



*Liberal education,
personal freedom and
republican government*

Walter Nicgorski
University of Notre Dame
Walter.J.Nicgorski.1@nd.edu

** This is the third, and last, of three lectures on the theme of Liberal Education and Human Freedom presented late in 2017 as a master class in Cátedra Carlos Llano. The lectures were given at Universidad Panamericana's campuses at Aguascalientes and Mexico City on successive weeks.*

Having considered the nature of liberal education and possible forms of its realization in the two previous lectures¹, I turn to explore how such an education relates to personal freedom and republican or popular government. Almost all important political theorists also write about education, either within their political works, as is the case of Plato and Aristotle, or in auxiliary writings which is the case with John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is understandable that minds devoted to political understanding in the interest of making our societies better would come to be, would in fact be compelled to be, concerned with how human beings are best educated. In *The Republic*, Plato had taught graphically and metaphorically that disordered souls of citizens would be the underlying cause of disorder in the political society and that at least a predominance of just citizens is requisite for a just society. Educational theorists, philosophers of education, return the favor by very often drawing themselves into political reform efforts as a way toward making educational improvements. So there is a mutual recognition of what is a matter of common sense. What the community can do for individuals and what individuals can do for the community are closely bound together in the common interest or common good. It is possible then to think of the common good as a dynamic mutual giving between the part and the whole.

Aristotle taught essentially the same thing, more prosaically of course than the poet-philosopher Plato who was his primary teacher, but Aristotle was often clearer and more directly to the point. Ethics, or how we should live our lives, was for Aristotle a practical inquiry aimed at understanding what true happiness is. It reaches its end when happiness is attained. Politics is also a practical inquiry (and activity) aimed at realizing happiness for the community, this being the common good. Without ethics, politics has no direction rooted in nature and the right; without politics and its sound political institutions, ethics has no muscle or support. Man, being essentially a social or political being, can only succeed as a social and political being. He is incapable of flourishing as an individual. As the refrain goes, no man is an island — we are all in this together. So it is not surprising that in this seminar considering the topic of Liberal Education and Human Freedom, we are drawn into discussing the realm of politics and government. Both liberal education and human freedom are great goods and thus important constituents of happiness, the overall end for man. Liberal education,

1. The mentioned previous lectures were published in the first two issues of our journal, available at: <http://revistas.up.edu.mx/cya> –ed.

already in these lectures, has been shown by its nature to be a good, and shortly that favorable light can be cast on human freedom. One important matter to notice right now, is that it is the very fruit of liberal education, the liberation of reason and speech, that we are here employing to sort out various notions of freedom and clarify what genuine or human freedom is. It is a freeing education, a liberal one, that enables us to deal with freedom thoughtfully and dialectically, and to make important distinctions among sister or related notions.

Freedom, *libertas*, has likely always been a clarion call for humankind; it has been a good for ancients and moderns alike. However, there must be something elusive or tricky here, for it is common to hear people say, “freedom is not license.” Remember that Aristotle would always encourage us to start any inquiry with common opinion — so again, “freedom is not license”. Why is that so? Why is freedom anything other than doing whatever you want? I ask you to ponder for a few moments that question while I briefly lay out a number of usages of the term “freedom” (with their adjectival modifiers) that we must make our way through in this stage of the history of thought. Let me start by reminding you that in the specific title for today’s lecture, (Liberal Education, Personal Freedom and Republican Government) I use the expression “personal freedom”. Cicero gave us the concepts of private individual freedom and public national freedom, concepts still in use². Isaiah Berlin in his 20th century classic on liberty, gave us the distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom, still very much in use³. So we have six freedoms or six possible kinds of freedom that can be expressed in three pairs. 1) personal freedom and human freedom, 2) individual private freedom and national public freedom and 3) negative freedom and positive freedom. Our task will be to sort through these, in the literal sense of dialectic, in order to understand them by distinguishing each from each. As we sort, we will be asking what has liberal education to do with each. Think with me now as we attempt to sort out and understand these different senses of freedom.

Having laid out these types, let us begin with the undifferentiated simple freedom, of which people often say “freedom is not license.” We asked earlier, why is this so? Why is freedom anything other than doing whatever you want? It seems that the common wisdom implied in this saying embraces what a child can understand, that is that certain exercises of freedom, certain choices, might damage the conditions for continuing to exercise freedom. So freedom is not license because it would be acting against oneself, self-destructively. For example, to act violently and without justification exposes you to the same in return and thus makes it likely that the potential retaliation means you live in fear and with diminished freedom -- to steal is to live in the future in the fear of being stolen

2. These aspects of Cicero’s writings are well explored in Chaim Wirszubski’s modern classic, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome During the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

3. Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), I, 118-172.

from. So it can be said that you experience a deficit in freedom, you lose freedom overall, when you act in certain ways.

Stated positively, a free person acts so as to protect the freedom to act in the future. It is not just a child who might act self-destructively, but as the Greek poet Sophocles reminded us in his character Ajax in the drama by that name, the rage of anger like any strong emotion can produce self-hurt if not self-destruction. Ajax, the great Greek warrior cannot be stopped by the quiet counsels of his wife until he has done great self-damage while acting in the heat of anger. Tecmessa, the wife, adds love to reason in urging restraint, but all to no avail. Sophocles teaches a similar lesson in the more complex drama of another great hero, Oedipus Rex. In fact, in this case of adults abusing their freedom and destroying thereby their humanity, we do not particularly need examples from the ancient classics, for everyday in our newspapers we see instance after instance of abuse of freedom.

Those here for the first lecture will know that I talked more about this as we entered that lecture's topic. I have written elsewhere of the importance of attaining a liberating self-mastery⁴. Without that we have setbacks for ourselves and pose grave problems for our societies in drug and alcohol dependence and the corruption and cover-ups that drive us deeper and deeper toward a life of depravity. The lack of a liberating self-mastery is the facilitator of the dishonesty in public offices, churches and businesses that has plagued so called "free" societies in recent years. Without that liberating self-mastery, we have ever more people who are problem makers rather than citizens and leaders who are problem solvers. The disordered soul that has come to prevail and have the support of any number of contemporary intellectuals, has been called "the emotivist self" by my colleague Alasdair MacIntyre. In his very influential modern classic, *After Virtue*, described this self as follows: it is one that "finds no limits to that on which it may pass judgment, for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and the emotivist self lacks any such criteria"⁵.

Allan Bloom through this same period was writing about the dominant moral and intellectual relativism in Western universities which was another way of undercutting reason's authority⁶. Bloom rightly predicted that it would seep into the general culture of our Western societies and that lower classes would likely pay the greatest price for this moral lapse among elites. And so we hear the emotional cries

4. Walter Nicgorski, "The Moral Crisis: Lessons From the Founding" in *The World and I* (Washington D.C.: The Washington Times Corporation, September, 1987), 76 ff.

5. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 30.

6. Bloom's fullest statement of this analysis is found in his *Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

and see the demonstrations here and there, the cries for freedom to do as we will with our bodies, with our talents and with our resources, the cries for rights and entitlements of all kinds.

Reason has been disarmed by the elevation of emotion and will; thus no longer can it reign in the modern soul — of course no longer then will it reign in our politics. In calling for something different from where we find ourselves, in speaking of a liberating self-mastery, I am edging into a discussion of positive liberty, a liberty that springs from the ordered and developed soul, a liberty that liberal education seeks specifically to cultivate. It is a liberty that genuinely empowers us rather than a license that weakens us; it empowers us to serve well our societies and enlarges the opportunities we see for such service. Positive liberty is distinctively human liberty, our liberated powers of reason and speech topped off with what we have been calling in previous lectures the power of powers, namely an understanding how to use our powers.

Before proceeding to consider negative liberty, I make two observations that seem appropriate here: is it not surprising that the world readily recognizes the elementary child-like logic why liberty is not license with respect to external actions, such as do not strike out or many will be striking back. Here instrumental reason recognizes freedom's loss and even self-destruction in certain actions and practices — yet with respect to our internal life and the ordering of our faculties and inclinations, there is often thought to be no one right way. Our moral relativism runs deep; we refuse to recognize how bad practices and indulgences feed bad habits and incapacitate us as reasoning human beings. There is a resistance to reaching to the deepest levels of our being and seeing how our freedom is compromised by the failures in guidance and good habits to order the soul well and prepare it for the friendly reign of a yet developing reason. Positive liberty seems to call for a rich or thick conception of virtue the ground of which would be cultivated even before formal schooling. This liberty benefits from religious liberty, so there might be ample resources and support in the efforts to order the soul well.

My second observation is to notice that a young scholar, D.C. Schindler who spent formative undergraduate years in Notre Dame's Great Books program, has just written a book that speaks well to the point we are considering, namely the necessary deep grounding in our very nature of a positive, human freedom. The title tells us much. Schindler, now the director of the John Paul II Institute at the Catholic University of America, titles his book *Freedom From Reality. The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*⁷. Consider the claim that there can be a freedom from reality; it develops this way. Such a freedom, the modern concept, is not grounded in the way we are, in our natures; it involves a flight from our nature and becomes unlivable for individuals as well as for the species, bringing destruction to our humanity; it must then be diabolical.

7. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017..

In discussing such an unmoored freedom, I have slipped back toward “license”, and this is the backdoor to approaching again positive liberty which is truly human freedom. This authentic human freedom is the fruit of liberal education, the development of human powers or arms.

What then is personal freedom, used in the title for today’s lecture? This too is very much like genuine human freedom and positive liberty. In fact, we might say that true human liberty is both positive and personal. By introducing the word “personal” I mean to emphasize what should be a dimension of human freedom, for this word is to evoke a deep aspect of freedom that is open to rather than fleeing from reality, open to the fullness of reality, that is open to the transcendent, being able to let our own encounter with God and the spiritual realm sound through (*per sona*) in the ordinary day-to-day world of our choices. Thus personal freedom is exercised with what is deep within sounding through the masks *personae* of our faces. This understanding of authentic human freedom is in debt to the philosophy of personalism developed in the last century and given authoritative expression in the work and leadership of St. John Paul II.

The personal, on the surface, can appear very private or individual, but it is precisely not that; it represents what is drawn from a well that is oriented to other humans, to what is shared and universal and to a common God. When this understanding of personal freedom is at hand, religious liberty is especially important, for such liberty opens to the fullness of reality and allows the human being to grow and to enter conversation about it. Such openness is a capstone to positive freedom and a dimension of authentic human freedom. It depends on them and yet turns around to sustain them. Considering personal freedom in this rich way makes it the very best expression of the end or good of liberal education, human development to the full extent. We are now equipped for an appreciative understanding of an observation attributed to St. Irenaeus, “man fully human is God’s greatest glory.” Man equipped to freely return to God is what delighted Irenaeus.

There is need now to speak of what might seem to be more mundane or ordinary freedoms. I mean those that are largely understood as negative freedom. It has private and public manifestations, and to consider it draws us back to the realm of politics. Negative freedom is the down-to-earth basis for liberal education and all the higher forms of freedom that can come from it. Negative freedom is freedom from — freedom from physical control and/or mental control, freedom from domination by external forces. Positive freedom is freedom for. It is a freedom that enables one to live in virtue because it is a freedom arising from an order of the soul. Negative freedom wants individuals or government or nations “off our back.” It is usually the primary motivator of revolutions. The negative freedom is normally what adolescents seek when they struggle to get free of parental control (and often, let me add, fail to recognize and appreciate what their parents have done for them by means of

positive freedom.) Private negative liberty is before us when an individual is totally unencumbered by control from others or groups, including his own government. Public negative liberty is at hand when a nation or people asserts its own claim to freedom from control by others, be they colonizers, conquerors or nuclear intimidators.

It seems that positive liberty can also be private or public. Just as an individual self-disciplines and prepares herself for real choices that are rational, so too a people might work to self-discipline, to improve national character for impact on popular choices in the long future. However, given the mutual dependence between the human person and the community that we noted earlier and that Aristotle treated so well, it is not in our nature to allow a strict separation between the person and the community such that one might become virtuous and happy without crucial help from others and/or from the community.

The last and perhaps most important thing to say about negative liberty is that it provides a necessary condition for autonomy, the autonomy that is itself necessary to attain self-mastery and for the community to do the same. When human beings began the process of reaching for full and authentic human freedom is when groups, call them nations, toppled absolute rulers. Then they began on a path to or they took up at once what we today call republican government. This republican or popular form of government now dominates throughout the Western world and is widely regarded as desirable throughout the world.

Let us consider now more thoroughly republican government because it is republican government, in almost all cases, on which the future of human freedom rests. Republican governments are expected to protect negative liberties in the greatest possible way. In doing so, they preserve the conditions for autonomy and higher freedoms. Furthermore, republican governments can protect and nurture liberal education or work in the opposite direction.

The term “republic” is derived from the Latin *res publica* and literally means “a thing or property that is public,” in other words, public space or the public’s space. Cicero who first spelled out this definition also said of *res publica* that it was *res populi*, namely that this space or property was the people’s and that they above all should determine its use⁸. The contrast with monarchy, detested by those republican Romans, is clear enough. The term “monarch” is the Greek, meaning rule of the one, and such rule can be and often is strictly for or on behalf of that one. Cicero lived in the failing years of the great Roman Republic begun by an ancestor of his contemporary and friend, Marcus Junius Brutus, who

8. Rep. 1. 39.

joined in the assassination of Julius Caesar. That ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, killed a king who had abused his power. In the Republic that Cicero tried to save, there was a powerful class that shared power through heredity with the people; it was then a kind of mixed government; it was not, in other words, a pure republic, one totally controlled by the people.

When the United States Constitution was drafted and put into effect (1787- 1789), its designers claimed it was a pure republic, perhaps the first in history. What was meant by this? Why should we not call this government of the people a democracy? Many in the United States and throughout the world do not distinguish between a republic and a democracy, but the American Founders did, and it is likely right now a task for a good liberal education to assist us in understanding the difference. We have democracy when the people rule directly in the town square or in assemblies or even, as some have suggested by online voting. Republics —unadulterated pure ones— are also governments where the people rule, but indirectly through representation. Senators or even judges in the American form of such a constitution are all accountable to the people and derive their powers from them, in complicated and less than direct ways. Republics are often designed to slow up and make more deliberative and careful the decisions that a majority are inclined to make. The people's will — if firmly settled — will work through a complicated republican structure and finally pull government in its direction. Waves of what we now call populism were expected to hit the republican system and to be influential there, but to be resisted and filtered and not be quickly determinative of the direction of the nation. Through the work of filtration of public opinion by elected and appointed officials the American Founders hoped to get better results than would come from raw direct public opinion. They sought in the institutions they created to check and purify the thrusts of populism.

What kind of people will come to hold office? What qualities will characterize citizens so that they might elect, tolerate and encourage good people in office? It depends, it seems, on how they are educated, and whether liberal education is able to do its work in elevating citizens and leaders and thus saving this American Republic or another. In 1787 as the American Constitutional Convention completed its work in that hot and secretive summer, the delegates were filing out, and a woman waiting outside grabbed the coat of Benjamin Franklin, the senior most delegate who participated in the Philadelphia gathering. She asked what kind of government was being presented to the American people. Franklin responded in an enigmatic way, “a republic if you can keep it”⁹.

9. An anecdote reported years later by James McHenry, also a delegate to the Convention. Max Farrand (ed.), *The Records of the Federal Convention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 3.85.

What does keeping a republic entail? It surely means maintaining negative freedom from potential foreign dominators and from internal factions including majority factions. This is a fundamental task and can be quite consuming for any nation. Recall the importance of negative freedom as the basis for higher freedoms. A republic is lost if the government of the people cannot govern effectively in its own defense. Would there be enough practical wisdom to govern well? to stay alert and poised for defense? Thomas Jefferson had told Americans that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, and Ronald Reagan having witnessed the awesome threats of the Cold War wisely observed that our freedom, our negative freedom, is very fragile. He said that such freedom is never more than one generation from extinction.

To be free as a person and as a people is to have the opportunity for liberal education. More is necessary than the opportunity. One must be disposed and inclined to take the opportunity; one must have the capacity for positive liberty. John Adams and other American Founders saw this clearly, republican government depends on virtuous leaders and citizens. He said the public virtue that republics required could not be severed from private virtue, the well-ordered soul¹⁰. James Madison, often regarded as the father of the Constitution, wrote on two occasions as follows:

“The aim of every political constitution is or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess the most wisdom to discern and most virtue to pursue the common good of society. I go on this great republican principle that the people will have the virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom”¹¹.

And Benjamin Franklin, at an earlier point from when he issued the challenge, “a republic if you can keep it,” had observed that he saw in America “the kind of people who were characterized by frugality, ability, prudence and virtue”¹².

If representative or republican government is to work well, there is need for the very kind of leaders and citizens that liberal education seeks to cultivate, ones who are truly free. Such governments in turn will best make space for and foster liberal education. Educate truly well potential leaders in every facet of society, especially those in the media; this is the only way of responsibly purifying and uplifting government in the modern age. It is the way in accord with freedom, built on freedom and working toward an authentic human freedom.

10. See especially John Adams to Mercy Warren, April 16, 1776.

11. James Madison in *The Federalist* #57 and at the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 20, 1788.

12. Benjamin Franklin as cited in Ralph Ketcham (ed), *The Political Thought of Benjamin Franklin* (Indianapolis:Bobbs Merrill, 1965), 300.

This last lecture has explored the roles of different kinds or aspects of freedom. Human freedom not only must be personal freedom and positive freedom, but it is also conditioned by negative freedom. Human freedom while primarily private is the basis for public freedom in the form of republican government. I need now to conclude this opportunity to reflect with you on liberal education and human freedom. I thank Universidad Panamericana both at Aguascalientes and Mexico City, their faculties and leadership, for providing the occasion for my preparation of these lectures. I conclude without despair but with hope because there are institutions like Panamericana that care about liberal education. We must pull together our best resources of mind and will, and remain clear-headed about what we are seeking while renewing dedication to highest personal and institutional purposes. This is our duty. Embrace it, and it is likely we will then do well, or we will do as well as circumstances allow.

Bibliography

Berlin, Isaiah. «Two concepts of Liberty», in *Four Essays on Liberty*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Nicgorski, Walter. «The Moral Crisis: Lessons From the Founding», in *The World and I*.
Washington D.C.: The Washington Times Corporation, September, 1987.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

Bloom, Allan. *The closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Farrand, Max (ed.). *The Records of the Federal Convention*. New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1996.

Ketcham, Ralph (ed.). *The Political Thought of Benjamin Franklin*. Indianapolis:
Bobbs Merrill, 1965.