourse favored in a deliberative democracy may lose their voice and, in a sense, their freedom.[17] Similarly, the deliberative process ideally occurs among conditions where all are represented and equal enough in power that coercion or dominance of deliberation does not occur. As critics have pointed out, the deliberative process can be overwhelmed by differences in power among those deliberating[18] or can result in the polarization of viewpoints instead of fostering mutual understanding, depending on who is represented in the deliberative process.[19]

Because of the nature of deliberation, educating citizens for freedom within a deliberative democracy will involve the inculcation of certain values and the development of certain skills if deliberation is to occur consistent with the demands of the theory. Citizens who will experience freedom in this regime will be educated concerning how to express their viewpoints and how to listen to others. They will learn certain dispositions concerning deliberation, such as openness to changing one's own preferences in light of what is learned over the course of the deliberation and principles of deliberation, that are required for deliberation to occur.[20]

The Power of Combining Philosophy and Political Theory

The previous sections of this essay outlined how various philosophical conceptions of freedom can guide one's understanding of what it means to educate for freedom and how different understandings of democracy would lead to different ways of educating for freedom. In this section, I describe how our understanding of educating for freedom becomes richer when philosophical understandings of freedom are combined with the political context within which freedom will be exercised.

Mill and Constant

Mill's conception of freedom leads to an education for freedom that involves maintaining a wide swath of individual freedoms, checking against government intrusion into that freedom, and preserving the rights necessary for freedom. However, Mill's understanding of freedom does not provide guidance about how that freedom is to be defended and maintained. By placing that understanding of freedom within an aggregative democracy, civic education becomes focused on teaching citizens how to express their individual preferences within the democratic system. It would also emphasize the duty to participate in expressing one's preferences through voting. Mill's understanding of freedom within an aggregative democracy would develop within students an understanding of how to use one's rights of free expression and religion, but would not imply that there is a duty to

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respond to the expression of any other person's opinion in any particular way. In other words, it would not imply that there is a civic duty to give any particular consideration to the views of others.

Placing Mill's understanding of freedom within a deliberative democracy would provide moral values that must be considered when deliberating. A deliberative democracy that uses Mill's understanding of freedom would focus on the moral question of whether the political issue that is being deliberated is appropriate for government action. Mill's focus on maintaining a wide realm of individual liberty and thereby limiting government intrusion into that liberty means that a starting point for each deliberation would be the question of whether this particular moral conflict is one that should be mediated by government action (because if the government fails to act harm to others may result) or whether the government should not be involved. In this way, Mill's conception of freedom would provide substantive guidance for deliberation.

Just as with Mill, Constant's understanding of freedom does not fully provide the information necessary to educate for freedom. Within an aggregative democracy, educating for freedom would bear much resemblance to Mill. Citizens would learn about the mechanisms of government necessary for exercising their political liberty in the interest of maintaining individual liberty. They would learn about their rights required for individual liberty. However, layered on this would be an education that provides citizens with a certain amount of patriotism and that would help them limit the degree to which they are controlled by selfish drives. The democratic state would still focus on aggregating preferences and would not attempt to have institutions or mechanisms that focus on providing opportunities for people to have their preferences shaped by others (as in a deliberative democracy), but this type of education would include elements that would direct citizens to consider not only their own selfish interests but also to consider the larger public good.

Placing Constant's view of freedom within a deliberative democratic state provides yet another understanding of the shape of educating for freedom. Educating for Constant's idea of freedom in a deliberative democracy would again bear resemblance to that described by Mill. However, the content of the deliberation could expand beyond simply setting the appropriate limits of governmental authority (which relate to Constant's individual freedom), but could also extend to matters of political freedom. People would speak in deliberative forums not only about their own self interest, but could legitimately appeal to arguments that relate to interests of the society at large and about the ways in which the exercise of political liberty can be shaped to promote the betterment of individuals. Only by broadening education for freedom to include these elements in deliberation could a person experience the individual and political freedom described by Constant.

Aesthetic Freedom

If one takes an aesthetic view of freedom, the question of what it means to educate for freedom becomes less prescribed by the political system in which the freedom is to be exercised and depends more upon what society constructs as the

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appropriate role for education. In other words, when freedom is viewed aesthetically, what it means to educate someone to participate in the ongoing construction and acting out of freedom is subject to change.

One can imagine that in an aggregative democracy, educating for freedom could look very much like education for freedom under Mill's understanding. In fact, if the aesthetic understanding of freedom is correct, education should look like that described for Mill's in an aggregative democracy for that period of time when Mill's understanding of freedom held greatest sway and before democratic understandings took a deliberative turn. It can be argued that it is the case that the discourse about what it means to educate for freedom did look like that described for Mill and that the influence of that continues today.

An aesthetic understanding of freedom when paired with a deliberative democracy opens the door for a critical view of both freedom and the democratic regime in which freedom is exercised.[21] What it means to be free is what is being negotiated through deliberations, and the understanding a society has of deliberative democracy can be viewed as reflecting (at least in part) a society's understanding of what it is to be free.

This leads to several ways of viewing educating for freedom. In criticizing the way in which deliberative democratic theorists have described educating for freedom, Wingo takes the position that what deliberative theorists are after is social reproduction of a certain set of liberal values.[22] Therefore, from an aesthetic freedom standpoint, he can argue for the use of myth and other methods to inculcate values described earlier as a more appropriate path for deliberative theorists to consider if they desire to educate people to function within a deliberative democracy.

An aesthetic understanding of freedom also allows people to advocate for a critical perspective on educating for freedom. This would reflect an understanding that as people live out their understandings of freedom by inserting themselves into the political process, they can shape society's understanding of freedom and of the political system. Therefore, participants can take action to identify those things that prevent them from experiencing their understanding of freedom, whether it is power inequities, institutional constructs that negatively impact their ability to pursue their interests, or any other issues that limit their pursuit of the good.

The Impact on Educating for Freedom Today

The observation that both one's understanding of what freedom is together with the political structure within which that freedom exists are necessary for educating for freedom seems basic and unremarkable. However, a brief examination of issues surrounding deliberation in civic education indicates that more clarity is needed in understanding what educating for freedom means and that the failure to consider both the understanding of freedom and the political system has resulted in lack of consistent and clear guidance to teachers who are attempting to provide civic education.

As an example, we return to the teaching practice of deliberating about controversial issues in the classroom referred to in the introduction. A strong

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philosophical understanding of what freedom is and the democratic system in which freedom is exercised should provide guidance to teachers regarding what topics are appropriate for deliberation and how the deliberation should be structured. Placing Mill's understanding of freedom within a deliberative democracy, topics appropriate for deliberation would focus on the appropriate reach of government into the liberty of the individual. The content of controversy, or deliberation about the appropriate moral stand to take on the topic, would not be an issue. If, however, we place Mill's understanding of freedom within an aggregative democracy, one might question whether deliberation is an appropriate part of civic education or whether it is best left for the private sphere of citizens' lives.

An aesthetic view of freedom would not just potentially yield different answers to the question of what topics are appropriate for deliberation, but would change the nature of the question itself. Within any vision of democracy, one might ask whether deliberation is an activity that would entice people to participate in politics and the construction of freedom. Similarly, if deliberation is considered enticing, one might legitimately consider choosing topics based less on their relationship to the concept of freedom and more on whether those topics are sufficiently engaging. This is not to say that the vision of democracy plays no role under an aesthetic view of freedom. The political structure will influence how people view the answers to the previous questions. Deliberation may seem more meaningful and enticing within a deliberative democratic regime. Alternatively, in an aggregative democracy, deliberation may be viewed as a way to make politics less cold and individual, even if the deliberation is not viewed as essential to the process. In all of these cases, one can see that an aesthetic view of freedom combined with different understandings of democracy provide a different context for discussing appropriate answers to the question.

There are many other issues within civic education that could benefit from more thought regarding our philosophical conceptions of freedom and the understanding of the type of democracy within which freedom is experienced. What are the appropriate boundaries between public and private? In what ways should moral frameworks such as religious beliefs affect civic education? How do we understand the concept of rights and the appropriate exercise of rights as free individuals? How should we educate future free citizens about political duties, if they exist?

Although this essay cannot explore these questions, civic education would benefit from having philosophy and political theory brought into the conversation regarding their answers. By engaging in conversation, freedom becomes a subject that is examined in citizenship education rather than one that is assumed. In a period where the time and resources devoted to civic education are becoming scarcer, the greater clarity in civic education that could result from these conversations will enable civic educators to make the most of their efforts.

1. Because of the intimate relationship of freedom to liberal democratic society, I use educating for freedom and citizenship education interchangeably. Any facet of citizenship education necessarily

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teaches citizens about the meaning and boundaries of, as well as the appropriate exercise of, freedom in society.

2. For an insightful look into the challenges facing teachers who wish to discuss controversial topics and how challenging it is to guide teachers on the topic without a clear notion of freedom, see Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2009). The book also illustrates the challenges of answering questions about deliberation without a consideration of what freedom means.

3. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 13.

4. This understanding, of course, puts aside the question of what it means to injure others and the degree to which one harms others through actions that cause immediate harm only to oneself.

5. Mill, *On Liberty*, 129.

6. Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns," http://www.uark.edu/depts/comminfo/cambridge/ancients.html.

7. Constant, "Liberty."

8. Ibid.

9. Although I am focusing on a very recent conception of freedom, one can see connections to John Dewey's ideas regarding the socially constructed nature of freedom in *Freedom and Culture* (New York: Capricorn, 1963).

10. Ajume Wingo, "The Aesthetic of Freedom," in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, eds. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher Zurn (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

11. Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1979).

12. Ajume Wingo, "Civic Education: A New Proposal," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 16 (1997): 277–91.

13. I choose these two conceptions of democracy not because they are the only ways democracy is or should be understood, but because they provide an effective contrast that illustrates the impact of political conceptions of democracy on our understanding of freedom.

14. Aggregative democracy is sometimes referred to as individualist or economic democracy. See Simone Chambers, "Deliberative Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 6 (2003): 307–26.

15. Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Jason Harnish, "Contemporary Discourses of Citizenship," *Review of Educational Research* 76 (2006): 653–90.

16. There are several understandings of deliberative democracy that vary in nuance from the one described in this essay. For purposes of this essay, I will focus mainly on the version of deliberative democracy outlined by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson in *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996).

17. Iris Marion Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Selya Benhabib (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996). Note that Young proposes a "communicative democracy" that defines the limits of deliberation differently to permit different forms of discourse in a deliberation and thereby increase the opportunity for all to exercise their freedom.

18. See Ian Shapiro, "Enough of Deliberation: Politics is About Interest and Power," in *Deliberative Politics: Essays in Democracy and Disagreement*, ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

19. See Cass Sunstein, "Deliberative Trouble? Why Groups Go to Extremes," *Yale Law Journal* 110, no. 1 (2000): 71–119.

20. See Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, for a description of nonrepression and nondiscrimination and why those values are important for deliberative democracy.

21. This is said knowing that an aesthetic understanding of freedom being paired with a deliberative democratic system would not just happen, but would be the result of how freedom and therefore democracy are lived out by those participating in the political process.

22. Wingo, "Civic Education," 280–81.

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