

Education and the Flight from Decision

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Education for freedom involves helping students develop inner resources which assist them in making effective decisions. It also necessitates clarifying some of the ambiguities surrounding current concepts of "freedom."

A FRIEND from Kansas tells of a farmer in his district who encountered the familiar problems of finding a hired hand whom he considered worth his keep. One day fortune seemed to smile upon him in the form of a man a neighbor had recommended. The first day the new hand harvested the back field, plowed the creek stretch, mended the woods fence, and topped off his day's work by feeding the stock. Thoroughly elated at such a find, the farmer retired in high good spirits. When the following day proved rainy, he decided to reward his hand by suggesting he merely sort out the big potatoes in the pile in the cellar and take the rest of the morning off. When his hand had not put in an appearance by lunch time, the farmer went down the cellar to investigate. His new employee was there sure enough, sitting before the potato pile, a potato in each hand, sweat on his brow, and three or four little spuds in one corner and an equal number of big ones in another. Upon seeing his employer, the hired hand dropped the potatoes with an oath, wiped his brow, and announced he was quitting. Thoroughly taken

aback, the farmer demanded what was wrong. "Well," said the hand, "I didn't mind plowin' or harvestin' or feedin' the stock, but it's these decisions that get me."

Fundamentally this flight from decision is the problem of freedom in our age. For freedom is nothing more than the power to make one's own decisions and to carry them into effect. Were all our decisions as simple to make as those of the potato-sorting, most of us would not find our freedom as ill-fitting a garment as we do. But when our decisions must call into play the full gamut of our ideals, our hopes, our knowledges and our limitations, we are too often conscious that we have not yet fully grown into the clothes of freedom. As teachers we must soberly recognize the discomfort and the challenge it presents if we would forestall the flight from freedom which it bodes. This is a challenge worthy of our best efforts but not characterized by any surety of success. For the failure to build characters capable of wearing the cloth of freedom has in our time led many to flee from it, and this may in itself give us pause in assaying our strengths for the task.

But the task in America is more delicate than it has been in many countries. Within our own day in Europe and

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Asia what Erich Fromm appropriately termed the *Escape from Freedom* has led many to accept either the totalitarianism of the right or of the left. Here in America few have thus far hearkened to the call of authoritarianism and strong champions are arising to challenge those who would prey upon our uncertainties. We cannot underestimate the contributions of these champions to the cause of freedom and we can glory in the fact that many of them have been teachers. But the abiding danger here in America arises less from overt restraints upon our freedoms than from our lack of inner resources to make independent decisions and the drift toward conformity which this has occasioned. Without the inner resources to make decisions the lack of external restraints is no guarantee of effective choice. It is our professional role as teachers educating for freedom to develop those inner resources which expedite effective decisions and to help students resolve the ambiguities which becloud freedom. This can only be done by consciously creating in our classrooms those conditions which promote freedom and by openly confronting the ambiguities which beset the concept.

Building Conditions of Freedom in the Classroom

It has been said that to live is to stand before alternatives; it might equally be said that to live freely is to choose considerably among alternatives. This is the first condition of freedom and it imposes our first teaching imperative: *To educate for freedom we must provide choice situations in which students can make considered*

decisions. Education has long been caught on the horns of the dilemma of whether the teacher as a professional person should make all choices in classroom instruction or whether students are qualified to make decisions for themselves. As is so often the case with dilemmas, this is probably a false one; and thoughtful protagonists on either side have in practice qualified their positions in terms of the relevant competence of students. But less agreement in practice appears when other criteria implied by the concept of freedom are applied.

The first of these further criteria is that *the choice situations which are provided should be real choice situations.* Too much of what passes for democratic education upon careful scrutiny reveals itself to be masked manipulation. Any teacher who consistently finds students reaching his own preconceived conclusions might well exercise the caution of re-examining the choice situations presented. Nor can any real decision be arrived at in a situation in which alternatives may not be reasonably evaluated by students. The second of the further criteria for freedom of decision is not always as clearly perceived. Authority need not be limited to some external force which applies restraints; the inner barriers to freedom are often fully as high and insurmountable as the external ones. The adventuresome teacher who is constantly thwarted by students' insistence that "we've never done it this way before" will bear willing witness to these barriers. The narrow conscience with rigid prescriptions, the ingrained and unexamined expectations which previous experiences have built into us,

can be as harsh taskmasters as any external potentate. The expanding and self-inquiring conscience is always world-building; the narrow conscience filled with rigid prescriptions is always world-constricting. *If alternatives are to be faced squarely, it is just as important that internal barriers be examined as that external barriers be down.* This is no clarion call for moral anarchy but rather a summons to teachers to lead in self-investigation. If students make decisions without plumbing the depths of the self to discover the sources of their decisions, we are but substituting the hidden authority of unexamined expectations for the open authority of the teacher,—a sorry exchange.

Psychologically the problem of freedom in our age is one of security. This imposes the second imperative for teachers: *To educate for freedom we must vest our choice situations with an atmosphere of security.* This stands though many decisions in life are insecure, and unhappy because insecure; for security is not some external situation but a feeling within the individual, and as such it can be built into persons. Those persons who are in later life able to stand up against error, those who are able to non-conform when non-conformity is proscribed, are precisely those persons who in early life have built an inner security. In part this security is built by avoiding moral aloneness. Decisions which differ from those of others need not produce insecurity if one recognizes that he holds common values with those others. But the need for security places two further restrictions upon education for decision-making. First, *security in decision-making*

can be provided only by preserving some limits. Most effective planning, and hence most freedom, exists within limits and, where such limits are unreasonable, in working to modify them. Honest education, however, calls for making the limits which bound student choices as clear and explicit as possible. Second, *security in decision-making can be provided by not calling everything up for question at once.* A human personality is not destroyed by reshaping its values but by obliterating its whole constellation of values. Anti-democratic values are given up by students as they see that these values conflict with other humane values which they hold. Good teaching modifies slowly and avoids that insecurity which produces the flight from decisions.

The role of freedom in the development of the self is one of its most important facets. Significant choices build significant selves; insignificant choices build insignificant selves. This presents us with our third imperative: *To build for freedom we must vest school choices with the quality of significance.* In the kind of expanding universe in which we live it is easy for individual significance to lose out in the race with infinity. Significance can best be assured by centering upon the supreme worth of the individual. The surest way of doing violence to such a concept is by reserving to students the "unimportant" decisions. But significance can also be gained through an expanding conception of oneself: the pluralists have pointed out that one fulfills oneself in a multiplicity of group affiliations. Choices among such affiliations and action in them is one facet of freedom. Inside of school and outside of

school, in the classroom and outside of the classroom, one part of education for liberty will be in encouraging a wide range of democratic group affiliations which will provide the individual with opportunities for self-actualization and the sense of significance.

A final imperative of education for freedom is one which is deeply engrained in democratic thinking: *To build for freedom we must practice making decisions in an air of reasonableness.* It has been a fundamental credo of modern libertarians that education is the tool whereby the rationality of the populace is assured. But rationality is not an easy criterion to apply, for rational action calls for discovering and predicting the relevant consequences before acting. But perception and prediction call for difficult intellectual skills. For example, the actual environment often prohibits physical trial and error and demands symbolic control of conditions and consequences. Moreover, our words and symbols carry a freightage of magic all their own; and decisive action calls for stripping off affective coloration during consideration and reinserting it during action.

Effective control of situations also involves negating the usurpation of real thought by borrowed thought. Freedom demands an intellectual honesty which searches for real reasons rather than parrots the reasons of others. Consequently effective teaching for freedom is always more concerned with consciously developing and applying criteria in the process of decision-making than in measuring the products of decision-making against some ready-made answer.

Clarifying the Ambiguities of Freedom

When teachers have set up the conditions of freedom in their classrooms, their task is but half finished; for the concept of freedom is ambiguous in our day and we will not serve its cause if our students go forth confused as to its meaning. Three such ambiguities illustrate our job. The first of these is the confusion which confounds *freedom from* and *freedom to*. This confusion developed historically when emergent groups saw the church or state as imposing restrictions upon them: the cause of freedom then became identified with removing restrictions. But in our day most of the old annoying restrictions are gone and yet we often find ourselves unable to realize our full potentialities. The implications of this ambiguity for the classroom are weighty. Too much of our concern with developing free men has been devoted to relaxing or eliminating the rules which govern our schools and classrooms on the assumption that once rules are lifted, students are free. True freedom isn't in breaking a rule, following a rule, or living without a rule. As teachers we should be more interested in developing those tools which produce effective decisions and in developing in students those attitudes which view decision-making as the heart of freedom. When such tools and attitudes have been built into students the rules become increasingly superfluous. Teachers and schools justly come in for criticism when classroom rules have been lifted (in the name of freedom) in situations where students are not learning the processes of thought and

action which enable them to make and act upon considered decisions.

The second ambiguity which demands clarification is the supposed opposition between *freedom* and *authority*. It is customary to point out that authority should be limited to the realm of fact. (It is certain that one renders ill-service to the cause of freedom and democracy if one allows the idea to develop that the way to determine the number of legs on an ostrich is by a class vote.) Furthermore it is generally accepted that the common man is as expert as anyone on value questions. As most facile distinctions, this one between facts and values is neither too accurate nor too helpful. It is true that freedom requires choices among values, but this is not to say that any answer to a question involving values is as "good" as any other answer. (How often we hear the student complaint: "This is only a matter of opinion and my opinion is as good as anybody else's!") Most important questions in our day involve values and any such conception of value can only lead to anarchy, not liberty. Nor need we accept conformity as the only alternative. But if we do not we must be willing to take the time to deal with questions at the level of differing values, teaching students to examine their values in terms of their consequences. For until we develop in students the habit of

testing individual values for their consistency with other values they hold, they cannot be expected to learn to make decisions which they will be willing to act upon. For when values are suddenly found to be in conflict, indecision results; and we teachers would be sorry spectators of the familiar flight from indecision into the arms of authoritarianism.

The final ambiguity which we must help clarify is that which comes from confounding freedom for oneself with freedom for everyone. It is easy for man to universalize those particular conditions which set *him* free into those which would constitute "true" liberty for his neighbor. But too frequently the liberty of one man is the bondage of another. Thus freedom is ultimately the freedom to be different. The respect for the person who disagrees is one we must build in any free society, and our classrooms full of the rebels of youth are ideal grounds for building this respect. As teachers we must not only practice ourselves but encourage in our students the respect for the other person's point of view. This respect need not be the value-neutral one that "his view is just as good as mine" but rather the value-positive attitude that "his is a view worth considering and investigating." Not the equality of conformity but the equality of diversity is the hallmark of freedom.

GIVE ME the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties. . . . And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to worse in a free and open encounter. Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing.—JOHN MILTON, *Areopagitica*. London, 1644.

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