

THE UNIVERSAL TRUTH ABOUT PARTICULAR PERSONS IN AMERICA

Peter Augustine Lawler

The universal truth can only be perceived by particular persons. And particular persons as we experience them are free and relational beings limited by their embodiment. So they necessarily live in particular places as parents, children, citizens, and creatures. America embodies rather than resolves this tension between universal truth and particular existence by being the experiment of people of a particular country devoting itself to the universal truth about human nature. The universal experience of having natural rights is of intense particularity, of being not most deeply a part of a whole—nature or a country—greater than oneself.

But a relational being, in truth, cannot experience himself as a relational whole without others. Even consciousness is knowing with others. Too much attention to the uni-

versality of rights can have the unintended consequence of undermining the particular person's openness to the whole truth about who he or she is. An important threat to the sustainability of our country—and perhaps the most menacing threat to the future of liberal education in our country—is the idea that we have progressed beyond the various features of the dialectic between universality and particularity that characterizes a free people constituted politically under God.

The democratic view of progress, Alexis de Tocqueville explains, tends to be vague or indefinite. It tends to generalize from the undeniable fact of technological progress to progress in general, including moral and spiritual progress. Its vagueness comes from being more clearly a movement away from injustice and poverty than a movement toward anything more than power and freedom. Power and freedom, of course, are *means* to be understood as good or bad according to the *ends* they serve. Those “hows” are good to the extent they serve humanly worthy “whys.” Power and freedom

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are always *limited*, unless we somehow acquire total control over all of being. As long as they are limited, they don't really change who we are as beings born to know, love, and die.

The democratic view of progress is vague because its transformational claims are always exaggerated. Despite progressivist hopes, most of the techno-change we've experienced we should, at best, half-believe in. As machines get better, persons in some respects get worse. The relationships among the generations and fellow citizens become attenuated. The heart contracts to a narrow circle of friends and families, and the men and women have less "class," or a virtuous sense of their place. Techno-orientation *universalizes* education by making it all about skills and competencies needed by all free beings who work. Its aim is to create a meritocracy based on productivity that, in principle, is open to everyone who participates in the global competitive marketplace. It is the kind of education appropriate for all of us who have natural rights, who are neither more nor less than beings with interests.

A middle-class techno-orientation also *particularizes* education by making it all about working for oneself, satisfying one's own needs. So education becomes both more and less particular. It is education for a particular free or displaced individual, for someone who is from and belongs nowhere in particular. Orienting our middle-class democracy toward the meritocracy based on productivity has helped us to think of ourselves less as members of races, classes, religions, "genders" (sexes), and (lately) sexual orientations. It has helped us think more truthfully and justly of all human beings as equal beings with natural rights. It doesn't help us think of who we are as citizens or creatures or parents or children or friends or neighbors.

Our understanding of each person as a middle-class being with rights was, of course, effective in discrediting the unjust aristocratic pretensions of the few who said they were free not to work and that the many lived to work for them. This American self-understanding was also effective in discrediting the communist/fascist/collectivist theory that reduced individuals to parts of a class or a nation or a race, that reduced individuals to expendable fodder for bringing some ideologically generated vision of the future into being. Communism dissolved the particularity of the free individual in the universal progress of History to its inevitable end. And America defeated communism in the service of the universal truth about irreducible personal particularity.

What passes for politically correct criticism of our understanding of individual rights is no longer radical in the sense of being socialist/communist or even progressivist in the bigger-and-better-government sense. It's been pretty much reduced to critique of our society past and present for being racist, classist, sexist, heterosexist, and so forth. Its premise is that we know the universal truth about who we are as free or encumbered individuals, and that future progress in principle is limited to uncovering blind spots when it comes to the full implications and applications of universal principles. It's not a critique of the theory of our Founders but of their failure to have their practice correspond to their theory. When we criticize Jefferson for encouraging the development of industrialized slavery on his plantation or failing to recognize the revolutionary government of Haiti, we do so on the basis of his abstract principles.

As the court said in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, every autonomous person has mysteriously been given the right to define him- or herself as he or she pleases; women are just

as free as men to be free and equal economic and political actors, and women have the same right as men not to be regarded as reproductive machines for the state. The court added, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, that each person has the dignified autonomy to define him- or herself relationally through intimate encounters with others; we all have the liberty to give ourselves identity as particular persons.

In *Lawrence*, the court also articulated what has become the prevailing constitutional doctrine of our time. The word *liberty* in the Constitution was deliberately left undefined by the framers. That's because they knew that they, like everyone else, were limited by their times in seeing its full meaning. So they meant it to be a "weapon" in the struggle of each generation of Americans for a fuller understanding of how the idea of universal liberty applies to particular lives. This means, in effect, that we can see that the framers of the Constitution were wise enough not to have been surprised that we can know better than they what liberty means when it comes to women and gays. And laws they regarded as "necessary and proper"—restricting marriage to between men and women or voting to men—we have come to regard as arbitrary deprivations of liberty.

The progressivist or aspirational faith of *Lawrence* is that the meaning of personal liberty unfolds over time, and it's primarily the court that informs us of what liberty has come to mean in our time. "The realm of freedom," as George Will recently said in an audacious column, is indefinite and progressively expansive. We're tempted to say that, with the help of our judiciary's clamping down on reactionary majorities, the emerging history of our constitution is the withering away of the state.

State here, of course, has two meanings

for Americans. It means government in general, which, for our progressivist libertarians, is being displaced by the competitive dynamics of the global marketplace. It also means the government of our states. To the states, the framers reserved the power to pass moral legislation encouraging or protecting relational institutions from the family to the church. But state majorities, even the framers believed, are to be disciplined and, we now believe, progressively more disciplined by the imperatives of personal liberty. We're tending to think that the Fourteenth Amendment made federalism as a limit on the framers' Lockean liberalism unconstitutional.

In our time, a newly comprehensive or extreme view of that individual liberty is undermining particular relational institutions. More than ever, we believe that the free person can't be defined by being a part of some relational whole. We're having a hard time remembering the difference between being impersonal and expendable parts of the collectivist wholes of the fascists and the communists and being relational, personal parts of countries and churches and even marriages.

Now any libertarian would immediately interject: the difference is between being voluntary and being coercive! So it may well be true that the court is in the process of using "liberty" to deconstruct civil marriage. Privileging one form of relational autonomy over another, we now know, has degraded nonmarital intimacy to a second-class status. But marriage can still exist as a personal, private choice. Churches can marry whomever they want.

The churches can respond: we're being coerced into accepting the court's definition of personal liberty. We will increasingly be viewed as violating individual rights when we insist that sacramental marriage is between

a man and a woman and that sex outside of marriage is a sin. It's already clear that sophisticates can't tell the difference between the religiously observant and the racists. The court has already judged that every effort to privilege "traditional" or opposite-sex marriage is driven by an irrational animosity destructive of individual rights.

A libertarian might still respond that the way to deal with that coercion is to downsize government. The churches wouldn't have to obey Obamacare's contraceptive mandate if government would get out of the insurance business. There is, after all, some truth to this response. Our most astute religious political activists are increasingly devoted to using libertarian means to pursue nonlibertarian ends, to create better "safe spaces" for their alternative relational lifestyles, which often include homeschooling and so forth.

But that response is clearly insufficient, as we can see, for example, with higher education. Today's political correctness limits intellectual liberty to "discourse" within the prevailing view of individual liberty. Just as we used to tolerate diverse views on racial segregation but do so no longer, we used to tolerate diverse views on same-sex marriage but do so no longer. Moral and intellectual diversity is trumped by "diversity" as a judicial/bureaucratic project. Diversity is officially "multicultural diversity," but it's really about freeing individuals everywhere from the authority of particular cultural and political norms over personal behavior. So, as conservatives routinely and rightly note, the word *diversity* has morphed into pure mendacity. It involves clamping down on the diversity of opinion about the fundamental human issues that have separated us into a variety of cultures or "regimes."

Our deceptive misuse of "diversity" is, of course, a historical accident caused by a whimsical interpretation of the Constitution

by the court in *Bakke*. The court said that pursuit of diversity in the classroom is part of the intellectual liberty protected by the First Amendment that trumps the constitutional injunction that everyone be treated purely as an individual, or not in any way as a member of a race or class. The court has taught us to say "diversity" whenever we mean racial justice pursued through the coercion of affirmative action. (To make myself perfectly clear, I don't think that affirmative action honestly used in higher education to achieve equal access of all Americans to its benefits is obviously unconstitutional. It's sad that "diversity" has deprived us of that precise debate.)

Later we learned to say "diversity" when we meant freeing the individual from all relational determination by the law or even the stigmatic judgmentalism of anyone's moral or religious opinion. Once again, the claim is really about justice, not intellectual freedom. And that's why our academic experts have little trouble conceding that the real or covert meaning of "diversity" is that intellectual freedom be limited by justice. Certainly, everyone knows that when someone invokes "diversity issues," it is really a threatening allegation of injustice. Nobody who can say "diversity" unironically ever says that the homogeneity of opinion among our professors is a "diversity issue" suggesting that our universities might be lacking in real intellectual freedom.

From the perspective of higher education, the big problem with political correctness as "diversity" is less trendy dogmatism about what being antisexist, antiracist, and so forth requires than of the limiting of education to a dogmatic inculcation of an extremely individualistic view of justice. The political correctness of the Sixties displaced the "existential" emphasis of the Fifties on

the predicament of the particular person born to know, love, and die. The exploration of the experiences of persons caught for a moment between two abysses was displaced by the “deconstruction” of various forms of particularity by “diversity.” So political correctness is readily and rightly blamed for emptying liberal education of distinctively human content, for combining absolutism concerning justice with relativism about every other claim for virtue. Political correctness, after all, is at the foundation of the various “studies” majors—black studies, women’s studies, queer studies, and so forth—which are forms of angry “identity politics” that manage to be neither liberal education nor techno-vocational education.

The various “studies” majors, however, haven’t really been effective in resisting the domination of techno-vocationalism of the middle-class meritocracy based on productivity. Our corporations, foundations, accrediting associations, and government bureaucracies typically embrace both “diversity” and “disrupting” higher education in the service of the measurable competencies that prepare students to be flexible participants in the twenty-first-century competitive global marketplace. Those experts agree with the politically correct that “diversity” properly understood empties out the authoritative content of particular cultures. All that remains are the needs of the particular individual—which can only be met effectively through personal productivity—and the universal logic of the marketplace, which we all enter as producers and consumers.

So there are now two extreme enemies to the genuine diversity of liberal education: political correctness and libertarian economics. They complement more than oppose each other. The economists do mock the “studies” professors on their whiny neglect of techno-vocationalism. The truth about

the liberation of women is that they can now be “wage slaves” or entrepreneurs just like men. And true education for liberation is found in the STEM majors and so forth, disciplines that are true meritocracies and so know of no distinction between man and woman, black and white, and so forth. The only distinctions that matter now are “quantitative” measures of money and power; and acknowledging that “capitalism has won” means that women have been perfectly liberated from being women in particular for being particular individuals, and the truth about every particular individual is universal or described by the doctrine of rights and the science of economics. This is the liberation, of course, that is celebrated in its own way by our Supreme Court.

As a result, defending liberal education today has become, more than ever, about resisting the intellectual despotism that Tocqueville noticed in America: the tyranny of middle-class opinion. Tocqueville denied, in effect, that our large and diverse republic as described by *Federalist* No. 10 was really all that diverse in a moral and intellectual sense. The diversity mainly relied upon there to protect liberty from the tyranny of majority faction is diversity of interests. But the omnipresent middle-class opinion is that we are all essentially beings with interests—no more and no less. That is, finally, the opinion at the foundation of today’s celebration of “diversity.” To believe in some moral and religious truth that comes from religion or philosophy or citizenship or nature or whatever is the kind of diversity that allegedly undermines “diversity.”

The defense of real educational diversity—and so real liberal education and real intellectual liberty—begins by complicating the view that America is only a middle-class or Lockean country. Tocqueville reminds us that the first American egalitarians were

actually the Puritans. They were for universal education based on the truth that each of us is a particular creature with a soul. They agreed with the middle-class principle that every free being should work for himself. But they added that every creature has also been made for contemplation of the truth about who he or she is; the Puritans' provision for universal education began with the thought that all of us should read the Bible for ourselves. And it was that thought, our neo-Puritan novelist Marilynne Robinson reminds us, that animated the liberal education found at antebellum Oberlin, where everyone, faculty included, did manual labor; and where everyone, women and blacks included, studied real books, beginning with the Bible. It was that Puritanical thought, Robinson adds, that was behind privileging Sunday as a restful and self-reflective respite from the productive demands of the world of commerce.

The truth is that the presence of a place for civic and religious education—including higher education—in our particular country depends on the diversity that animates the dialectical tension between what we can call Puritan and Lockean voices. It's true enough that the dominant voice, which we hear in *The Federalist*, emphasizes securing the conditions of liberty for the free and self-interested individual. But a second voice, which originates with our Puritans, is more concerned with a participatory, egalitarian idealism routed in the indispensable Christian insight about the dignity of all beings with souls. Lincoln, Carey McWilliams remind us, corrected an excess of the dominant voice of our Founding with the Gettysburg Address: "the Declaration of Independence asserts that we are created equal and government exists to secure rights; Lincoln argued that the Union, conceived in liberty, is *dedicated* to equality."

The efforts to abolish slavery and end segregation in our society depended not only on Lockean calculation of rights but also on what can only be called religious devotion. Jefferson spoke with unrivaled eloquence about the violence slavery did to beings with rights, but he wasn't inspired to do much about it. He certainly didn't think much of those neo-Puritan Abolitionist graduates of Oberlin who were so intransigent when it came to acting on the whole truth about personal freedom. Lincoln thought highly of the egalitarian universalism of Jefferson's abstract principles, but not of his indifference to taking particular personal risks on behalf of justice. Martin Luther King Jr.—who deployed what he learned from his neo-Puritan liberal education to mix perfectly Christian and individualistic themes—didn't think much of the middle-class "white moderate," who knew what was right but lacked the devotion to act now.

This same balance between Lockean freedom and democratic/biblical civic devotion can be found even in the theology of the Declaration of Independence. The residually Puritan (or Calvinist) members of Congress amended Jefferson's draft. Jefferson wrote of "Nature's God" in the mode of the Deists, of a past-tense Creator indifferent to the present existence of particular persons. Amended, our Declaration speaks of a living, judgmental, and providential God, a personal and relational God, a God who cares about each of us in particular, as we should care for each other.

Jefferson viewed these changes as a mangling of his original intentions. And so they were. But he accepted them in the spirit of accommodating statesmanship. The Declaration, as a compromise, is better than the theory of either of the parties to the compromise. A purely Puritan Declaration would have been too intrusively egalitarian, result-

ing in a theocratic trampling on the rights of conscience. A purely Lockean Declaration would have alienated and could easily serve to marginalize religious Americans.

Our Declaration is neither Lockean nor Puritan. The free being with rights is also a relational being. He's not an unencumbered individual. He has at least some of the devotion of the citizen and the personal faith of the creature. Government is limited by the irreducible personal progress toward wisdom and virtue of particular individuals open to the truth about who they are as free and relational beings. The American devotion to justice does not require emptying out our personal content in the name of liberty, and its understanding of equality affirms the dignified personal significance of beings who are much more than producers and consumers.

So freedom from government is for the freedom of families and freedom of the church, and our civic devotion is not based on some merely civil theology, but the trans-political universal truth about the personal and relational logos who is both the God of revelation and the God of nature. We can say that the theology of our Declaration is a kind of accidental Thomism, agreeing with the philosopher-theologian who improved upon what Aristotle taught about the impersonal God of the philosophers with the whole truth about the free, rational, relational, creative, and loving personal God. It goes

without saying that we see the Thomism in the Declaration without accepting all the doctrines specific to Catholics.

The danger to genuinely higher education, let me repeat, is the view that somehow we have progressed beyond the Declaration's reconciling of the middle-class view that universal education is techno-vocational with the Puritan view that universal education is for the discovery by particular beings of who they are as unique and irreplaceable beings made for singular personal destinies. Education is for citizens and creatures and even philosophers as much as for producers and consumers. Most of the genuine diversity of our system of higher education, which is its saving grace, can be traced to the religious inspiration of so many of our colleges and universities. And our task is to defend that diversity by using libertarian *means* for non-libertarian ends, to free up our institutions from the disruptive or leveling influence of our accreditors, bureaucrats, think tankers, and other so-called experts.

My educational conclusion is, of course, about how to teach the Declaration to save our understanding of personal liberty from devolving into the emptiness of a kind of unencumbered individualism that reduces all education to techno-vocationalism. We must not forget that the universal truth about who we are can only be experienced by particular, relational persons. †