FREEDOM WILL SAVE HIGHER EDUCATION: COUNTERING CANCEL CULTURE

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develop into adults capable of mature exchange of ideas, we must ensure that campuses are open spaces for discussion. Anything less is infantilization.

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From time to time, my extended family will get together to break bread. This is a longstanding tradition, as is what follows each lunch: remaining at the table to discuss anything and everything. Sometimes the discussion stays close to home, but most often the subject is politics.

When I was a child, I was encouraged to go play with my cousins during these conversations. However, I was fascinated by the discussions on why this politician was wrong, or why that policy was what my country needed. Occasionally, I would hear opinions that were directly opposed to what I had heard from my parents, which was disturbing to me. However, some years later on a visit home from college, I found myself engaged in one of these discussions. I had developed the tools to judge the opinions expressed, and my views were taken seriously, so much so that in time I would influence relatives' opinions.

But what had changed? What enabled me to grow and become capable of respectful and serious discussions of important topics? As you may have guessed, I attribute much of this growth to my experiences at college. I thrived there. I loved confronting ideas, whether in the classroom or outside it. I especially enjoyed visiting lecturers, particularly when they exposed me to ideas and arguments I had never heard before. These experiences helped me to become a more responsible interlocutor, family member, and citizen.

Today, however, it is becoming more difficult for students to cultivate the virtues required for this kind of growth. This is because many Western university campuses today are

skeptical of the concept of the free exchange of ideas. This is one of the best-known (and most alarming) examples of the much-discussed ‘cancel culture.’ I am deeply concerned that many places of higher learning are now informed by a culture that leads students to protest scholars who hold—or are alleged to hold—controversial positions. Worse than this, it can even lead universities to disinvite visiting lecturers. I believe this debate over cancel culture is a crucial one, and in order to understand it, we must re-examine the very nature of education, what the ‘right’ to it is, the place of freedom in it, why the definition of freedom is becoming a growing issue, and how a classical definition of freedom can help us to overcome the growing tensions.

What is the aim of education?

Education, we are often told, is a human right. If this is true, then it, like all human rights, must be directly rooted in human dignity. Bearing this in mind, we should consider education as a reality that goes beyond a public expense, an investment or a political tool. From this perspective we can answer what the aim of education is: is it equity? Social transformation? Something else altogether?

To answer this question beyond its purely political ramifications, it is relevant to recall what Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights said: “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality.” We can observe this formulation in many other European constitutions, which shows the consensus around this aim. Man becomes fully himself through education. This is, of course, not a novel idea, with roots not only in the Enlightenment or the Renaissance, but even in ancient Greece. We could reformulate the sentence in unadorned language by saying the right to education enables the human being to become a fully-integrated and mature person. The aim of education, then, is not to just prepare someone for a job, but to help him understand who he is and the world that surrounds him. This is true of all education, including higher education.

Freedom and education

Freedom is a crucial feature of the right to education.

Despite the efforts of some Leftists to portray freedom of education as a recent invention of conservative or libertarian theorists, this liberty has been recognized by different juridical traditions for ages. Further, the article Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the "prior right" of parents "to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Along the same line, academic freedom is recognized as an essential cornerstone of the right to education by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. And yes, it includes the rights of the academic community "to pursue, develop and transmit knowledge and ideas, through research, teaching, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation or writing." Both parental freedom and academic freedom play critical roles in the realization of other rights, such as the freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion. Any honest expert on human rights agrees on this last point.

To what extent, then, does freedom concern university students?

Parents are recognized as having responsibilities, rights, and duties towards children in the field of education. A child's lack of development means he cannot properly exercise his rights without assistance, and therefore parents are considered the best-suited actors to help him grow into someone who will make good use of his rights. This is why the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child says that certain rights are exercised by parents "in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child." This implies that, once the minor achieves maturity, he becomes fully responsible for exercising his freedom well. This moment of passage of responsibility is particularly clear once he reaches the age of majority, which, not coincidentally, usually coincides with the age at which he becomes eligible to enter into university.

What are the tensions around freedom?

How do we have to understand freedom in regards to students and professors in higher education? Freedom, like many great words such as happiness or democracy, is full of nuances, and therefore it has never ceased to stir discussions. Beyond the debates of positive liberty and negative liberty, we find an anthropological debate on the aims of freedom, which is essential for understanding education.

We can contrapose two different conceptions of freedom. On the one hand, we have the classical, Greek way of understanding freedom. In this view, the human being has full command of his acts and that he is fully responsible for these. This view presupposes that the human being is dependent on his circumstances, and it acknowledges the human capacity to know truth, goodness, and beauty. Freedom is not just a feature of the human being, but a necessary means to access the good, the true, and the beautiful.

On the other hand, the second idea of freedom conceptualizes it as emancipation. Held by many modern philosophers, this conception focuses on man’s ability to liberate himself from his circumstances and to bring about change. In this view, freedom has to liberate the human being from his circumstances and established moral aims; freedom is an end in itself.

While the first conception of freedom aims at appropriating what is inherited, to cultivating what is true, good, and beautiful, and later to acting on it, the second aims at emancipating the individual from his inheritance and enabling the human being to define his own law. We can extract some conclusions from these contrasted visions of freedom.

The first conception, the classical one, does not impose a notion of truth or goodness, but instead it acknowledges its existence and recognizes the achievements of past generations as part of a long and arduous journey of humanity. Freedom is critical and necessary to continue this path.

The second conception sees freedom as man's ultimate goal. Therefore, freedom is only achieved when the individual overcomes oppressive traditional norms in order to define his own moral law. The notion of common truth or goodness is not relevant or even possible. This path wants to crush all the yokes the human being is under. Anthropologists who focus on education, such as José Ignacio Murillo, are skeptical of its validity. Murillo argues that there are three characteristics of the human being: growth, freedom, and dependency, characteristics especially significant for the field of education.

Man is dependent not only on the laws of nature but also on others and on our previous decisions, both as individuals and as members of groups. The dependency of the human being can be observed when referring to the human being as the subject. This dependency can be understood and modified in different ways, but in essence, it cannot be eliminated. Thus, focusing exclusively on a notion of freedom as emancipation condemns the human being to an endless cycle of liberation. Truly, freedom as emancipation has served social injustice on some occasions. Nevertheless, if the end goal of freedom is emancipation, then people fighting the actions of those citizens who suggest any sort of dependency on other human beings would be justified. Including if such suggestions are put forward solely through discourses.

We must recover the classical conception of freedom, as the modern one condemns us to a suffocating and endless fight against our nature, against ourselves.

Freedom in higher education in the 21st century

Opposition to speech is not the only danger faced by the contemporary university. Violence on campuses is a growing phenomenon all across the Western world. Tensions around certain lectures or areas of research, or violence around certain visiting lecturers are becoming more common in both Europe and in America.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, in their popular book *The Coddling of the American*

Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure, argue that the iGen generation (born between 1995 and 2012) feels more vulnerable and fragile than previous generations. This feeling of vulnerability, together with an increasingly Manichean approach to public life, has led to more and more protests on campuses.

These sociological realities, together with the conception of freedom as emancipation, have proved to be an explosive combination. As I argued above, the main aim of education is the full development of human personality. To fully develop the student must engage in uncomfortable discussions, read authors he dislikes, and hear opinions outside of his comfort zone. As the previous president of the University of Chicago, Hanna Holborn Gray, put it, "education should not be intended to make people comfortable; it is meant to make them think. Universities should be expected to provide the conditions within which hard thought, and therefore strong disagreement, independent judgment, and the questioning of stubborn assumptions, can flourish in an environment of the greatest freedom." If freedom does not have to lead us anywhere, but exclusively to overcome oppression and define our own moral law, how should we convince an anxious student to tolerate and engage in a discussion with a lecturer that confronts one of the pillars of his own moral law? What purpose can we present the student with, if not truth, goodness, or beauty?

Indeed, sentences such as the Biblical claim that "the truth will set you free" (John 8:31) or Dostoyevsky's "beauty will save the world" are seen as provocative and insulting on some campuses today. But if we do not recognize the objectivity of truth, goodness, and beauty, then what is the point of science? Why are we spending so much energy on politics? And what are we doing in fine arts classes? Freedom, classically understood, is essential to higher education. It trains us to engage together in the quest for knowledge and fulfill our thirst for truth, goodness, and beauty.

Public authorities, as well as the officials of universities, should avoid embracing in education a comprehensive notion of goodness. Nevertheless, they should acknowledge that it is *through* knowledge that we are closer to getting to understanding goodness, truth, and beauty. We must remember that it is through earnest discussion and confrontation of ideas that we increase scientific knowledge. As said the old adage goes,

“An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.”

Let us return to where we began: the dining table. Not allowing speakers to engage in a discussion reminds me of how my parents treated me as a child, sending me out of the room to play or simply changing the subject. If we truly respect our students and hope they will develop into fully-fledged adults capable of having a mature exchange of ideas, we must ensure that campuses are open spaces for discussion. Anything less is infantilization.