

## **Epistemic Freedom and Education**

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### 1. Introduction

This paper explores a particular kind of freedom which is termed 'epistemic' – the freedom to formulate or construct beliefs and ideas, to discuss these with others and to revise one's ideas accordingly. Clearly, epistemic freedom depends on the free circulation of ideas and although this will be discussed my focus will rather be on the *subject* or agent of epistemic freedom. I will be asking what is an epistemic agent and what constrains or enhances the epistemic activities of such an agent. It should not be thought that through the term 'epistemic' I am foreclosing in advance the kinds of beliefs that count as 'epistemic'. They may be beliefs grounded in evidence and argumentation; but epistemic beliefs may also be ones which borrow from the realm of the imaginary. Nor need such beliefs have to be true: my epistemic freedom is not necessarily undermined through entertaining beliefs that turn out to be false.

This paper was in part stimulated by reading Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice*. In this book, Fricker (2007) calls our attention to the injustice suffered by those whose testimony is disbelieved or belittled and the credibility deficit which groups of people undergo through casual (or systematic) prejudice and stereotyping. But it seems to me that such injustices not only happen because of a denial that a piece of testimony constitutes knowledge results in undermining a person's status as a knower; what also happens is that her freedom to formulate beliefs and to articulate those beliefs is also denied. At the core of epistemic injustice is the denial of freedom itself. Indeed, epistemic injustice can be deliberately and purposefully marshalled precisely in order to confirm persons in their state of unfreedom, as shown by Fricker's use of powerful examples.

In addition, the theme of this paper is also motivated by a distinction that can be made between learning and education. Learning can take place under many different kinds of regime, including regimes intent on keeping children and students in a subaltern status. Unfree individuals still must learn; indeed, learning may be an intrinsic part of the identity of unfreedom. For those who are not free still have many tasks to complete and need to work accurately and in a timely fashion so that they can achieve what is expected of them. The re-casting of education in terms of learning is well known. Gert Biesta has drawn our attention to the promotion of a learning ideology – which he dubs 'learnification' (Biesta, 2010) – in which subjects of learning are constructed, fashioned and moulded through assessment regimes where there is an explicit alignment between learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment. This so-called 'constructive alignment' is designed by its advocates to ensure that "the students are 'entrapped' in this web of consistency optimising the chance that they will engage appropriate learning activities." (Biggs & Tang, 2011: 99)

In advocating the significance of freedom in education – specifically, epistemic freedom - I want to suggest that although education does indeed contain learning as one of its necessary components it does something else: education promotes epistemic freedom. In

particular, this freedom puts learning to question and eschews constructive alignment in all its forms.

The progress of this paper will be as follows. I will first of all discuss more detail what is meant by 'epistemic freedom'. This will include a brief review of some of the more technical literature on the subject with the aim of establishing the ontological reality of freedom of belief in the face of fairly general assumptions about the truth of determinism. Having established the philosophical possibility of epistemic freedom I then go on to suggest the need for a *narrative* of freedom that takes the form of a *genealogy*. I then explore two possible ways of construing such a genealogy. The first is structured around domination/non-domination; the second considers the role of 'productive power'. I then make some tentative suggestions concerning the nature of epistemic freedom. In the conclusion I will, very briefly, discuss the ethical significance of epistemic freedom.

## **2. Epistemic Freedom – real or illusory ?**

Central to the idea of epistemic freedom is the power to generate beliefs and ideas based on evidence, argumentation and the imaginary. By the 'imaginary' is designated that counterfactual world which is construed as being different from or other to the world of evidence and argumentation – components of the given world. It is important that epistemic freedom is not merely governed by the given and the oft-stated requirement that all research must be 'evidence-based'. This already threatens epistemic freedom if the evidence requirement is deemed to be the chief component of belief justification since the possibility of going beyond evidence may be ruled out from the start. Epistemic freedom is typically manifested when we 'entertain' ideas, running through them, back and forth – rejecting some, holding on to others. In contrast to an idea, a belief on the other hand is simply the fixing of a set of ideas – but even beliefs are provisional. One thing that may change a belief is, of course evidence; but it is often wise not to bring in evidence too early in case ideas that are being entertained are knocked out before they have a chance to flourish and make a claim. The key difference between ideas and beliefs is that the latter are motivated. For it is at this point that I take 'ownership' or responsibility for my ideas. Confusion is often caused in discussions when ideas that are merely being entertained by one party are taken as beliefs by another. If this is done deliberately then we might be justified in suspecting that this is an early attempt to inhibit epistemic freedom; but equally it could be just the result of passion or enthusiasm. For part of the etiquette of exercising epistemic freedom is to give people leeway to entertain ideas and not to presume that every idea that is being explored must be a fixed belief. We must all be given time and space to peruse, to wander, to explore; a culture (like ours, often) which insists that entertaining ideas is a sign of weakness and half-baked, flabby thinking inhibits epistemic freedom and in doing so may suppress what it is supposed to prize: innovation. We might suppose that someone who never moves from ideas to beliefs is a daydreamer: but only if the entertaining is done in private. For as soon as I mention an idea to another then I lose

control over my idea as it follows a trajectory whose destination may be guessed (assuming epistemic freedom is operative) but is never certain.

It was Kant who theorised some of the thinking that underpins the idea of epistemic freedom. His idea of freedom derives from the distinction he makes between the empirical and the intelligible. In the Critique of Pure Reason he says:

...a subject belonging to the sensible world [would] have, first, an empirical world, whereby its actions, as appearances, stand in thoroughgoing connection with other appearances in accordance with unvarying laws of nature ... Secondly, we should also have to allow the subject an intelligible character, by which it is indeed the cause of those same actions as appearances, but which does not itself stand under any conditions of sensibility, and is not itself appearance. (Kant, 1933, A539/B567 p. 468)

Kant goes on to explain that in the capacity of intelligibility, humankind possesses the faculties of reason and understanding and the former (namely reason) enables us to formulate ideas and has its own causality. Thus whereas the understanding is deployed as the essential mechanism for converting appearances into objects, reason is characterised by genuine spontaneity. It is unconditioned and is directed towards the formulation of human ends and the creation of ideas. He explains that freedom is not simply to be viewed 'negatively' as merely independent of empirical conditions but it must also be viewed 'as the power of originating a series of events' and as such can initiate 'a beginning in a series of appearances' (A554/B582 p. 476). It is this notion of freedom that Kant refers to as the causality of freedom (and also sometimes as the causality of reason). The workings of an unfettered reason constitute precisely the power of freedom.

Kant was, of course, attempting to find a space for freedom in a world where the agent's actions, qua member of the sensible realm, was fully determined. I will say a little more on the issue of determinism later in this section. But one way of interpreting Kant is to realise that freedom cannot be equated to an object of knowledge. Our knowledge of appearances is mediated through the forms of sensibility and through the operation of the understanding by means of the deployment of the categories. But the doctrine of freedom that Kant is proposing is dependent on an agentic perspective. Thus we can experience the power of our freedom and witness its effects but we cannot know our freedom in the sense of its being an object for us. It is this agentic capability that ensures we are not subject to empirical causality and that enables us to set off a train of events. Even if, from the empirical perspective, these events can be explained in terms of a causal chain this does not detract from the agentic perspective.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a certain amount of contemporary discussion of epistemic freedom as part of a wider literature on freedom and its compatibility or otherwise with determinism. Interest in epistemic freedom arises because, from an agent's point of view, when ideas are being entertained the future seems open: I do not know, when I start to form my beliefs what my final position may be, even if I have a reasonable idea of this. But as David

Velleman suggests, this feeling of an open future is illusory if it is conceded that, in the end, there will be only one set of beliefs that I may be destined to have and this can be given an explanatory history based not only on external events as they affect me but also based on events in my brain processes (see Velleman, 2017, p. 1). Velleman goes on to suggest that this feeling of an open future arises because for an agent “what makes him feel free is freedom from the evidence” (p. 4); how a situation stands at the present, however it is described, does not seem to legislate for how a situation might turn out for the future. If it is my own beliefs that constitute ‘the situation’ then it may appear that I am free to form whatever beliefs I wish – including ones that may be completely false. Velleman goes on to suggest that we have a ‘licence’ to form beliefs whatever the evidence in front of us at the moment: “the evidence licenses (us) to assert propositions even in the face of more extensive evidence guaranteeing their falsity” (Velleman, P. 5). He goes on to suggest that this amounts to a “self-fulfilling prediction” (p. 3-5) because I can, as it were, guarantee any outcome as far as my own beliefs are concerned.<sup>2</sup> However, this freedom, for Velleman, is illusory in a sense that he explains as follows (following a discussion about choosing from a menu): “the fact that there isn’t one, pre-determined thing that you must say you’ll have, in order to speak the truth, is perfectly compatible with the fact that there is something that you’re predetermined to have.” Thus Velleman wishes to affirm the ‘feeling’ of freedom as being justified within an overall metaphysics of determinism. It is just this that I wish to dispute: our epistemic freedom is a real freedom.<sup>3</sup>

One thing one could say straight away arising from Velleman’s account is that it would not matter to me what I chose if whatever I choose would somehow be ‘right’. This arises from the self-fulfilling character of epistemic freedom as Velleman understands it. It is as if agency only exists for the agent, as if it were disconnected from the world of pre-determined events. On this view, agency is ‘real’ enough for the subject but makes no difference as to how things turn out. But I would suggest that agency is central: our freedom is underpinned by our ability to represent the world both as it is and as it could be. Our representations, in the form of beliefs, arise through an interaction with and response to the world – they are not simply self-generated. However, our freedom is not based on the sole fact that we have beliefs about the world; what is crucial is that those beliefs themselves are the object of reflection. We are aware of our own beliefs so that the relationship between beliefs and world is itself reflexive. This means that I am aware of my beliefs and also aware that I can change them and that this is in my power to do so. If my beliefs were simply generated as a result of the world impacting on me then this fact, in itself, would not render me free. It is the fact that I am *aware* of my believing such-and-such that counts. This awareness is captured by the concept of reflexivity. This means that our beliefs take into account the role played by ourselves as part of that represented world. Moreover, those beliefs can also motivate us to act and to bring about a new representation of the world. Again, they can do this through reflexivity. Not all beliefs will motivate and not all beliefs will motivate to the same degree. It is up to me whether I take ‘ownership’, as we say, of my beliefs. Persons are therefore not some peculiarly complex kind of monad that make prediction peculiarly difficult; these ‘monads’ carry within them their own knowledge (both knowledge of themselves and knowledge of the world plus a reflexive awareness of

this relationship) and it is this agent-based knowledge that has to be factored in when explanations of action are needed.

It is often thought that our actions are wholly determined and that it is only an informational deficit that prevents us from making fully accurate predictions about actions and beliefs. I would dispute this. Suppose, for example, that I am entertaining a range of possible ideas, trying to decide which ideas I will form into beliefs in order to carry forward my project (whatever it is). Alongside me is an expert neurologist who has successfully mapped out my brain processes onto a model of a neural network and is ready with his predictions. I am entertaining different sets of ideas – *abc*; *xyx*; *pqr*. Suppose that I am in mental state *s1*. At that point the neurologist sitting next to me is predicting that I will believe *abc*. But, as I move to consider another set of beliefs I move into mental state *s2*, appropriately mapped by our neurologist. He then predicts that I will next move in to mental state *s3* and, sure enough I begin to consider a wild card idea, *z*. It is predicted that I will reject this and move to state *s4*. At this point, having moved through successive mental states *s1* - *s4*, the neurologist is keeping step all the way. In order to make the correct prediction he needs to examine and map out the neural structure of my brain through its different changes. He may also confer with me as well in order to validate his readings. But then, of course, he has to factor in his own intervention. He must decide not only if this is affecting my mental state and what I will believe but also his mental state and what he will predict! It is not that the neurologist is redundant at this point – he is making interesting observations on my mental states which may indeed help me to form my own beliefs. Yet it is difficult to see how he can predict with any real accuracy my beliefs before they have happened. In particular, it is difficult to see how he can add substantively to what I already know myself.

The point of this story is not that I am radically free in some mysterious wholly undetermined sense: for a start, I can never be free from my own neurological brain-state. The point rather is that the neurologist is in no better position than myself in predicting what I might end up actually believing once I have entertained a range of ideas. Of course, the neurologist may make a prediction that turns out to be true and – more realistically – may predict a range of beliefs and assign probabilities to each set within that range. But his knowledge is not superior to mine. The reason is that agency cannot be captured and nailed down. Because of its reflexive nature it continually escapes attempts (both by myself and by the neurologist) to frame my mental state; as I assess and evaluate sets of ideas, working out what I want to believe in the light of my own history, in the light of the kind of person I think I am and what I want to become, in the light of what others may think and whether this is important to me – all these factors enter into agency in which I am never just a self but always a meta-self as well at the same time. Through my agency my freedom consists of facing a future into which I project myself and only I can do this. Agency is in permanent state of *becoming* and it is this that renders the future open.

It is not that there cannot be *post-hoc* explanations of my conduct which may be used to predict future conduct as well. But predictions are always provisional because agency is self-

moving through the very consciousness of being an agent – the idea of meta-agency, referred to earlier. This, then, is the ontological basis of our epistemological freedom.

### 3. A genealogy of freedom

The previous discussion has suggested the possibility of freedom, in the face of arguments from determinism. However, given the terms of what might be called the problematic of freedom, there is no way in which this binary can be annulled: this is the antinomy of freedom, set out by Kant in his *First Critique*. There is, however, another way of understanding the reality of freedom which is through constructing a narrative in the form of a genealogy. The material for this narrative lies ready to hand and takes two elements: first, the kinds of activities that are regarded as ‘free’, or the *scope* of freedom; second, the *subject* of freedom. This narrative need not take on a linear, progressive character in which both scope and subject are progressively enlarged. For example, the scope of sexual activity in respect of its nature as a ‘free’ activity has both increased and diminished (the latter especially with regard to children). Smoking is no longer a free activity in contrast to a time when smoking as a signifier was used to represent a relaxed freedom and maturity. But the key point about this kind of narrative is that it does not need permissions from the sciences for its existence; nor does it need permissions from the social sciences. This narrative can be seen as an historical discourse with its own stories about struggles for freedom; those who inhabit the narrative find in those stories a sense of motivation, solace and perhaps even inspiration. The ‘reality’ of the genealogy is expressed through the lives of those countless individuals who have lived through it and for whose lives ‘freedom’ plays a central part. Learning these stories and their accompanying analysis helps breed a lasting *love* of liberty without which lives would poorer in value.

I have said that we can see the narrative as a genealogy. We can interpret a genealogy in a number of ways. First, we can see it as a way of explaining how a phenomenon has come about or could have come about (Williams, 2002: 20). Second, a genealogy takes the form of an immanent narrative in which phenomena unfold as a result of an internal interplay of elements within the genealogical structure (key of these as far as freedom is concerned is who or what counts as the subject of freedom). Thirdly, once the narrative is laid out, it has a tendency to compel recognition of its validity. A genealogy of freedom does not speak to those uninterested in freedom or who wish to destroy freedom but for those on the inside the narrative sets out truths. And within that genealogy those truths can be announced, revised or rejected.

This genealogy can take on different themes. For example, one could trace a genealogy of freedom through the theme of aesthetics and the way in which individual self-expression has been enacted. But since the theme in this paper is *epistemic* freedom I would like to propose two approaches in which this theme can be laid out – although there may be others. The first approaches epistemic freedom by way non-domination in which Antonio Gramsci’s analysis is particularly helpful. The second approach centres on Foucault’s presentation of power discourses.

#### 4. Freedom as non-domination

We can think of the idea of epistemic freedom as arising out of a broader narrative of non-domination. Since the kind of freedom in question is epistemic then domination takes the form of a hegemony within which certain forms of education seem to represent common sense and what is reasonable.

The idea of liberty as non-domination has a rich history and is grounded in the concept of republican liberty which has been explored by Quentin Skinner (1984, 1998, 2003) and Philip Pettit (1997, 2012). As presented by Skinner, the idea of republican liberty draws on a critique of negative liberty, the latter being defined in terms of non-interference or absence of constraints (Berlin, 1969). The appeal of negative liberty lies in its conception of the value of freedom embodied in unconstrained human agency with the accompanying thought that human beings are the authors of their own fates. Proponents of republican liberty tend to accept the favourable normative connotations associated with negative liberty but hold that it is inadequate as it stands nonetheless. Rather, they suggest that an additional specific condition be added to the absence of constraints – namely that one is not dominated by another person. That is, one is not beholden to another's will even if this will is benign in character. The paradigm case is that of the slave whose benevolent master affords him a far better material life than that led by the impoverished freeman: yet the latter is not subjugated in the way that the slave is even if the master refrains from interfering in the slave's life. For the well-being of the slave is entirely dependent on the good will of the master (Skinner, 1998).

Indeed, quite often domination can ensue without there being any need for explicit interference. If my options in life are in effect controlled by another then I may do one of two things: I may either only select those options that I know will be approved by the dominator (I may even go further and tell myself that unapproved options are not worth having in any case – that is, I may adapt my preferences). Or, I may obtain my preferred option but only by pleasing or flattering my dominator in a way that I know may stand a good chance of working for me. In doing so, I may become successful through my artfulness; but the very act of flattery demonstrates that I am unfree, no matter how often I may succeed in getting my own way. (These stratagems are explored in more detail by Pettit (2012), p. 64-64).

Domination can affect epistemic freedom to the extent that the dominated may become accustomed to their subaltern life; as their behaviours become modified to suit their status so the conception of their own possibilities become restricted: epistemic freedom is of little use to them. This may be reflected in a restricted education that is focussed on skills and operative competencies that does little to encourage people to form and develop independent values that may guide their endeavours - here I draw on the idea of what Charles Taylor has called 'strong evaluators' - see Taylor, 1985: 15-44). By contrast, a characteristic of what might be termed 'weak' evaluation is a fixity on means and a lack of interest in thinking about ends, especially where those ends pertain to one's guiding values.

However, although Pettit and Skinner have elaborated with a fair degree of precision the nature of domination in terms of individual relationships this does not quite capture what might be termed 'structural domination'. I suggest that the ideas of Antonio Gramsci (1971) can be seen as a development of traditional republican views on liberty through his concept of hegemony.

There are two principal reasons for this. First, Gramsci grasped that domination is structural and cannot be adequately captured simply through a description and analysis of relations between individuals. He can thus be seen as adding, through the concept of hegemony, to the classical account of republican liberty. The second reason is that Gramsci understood the key role that education can play both in securing domination and in resisting it. Thus he can be seen as providing a powerful supplement to theories of republican liberty since his approach provides a macro- theory in which the concept of liberty can be viewed from the perspective of power. The concept of hegemony emerged through a study of Italian political history in which Gramsci noted that for a social group to emerge supreme, two factors are involved: domination – the exercise of coercive power which could include subjugation through armed force; and the exercise of 'intellectual and moral leadership' so that a group "becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well" (*Selections from Prison Notebooks (SPN)*: 57-8).

According to one commentator, hegemony is exercised primarily through the consent given by subaltern groups to the leadership – moral, intellectual, cultural – exercised by dominant groups (Femia, 1981: 31). Hegemony consists in the supremacy of a set of ideas that privilege some social groups over others, that privilege certain activities over others. Femia's point is that hegemony is maintained through voluntary agreement by subordinate groups so that hegemony does not merely rely on repressive state apparatus; crucially it also consists in the dominance of ideas (24). Hegemony is exercised primarily through the acceptance given by subaltern groups leadership values and aims. It succeeds whenever the subaltern classes accept the interests of the ruling classes and leading groups as being *their* interests.

Thus a hegemonic relation is maintained and developed through a directed endeavour that is purposive in a number of respects including re-enforcing the moral authority of those in power and developing perspectives that include some ideas and exclude others. This assists in forming and developing a self-identity for persons appropriate to their station in life:

"this form of relationship exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals .....It exists between rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and the led.....every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship". (*SPN*): 350)

Thus for Gramsci, the values that we hold dear, our social purposes and even our own individual desires and aspirations are inscribed in hegemonic relationships that have education at its core. But it should be noted that these hegemonic relations do not necessarily *determine* our fate; it is because the assent given by subalterns to dominant ideas and institutional forms is *voluntary* that this assent can also be withheld. One way in which one can best ensure that assent is not withheld is not simply through threats or violence but through the suggestion that any alternative to the prevailing hegemony is something that any person with common sense just would not countenance. Gramsci's critique of common sense captures the thought that it is "the philosophy of non-philosophers" of which:

"its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual is..... in conformity with the social and cultural position of the masses whose philosophy it is." (SPN: 419)

The ideas of common sense are fragmentary and contradictory and contain "prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level" so that "the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory." (SPN, 324) Thus the rock of common sense provides solidity and sureness in the lives of those whose certainty it comforts; but like a rock it can be immovable and impermeable.

Nevertheless, Gramsci does hold out hope because he has another, quite different thesis concerning human beings, namely: 'All men (*i.e. persons*) are philosophers'. In the section of the *Notebooks* entitled *The Study of Philosophy*, Gramsci proposes the idea that "it is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing" and goes on to suggest that "it must first be shown that all men are philosophers" (SPN: 323). He gives a number of reasons as to why this is the case. One reason is that engagement with language carries with it a specific conception of the world, even if this is disjointed. Moreover, "there is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*" :

"Each man.....carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher', an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought." (SPN: 9)

Thus ranged against the rock of common sense is a different attribute, best seen as a potential capability for engaging in abstract ideas even if this may be denied by the very people who think about their lives and relations with others in terms of, say, loyalty, honour or care. Another way of expressing the same thought is that Gramsci held that *epistemic* freedom was within the grasp of all.

The argument here is not only that regimes of learning in schools and universities constitute forms of *domination* in which children and students are being equipped for their designated roles and in which epistemic freedom is not eliminated entirely but marginalised. Regimes of learning also assume the status of common sense with their demands and imperatives accepted as inevitable and, ultimately, desirable.

It is not only students that are affected. In an article in the London Review of Books in 2015, the scholar and author, Marina Warner (a distinguished British writer on the role of myth and folk tales in literature) inveighs against the directing of teaching and research by university managers and the increasing marginalisation not just of academics but of academic activity itself. Her specific complaints include: the directing of teaching and research by university managers; the incessant quest for cash and the effect this has on academic life; 'gagging' orders on academics; and the feeling that one's good will and dedication to teaching and research are being exploited. As she puts it:

"As universities are beaten into the shapes dictated by business, so language is suborned to its ends. We have all heard the robotic idiom of management, as if a button had activated a digitally generated voice. Like Newspeak in Nineteen Eighty-Four, business-speak is an instance of magical naming, superimposing the imagery of the market on the idea of a university – through 'targets', 'benchmarks', time-charts, league tables, 'vision statements', 'content providers'." (Warner, 2015)

Warner's comments are by no means isolated (see, e.g. Readings 1996, Rolfe 2013 and Brown 2013 for similar complaints), although it could be said that the singling out of university managers as chief culprits may be a little unfair. The kinds of controls cited by Warner are widespread and involve large numbers of university staff, including senior academics. Judging by the online response, this article struck a chord and was widely read in UK Universities. Her complaint goes further than the traditional complaints academics have always had about over-zealous administrators. What Warner was objecting to was the corralling of her intellectual activities: the corralling, in short, of her epistemic freedom.

## **5. Freedom and Power**

It might be thought that there is nothing useful that can be said about freedom that cannot be said within discourse of *power*. Thus the process by which human beings are made into subjects; the way in which resistances are created in the face of a 'government of individualisation'; that power can very often take on a benign character, especially in the form of 'pastoral power'; and the deployment of communication networks which both facilitate free activity at the same time as directing that activity towards specific purposes – all of this must be acknowledged (see Foucault, 2001: 326-339). Foucault has even gone so

far as to proclaim: “We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” (p. 336). Yet it is difficult – indeed, impossible – to see how this might be achieved without a clear counter-narrative to power discourse. Otherwise, freedom simply becomes the effect of the play of power – a resistance here, a refusal there. But in the name of what should these resistances take place? For what purpose should one resist if it is to be more than merely for the sake of resistance and the minor, fleeting victories that may ensue? The ‘new forms of subjectivity’ require a counter-narrative in which they can be developed and tested; in which subjects of *liberty* are fashioned.

One crucial component of this counter-narrative has already been hinted at in the brief discussion of Kant’s causality of reason in the previous section. It is elaborated with clarity by Hannah Arendt in her use of the metaphor of ‘natality’ :

“It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before..... the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can always be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (Arendt, 1958: 177-8).

This kind of agency – the ability to bring something new into the world through speech acts – disrupts the play of power, compelling the latter to ‘normalise’ the unexpected and to turn it into something that can be accommodated. Arendt thought that ‘originary’ actions needed a public space within which they can be witnessed and discussed. By contrast, the deployment of productive power restricts the space for actions by ensuring that actors ‘keep to script’ and through management of lines of communication. This ensures that protests become idle rhetoric that dissipates into an empty, unrecognised space.

Foucault spoke of the deployment of pastoral power, in which subjects are nurtured, cared for and looked after. We might speak, in addition, of a *pedagogical* power in which subjects are tutored and instructed. We might say that these subjects are constructed in two, related ways. First, they must imbibe habits of learning and the processes through which they are able to reproduce learning for themselves – a kind of auto-pedagogy. Managing one’s own learning enables pedagogy to be internalised so that one embraces more readily the learner identity. And second, the content of what is learned must be framed in such a way that it has a temporary, transient character so that learning never stops. That is, the learning is framed in terms of learning outcomes and performances so that content simply becomes the vehicle for developmental goals (e.g. employability) whilst that content itself is robbed of any intrinsic value. As Biggs & Tang put it: “the intended learning outcomes specify the activity that students should engage in if they are to achieve the intended outcome as well as the content the activity refers to..... the outcome statement thus specifies a verb that informs students how they are expected to change as a result of learning that topic.” (Biggs & Tang, 2011: 97-98) Note that there is nothing here to indicate the value of what is learnt; nor is the learning goal negotiable. There is also no room for any originary action or gesture – learning becomes merely a repetitive performance.

There is one particular characteristic of productive power that marks it out as different from a narrative in terms of domination/non-domination. In the latter the domination is purposive and carried out by agents who have aims and goals: within a hegemonic regime, leaderships reprise, over and over again, the importance of certain societal values which all are supposed to hold dear. But the case of productive power is different: for it has no purpose other than to reproduce itself, over and over again. Of course, within the discourse of power, specific aims and goals are enunciated with a wearying constancy. And within that discourse, too, persons have their allotted roles and functions. Moreover, enacted discourses can always be justified in terms of efficiency, outputs, results, etc. But – and this is the point – no-one actually *owns* those power mechanisms with a view to deploying them for some overarching purpose. They simply ‘exist’: they are immovable. Pedagogies of power – with all their discursive programmes, assessment regimes and disciplinary procedures – can no more be questioned than life itself: they *are* life. They constitute the world of education within which all must live.

It is against this background – the intrusiveness and ubiquity of pedagogical power – that a different narrative is needed, a narrative specifically of epistemic freedom. This goes beyond the usual petty resistances against a learner ideology that students are sometimes wont to embark on. However, such a narrative cannot be developed *within* the processes of power discourses, including pedagogical power. Rather, a counter-narrative must be constructed *outside* power discourse, with its own distinctive aims and imperatives. What might it look like?

## **7. Developing Epistemic Freedom**

I suggest that epistemic freedom in education has three distinct characteristics.

First, is an affirmation that learning and knowledge have intrinsic value for their own sake. Central to this idea is that a subject discipline does not derive its value as a means to employment or monetary goals which are entirely secondary. Nor is the subject a way of developing a ‘trained mind’; nor is it a way of acquiring ‘life skills’ or transferable skills. The point about all the different kinds of ends to which a subject might serve as a means is that they limit epistemic freedom by channeling learning activity in a predetermined direction. Whereas, by contrast, a well-established subject discipline provides a whole range of pathways and byways on its own account. For example, one could view English Literature in this way. Not only does it furnish opportunities for exploration but, at every turn, there is also room for doubting, for questioning, for probing. This includes those authors which are deemed to be canonical, for within the discipline even authors held in great esteem must still compete and prove their worth. Moreover, a discipline provides freedom to explore the outer contours of subject matter and to stray, wander (or even brazenly push one’s way) into adjacent disciplines, including those that seem to be at some distance away.

If the provision of education is organised in a truly democratic way then there are no barriers whatsoever to anyone who wishes to explore a discipline and part of the art of organising learning is to ensure that all have a welcome, including and especially those who

are new and who find the language strange and forbidding. They, in particular, must be made welcome – an unconditional welcome, too. Moreover there should be no hurdles labelled ‘ability’; no severe notices warning off anyone who fails to reach a predetermined standard or benchmark of ability. Rather, the learning of a discipline should be organised so that those who may have apparently very little ability are *still* made welcome. For who knows what they might achieve? And even if they achieve very little is it still not worth making the effort for them? After all, if the subject has a value of its own – if it has intrinsic value – then even if some people only imbibe a little of that value it is still worth while. However, there is one final point which must be faced head-on and which cannot be ducked. It is this: that only those engaged in a discipline will really understand its value. Only someone who has read through *Bleak House* will appreciate the extraordinary skill in which Dickens weaves character and plot. Only those who have read through Coleridge and Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* will recognise the freshness of its achievement and how new subjects of poetic diction (children, the impoverished, the mad) became possible. In order to appreciate the value of a discipline one has to be on the inside. That is precisely why it is so important to make welcome every single person who wishes to enter into it.

That a subject has intrinsic value does not imply that it must be of a highly theoretical or literary nature. There is no reason for a university not to offer degrees in the practice of European Cuisine as well as European Law. Nevertheless, there can be a danger in fetishising practice, in exalting its status and role. For example, there is a widespread prejudice that theory is subordinate to practice and that all ideas must submit to evidence. But this in itself may restrict epistemic freedom through an a priori restriction of what ideas can be countenanced in the first place. Gramsci understood this well and suggested that a “mechanistic conception of reality has been a religion of the subalterns” (SPN: 337) and goes on to observe that an aspect of this mechanism is the separation of theory and practice, observing that this separation is merely conventional (SPN: 335).

The importance of theory has been defended by the radical American writer, bell hooks, in her book *Teaching to Transgress*. In the chapter entitled “Theory as Laboratory Practice” she recognises the way in which the appropriation of theoretical vocabularies can be used to exclude and marginalise. Nevertheless she goes on to criticise severely those who eschew theory (she is thinking here specifically of tendencies amongst some black feminist radicals) saying: “by internalising the false assumption that theory is not a social practice, they promote the formation within feminist circles of a potentially oppressive hierarchy where all concrete action is viewed as more important than any theory written or spoken.” (hooks (1994, p 65-66). hooks affirms the ‘healing’ nature of theory as a kind of mental therapy in which fresh ideas can be used to cleanse the mind of dull, sterile thinking that only serves to confirm and perpetuate one’s unfreedom. She goes on to say that we should “necessarily celebrate and value theory that can be shared in oral as well as written narrative.” (p. 70) I suggest that an essential part of epistemic freedom is precisely the celebration and valuing of theory and ideas. hooks shows herself – even though Gramsci is nowhere quoted by her – to be part of the Gramscian tradition.

The third element of epistemic freedom – and this is crucial – is that *formal* assessment be minimised and preferably be only undertaken at the end of a degree programme. This does not mean that students cannot undertake essays and projects as part of their study which are assessed and marked. But the marks in this interim work should be taken as work in progress. The moment marks start to figure in formal assessment is the moment when epistemic freedom is in danger of being lost. It immediately signals a retreat from the open spaces of freedom into the cramped passages of pedagogical power. Moreover, I also suggest that it is quite unnecessary to formally assess every unit or module in a programme of study. It is perfectly possible to formulate questions and assignments that are designed to assess how well a student has engaged in a subject of study without dutifully assessing each and every unit of study.

In his book *Freedom to Learn*, Bruce Macfarlane has pointed out how academics in British Universities have started to adopt, on a large scale, learning methods using group presentations, peer assessment and group dialogue, through a need to demonstrate student engagement.<sup>4</sup> This is *in addition* to traditional methods of assessment along the lines of the individual assignment. There are now in place in English universities a huge range of assessment strategies which lecturers are expected to employ: but they are all of them – whether individual or group based – fully consistent with the wielding of pedagogical power that ‘produces’ the required learner identity. Macfarlane’s concern is that the freedom to learn passively or individually is being undermined; students have a right *not* to participate (see Macfarlane, 2016). My concerns overlap with Macfarlane’s but go much further: what he shows is that the *range* of epistemic freedom is being progressively corralled. There is less freedom to explore more deeply aspects of a subject that might interest one, less freedom to contemplate, less freedom to just think. Moreover, the possibility of thinking that happens outside assessment regimes is reduced because students only become accustomed to thinking if assessment is in the offing.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion I propose to say a word or two on the ethical significance of epistemic freedom. I have suggested that such freedom lies at the very heart of any educational endeavour. This means that whatever ethical gains a student might derive from her study, they are conditional on the exercise of epistemic freedom. The value of an education and how it may transform an individual depends on whether an individual has freely formulated ends, purposes and values. This has two aspects. First, it seems to me that we wish to encourage students to make their own judgements and to own those judgements – to recognise that an academic judgement carries weight that may go well beyond the library and seminar room and for the student to recognise and understand the consequences of the judgement she makes. Second (this has already been alluded to) we want students to become ‘strong’ evaluators in the sense outlined by Charles Taylor (1985). This involves a willingness to look at one’s own values and priorities and to reflect on their saliency. In particular, it involves an ability to recognise that both beliefs and actions may be conditioned by values that have been hitherto unexamined and taken for granted. This

thought can be put a different way. Suppose we say that we want all students to be ethical in the sense that we want them to be strong evaluators. Then in order for them to be like this, epistemic freedom is essential.

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<sup>1</sup> Galen Strawson argues against the idea of 'causal freedom', as he puts it, on the grounds that it leads to an internal regression (see Strawson, 2002). But this view neglects, I think, the concept of agency which I elaborate in the paragraphs that follow. Agency is a response to its environment rather than a self-generating *sui generis* power.

<sup>2</sup> This self-fulfilling prediction may bring about more than just a belief if it is the case that based on that belief I can give an instruction that would normally be carried out by someone else – no matter what the instruction, within reasonable limits. This particular extension of epistemic freedom is much discussed by Velleman but it lies outside the scope of this paper since I am only interested in beliefs *tout court*.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Fernandes in a wide-ranging but rather technical discussion suggests that our feeling of freedom described by Velleman arises not so much from being free of evidence but rather that this arises because we are ignorant of the outcome. But I do not think that too much hangs on this distinction since Fernandes seems to share with Velleman the supposition that the feeling of freedom is still an illusion. See Fernandes (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Most notably in the UK government policy document for higher education, *Teaching Excellence Framework* (2016). See: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/556355/TEF\\_Year\\_2\\_specification.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/556355/TEF_Year_2_specification.pdf)