

Academic Freedom and the Liberal Arts



**Academics are telling students that our traditions are oppressive.
In fact, it's the academics we should be worried about.**

By Robert P. George

WHEN THE FLOWER CHILDREN AND anti-war activists of the 1960s came to power in the universities, they did not overthrow the idea of liberal arts education. In a great many cases, they proclaimed themselves true partisans of liberal arts ideals. True, many influential representatives of that generation believe that universities should be producing left-wing social activists, with more than a few eager to transform university education into a species of vocational training for aspiring ACLU lawyers, Planned Parenthood volunteers, and Barack H. Obama-style “community organizers.” There are even colleges and universities that 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 liberate the student. That is what is supposed to be “liberal” about liberal arts learning—that it conveys the knowledge, 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 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—from the beliefs, principles, and structures by which earlier generations 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—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 on behalf of unjust (racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, etc.) social orders, or yet more insidiously (2) to show how

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the old texts and traditions can be “reappropriated” and used as tools to subvert the modern forms of social injustice.

And beyond this, liberal arts learning is meant to enable students to become truly “authentic” individuals—people who are true to themselves. But 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 people are defined by their desires. Authenticity consists 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, whatever impedes you from doing what you truly want to do (unless, that is, what you want to do is in violation of some norm of political correctness) is a mere hang-up—something that holds you back from being the person you truly are. 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 essence of liberation is transcending such hang-ups, for example, by “coming out” as a homosexual, transvestite, polyamorist, or as a member of some other “sexual minority,” and acting on sexual desires that might have been “repressed” as a result of religious and moral convictions.

Nowhere is this clearer than in freshman orientation programs that feature compulsory events calculated to undermine any lingering traditional beliefs about sexual morality. These events are advertised by university officials as efforts to discourage date rape, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, bullying, and so forth. Because



they are designed precisely to establish and reinforce campus orthodoxies, however, they are invariably exercises in liberationist propaganda. 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 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 mandatory. 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.”

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 re-education camps is *radically* different from the classical understanding of what liberal arts education is supposed to accomplish. *Formally*, the classical and the revisionist conceptions are similar. Both propose the liberal arts as *liberating*. Both promise to enable the student 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 classical 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? Why does the study of Augustine, Dante, or Aquinas help us to be free? 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 classical 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 classical

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 making us truly *masters of ourselves*.

These contrasting views of liberal learning reflect competing understandings of what human beings fundamentally are, and what is possible for us to be or become. I have spoken of the soul-shaping power of truths, but on 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, but rather 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, but only its servant. Reason cannot tell us what to want, but only how to obtain whatever it is we happen to want. As David Hume articulated the point, “Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and may pretend to no office other than to serve and obey them.”

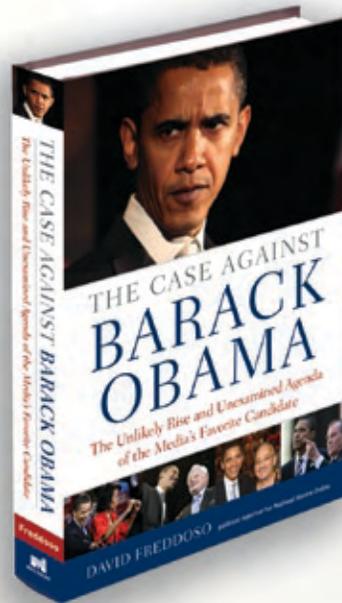
On this view the rational soul is an illusion and belief in it, and in truths that can liberate us from slavery to our desires, is something not unlike a superstition. Human fulfillment consists not in overcoming desires that run contrary to what reason identifies as good and right, but rather in freeing 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 slave. 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 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,

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emotions, and passions, and not mere slaves to them? Only this mysterious thing that Plato's Socrates was so concerned about, and about which so many great thinkers and writers of the Western intellectual tradition from Plato forward have sought to understand and teach us: the soul. Soulless "selves" could have desires and even a certain form of purely instrumental rationality directed towards achieving their efficient satisfaction, but soulless "selves" could never be masters of their desires. Only by virtue of our rational souls can we exercise the more than instrumental forms of rationality that free us from the chains of appetite.

Now if you believe that reason is not the slave of the passions but is capable of mastering them, then you must acknowledge the existence of human *virtues*—the dispositions that enable reason to prevail over impulse whenever the two conflict. You must believe that there are qualities that make for an honorable, worthy, upright life, habits and traits of character that we should cultivate in ourselves so as not to be governed by our impulses, but self-directed towards the good.

A few years ago, the wonderful documentary filmmaker Michael Pack and the no less wonderful historian-biographer Richard Brookhiser visited us at Princeton to offer an advance viewing of their film biography, *Rediscovering George Washington*. Some of the students were perplexed when Brookhiser 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 inauthentic 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. On the contrary, 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* inauthentic. He was play-acting, 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, as one of them put it, from "outside himself."

Not all the students saw things this way, but we can explain why some of them did. They had absorbed

the revisionist notion of what a person is. Influenced by the prevailing orthodoxies, they had come to see the person as a soulless self, governed by desires, whose liberation consists in freeing those desires from constraints, 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 the liberal arts, namely, the view of man as a rational creature capable of self-transcendence and self-mastery. Why had they not considered it? Because 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." 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 justifiably confident that we have the right answers. Nor is liberal arts learning merely a matter of receiving and processing information, even if it's great information, such as historical facts about the Western tradition or the American founding. Nor is it merely a matter of reading Aristotle, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, or Tocqueville and knowing what these great writers

said. Liberal arts education is about *engaging* with these things, wrestling with them and with the questions they suggest. It is about considering arguments and counterarguments, and examining competing points of view.

And the range of competing alternatives students should be invited to consider, while not limitless, needs to be wide. Liberal arts education is not a catechism class. Students should not simply be presented with officially approved views—even if they are the right views. I want my own students to consider seriously a range of possibilities, including some—Marxism for example—that I think are not only unsound, but reprehensible, and whose record in human affairs is a record of death and abomination. I certainly 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 understand how it was that Marxism could have attracted the allegiance of many intelligent and morally serious (if seriously 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 students 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 possibility that he did is what opened him to the charge of relativism and even nihilism advanced by some culturally conservative critics of Bloom's influ-

ential 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 antithetical 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 point of an open mind is like the point of an open mouth: to close on something solid.

WE BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE much misunderstood and abused concept of academic freedom when we consider the central importance of the interrogatory attitude to the enterprise of liberal arts learning. The interrogatory attitude will flourish only under conditions of freedom. It can be smothered by speech codes and the like, to be sure, but it can be smothered 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 are subjected to discriminatory treatment for dissenting from campus orthodoxies. 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 wherever teaching and learning are governed by orthodoxies that refuse to subject themselves to questioning.





Crystal Dixon was the associate vice president of human resources at the University of Toledo. She is an African American woman and a faithful Christian. In April, 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 anti-discrimination 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 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 correctness made it possible to bring down even someone as powerful as a president of Harvard for asking a politically incorrect question. Summers’s fall, in turn, strengthened the hand of those who wish to rule out of bounds the questioning of campus orthodoxies. And it sent a chill 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 mention freely 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 give courage to those who dissent from prevailing opinions and help them to stand up and say what they actually think, and it will serve as a warning to those who would attempt to punish them. The warning is that those who abuse the power of their offices by trying to punish dissenters will lose out—and their loss will expose them as enemies of free intellectual inquiry, in other words, people who themselves have no place in a university.

As we consider the disgraceful behavior of one university president in Crystal Dixon's case, and the encouraging conduct of another in the case of Bradford Wilcox, perhaps it is worth pausing to ask why we care—or should care—so much about intellectual freedom in the academy. Why ought we to 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 we 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 freedom that makes it worth worrying about—and worth fighting for?

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 want students and scholars to be able to pursue understanding, knowledge, and truth more robustly, and to appropriate the great goods of human intellectual striving more fully into their lives. We should honor academic freedom as a great and indispensable value because it serves other values—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. Any plau-

sible and complete case for academic freedom will show it to be an essential means to knowledge. It is because we value truth that we value the freedom that enables us to discover it. The overwhelming evidence of history, not to mention the plain evidence

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under our noses from the contemporary situation, 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 must be generous—especially in the academy, where free inquiry, exploration, and experimentation are the primary purpose. Even within its legitimate bounds, can academic freedom not be abused? Of course it can be, and 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 of our current situation are clear: repression of academic freedom—far from shielding us from error—undermines the process whereby errors are detected.

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?”

In response to such worries I would argue 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. I use this 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, as in 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, and a great deal of knowledge that wouldn’t qualify as “useful” in the instrumental sense is intrinsically and profoundly

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enriching *and liberating*. This is why we honor—and should honor more highly than we currently do in our institutions of higher learning—academic excellence, whether in the humanities or the sciences.

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, and the affirmation of the intellectual life.

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. Knowledge of truth 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 these possible.

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. ❧

Robert P. George is McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University and director of its James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. This essay is the seventh in a ten-part series being published in successive issues of *The American Spectator* under the general title, “*The Future of Individual Liberty: Elevating the Human Condition and Overcoming the Challenges to Free Societies*.” The series is supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.