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Liberty as Central to the Liberal Arts

An address to the entering class, August 31, 2011

J. Scott Johnson¹

Thank you for that kind introduction and thanks to the faculty for honoring me with the opportunity to speak here today. Thanks also to my friends in political science and the SJU Rugby team for coming to hear me. Finally, thanks to all the incoming students for attending—Welcome—it is to honor you that we have gathered here.

It is quite unusual for the faculty to don our ceremonial robes and gather together. We do it only on important occasions. The next time we all will be in the same place together—the entire faculty and all the members of your class—is when we celebrate another kind of beginning called commencement. I am here this morning to talk about part of that journey from one beginning to the next. In the next few minutes I'm going to flesh out a claim that may be obvious to some, yet certainly is not trivial.

I am going to argue that liberty is central to a liberal arts education.

It may seem ironic that many of you feel that you were forced to come here today, herded into this beautiful space, to hear a talk about liberty.

My first claim is that you don't properly understand what liberty is.

When you hear the word liberty, or freedom, you probably think of Mel Gibson in "Braveheart"² shouting his last line as they eviscerate him. Or maybe you think of Dobby the House Elf when Harry Potter gets Lucius Malfoy to hand him a sock.³

But my guess, and some research backs this up, is that you are thinking that you are finally away from home, away from your parents, away from their stupid rules, and that means only one thing: Beer.

Some of you may already have experienced your new found 'freedom' in the basement of some dilapidated party house in St. Joe. Some of you may already have earned your first badge of freedom: a ticket for minor consumption or a write up from your RA.

The confusion of freedom with alcohol, along with their uses and abuses goes back at least to 1754 when Rousseau wrote in his second "Discourse" that "freedom is like those solid and rich foods or those **heartly wines**, which are proper to nourish and fortify robust constitutions habituated to them, but which overpower, ruin, and intoxicate the weak and delicate who are unsuited for them."⁴

Freedom is like a hearty wine. Freedom is like strong beer. Freedom can ruin and intoxicate you just like wine or beer. Hmmm.

Rousseau goes on, “Once people are accustomed to masters, they are no longer able to do without them. If they try to shake off the yoke, they move all the farther away from freedom because, **mistaking for freedom an unbridled license which is its opposite**, their revolutions almost always deliver them to seducers who only make their chains heavier.”⁵

Having been trained by your parents, yet now being away from them, you may be: “Mistaking for freedom an unbridled license which is its opposite.”⁶ In other words, if you think, “doing whatever you please,” is the very definition of “freedom” you have made the very same mistake the boys in *Pinocchio*⁷ make shortly before they are transformed into donkeys sold into servitude. Mistaking licentiousness for liberty is the shortcut to slavery. [Pause.]

Mistaking licentiousness for liberty is the shortcut to slavery. Plato understood this 2500 years ago when he argued that the drunken man has the soul of a tyrant, a slave to his passions.⁸ He, too, understood the perils of freedom and how quickly it could lead to its opposite.

So what is this freedom we are looking for?

John Locke argued, “[W]here there is no Law, there is no Freedom. For Liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others which cannot be, **where there is no law**.”⁹ Locke explicitly rules out licentiousness, saying, quote, “Freedom is not, ..., *A Liberty for every Man to do what he lists*.” [whatever he leans towards].¹⁰

Locke continues, “The *Freedom* then of Man, and Liberty of acting according to his own Will, is *grounded on* his having **Reason**, which is able to instruct him in that Law he is to govern himself by,....”¹¹ Note the emphasis on reason and instruction. Locke argues that reason is what needs to be developed so a person can effectively use one’s freedom. Locke writes, “To turn him loose to an unrestrained Liberty, before he has Reason to guide him, is not allowing him the privilege of his Nature, to be free.”¹²

Freedom is grounded on having reason. Reason allows us to govern ourselves. Reason is a capacity that needs to be developed. My obvious and important claim is that a liberal arts education is centrally designed to develop your capacity to reason. Hence freedom is central to the liberal arts.

How does a liberal arts education develop reason? Not by simply allowing you to do whatever you list.

You will need to pick a major which will discipline you, pun intended. A discipline contains a body of knowledge which you must master, but it is also filled with rules, regulations, and laws that govern it and you. It is instruction.

You will need to take courses outside your major which will enrich and broaden your understanding of the world, not narrowly focus you on a single way of exploring the world. These courses include work in Mathematics, the Social Sciences, the Humanities and the Natural Sciences. You will need to take a language so you can immerse yourself in another culture, another world. You will need to learn how to write, to read, to discuss, and to think critically. All of this is related to developing your ability to reason.

The faculty has designed these academic rules and regulations to train you for freedom. We are educating you to be free, not donkeys. We are educating you for careers which won't have you asking, "Would you like fries with that?"

But you could choose to avoid all of this. You could choose to avoid the hard classes. You could choose to party all the time, develop your skills at Beer Pong and Quarters, at the expense of developing your capacity for freedom, all in the mistaken belief that we groovy geezers in the funny robes can't teach you anything. *"I'm free. I can already think for myself. I'll get a job without you and I'll have more fun without all those rules and hard work."* Hey Peter Pan, your bar is the second one on the right, straight on 'til morning.¹³ [Pause.]

Freedom is like a hearty wine. Freedom is like strong beer. Freedom can ruin and intoxicate you just like wine or beer.

Make no mistake. I am not arguing that you need to grind your nose off studying. I like beer as much or more than the next guy, and I've got the shape to prove it. But every life needs balance.

I support the SJU Rugby team because they are working on balance. They came here for an education, not just the chance to beat Iowa, Michigan, Iowa State, and Minnesota in a game most of you don't understand. Rugby is a free flowing game governed by laws and you can't play the game if you don't know the difference between a ruck, a maul, and a scrum. For example, in rugby, Law 12 says,¹⁴ when opportunity knocks, the other team is awarded the scrum. If that pun doesn't make sense please talk to one of the players. So: work hard, and play rugby. Find your balance.

Conclusion: Freedom is the capacity for self-governance: The capacity to rule oneself according to laws, according to laws of your own choosing. If you can't govern yourself, someone else will govern you and you simply won't like that. Freedom is about leadership. It depends on Reason. A liberal arts education is all about developing your capacity to reason, your capacity for freedom, your capacity to lead. We the faculty are here to help you, but the choice is yours.

Thank you.

¹ I would like to thank a number of people who helped with this speech. First, to whomever nominated me for the Robert Spaeth Award, thank you, along with Jim Read who organized the file and collected the supporting letters and other documentation. Thank you to everyone who wrote on my behalf, especially Jennifer Rexroat, Nina Kollars, Alan Christenson, and Robert Kirsch. Thank you to Kimberly Adams for listening to various drafts and ideas of this speech and saving me from critical errors in judgment. She is simply the best. And special thanks to Terry and Susan Wolkerstorfer for editorial comments. For the others upon whom I inflicted earlier drafts, puns, jokes, and ideas, I sincerely apologize and thank you for your patience.

² Braveheart, dir. Mel Gibson, 177 min., Paramount Pictures, 1995.

³ “Master has given Dobby a sock. Dobby is free.” Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, dir. Chris Columbus, 161 min. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2002.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men,” trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters, in The First and Second Discourses, ed. Roger D. Masters (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964), 80, emphasis added.

⁵ Rousseau, 80, emphasis added.

⁶ Rousseau, 80.

⁷ Carlo Collodi, The Adventures of Pinocchio, various editions. First published 1883.

⁸ Plato, “Republic,” trans. G.M.A. Grube, in Classics of Moral and Political Theory, 2nd ed., ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 209.

⁹ John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), 306, bold added, italics in original.

¹⁰ Locke, 306.

¹¹ Locke, 309, bold added.

¹² Locke, 309, underline added.

¹³ Peter Pan is a character created by J. M. Barrie and appears in a variety of texts and films. The reference here is to the location of Neverland which is also quoted at the end of “Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country” by Captain James T. Kirk. Obviously I substituted bar for star.

¹⁴ http://www.irblaws.com/downloads/EN/Law_12_EN.pdf