

# WHAT DO WE MEAN

## Libertarian Education

For over forty years this magazine has been published in one form or another. At first it was the newsletter of the Libertarian Teacher Association. Then it became plain old *Libertarian Teacher*. A few years later, to recognise that learning was not, and should not, be teacher oriented, the title was changed to *Libertarian Education*. The name *Lib ED* with the subtitle “for the liberation of learning” was adopted in 1978, partly because the old title was a bit of a mouthful. Since 2005 the magazine has been published as collections of articles on line.

The term *libertarian* has historically been part of two rather different traditions; there have been libertarians of the left and libertarians of the right. Nowadays, there is a tendency, most marked perhaps in the United States, for the term *libertarian* to be associated exclusively with extreme right-wing politics, which reinforces the currently fairly widespread view that socialism is incompatible with freedom and that a serious commitment to individual liberty implies a right-wing approach to other issues. This view is fundamentally mistaken. Not only are socialism and freedom compatible, but in our opinion the one presupposes the other. Conversely, those on the right are often vociferous in proclaiming their commitment to individual freedom while at the same time advocating social and economic views, such as a belief in capitalism, that are fundamentally incompatible with that ideal. So, partly in order to resist any hijacking of the term *libertarian* by the right, this article continues, and tries to reinforce, the tradition of left-wing libertarianism.

The definition of libertarian education from a left-wing perspective can be taken in two parts: the ends and the means. The ends describe what the objectives of libertarian education ought to be, and the means encompass the kinds of methods which ought to be used in attaining those objectives.

The aims of libertarian education can be usefully looked at from two points of

view: that of the individual and that of society.

From the point of view of the individual, the aims of libertarian education have much in common with other approaches to education in the liberal humanist tradition; to enable people to realise their innate potential to the full and to foster people's self development across the full range of cultural intellectual, artistic, physical and emotional activities. This is probably sufficiently familiar to require no further elaboration; it is not exclusively or distinctively libertarian.

More distinctively libertarian are aims relating to the concept of freedom, in particular the aim of enabling people to make choices, and to make their choices in as free a way as possible. There are two components to this. Firstly it is necessary to present people with as wide a range of different alternatives as possible, with each being presented both in its own terms and, where appropriate, in comparison with others. Secondly, it is necessary to create a situation in which people can then make informed, unprejudiced choices between the various alternatives. Take religion as an example. Within a libertarian education, people would, in principle, have the opportunity to become familiar with Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, or animalism, as well as anti-religious philosophies like humanism and Marxism, and to make an unconstrained choice as to which suits them best. There are practical limits to what is possible in this area as in any other; there just isn't enough time within the space of one lifetime to experience all religions in depth. But since no choice can ever be a fully informed one in the sense of taking into account absolutely all relevant factors, this limitation is not of any practical significance for the principles being outlined.

An important factor is the environment in which people make their choices. If choices are to be truly free and unconstrained, society must be open-minded and tolerant. For example, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs must be able to live side by side in mutual respect and toleration. The same applies to other areas of choice as well as religion, politics, music and fashion.

This highlights an important feature of the libertarian approach. It promotes mutual respect and tolerance among all ways of life and thought, and this

necessarily includes traditions which themselves advocate just the opposite. Many religions, for example, regard themselves as the sole possessors of the truth, and are therefore overtly hostile towards other points of views. There is an inherent problem in adopting an attitude of tolerance towards intolerance, but accepting that problem is part of what it is to be a libertarian; our commitment to freedom requires that we be prepared to see people make choices that we disagree with. In the extreme case, the education provided will result in people freely choosing ways of life and thought that deny freedom of choice and deny freedom in education.

The effective exercise of freedom does not come easily. It is an ability that is acquired only through experience and learning, and calls for qualities that are for most people quite difficult to attain, such as honesty, self discipline, courage, determination and responsibility. Enabling people to develop these qualities is one of the prime objectives of libertarian education. It also demands the same qualities on the part of educator.

One of these qualities is worth focusing on in particular, because it forms a bridge between the individual oriented matters discussed so far and the socially oriented questions that follow: responsibility. There is a traditional distinction made between freedom and licence, Licence is doing whatever you feel like, in an unprincipled way, and without much regard for the consequences. Freedom, on the other hand, involves the exercise of choice within a framework of principle and with a commitment to face the consequences of one's choices. Whereas licence is a sign of social immaturity, it is the distinctive task of libertarian education to foster the development of freedom, which is characteristic of mature individuals in society. Notice, incidentally, that age and maturity are not the same thing. In this, the notion of responsibility is central.

There are two sides to responsibility. Firstly, we say that you are behaving responsibly when you are acting with due regard for the consequences of your actions as these affect both you and others; you take credit for whatever good consequences result and take the blame for any bad consequences. Secondly, you have responsibility for something if you are in charge of it and are in a position to take decisions that affect it. The second aspect of responsibility therefore relates to the ability to make choices, and hence to

freedom; the first adds the commitment to facing up to consequences of one's choices and so provides the key factor that distinguishes freedom from mere licence. It is this that makes the development of responsibility such an important component of libertarian education, and one which links the aims related to individuals to those related to society.

What, in general terms, constitutes the socially responsible behaviour, which a libertarian education seeks to inculcate?

Firstly, it calls for awareness of other people's rights, needs, and feelings. Secondly, it calls for a commitment to respect other people's rights and feelings by placing them on a par with one's own. This entails the development of high ethical standards of behaviour, and as before, the same qualities are demanded on the part of educators. The precise forms these standards take will naturally depend on, for instance, the kinds of rights one considers individuals to have and which have to be respected. Given the individual oriented aims of libertarian education described above, consistency demands that a respect for other people's rights to self-development and self-fulfilment is included, as well as their right to freely choose their own way of life.

The importance attached to freedom has additional implications for the social aims of libertarian education. Freedom is incompatible with power, be it economic power or military power, and all kinds of authority. Consequently, the pursuit of freedom involves working towards a society in which nobody can exert economic power, military power, or any other form of power or authority over anybody else. Since most injustices and inequalities in society are the result of some people being able to gain advantage over others through the exercise of power, it follows that a free society is inherently also an egalitarian society, a point which is not grasped by the so-called libertarians of the right.

The three most basic aims we have already seen, responsibility, freedom and equality, also combine to produce a fourth: the development of solidarity and community. If we are committed to the ideals of freedom and equality, and to respect for other people's rights, then we are also committed to working with other people to attain these things, both for ourselves and for

everyone else. This too seems to elude right-wing 'libertarians'.

In looking at the means that are to be employed in realising the aims of libertarian education, this piece is not the place to attempt a detailed exposition of libertarian educational methodology. Instead the general principles will be outlined.

The most basic principle concerns the relation between ends and means. It applies to all kinds of libertarian endeavours, and perhaps most forcibly of all to education. The principle is that the ends do not justify the means, and in particular that noble ends cannot be used to justify evil means. As Odo said: the means are the end. To put it less cryptically, the principles described in the aims of libertarian education are precisely the principles to be used as the basis of our educational practice.

Just as freedom is one of the primary goals of libertarian education, freedom is also the cornerstone of our practice. In this, libertarian education contrasts fundamentally with current norms, which are based on authority. Many of the aims of standard education involve the assertion of intellectual, cultural and political authority, and it is natural that authoritarian methods are used in pursuit of these aims. This is embodied in the authority of parents over children, of teachers over pupils, and of head teachers over ordinary teachers. Libertarian education is, by contrast, implacably opposed to the use of authority and attempts to subvert it whenever it arises.

Opponents of libertarian education typically object that the absence of authority will lead to chaos, and that discipline is necessary if anything constructive is to be achieved. They are right in the second of these assertions but wrong in the first. Discipline is indeed necessary, but the only kind of discipline that has any value is self-discipline. The kind of discipline involved in the ability to follow other people's orders is at best a surrender of responsibility and at worst moral cowardice. Given self-discipline and a sense of responsibility, both of which are among the key aims of libertarian education, there is no need to fear chaos.

Another objection frequently heard is that, when left to themselves, people, and especially children, will simply run riot, and show no consideration for others and their rights and sensibilities. That may well be true. But it is no

part of libertarian practice to let people, including children, run roughshod over everyone else. As was described earlier, developing a sense of social responsibility is high among the aims of libertarian education, and the means for doing this will include active defence of one's own and others' rights and needs against the onslaughts of other people whose sense of social responsibility is lacking.

A third objection is to describe a situation where a child, for example, is about to harm itself through ignorance, perhaps by not knowing that some substance is poisonous. In this case it would surely be impossible to stand by and let them hurt themselves, and it would be necessary to intervene and prevent injury. Of course this is the case. But this is no objection to the libertarian methods being described. What is important for a libertarian is the avoidance of relationships involving authority. It is reasonable for anybody to intervene to prevent somebody else from harming themselves through ignorance. By doing so, one is expressing concern for the other person's welfare, not imposing authority. This is a distinction of principle. Drawing it clearly in practice may of course not always be straightforward, although it does at least remove the possibility of "Because I say so", as a response to "Why should I?"

The avoidance of authority has many aspects, particularly when combined with the desire to promote self-development and the ability to exercise freedom. For example, it demands an undogmatic response to differences in philosophy, culture and lifestyle among people one comes into contact with. If people are to be enabled to make a free choice regarding, for example, their own sexuality, this can be achieved only in a context of tolerance and respect for varying expressions of sexuality.

This respect for differing ways of life and thinking must go beyond mere tolerance. It must include an active defence of people's rights to live and think in the way they choose, when this right comes under attack from other, less tolerant people, who, we would say, have yet to complete their education in this respect

In presenting this framework for libertarian education any specific reference to children has been deliberately avoided. Obviously children will be the

primary focus of any society's educational endeavours simply because most people probably have a greater propensity to learn while they are young. Despite this, education should not be thought of as being exclusively for the young; the more people can be encouraged and enabled to go on learning and developing throughout their lives, the better. To restrict people's educational opportunities on grounds of age is in conflict with the aims presented earlier, just as it is to impose particular kinds of education on grounds of age.

Any mention of particular areas of educational subject matter, such as science, literature, history and football has also been avoided. Contemporary Western culture happens to value these things, but other cultures have different values. Again, the aims mentioned earlier require that libertarian education should at least be open-minded with respect to such things.

Finally, it's all very well to expound the aims and methods of libertarian education, but who decides what these aims and methods are to be? This issue is made all the more pertinent by the emphasis we have placed on freedom; people's right and ability to make choices for themselves. As it happens, this also indicates the answer. Like anything else in the libertarian society we aspire to, the form that education should take is a matter to be decided by all those involved. Rather than have decisions taken higher up in a hierarchy consisting of administrators, teachers and pupils, and imposed on those lower down, all the people concerned have an equal right to take part in the decision-making. Achieving this is both another aim and another method of libertarian education.