



What one thinks they want vs. what they really want

Prakash Iyer

A mere mention of the word 'democracy' invokes a host of concepts like justice, freedom, equality, fraternity, toleration, power, consent and autonomy. But these concepts are abstract and they only become real when they manifest in the form of actions by persons, communities and the state. The actions are in various forms like extending, limiting, curbing, relaxing; in a wide range of situations related to progress, development, security, education and communication. The situations in which these concepts are demonstrated involve substantive issues like economics, technology, welfare, culture and knowledge. Democracy is demonstrated in various sites like public spaces, homes, schools, colleges and other institutions like communities, families and other relationships. To make things more complex, these concepts are interpreted in different ways, all of which can legitimately be called democratic.

How does one make sense of all this? I often face questions related to democracy and democratic schools, and each time the question is different, and therefore my answers are different too. I am sometimes disturbed by my students' occasional claim that I am being democratic, or other times when I am accused of being undemocratic. At least, we teachers should have a clear understanding of democracy. How else will we perform our duty of developing good democratic citizens? At a minimum, we need to understand these concepts and the different ways in which they can be interpreted; so that we ensure our curriculum, pedagogical methods and the environment we create in our classrooms and schools employ them in the right manner and uphold the basic idea of democracy.

In this and subsequent articles, my aim is to reflect on some controversies and paradoxes associated with these concepts, and pay particular attention to the problems caused by contrary interpretations.

Negative and positive notions of freedom

If we define freedom in its absolute sense, then one could easily ask us: do we have the right to coerce children to come to school, to learn what we decide they have to learn? Aren't we violating their freedom of choice? There have been many schools that claimed to uphold the freedom of children. But it seems rather strange to say we should allow children to do whatever they want because "they do not know" yet. They do not know themselves, they do not know others, they do not have the physical and mental abilities to take care of themselves. They have to be taught what is harmful, what is not, what is beneficial and what isn't, what is the basis on which they should make choices, and most importantly the concept of freedom itself - what is it to be free? A justifiable argument against complete freedom for children is that making any choice requires knowledge of all possible choices available, and a reasonable understanding of what each choice entails. Which is one of the fundamental purposes of education. Knowledge makes you free because once you have knowledge you can think for yourself and choose the things that you really want.

This brings up the second critical point related to freedom articulated by Isaiah Berlin in his seminal book "*Four Essays on Liberty* (1969). He pointed out that there are two notions of liberty - positive and negative. Absence of constraints is the negative notion of freedom. The common understanding of freedom is "absence of external constraints" - no external circumstance or norm should control or limit actions that we choose to do. The simplest way to express this is "you should not stop someone else from doing what they have decided to do". Obviously "doing" does not mean only physical actions, but also thinking and speaking. The Indian constitution includes access to public spaces, employment, speech and expression, assembling peacefully, forming associations, moving freely within India, not being imprisoned unless they are proven to have committed a crime, and most importantly education (after the RtE came about in 2009). This seems reasonably simple and direct, if not for two critical complications that directly affect us teachers.

One could also raise an additional question: Who has the right to control a person and in what area? The positive notion of liberty answers this question by saying that a knowledgeable person has the right to control a person's thought in the area he/she is knowledgeable in. This justifies the teacher and parents' right to educate a child; but the positive notion of freedom goes beyond the education of children. Some norms and laws in society perform this function too. A braille keypad and voice control in an ATM removes the constraints that a person with impaired sight would have experienced in using it; it also encourages and claims that a sight-impaired person can and should use the ATM too. Similarly, other forms of positive discrimination (affirmative rights like reservation, facilities for the physically disabled, etc.) demonstrate the positive notion of liberty.

But the positive notion of liberty can, and is often misapplied or abused. Girls and women are not allowed to do some things because men say these things are harmful or dangerous for women. This is the logic based on which women are not allowed to go out alone after a certain time of day, do certain jobs, or work in a night shift. Equally important misapplication is various so-called masculine things that girls are not allowed to learn, and therefore not taught. Similar misapplication of positive freedom can be seen when people of some communities are taught that they should only be doing some kinds of jobs, and not do other kinds of work that belong to other communities. Transgender people have been similarly oppressed for centuries now. Society limits their lives by misapplying the positive notion of liberty by saying this is your nature and you are not made to do most kinds of work.

Archives

- » ▼ 2021
 - » April
 - » March
 - » February
 - » January
- » ► 2020
- » ► 2019
- » ► 2018
- » ► 2017
- » ► 2016
- » ► 2015
- » ► 2014
- » ► 2013
- » ► 2012
- » ► 2011
- » ► 2010
- » ► 2009



How do we avoid such misapplication?

This paradox is bewildering and confusing. It seems that the positive notion of liberty is necessary and should be exercised in some situations, but dangerous in some other situations. How does a democratic society avoid this trap of misapplication?

It would help for us to go back to the negative notion of liberty and its purpose. Why should there be absence of constraints? People should be able to invent their own identity and become the kind of people they want to be. This is commonly referred to as self-determination or self-realization. Democratic societies assure every individual the right to determine their own self. The positive notion of freedom is necessary to enable them to know the choices they have and to make the appropriate choice whether it is an occupation, where they want to reside, the religion they want to follow, the character they want to build, and what they want to identify themselves as.

While positive liberty has an element of imposition and guidance in it, it is important to protect the person's autonomy. They should be willingly accepting the advice and education, so that the knowledge they acquire can indeed make them free to do what they really want. Moreover what they really want needs to be controlled by their morality and conscience.

The accompanying risk of authoritarianism can be neutralized by classifying the areas as more significant and less significant. For example, imposing a traffic rule or the rule of wearing a helmet when you are riding a two-wheeler to protect your life are legitimate applications of the positive notion of liberty. On the other hand, imposing a religion or an occupation on a person is a misapplication of the positive notion of liberty. A religion or a job are higher order choices that a citizen of a democratic society should choose themselves. These are higher order because they are an integral part of self-realization.

Why bother!

Needless to say, this is clearer in the context of education. We can teach children "about religion" but we should not impose any particular religion on a child. We teachers know there are milder and innocuous ways of imposing a religious belief – through daily assembly prayers, dress codes, eating habits, moral education using religious texts.

Why should we teachers bother with all this? Rather why should a democratic society be bothered with the risky subtleties of the positive notion of freedom? Apart from the need of knowledge for anyone to determine themselves, there is an additional issue that makes it important for us teachers to comprehend the positive notion of freedom.

The objective of exercising the positive notion of freedom is to help a person develop the capacity to exercise their freedom in their own life. We exercise our freedom by making choices. Charles Taylor points out that it is not enough to remove external constraints to enable people to make their own choices. Sometimes internal constraints like fear, uncertainty, lack of self-awareness and confidence, or self-direction could be blocking our ability to make choices. We have often seen and heard of people from certain castes who are afraid to even aspire to jobs that they think only people from upper castes should be doing. In a tragically ironic way, oppressed people further their own oppression. It is difficult if not impossible for an individual to overcome these internal constraints by themselves. They would need someone else to make them self-aware, provide direction and ensure that they are not deceiving themselves.

We teachers see similar things with our students. Many students who do my course are afraid that philosophy is inherently difficult. They are convinced that they do not have the capability to learn much from the course. Mathematics invokes similar fear in children (and even adults). These fears and the associated trepidation are examples of what Taylor calls internal constraints. This fear disables them from discriminating between what they really want and what they do not want.

Taylor says, "But where this happens, where, for example, we are quite self-deceived, or utterly fail to discriminate properly the ends we seek, or have lost self-control, we can quite easily be doing what we want in the sense of what we can identify as our wants, without being free; indeed, we can be further entrenching our unfreedom."

This positive notion of freedom helps us quell self-deception, and clarify whether we really want something, or if we merely think we want something. It helps in realizing one's true self, by overcoming our internal constraints. Being an active citizen in a democratic society requires "self-awareness, self-understanding, moral discrimination and self-control" to ensure each of us makes the right choice for ourselves and for others. The freedom to make the right choice and the ability to autonomously make choices is the essence of being democratic. To be precise, it is among the various "essences" of being democratic!

References

1. "Four Essays on Liberty" by Isaiah Berlin. 1969.
2. "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," by Taylor, Charles. 1979. "The Idea of Liberty" edited by Alan Ryan, 1979, Oxford University Press.

The author teaches Philosophy of Education at Azim Premji University. He can be reached at prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in.

 *Cogitations, February 2021*

Leave a Reply

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Contact

Teacher Plus
A15, Vikrampuri
Secunderabad
Telangana 500 009
India

[Subscribe](#)

Teacherplus

Copyright. All rights reserved. **Designed By Ochre media Pvt Ltd**