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*Liberty: Spiritual Freedom
and Moral Responsibility*

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Liberty: Spiritual Freedom and Moral Development



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‘The condition of freedom is inherent to humanity, an inevitable facet of the possession of a soul and sapience, with the implication that all social interactions subsequent to birth imply a loss of freedom, voluntary or involuntary.’ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, French philosopher.

Liberty is another pillar of Montessori education and Dr. Montessori insists that it be one of the constants of all educational endeavour. I am honoured to share my research and thoughts with you and can only hope to shed some light on this often-misunderstood concept within the Montessori approach.

In order to understand the relevance of liberty in education we must first understand what the purpose of education is. It is a Montessori premise that humans are spiritual beings encapsulated within a material body, and that the body is designed to be but a vehicle of spiritual expression. This is the core of Montessori philosophy, and the Montessori approach can be understood and fully realised only within this concept.

‘If the work of man on earth is related to his spirit, to his creative intelligence, then his spirit and his intelligence must be the fulcrum of his existence, and all the workings of his body. About this fulcrum his behavior is organised, and even his physical economy. The whole man develops within a kind of spiritual halo.’

Educate comes from the Latin *educare*, which means to lead out, bring up. To be able to do so implies that there is something already present that needs to be led out, brought up. I propose that this is the spirit within us all. From this we get that the ulterior goal of education is to help the spirit within each individual to free itself from the confinements of the limitations imposed on it by this *envelope*, by developing and refining the body to its maximum possibilities. This will free the human spirit, allowing it full expression. This expression of the spirit enveloped by the material body takes the form of a personality. After all, the essence of the word personality is the Greek *persona* which means mask. My understanding is that the personality is that which covers the spirit, not to hide it but as a means of expression. This is the aim of Montessori education, to aid the individual in the creation of his personality. Liberty is the means.

‘The study of a teacher is like a study of the Soul. The teacher sees what is to be found there and also sees the path the teacher herself must follow to learn.’(...) ‘This feeling of love is a connection between Souls. The Soul of the child begins to blend with the Soul of the teacher and the child becomes obedient.

‘When the spiritual life has formed, it remains and grows and perfects itself because it is like a living being which has been generated and must therefore grow.’

Personality is founded on one's unique spiritual gifts: talents, inclinations and interests, in combination with one's particular genetic make-up. It is the result of the individual's response and accommodation to the experiences lived in the environment. According to Dr. Montessori, personality is an organ that is psychic—or spiritual—in nature.

‘Psychical (psychic) development is organised by the aid of external stimuli, which may be determined experimentally.’

Since psyche is the Greek word for soul—*alma* in Latin—one can refer to either soul or psyche to describe the spiritual dimension of the process. Personality itself is the sum of several other psychic characteristics: such as language, intelligence, will and character, all of which are only potentialities at birth—seeds as it were—that need to grow and flourish. Montessori theory states that these characteristics develop during what is known to us as the Spiritual, or Psychic Embryo, the period of human development which occurs from birth to 3 years of age.

This notion may be best understood by comparing the unfolding of the personality to the formation of parts of the physical body, such as the feet and legs. These must be created, grow and develop—through proper nutrition and exercise—so that as a result, we have the phenomenon of walking. Walking must be considered a developmental process as the ability to walk does not exist at birth and could never come about simply by formation and growth. It occurs only if the individual encounters the *right* environment; one that will provide the nourishing and the nurturing required for the potentiality to develop the experience of movement. Personality must undergo a parallel process in order to come to full bloom. It also needs to find in its environment the *right* ingredients for its psychic development.

‘In order to expand, the child, left at liberty to expand his activities, ought to find in his surroundings something organised in direct relation to his internal organisation which is developing itself by natural laws...’

‘The secret of the free development of the child consists, therefore, in organising for him the means necessary for his internal nourishment, means corresponding to a primitive impulse of the child...’

‘It is in the satisfaction of this primitive impulse, this internal hunger, that the child’s personality begins to organise itself and reveal its characteristics; just as the new-born infant, in nourishing itself, organises its body and its natural movements.’

So, what is the appropriate nourishment and nurturing for the full development of the personality—that which will allow it ‘to begin organising itself and reveal its characteristics’? It is the child that reveals this to us, through its movements, as reactions and responses to the environment. Through observation we have identified these in detail, but to describe these is the subject of another lecture altogether. Let us just state that the ‘right’ nourishment is that which responds to its needs.

‘We must not therefore set ourselves the educational problem of seeking means whereby to organise the internal personality of the child and develop his characteristics; the sole problem is that of offering the child the necessary nourishment.’

‘It is by this means that the child develops an organised and complex activity which, while it responds to a primitive impulse, exercises the intelligence and develops qualities we consider lofty, and which we supposed were foreign to the nature of the child, such as patience and perseverance in work, and in the moral order, obedience, gentleness, affection, politeness, serenity...’

This lecture is concerned with the nurturing aspect of education, the *how* and not so much the *what*. This is where liberty becomes relevant.

‘In order that the phenomenon should come to pass, it is necessary that the spontaneous development of the child should be accorded perfect liberty, that is to say, that the child’s calm and peaceful expansion should not be disturbed by the intervention of an untimely and disturbing influence.’

As you have probably noticed, I am both intrigued and fascinated with etymology. Permit me to share some insight as to the root of the word *freedom* and *liberty*. These terms have been used rather indistinctly in translations of Dr. Montessori’s work where there is only one word for the

concept of liberty in Italian. Yet, we shall see how the two terms used in English, *freedom* and *liberty*, represent two aspects of the concept, each having a different meaning.

At the root of the word freedom is (prî-), which means ‘to love, to set free, not in bondage’. It is the same root of the words friend, and peace. Fascinating!

The Latin word *liber*, meaning free, gave us the word liberty in the English language. (The Indo-European root of liber is *leudh*.) Among the definitions found in the dictionary are:

- the condition of being free of restraints;
- the capacity to exercise free choice; free will.

I’d like to emphasise the word capacity.

Liberty is defined as:

- the condition of being free from restriction or control;
- the right and power to act, believe, or express oneself in a manner of one’s own choosing;
- the condition of being physically and legally free from confinement, servitude, or forced labour.

The dictionary also says that freedom is the most general term, whereas liberty is (but) one meaning of freedom.

At first glance both definitions seem to mean the same but looking closely one will discover that they do not. Freedom refers to the capacity to be free—as an ability the individual has or has not developed. Liberty, on the other hand, refers to the possibility of being free, as an external reality. It’s like *may* and *can*: ‘yes, you may go outside’, (the liberty), but ‘no you can not’, (the freedom). The lack of freedom is due to a personal—internal—limitation, whereas the lack of liberty is due to a limit imposed from the outside.

Take for instance the limitation an individual has due to the incapacity to walk, not having developed the required strength, coordination or balance; it is a restriction from within. Under such conditions he cannot walk no matter how much liberty he’s given to do so. Whereas the individual who cannot walk because his legs are tied, is experiencing a limit to his ability, a restriction from without.

I propose that to understand the subtle but important difference between these words would shed light on what Dr. Montessori is suggesting in her pedagogical approach. As we read her books we must identify which concept she’s referring to in order to correctly interpret what she’s proposing. I believe that the misunderstanding of these terms has deviated Montessori practices from the onset and—sadly—continues to do so today. Many Montessori directors and directresses are still withholding the *perfect liberty* Montessori demands. There is still unnecessary interference, or what’s worse, the imposition of *tasks* on the child, i.e. the useless paperwork going on in so many of our prepared environments. We must even question the constant ‘go get something to work with’ or ‘what work are you going to do today?’ etc.

We can conclude that we must distinguish between both terms: freedom as a phenomenon of an internal nature and liberty as one of an external nature. Freedom reflects the capacity and ability the individual has developed, allowing him to relate successfully to his surroundings. Whereas liberty reflects the unrestricted possibility of relating. Liberty is given to the child; freedom is acquired by the child. Interestingly enough, both these freedoms may or may not coexist. In other words, one may experience freedom even when there is no liberty, or have liberty without truly being *free*. Therefore, the ultimate experience of freedom is to be found in the coexistence of both the external possibility and the internal ability.

I propose that the divorce of these two aspects of freedom is at the core of the problems our societies experience today: Liberty is given to individuals bound with personal limitations while liberty is taken away from those who have developed freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of fear ... to name a few. We should not confuse the liberty to think with freedom of

thought—which implies critical thinking; nor the liberty to express oneself with freedom of expression—which is to have the means of expressing oneself.

Having said this, one must recognise that there is a vital relation between these two freedoms, the external and the internal, especially when referring to the developing child, (but not limited to the child), the fact being that one cannot reach the state of spiritual freedom without conquering one's limitations. In order to transform one's potentialities into capacities and abilities one has to exercise oneself within and upon the environment. Therefore, *perfect* liberty —the possibility of exerting oneself so as to construct oneself—must be given to the child. Hence, liberty is the first condition. That is why it is an essence of education. *Perfect* liberty must first be given to the child so that he may then develop his potentialities, and in so doing, reach continuous degrees of spiritual freedom.

When asked by a directress about a problem with discipline, Dr. Montessori responded that the answer to a lack of discipline is to give the child more freedom, not less, which is contrary to what one would think. Yet, at the same time, she adds that it's a freedom 'within limits'. A conditioned *perfect liberty*? Is this not a contradiction in terms? This apparent oxymoron seems to confuse many Montessori practitioners. Let us once again turn to etymology to understand what Dr. Montessori meant by this idea. Perfect is from Latin *perfectus*, meaning finished, complete, excellent. Therefore one can read a "perfect liberty" as "complete liberty", meaning lacking nothing essential to the whole.

Yet all too often, "perfect liberty" has been interpreted as "total liberty", as the lack of restriction of any kind. I believe that if Dr. Montessori would have wanted to convey such a notion she would have simply said "total liberty". But she did not, as this was not what she was proposing. She was identifying instead a scenario where the child was allowed the possibility to completely correspond to his developmental needs, these very needs confining the liberty thus making it perfect. And what is the nature of these needs?

We must make our meaning clear by using another word than liberty; a word expressing another concept. At the base of all these activities there must be going on a gradual conquest, a gradual gaining of independence. This does not mean that one is to do what one pleases at the moment, or that one is allowed to play about with anything, using it as an accompaniment to one's fancy. It implies to acquire a sense of power to act alone; the possibility of carrying out some useful and important action without help from others; the being able to solve one's problems for oneself, to reach a difficult goal by one's own efforts.

So in truth there is no contradiction as what makes for perfect liberty for it does not exist in a totally unrestricted, unconfined or unfettered environment, without rules or limits of any kind. Perfect liberty is intrinsic to the particular development going on in the child at that time. The expectation is that in such a free environment the individual will have the possibility to interact with it in accordance to his natural dictates. This should then render a person who develops optimally, to the point of becoming independent, which is the nature of the individual that is truly free.

'It is independence which lies at the root of this concept of "personality". Personality begins when the Ego has got rid of the enthrallment of other egos and has begun to be able to function alone. Personality is urged forward by feeling its own worth; self respect makes one seek out tasks of increasing importance. Thus comes the impetus towards progress. What education has to do is prepare an environment favourable to this unfolding of the personality.'

'With independence it is a matter of "to be or not to be". Personality is there or it is not. With independence as a foundation we can build up all the serious and progressive erections of culture. It is upon independence as a basis that we can organise a new education and the schools. And independence will be the foundation of a new curriculum, rooted in the very nature of human personality.'

This implies that the liberty given to the child at any time is conditioned to the level of independence he's acquiring. It also implies that the independence the child conquers is a true reflection of his spiritual freedom, for there cannot be any greater restraint or confinement upon one's being than one's dependence on others.

'Independence really constitutes a succession of conquests. We cannot possess it completely at birth but we can acquire it bit by bit as we gain new functions, capacities and powers of adaptation. Thus at all the various and successive stages of development, independence is a valid guide for education.'

'Here I would stress', she says, 'the fact that unless he is allowed to acquire each successive form of independence proper to the stage he is passing through, the child cannot be "normalised"; he cannot, I mean, either cure his deviations, his psychic complexes, or learn anything with real zeal and interest.'

Therefore, true freedom is seen by Montessori as the acquisition of independent functioning, which is at the heart of the creation of personality—the unique personality that 'begins to organise itself and reveal its unique characteristics'. It is this unique independent person that renders the individual free.

'The child has to acquire physical independence by being self-sufficient; he must become of independent will by using in freedom his own power of choice; he must become capable of independent thought by working alone without interruption.'

'The child's development follows a path of successive stages of independence, and our knowledge of this must guide us in our behaviour towards him. We have to help the child to act, will and think for himself. This is the art of serving the spirit, an art which can be practised to perfection only when working among children.'

And this, and this alone, will bring about Moral Responsibility. You see, independence actually allows for interdependence, which is the basis of all social progress. It's the individual that cannot fend for himself that becomes codependent and a burden on society. To take care of oneself in as many facets of life as possible allows one to become an active and responsible member of a society, taking on tasks within the community in accordance to that which one is best suited.

And this breeds a strong sense of identity and self-esteem, a vital element of moral development. The individual that does not valorise himself—who, because of his unmet development, requires others in order to have a sense of value—becomes a candidate for codependent behaviour.

So we realise that in order to develop the individual needs to display effort, to exercise himself and not be dependent on others. Now this independence is only acquired by an effort. Freedom is the independence acquired by one's own effort. It is evident that this is a formation, a growth, therefore only acquired by long experience. It is the valorisation of the personality, to become aware of one's own value. Without this, as many psychologists say, the child only feels his own value if he is loved. This is another valorisation—he is independent, he is sure of his own actions and knows how to act. This is the basis and law on which the soul must stand. All the rest, the sweetness, (and affection of others), etc. is secondary in the valorisation of the child's personality. For the valorisation of the child's personality there must be a very definite basis in social experiences.

Then, what's the relevance of independence to Moral Responsibility? Morality is not only the possibility of distinguishing good from bad, but more importantly, the choosing to do what is good rather than what isn't good. It is a notion which arises from the fact that we relate to other people, and that we need to adapt to life with other people. Therefore, the question of morality and social life are intimately related. Morality is based on a set of rules which allow different individuals to live harmoniously in a society—with a common aim. This requires a form of adaptation to a common life, for the achievement of that common aim.

And what is the common aim which is dictated by our very nature? The development of independence. Dr. Montessori identifies this as a fact of life, one on which we can base all our educational efforts.

The other fact is that this independence, this continuous conquest toward independent functioning—which gives us existence as individuals—must occur by way of personal effort.

And here's where the moral aspect lies. Only when one is allowed total freedom (liberty) to act in accordance to one's inner directives can one satisfy one's own developmental needs. And this is what the individual experiences as goodness; the realisation of all one's potentialities. This is what gives us great satisfaction and the sense of joy. On the other hand, obstacles to our development are experienced as "bad", as that which impedes our becoming.

The satisfaction of these personal needs renders an individual that is in harmony with his surroundings, due to the valorisation of his unfolding personality. This child is now 'calm and sweet'.

'...mutual understanding and love, (between the child and the adult), depend on whether the child has acquired independence'.

Only the child that's experienced this sense of goodness can behave accordingly with others. It's like the saying goes, 'how can you love another if you cannot first love yourself? How can you value others—take them into consideration, respect them, care for them—if you have no sense of value, respect and care for yourself?'

In this process of becoming we see that the child who's given the liberty to become —to free himself from his own limitations—will also allow others the same possibility. As long as the child is allowed to be active —in the process of becoming independent—the child will also allow others around him to be active in their common pursuit.

We constantly attest to this fact in our environments; children do not interfere with another's efforts to conquer a specific movement or intellectual understanding, as if unconsciously knowing that this is that person's supreme right ... and the only means to the full expression of who he's to be. On the other hand, the child is always seen to be ready to help when help is really required, as when someone has an accident. This profound discernment on the child's behalf is a lesson that we as adults must learn, as this is the very essence of moral responsibility; the knowing when and when not to intervene. One's response when necessary would be sensed as "good" but to interfere would be experienced as "bad". "This demonstrates genuine and very refined sentiments of love and compassion.'

Therefore, the liberty we give the child must allow the child to function independently, live together with and relate to others, carry out ever greater social experiences, choose what to do, and exert the greatest effort in what has been chosen ... all for the development of the individual, the creation of a wholesome personality, and the sense of goodness that accompanies it.

'The basis of it all is to satisfy the constructive energies of man, otherwise the individual is perturbed causing deviations and the social life is perturbed, causing conflicts.'

'Therefore, the valorisation of the individual is in close relation to maximum effort; (to make things easier breeds dissatisfaction and defects). As a consequence the child is always urged to a more difficult challenging life.'

'This valorisation of oneself is nurtured by the feeling that one can walk through life carrying on one's shoulders all that is necessary to one's own life.'

'We should not help and protect the child from maximum effort but help and protect by organising the society—the environment necessary for his development.'

I would like to leave you with a moving and powerful quotation by the author Marianne Williamson—one that often has been mistakenly attributed to Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we subconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

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