

## Freedom, citizenship, and the liberal arts and sciences

Bert van den Brink

University College Roosevelt

1. The liberal arts and sciences are the academic disciplines worthy of the free person. The free person is conceptualized as free in both civil - that is social - and in civic - that is political - respects. The free person knows how to engage and orient herself in social and political contexts; she knows how to be a citizen, with the legal, ethical, social and political maturity required. He masters the use of language (grammar and rhetoric), of reasoning (through logic) and mathematics (arithmetic and geometry); the arts (music) - and knows how to place human endeavors in a wider, scientifically grounded understanding of the universe (astronomy). Indeed, the agenda of the liberal arts and sciences has never been a modest one. It thinks big, and trusts that whoever has been educated to think big at a rigorous academic level, will be ready for further academic, civil, and civic activity in society. But how fit is this classical program to cater for the needs of society and the labor market?

Well, it isn't and then it is. On a narrow view, *it isn't*, because programs in the liberal arts and sciences are not and should not be professionally or vocationally oriented in their educational programs. The liberal arts and sciences are not primarily a training ground for lawyers, psychologists, doctors, engineers, teachers, historians, or art critics. Many alumni of liberal arts and sciences programs have eventually found themselves in these professions; but that is not because our programs directly train or educate them for these roles. Indeed, as we all know, in many countries, the Netherlands among them, there is something of a tension between broad liberal arts and sciences education on the one hand, and admission to academic graduate programs with a strong professional focus on the other hand. Well-known examples are master's programs in law, in clinical psychology, in medicine, as

well as in music and the arts. They have entry requirements that are strongly determined by the demands put on higher education by professional and vocational organizations. Pre-med and double degree programs in Dutch colleges help repair some of these problems. But the tension is there, and it illustrates a genuine difference between broad liberal arts and sciences education and a professional and vocational orientation. The more we try to cater for the call for direct professional and vocational orientation, the less we will offer our students the broad academic, social, and outreach orientation that helps them to freely build their own programs.

My question is how fit the liberal arts and sciences are to cater for the needs of society and the labor market. They are not for the reasons that I just gave. And then they are: we see that many of our alumni eventually become successful members of society, who very often are not just in it for the money, but who lead their lives as what I would call professional idealists. They are active in a huge variety of professional engagements, often combining the power that their professions and social status bring with strong civil and civic engagement and responsibility. Indeed, an alumni survey that the Dean's network of University Colleges in the Netherlands recently conducted - and which will be published shortly - shows that the three most common professional fields of LAS alumni are in research (19%), policy advice (12%), and education (9%). These fields are ahead of commercial (8%) and financial and business (8%) occupations.

I am not surprised by these results. Research, policy advice, and education are fields in which professionals typically have to switch roles between living up to functional and systemic requirements on the one hand, and a wider view that monitors the moral, legal, social, and political consequences of science and technology, politics and law, and working with the next generation of students on the other.

Not only am I not surprised by these results, I feel heartened by them. For if there is one thing that liberal arts and sciences programs should wish for, then it is that their alumni excel at *bringing together* professional and civic roles. It is not our task to educate for a

tension-free insertion in further professional and vocational training for some highly specialized segment of the workforce of our societies. It is rather our task to enrich the workforce with critical thinkers, who know how to move in and out of their roles of specialized professional on the one hand and mature, critical citizen on the other. If our programs are about educating for a meaningful form of freedom, then we should want our alumni to demonstrate that freedom in society. But what does that actually mean?

2. For me, the most inspiring reflection on the balancing act between our professional and civic roles in society does not come from the set canon of liberal arts and sciences literature. It rather comes from the philosophical canon: Immanuel Kant's little 1784 essay, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" The essay was written at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, amidst a veritable boom in Kant's contemporary Prussia as to the notion of Enlightenment, which had achieved earlier popularity in the Netherlands, France, and Scotland especially. There were theological, philosophical, scientific, social, moral, ethical, and political sides to the question what Enlightenment actually is. For Kant, it was about all of this and more. But boiled down to its core it was about the knowledge, courage, and institutions needed to speak one's mind as a competent *citizen* and contribute to the public good of a self-governing society. It was a daring and unlikely vision at the time, and if you think through its radical nature, it still is. Kant's definition of Enlightenment is the following: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." Immaturity, he explains, "is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!"

Immaturity - *Unmündigkeit*, in German - is a concept with multiple meanings. It refers to not having reached the legal age of maturity,

but more importantly it refers to not (yet) being a person who can guide and express herself as a full member of society. Kant is not just speaking about the *formal* status of full citizenship here; he is rather speaking of competent and effective, engaged citizenship. Such citizenship is made up of 1) a full formal status in terms of citizens' rights, 2) being sufficiently educated, and 3) the courage and resolution to use one's own understanding in contributing to public debate over questions of the common good. In this latter sense, *Mündigkeit* is about the competent expression of knowledge and insight from a perspective of the common good.

Before I now loose myself in a blind hagiography of Kant, let me stress that his essay is elitist and sexist in several ways. Most shockingly, it claims straightforwardly that the "largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex [i.e. women]) should consider the step forward to maturity not only as difficult but also as highly dangerous." For most, he claims, it is just very convenient to be *lazy* about question of maturity and immaturity. Here, to put it mildly, our great philosopher might have paid a little bit more attention to institutional and social grounds for the perceived "laziness" and "convenience" of women and less fortunate men, as his contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft was able to do in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* just a couple of years later (1792).

In Kant's time, the notion of the public sphere as the realm in which all can phrase their contribution to a shared reflection on what society needs hardly existed. He conceptualized it as a republic of letters, to which citizens can contribute as *scholars*. With this, he meant that society needs a place in which its members can articulate and *think through* matters of common concern not from the perspective of their professional engagements, personal beliefs, or individual interests, but from a perspective that takes into consideration the *legitimate perspective of all* as free and moral persons. This perspective is not conceptualized as an aggregative and majoritarian adding up of individual preferences. It is rather developed from a concept of public reasoning: together, free persons can think beyond their direct

individual interests and roles and take into account the perspectives of others. The legitimate perspective of all is the perspective that is reasonable from such a wider view and still rational, that is: in the considered interest of all involved and of society as a whole.

This insight into the division of labor between roles and interests in society was urgent at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It served the conceptual need to think through the potential of the self-governance of a people who would no longer be subservient to autocratic rule. The common good, defined by the people as the legitimate interest of all, becomes the new sovereign.

But Kant is not promising his readers a rose-garden. He is aware both of the difficulty of separating and protecting in society the very different roles that members may play. Interestingly, and foreshadowing the rise of critical sociology more than a century later, he distinguished between society as a functional 'machine' of pre-defined functional roles and society as a commonwealth "or even a cosmopolitan society". As part of the machine, we cannot argue or reason in the same way that we can as members of the commonwealth or cosmopolitan society. Let us look at a quote from the Enlightenment essay here:

"Thus it would be very harmful if an officer receiving an order from his superiors were to quibble openly, while on duty, about the appropriateness or usefulness of the order in question. He must simply obey. But he cannot reasonably be banned from making observations as a man of learning on the errors in the military service, and from submitting these to the public for judgment. ... In the same way, a clergyman is bound to instruct his pupils and his congregation in accordance with the doctrines of the church he serves, for he was employed by it on that condition. But as a scholar, he is completely free as well as obliged to impart to the public all his carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts on the mistaken aspects of those doctrines, and to offer suggestions for a better argument of religious and ecclesiastical affairs."

It may look easy to simply agree. But this task of engaged scholarly citizenship as sketched in 1784 remains a demanding one in 2018. Think only of the whistleblower affairs that begin with employees of the state, private businesses, show business, and universities who at a certain point feel the moral need and civil obligation to identify problems of corruption, abuse of power, sexism and racism in the workplace, lack of scientific integrity, etc. More often than not, such individuals will be put under pressure by their employers, colleagues, politics, society, and even their own families and friends to rather not live up to moral and civic obligations. As Kant said: "It is so convenient to be immature!" But of course, if we all just conveniently move along with what our professional roles and organizations seem to demand, we may forever remain immature.

Societal change is nearly always accompanied by such tensions between expected societal roles and claims that question them in light of the idea of free and equal citizenship. Historically, we see the dynamic in debates and social struggles concerning slavery and citizenship, ownership and labor in the capitalist economy, civil rights, the right to education, the relationship between diversity and equality, the recent #metoo movement, etc. The near scholarly work that critical citizens do in such struggles is to reshape the narrative. They ask, in a variety of ways, with a variety of intellectual strategies at their disposal: if the constitution says that all members of society are free and equal before the law, then must we conclude that some of us are not full members, or must we conclude that society is making a mockery of its own ideals? They ask, if the means of production in society are in the hands of the few and the many are expected to both produce and consume consumer goods in less than acceptable social circumstances, then is it reasonable for the many to collaborate in this seemingly irrational scheme? They ask: if society has built a powerful social institution - marriage - around the idea of the bonds of love between men and women, then why should that institution not be opened up to different bonds of love? Interventions in the tension between reigning expectations and alternative interpretations of the

ideals at the heart of society are one of the permanent motors of social and conceptual change at the root of the institutional reordering of society.

What is 'scholarly' about such interventions is the combination of 1) thinking the matter through from an impersonal perspective, which stresses the importance both of equality and individual freedom, 2) their being based in the form of public reasoning, the reciprocal exchange of arguments and reasons we can hold in common as members of the commonwealth, and 3) generalizing conclusions and reformulating them in terms of proposals for legislation.

Kant had the benefit of being in a position of thinking through some of the demands of the democratic age before it began. We are in a very different position. Indeed, we know that our practices of democratic self-government under the rule-of-law seem under serious threat from a growing unwillingness of influential entrepreneurs, politicians, and financiers to submit individual, corporate, and political interests to the critical eye and judgment of law and democracy. They'd rather see that everyone would stick to their professional and vocational roles. At the same time, we see new organizations live up to the ideal of near scholarly citizenship - from more traditional NGO's and development programs such as the Open Society Foundation, to citizen journalists, ethical hackers, and student-based projects such as the Utrecht *Dare to be grey* initiative. They stress the importance of knowledge, of facts, of data, of nuance and balanced interpretation. Our world needs individuals with the education, the knowledge, the institutional protections, and the courage to stand up for importance of knowledge, of facts, of data, of nuance and balanced interpretation. And you feel this one coming: if liberal arts and sciences programs have an obligation to prepare their students for a role in society, then it is this one: in the field of tension between your professional and civic role, do have the courage to make scholarly use of your own understanding!

3. So how might liberal arts and sciences programs prepare their students for this urgent and demanding task? The aim is to educate for a form of citizenship that leaves room for the freedom to both *work* for the machine *and* to fight it from a perspective of engaged citizenship. That entanglement is a fact: there is no escape from what Kant calls 'the machine'. All members of society work for machines of functionally differentiated, although often overlapping societal systems that have their own goals. Aggregating popular support and governing for the common good are the goals in politics; optimizing financial gains are the goals in the economy and in finance; administering law in justice and law; enabling learning in the educational system; enabling mastery of academic knowledge and competence in university education; strengthening and testing our universal knowledge base in academic research; providing medical care and support in the health system - one could go on for a long time. It is not without reason that I just said that we both *work for* the machine and at times have *to fight* it from a perspective of engaged citizenship. There is no escape from this dynamic.

The view sounds more heroic than it really is. I am not talking about activism, necessarily. Activism *may* be an outcome of taking a civic perspective on the functioning of a social system, but it need not be. Indeed activism, demonstrations, whistleblowing, and civil disobedience are signs that the balance between the power of existing states of affairs in social systems and the critical civic eye that criticizes them has been *severely* disturbed. We are then confronted with an open and conflictual opposition between set roles and the critical perspective of the legitimate interest of all. If all goes well, things will be less conflictual. Social systems such as the economy, finance, higher education, the arts, law, governance, parliament are full of individuals and institutional arrangements that actually bring the critical civic eye to the heart of a practice.

As a small-scale example, think of the circus of evaluations, program committees, councils, academic affairs committees and boards of examiners at our colleges. There are those who think that they are a



waste of time or forms of pseudo-democracy. But they are not. At UCR, my board is constantly being held in check by colleagues and students who think through every possible state of affairs and proposal for change or improvements in the college. In these fora, they don't speak as students or instructors; they speak as citizens of our small-scale and *highly intensive* community. As citizens, the members test states of affairs within the college and proposals for its future from an impersonal, or rather multi-personal perspective: what will 'proposal for change x' to the curriculum mean for *all* (universal perspective) and *each and every one* (individual and diverse perspective) of us, and how do foreseeable consequences relate to intended learning outcomes and teaching and learning? Does the board listen to the reasons that members of the community have for supporting, not supporting, amending proposals on the table; do students and faculty listen to the remarkable wisdom and knowledge of the Dean [next slide]; do we take each other seriously as equals, do we bring genuine evidence and reasons to the table? University College co-governance is a school of scholarly citizenship.

That brings us back to Kant's demanding conception of maturity in citizens who have the knowledge and the courage to think for themselves - and to do so together. I said that what I consider scholarly about the form of citizenship I envisage is the combination of 1) thinking the matter through from an impersonal perspective, which stresses the importance both of equality and individual freedom, 2) it being based in the form of public reasoning, the reciprocal exchange of arguments we can hold in common as members of the commonwealth, and 3) generalizing conclusions and reformulating them in terms of proposals for legislation.

This conception of the tasks of citizenship may sound overly elitist to some, epistemic and universalistic to others. And it is. Of course liberal arts and sciences students and alumni are an elite. The question is: what kind of elite are you? You should not be a socio-economic or cultural elite upon entering our programs. But you should definitely be a merit-based intellectual elite upon graduation. You will have had

privileged access to forms of knowledge, skills and competence that the vast majority of your fellow human beings will not have access to. That makes you an elite by definition. At the same time, being part of that elite does not make you a better, more valuable, or more dignified person. But being part of this elite comes with the responsibility of caring for the societies that made your education possible. After all, for the vast majority of you, a lot of taxpayers' money is spent on your very expensive education - and my salary, I know.

Now, as I said, taking civic responsibility knows many registers. And in the big picture, practical aspects such as organization, demonstration, protest, planning, campaigning, and activism are as important as more intellectual or epistemic ones such as debate, deliberation, investigation, moral, legal, and logical reasoning are.<sup>1</sup>

If I claim that our liberal arts and sciences students and alumni form a special elite, then I claim that they have - or should have - special merit when it comes to the intellectual and epistemic registers. The conception I defend is elitist in that it privileges these as forms of civic responsibility that our students and alumni may be expected to master.

At a pace that most of us have difficulty to keep up with, we have arrived in what seems a new political era. Political and social battles often are not about the question as to which claims are to be held true or correct, but rather about which claims seem to benefit this or that group or interest most. The most famous examples we take from Donald Trump's political rhetoric. His argument only last week that the terrorist attacks on the Bataclan club in Paris in 2015 would have gone out very differently if only victims had been properly armed with guns is a perfect illustration. Trump and his advisors know that this argument is inappropriate, divisive, particularistic, and indefensible - especially when used, as it was, in a plea for a society wide politics of gun ownership. But pushing that point is not going to convince them; this rhetoric is not in any way interested in

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Walzer, *Deliberation, and what Else?* In Macedo 1999.

evidence-based agreements. Something similar we see in the media, from Fox news to Russia today and Chinese CCTV: by offering alternative narratives, constructing different stories, searches for how things are, attempts at seeking trustworthy knowledge of and justice in certain states of affairs becomes increasingly difficult. As I said earlier, the construction of new narratives has always been central to political judgment and activism. But we have arrived in an era in which we have lost a common ground of politics and citizenship: the common ground of *shared epistemic criteria* and the goal of *reaching reasoned agreements* instead of merely strategic balances of power. Many citizens and their political representatives are no longer interested in, or no longer trust, evidence and reasoning-based politics.

A related set of questions concerns the status of data, their ownership, privacy, and - quite literally - their value in economic, political and academic balances of power in society. Who has access to which information, who owns this information, which information should be public, which should not, and how does this affect the integrity of political, economic, academic, and journalistic agency?

A historical, comparative, and conceptual analysis of different political and information regimes in different times and cultures will help us understand that the situation that we seem confronted with is perhaps less unique than it seems at first sight. We are not so much confronted with the absolute end of one era and the absolute beginnings of another. Rather, we seem to be in a phase of transition, in which important battles are about the epistemic status of the new forms of information and new fora for debate that citizens, politics, science, and business work with. Joint with these epistemic questions are questions of freedom, equality, and solidarity. What is at stake is a certain type of universalism - thinking in terms of freedom, equality, and solidarity of all under one political regime - that has been a defining feature of Enlightenment political thought.

Basically, my message to liberal arts and sciences students, alumni and programs is that there is a special task for us in taking on these challenges to epistemic and civic stability and justice. We do not want

to educate our students to uncritically work for those who make a mockery of epistemic and political justice. On the contrary, we want to educate our students to be critical of these trends, and to let their future employers and the democratic community benefit from their special intellectual and epistemic virtues of debate, deliberation, investigation, moral, legal, logical, and intercultural reasoning.

4. Let me one last time hark back to the three element I took from Kant's Enlightenment essay: Making use of your own understanding and contributing to society from a civic attitude demands the thinking through of questions of common concern from 1) an impersonal perspective, which stresses the importance both of equality and individual freedom. 2) This demands that contributions to public debate be based in the form of public reasoning, the reciprocal exchange of arguments we can hold in common as members of the commonwealth. And 3) it demands that we should be able to reach generalized conclusions and reformulate them in terms of proposals for legislation. To what extent are our liberal arts and sciences curricula conducive to bringing out these elements of an elitist, epistemic, and universalistic program of civic education.

1) Our first demand, of the impersonal perspective, calls for moral, legal, and rhetorical education in making impersonal or multi-perspectival analyses of states of affairs. Liberal arts and sciences programs should offer that content as core elements of the curriculum. There are many ways of doing this, but given the contested nature of claims to the impersonal nature of academic analysis or even the assumption of the freedom and equality of all, these disciplines need to be present in our curricula.

Of course, this is a value-laden enterprise. An impersonal conception is not a neutral one. The whole point of making impersonal analyses of states of affairs under discussion in society and academia is that not one interest or perspective is arbitrarily discriminated against.

Discrimination is an inevitable characteristic of any analyses. The challenge is to get your fundamental normative and factual assumptions and pre-suppositions clear, and then arrive at non-arbitrary impersonal and multi-perspectival analyses from that framework. In liberal arts and sciences education, the fundamental assumptions and pre-suppositions concern the fundamental freedom and equality of all students, as well as the fundamental freedom and equality of all human beings. This is the universalistic agenda of our programs. This is why the framework of human rights and United Nations developmental goals are so central in the self-understanding of many of our colleges and programs. There is no shame in standing up for that normative agenda. And indeed, one of our tasks is to keep defending it against those who will claim that we work from non-neutral, liberal political agendas. Of course we do. But this is not uncontroversial. We will have to engage in public reasoning to show the strengths of the agenda.

2) The status of public reasoning is under threat in our societies. The threat is not total: in the participative fora of most states, institutions and organizations, public reasoning is doing fine. This is especially the case where the theatrical aspects of citizenship and politics can be controlled. On camera, and on social media, public reasoning from legitimate interest of all often is not achievable. This need not be a problem. The art of debating, for instance, has never been about reaching agreements. Rather, it is about statement: about defending one view against another, within a clearly defined set of rules for the debate. Debate and public reasoning are different rhetorical regimes, one directed at statement, the other at reaching evidence-based shared conclusions through reasoned deliberations. The well-educated citizen needs to be fluent in both, and needs to be able to apply clearly articulated criteria of success to individual debates and exchanges. Every liberal arts and sciences program needs to train students in the art of rhetoric in its different genres. Logical, formal, moral, political, legal, economic, and intercultural reasoning all have their own criteria. Mastering them is one of the greatest gifts that an academic education can give you. Your greatest civic tasks may

lie not in heroic activism on camera and social media, but in reaching well-balanced conclusions through reasoning and diplomacy in less visible, but equally influential segments of democratic societies under the rules of law. These are the segments where our alumni in research, policy advice, and education work.

3) Competent epistemic citizenship requires that we should be able to reach generalized conclusions and reformulate them in terms of proposals for legislation. This sounds as over-the-top-demanding, but it is not. It is the ultimate consequence of caring for society, and bringing to bear the conclusions of critical and public reasoning on policy making in society. Earlier in my lecture, I worked with the opposition of role-based reasoning and public reasoning as a scholar. Someone locked up in the strictly role-based reasoning of, for instance, a police officer, an admissions officer, a college professor, a soldier, a doctor, an art collector, a banker, and even an activist is not bothered by testing their best judgment in light of a broader view.

As liberal arts and sciences students, you have grown accustomed to a multi-perspectival reality within the curriculum. In one course you work on questions of sustainability and climate change from the perspective of entrepreneurialism, in another course you may do so from a perspective of chemistry, banking, or of ecological ethics. And you may be in a project that is interdisciplinary by its very nature. You will learn to go back and forth between disciplinary perspectives and more general conclusions that take the insights that you gain from all the different perspectives together. Role-based and perspectival reasoning can be escaped and transcended in at least two ways: either you can slip into another role or perspective and gain a different point of view, or you can bring several together and reach a more complete, a more impersonal view.

The challenge for our students and especially our alumni is to keep fit with regard to the art of switching perspective and looking for the more general view after leaving our programs. Specialized masters and employers usually set less multi-perspectival agenda's. At the same

time, I know from my institution that alumni who reflect on what it is that they actually learned during their three years with us the very first things that they stress is the aspect of learning to see, think, and reason from many perspectives and reaching more balanced conclusions when thinking through specific questions and tasks. Reaching overall conclusions, tying loose ends together, daring to go for the bigger picture instead of the soundbite or twitter statement: that is one of the greatest virtues of what I have called scholarly citizenship.

This focus on epistemic and universalistic agenda of civic education is not purely a thing of political ethics, philosophy of science, political theory, human rights and social theory. If there is one area for improvement in our programs, then I think it is in the field of the sciences. Possibilities and threats in big data, ICT, and artificial intelligence are affecting the limits and scope of virtually all academic and societal knowledge. Digital citizenship, having the skills and knowledge to relate to that still new and rapidly evolving field, will be a new challenge for our programs. At least as much as we need ethics, rhetoric, logic, and statistics in our core curriculum, we have to start providing for the knowledge and skills we need here. Many of us have not taken that step yet. And that is not surprising; but there is important work to be done. For if you do not know how the world is constructed and works, then you cannot think critically about it.

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Let me conclude that the liberal arts and sciences can help its students shake off a certain level of immaturity, and learn to think and act for themselves from a multiplicity of perspectives. That is what makes the liberal arts and sciences worthy of the free person. I have presented an abstract conception of freedom and civic competence, which according to some will be quite irrelevant to the needs of society and the labor market. It is true that we do not educate professionals - but that is a strength. We deliver critical thinkers, who dare to be elite in thinking through the epistemic and political-ethical

challenges of our times. And who will eventually grow into great professionals exactly because they have gained the freedom to not be bound at all costs by the shackles of professional competence.

THANK YOU