

# Do we have a right to education or a duty to educate ourselves? An enquiry based on Fichte's views on education

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**Abstract**

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'Everyone has the right to education' and it 'shall be compulsory'. I note that there is a tension between 'right' and 'compulsory' in the Declaration because, by definition, a right is an entitlement and not an obligation. The reasons why education is an exception to the rule have not been explored in detail, and efforts seem always to concentrate on the 'compulsory' side of the tension in trying to understand exactly what it would entail, and fail to direct attention to the 'right' element of the problem. In this article, I wish to turn the problem on its head and take issue with the idea that education should be understood as a right. The argument is, rather, that education should be conceived as a duty – an obligation that all human beings have towards themselves and their communities. In order to do this, the author refers to the works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), the German post-Kantian idealist, whose works in education have been long neglected and forgotten. Nevertheless, they are of great help in trying to make sense of education not as a right, but as a duty. I argue that such understanding dissolves the tension between 'right' and 'compulsory', and that a reframing of an understanding of 'what education is' needs to occur not just at the individual, but also at the societal level.

**Keywords**

Fichte, right to education, compulsory education, positive freedom, negative freedom

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## Introduction

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

Everyone has the *right* to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be *compulsory*. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (United Nations, 1948: Article 26; my emphasis)

A number of further declarations restated the ideas that ‘education is a right’ and ‘education shall be compulsory’, enshrining these in international law and reinforcing the international community’s will to make it good. In the past few decades, this has gained a new impetus through the Education for All movement, which is officially sponsored by UNESCO, but also supported by a number of development agencies and non-governmental organizations. Meetings held in Jomtien (1990), Dakar (2000, 2007), Brasilia (2004), Beijing (2005), Cairo (2006) and Oslo (2008), amongst others, urged governments to prioritize investment in basic education, achieve inclusion and gender parity in education, and aim at providing primary elementary schooling by 2015 (see McCowan, 2009: 284; Singh, 2010: 91–93). Needless to say, these targets were not achieved because of a lack of investment and commitment by parties. The problem is compounded by the fact that understanding education as a right implies an interconnection between this right and other rights – that is, ‘the requirement for there to be a right *to* education (relating to access), rights *in* education (the protection of and respect for learners) and rights *through* education (development of capacities for exercising human rights)’ (McCowan, 2011: 289). This demonstrates the complexities involved in this issue and the mammoth task faced by educationists.<sup>1</sup>

Further, I note that there is a tension between ‘right’ and ‘compulsory’ in Article 26 of the 1948 Declaration, and this has been a source of contention for commentators discussing issues such as understanding education as schooling, and turning schooling into something compulsory (Lees, 2013), compulsory education and infringement of other rights, especially in connection with social segregation, indoctrination, and class inequalities (Kadel, 1948 cited in McCowan, 2010), or perhaps even more telling, making elementary education compulsory but not education in general, especially adult education or higher education (Brighthouse 2009; Brighthouse and McAvoy, 2009 cited in McCowan, 2012: 119).<sup>2</sup> McCowan has noted the tension:

*A right to something is an entitlement and not an obligation (although there are exceptions, such as the stipulation for compulsory primary education in international rights instruments) . . . [But] there is a counterfactual aspect to rights, in the sense that it is important that one has the right to freedom of religious worship, even if one does not actually exercise it. At the same time, it is argued (although not accepted by all) that human rights are inalienable: for example, one cannot voluntarily give oneself up into slavery. Nevertheless, even if one cannot voluntarily give up the right to, say, healthcare, one can choose not to exercise that right in a particular moment. (McCowan, 2011: 291; my emphasis)*

The reasons why education is an exception to the rule are never explained by McCowan, or by other commentators. They seem to take it for granted that education is, indeed, a right, perhaps because it is stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other such documents. In this article, I wish to turn the problem on its head and take issue with the idea that education should be understood as a right. My argument is, rather, that education should be understood as a duty – an obligation that all human beings have towards

themselves and their communities. In order to do this, I will refer to the works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), the German post-Kantian idealist, whose works in education have been long neglected and forgotten. However, they are of great help to us in trying to make sense of education not as a right, but as a duty. I will argue that such understanding dissolves the tension present in Article 26 between ‘right’ and ‘compulsory’, and that, perhaps, a reframing of our understanding of ‘what education is’ needs to occur not just at the individual, but also at the societal level.

## Fichte and education

Fichte developed his understanding of education in several of his writings in both his early and later philosophical phases.<sup>3</sup> However, Fichte’s views on education remain fairly unappreciated by contemporary philosophers of education, perhaps because of Hegel’s and Schelling’s assessment of these as being somehow secondary to his purely philosophical writings (see Dimić, 2003: 778). That said, this was not always the case (Seeley, 1879: 41), and this is better appreciated if we acknowledge that Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose plans for changes in the German education system were implemented between 1809 and 1910, was very much influenced by Fichte’s ideas (see Turnbull, 1923: 197). For both Fichte and Humboldt:

Education is to be democratic in nature and universal and compulsory in application . . . [it] is the very life-blood of the State [because] . . . [t]he individual is not only an individual; he is at the same time a member of a community and as such must be educated to take his place in it; otherwise the future of that community is doomed. (Turnbull, 1923: 198)

These views would later influence changes in many other countries, including the USA and Japan.

Despite Hegel’s and Schelling’s assessment, I note that Fichte’s views on education remained intrinsically connected to his wider philosophical project: the *Wissenschaftslehre* project. The project encompasses some 17 writings, reworking some of the most important themes of Kantian philosophy dealing with issues connected with the possibility of consciousness, the subjectivity–objectivity relationship and the attainment of knowledge. These issues are used as a foundation for his wider philosophical views, including those on education and political philosophy. The connections between these various aspects of Fichte’s thought will come to the fore as this article unfolds.

## Is education a right?

In the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796–1797; Fichte, 2000), Fichte presents his argument for the emergence of ‘natural rights’. Following on from the tradition of the *Wissenschaftslehre* project, the text begins with an account of ‘consciousness’, leading Fichte to argue that the rise of self-consciousness can only occur through a meeting with external reality, which mirrors Kant’s view in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).<sup>4</sup>

His argument proceeds in three stages and is outlined in very fine detail (Guilherme, 2009: 121–122). Firstly, self-consciousness requires that a rational entity posits itself as an individual that is different from the rest of reality.<sup>5</sup> To use Fichtean terminology, this means that the ‘I posits a not-I’. Secondly, Fichte comments that when an entity posits itself as rational, it necessarily posits itself as a free entity and, in doing so, it infers that there are other entities like itself in the world. In Fichtean terms, this means that the ‘I perceives other Is in the

not-I'. As such, freedom is established as something shared by all rational entities in reality (i.e. I am a free rational being. I perceive other entities behaving like me in reality, therefore they must be free rational beings). The third and final stage of Fichte's argument is that, originally, the conception of freedom referred only to a power (i.e. rational spontaneity), and it was only this power that rational entities ascribed to each other – that is, the phenomenon of rationality necessarily requires that it is not caused externally.

However, when entities move into the social sphere, the conception of freedom is further developed. Freedom requires that an outcome of the thinking activity be perceived tangibly in reality, in the external world. This is to say that freedom necessitates that an entity's will be effective in the world. But if other free rational entities are present in the world, and thus interfering and opposing each other, freedom, as the implementation of the I's will, is only possible when these entities restrict their causality by setting up some limits to freedom. This means that they must divide the world amongst themselves so as to avoid conflict, and the notion of 'rights' emerges as a form of 'entitlement'.

At first, this limitation is not imposed from the outside, and all free rational entities chose to limit themselves, making it a rule not to disturb the freedom of other entities with whom they share reciprocal relations. This is what ends up giving rise to society – to the commonwealth. The influence of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative is quite evident, demonstrating the Kantian influence on Fichte's thought: 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end' (Kant, 1993: 30). But this situation can only continue to occur in an ideal setting – in a Utopia – because some human beings will not abide by it. Ultimately, Fichte was a pessimist about human nature. This can be seen in his first book, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792; Fichte, 1978),<sup>6</sup> where he discusses in great detail the nature of revelation, as well as theology, and natural and revealed religion. Fichte understands that evil is ingrained in human nature, and thus, by and large, human beings are bound to diverge from the moral law.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence of this, the commonwealth decides that any disturbance to an I's sphere of freedom, such as a coercion or a crime (caused, according to Fichte, because of the inherent evil in us), is dealt with in such a manner that the disturbing-I gets exactly the opposite of what it desires; ultimately, it loses its social freedom (e.g. is sentenced to prison). For this to happen, rules and obligations are created externally by the commonwealth, and all individuals must abide by them.

I note that Fichte's account of freedom has connections with Berlin's notion of 'positive' freedom. In 1957, Berlin delivered his paper 'Two concepts of liberty', his inaugural lecture for the Chair of Social and Political Theory at the University of Oxford (Berlin, 2002b), where he comments on the notions of 'positive' and 'negative' freedom. Berlin did not create the terms 'negative' and 'positive' freedom; however, his characterization has become a classic in the canon of political philosophy. Berlin's essay was written during the Cold War years and it associates 'negative' freedom with the kind of freedom in liberal democracies, whereas 'positive' freedom is connected with that of communist societies. Ultimately, Berlin is very critical of 'positive' freedom.

The notion of 'negative' freedom is associated with the liberal thought of Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Tocqueville (Berlin, 2002b: 169–171), who argued that a minimum 'negative' freedom is required and essential for human well-being, as it is 'the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others' (Berlin 2002b: 169). Thus, 'a person is free in the negative sense when he or she is not prevented, by human act or omission, from doing what he or she may wish to do' (Crowder, 2004: 66). In short, 'negative' freedom is freedom *from* constraints.

Contrasting with this is the notion of ‘positive’ freedom, which is founded on the individual’s desire to control his or her own life, ‘from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master’ (Berlin, 2002b: 178). However, this kind of self-control can be diminished by both the interference of other individuals and by one’s own faulty character or lack of control over one’s own passions. This notion of freedom can be traced as far back as the Stoics (see Epictetus’ *Discourses*)<sup>8</sup> and Plato (see Plato’s *Philebus*), who discussed self-mastery and the case of ‘false pleasures’.<sup>9</sup> ‘Positive’ freedom is freedom *to* control one’s own life.

Berlin is critical of ‘positive’ freedom as he understands that, in some cases, it might lead to authoritarianism, inverting the conception of liberty into its very opposite (the ‘inverted thesis’). This happens because the kind of philosophy behind ‘positive’ freedom usually understands the self as divided into two halves: a higher part, associated with reason, and a lower part, connected with passions and emotions. And once this is presumed, the higher part needs to conquer the lower part; reason must dominate the passions. Crowder (2004: 70) notes that the ‘slippery slope’ happens when ‘dictators ... suppose ... they know the requirements of the true self better than the individual concerned ... The doctrine of the divided self does not guarantee authoritarianism, but it offers authoritarianism aid and comfort’.<sup>10</sup>

It might be clear to the reader by now that Fichte was a staunch defender of ‘positive’ freedom in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, and this was noted by Berlin in *Freedom and Its Betrayal* (1952). Berlin (2002a) traces Fichte’s standpoint, and his critique of ‘positive’ freedom and the ‘inverted thesis’, to Rousseau, who understood that:

liberty *is* social cooperation and right action. The vulgar idea of liberty as negative non-interference refers merely to an amoral, animal liberty, consistent with acting wrongly. But to act wrongly is to depart from the standards of the ‘inner, better, more real self’ which necessarily seeks the good [Berlin, 2002a: 46]. Truly human liberty entails the liberation of that which is distinctively human, namely a person’s capacity for self-direction in accordance with moral rules, the will of ‘the true self’. (Crowder, 2004: 61)

For Rousseau, the ‘lower’ part of the self needs to be conquered by the ‘higher’ part of the self, and this can only be done in a commonwealth where all individuals seek a common good. This opens the door for individuals to be ‘forced to be free’ (Berlin, 2002a: 47), because the commonwealth believes it knows what is best for the members of the group. Hence, freedom is inverted and becomes mere obedience to the commonwealth’s will. Berlin (2002a: 49) concluded that Rousseau was one of ‘the most ardent and passionate lovers of human liberty who ever lived’, but also ‘one of the most sinister and most formidable enemies of liberty in the whole history of human thought’. The same could be said of Fichte, since he followed in Rousseau’s footsteps in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, arguing that obligations must be created externally by the commonwealth and all individuals must abide by them. Some years later, Fichte added a nationalistic tinge to this in *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808; Fichte, 2008), where he talks about complying to the ‘spirit of the nation’, and for Germans to the ‘German nation’.<sup>11</sup>

But what does this have to do with the understanding that ‘education is a right’ and ‘shall be compulsory’? It is arguable that the 1948 Declaration’s understanding of education as a right, and as compulsory, follows the school of thought that defends the notion of ‘positive’ freedom. A ‘right to something is an entitlement and not an obligation’ (McCowan, 2011: 291), but education became an exception to this characterization because the international community – the established commonwealth – understands

that it knows what is best for individuals. As such, education became something compulsory and no longer an entitlement that all human beings have in order to fulfil their humanity and something they can choose to subscribe to if and when they wish. Education became an obligation that all human beings have to conform to, because the commonwealth understands that it is important that all its members are educated (or perhaps we should use the word ‘schooled’ here). This is at the very heart of the philosophical tension between ‘right’ and ‘compulsory’. The original idea of ‘right’ as ‘freedom not to be interfered with and to choose and implement one’s will’ is still used with reference to education in speech and documents related to education, but it has become secondary to the ideas of ‘compulsory’ and ‘obedience to the law’. This is a prime example of the ‘inverted thesis’ discussed by Berlin.

In connection to this, it is perhaps worth ending this section by referring to Foucault, who also noted how a system of rights can be imposed on all members of the commonwealth by those who are in *control* of the community. I will come back to this point when I discuss the *aristoi* and the *pseudo-aristoi*. Lechner (2001: 279) says:

[a]ccording to Kant’s classical definition, the law, the agency guaranteeing individual rights, is made up of ‘the whole of conditions under which the... freedom of choice... of the one can coincide with the [freedom of choice] of the others according to a general law of freedom’ (Kant cited in Scheltens, 1983, p. 77). Foucault argues [in *Discipline and Punishment*] that disciplinary power constitutes a ‘counter-law’ by invoking ‘insuperable asymmetries’ and excluding ‘reciprocities’ (Foucault, 1979: 222). For this purpose disciplinary power establishes coercive relations between individuals that essentially digress from the formally sanctioned contractual relation in which the idea of universal rights is embedded. Disciplinary power thus renders both the volitionality of the contractual relation and the contract itself fictitious. Therefore Foucault summarizes: ‘[I]t would be hypocritical or naive to believe that the... [system of rights] was made for all in the name of all;... it would be more prudent to recognize that it was made for the few and that it was brought to bear upon others’ (Foucault, 1979: 276).

## Is education a duty?

In order to resolve the philosophical tension between ‘right’ and ‘compulsory’, I wish to propose a different understanding of education – that is, not as a right, but as a duty that all human beings have towards themselves and their communities. I will turn to Fichte’s writings again and look in detail at ‘Some lectures concerning the scholar’s vocation’ (1794; Fichte, 1993c). Fichte and the Rousseauian school of thought might have generated the problem through their defence of ‘positive’ freedom, but, I believe, Fichte might also provide us with the solution to the problem.

Fichte arrived in Jena in 1784 just before the start of the summer semester to take up his appointment as Professor of Philosophy. He had spent the previous months perfecting his new philosophical system – the *Wissenschaftslehre* project – and preparing his private lectures on this. Fichte, however, did not want to use his newly appointed position to teach his system to a handful of students; rather, he wished to have a more profound influence on the whole of the university community. It is for this reason that Fichte devised a series of public lectures, in addition to his private lectures, which were entitled ‘Morality for Scholars’, and the first five of these were published as ‘Some lectures concerning the scholar’s vocation’. He did the same thing, but on a larger scale, in *Addresses to the German Nation*, with the aim



that his interaction with the wider public would spread the message even further (see James, 2010). In this connection, Dimić notes:

Fichte is the first philosopher after Plato and Aristotle who, in his philosophical practice, made a difference between exoteric and esoteric lectures as they were called in [Plato's] *Academy*, that is, lectures for all interested citizens, i.e. the broad public, and highly specialised lectures for professional philosophers. (Dimić, 2003: 779)

Prior to Fichte's efforts during this period, 'philosophy and science scarcely reached common people', and he was keen to realize the ideal of 'the school for everybody' not just in theory, but also in practice. This was based on a new understanding of education, advocating that it 'would become available to absolutely everybody and not only the circle of the educated and rich' (Dimić, 2003: 779). The influence of Fichte on Humboldt is quite evident here, and triggered significant changes in the German education system soon after, as previously discussed in my introduction.

Fichte's motivation for choosing the topic 'Morality for Scholars' in his public lectures is explained in the following passage of another text, his *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre (Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre, 1794; second edition 1798; 1993)*. Fichte (1993a: 138) says:

The sciences, as you all undoubtedly realize, were not invented as an idle mental occupation to meet the demand for a refined type of luxury. Were they no more than this, then the scholar would belong to that class to which all those belong who are living tools of a luxury which is nothing but luxury; indeed, he would be a contender for first place in this class. All our enquiries must aim at mankind's supreme goal, which is the improvement of the species to which we belong, and students of the sciences must, as it were, constitute the centre from which humanity in the highest sense of the word radiates. Every addition to the sciences adds to the *duties* of its servants. It thus becomes increasingly necessary to bear the following questions seriously in mind: What is the scholar's proper vocation? What is his place in the scheme of things? What relation do scholars have to each other and to other men in general, especially to the various classes of men? How and by what means can scholars most expeditiously fulfil the *duties* which they incur through these relationships? And how do they have to develop the skills which this requires? These are the questions which I shall be trying to answer in the series of public lectures which I have announced under the title 'Morality for Scholars'. (Fichte, 1993c: 138; my emphasis)

Further, the word *Gelehrter* in the original title of 'Morality for Scholars' [Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten], which is usually translated as 'scholar', requires explanation (see Fichte, 1993b: 140–141). The word 'scholar' is meant to refer here not only to academic professionals, researchers and teachers, but also to someone who is educated, who spends their life pursuing knowledge and who is concerned with sharing any gained knowledge with the rest of humankind, because they understand that knowledge is the central pillar in humanity's continuous pursuit of self-improvement. Commenting on Fichte's understanding of *Gelehrter*, Fichte (1993b: 141) notes: 'thus it is the especial responsibility of the scholar to supervise and to regulate human progress toward perfection, and in order to do this he must at least strive to be the ethically best man of his time'.

Let me now look in detail at these lectures. In his first lecture, Fichte aims to answer the question 'What is the vocation of man as such?' The answer is given at the end of the lecture:

Man's final end is to subordinate to himself all that is irrational, to master it freely and according to his own laws. This is a final end which is completely unachievable and must always remain

so – so long, that is, as man is to remain man and is not supposed to become God. It is part of the concept of man that his ultimate goal be unobtainable and that his path thereto be infinitely long. Thus it is not man's vocation to reach this goal. But he can and he should draw nearer to it, and his true vocation qua man, that is, insofar as he is a rational but finite . . . being, lies in endless approximation to his final goal. Now if, as we surely can, we call this total harmony with oneself 'perfection', in the highest sense of the word, then perfection is man's highest and unattainable goal. His vocation, however, is to perfect himself without end. He exists in order to become constantly better in an ethical sense, in order to make all that surrounds him better sensuously and – insofar as we consider him in relation to society – ethically as well, and thereby to make himself ever happier. (Fichte, 1993c: 152)

Human nature, or the vocation of man qua man, implies, according to Fichte, that human beings are in a constant pursuit of self-improvement – self-improvement towards 'perfection' (*Vollkommenheit*). Presumably, Fichte understands that, by perfecting oneself, one becomes a better and well-rounded individual, one overcomes one's inherent evil and, as such, becomes a better moral agent.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Fichte understands that the path towards self-'improvement' (*Vervollkommung*) is endless and eternal, and this is so because human beings are finite and, as such, they can never achieve perfection, because perfection requires infinity and only God is infinite and perfect. Fichte is making reference here to the ontological argument for God's existence – that is, the predicate 'perfection' is not part of the concept of the human being, but is part of the concept of God. Hegel took issue with Fichte's understanding of the human condition, and some of my readers will be in agreement with him. I quote Harris:

The 'infinite progress' in morality, which Fichte accepted as the destiny of humanity, was for Hegel an endless treadmill of internalised slavery; it placed man in the situation of Sisyphus or Tantalus, it deprived him even of the rational possibility of a real self-fulfilment that could be known and enjoyed. (Harris, 1977: 17)

I believe that such criticisms are unfounded and Fichte would reply that, if one fulfils one's nature, one must feel some sort of self-fulfilment. It would be something paradoxical if one followed one's nature and did not enjoy it – did not feel some sort of self-fulfilment. The process is what is important, not the final goal. Each achievement is a conquered milestone, leading to another, and, as such, a sense of self-fulfilment is gained with every conquest.

In the second lecture, Fichte poses the question: 'What is the vocation of man within society?' In doing so, Fichte puts forward an account of human beings' social nature and their drive towards the improvement of society:

One of man's fundamental drives is to be permitted to assume that rational beings like himself exist outside him. He can assume this only on the condition that he enter into society with these beings. Consequently, the social drive is one of man's fundamental drives. It is man's destiny to live in society; he ought to live in society. One who lives in isolation is not a complete human being. He contradicts his own self.

The true vocation of man within society is . . . unification, a unification which constantly gains in internal strength and expands its perimeter. But since the only thing on which men are or can be in agreement is their ultimate vocation, this unification is possible only through the search of perfection. We could, therefore, just as well say that our social vocation consists in the process of communal perfection; that is, perfecting ourselves by freely making use of the effect which others have on us and perfecting others by acting in turn upon them as upon free beings. (Fichte, 1993c: 156, 160)

In this lecture, Fichte presumes that there is a 'state of nature', a pre-society (perhaps following Rousseau and Hobbes), and establishes that human beings are social beings, craving



the encounter with other rational and free beings, and hence forming societies. For Fichte, not to do so is to diminish oneself as a human being and go against one's very nature. After establishing this, Fichte reinstates his argument that human beings aspire to achieve a state of perfection through the powers of pure and practical reason – that is, the human being tries to achieve a state of absolute unity and harmony with himself. However, this is something that it is impossible to achieve, leading to an everlasting struggle to achieve the impossible – the infinite quest for improvement of the human being qua human being. Fichte concludes that human beings do not only aim at their personal and constant self-improvement towards perfection, but they also, as social beings, aim at the constant improvement of their societies (see Dimić, 2003: 780; Guilherme, 2009: 118).<sup>13</sup> In this respect, it is arguable that self-improvement is something inescapable – a *duty* – and that it is also a *duty* to improve one's society.<sup>14</sup>

Now that Fichte has dealt with the issues of the vocation of man qua man and the vocation of man within society, he is in a position to deal with his main concern in the lectures – that is, the vocation of the scholar. This is done in the fourth lecture:

We have already shown that the purpose of all human knowledge is to see to the equal, continuous, and progressive development of human talents. It follows from this that the true vocation of the scholarly class is the supreme supervision of the actual progress of the human race in general and the unceasing promotion of this progress. (Fichte, 1993c: 172)

Thus, since the role and *duty* of the scholarly class within society is to supervise, direct and promote the development of human beings' talents, it has a prominent position in humankind's continued pursuit of self-improvement towards perfection. This means that the scholar has a duty to encourage and facilitate human progress on the eternal and endless road to perfection. Moreover, every scholar must strive to promote and facilitate progress within his own class. Fichte places a heavy weight on the shoulders of the scholarly class, as it must promote and facilitate the improvement of its own class, as well as supervise, direct and promote the betterment of the other classes. But this does not mean that all human beings need to become scholars and, as such, Fichte's argument might appear to bear some elitist overtones and to resemble Plato's (2007) argument in *The Republic*. It thus has implications for sociopolitical thought, and particularly for education. The Platonic idea of society and citizenship is fundamentally based around the concepts of the *aristoi* and the *pseudo-aristoi*, and it is in direct contrast to Aristotle's, which is centred on the concept of a *polis*. White comments on this as follows:

The Aristotelian idea of citizenship, which combines, at once, ruling and being ruled [forming a *polis*], is not, however, the only model on offer. The Platonic version of citizenship, for instance, draws a sharp distinction between rulers and ruled, or the *aristoi* and the *pseudo-aristoi*. (White, 2013: 115)

As will become clear later in this section, Fichte did not envisage the commonwealth as divided between the *aristoi* and the *pseudo-aristoi* in a Platonic fashion. In fact, I would argue that he strongly defended a republican Aristotelian conception of society and citizenship based on the idea of a *polis*. However, with regard to the point about him being 'elitist', I believe this is not the case and he was merely being 'realistic' about the possibilities of human societies. Fichte commented:

The scholar is especially destined for society. More than any other class, his class, insofar as he is a scholar, properly exists only through and for society . . . The scholar should now actually apply

for the benefit of society that knowledge which he has acquired for society. He should awaken in men a feeling for their needs and should acquaint them with the means for satisfying these needs. This does not imply that all men have to be made acquainted with those profound inquiries which the scholar himself has to undertake in order to find something certain and true. *For that would mean he would have to make all men scholars to the same extent that he himself is a scholar, and this is neither possible nor appropriate.* (Fichte, 1993c: 173–174; my emphasis)

This brings us to the fifth and final published lecture, where Fichte discusses the claim that education and culture have corrupted, and not improved, human beings. He does not mention Rousseau by name, but this view is usually attributed to him and his prize-winning essay of 1750, *A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*.<sup>15</sup> In truth, Rousseau's position is much more subtle than that demonstrated by Fichte, but this does not stop Fichte from exploring the 'internal contradictions and external limitations of such a position'. This leads him to conclude that 'Rousseau's ideal of harmony between reason and sensibility' is something that 'lies ahead of, not behind, us'; it is 'an ideal we should infinitely approximate, not a natural state from which we have fallen' (Fichte, 1993b: 142).<sup>16</sup> By doing so, Fichte emphasizes the idea that we, as human beings, are in a constant and eternal pursuit of *perfection*, advocating that education and culture play a pivotal role in this. Thus, although Fichte, like Kant, was an admirer of Rousseau's writings and influenced by them – as we saw in the previous section where I discussed the issue of 'positive' freedom – Fichte was also very critical of Rousseau, taking issue with his position on education and culture.

Fichte's argument in favour of education and culture leads him to claim that, within the commonwealth, the individual is at the same time a teacher and a student, in constant interaction with others and permanently exchanging these roles (Dimić, 2003: 780–781). Fichte was not defending a version of Platonic citizenship because there is no division between the *aristoi* and the *pseudo-aristoi* – between an educated class and a *pseudo*-educated one – but something much more Aristotelian, democratic and egalitarian, and ultimately *polis*-centred. I note that Fichte's views contrast with contemporary developments in the field of education and the move from traditional republicanism, based on Aristotle's views, to modern liberalism, founded on Plato's thought (see Touraine, 1997: 77–89). It is perhaps worth quoting the following passage from Ignatieff, who instantiates this by contrasting both positions:

The one defends a political, the other an economic definition of man, the one an active – participatory – conception of freedom [traditional republican and the *homos politicus*], the other a passive – acquisitive – definition of freedom [modern liberal and the *homos consumus*]; the one speaks of society as a *polis*; the other of society as a market-based association of competitive individuals. (Ignatieff, 1995: 54)

Indeed, I would argue that Fichte's views on education seem to be very supportive of traditional republicanism and could be used as a defence against modern liberalism and the dangers for education, institutions and democracy that come with it. Fichte's framework suggests that we are in a constant pursuit of self-perfection and the improvement of our societies, as well as constantly exchanging the role of teacher and student, and, as such, it is very much a form of traditional republicanism based on democratic egalitarianism and the *polis*. However, Fichte's version of republicanism does not happen just because we agreed to a 'social contract' specifying it; rather, there is something more fundamental to it, as it occurs because it is part of our very essence as human beings. This means that we should not try to escape from our human condition, but embrace it. The vocation of the human

being qua human being is to educate oneself, in a constant personal, and social, pursuit of perfection. As human beings, we have a duty to improve ourselves and our societies through education.

## Conclusion

When the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted, some parties manifested their uneasiness about some of its wording. For instance, the American Anthropological Association (1947: 539) warned that the Declaration could become ‘a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in Western Europe and America’, and that values are culturally dependent. In connection to this, and as I have previously argued, the Declaration, at least insofar as Article 26 on ‘education’ is concerned, could be viewed as a prime example of the kind of authoritarianism that is based on ‘positive’ freedom. This is because it conceives of education as a right, but also understands that people cannot be trusted to take up this right, turning it into something compulsory. Bergström commented on this last point, whilst noting the tension between ‘right’ and ‘compulsory’:

By the end of the nineteenth century, education was not only elementary and free, it departed from *laissez-faire* and became compulsory. The word compulsory could be ‘justified on the grounds that the free choice is a right only for matured minds, that children are naturally subject to discipline, and that parents cannot be trusted to do what is in the best interest of their children’ (Marshall 1992: 16). It is such *distrust* in parents’ ability to do what is in the best interest of the child that invoked, among the delegates on the UN [United Nations] drafting committee, a fear of totalitarianism, authoritarian governments and political paternalism ... [thus] the meaning of the word ‘compulsory’ became an issue. The concept of compulsion appeared contradictory to the statement of a right. (Bergström, 2009: 171)

This problem is compounded by the rise of a Platonic conception of commonwealth and citizenship, dividing society into the *aristoi* and the *pseudo-aristoi*. Neo-liberalism’s hegemonic rise in the past decades has only made matters worse by turning education into a ‘market tool’ and something to be ‘consumed’. The consequence of this is that the *aristoi* – the elites – have access to the most valuable, ‘highly prized educational commodities’, whilst the *pseudo-aristoi* – the masses – by and large, need to content themselves with ‘educational commodities of lesser value’, thus creating an untenable division that is difficult to overcome within the commonwealth. This situation can be traced back to Plato, because he ‘conflated state and individual, public and private, politics and psychology on the foundation ... of civil society and theory of the state’ (Ehrenberg, 1999: 16). This is at the centre of many of the problems faced by modern societies, including that of ‘marketization’ in education and the deterioration of the *homo politicus* into the *homo consumus*.

I would argue that this makes it easier for the *aristoi* to maintain their privileged position over the *pseudo-aristoi* in society because, in an ‘educational market’, they have access to more valuable ‘cultural, social and economic capital’ (see Bourdieu, 1986), leading them to possess more ‘knowledge’, and ‘knowledge itself is power’ (*ipsa scientia potestas est*; see Bacon, 1996). Furthermore, the *aristoi* can make use of education as a disciplinary mechanism and power, so as to normalize and discipline individuals, pretending to protect,

empower and stimulate their personal development (see Lechner, 2001: 280). This set-up turns teachers into ‘technicians of behavior: engineers of conduct, orthopaedists of individuality’ (Foucault, 1979: 294) and, through this atmosphere of surveillance and observation,

the conduct of pupils is directed and coordinated, while in the mean time a stock of knowledge about the individual students is being built up. In this way discipline is formed, which produces enslaved subjects and at the same time generates reliable knowledge about them. (Lechner, 2001: 280)

This means that ‘[t]he objective of the educational system is to produce productive, effective and obedient subjects’ (cf. Habermas 1981 cited in Lechner, 2001: 280) – that is, the *pseudo-aristoi*. Fichte’s position represents a rejection of all this and a recovery of the Aristotelian conception of commonwealth, citizenship and education.

It can be argued that Fichte’s framework, and its traditional republicanism, advocates that the unity of the commonwealth is, as Bauman argued in *Liquid Modernity*,

achieved daily anew, by confrontation, debate, negotiation, and compromise between values, preferences and chosen ways of life and self-identification of many and different, but always self-determining, members of the *polis*.

This is . . . the *republican* model of unity, of an emergent unity which is a joint achievement of the agents engaged in self-identification pursuits, a unity which is an outcome, not an *a priori* given condition, of shared life, a unity put together through negotiation and reconciliation, not the denial, stifling or smothering out of differences. (Bauman, 2009: 178)

Therein lies the importance of education for traditional republicanism – that is, it can only be achieved if individuals understand that to educate themselves is a duty to themselves and their communities, and something that is achieved through a constant exchange of roles between teachers and students. Further, the commonwealth must recognize that it can only continue to exist if it provides its members with the opportunity to fulfil this duty (see Dotts, 2012: 75–76). This means that *investment in education at all levels*, from child to adult education, should be an absolute priority for any commonwealth because ‘[t]he individual is not only an individual; he is at the same time a member of a community and as such must be educated to take this place in it; otherwise the future of that community is doomed’ (Turnbull, 1923: 198). This also means that the relations between teachers and students in education must be conceived in less asymmetrical and more egalitarian terms, because the line between teacher and student, and teaching and learning, is a very fine one in Fichte. Perhaps he could even be understood as a visionary and a forerunner, sowing the seeds of what would become critical pedagogy. Finally, by understanding education as a ‘duty’, the tension between ‘right’ and ‘compulsory’ is dissolved and discussions about how to understand ‘compulsory’ in education become nonsensical.

## Notes

1. Progress has been made slowly in this direction, and certain parts of the world, such as Latin America, have made good progress. Developments in this area are not always driven by governments, but by grass-roots movements, such as the Landless Movement in Brazil, which implemented a large network of primary schools, early years provision, and teacher education and adult education courses with the aim of equipping people to be valuable members of the community and to fight for social justice (see McCowan, 2009, 2010: 522, 2011: 290).

2. By definition, one cannot speak of a ‘right in degrees’ (e.g. a right to elementary education but not a right to higher education, which is considered a privilege) – that is, either one has a right to something or one does not, because a right is something *absolute*. For instance, one has a right to vote, to get married or not to be tortured, and these are absolute. One cannot cast ‘half a vote’, get married ‘partially’ or be tortured ‘a little bit’. To defend one’s ‘right to elementary education’ whilst arguing that ‘higher education is a privilege’ seems to be inconsistent and arbitrary.
3. It is generally agreed by Fichte commentators that his philosophical development can be divided into three phases. His first phase is the Kantian phase and it encompasses his earlier writings such as the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792). The second phase is usually referred to as the Jena period (1794–1799), in which Fichte develops his *Wissenschaftslehre* project, and includes his more popular writings such as ‘Some lectures concerning the scholar’s vocation’ (1794). The third phase is normally referred to as the Berlin period (1800–1814), which is also known by commentators as the eclipse of Fichte’s career, and includes texts such as *Addresses to the German Nation*, written in 1808 during the Napoleonic occupation (see Guilherme, 2009: 59).
4. This position can be explained through a simple example: imagine a human being devoid of all interaction with physical reality and other human beings from the very moment of birth. Could we conceive that this human being can say ‘I’? Certainly not. This insight is something that permeated German post-Kantian idealism (see Morgan and Guilherme, 2012: 983).
5. In a very insightful and innovative way, Fichte introduces the idea of Anstoss, the ‘challenge’ and ‘obstacle’ posed by reality to the activity of the ‘I’, as an important aspect for the rise of self-consciousness. This was something that Kant had neglected to discuss in detail in his writings. Fichte (1794–1795; 2nd Introduction 1802; 1970: 212) defines Anstoss as follows: ‘The Anstoss (which is not posited by the positing I) occurs to the I insofar as it is active, and is thus an Anstoss only insofar as the I is active. Its possibility is conditioned by the activity of the I: no activity of the I, no Anstoss. And vice versa: the I’s activity of determining itself would, in turn, be conditioned by the Anstoss: no Anstoss, no self-determination. Moreover, no self-determination, nothing objective’. Once one cuts through Fichte’s philosophical jargon, the same thesis defended by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is established; that is to say, self-consciousness is dependent on one’s contact with reality.
6. The story of the publication of this work is perhaps better known than the work itself, since it was written as a sort of self-introductory note from Fichte to Kant. Kant thought the text was a well-written piece of work, and suggested that Fichte should sell it to Kant’s own publisher. The first edition had very strange omissions: the title, publisher, city and date appeared as usual, but Fichte’s name and signed preface were missing. Whether this was due to a true printing mistake or a cunning ploy by the publisher, one will never know. The second and subsequent editions corrected these errors and acknowledged Fichte’s authorship. However, by the time this was done, the book had already proven to be a huge success, partly because it was assumed by book reviewers and readers to be yet another of Kant’s works. The written style, the terminology (including the *Critique* of the title), the fact that it was published by Kant’s own publisher, and the fact that it had been widely expected that Kant was soon to publish a *Critique* of religion led to the conclusion that Kant was the author (see Guilherme, 2009: 80).
7. Fichte’s views have a clear foundation in the Christian belief of original sin. Contrasting to Fichte’s views are Schelling’s, who understood that evil has a metaphysical foundation in reality because both Satan (the force of chaos or disharmony) and Jesus (the force of creation or harmony) were begotten by God and, as such, these two forces are always at play in reality, and are not something ingrained in human nature as a condition bestowed on humanity by Adam and Eve’s original sin (see Guilherme, 2009: 89; Lawrence, 2004: 173–175). In this first work, Fichte also argues that theology is not enough and religion – especially revealed religion – is necessary to *reconnect* individuals to morality. The root of the word ‘religion’ is the Latin *religare*, which is translated as ‘to reconnect’ in English.
8. Available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/discourses.html>.

9. Available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/philebus.html>.
10. Mill's (1998) account of higher and lower pleasures in his version of utilitarianism is another classical example of this school of thought.
11. Crowder (2004: 62) notes that the section on Fichte ends with Berlin citing 'a series of quotations from Heine, who warns the French against underestimating the destructive potential of the ideas emerging in Germany. "Armed Fichteans will come, whose fanatical wills neither fear nor self-interest can touch . . . A drama will be performed in Germany in contrast with which the French Revolution will seem a mere peaceful idyll" [Berlin, 2002a: 72]. For Berlin, this is a "genuine vision of the doom to come" [Berlin, 2002a: 72]'.
12. Fichte's argument seems to have been influenced by Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, where he argues against ignorance: 'it is evident that whoever neglects to have or do what he ought to have or do, commits a sin of omission. Wherefore through negligence, ignorance of what one is bound to know, is a sin; whereas it is not imputed as a sin to man, if he fails to know what he is unable to know. Consequently ignorance of such like things is called "invincible," because it cannot be overcome by study. For this reason such like ignorance, not being voluntary, since it is not in our power to be rid of it, is not a sin: wherefore it is evident that no invincible ignorance is a sin. On the other hand, vincible ignorance is a sin, if it be about matters one is bound to know; but not, if it be about things one is not bound to know' (Aquinas, 1947: 1a2ae.76.2).
13. Fichte's views seem to mirror the Jewish concept of *Tikkun olam* (literally, 'repair of the world' in Hebrew). This is a Hasidic and Kabbalistic aspect which understands that the 'shards' or 'sparks' of the divine remain contained in the material world, and that rightful deeds by the pious will help in releasing this divine energy (see Silberstein, 1989: 46–48). It is not possible, however, to ascertain if Fichte was familiar with this concept.
14. It must be noted here that one must seek to perfect society according to the moral law, or acting in accordance with practical reason (see Henson, 1979; Herman, 1981). One cannot seek to perfect oneself and society without taking this into account. Not to do so would be 'un-reasonable' to Kant and Fichte, incurring a whole range of criticisms, such as relying on 'emotions' (e.g. selfish desires or altruistic desires, à la Hume) or 'moral luck'.
15. Available at: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/638/71079>.
16. As already mentioned, Rousseau's position is much more subtle than Fichte portrays. This is noted by Osterwalder (2012: 437): 'in *Emile* . . . the pupil [is] . . . educated in unity with and for himself as well as in unity with the whole, with an order like the absolute moral order manifested in nature, in which humanity *ought* to live, beyond the decadent reality of the existing society. In *Emile* the education culminates in the educator's confessed commitment to an absolute moral order beyond the order, or rather disorder, of a decadent society'.

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