1979

The Liberating Function of Philosophy in Education

Leonard M. Fleck
Indiana University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol10/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
THE LIBERATING FUNCTION OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION

Leonard M. Fleck

"But wherever ideas are effective, there is freedom."¹

The primary intent of this paper is not to advance or defend any novel philosophic theses. Rather, the purpose is to provide what I will call a "philosophic service" for undergraduate teachers of philosophy. More specifically, I am concerned both with the continued decline of interest in the liberal arts (philosophy in particular) among undergraduates and with the apparent inability of many teachers of the liberal arts to articulate satisfactorily a rationale for the pursuit of the liberal arts. In this paper I cannot analyze all the complex economic and socio-cultural factors that have conspired to minimize the importance of the liberal arts. But I can contribute to the articulation of an adequate rationale for the continued pursuit of the liberal arts, and I can do so in a way that will resonate with some of the dominant concerns of our contemporary undergraduates. Specifically, my contention is that a radical articulation of the function of the liberal arts is required, radical in the sense of going to the roots of the liberal arts. There we find that the liberal arts are liberal precisely to the extent that they contribute to the liberation of persons. The way in which each of the arts effects human liberation is something unique to that art. In this paper I shall concentrate on the way philosophy effects human liberation. Furthermore, I wish to situate my comments in the context of the introductory philosophy course, for I think that it is a mistake to believe that the liberal arts are somehow intrinsically liberating. How the liberal arts are conveyed will determine quite as much as their content whether or not they are humanly liberating.²
In inquiring of my students why they thought the liberal arts should be an integral part of a college education, I found that they tended to subscribe to one or another of four theories of the function of the liberal arts. They may be conveniently labelled as: (1) The Gourmand Theory ("We should study the liberal arts because it's good for us to have a taste of everything"); (2) The Cocktail Theory ("We should study the liberal arts because we'll be able to talk with more people from different backgrounds at parties and other such social affairs"); (3) The Bangles and Baubles Theory ("We should study the liberal arts because it's part of being cultured and we should have some culture (just as we should have a snazzy sportcoat or a frilly dress for special occasions); and (4) The Cogito, ergo Cogito Theory ("We should study the liberal arts because the liberal arts help us to think").

It should be noted that these theories are rarely presented by students with conviction, as philosophers are prone to present their theories. Rather, the dominant tone is one of resignation and acceptance. That is, they have been given reasons by their parents and teachers for studying the liberal arts, and, upon request, they will dutifully pass along these reasons to whoever asks the appropriate question. Clearly, however, these reasons are not an integral part of their thought or existence. Their existential relationship to these reasons is analogous to that of an airline information clerk to the information he dispenses.

What I would suggest is that the superficiality of this relationship is indicative of the superficiality of the reasons themselves. That is, the reasons advanced in connection with each of the theories mentioned above fail to make connection with the depths of an individual's being. They fail to exhibit the liberal arts as literally vital to man's being as man. Instead, they tend to suggest that the liberal arts are little more than cultural costuming. Certainly from a sociological perspective it is probably true that this latter claim more accurately represents present cultural attitudes than does the former. And that is precisely where the problem lies. The fashions in cultural costuming are changing. No longer is it necessary to include in one's mental wardrobe historical, philosophical, literary, and artistic suits. A few good business suits and sports outfits will do just fine.

Unfortunately, in responding to this challenge many defenders of the liberal arts have often been their own worst enemies. For they are ultimately responsible for advancing the superficial reasons referred to above, the reasons that have just enough truth in them to tranquilize the critical faculties. By way of illustration, consider the Gourmand Theory. The truth contained in the Gourmand Theory is that the liberal arts provide us with comprehensiveness of experience and knowledge. One of its chief deficiencies is its suggestion that significant comprehensiveness of experience and knowledge is attainable apart from depth and connectedness of experience and knowledge. To be liberally educated requires merely that one taste many different courses. What is involved here is a confusion between the well-informed man and the wise man.

Another deficiency of this theory is that it fails to offer any fundamental explanation of why comprehensiveness of experience and knowledge are valuable. I would contend that this explanation must be sought in the function of comprehensiveness of experience and knowledge in the attainment of human liberation. We are born creatures of necessity — physical, psychological, and cultural necessity. The process of liberating ourselves from these necessities by achieving a comprehensive knowledge of their workings in our lives
is an integral part of the process of our own humanization. It is precisely in this connection between the processes of liberation and humanization that we find a fundamental, practical, existential explanation of why comprehensiveness of experience and knowledge is valuable. This is the sort of explanation that transcends shifts in cultural fashions and that provides an enduring ground for the liberal arts.

Turning next to the Cocktail Theory, it contains the truth that by means of the liberal arts we can augment our ability to communicate effectively with others. No doubt this is a valuable skill, especially in connection with some occupations. But herein lies the main defect of this theory. It fails to explain in any fundamental way the role of communication in the constitution of human life. That is, it fails to indicate the connections that bind into an organic totality the processes of communication, liberation, and humanization. It suggests that communication is accidental rather than essential to human existence.

As in the case of the two preceding theories, the Bangles and Baubles Theory has an element of truth in it. Briefly, it is that the liberal arts provide one of the chief instruments for the transmission of culture from one generation to another. The chief failing of this theory is that it trivializes culture (as well as the liberal arts) by its suggestion that culture is a matter of personal, inner ornamentation, something ultimately inessential for the development of the human person. Furthermore, carried to its logical conclusion this theory is a source of social division and dehumanization in that culture becomes a barrier that divides economic, social, and political classes. Thus, culture, instead of being "the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings," as Dewey puts it, and instead of being a source of free and full communication (and hence, liberation), becomes an insurmountable obstacle to communication and a tool for effecting the submission of one social class to another.

The last of the theories to be considered is what I have dubbed the Cogito, ergo Cogito Theory. The truth in this theory is that one of the primary functions of the liberal arts is to augment and refine our abilities to think. A critical deficiency of this theory is that it loses sight of the instrumental function of thinking. It tends to make thinking into an end in itself, the result being a degeneration of the liberal arts into a sterile intellectualism. Certainly this is a common view among those in our culture who are not committed by faith alone to believe in the value of the liberal arts. But it seems to me that the liberal arts ought to make a fundamental, practical difference in the quality of our living, a difference as demonstrable as those made by business and science. I would suggest that such a difference may be specified in terms of the liberating function of the liberal arts in our thought and action. This point will be elaborated upon in the next section of this paper.

Before moving on to the next section though, a response is in order to the possible charge that I have been guilty of caricaturing otherwise reputable positions. I will readily grant that more defensible versions of all the theories I have mentioned have been put forth, and by reputable thinkers. But the views of these thinkers have not been the object of my criticism. Rather, my object has been the popular views that circulate among undergraduates, and even their teachers. For this is where the practical problem lies and the point at which a suitable response must be directed. I shall now turn to the task of formulating that response.

II.

As I indicated in my opening remarks, the remainder of this paper will be given over to a discussion of the liberating function specific to philosophy as one of the liberal arts. Furthermore, the context for these remarks will be that of an introductory philosophy course.

The beginning of wisdom is an accurate knowledge of one's own present condition. Herbert Marcuse, following the lead of Hegel and Marx, has remarked: "All liberation
depends on the consciousness of servitude, and the emergence of this consciousness is always hampered by the predominance of needs and satisfactions which, to a great extent, have become the individual's own. If the liberal arts in general and philosophy in particular are going to be recognized by students as having a liberating role to play in their lives, then they will first have to become conscious of their own servitude. This is by no means an easy task, for the vast majority of students recognize only overt forms of political repression as servitude. They are almost totally insensitive to non-political, covert forms of servitude. This may be explained in part by the fact that we live in an affluent, highly mobile (socially and physically), highly democratic society. We have so many liberties and opportunities that it is difficult to imagine what further liberation might consist in. It is even more difficult to believe that this further liberation could be more fundamental and more necessary for living a good life than the specific liberties we already possess. This, then, is the problem with which I, as an undergraduate teacher of philosophy, must cope.

In my teaching I approach this problem by trying to make evident to my students four specific modes of philosophic servitude and four corresponding modes of philosophic liberation. I usually begin by acknowledging my own philosophic commitments. Briefly, these may be covered by the label 'symbolic interactionism.' John Dewey and George Herbert Mead are generally taken to be the sources of this position. Roughly speaking, one of the defining tenets of symbolic interactionism is that the symbols we employ for purposes of representing reality are in fact constitutive of reality. The world that we as human beings inhabit is a socio-symbolic construct. That is, man's world is a world of objects, things that have been invested with social meaning. Among the significant objects in this world are selves. They are first and foremost products of social interaction. Only much later in their development do they acquire the capacity for determining their own being. But even then the exercise of the capacity for self-determination is severely restricted by the particular world (i.e., an organized system of social beliefs, social values, and social institutions) into which a self is born.

This brings us to our first form of servitude, cultural servitude. The social world into which we are born does not present itself to us as a world, but rather, as the world, the natural world, the right world, reality as it is and must be. In this connection Whitehead writes: "In each period there is a general form of the forms of thought; and, like the air we breathe, such a form is so translucent, and so pervading, and so seemingly necessary, that only by extreme effort can we become aware of it." Whitehead, of course, is referring to the philosophy that defines an age or culture. Theodore Roszak in his book The Making of a Counter Culture supplies us with one contemporary example of Whitehead's point. His concern is with the subtle and pervasive way in which technocracy has become the ruling force in our lives. He observes that "it is characteristic of the technocracy to render itself ideologically invisible. Its assumptions about reality and its values become as unobtrusively pervasive as the air we breathe."

The servitude involved in the situation described by Roszak and Whitehead is really of a twofold sort. First, there is the servitude of having no options or severely restricted options. To the extent that we are restricted to the perspective of our culture, we are restricted to the options permitted by the beliefs, values, and institutions of our culture. To the extent that a single philosophy shapes that culture, our servitude is as fundamental and as encompassing as it can possibly be. I make this point explicitly for purposes of emphasizing the incomparable significance of both philosophic servitude and philosophic liberation. No other dimension of human thought or existence has the breadth or depth or intricacy and multiplicity of implications that characterize philosophy.
The second form of servitude suggested by the remarks of Roszak and Whitehead is that associated with the lack of certain conceptual sensibilities. By the phrase ‘conceptual sensibilities’ I mean the various languages or conceptual frameworks appropriate to the various disciplines, languages which we must internalize if we are going to be sensitive to or aware of the objects that comprise a particular dimension of reality. For example, most of us do not possess the conceptual sensibilities of an entomologist; and consequently, we are satisfied to divide the world of insects into crawling insects and flying insects. That is all we need to know in order to buy the right kind of bug spray. But for the dedicated entomologist his insect-world is infinitely richer than this crude division would suggest. The point of these remarks is that to the extent that we lack certain conceptual sensibilities our lives will be necessarily determined by the objects and events that comprise the corresponding dimension of reality. If we lack the conceptual sensibilities of an entomologist and are bitten by an African bee, then we will probably die shortly without being aware of the need to seek medical attention. Likewise, to the extent that we lack meteorological, political, economic, or philosophic sensibilities we will be unable to respond intelligently to these dimensions of our world. Instead, our lives in these respects will be subjected to the workings of necessity, both physical and social necessities. And in the case of a lack of philosophic sensibilities, our lives will be subjected to a necessity of the most fundamental and pervasive sort possible.

What then is required of an introductory philosophy course if it is to effect any significant degree of philosophic liberation? First, it ought to present a variety of philosophic viewpoints in as sympathetic a way as possible. Such an approach is usually enough to free an individual from enslavement to the pre-reflective “natural” philosophy of his culture or social group. Second, an introductory philosophy course ought to help an individual begin the process of acquiring as broad and complex a set of philosophic sensibilities as possible in order that he might begin to respond in a free and intelligent way to the philosophic dimension of his world. I emphasize the word ‘respond’ because I wish to bring out the ultimately practical end of the development of these sensibilities. They liberate action in that they suggest new ends for action and new means for achieving these ends, the result being greater control over our environment.

Perhaps nowhere is the practical import of these sensibilities exhibited more clearly than in the history of the development of science and technology. Unfortunately, as Dewey so often lamented, our philosophic sensibilities have not kept pace with our scientific sensibilities. Hence, today we have a twenty-first-century science and technology interpreted and responded to in the light of a seventeenth-century philosophy. If a philosophy were merely a personal set of beliefs and values toted about by individuals in their heads, then perhaps we could tolerate this disparity. But a philosophy determines the ultimate possibilities of social action within a culture. It determines the kinds of social and political and economic institutions that can be conceived and constructed within a culture. If the sinews and muscles of a culture are constituted by its political and economic organization and its technological capacities, then the central nervous system of that culture is its philosophy. It determines in a fundamental way the range and refinement of all the responses of that culture. It is the communications systems of a culture. It determines in a basic way both the form and the content of what is communicable. As Dewey writes, communication is uniquely instrumental “as liberating us from the otherwise overwhelming pressure of events and enabling us to live in a world of things that have meaning.” Thus, the liberality of a philosophy, its capacity to create free and full communication at the deepest levels, is the best index of the liberality of a culture and its institutions. Likewise, the illiberality of a philosophy will be a good index of the depth
of servitude within a given culture. In either case, failure on the part of an individual to acquire the requisite philosophic sensibilities will mean servitude of the profoundest sort, for he will be able to neither recognize his condition nor to fashion the instruments needed to remedy it. Thus, the provision of these sensibilities is the first liberating function of philosophy.

The second liberating function of philosophy has to do with giving a student the ability to recognize and analyze the functioning of paradigms within his thought and within his culture. By a ‘paradigm’ I mean a metaphor that structures in a fundamental way our patterns of thinking and acting with respect to a particular field of experience or inquiry. What makes paradigms of special interest to philosophers is that they structure a field of thought and action in a fundamental way. What makes paradigms especially relevant to this paper is that they usually operate at a pre-reflective level. That is, we often think and act in accord with them without self-consciously recognizing that we are doing so. For this reason I think it fair to say that we are enslaved by such paradigms.

One of the more controversial cases of paradigm recognition and rejection in recent years revolves around a book entitled The Myth of Mental Illness by a psychiatrist, Thomas Szasz.9 Szasz does not doubt that there are all sorts of people who suffer from delusions, hallucinations, and the inability to establish satisfactory interpersonal relationships. What he does doubt, however, is our ability to respond effectively and intelligently to these people so long as our institutional patterns of response are governed by the medical paradigm which requires that we respond to these problems in the same general way as we would to any physical illness. I cannot argue the merits of Szasz’s case here. The point is that for a long time this paradigm governed a broad range of social responses, apparently without anyone being critically aware of this fact.

Another critical example of the functioning of paradigms may be gleaned from a speech four years ago by Senator “Scoop” Jackson during the Mid-East oil crisis. He spoke then of oil as “the lifeblood of the nation.” If this is literally true, then the moral implications are nothing short of astonishing. For we would be warranted on grounds of self-defense in waging an atomic war against the Arabs to guarantee our oil supply. On the other hand, if oil is just a very important commodity for an industrialized nation, and if we could survive as a nation with a reduced oil supply and a reduced G.N.P., then the moral grounds for waging war against the Arabs would be non-existent. Again, my point is that this paradigm has governed, and continues to govern, in a pre-reflective way our political responses. To the extent that this is true, we are enslaved by this paradigm. I take it then that another of the practical, fundamental ways in which philosophy can contribute to human liberation is by sensitizing us to the existence and operation of paradigms in our culture.

A third source of philosophic servitude is to be found in the philosophic presuppositions that govern our thought and action. Like paradigms, they tend to govern our thought in a pre-reflective way. Hence, they are not obviously available for critical scrutiny. Moreover, since these presuppositions are of a philosophic sort, their influence tends to be pervasive. A simple example that I use in class to illustrate the enslaving features of unscrutinized philosophic presuppositions is the question, “Who made the world?” The very asking of the question presupposes that we accept as true at least three claims, namely, that the world had a beginning, that the world was made, and that a personal being was responsible for making the world. All of these claims may well be true. But the point is that if we have not explicitly recognized these presuppositions we will unknowingly be locked into certain modes of questioning, thinking, and acting which may or may not prove fruitful. In short, our lives will be necessarily rather than freely determined in the relevant respects. A third important respect, then, in which philosophy contributes to human liberation is by providing us with the critical tools we
need for recognizing and analyzing the operative philosophic presuppositions in our individual and collective thought and action. Furthermore, this third form of liberation is not just a liberation from our old presuppositions, but it is a liberation for asking new questions. Philosophic presuppositions constitute the horizons of our thoughts. In the very act of recognizing them we move beyond them. We cannot hope to get beyond all such horizons, for they are logically among the conditions of rationality and freedom. But we can hope to push those horizons back as far as possible.

A fourth form of servitude which it is the task of philosophy to save us from is the isolatedness of concrete immediacy. We are too enamoured by facts, data, tidbits of information. We fear theories and abstractions unless they are severely controlled by facts. But if we examine the history of ideas, what we find is that the great liberators of human thought and action have not been the fact-gatherers primarily but the men of speculative vision. In this regard Whitehead writes: "Human life is driven forward by its dim apprehension of notions too general for its existing language. Such ideas cannot be grasped singly, one by one in isolation. They require that mankind advances in its apprehension of the general nature of things, so as to conceive systems of ideas elucidating each other." In a similar vein Dewey writes:

As long as we worship science and are afraid of philosophy we shall have no great science; we shall have a lagging and halting continuation of what is thought and said elsewhere. As far as any plea is implicit in what has been said, it is, then, a plea for the casting off of that intellectual timidity which hampers the wings of imagination, a plea for speculative audacity, for more faith in ideas, sloughing off a cowardly reliance upon those partial ideas to which we are wont to give the name of facts.

Two of the liberating characteristics of philosophy are its generality and its comprehensive systematicity. The generality of philosophy is what saves us from being trapped within the circle of beliefs that are tribal, sectarian, and provincial. It keeps alive our ideals by suggesting that the present embodiment of our ideals need not be their final embodiment. This point is well documented by Whitehead in his Adventures of Ideas with respect to the ideal of freedom. He shows how this ideal first emerged among the Greeks at the time of Plato, received concrete but inadequate embodiment in the feeble democratic institutions of the Greeks, and was judged as an appropriate ideal of life for only some few men. The history of the West has been the history of the growth of this ideal in the form of more and more adequate embodiment in our political, social, and economic institutions. But the point is that even now the ideal of freedom serves to liberate us by its suggestion of the inadequacy of its present institutional embodiments. We realize that merely giving women the vote did not adequately effect their liberation, nor did merely repealing segregation laws adequately effect the liberation of blacks. But we can have this realization only because we operate with an ideal of freedom that is abstract enough that it can never be perfectly embodied. Without such ideals we would be enslaved to the status quo.

The other point suggested by Whitehead and Dewey is that liberation is a function of the comprehensive systematicity of our thinking. In the passage from Whitehead quoted at the beginning of this paper he said that freedom was to be found wherever ideas are effective. But as he observes later, ideas have to be coordinated in order to be effective. The task of philosophy is to provide us with the most encompassing forms of coordination possible for our ideas. Again, wherever we find a revolution occurring in thought, a liberation from old ways of thinking, we never find that a single fact brought about that revolution. Rather, it was a massive coordination of ideas.
In trying to convince my students of the importance of having a self-conscious philosophic perspective of their own, I often play for them the old Beatles’ song *Nowhere Man*. The relevant lyrics are:

Doesn’t have a point of view,
knows not where he’s going to,
isn’t he a bit like you and me?
Nowhere Man please listen,
you don’t know what you’re missing,
Nowhere Man, the world is at your command.\(^1\)

The Nowhere Man is very much like a piece of desert tumbleweed. He does not seem to be confined at all. He seems to possess absolute freedom. He has the world at his command. But this is meant to be ironic. The Nowhere Man, far from being absolutely free, is absolutely enslaved by whatever forces, fads, or fashions are creating a stir in his environment. And the same situation obtains for an individual who has not thought out his own philosophic viewpoint. He will be forced to move with whatever moral and social pressures happen to be dominating his environment. But to the extent that an individual does have a reflective philosophic point of view, and not just an uncoordinated assortment of beliefs, he can resist these environmental pressures and choose for himself the direction in which he wishes to move. In short, philosophy, by virtue of its comprehensive systematicity, is a fundamental source of human liberation.

III.

In this concluding section I wish to develop a point I made in my introductory remarks. It is that while philosophy possesses a liberating potentiality, whether or not that potentiality is brought to actualization in the classroom is as much a function of factors intrinsic to philosophy as it is a function of how philosophy is presented. Philosophy must be presented in a liberating way if it is to be an effective source of liberation.

Paolo Freire in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* distinguishes between two methods of education which he refers to as the “banking” and “problem-posing” methods of education. The banking method identifies education with information dissemination. Students are treated essentially as things to be stocked with information. Students are expected to be passive, manageable, adaptable beings. As Freire observes: “The more completely they [students] accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.”\(^1\) For Freire this is educational oppression, for it involves turning men into automatons by negating their ontological vocation to be more fully human, to develop themselves as free beings. By way of contrast, the problem-posing method of education rests on the assumption that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”\(^1\) The problem-posing method of education insists that cognition be an act of inquiry rather than a transferral of information; for that is more consistent with the fact that man is an unfinished, incomplete being living in an incomplete world, that man is a historical being, a creative being, a free being, a being always capable of transcending himself.

By way of illustrating the problem-posing method of education I would like to describe briefly the project that students in my introductory philosophy courses presently work on. The project involves the construction of a “utopian society,” by which I mean, not some pie-in-the-sky utterly unrealistic society, but a society that is better in specifiable
respects than our present society. The project itself is divided into fifteen practical problem areas, e.g., problems related to human sexuality, abortion and euthanasia as means of population control, biological and psychological engineering, capital punishment, the distribution of wealth, the function of government, the function of laws, natural rights, civil disobedience, the nature of education, and so on. The class is divided into groups of seven, each of which is responsible for constructing its own utopia. Each group as a group writes a ten-page paper outlining their utopia and defining and justifying the ultimate goals and values of that society. Each member of the group must in addition write two five-page papers dealing with two of the remaining fourteen problem areas in the project. All problem areas are covered by each group. Moreover, these problems are discussed in the light of the ultimate goals and values that each group has committed itself to, so that what should emerge is a comprehensive and consistent vision of that society. At the end of the semester each group presents and defends its group paper before the rest of the class.

What I take to be the specifically liberating features of this project are as follows. (1) It encourages comprehensive, systematic thinking, for a variety of problems have to be dealt with in the light of the ultimate goals and values of a given society. (2) It requires students to make their own inquiries. No "right" answers are imposed on them. Moreover, this inquiry is carried on as a community, thus emphasizing that knowledge and liberation are primarily social affairs. (3) It encourages the development of critical thinking since the student must recognize the deficiencies of their own society before they can construct a better society. (4) The presentations at the end of the semester and the discussion during the semester within each group make evident the variety of viable philosophic options available. (5) This project enables students to see the ultimately practical thrust of philosophy. They recognize that philosophy makes a difference in the sort of social institutions we have, whether or not we may be aware of it. (6) Through the recognition of the philosophic dimension of our present social institutions students begin to develop the philosophic sensibilities that I mentioned earlier as a necessary component of philosophic liberation. Lastly, (7) students begin to recognize that they have been in a state of servitude, a very fundamental form of servitude, a very subtle but nevertheless real form of servitude. And they begin to realize that philosophy in particular, and the liberal arts in general, have a very practical function in human life, namely, that of human liberation.

NOTES

2 The reader will find the work of Marshall McLuhan quite enlightening on the general point of this remark. See especially his Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: New American Library, 1964).
5 Dewey thinks Jefferson was mistaken in believing that political freedom could be maintained without being based on a broader cultural freedom. See John Dewey, Freedom and Culture (New York: Capricorn books, 1963, orig. 1939), p. 6.
6 Whitehead, p. 12.
14 Freire, in Ogilvy, p. 441.