

# Freedom as a Fundamental Value in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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When we discuss the issue of academic freedom in Catholic colleges and universities, we usually assume that such institutions face a particularly difficult challenge in upholding academic freedom because of their Catholic commitment. In this paper I will argue on the contrary that Catholic colleges and universities have an opportunity to uphold academic freedom to a degree that would be difficult for secular institutions to match, because the Catholic intellectual tradition provides a knowledge of freedom as a fundamental intellectual and spiritual value and not just as a condition of being unimpeded by external constraints.

## I. The "External" and "Internal" Conditions of Freedom.

When we talk about academic freedom we usually concentrate on the problem of illegitimate restrictions placed upon individual faculty members by the colleges and universities within which they conduct their academic work. The discussion customarily revolves around the image of a solitary thinker who boldly arrives at opinions that contradict conventionally accepted views and politically popular positions, and who must then invoke the principle of academic freedom as protection against other faculty and administrators who believe the institution as a whole will be damaged by its association with such opinions. It is important to expose and resist illegitimate restrictions placed upon scholars, but it is also important to reflect upon the assumptions that accompany the concept of academic freedom when it is viewed exclusively in the context of a clash between individual scholars and the institutions within which they work.

The first assumption at work here is that the thinker is a solitary explorer whose primary responsibility is to break free of tradition and convention to establish an authentic, individual position in which alone true thinking takes place. Freedom in this account means detachment from the encroachment of tradition, convention, and social institutions, and the assumption is that authentic thinking takes place only from within such a position of individual detachment. The scholar is viewed as someone whose efforts produce new knowledge, and academic freedom is required to prevent inhibitions arising from convention, tradition, or institutional interests from impeding the scholar's productive activity.

A second assumption that accompanies the first is that responsibility for nurturing an openness to truth resides primarily in the individual scholar, delegating to the institution merely the role of protecting the scholar from obstacles that would impede or obstruct the production of new knowledge. The institutional role in this line of thinking is usually restricted to protecting the professional interests of the faculty member and institutional

interests are usually viewed as restricted to material interests, such as an interest in preventing scholarly work from displeasing or giving embarrassment to benefactors of the institution upon whose financial support the institution relies, or an interest in preserving the reputation of the institution in the eyes of its benefactors.

The problem with this account of academic freedom is not that it is untruthful or unimportant, but that it dominates discussions of the concept to such an extent that we lose sight of other, perhaps more fundamental, aspects of freedom that are essential to the intellectual and spiritual life. We need first to recover a fuller account of the nature of freedom as the foundation of academic life before we can arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the problems posed under the topic of academic freedom. The term "academic freedom" is usually understood with reference to what we might call the "external" conditions of freedom; but it is important also to think well about the "internal" conditions of freedom if we hope to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the value of freedom in the academic world. All colleges and universities have an obligation to protect academic freedom, but it could be that Catholic colleges and universities have a special opportunity to foster academic freedom by drawing upon the deep knowledge of freedom as a fundamental value sustained by the Catholic intellectual tradition.

I will first review two important aspects of freedom as it manifests itself in intellectual and spiritual life, drawing upon Hans Urs Von Balthasar's account of freedom as the fundamental orientation of the human person and Dietrich von Hildebrand's account of freedom as the essential basis of authentic value response. These reflections will shift the perspective within which we view the problem of academic freedom, leading to considerations of the ways in which academic institutions need to foster an academic orientation within which the potential for intellectual and spiritual freedom can blossom. We will then examine the view of academic freedom that emerges when we consider that responsibility for truth falls not only upon individual scholars working in a condition of enlightened detachment but also upon academic institutions themselves. Finally, another question related to academic freedom will come to light: what new aspects of academic freedom emerge when we bring forward the realization that the responsibility for teaching extends beyond the individual scholar and the individual academic institution and within the Catholic tradition falls also upon the Church?

## **II. Freedom as the Basis of Spiritual Life**

Freedom is an essential value in academic life not only because it provides protection for scholars who express unpopular and unconventional opinions but because it is a necessary condition of intellectual and spiritual life in the first place. But what does this mean?

To speak of freedom as a condition of intellectual and spiritual life points first of all to thought as a function for which the person who thinks bears responsibility. Thought is not a reflex determined by a sequence of causes over which the thinker has no control, although many conditions beyond the power of an individual thinker both limit and

enable the act of thinking. Intellectual responsibility does not mean that thought is necessarily a function in which every element of thinking can be traced exclusively to the solitary thinker as the sole originator of the ideas, views, and opinions produced by the act of thinking. For most of us it is difficult or impossible to disentangle the multiple sources and influences that stand behind any proposition we might write or utter. To call ourselves "responsible" for the ideas and opinions we consider and put forward, it is not necessary to claim exclusive ownership of the ideas or to claim that our thoughts originated solely from the solitary effort of our own intellect, as though a power as essentially communal as mind could be solely and solitarily original.

If responsible thinking is not a reflex produced by causal conditions over which we have no control, it is also not the product of whim or caprice in a condition of pure arbitrariness. Perhaps it is helpful to consider these two extremes between which responsible thinking operates as limiting conditions. Our thinking at its worst could degenerate into either one of these extremes, becoming nothing more than the endorsement of prejudices we absorb on the one extreme or the expression of willful arbitrariness motivated by the desire to earn a reputation for uniqueness on the other extreme. When our thinking degenerates toward either one of these extremes we remain responsible for our thinking, but in these cases our responsibility is manifested by our failure to rise above the temptation of falling into thoughtless prejudice on the one hand or the temptation of indulging in prideful assertions of uniqueness on the other hand.

The fulfillment of the richest potential of freedom in the act of thinking does not depend, then, on the claim that our thoughts are constructed solely through our own originating powers, or on the claim that we have separated ourselves from all external influences to achieve the condition of free thought. The validity, truthfulness, or even interest and appeal of the thoughts we produce do not depend upon our claim of exclusive ownership and power of origination in producing the ideas. We could not, indeed, participate in community with other persons whose power and freedom of thought we recognize and respect if we regarded the validity and importance of our thoughts and ideas as deriving from our status as authors and owners of the ideas. How could I ask another person to give free assent to a proposition I put forward if I thought the validity and importance of the proposition depended on my status as owner and originator of the ideas, since I could then ask only that the listener or reader grant recognition of my authority as originator of the proposition as the necessary condition of assent to the proposition? The possibility of free assent to an idea I put forward presupposes the ability of the listener to agree or disagree based on a judgment that is independent of my own power of assertion.

My intention when expressing my thoughts is to extend the network of communal understanding that stands behind each proposition I utter, and this intention requires me to recognize that the significance and truthfulness of the proposition exists outside of my own wishing and asserting that it is so; my real (best) hope is to have my position refined and affirmed by the recognition secured with another person that the proposition I stand behind holds significance and truthfulness. The freedom inherent in the power of thinking carries me to the recognition that I am responsible not to my own status, reputation, or authority as a thinker but to the community of persons within which I hope to participate,

a community that I seek in some degree to affirm or reform through my thinking. I come to realize as well my responsibility to a mysterious source and power of truth that does not depend upon me for its validity and significance.

The mistaken notion that our freedom and responsibility as thinkers can exist only if we can lay claim to sole authorship and ownership of the ideas we produce stands behind the intellectual urge to deny the existence or at least knowability of God, since the authority that accrues to God's existence and knowability would correspondingly diminish the scope for individual authorship and ownership of the thoughts we produce. The territory we have entered at this moment is called intellectual pride, and it would be a grave mistake to underestimate the prevalence, power, and danger of such pride. (It is an equally dangerous form of pride to believe that we individually have conformed ourselves so thoroughly and perfectly to the will of God that the propositions we utter carry the weight and power of God's authority.)

At this point we are prepared to encounter the concept of spiritual freedom put forward by Hans Urs von Balthasar in *The Glory of the Lord*. Balthasar in this work explores the way in which our theological understanding of the world is rooted in our free response to the most perfect of all forms, the form of God incarnate in Jesus Christ through whom the glory of the Lord radiates. True theological thinking as the free inquiry into the understanding of the world that opens up through the illumination of faith is possible only if the power of a self-revealing God does not overrun and annul the freedom and responsibility of thought, for in that case revelation that gives rise to faith would be a blinding and not illuminating power. How can we lay claim to our freedom as thinkers while also standing faithfully by the claim that we live in loving relationship with a self-revealing God who is the true and final ground of our free and responsible thinking?

Balthasar's insight is that God acts freely in divine revelation, and can be revealed in freedom only if God bestows freedom upon the human spirit at the same moment as God's self-revelation. God can be revealed as gracious and loving only if the revelation is seen to be an act of divine freedom; the human spirit could be capable of recognizing God's graciousness and freedom only if that spirit were endowed with the capacity to perceive and respond freely to God's self-revelation. If God's revelation registered upon human consciousness only through necessity and compulsion, such revelation could never manifest the fullness of divine grace and love that is the heart and purpose of divine revelation in the first place. The freedom and responsibility of human spiritual and intellectual life depends not upon our power of origination but upon our capacity for freely recognizing, understanding, and assenting to what God reveals and to the natural revelation of the creation itself.

By the mere fact of disclosing itself, this deepest of depths exhibits its freedom. If the existent [the human person] can be free, how could the very wellspring of Being be freedomless? The very fact that its free light reveals itself already means that it must free the person in whom such radiance appears to participate in the divine freedom. This light bestows on him the freedom to answer and, along with it, the possibility of rejection: it effects belief in the believer and leaves him the freedom of unbelief. (158-59)

Balthasar powerfully contradicts the voice of pride that demands God be pushed aside so that human intellect can be free by showing on the contrary that God's self-revelation demands human freedom as the very condition for divine revelation. If we fear that the "freedom to answer" is too restricted to hold value, such fear stems only from an impoverished imagination. The freedom to answer includes the freedom to reject God, as Balthasar states, and surely includes the countless musical, literary, artistic, philosophic, and scientific responses to divine creation and revelation exhibited by cultures throughout the world as well as the unique and infinitely nuanced personal, individual responses to God that mark each person's spiritual relationship with God.

Balthasar later in the same work again brings to light the manner in which human spiritual and intellectual freedom is not only compatible with divine revelation but is grounded in such revelation:

The extent to which God's transpersonal and Trinitarian work of revelation respects and perfects the creature's personality is shown by the fact that freedom is apportioned to the Holy Spirit. Precisely at the moment when he unites man with Christ, the Holy Spirit bestows freedom on him: he elevates man's restricted, creaturely freedom to the level of a liberated, mighty, divine freedom, in order then to entrust this grace-gift of freedom to the believer as a freedom truly his own and truly to be exercised by him. For this reason, in such a handing over of freedom there is the moment when the individual can also refuse this assent and instead choose unbelief. In revelation, seeing and being seen are realized by both sides wholly without compulsion. (196)

Balthasar emphasizes here that human freedom and the cultivation of personality are grounded in and enriched by God's revelation, not in necessary rivalry with divine revelation, while acknowledging that the possibility of turning away from God is rooted in the same source. From this point we can observe that constructions of knowledge designed to demonstrate the self-sufficiency of human thought (such as Marxist dialectical materialism) and that seek to guarantee the freedom of thought through a claim of systematic self-sufficiency do indeed display certain aspects of the range and power inherent in intellectual life. However, what we see in such demonstrations of the self-sufficiency of thought is only one possible variation of the range of intellectual activity made possible by our fundamental intellectual freedom rather than the sole evidence and manifestation of intellectual freedom as such systems of self-sufficient thought understand themselves to be. It is possible to develop a system of thought based upon the refusal of assent to God, but such refusal is but one of many possible answers to God and fails to strengthen the quality of freedom in human thought just as the assent to God does not jeopardize the freedom of human thought.

Thought according to the model proposed by Balthasar has the quality of response in our engagement with the world and its creator and this aspect of response is more fundamental than the quality of opposition to what is conventional or traditional (although a free response might indeed sometimes require strenuous opposition to the powers of convention and tradition). According to this perspective, an academic institution that fostered academic freedom by protecting scholars against incursions of

external power or authority would serve a good purpose but would provide insufficient support for academic freedom understood in a more fundamental sense. Academic freedom in this fundamental sense requires an institution also to foster the conditions in which scholars and students freely encounter the ways in which the world gives itself to us and the conditions in which we freely give the responses befitting the dialogic quality of knowledge. A Catholic college or university that draws upon this deep recognition of the nature of academic freedom should seek ways to foster the "internal" conditions of freedom in addition to upholding safeguards against illegitimate incursions upon the life of the mind. Later in this essay we will review some of the ways in which this can be done.

### **III. Freedom as the Basis of Value Response**

We can enter more fully into the phenomenon of intellectual freedom if we identify more precisely where freedom emerges in what Balthasar calls our "freedom to answer." This concept draws attention to the responsive nature of the soul, an idea evoked also by Plato's view of the musical quality of the soul. To focus upon the soul as a responsive power is to turn attention away from an emphasis on the originating and constructive powers to the soul's power of attunement as it progressively awakens through wonder and inquiry to a discovery of its place and motion within the world in which it finds itself created.

When we recognize the important turn of thought accomplished through emphasis on the responsive rather than originating powers of the soul, we are better prepared to understand Dietrich von Hildebrand's surprising assertion that freedom manifests itself more fundamentally in the power we display in relation to our affective value responses than through human action itself. Just as discussions of academic freedom usually focus on the realm of activity, so also the concept of freedom itself is often viewed solely in the realm of action. Yet, as von Hildebrand argues, moral actions are founded upon our awareness of the moral values we seek to bring to fulfillment through our action, and we find freedom at work already in the degree of wakefulness we display in our response to values in contemplative experience.

Dietrich von Hildebrand's concept of value response enables us to explore more deeply the fundamental orientation of the soul in its "freedom to answer," to return to Balthasar's phrase. It might be helpful to locate the concept of value response by pointing to two major philosophical accomplishments of the twentieth century which von Hildebrand draws upon deeply in developing his thought. The first is Edmund Husserl's refutation of a variety of reductionist modes of thought such as relativism, psychologism, and historicism in *Logical Investigations*. The second is Max Scheler's turn against Kantian formalism in ethics in *Formalism in Ethics and the Non-Formal Ethics of Values*. Von Hildebrand is able to draw upon Husserl to develop the concept of the *intentionality* of affective responses such as joy, anger, love, and forgiveness the experience of which always reveals their directedness toward an object that is not itself immanent in the psychic experience; it is this directedness toward an object recognized as (to varying degrees) ontically transcendent to the experience that is captured by the term

"intentionality." Scheler's work helps von Hildebrand focus upon the particular value qualities that come to appearance in affective responses, such as our response to the beauty of a work of art or our response to the goodness of a morally courageous action. In his analysis of value response von Hildebrand is able to locate the function of human freedom in a profound way.

We know in our hearts that we do not possess the freedom to produce through our own volition an affective response to a value, as is made evident for instance in the experience of depression in which we discover a potentially deadly flatness of affectivity marked by the absence of spontaneous joy, gratitude, or even anger or indignation. Freedom enters into the realm of value response not through our power to produce a value response but through what von Hildebrand calls our free power to "sanction" a response when we deem it to be proportionate to the object that engenders the response and also morally good, such as a response of admiration when we witness an act of forgiveness. When we sanction this response, we strengthen what von Hildebrand calls our "solidarity" with the response; we identify ourselves with the response and assume responsibility for the response through the sanction we bestow upon it. We also possess the power to "disavow" a response that we deem to be morally unfitting, such as a feeling of joy when a person we envy suffers failure or misfortune. In this case we recognize a quality in the response that wells up within us that we cannot approve and from which we wish to separate ourselves to the extent that this remains within our power.

Our free power to sanction a value response is not sufficient to engender that response, but the sanction expresses our willingness to assume moral responsibility for the response and renders the response and therefore any actions we might take on the basis of the response morally significant. At the same time, our power to disavow a value response does not dissolve the response, as von Hildebrand points out, but it distances us from the response and plants the seed of transformation that might someday lead to the eradication or at least diminution of such morally negative value responses.

The power to sanction or disavow a value response demonstrates our free power to turn from the narrow domain of what is personally pleasing or useful and enter the larger moral territory of what is morally good. Even prior to the level of action we find in this power evidence of what Hans Reiner has called the distinctive mark of the ethical dimension of experience, our power to distinguish between what is subjectively pleasing to ourselves and what is morally worthy in itself. When we recognize the power we possess to sanction or disavow our affective value responses, we expand the territory of human freedom and responsibility.

#### **IV. Institutional Support for Academic Freedom**

These reflections have opened up a broader territory for our consideration of academic freedom. My argument on the basis of these reflections is first that institutional support for academic freedom is inadequate if that support is designed solely to protect individual scholars from external interference in what they teach or publish, and second that efforts in Catholic colleges and universities to strengthen the Catholic identity of the institution

when carried out properly can legitimately be understood to be supportive of intellectual and spiritual freedom in its deepest dimension.

This argument does not cancel the importance of protecting teachers and scholars from illegitimate interference from external powers, and perhaps it is disappointing to observe that this argument does not provide a general solution to the vexing problem of determining the boundary between the responsible exercise of freedom in teaching and research and the irresponsible abuse of the power of a faculty position. I do not indicate by turning aside from these problems that I regard them as unimportant or irrelevant to the issue of academic freedom. My purpose is to expand the territory of reflection as we consider the problem of academic freedom, and the hope is that when we return to these familiar problems we will have added another perspective upon them.

How, then, can a Catholic college or university foster academic freedom in addition to protecting it from external threats?

We must recognize first of all that the concept of freedom presented here is theologically grounded and cannot be cultivated and fulfilled within a college or university unless the illumination of faith pervades the academic life of the institution. It is true, as Balthasar points out, that the light of faith grants both the "freedom of belief" and the "freedom of unbelief," but these two positions do not understand themselves in the same way. The perspective of belief sees itself as more comprehensive than the perspective of disbelief, because belief recognizes both itself and its contradiction as responses to divine revelation while disbelief is unlikely to regard itself in this way. Moreover, when belief includes the recognition that we stand as a community and not merely as individuals within the light of faith, we can conclude that a Catholic college or university can cultivate a theologically-grounded concept of freedom only if it cultivates its own identity as a Catholic institution.

This claim that Catholic colleges and universities are in fact cultivating the conditions required for intellectual and spiritual freedom by cultivating their Catholic identity does not resolve the difficult questions concerning how this should best be done in practice and stands open to the objection that such institutions foster a theologically-grounded understanding of freedom but not other views of freedom. The communal experience of spiritual freedom in response to the light of revelation is enhanced by establishing and sustaining institutions that know themselves to be bound together at the deepest level by faith; the exploration of all areas of knowledge within the context of faith is an exciting and valuable undertaking. There is no abridgement of freedom when an institution declares itself to be one kind of community rather than another, since the establishment of identity of any type always requires the delimitation (but not the denunciation) of all else not subsumed within the particular identity embraced.

An institution that understands and respects the theologically-grounded view of freedom at the heart of its intellectual and spiritual life is in an excellent position to participate fully in its engagement with the larger communities in which it flourishes, since in its

own foundation it finds also a source for respecting the freedom and dignity of those who do not share the faith tradition constituting its own core identity.

The concept of freedom we have been exploring opens up other insights into ways in which a Catholic college or university can foster spiritual freedom. We could say that each academic discipline in a Catholic university possesses a power that is analogous to the free power within each individual to sanction or disavow value responses. That power within the individual is derived from the spiritual capacity to rise above one's predilections, dispositions, and habits of perceiving and experiencing and to reach toward an understanding of the ultimate unity of values in the light of which each particular value response can be reevaluated. The analogous capacity within the academic disciplines would be derived from the power to reach toward a comprehensive vision of truth that exceeds the content and methods of any single academic discipline. The spirit of freedom in a Catholic university can be fostered by cultivating an active awareness within each discipline of its necessary insufficiency such that each discipline would disavow its habitual tendency to envision all knowledge in the terms specific to its own special area of potency while sanctioning its own special contributions to knowledge with a clear awareness of the complementarity of this contribution with other areas of knowledge. The special emphasis on interdisciplinary understanding that can be found in *Ex corde ecclesiae* turns out to be grounded not in a desire for forming new fashionable academic alliances but in a recognition of the orientation to the whole of knowledge that should be kept manifest in each individual discipline.

Catholic colleges and universities foster academic freedom by cultivating their own identity grounded in an orientation to faith; they foster academic freedom not only by offering protection to scholars against illegitimate intrusions upon their freedom to teach and publish, but also by exerting a formative influence upon students, teachers, and through faculty upon the academic disciplines themselves that promotes a deeper understanding of spiritual and intellectual freedom grounded in faith. In this sense, a Catholic college can be said itself to represent a particular stance toward the truth and can be said to have something to teach and promote in its orientation to truth. Could we not say, then, that within the larger world of academic institutions the Catholic college and university as a particular type of institution should hold the right to a kind of academic freedom that enables it to cultivate its vision of the integration of faith and knowledge? The concept of academic freedom when transferred from individual scholar to an institution as a whole continues to be meaningful and calls upon scholars to recognize the legitimacy of the institution's interest in preserving its Catholic identity. Just as there are difficult judgments to make when determining the appropriate boundaries of academic freedom for individual scholars, so also there are difficult judgments to be made when determining the appropriate degree to which an institution's freedom to cultivate its identity should be respected when in conflict with other claims and values.

In a sense, then, a Catholic college or university has something to teach when cultivating and developing its vision of the integration of faith and knowledge. At this level we encounter a final problem that is not faced by most other colleges and universities. Individual faculty members have a teaching function within the college or university, the

college or university at a different level has a kind of teaching function as it seeks to actualize a vision of faith integrated with knowledge in accordance with the Catholic intellectual tradition, and finally the Catholic Church itself lays claim to a responsibility for teaching the faith to people throughout the world. The term "academic freedom" should probably not be stretched so far as to encompass the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, since the Church's instruction in matters of faith and in the application of faith to personal and social challenges cannot properly be called academic in nature. However, even though we have left the territory of academic freedom at this point, our respect for the dignity and capacity for understanding of all persons calls upon us to respect the importance of the Church's teaching mission that seeks to bridge differences of culture and language throughout the world, to reach people at every level of social, cultural, and economic development, and to stretch even across the vast movement of time from the days of the apostles to the expected second coming. The difficult questions of academic freedom in cases when a faculty member in a Catholic college or university promotes teachings that are contrary to the magisterium of the Church should be evaluated with some consideration given to the legitimate responsibility for teaching that falls upon the faculty member, the Catholic college or university, and the Catholic Church.

Conflicts and tensions, some of them fruitful and some enervating, between teaching functions at the level of individual scholar, Catholic college, and the magisterium of the Church will continue to make themselves felt and it seems unlikely that any single or universal solution to such tensions can be proposed. We have a better chance of reaching wise solutions to such conflicts and tensions if we recognize that they unfold at every level from a deep understanding of intellectual and spiritual freedom and the responsibilities that living in freedom entails.

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