NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOM:
CONSIDERING EDUCATION AND THE DIGITAL WORLD

Dan Mamlok
Miami University

The concept of freedom is one of the key ideas in political philosophy. Hobbes depicted human nature as based on self-interests and rational reason, where freedom can be achieved only under a robust sovereign who is authorized by the citizens. In other words, by sacrificing natural individual freedom to a central regime, individuals and society become free.[1] Locke, however, emphasized the good virtues of human beings and argued for greater liberty for individuals.[2] Kant's notion of freedom rests on the self's rationality.[3] In his notable essay, "What is Enlightenment?" Kant criticizes the tendency of people to rely on external authorities. His exclamation, "Sapere aude—Have the courage to use your own intelligence is, therefore, the motto of enlightenment,"[4] is Kant's call for individuals to develop autonomous reasoning. Interestingly, Kant distinguishes between the *public* and the *private* use of reason. The public use of reason refers to one's autonomy to develop his or her knowledge and opinions and to express them publicly. The private use of reason refers to one's obligation to comply with rules when he/she holds a civic role, or in Kant's words: "*Argue*, as much as you want to and about what you please, *but obey!*"[5]

Kant's political concept of freedom paved the way toward political liberty, which comprises the strain between the public and the private spheres. In a liberal society one can do, live, and like whatever he/she pleases, but at the same time there are certain constraints on the individual that balance between one's desires and the common good.[6] Elaboration on this idea is found in Berlin's distinction between *negative* and *positive* freedom, which confronts certain fundamental dilemmas regarding citizenship, liberty, and democracy.[7] In this paper, I examine the notion of freedom in the age of digital technology and argue

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).

[2] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslet (1698; repr., Cambridge, England: University Press, 1960).

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt (1781; repr., London: Penguin, 2007).

[4] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *The Philosophy of Kant—Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Carl Joachim Friedrich (1784; repr., New York: The Modern Library, 1949), 132.

[5] Ibid., 134, emphasis original.

[6] Isaiah Berlin, "Liberty," in *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[7] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 122–34.

that attaining freedom requires reconsidering the traditional liberal distinction between negative and positive freedom.

The first section introduces the distinction between the two concepts of freedom. Then, I discuss Dewey's notion of freedom. In the final section, I examine freedom, technology, and the quest for democracy. I shall argue that rather than focusing on mechanisms of control and limiting digital freedom, educators should foster students' critical literacy of digital technology[8] and provide them learning environments that enable the development of social responsibility capacities and active citizenship.

Negative and Positive Freedom

In his well-known essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin ponders the notion of freedom and the way it has been perceived since the Enlightenment. He begins by criticizing the over-reliance of philosophers on rationality since Kant. Recalling Heine's warning not to undervalue the power of ideas and thoughts, Berlin reminds us that the horrors of the 20th century demonstrate what happens when fanatical and fatalist ideologies utilize "pure reasoning" against liberal culture. Thus, the notion of obedience, and the degree to which we are free, leads Berlin to the distinction between *negative* and *positive* freedom.[9]

The notion of *negative freedom* refers to "the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others."[10] Namely, negative freedom relates to the ability of one to act without restraints or interference. In contrast, positive freedom relates to a degree of intervention or constraints that control or determine one's actions.[11] The main challenge in adopting these concepts is to decide to what degree one should have negative freedom and the degree at which the utilization of positive freedom is considered coercive. How can we balance between these two concepts and make a just society that enables people to feel they belong? Since there is no harmony between people's wills, societies cannot rely only on negative freedom. A degree of constraints are needed in order to regulate certain actions and to maintain a lawfully peaceful society.[12]

The notion of negative freedom entails several questions regarding the meaning of freedom and the responsibility of the society. For instance, Berlin raises the question: "What is freedom to those who cannot make use of it?

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[8] Digital technology in this essay refers to the use of computers, projectors, tablets, emails, forums, educational software, and any type of information and communications technology.

[9] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 118–21.

[10] Ibid., 122.

[11] It should be noted that there are some variants of negative/positive freedom. Both Hegel and Fromm used these notions and elaborated them. This paper will not be able to capture the nuances between the different definitions.

[12] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 126–31.

Without adequate conditions for the use of freedom, what is the value of freedom?"[13] These questions lead to the idea of compulsory education. If we want people to have free and rational choice, society has to provide certain basic knowledge that enables people to make reasonable decisions. In this sense, one can ask: What kind of freedom in the age of digital technology might one have if he/she does not have basic digital literacy? Providing students the opportunity to work with digital devices and develop their critical abilities is necessary for attaining an extent of freedom. In a figurative way, Prensky suggests that, compared to work in the pre-digital age, working with computers is like turning on the lights for students.[14] In his review of the history of liberty, Berlin points out that amidst the differences between philosophers of the modern era, they all agreed that "we must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to 'degrade or deny our nature.'"[15]

The tension between negative and positive freedom is embedded in the liberal discourse. Berlin distinguishes between the questions "Who governs me?" and "To what degree does the authority that governs me interfere with my actions?" The differences between them may seem to be tenuous in certain examples, but as Berlin notes, the desire for "self-mastering" and the ability to control my life is not the same desire as the wish for being free *from* constraints.[16] Berlin points out that philosophers of the Enlightenment glorify the level of one's abnegation to the collective society and define that abnegation as a "higher" level of freedom. In addition, positive freedom entails the principle of a universal "truth." Berlin criticizes the ambitious end of enlightenment to utilize "pure reason" that will determine imperative categories:

> It is one thing to say that I know what is good for X, while he himself does not; and even to ignore his wishes for its—and his—sake; and a very different one to say that he has *eo ipso* chosen it, not indeed consciously, not as he seems in everyday life, but in his role as a rational self which his empirical self may not know—the "real" self which discerns good, and cannot help choosing it once it is revealed.[17]

The nuances between the two approaches are crucial to the argument of this essay. As previously mentioned, public education is based on the idea that citizens are "coerced" to participate in compulsory education, since there are certain benefits for us as individuals and for society. However, it is another thing to claim that we send children to school, not compulsorily, but as part of a

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[13] Ibid., 124.

[14] Marc Prensky, "Turning on the Light," In *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 6 (March 2008): 40–41.

[15] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 126.

[16] Ibid., 131–34.

[17] Ibid., 133.

universal "truth" that enables their freedom. In education, this distinction entails the difference between compulsory general education and indoctrination. Berlin claims that while Kant endorses expanding individuals' freedom by relying on their intelligence, his rigid categories that presuppose *a priori* truth are a secular version of religious authority. In the context of the Enlightenment, this is the reasonable way to eliminate "bad" manners and to subdue one's nature. This doctrine entails the modern thinking of emancipating one's self through reason. On the one hand, this doctrine may seem apolitical. On the other hand, we can identify this approach as constituting the roots of modern individualism and the advocacy for negative freedom.

Berlin's discussion on positive and negative freedom reflects the liberal spirit that follows the Enlightenment's principles. Yet, as previously contended, the challenge of these two notions lies in the tension between society and individuals, constructing a problematic dichotomy that requires one to conceptualize the necessary and sufficient conditions in which one becomes free. In this respect, Dewey's notion of freedom is helpful as a response to the dualism constructed by liberal philosophers.

Freedom as an Ethical Problem

The starting point of Dewey's exploration of freedom is ethical. He tries to compose a theory that will reconcile the tensions between different groups, institutions, and communities. He contends that the notion of freedom cannot be separated from the idea of democracy. As a general comment, it is important to note that, for Dewey, one of the limits of the Enlightenment's legacy lies in the distinction between strict categories. For instance, in *Ethics*, written with James Tufts, they reject the traditional dichotomy between the *social* and the *moral*. Unlike Berlin's notion of positive and negative freedom that form a border between individuals and the state, Dewey and Tufts deem that one's actions should inherently reflect social customs. They criticize modern moral theories which, since Kant, have established the distinction between ethics and law. In addition, they point out that even when examining some of the great philosophers' views regarding the notion of freedom, one would find logical gaps in the traditional distinction between society and individuals. For example, Dewey and Tufts argue: "Kant himself virtually passed beyond his own theory of individualism in insisting upon the promotion of a 'Kingdom of Ends,' in which every person is to be treated as an end in himself."[18] Moreover, they recall utilitarian positions, such as that of Mill, who "insisted upon the educative value of social interests and habits in the individual."[19]

Dewey elaborates on this point in *Democracy and Education* and emphasizes the social role of education. Namely, Dewey contends that education is inherently social, and any attempt to separate education and society inhibits

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[18] John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1906), 433.

[19] Ibid.

the potential of education to enhance democratic values and promote a free society. Distinguishing between the social and the individual distorts Dewey's concept of community, in which both individuals and the formal institutions continue to grow in a way that nourishes the community, and that nourishes the individual. An ideal society is a society able to form a community "in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups. An undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience."[20] Thus, the concept of an ideal society recognizes the necessity of individual and community growth as totally interdependent.

The last point raises a tension between Berlin's two concepts of freedom and Dewey's notion of a free community. Whereas Berlin conceptualizes freedom as contingent on the absence or the presence of constraints, Dewey theorizes freedom in terms of one's ability to become "an individualized self."[21] One's individuality involves the ability to fulfill one's wishes reasonably, through a reflective process, and to make one's choices. In addition, one's fulfillment should be considered in its social context. Namely, freedom can be achieved only when one takes into consideration the social conditions of communal life. Finally, Dewey suggests that freedom is entrenched in the idea of participative democracy. Hence, attaining freedom requires the reconstruction of the social conditions that will enable one to act in a free way.

Dewey recognizes the necessity of effective legal authorities. However, the difference between Dewey and Berlin, in this sense, lies in the relationship between the *legal* and the *social*. For Dewey, freedom cannot be attained merely by external powers that restrict or enable one's action, but rather by internalizing social norms that have been established in a democratic process:

> A society is then *politically* organized; and a true public order with this comprehensive law is brought into existence. The moral importance of the development of this public view, with its extensive common purposes and with a general will for maintaining them, can hardly be overestimated."[22]

In exploring Dewey's concept of freedom, it is interesting to examine how his idea was developed over the years. While in his middle works, such as *Ethics* and *Democracy and Education*, Dewey emphasizes the relationships between people, the establishment of communities, and the importance of ethical

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[20] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 115.

[21] John Dewey, "Search for the Great Community," in *John Dewey*, *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 2, *1925–1927* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 329.

[22] Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 435, emphasis original.

consideration, his late work provides richness to his concept of freedom and reflects the complexity of attaining freedom in such a way that would reconcile the traditional liberal concepts and the pragmatic progressive ideals. In his middle works, Dewey emphasizes the importance of establishing communities, but in his later work, *Freedom and Culture*, freedom is associated first and most often with culture and not with formal institutions. Striving for free culture involves reflection on political freedom: "No matter what is the native make-up of human nature, its working activities, those which respond to institutions and rules and which finally shape the pattern of the latter, are created by the whole body of occupations, interests, skills, beliefs that constitute a given culture."[23]

Freedom and Culture was published in 1939, a time when the world, and Europe in particular, was in turmoil. Dewey was concerned with the different forms in which freedom was limited by communist regimes, on the one hand, and by fascist regimes, on the other. Hence, he devotes an extensive examination to the social and economic conditions that affect different cultures. He points out that "proof is decisive that economic factors are an intrinsic part of the culture that determines the actual turn taken by political measures and rules, no matter what verbal beliefs are held."[24] However, he criticizes the fact that, "It has not been customary to include the arts, the fine arts, as an important part of the social conditions, that bear upon democratic institutions and personal freedom."[25] He elucidates the great potential of the arts to forge one's self-identity, and shows how in dictatorships the arts are used to manipulate and to indoctrinate the populace. In a democracy, however, culture plays an important role in reflecting different groups in society, and people define their culture based on their preferences. Taking into account the moral aspects of freedom, Dewey contends that communities should find several moral elements that are accepted and dear to them. Following these accepted elements would be an answer, according to Dewey, to the traditional ideologies and entail a different notion of freedom: "The problem of freedom and of democratic institutions is tied up with the question of what kind of culture exists; with the necessity of free culture for free political institutions."[26]

Dewey was aware that one of the great challenges of his ideal of society lies in the problem of finding ways to harmonize the different elements of the society and to establish a common culture that would enable proper conditions for a democratic and free society. In this sense, the most attainable way to achieve a free society is by having a proper educational system that would foster the values of freedom and democracy. The role of education, in this sense, is in

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[23] John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), 7.

[24] Ibid., 8.

[25] Ibid., 9.

[26] Ibid., 13.

preparing students to become active participants in a democratic society, as Cunningham clearly explains:

> In short, the teacher has a special obligation in the school community to set up the environment in such a way that the children learn to connect their actions with the consequences of those actions and gradually learn to make intelligent choices and plans, while coming to share in the ideals of the larger society.[27]

The work of a teacher involves dynamic relationships with students and providing the conditions for ongoing participation in democracy. In other words, if school is supposed to prepare students for civic life, then teachers are responsible for honoring individual students and those students' connections to their own social lives, and to provide educational activities that surface the existing connections between their education and their civic lives; between their individual growth and their participation in social life.[28]

Digital Technology, Education, and Freedom

What is missed in Dewey's discussion is how one goes beyond human nature, cultural conventions, restrictions, and restraints. If, as Dewey argues, "the idea that human nature is inherently and exclusively individual is itself a product of a cultural individualistic movement,"[29] then one would inevitably adopt external or internal constraints. In this sense, Berlin suitably comments: "Men are largely interdependent, and no man's activity is so completely private as never to obstruct the lives of others in any way."[30] Perhaps one of the most notable examples in our time is the use of digital technology. The information revolution has opened new avenues for different types of content. Digital technology has the potential to provide an avenue for promoting freedom, allow people to engage in public activities, and help people to make reasonable choices.[31]

Nevertheless, digital technology has been developed, promoted, and operated by large corporations, with their main interest in maximizing their profits. In this sense, Giroux claims: "Under neoliberalism, pedagogy has become thoroughly politicized in reactionary terms as it constructs knowledge, values, and identities through dominant media that have become a handmaiden

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[27] Craig A. Cunningham, "What is Democratic about New Instructional Technologies?" (presentation, European Conference on Educational Research, Vienna, September 2009): 3.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 21.

[30] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 124.

[31] Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–4.

of corporate power."[32] Whereas the new opportunities to access different types of information on the Internet may seem to be liberating, the content in many cases can be manipulative, deceptive, and rather than promoting the values of freedom and democracy, it can promote the values of consumerism. The question to be asked is: How should educators respond at a time when consuming information has become ubiquitous? Cunningham contends that we should encourage students to resist the concurrent mass consumerism culture by revealing corporate manipulations that mainly promote private interests instead of the interests of students and the public: "Students must come to appreciate the ways that uses of imagery and associations can be used to manipulate viewers of advertisements and even ostensibly-artistic movies and television shows."[33] Resistance in this case may be one aspect that moves beyond human conventions and restraints. Critical literacy would enable students to develop the capacities to use digital tools reasonably and to nourish their humanity instead of being used by technology.[34] In this respect, Oliverio rightly criticizes those who view digital technology as the ultimate panacea of education and do not take into consideration the social conditions in which students act. He argues that it is not enough to leave technology to students, "advocating a process of proliferation of links, ultimately unreflectively organized."[35] Rather, educators should provide students with the conditions for developing an educative experience, which is shaped and based on student inquiry and mutual interactions.

An additional aspect that should be considered is the harmful, inappropriate content on the Internet, such as the promotion of racism, fascism, and undemocratic ideas. In addition, pornography, gambling sites, and the fear of cyber bullying may lead schools to place different types of constraints on using the Internet.[36] One can treat these questions merely as a technical problem and the constraints as ways in which educators can shield students from the dangers of the world. While I empathize and share parents' and educators' inclination to protect our children, I argue that the ethical duty of educators is not to mask reality, but to help students discern between appropriate and inappropriate content and to prepare them to become critical citizens. The question to be asked is how we can agree about what is appropriate and inappropriate. Dewey deems that one of the problems lies in the attempt to develop fixed ethical codes in a changing world, ignoring new realities and new conditions of human experience: "A new and effective morale can emerge only

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[32] Henry Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 136.

[33] Cunningham, "New Instructional Technologies," 9.

[34] Matthew Festenstein, "Dewey's Political Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2014 Edition), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/dewey-political/.

[35] Stefano Oliverio, "The Need for Connectedness in Growth: Experience and Education and the New Technological Culture," *Education and Culture* 31, No.2 (2015): 59–60.

[36] Cunningham, "New Instructional Technologies," 8.

from an exploration of the realities of human association."[37] Namely, digital technology involves myriad potentialities, which create new realities that are the basis for new experience. In this sense, Dewey distinguishes between "discipline" and "interest." Whereas the first aims to indoctrinate students, the second offers students the experience of the conflicted essence of reality, taking into consideration the peculiar needs of students and preparing them to experience conflict in a democratic society.[38] Deliberating and participating in democracy can and should provide the basis for "mutual interest as a factor in social control."[39] As noted earlier, the challenge of harmonizing different cultures, norms, and ideological predispositions can be met by promoting the values of freedom through education.

  Yet the ethical considerations of digital technology should not be confined to potential dangers, but also to the latent social potential that new technologies hold. One can recall the 2011 global wave of protests that arose in more than 900 cities around the world. Most of these demonstrations were promoted by social media networks, such as Facebook.[40] Certainly, if one wants to examine the practical aspects of constraints on information in the digital age, one can find that, in most cases, it is impossible. Considering the social and ethical aspects, digital media enables young people to be exposed to different realities, to dream of what they can become, and to act toward social change. To fulfill the social potential of digital technology, students need appropriate guidance and fewer constraints. The following example demonstrates a possible way of thinking about the social potential of digital technology.

  Sugata Mitra conducted an experiment in the poorest districts across rural India. He examined the impact of digital technology on young people's learning skills by installing computer kiosks on the streets. The children had not had any access to digital technology prior to this experiment. The experiment shows that with minimal exposure of the participants to computers, they succeeded to learn how to use computers and could eventually improve their academic performance. For the purpose of this paper, the interesting point of this experiment is the collaboration of the young students to enhance their digital literacy and to solve problems together. Mitra points out that students "worked in groups, interacting constantly with each other, in a somewhat chaotic way. Their approach scarcely resembled the orderly learning environment provided

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[37] John Dewey, "What I Believe," in *John Dewey*, *The Later Works*, *1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 5, *1929–1930* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 267.

[38] John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum," in *John Dewey*, *The Middle Works*, *1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 2, *1902–1903* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976).

[39] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 100.

[40] Michael Gould-Wartofsky, *The Occupiers: The Making of the 99 Percent Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

by a school classroom."[41] In this sense, the experiment shows that students' collaboration in their work on computers has enhanced their social cohesion and has established students' self-confidence. In addition, Mitra recounts how information and communications technology enabled students from rural India to communicate with volunteer teachers around the world and to be exposed to different realities.[42]

One can only imagine the social potential of digital technology in Western countries, where digital devices have become more and more omnipresent. The work of teachers stands in between the traditional liberal doctrine of balancing between positive and negative freedom and the open world of the Web. Cunningham rightly notes: "Barriers such as the official curriculum, the limitations of time, the level of student cooperativeness, teachers' desires to fit in and survive the demands of the job, standardized testing and accountability, and so forth constrain teacher choice."[43] Attaining freedom through education in the digital age requires teachers to consider how to go beyond the conventions, restrictions, and constraints. Following Dewey, I argue that the ethical standpoint of using digital technology should encourage students to experience, grow, and shape their predispositions:

> He [the individual] holds himself responsible for the consequences of his acts; he does not wait to be held liable by others. When society looks for responsible workmen, teachers, doctors, it does not mean merely those whom it may call to account; it can do that in any case. It wants men and women who habitually form their purpose after consideration of the social consequences of their execution.[44]

Educators should embrace the possibilities of new technologies that allow students to be exposed to the world, to be able to develop their dreams and desires, and to think not only about what they are, but also about what they could be. However, as I argued earlier, fulfilling the potential of digital technology requires that educators provide students the conditions for developing an educative experience, which is shaped and based on student inquiry and mutual interactions. Finally, teachers should encourage students to become responsible students—not by coercion, constraints, or punishments, but rather by developing a notion of active and critical citizenship in which one feels responsible for oneself and for the community.

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[41] Sugata Mitra, "The Future of Schooling: Children and Learning at the Edge of Chaos." In *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* 44, no. 4 (December 2014): 550.

[42] Ibid., 549–53.

[43] Cunningham, "New Instructional Technologies," 10.

[44] Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 436–37.