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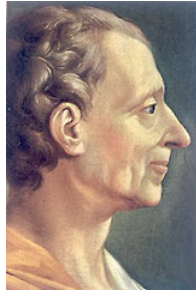
## FREEDOM THROUGH DISCIPLINE

*Elective system defeats purpose of liberal education*

**Mortimer Adler**

The word “discipline” is more usually connected with the notion of duty than with the notion of freedom. We think of discipline, whether self-imposed or imposed by another, as systematic regulation directed toward doing well the things we ought to do. We seldom connect the idea of freedom with the regulation of conduct in terms of *ought* or *should*. Freedom, we think, is doing what one pleases. If freedom were that, if it were the opposite of doing one’s duty, freedom might be achieved in the absence of discipline rather than through it.

But true freedom is identical with duty. It is necessary to understand this in order to perceive that discipline is indispensable to such freedom.



As Montesquieu wisely and tersely said, “Political liberty does not consist in an unlimited freedom. In government, that is, in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will. Liberty is the right of doing whatever the laws permit, and if a citizen could do what they forbid he would be no longer possessed of liberty, because all his fellow citizens would have the same power.”

Thus we see that political liberty is a freedom achieved through the discipline of laws. Under anarchy, there is no freedom. There is only license for every man to do what he pleases, and since the desires and wants of individual men will bring them into conflict, freedom from laws necessarily means subjection to the war of each man against every other. Where men recognize no rights or duties, only might prevails. But civil rights and duties are instituted by laws, and so it is through law, and the discipline it imposes upon our social conduct, that men are able to live together freely and in peace.

Let me define freedom in terms of the two notions which are basic to it—right and duty. I shall deal first with political liberty, and then with moral and economic freedom.

A man is politically free if he is accorded all the rights and privileges which are due him in strict justice. If he is a normal adult, he has two fundamental political rights arising from his very nature as a political animal. One is the right to be governed as an equal, not only as the equal of other men who are his fellow citizens, but also, and more fundamentally, as the equal of those among his fellow citizens who exercise the authority and power of governing. They are not his rulers by their personal pre-eminence or power, but only as temporary holders of public office to which he himself has delegated them.

This delegation indicates the second right which constitutes political liberty. It is the right to have a voice in one’s own government, to determine the constitution of one’s society, to limit by due process of law all those who hold public office under that constitution. Free government, which is always constitutional government, is

founded on those two rights. That is why Aristotle called such government the government of freemen and equals.

But rights are only one aspect of freedom. The other aspect consists of duties. The free man must be unrestrained from doing what he ought to do, and he must not be coerced into doing what he ought not to do. If he recognized no duties, if he did not recognize the authority of what ought and ought not to be done, his freedom would be empty; or worse, it would be mere license.

In short, only when men live under a just government are they politically free. Justice is the root of political freedom. It is also the root of moral freedom and economic freedom.

As political freedom is liberty under just laws, so moral freedom is liberty under the direction and discipline of the moral virtues. St. Augustine said that the moral virtues consist in a proper use of our free will. Nothing can take our free will away from us, neither tyrannical government nor a vicious character; but tyranny and vice can prevent us from using our free will properly, that is, for our ultimate good and for the common good of the society in which we live.

Similarly, economic freedom consists, not in the absence of restraints upon enterprise or economic organization, but in a just regulation of economic processes. All the loose talk now current about the ideal of free enterprise confuses liberty and license. The injustice of laissez-faire capitalism and the injustice of complete collectivism are equal and opposite. In neither are men economically free; for the injustice in the profit system enslaves them to individual entrepreneurs; and the injustice of a completely regimented economy enslaves them to bureaucratic commissariats.

I mention these things because they have a crucial bearing on education for freedom, the platform and program of which could just as well be signified by the phrase "education for duty." A good education is an education for freedom only when freedom is properly understood as a function of rights and duties, both founded upon justice. It follows, therefore, that education for freedom is incompatible with tyrannical or despotic government, with fascism and nazism. Nor can education for freedom be regarded as a bulwark of the so-called "American way of life" when that is interpreted to mean free enterprise unqualified by justice.

Liberal education, which is identical with education for freedom, can exist, and perhaps even thrive, in societies which are unjust

socially or economically, as was the slave society of ancient Greece and Rome, or the feudal society of the Christian Middle Ages. Similarly, it can exist under modern capitalism. But it must never be regarded as an instrument for perpetuating unjust institutions. On the contrary, liberal education is education for freedom only in so far as it is revolutionary against every form of injustice.

Above all, education for freedom must be dissociated from that false liberalism which makes a travesty of liberal education. The false liberalism of which I speak consists in confusing authority with autocracy, discipline with regimentation, and hence liberty with license. This false liberalism is nowhere more dominant than among our professional educators, our teachers' colleges, and our college faculties. Of them, the words of President Barr of St. John's College can be aptly and fairly said:

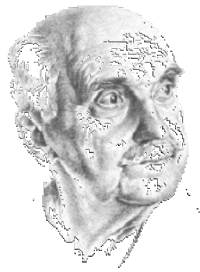
“We have slithered into the belief that liberty meant being left alone and nothing else. We have come to assume that liberalism is the absence of authority because we no longer distinguish between authority and tyranny. We have forgotten that the mind that denies the authority of reason falls under the tyranny of caprice. We have forgotten that he who will not answer to the rudder must answer to the rock.”

It is appropriate, indeed, that these words should have been spoken by the president of St. John's, because that is the only college in the country which is making a proportionate effort to adapt means that may succeed in achieving the ends of liberal education. Liberty is prized at St. John's, but with such discrimination and moderation that authority and discipline are not sacrificed. The elective system has been entirely abolished—the elective system which stands to sound educational policy as laissez-faire does to a just economy.

The abolition of the elective system goes to the very heart of the problem. Liberal education is developed only when a curriculum can be devised which is the same for all men, and should be given to all men, because it consists in those moral and intellectual disciplines which liberate men by cultivating their specially rational power to judge freely and to exercise free will.

The elective system, which false liberalism still defends, defeats the very purpose of liberal education. It emphasizes the untutored free will of the student, granting him opportunity for choices which he is ill-prepared to make; whereas liberal education, aiming at freedom through discipline, should emphasize the tutelage which

must be given the mind and will in order to enable them to do their duty freely and with genuine facility.




In his recent autobiography, George Santayana comments on the elective system which Harvard had just adopted and which later swept the country. He says: "I began badly also in not having a fixed plan of study. President Eliot's elective system was then in the ascendant. We liked it, I liked it; it seemed to open a universal field to free individuality. But to be free and cultivate individuality one must first exist, one's nature must be functioning. What was I, what were my powers and my vocation? Before I had discovered that, all freedom could be nothing but frivolity."

Liberal education, rightly conceived as a discipline of man's rational and moral nature, provides the answer to Santayana's questions. Each student is a man. His characteristic powers are reason and free will. His vocation is to be the citizen of a democratic society, which shall include all men as members of a single community, existing perpetually at peace under world government, justly constituted.

Only when his mind is disciplined by the liberal arts to perform the critical functions of a free intelligence, only when his character is rectified by the moral virtues to perform the social duties of a free will, can the student grow into the free man, the good man, the good citizen. Only when all young men and women are prepared by liberal education for the responsibilities of citizenship, and the obligations of the moral and intellectual life, will the world community come into existence. Without it world peace is impossible.

But education for freedom cannot itself be instituted until the educators understand the principles of freedom, until they realize that freedom is not an end in itself, but a consequence of justice, and an affair of rights and duties. Life and liberty are good only as prerequisites to the pursuit of happiness, a pursuit in which all men should be able to engage without hindering or frustrating each other. No man should have more freedom than he can use justly, or less liberty than he needs to lead a good life in the society of his fellows. Because he is a social being, no man should ask for more freedom, nor can he be satisfied with less. Because he is born free only in the sense that he has powers which can be disciplined for freedom's sake, man achieves the fullness of liberty only through

an education which prepares him to do his duty; he knows what his duties are and is competent to do them only when education disciplines him to be free. 

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