Self-Mastery, Academic Freedom, and the Liberal Arts

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Self-Mastery and the Liberal Arts Ideal

When the flower children and anti-war activists of the sixties came to power in so many universities in the seventies and eighties, they did not overthrow the idea, or at least an idea, of liberal arts education. In a great many cases, they proclaimed themselves true partisans of liberal arts ideals.

Now it is true that many representatives of that generation in positions of influence and authority in the academy today believe that universities should be in the forefront of producing young men and women who will be left-wing social activists. Indeed, more than a few seem to be eager to transform university education into a species of vocational training for aspiring ACLU lawyers, Planned Parenthood volunteers, and “community organizers.” There are, indeed, some colleges and universities that actually offer academic credit for social activism. Others, however, resist the idea that learning should be instrumentalized in this way. They profess allegiance to the traditional (or, in any event, traditional-sounding) idea that the point of liberal education is to enrich and even liberate the student-learner. That’s what is supposed to be “liberal” about liberal arts learning—it is supposed to convey the knowledge and impart the intellectual skills and habits of mind that carry with them a certain profound form of freedom.

However traditional this may sound, there is nevertheless an unbridgeable chasm between the idea of liberal arts education as classically conceived and the conception sponsored and promoted by some (though, mercifully, not all) in authority in the academy today. Many academic humanists and social scientists working in contemporary higher education propose liberation as the goal of liberal arts learning, to be sure; but the question is, liberation from what?

In their conception (what I shall call the revisionist conception), it is liberation from traditional social constraints and norms of morality—the beliefs, principles, and structures by which earlier generations of Americans and people in the West generally had been taught to govern their conduct for the sake of personal virtue and the common good. Why do they regard this form of “liberation” as desirable? Because it has become a matter
of dogma that the traditional norms and structures are irrational—they are vestiges of superstition and phobia that impede the free development of personalities by restricting people’s capacities to act on their desires.

In this dogmatic context, the purpose of liberal arts learning is to undermine whatever is left of the old norms and structures. To accomplish the task, teaching and scholarship are meant either (1) to expose the texts and traditions once regarded as the intellectual treasures of our civilization—the Bible, Plato, Dante, Aquinas, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, Locke, Gibbon, the authors of The Federalist, etc.—as mere works of propaganda meant to support and reinforce unjust (racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, etc.) social orders, or, yet more insidiously, (2) to show how the old texts and traditions can be “reappropriated” and used as tools to subvert allegedly unjust (racist, sexist, etc.) contemporary social orders.

And beyond this, liberal arts learning is meant to enable students to become truly “authentic” individuals—people who are true to themselves. Here the question is What is the “self” to which the authentic person is true? For those in the grip of the new liberationist ideology, to be true to one’s self is to act on one’s desires. Indeed, what one fundamentally is, is one’s desires. So authenticity—that is, being true to one’s self—is understood to consist in doing what you really want to do in defiance, if necessary, of expectations based on putatively outmoded moral ideas and social norms.

According to this conception of personal authenticity, whatever impedes one from doing what one truly wants to do (unless, that is, what one happens to want to do is in violation of some norm of political correctness) is a mere hang-up—something that holds one back from being true to one’s self, from being the person one truly wants to be. Such impediments, be they religious convictions, moral ideals, or what have you, are to be transcended for the sake of the free and full development of your personality. The very essence of liberation as reconceived by partisans of the revisionist conception of liberal arts education is transcending such hang-ups by, for example, “coming out” as a homosexual, transvestite, polyamorist, or as a member of some other “sexual minority” and acting on sexual desires that one might have been “repressing” as a result of religious and moral convictions.

Nowhere is this clearer than in freshman orientation programs in many colleges and universities throughout the United States that feature compulsory events designed to undermine any lingering traditional beliefs about sexual morality and decency that the new students might bring along from home. These events are the purest exercise in sexual liberationist propaganda, however much they may be advertised by university
officials as efforts to discourage date rape, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, bullying, and so forth. Since they are designed precisely to establish and reinforce campus orthodoxies, they are invariably utterly one-sided. Dissenting views, such as the view that sodomy and promiscuity are immoral and affronts to human dignity, are never aired. The manifest point is to send the clearest possible message to students who may dissent from the prevailing sexual liberationist orthodoxy that they are outsiders who had better conform or keep their mouths shut.

A young friend of mine who attended prestigious Williams College tells a story that could be told by students and recent alumni of similar institutions from Bates to Pomona. Shortly after arriving at the college, the new students were divided into small groups to discuss campus life. Each group was led by an official moderator. Attendance was compulsory. The moderator informed the students that it was important for each of them to understand sympathetically what it was like to come out as “gay.” The presupposition, of course, was that a person who experiences strong or dominant homosexual inclinations or desires must come out as gay in order to be true to himself. No alternative view was presented, despite the fact that belief in sexual restraint and traditional sexual morality generally, not to mention reticence concerning one’s personal feelings pertaining to sex, is by no means a monopoly held by “straights.” But let’s lay that aside for now. The moderator’s next move was to direct each student to state his or her name and say, “I am gay.” So around the table they went, with students all-too-predictably conforming to the moderator’s absurd and offensive directive. “I’m Sarah Smith, and I am gay.” “I’m Seth Farber, and I am gay.” When it was my friend’s turn, he politely but firmly refused. The moderator, of course, demanded an explanation. With some trepidation he replied by simply stating the truth: “This exercise is absurd and offensive and has nothing to do with the purposes for which I and others came to Williams College, namely, to learn to think carefully, critically, and for ourselves.” Confirming the old dictum that bullies are cowards who will never stand up to people who have the temerity to stand up to them, the moderator backed off.

Now, of course, what goes on in these collegiate reeducation camps masquerading as freshman orientation programs, and in far-too-many classrooms, is radically different from the classical understanding of what liberal arts education is supposed to accomplish. Formally, the classical and the revisionist conception are similar. Both propose the liberal arts as liberating. Both promise to enable the learner to achieve a greater measure of personal authenticity. But in substance they could not be farther apart. They are polar opposites. The classical understanding of the goal of liberal arts learning is
not to liberate us to act on our desires but rather, and precisely, to liberate us from slavery to them. Personal authenticity, under the traditional account, consists in self-mastery—in placing reason in control of desire. According to the classic liberal arts ideal, learning promises liberation, but it is not liberation from demanding moral ideals and social norms; it is, rather, liberation from slavery to self.

How can it be liberating to enter into the great conversation with Plato and his interlocutors? What frees us in thinking along with Augustine, Dante, or Aquinas? Beyond being entertained by Shakespeare’s charm, wit, and astonishing intellectual deftness, why should we make the effort to understand and appreciate the plays and sonnets? According to the classic liberal arts ideal, our critical engagement with great thinkers enriches our understanding and enables us to grasp, or grasp more fully, great truths—truths that, when we appropriate them and integrate them into our lives, liberate us from what is merely vulgar, coarse, or base. These are soul-shaping, humanizing truths—truths whose appreciation and secure possession elevates reason above passion or appetite, enabling us to direct our desires and our wills to what is truly good, truly beautiful, truly worthy of human beings as possessors of a profound and inherent dignity. The classic liberal arts proposition is that intellectual knowledge has a role to play in making self-transcendence possible. It can help us to understand what is good and to love the good above whatever it is we happen to desire—and it can teach us to desire what is good because it is good, thus truly making us masters of ourselves.

These contrasting views of what liberal learning is supposed to liberate us from reflect competing understandings of what human beings fundamentally are and what it is possible for us to be or become. I have spoken of the soul-shaping power of truths, but in the revisionist view there neither is nor can be any such thing as a rational soul. There is merely a “self.” And the self is constituted not by powers of rationality that enable us to know what is humanly good and morally right and direct our desires toward it; rather, it is constituted by our desires themselves. Reason’s role in our conduct can be nothing more than instrumental. It is not, and cannot be, the master of desire—it is only its servant. Reason can tell us not what to want but only how to obtain whatever it is we happen to want. As David Hume articulated, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (A Treatise of Human Nature [1739–40], book 2, part 3, section 3).

Sometimes it is suggested that it was the convention-flouting, colorful figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who above all others inspired the trend of belief that reached its full flower in the sixties. I wonder, though, whether the greater
blame should fall upon the staid old “conservative” David Hume. In any event, if the Humean understanding is the correct one, then the rational soul is an illusion and belief in it, and in truths that can liberate us from slavery to our desires, is something not unlike a superstition. Human fulfillment, such as it is, consists not in self-mastery, not in overcoming desires that run contrary to what reason identifies as good and right, but rather in freeing ourselves from “irrational” inhibitions (those “hang-ups”) that impede us from doing as we please. Hence, the slogan that will ever stand as a sort of verbal monument to the “Me Generation”: “If it feels good, do it.”

The true liberal arts ideal rejects the reduction of reason to the status of passion’s ingenious servant. It is an ideal rooted in the conviction that there are human goods, and a common good, in light of which we have reasons to constrain, to limit, to regulate, and even to alter our desires. It proposes the study of great works of the humanities and social sciences with a view to grasping more fully these goods and the reasons they provide and to understanding them in their wholeness. What liberal arts learning offers us is a truly audacious hope—the hope of self-mastery.

Can it really be true? What could there be in us, or about us, that could actually make it possible for human beings to be masters of their desires, feelings, emotions, and passions and not mere slaves to them? The answer is only this mysterious thing that Plato’s Socrates was so centrally concerned about and that so many great thinkers and writers of the Western intellectual tradition from Plato forward have sought to understand and teach us about: the soul. Soulless selves could have desires and even a certain form of purely instrumental rationality directed toward achieving the efficient satisfaction of desires, but soulless selves could never be masters of their desires. Only by virtue of our rational souls can we exercise the more-than-merely-instrumental form of rationality that enables us, unlike the brute animals, to be masters of our desires and not mere slaves to self.

Now of course if you believe in such things as reasons with the power to constrain desire (reasons that we have access to by virtue of intellectual capacities—capacities that are part of an apparatus that is no mere slave of desire but can transcend and master them), then what are you looking for? What you are trying to understand and know are virtues. You are seeking answers to the following questions: What qualities make for an honorable, worthy, upright life? What are the habits and the traits of character that we should cultivate in ourselves so as to be masters of our passions rather than slaves to desire?

A few years ago the wonderful documentary filmmaker Michael Pack and the no-less-wonderful historian-biographer Rick Brookhiser visited us at Princeton
to offer an advance viewing of their film biography George Washington. Some of the students were a bit perplexed when Rick explained to them that Washington came to be who he was by imagining an ideal, truly noble individual. As a young man, the future statesman formed a picture of the kind of person he would like to be and then tried to become that person by acting the way that person would act. He “stepped into the role” he had designed for himself. He sought to make himself virtuous by ridding himself of wayward desires or passions that would have no place in the character and life of the noble individual he sought to emulate and, by emulating, to become.

Now, for someone who understands and believes in the classical liberal arts idea and its ideal of self-mastery, there is nothing in the least unauthentic about Washington’s imagining what a virtuous person would be like and then trying to become such a person by living out the virtues he would embody. This is an act of the most profound authenticity. Washington sought to be master of himself rather than a slave to his desires. But to some of the students, Washington’s conduct seemed radically unauthentic. He was playacting, they protested; he wasn’t really being himself. He was trying to live a life that wasn’t his own because he wasn’t affirming and following his desires; rather, he was trying to reshape his desires in line with standards drawn from, as one of them put it, “outside himself.”

Not all the students saw things this way, but we can explain why some of them did. They had drunk deeply of the Kool-Aid of the revisionist conception of what a liberal arts education is about—a conception rooted in a profoundly misguided notion of what a person is: a soulless self, governed by desires, whose liberation consists in freeing himself, or being freed, from constraints on those desires, be they formal or informal, external or internal. They had not so much as considered the alternative view of man that is at the core of the classical conception of liberal arts learning, namely, the human being as a rational creature—a creation capable of understanding reasons in light of which he can become the practitioner of virtues that enable him to discipline his desires and become truly master of himself. Why had they not considered it? Because, I suspect, it had never been presented to them as an option worth considering.

The true founder of the liberal arts ideal was Socrates, as presented by his student Plato. And Socrates’ method of teaching was to question. He is the great exemplar of what the late Allan Bloom labeled the “interrogatory attitude”—an attitude that even defenders of the classical liberal arts ideal sometimes fail to exhibit and inculcate in their students. The liberal arts ideal assumes, to be sure, that there are right answers to great moral and existential questions. It is the enemy, not the friend, of moral relativism. But liberal arts teaching is not fundamentally
about telling students what the right answers are—even when we are justifi-
ably confident that we have the right answers. Liberal arts learning is not just
about receiving and processing information, even if it’s great information, such
as historical facts about the Western tra-
dition or the American founding, vital
though that is. It is not just about read-
ing Aristotle or Chaucer or Shakespeare
or Tocqueville and knowing what these
great writers said. It is about engaging
with them; indeed, it is about wrestling
with them and with the questions they
wrestled with. It is about considering
their arguments or arguments that can be
gleaned from their work. It is about con-
sidering the best possible lines of coun-
terargument and examining alternative
points of view.

And the range of alternatives that
students should be invited to consider,
while not limitless, needs to be wide.
Liberal arts education is not catechism
class. Students should not simply be pre-
sented with officially approved views—
even if they are the right views. I want
my own students to seriously consider a
range of possibilities, including some—
Marxism, for example—that I think are
not only unsound but also reprehensible
and whose record in human affairs is a
record of death and abomination. I cer-
tainly want them to hear the profound
arguments advanced against Marxism by
people like Hayek, Solzhenitsyn, and John
Paul II, but I also want them to un-
stand how it was that Marxism could have
attracted the allegiance of many intel-
ligent and even morally serious (if seri-
ously misguided) people. I want them to
know the arguments Marx and his most
intelligent disciples made. In fact, I want
them to consider these arguments fairly
on their merits. The task of the liberal arts
teacher, as I envisage it, is not to tell stu-
dents what to think; it is to teach them to
think, as my young friend said, carefully,
critically, and for themselves.

Now, why? Is it because I think there
is something intrinsically valuable about
the interrogatory attitude? Allan Bloom
might have thought so. The possibil-
ity that he did is what opened him to the
charge of relativism and even nihilism
advanced by some culturally conserva-
tive critics of Bloom’s influential book
The Closing of the American Mind. Walker
Percy, for example, faulted Bloom for
allegedly holding the view that the point
of an open mind is merely to have an open
mind rather than to arrive at answers that
are to be affirmed and acted on. Whether
or not the charge is just, the charge, if
true, would be damning. The idea of a
mind that never closes on a truth is anti-
thetical to the liberal arts ideal. The point
of the interrogatory attitude, rather, is
precisely to move from ignorance to truths—truths that can be affirmed and
acted on. As G. K. Chesterton once said,
“The object of opening the mind, as of
opening the mouth, is to shut it again on
something solid” (in “Friendship and
Foolery,” chapter 10 of The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton [1936]).

Academic Freedom

We begin to understand the much misunderstood and abused concept of academic freedom when we consider the central importance of the interrogative attitude to the enterprise of liberal arts learning. The interrogative attitude will flourish only under conditions of freedom. It can be smothered by speech codes and the like, to be sure, but also in less obvious ways. It can be smothered when well-qualified scholars, teachers, and academic administrators are denied positions in institutions that claim to be nonpartisan and nonsectarian; or when they are denied tenure or promotion; or when they are subjected to discriminatory treatment. It can be smothered by an atmosphere of political correctness, which may, of course, be conservative but in most places today is a phenomenon of the left. It can fail to emerge as a result of the sheer lack of diversity of opinions among students and, especially, faculty.

Crystal Dixon is associate vice president of human resources at the University of Toledo. She is an African-American woman and a faithful Christian. Recently she wrote a letter to the editor of her local newspaper rejecting the claim that “sexual orientation,” as it has ambiguously come to be called, is like race and should be included alongside race, ethnicity, sex, and the like as a category in antidiscrimi-
nation and civil rights laws. When her letter was published, the president of the University of Toledo, a man named Lloyd Jacobs, suspended her from her job and threatened further punishment if she did not recant and apologize for publishing a view that he evidently regards as heretical.

What is remarkable about this case is how unremarkable it really is. Scarcely a week passes without some offense being committed by a university or its administrators or faculty against intellectual or academic freedom. Given the strong leftward tilt and the manifest ideological imbalance at most of our nation’s colleges and universities, it is almost always the case that the victim of the attack is a student, professor, or member of the administrative staff who has dared to write or say something (whether in a classroom, a publication, or a casual conversation) that disputes a left-wing dogma, such as the belief that there is nothing morally wrong or even questionable about homosexual conduct and that “sexual orientation” is akin to race.

Whatever his other troubles and vulnerabilities at the time, it is worth remembering that what triggered the fall of Larry Summers as president of Harvard was his merely raising an intellectual question about whether disparities between men and women in scientific achievement might have something to do with nature as well as nurture. Previous successes at enforcing political correct-
ness made it possible to bring down even someone as powerful as a president of Harvard for asking a politically incorrect question. Summers’ fall, in turn, strengthened the hand of those who wish to rule out of bounds the questioning of left-wing orthodoxies on college and university campuses around the country. And it sent a chilling wind through the academy. After all, if the president of Harvard can be brought down for a thought crime, what public dissenter from the prevailing dogmas can be safe?

Yet, all is not darkness. A few months ago the Department of Sociology at the University of Virginia voted against granting tenure to an outstanding young scholar of family sociology named Bradford Wilcox. Despite his extraordinary record of intellectual achievement and distinguished teaching, Professor Wilcox was punished for his conservative religious and moral opinions—opinions that his politically correct opponents were foolish enough to freely mention in discussions prior to the vote on his application for tenure. Although Wilcox’s tenure denial was initially upheld by university administrators, the university’s president, John T. Casteen, reviewed the case and reversed the decision. Wilcox has been granted tenure. By rectifying a gross and manifest injustice, President Casteen struck an important blow for academic freedom and, with it, a blow for the interrogative attitude and the liberal arts ideal—one that will send a message not only to his own faculty at the University of Virginia but also to students and faculty at institutions around the country.

It is the Larry Summers episode at Harvard in reverse: It will encourage (in the literal sense of the term) those who dissent from prevailing opinions to stand up and say what they actually think, and it will serve as a warning to those who would attempt to punish their dissent. The warning is that those who abuse the power of their offices by trying to enforce politically correct thinking or teaching may lose—and their loss will expose them for what they in truth are, namely, enemies of free intellectual inquiry.

As we consider the appalling behavior of one university president in Crystal Dixon’s case and the encouraging conduct of another university president in the Bradford Wilcox case, perhaps it is worth pausing to ask why we care—or should care—so much about intellectual freedom in the academy. Why ought we be concerned about the rights of an administrator who is suspended for stating her moral views or the freedom of an assistant professor who is denied tenure because he would not toe the party line? Why should we care as much as most of us do about students who are punished with a bad grade for having the temerity to state views that are out of line with those of the course instructor? What is it about intellectual or academic freedom that makes it worth worrying about—and worth fighting for?
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In my view, it is not—or not merely—a passion for freedom for its own sake. We want our young people and those responsible for teaching them to be free from repression or invidious discrimination, but we should fight for these freedoms for a reason that goes significantly beyond them. We should fight for freedom from oppression on our campuses because we believe that academic freedom is freedom for something—something profoundly important, namely, the intellectual excellence that makes self-mastery possible. We should struggle to destroy political correctness on college campuses so that students and scholars can pursue understanding, knowledge, and truth more robustly across the arts and sciences and appropriate the great goods of human intellectual striving more fully into their lives for their benefit and for the sake of the common good. We should honor academic freedom as a great and indispensable value because it serves the values of understanding, knowledge, and truth that are greater still.

Although some have depicted freedom and truth as antithetical, in reality they are mutually supportive and, indeed, dependent on each other. The defense of academic freedom and the interrogative attitude it serves and supports must, implicitly at least, appeal to the concept of truth, and any plausible and complete case for academic freedom will present understanding, knowledge, and truth as the intrinsic values and virtues that ground the intelligibility of freedom as something indispensable to their pursuit and meaningful appropriation. On the other side of the question, the overwhelming evidence of history, not to mention the plain evidence under our noses when we examine the contemporary situation in much of the academy, shows that freedom is as necessary to the intellectual life of man as oxygen is to his bodily life.

Should academic freedom be boundless? Of course not. But the scope of freedom, as a value that is ordered to truth, must be generous—especially in the academy, where free inquiry, exploration, and experimentation are often essential to insight and richer understanding. Even within its legitimate bounds, can academic freedom not be abused? Of course it can be, and all too often it is. Academic freedom does not guarantee excellence (or even passable scholarship or teaching). Sometimes respect for it insulates abuses from correction. But, again, the lessons of history and our current situation are clear: repression of academic freedom—far from shielding us from error—undermines the very process of truth seeking.

But someone might say: “There are many truths we know. Why must we permit them to be denied and questioned? Why not take the view that error—or at least clear error—has no rights? Otherwise, doesn’t the defense of academic freedom collapse into the self-stultifying denial of the possibility of truth?”
Doesn’t it make freedom, rather than truth, the ultimate academic value?”

I have already mentioned that some partisans of academic freedom misguidedly depict truth as an enemy of freedom. They appeal to, or presuppose, a species of relativism or subjectivism or radical skepticism in defending freedom of inquiry. Now, it is certainly true that one reason for respecting academic freedom is that people can be mistaken about what they regard—even securely regard—as true. Indeed, even unanimity of belief does not guarantee its correctness. But I think that the possibility of error is not the primary or most powerful reason for honoring academic freedom—and protecting it even in areas where we are secure in our knowledge of the truth.

The stronger and deeper reason is that freedom is the condition of our fuller appropriation of the truth. Perhaps you noticed that I mentioned this idea of the appropriation of truth in this essay already. I use the term because knowledge and truth have their value for human beings precisely as fulfillment of capacities for understanding and judgment. The liberal arts are liberating of the human spirit because knowledge of truth—attained by the exercise of our rational faculties—is intrinsically, and not merely instrumentally, valuable. “Useful knowledge” is, of course, all to the good, and it is wonderful when human knowledge can serve other human goods such as health and the biomedical sciences or economic efficiency and growth or the constructing of great buildings and bridges or any of a million other worthy purposes. But even useful knowledge is often more than merely instrumentally valuable. A great deal of knowledge that wouldn’t qualify as useful in the instrumental sense is intrinsically and profoundly enriching and liberating. This is why we honor and should honor—and should honor more highly than we currently do in our institutions of higher learning—excellence in the humanities and pure science (social and natural).

Knowledge that elevates and enriches—knowledge that liberates the human spirit—cannot be merely notional. It must be appropriated. It is not—it cannot be—merely a matter of affirming or even believing correct propositions. The knowledge that elevates and liberates is knowledge not only that something is the case but why and how it is the case. And typically such knowledge does more than merely settle something in one’s mind; it opens new avenues of exploration—its payoff includes new sets of questions, new lines of inquiry.

To return, then, to the question Why respect freedom even where truth is known securely? I answer in the tradition of Socrates and, as Michael Novak would remind us, also the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church in its great Declaration on Religious Freedom: It is because freedom—freedom to inquire, freedom to assent or withhold
assent as one’s best judgment dictates—is a condition of the personal appropriation of the truth by the human subject—the human person, for the sake of whom, for the flourishing of whom, for the liberation of whom knowledge of truth is intrinsically valuable. And it is intrinsically valuable not in some free-floating or abstract sense but precisely as an aspect of the well-being and fulfillment of human beings—rational creatures whose flourishing consists in part in intellectual inquiry, understanding, and judgment and in the practice of the virtues that make possible excellence in the intellectual question.

The freedom we must defend is freedom for the practice of these virtues. It is freedom for excellence, the freedom that enables us to master ourselves. It is a freedom that far from being negated by rigorous standards of scholarship demands them. It is not the freedom of “if it feels good, do it”; it is rather the freedom of self-transcendence, the freedom from slavery to self.