



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

**Aalborg Universitet**

## **Freedom as a Value of Practice in Ethical Learning**

Wiberg, Merete

*Publication date:*  
2006

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Wiberg, M. (2006). Freedom as a Value of Practice in Ethical Learning. Aalborg: Institut for Uddannelse, Læring og Filosofi, Aalborg Universitet.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- ? Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- ? You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- ? You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



DANISH CENTRE  
FOR PHILOSOPHY  
AND SCIENCE STUDIES

**Freedom as a value of practice  
in ethical learning**

**Merete Wiberg**

**Philosophy and science Studies  
No. 4, 2006**

© Author

**Freedom as a value of practice in ethical learning**

Philosophy and Science Studies, no. 4, 2006

ISBN 87-91943-18-3

EAN 9788791943188

Published by  
Danish Centre for Philosophy and Science Studies  
Aalborg University  
Fibigerstraede nr. 10  
9220 Aalborg  
Denmark

[www.think.aau.dk](http://www.think.aau.dk)

# Freedom as a value of practice in ethical learning

By *Merete Wiberg*, MA, PhD student,  
Department of Education, Learning and Philosophy,  
Aalborg University, Denmark  
E-mailadress: merete.wiberg@learning.aau.dk

In democratic cultures freedom plays an important role as a means, an aim and ideal and vision in educational theory and practice. It is an educational aim in democratic cultures to help children and students to become free individuals who are able to be active participants in a democratic society and who are able to think in a reflective way.

According to Giddens we live in the Late Modern Age where overall reflection and sequestration of experience have broken down morality in its traditional outlook. (Giddens 1996 p.9, p.156) What is left is 'a morality of authenticity' which leaves the individual without clear guidelines (Giddens 1996 p.225).

May be, as an answer to the problems of morality, the Authors behind the behavioural program *Step by Step* claim that it is necessarily to train children to understand and identify their own and the emotions of other persons and to teach them how to behave in various situations. It might be that the reason why the program has become widespread in Denmark is a consequence of what Giddens is stating, or may be the program is a symptom of a Late Modern Age which not only is characterized by reflexivity but also is characterized by a search for structure and evidence in all areas of life, and where even learning of moral codes is systematized into a behavioural program. The question is if training programs are the answer to the problem of the apparently dissolution of morality?

I will state that it is necessarily for children to learn (not to be trained in) moral codes but at the same time morality has to be made sustainable by constant reflection and deliberation. The task is to avoid that learning of morality is only learning of how to behave and instead finding a balance between learning of moral codes and learning to deliberate and reflect on moral codes. Freedom as an educational tool has a role to play in this endeavour.

In the Danish society freedom plays a certain role in laws regulating educational institutions, and social educators and teachers are put under an obligation to educate children to become free individuals.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Right now in Denmark there is discussion about the principles in the Danish State School due to a change which is about to be made by Government. The principle of freedom has become less influential in the new bill due to the following change in the formulation. The current formulation is: "Teaching and the daily life in the school must build on freedom of spirit, equality and democracy" (Bekendtgørelse af lov om Folkeskolen § 1, stk. 3) The new bill suggests: "The activities of the school must be influenced/marked by freedom of spirit, equality and democracy". May be this

In this paper I will take a pragmatic outset and define the concept of freedom as an instrument or tool which can be defined as a value of practice.

I will discuss how freedom can be understood as an instrument which is loaded with values and which is working in practice as a means and an aim educators more or less explicit are trying to realize. In this sense freedom is to be understood both strategically and visionary. It is supposed to support various activities among these reflection and deliberation on moral conduct. I will state that learning of deliberation and reflection are important tools in a persons building up a dynamic line of moral conduct and therefore freedom is an important tool in relation to moral and ethical learning. In order to understand the process of ethical learning I will look at the relationship between learning of moral conduct and learning of deliberation and reflection on moral conduct. The former I will call moral learning while the latter is called ethical learning. Moral and ethical learning are not separated ways of learning but are aspects in a process of learning which is flowing up and down. I will come back to it after making some clarifications concerning the concept of freedom.

The concept of freedom can be understood both strategically and visionary and very often the two aspects are entangled. Freedom as a value of practice contains the strategically aspect and the visionary aspect as well. As a strategic concept freedom is applied as a tool and a means in the formation and transformation of children and students into human beings which conform to democratic and societal ideals. For example are self-determination, responsibility and autonomy examples of images of the self which conform to democratic ideals. Deliberation and reflection are ways of thinking and action which are understood as democratic tools. As a visionary concept freedom is part of human self-understanding and is applied as a tool in visions of schools and Kindergartens which conform to ideals of the good and happy life.

As part of my PhD project I have talked with a small amount of Danish teachers and social educators working with 5-10 year old children. I asked them about their view on morality, ethics and freedom in relation to educating children. My purpose wasn't to map a general understanding of freedom among social educators and teachers but to collect examples of understandings and use of the concept of freedom in relation to moral and ethical aspects in education. The impression was that most of them conceived of morality and freedom as contradictive. They didn't like to talk about morality. For them morality was about discipline and indoctrination. If they were to talk about moral issues they preferred to talk about ethics because ethics according to their view implied a reflective and free way of thinking. Therefore talking about freedom was more obviously for them but not without problems. Freedom seems to be a concept which has a vague and imprecise definition in educational contexts. The problem is how to get from an abstract understanding of freedom in relation to moral and ethical issues to a more reflective and balanced transformation of the concept into educational practice ?

To understand freedom as a tool or an instrument is inspired by the way John Dewey understood the role and influence of concepts. He formulated this understanding in *The Quest for Certainty*(Dewey 1988[1929]). A main theme in this book is how the relationship between theory and practice is to be

---

reformulation will change the daily life in the Danish State Schools. Anyway the concept is still there and it is still an obligation for social educators and teachers to make sure that the ideal of freedom influences their way of teaching and designing of frames for processes of learning.

understood. Dewey saw theory and practice as not distinguished levels of human activity. To produce theories, concepts and ideas are not isolated from practice but is a practice as well. Therefore ideas and concepts are to be understood as tools human beings are producing and using while coping and transacting or interacting with reality<sup>2</sup>. In the philosophy of Dewey the term 'idea' is applied to describe how intellectual categories are tools or instruments in human transactions.

“...ideas are worthless except as they pass into actions which rearrange and reconstruct in some way, be it little or large, the world in which we live.....To seek after ideas and to cling to them as means of conducting operations, as factors in practical arts, is to participate in creating a world in which the springs of thinking will be clear and ever-flowing.” (Dewey 1988 [1929] p.111)

To understand ideas as something which come from a place apart from practice, for example to understand mind as an entity apart from practice which has the task to produce ideas and theories, is to commit a dualistic fallacy. A metaphysical understanding of ideas is according to Dewey to make spiritual things out of ideas and put them beyond reality. On this matter he would agree with Wittgenstein's non-metaphysical and non-dualistic understanding of ideas and concepts. Ideas and concepts are tools in human practice and life. What distinguish Wittgenstein and Dewey is Dewey's attempt to make changes while emphasizing how ideas and concepts are playing an active and powerful role in human development.<sup>3</sup>

According to this understanding freedom is an idea and a tool. In order to emphasize how freedom is loaded with value which are expressed both in terms of strategies and visions I defined freedom as a value of practice. The task is to define how freedom as a tool loaded with value is to be defined and refined with regard to moral and ethical learning.

Dewey's moral theory gives no guidelines and is not offering moral principles. This is a strength of his theory as well as a weakness. The strength consists in that Dewey is emphasizing deliberation, reflection and the development of the reflective moral self. The weakness consists in that he is not offering any guidance of how to distinguish between right and wrong. The consequence is that he to a certain point dissolved morality and avoided to discuss the problem of how freedom as a value is playing together with other values. (Dewey 1989[1932].<sup>4</sup> The problem is if the only criterion of what is to be judged as

---

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the use of the terms 'interaction' and 'transaction' : "In his earlier writings Dewey described nature as "a moving whole of interacting parts"(1929a, 232[The Quest for Certainty]). When, in his later writings, he preferred to speak about "transaction," it is because "interaction" still suggests the existence of independent entities that interact ("ting balanced against thing in causal connection"; Dewey and Bentley 149, 101), while *transaction* put the process first and treats distinctions such as those between subject and object or between organism and environment as *functional* distinctions emerging from this process - not as starting points of metaphysical givens." (Biesta and Burbules 2003 p.26)

<sup>3</sup> Ryan writes: "Dewey belonged to the current of twentieth-century thought that saw it as a major task of present-day philosophy to overcome the errors and illusions of previous philosophy, whence the recent tendency to write of Dewey in the same breath as Wittgenstein and Heidegger. In other respects, he was quite unlike them; he never said, as Wittgenstein did, that philosophy leaves everything just as it is, and he would not have remained a philosopher had he believed it." (Ryan, A. (1995) p.241)

<sup>4</sup> For Dewey "...democracy is the participation of every mature human being in the formation of moral values". (Gouinlock, J.(1978) p. 225)

moral values is what the majority of the population decides to be the moral values in a given society. I will not go deeper into this discussion in this context.

What is interesting in this context is Dewey's point of view that deliberation and reflection constitutes what it is to be a moral person.

I will look at what kind of activity moral and ethical learning is and how freedom as a value of practice is playing a role in this activity by defining the relationship between ethical learning, which is understood as reflection and deliberation on moral conduct, and moral learning, which is understood as learning of moral conduct (Sittlichkeit), in the following way:

Ethical learning is learning of ways to reflect on values, habits and conduct already embedded in culture. Ethical learning is connected to moral learning where moral learning is defined as learning of moral conduct. Moral learning represents a kind of being embedded in a culture (not necessarily your own) while ethical learning represents a deliberative and reflective activity where ways of moral conduct continuously constitute a material for reflecting ethical values and producing of ethical values. Ethical values are to be defined as values which are results of personal choice due to reflection and deliberation. They are values which a person either has adopted rejected or is deliberating on and which are incorporated in the identity and personal policy of the person. This building up a personal policy of morality is a lifelong task which continuously is developing through experience.<sup>5</sup>

There is a difference between how children are able to formulate, discuss and deliberate on ethical values and how they incorporate these values in their conduct and how adults formulate, discuss and incorporate ethical values in their conduct. Children as well as adults shape their identity as ethical persons by building up a policy of conduct. Children as well as adults understand themselves as persons who have a policy for what they allow themselves to do. Children learn that kicking another child is wrong and that cheating is wrong and therefore they can through a process of deliberation and reflection build up a policy for themselves as a person who is not kicking other kids or a person who is not cheating or a person who is a good friend (of course they can learn and do the opposite). It might be that they sometimes are not able to follow/live up to their own line of conduct or that their policy from the perspective of an adult isn't consistent but it doesn't mean that they don't have a kind of policy. Bad conscience expressed as regret could be a sign of a broken policy of conduct. An important aim for moral and ethical learning is to build up a dynamic policy of conduct. The dynamic is constituted by the relationship between moral and ethical learning. The relationship between moral learning and ethical learning is a non-dualistic one because moral habits and conduct constitute the material for ethical learning and therefore there is a flow between moral and ethical learning. Reflected and deliberated ethical values become moral conducts which again constitute the material for reflection and production of values. It is a moral conduct not to steal but at the same time this moral conduct constitutes the material for reflection and deliberation and maybe production of new ethical values.

---

<sup>5</sup> S. Lovibond discusses in her book *Ethical Formation* how moral upbringing could be understood as making persons predictable and accountable due to their following a certain line of conduct and making it their personal policy to do so. (Lovibond 2002 p. 71) She claims that: "...we hope to find in the behaviour of people around us a reliability grounded not in any merely law-like regularity of emotional response, but in a moral personality determined by the adoption of certain ends or values rather than other." (Lovibond p.73)

Looking at this in a more global perspective some values which constitute moral conduct for other persons in other cultures constitute a material for reflection which is different from reflecting on moral conduct which are part of a persons own moral conduct.

I will return to freedom as a tool in relation to ethical learning and in specific in the task of building up a dynamic personal ethical policy.

In order to define and refine freedom as a tool freedom and being free is to be defined. How is freedom to be understood as a value and why is being free valuable? A method to be applied is to ask what the opposite of freedom is and what the opposite of being free is. Apparently not being free means that a person is forced either to do what the person doesn't want to do or not be permitted to do what the person wants to do.

What follows is that freedom as a tool and a working value of practice must be an instrument which assures that persons are not being forced – for example children could choose whatever line of moral conduct they want. How would it work in an ethical context? It might be a too simple way to cope with the instrument freedom in an ethical context. A problem with regard to the concept of freedom is how to decide on what is right and wrong? Is freedom a tool for creating processes of learning which do not give a direction of conduct with respect to what is right and wrong? Turning to the definition of freedom as positive and negative respectively poses other problems. Freedom in a positive sense means being one's own master and being a 'real self' or being in the state of self-government. But to understand freedom as the unfolding of the self is not without problems. According to Berlin (Berlin 2002) there are various problems with the definition of freedom in the positive sense. The main problem concerns what it is to be 'me' or to be a self in terms of being an authentic self. What is the criterion of being a 'real self'? Connected to the problem of the 'real self' is the paternalistic version of the concept of positive freedom. Who is to decide what the real aim for a person is and what it means for a person to fulfil himself? With regard to the question concerning what is right and wrong only the paternalistic version gives answers but it strangles freedom. But is the solution to turn to the negative definition of freedom and define freedom as 'not being interfered with others (Berlin 2002). With regard to right and wrong this solution would only work if children are presupposed to be natural good beings.

In order to try to touch on the problem of non-direction I will return to the relationship between moral and ethical learning. If it is right that moral learning understood as learning of moral conduct constitutes the material for ethical learning there must be given a direction from moral conduct and values already practiced. If freedom is to be practiced the problem is if habits, conduct and values become static. To sustain moral and ethical learning as a dynamic practice freedom as a value of practice must be implemented. But it might be that freedom as a tool and a value of practice doesn't have to be the only value to be practiced. Berlin comes to the same conclusion while discussing positive and negative freedom. His conclusion is that positive and negative freedom must be balanced against other values. (Berlin 2002)

If freedom is a tool it is only one tool, but an essential one, together with other tools. For example values as security and respect for other people should be balanced against freedom as a value. The function of freedom as a tool would be to make sure that values and moral conduct are deliberated and reflected and that alternative ways of looking at moral conduct and ethical values are considered. A related function would be to play a role in the shaping of children's dynamic personal policy. Being a free person and an ethical person is, as it was earlier mentioned, entangled because



freedom as a tool and a value of practice has a role to play in the processes of reflection and deliberation which is part of ethical learning and which constitute what it is to be an ethical person.

How can freedom as an idea and a value of practice be understood as a working idea in relation to moral and ethical learning? How does it work? According to Dewey it doesn't make sense to look at freedom as something in the mind of the educator or as something in the child to be unfolded. However freedom is to be identified as ways practices are conducted. What are to be found are educators experimenting with creating frameworks for processes of learning and children experimenting with ways of conduct and ways of reflection and deliberation. In this context I will not go deeper into how to frame these processes of learning.

It is often claimed that being a moral person entails being a free person because being a moral person presupposes being a free person. A robot could not be a moral person. This is an argument which goes in a circle. That human beings are free is part of our self-understanding and I don't think that this circle is to be broken or should be broken in western democratic societies. What is important is that 'being free' in relation to moral and ethical learning is constantly deliberated and reflected with regard to how it is understood as an aim and how it is understood and put into function as a means, tool and value of practice.

## **Bibliography**

- Berlin, I.(2002): *Two concepts of Liberty*, in Berlin, I.: *Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Biesta, G.J.J. and Burbules, N. (2003). *Pragmatism and Educational Research*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Dewey, J. and Tufts, J.H.(1989[1932]): *Ethics*. In: John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Volume 7:1932, ed. By Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press
- Dewey, J.(1988)[1929]. *The Quest for Certainty*. In: *The Later Works 1925-1953*, Volume 4:1929. Ed. By Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press
- Giddens, A. (1996). *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Gouinlock, J.(1978). Dewey's Theory of Moral Deliberation, In *Ethics*, Vol 88, No3, 218-228
- Lovibond: S.(2002). *Ethical Formation*. , Massachusetts, London, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Ryan, A. (1995). *John Dewey. And the High Tide of American Liberalism*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company

Trin for Trin 2 (2001)(Original title: *Second Step, a violence Prevention Curriculum Preschool – Kindergarten(ages 7-8)*. Edition Lone Gregersen, Herning: Special Pædagogisk Forlag

Wittgenstein, L.(1984). *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. In: Wittgenstein, L. Werkausgabe *Band 1*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp