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Arts that Liberate

(*De Litteris* talk, April 2005)

J. Melvin Woody

Imagine yourself floating loose in outer space. You have just become untethered from the space station you were attempting to repair, perhaps. Liberated from the pull of gravity, you are now free as a bird! Or are you? When you wave your arms in order to fly back to the space station -- nothing happens. You try a few strokes of the Australian crawl - to no avail! Utterly without limits for the first time in your life, you are not free, but impotent! Except that you are not without limits. For you know very well that your supply of air will run out in 30 minutes!

Fortunately, since this is only an exercise of the imagination, we can fix that. We will simply liberate you from your body - disincarnate you! Now you are better than free as a bird. You are fancy free! You can go wherever you wish, be whatever you like!

But be careful what you wish for - as many a victim of fairies and leprechauns has learned. For whatever you fancy, that you will be -- though only as long as you think so! You have not merely *three* wishes, but an endless supply. But you cannot choose amongst them because you cannot choose because you cannot consider your options - because whatever you think, that you are. You may wish you were back on terra firma, but without a body to hold you down, the terra can never be firm enough to locate you - and you could never gain a foothold. You would be at the mercy of your own free associations, as little in control of yourself as you are of your dreams. You could not realize your highest hopes, nor escape your worst fears -- since you could not take precautions against them without thinking of them and without a body, *cogito* would indeed be *sum* - a sort of certainty that left Descartes in total doubt about everything -- including his own ability to survive into the next moment. You dare not even sleep, since perchance, you may not dream -- and cannot even be sure that if you stop thinking, you will be able to begin again.

Well, enough of this nightmare. I assume that I was asked to speak in this series because I wrote a book about freedom and therefore should be able to say something about liberty and the liberal arts. So I set to thinking about arts that liberate and how they liberate. Instead of delving into history or dictionaries in order to discover which arts are liberal or how they came to be so called, I decided to begin with freedom and ask how the arts *can* free us, whether and why they should be called "liberal."

Human beings are free agents insofar as we can determine ourselves through our choices and actions. But *choice* would be meaningless if we could not *act* - and disembodied spirits floating in a limitless void cannot act. We can only act in a resistant world that limits and opposes our efforts - but which also supplies us with all our opportunities. And yet, because we can and do determine ourselves by choosing and acting, the very exercise of our freedom may prove self-destructive. My choices and actions close off some possibilities while opening others, and the new horizon may prove much narrower than the old, leaving me with less options and, in that sense, less free than I was - or than I would have been had I chosen otherwise. It is not merely that I change my situation with every move that I make, but that I change myself in the process. To determine myself is not to leave myself the same.

For purposes of this talk, I will use the word "liberty" to refer to the freedom shaped or determined by self-determination and "liberation" to refer to any process that expands the horizon of options. And so I ask, how can education liberate - and why should it? Why is liberty a good worth pursuing?

In the book, I argue that in the absence of any proof on a single, univocal definition of the good, freedom is the highest common good because it allows each to pursue his own conception of the good insofar as it is compatible with the freedom of others to do likewise. As I have just defined the terms, I should say that liberty is the highest common good. I therefore set out to establish the conditions whereby the exercise of freedom will preserve, sustain and expand liberty rather than constraining or destroying it. I find that that depends upon how we choose, how our characters are formed through our choices and how our further choices are formed by our characters - and upon how we relate to other free agents, since the world in which we choose and act is social as well as natural. In each of these dimensions, I argue that liberty depends upon striking a mean between surrender and withdrawal, between submitting to the order and vicissitudes of the world and withdrawing to cultivate my own garden or business or attend to the order of my soul in stoic indifference to the course of the world - or in a narcotic haze.

Now, how does this pertain to education? How can education serve this highest common good by liberating those who participate in that process, both students and faculty?

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I named the book "*Freedom's Embrace*" because it argues that the popular notion of freedom as the absence of limitations or the ability to do as I please is a misconception, as vague and vacuous as our opening flight of fancy. There can be no freedom without necessity, without a resistant world to push against and a resisting body with which to push. Freedom has its own necessities, then, its own exigencies, which I undertook to chart in the book. For if

freedom has inherent limits and being limited by the necessities of a surrounding world is primary among these, then it's no good being oblivious to those limits, to the extraneous necessities of the surrounding world and of one's own body. Freedom can only be thwarted by failure to face the facts and recognize the nature and scope of the necessities with which it has to cope. A freedom that does not *know* its own limits is also blind to what is really possible.

And so freedom can be served by arts that seek to appreciate the world in its own right - to apprehend the range and subtleties of necessity in all its variety. That, of course, is the role of the sciences - and of all the arts so far as they seek to be scientific. They liberate freedom from fantasy by confronting it with what can and cannot be or be done. We so often hear of the arts *and* sciences that we must beware of temptation to oppose the two and ignore how much art there is *to* science. Because the sciences seek to discover the ways of the world as it is apart from freedom, we are tempted to ignore the way in which science itself is an exercise *of* freedom, how much ingenuity and imagination goes into the design of experiments, what self-discipline is required to curb wishful thinking in order to serve the purpose of disclosing the world as it is *apart* from our purposes. The art and discipline that has enabled that self-discipline and yet nurtured the scientific imagination throughout its history is the science of mathematics and pure, deductive logic. One has only to recall Galileo's application of geometry to moving projectiles, Descartes' discovery of analytic geometry - (or was it his invention?) -- or Newton's and Leibniz's development of the infinitesimal calculus -- to appreciate the power of this most abstract and rigorous of sciences. It gains that power by its very abstraction, which liberates mathematics from the need to experiment and by its own ascetic rigor, whereby it binds itself to the study of pure deductive necessity, even when exploring the logic of probability. Yet that abstraction and that ascetic rigor liberate mathematics to range everywhere and inform anywhere that it can find a foothold in empirical science.

Yet what could serve freedom better than thus learning its own limits by coming to terms with necessity? The record of the sciences in opening up the range of human possibilities and opportunities speaks for itself. Take away all the resources that we have gained from what the sciences have learned about the necessities of our world and the exigencies of our own embodied existence and the horizon of human possibilities would shrivel. So far from constraining us within a prison of causal necessity, five centuries of scientific exploration have expanded the scope of human opportunity and utterly transformed our world --- for better or worse.

For the world in which we actually reside is not the world as it is independently of human freedom and purpose and agency, but an arena of human action and combat. The nature we encounter is not nature void of all purpose or final causation, but a nature exploited and

abused and polluted by human efforts, often at cross purposes with one another, leaving fields of mines where once there were fields of grain or poppies, where once before that, there were only steppes and veldts or prairies.

And it is terribly important that we understand that - that we recognize that we do not live in the "natural order of the cosmos," that things have not always been as they are now and that they need not and will not remain so. The historian's art liberates us from the illusion that the status quo is the natural order of things that we dare not disturb lest we reap the whirlwind. Mircea Eliade piles up mountains of examples to show how archaic, pre-literate societies resist and even abolish history by insisting upon the myth of the eternal return of the same and by establishing and repeating a ritual calendar that ensures the perpetuation of their culture and their social order. For without writing, how could a culture possibly survive without repetition? Indeed, the life of a culture, like that of a language, *depends* upon repetition, upon the reiteration of the same forms, from generation to generation. On the other hand, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has pointed out, without writing, how could they ever know that their culture *has* changed? By showing us that and how the prevailing state of the world and of society has come into being, the historian teaches us both the power and the limits of human agency. For we not only learn that the present order is neither natural nor sacred, but subject to change through human choice and agency, but also that it is fragile and vulnerable just because it *is* subject to change, because it *is* neither natural nor sacred, but caught in the cross purposes of multiple human agency. So, on the one hand, history teaches us that we need not submit to the status quo -- but that, on the other hand, what endures and what and how that order changes depends upon whether and how we participate in the historical process. I state these "lessons" in very general terms. But of course, the discipline of the historian's art depends upon knitting together every relevant particular detail into a coherent whole. In acquiring that discipline, the student learns that no event and no piece of evidence can be taken at face value because its import and evidential value depend upon how it fits into the construction of the whole. So the historical *method* is like historical *consciousness* in that it fosters the capacity to look beyond the immediate horizon, the immediate bit of data, to a wider horizon of possible meanings the both constrain and illuminate the interpretation of the here and now.

And yet, the mind should not become so caught up in the particulars of historical process as to overlook the general patterns of events and of social processes that enable people to have stable and reliable expectations about one another notwithstanding the diversity of individual projects and purposes. So there is a need for social sciences that liberate the mind from the torrent of historical particulars by seeking to identify the invariant or repetitive patterns of human interactions and to explain why those generalities persist or recur notwithstanding

the erosive stream of historical events. Sociology and economics liberate by seeking to rise above the helter skelter welter of particular agents and events to the level of the general forms of interpersonal interaction that enable individuals to base their own choices on reasonably reliable and stable expectations about the behavior of others - whether they accomplish by a Comtean method of induction from particulars, as sociology proposed from the outset, or by deductive inferences about the choices of rational utility maximizers in a friction free market, as traditional or neo-classical economics attempts to do. If the historian succeeds by weaving the multiple threads of evidence at his or her disposal into a single tapestry, the social scientist succeeds insofar as he or she can identify and explain the pattern of the weave. Compared to these two social sciences, anthropology and psychology seem to me to be special cases, perhaps because they have changed so much in the course of their own history, at least as I have experienced them. But I see their liberating power in the way they seek to understand individual diversity - whether of cultures, in the case of anthropology, or of persons, in the case of psychology. In the first case, I follow Clifford Geertz's reasoning that although it may be possible to generalize across cultures about social patterns and the "laws" of economics, the very effort to do so threatens to neglect how surprisingly cultures differ from place to place and time to time and thereby miss what is most remarkable about human beings: the astounding range of individuation. John Burton issues a challenge students: name one universal feature of human societies - and he will show them a society that condemns it -- or belies the claim. Even what counts as a "blood relative" or as masculine or feminine varies amongst cultures. In a way, then, anthropology accomplishes cross-culturally what history does across time: it de-natures our conceptions of ourselves, prevents us from elevating the values or mores of a particular place and time to the status of an eternal human essence. Psychology descends from the level of the whole society or culture to that of the individual. If we prescind from differences that range from Freud and William James to Watson and Skinner to 20th century cognitivists like Neisser and Bruner and the like, I'm tempted to say that although psychology seeks to identify invariances like the law of effect or the Oedipus complex or transference, and although it characteristically denies human freedom, its liberating power derives from its ability to use those invariances to "account for the variance" among individuals. That is most obvious in the case of Freud, who sought to account for the most extreme pathological quirks by appeal to the universal drama of the family's efforts to nurture and socialize the infant. But Skinner would appeal to a conditioning history to account for the same diversity of individual responses to the same stimulus. In so doing, they both appeal to history -- or biography -- as the principle of individuation notwithstanding the generality of the mechanisms involved. And insofar as I discover these unchosen mechanisms at work in the historical constitution of my identify and thereby become self conscious of them, I may be liberated from their unwanted

and uninvited influence.

But it is the creative arts that most vividly *express* as opposed to *explain* this personal individuality. Clifford Geertz traces the remarkable individuation of human cultures to the power of symbolism, which liberate human development from dependence upon genetic change as a means of adaptation to novel and varied circumstances. Human beings vary their life forms without depending upon mutation and natural selection to change the forms of their bodies. Hence, historical change displaces evolutionary change. The forms of symbolism enable us to represent remote possibilities such as no other species of animals can contemplate - as well as to store up a vast bulk of past experience far beyond the power of mere memory. Of course, all the sciences and other arts I have surveyed depend upon the use of symbols in their studies. But the literary and plastic and other arts concentrate attention upon the symbols as such rather than as instruments employed in other inquiries, though of course mathematics studies its form of symbolism in its own right too. The liberating power of these studies, the humanities or "Geisteswissenschaften," is at least two-fold. They teach the student to formulate his or her own thoughts. But those thoughts can scarcely be said to exist without or prior to that symbolic formulation. "There are no mute, glorious Miltons" Lester Reiss used to recite to students who claimed to have thought much better thoughts than they were able to put into words. Because the range of possibilities open to human choice stems from the power of symbolism, the arts that cultivate and develop that power are crucial to expanding the range of human liberty. Indeed, I have already commented on how major steps in the evolution of mathematics have expanded the scope of science -- and of the technology that science makes possible in turn. The same holds for arts that nurture other forms of symbolism. But I must now pass beyond general linguistics and semiotics to the study of art as art.

After all, the study of literature clearly transcends the study of language - of syntax and semantics. Interesting as that is in its own right, it has only to do with understanding the conventional usage that determines both meaning and grammar at any given moment in history. Learning to speak and write idiomatic English or Japanese falls short of studying literature. The poet dislocates language into new meanings, according to T.S. Elliot -- and the critical study of literature focuses attention upon how to make works of art out of words so as to formulate levels of meaning that transcend the shared conventions upon which language itself depends. In so doing, the literary work employs conventional symbols so as to liberate us from mere convention - and transform the convention in so doing. On the other hand, the poem, the play, the story, transmute submission to shared conventions into the freedom of individual expression.

Still, discursive symbolism, whether linguistic or mathematical, has its limits and the other,

non discursive forms of symbolism: painting, dance, architecture, music, sculpture liberate us from those limits and open up forms of expression and horizons of free activity that words cannot encompass. On the one hand, they teach us to see and hear in ways that liberate us from the tyranny of words, which tempt us to ignore most of the richness and variety of our experience as we file all the subtly nuanced different views of Rouen Cathedral under that simple, colorless label. Our lives get trapped in cliché's for, as Heidegger put it, I do not see what is there, I see what "one" sees - *und man denkt was man denkt*. The first, enabling task of the plastic artist, Susanne Langer argues, is to make the visible visible, to create an "apparition" that calls attention to its purely visible form so that that form can become a vehicle of meaning. And the same for hearing in the case of music - and for embodied motion in the case of dance. In the process, if it works, we are shocked into discovering our own experience.

This liberation of the sensuous form as such makes it available to express meanings wherein we find ourselves, as Hans Gadamer puts it. The expressive work of art is an objectification of subjective life. The self-knowledge which that makes possible is also self-liberating. So long as I am caught up in the misery of rejected love or loss, I am entombed in the caverns of my own subjectivity. But singing the blues - or even hearing Sidney Bechet or Louis Armstrong's soaring performances of that tune lifts me out of myself into the pure light of a very different kind of universality than any language that is determined by conventional usage. Moreover, much that we know about the vast scope of human experience, we discover through art rather than by undergoing it ourselves. It opens up horizons of vicarious or virtual experience such as no one could encompass in one single life.

Well, all this can be no more than a skeletal sketch of the creative arts, or of the liberating power of the liberal arts as a whole. But - what of philosophy? Since I have ended with the importance of self-knowledge, I had better not forget myself and the liberating role of philosophy.

In fact, I have tried to *demonstrate* philosophy's role by attempting to survey the liberal arts from a fresh perspective. I tell my introductory students that the purpose of the course is to give them an opportunity to change their minds - by showing them that there are other options -- other rational, well argued alternatives, so that they do not have to go on thinking in the ways that they take so much for granted that they don't recognize their limitations. Philosophy is the critique of abstractions, as Whitehead said. We cannot live without abstractions, without categorizing the stream of experience in one way or another. All of the liberal arts organize their activities and their data by employing one set of categories or another -- or perhaps several. Once they turn self-critical about their own methods and conceptual resources, they

are doing philosophy, whether they so conceive it or not. But philosophy at its most ambitious seeks to comprehend and organize them all, and still somehow criticize itself in the process. That, after all, is how Plato described the task of philosophy in the *Republic*, as he told Glaucon in describing the fourth level of the divided line - the highest level of cognition. The prisoner who has been liberated from the cave staggers out into the daylight that stands for the form of the good or that "natural light of reason" that renders the universe intelligible. At first, his unadjusted eyes can only contemplate reflections in the lake outside the cave - which stand for the objects of the several sciences. But then, in the final stage, by a process that Socrates calls "dialectic," he begins by questioning the basic assumptions of the several sciences and attempts to integrate them into a coherent understanding of the whole, which Socrates calls knowledge of the good. Now I began by saying that in the absence of agreement about the nature of the good, freedom is the highest common good available -- and I have attempted to provide a comprehensive view of the liberal arts in the light of that notion. I cannot say whether I have given you a chance to change your minds. But Socrates says that the process of dialectic is not a solitary undertaking, but to be accomplished through the sort of communal dialogue in which he and his young friends are engaged in the courtyard of Cephalus's house.

So I await your criticisms.