

## Lesson 4: Power to Choose: Freedom for Excellence

### PURPOSE

To motivate students to live freedom for excellence in their lives.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify and distinguish between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference.
2. Recognize Harriet Tubman as an example of a person who lived freedom for excellence.

### MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- [Video](#) Harriet Tubman: Fearless Freedom Fighter who Liberated Hundreds of Slaves | Biography
- Two Ideas of Freedom
- [Movie](#) HARRIET | Official Trailer
- [Freedom Center](#) resources

### VOCABULARY

- Freedom for excellence: using one's freedom to make excellent choices and become excellent oneself
- Freedom of indifference: choosing carelessly by failing to consider whether one's actions are excellent or non-excellent

### PROCEDURE

**Step 1:** Review the previous lesson. Recall the [Socrates' triple filter test](#) and its main "ingredients". Recall the importance of developing habits of excellent thinking and discuss any examples of excellent and non-excellent thinking habits.

**Step 2:** In the first lesson, the class learned that the power to choose is one of the most important human powers which distinguishes them from all other living beings. Introduce the students to the topic of freedom by asking the following questions:

What is freedom? How would you define it?

Is freedom the ability to do whatever you want? To not have to listen to anyone?

How is freedom linked to responsibility? Do we have a duty to make good choices or are our choices irrelevant?

Write the student responses on the board. Before providing the vocabulary definitions, ask the students to read the text [Two Ideas of Freedom](#). Divide the students into groups and ask them to read the text and discuss associated questions.

The text covers two ideas of freedom. The first is called freedom of indifference. Someone who lives by freedom of indifference may say: “If my teacher wasn’t out to get me, I’d have better Grades”; “You can’t tell me what to do. I don’t care!”

The second is called freedom for excellence. Someone who lives by freedom for excellence may say: “I don’t have to practice, I choose to practice because I want to get better”; “I’m upset, but I just need to cool off, since I don’t want to say or do something that will hurt others and that I’ll regret later.”

After the groups finish discussing, ask them to share their conclusions with the rest of the class. Lead the class discussion on the basis of the Answer Key provided with the text.

Write the definitions on the board:

Freedom for excellence: using one’s freedom to make excellent choices and become excellent oneself

Freedom of indifference: choosing carelessly by failing to consider whether one’s actions are excellent or non-excellent

**Step 3:** Freedom for excellence is possible for everyone to achieve, regardless of their age, sex, skin color, or any other circumstances. In this lesson, we will learn about the example of Harriet Tubman, a woman who used her freedom in an excellent way.

Harriet Tubman (1822 – 1913) was born into slavery by the name Araminta Ross, which she changed to Harriet after escaping slavery. She was beaten and whipped by various slave masters as a child. Early in life, she suffered a traumatic head wound when an irate slave owner threw a heavy metal weight intending to hit another slave, but hit her instead. The injury caused dizziness, pain, and spells of hypersomnia, which occurred throughout her life. After her injury, she began experiencing strange visions and vivid dreams, which she ascribed to premonitions from God.

In 1849, Tubman escaped to Philadelphia, only to return to Maryland to rescue her family soon after. Subsequently she made some 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people using the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century, and used by enslaved African-Americans to escape into free states and Canada. Traveling by night and in extreme secrecy, Tubman (or “Moses”, as she was called) never lost a passenger. After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed, she helped guide fugitives farther north into British North America (Canada), and helped newly freed slaves find work.

When the Civil War began, Tubman worked for the Union Army, first as a cook and nurse, and then as an armed scout and spy. The first woman to lead an armed expedition in the war, she guided the raid at Combahee Ferry, which liberated more than 700 enslaved people. After the war, she retired to the family home on property she had purchased in 1859 in Auburn, New York, where she cared for her aging parents. In her later years, Tubman was an activist in the struggle for women’s right to vote until illness overtook her. After her death in 1913, she became an icon of courage and freedom.

Show the [video](#) Harriet Tubman: Fearless Freedom Fighter who Liberated Hundreds of Slaves | Biography. After watching the video, lead the class discussion by asking the following questions:

After Harriet achieved her own freedom, was she indifferent to the sufferings of other black people or did she use her freedom to promote their dignity?  
What did it require of her to use freedom for excellence? Would it be easier for her to be indifferent to her people’s suffering?

After hearing the comments from students, explain that Harriet Tubman acquired freedom for herself, but that did not make her indifferent to the suffering of other black people. She made around 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people after she herself became free. She was among the people who created the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century, and used by enslaved African-Americans to escape into free states and Canada.

Using her freedom for excellence and promoting the dignity of black people required a great deal of sacrifice from Tubman. To help slaves escape, she was making many long trips at night, in difficult and dangerous terrain, often followed by slave hunters. At one point, she was a fugitive from the law with a large bounty on her head. It would definitely have been easier for her to remain indifferent to the suffering of others and to keep herself safe. Nevertheless, she understood that freedom for excellence is worth any sacrifice.

**Step 4:** Ask the students if they can recall some examples of freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference from their surroundings. Help them to recognize what an excellent choice would entail in each situation and motivate them to strive for freedom for excellence.

**Step 5:** Summarize. Recall the definitions of freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference. Highlight the example of Harriet Tubman and how she used her freedom for excellence.

### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

[Movie HARRIET | Official Trailer](#)

[Freedom Center](#) resources

## Two Ideas of Freedom<sup>10</sup>

An American author, George Weigel, popularized the idea of two ideas of freedom, even though the concept of different types of freedom dates back much further in history. The first idea of freedom was championed by William of Ockham in the 13th century, and it is very popular still today. In this understanding, to be free simply means that I should be able to do whatever I want. I am free as long as I have the power to choose. Whether I make a good or a bad choice, it does not really make a difference. According to this view, the choice itself does not matter so much as the fact that I have the ability to make that choice. Freedom is considered to be the mere capacity to choose. Choice can be anything, good or bad, excellent or non-excellent. This idea can be called freedom of indifference.

We know from experience that it is possible to use freedom to make both good and bad choices. It is true that people have the power to choose the good and the bad, but are they truly free if they make bad choices? Weigel, following the tradition of another 13th century thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas, argues that they are not.

“Freedom, for St. Thomas, is a means to human excellence, to human happiness, to the fulfillment of human destiny. Freedom is the capacity to choose wisely and to act well as a matter of habit...”

In other words, true freedom is the means to achieve human excellence. This means that I can only be truly free when I learn to choose what is true and good, and even more, what is excellent. Personal choices matter and each person should develop the habit of considering what is the excellent choice in each situation. Every day is full of opportunities to choose between excellent and non-excellent choices. For example, if someone has the choice to either read a book and go to bed early or to stay up late drinking alcohol, choosing the latter will not make them free in the long-term. In fact, it could end up making that person addicted and miserable. People can achieve true freedom only if they make good choices. Weigel calls this type of freedom “freedom for excellence.”

Freedom of indifference claims that people are free if they have the ability to choose any option they want while freedom for excellence claims that people are truly free if they choose what is excellent.

<sup>10</sup> A Better Concept of Freedom by George Weigel, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/03/a-better-concept-of-freedom> (last visited Dec 2, 2022).

Now, it is clear that choosing the good is not always easy. It often requires sacrifice and self-determination. Because of the challenge involved, freedom for excellence can only be achieved if people educate themselves in freedom and develop habits of excellence, or as Weigel calls them, virtues:

“Thus virtue and the virtues are crucial elements of freedom rightly understood... It’s a bit like learning to play a musical instrument. Anyone can bang away on a piano; but that is to make noise, not music, and it’s a barbaric, not humanistic, expression of freedom. At first, learning to play the piano is a matter of some drudgery as we toil over exercises that seem like a constraint, a burden. But as our mastery grows, we discover a new, richer dimension of freedom: we can play the music we like, we can even create music on our own. Freedom, in other words, is a matter of gradually acquiring the capacity to choose the good and to do what we choose with perfection.”

An important aspect of human actions is that they, so to speak, remain in the person who performs them. If people make bad choices, they make themselves worse (remember the example of addiction). On the other hand, if people make good choices, they become better versions of themselves and if they persist in making excellent choices, they can become excellent! Just as the person who practices playing the piano regularly can eventually become a great pianist, the person who makes excellent choices in important situations in life can achieve greatness as a person.

Thus, only the freedom for excellence can satisfy the deepest yearnings of the human heart, can make people truly free, and can help them to become the best version of themselves.

**QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:**

What is the difference between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference? Give an example to illustrate this difference.

How is freedom for excellence connected to developing habits of excellence or virtues? Give an example.

**Answer Key for the teacher**

- 1. What is the difference between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference? Give an example to illustrate this difference.** Freedom of indifference is the idea that to be free means simply that people can choose whatever they want. The choice that they make does not really make a difference. According to this idea, the choice itself does not matter so much as the fact that each person has the ability to make that choice, to “will it” on their own. Freedom is considered to be the mere capacity to choose. Choice can be anything, good or bad, excellent or non-excellent. While freedom of indifference claims that people are free if they have the ability to choose any option, freedom for excellence claims that people are free if they choose what is excellent. Personal choices matter and each person should develop the habit of considering what is the excellent choice in each situation. Here, the power to choose is closely tied to the power to think. Freedom for excellence is the capacity to choose wisely and to act well as a matter of habit. Freedom is the means by which, exercising both our reason and our will, we act on the natural longing for truth, for goodness, and for happiness that is built into each person as a human being. This means that people can be truly free only if they choose the true and the good.  
For example, if someone has the choice to either read a book and go to bed early or to stay up late drinking alcohol, choosing the latter will not make them free in the long-term. In fact, it could end up making that person addicted and miserable. People can achieve true freedom only if they make good choices.
- 2. How is freedom for excellence connected to developing habits of excellence or virtues? Give an example.** It is clear that choosing the good is not always easy. It often requires sacrifice and self-determination. Because of the challenge involved, freedom for excellence can only be achieved if people educate themselves in freedom and develop habits of excellence, or as Weigel calls them, virtues: “Virtue and the virtues are crucial elements of freedom rightly understood”.  
An example that Weigel gives is that of learning to play a musical instrument. Anyone can bang away on a piano; but that is to make noise, not music, and it is a barbaric, not a humanistic, expression of freedom. At first, learning to play the piano is a matter of some drudgery as one toils over exercises that seem like a constraint, a burden. But as mastery grows, one discovers a new, richer dimension of freedom: they can play the music they like, they can even create music on their own. Freedom, in other words, is a matter of gradually acquiring the capacity to choose the good and to do what one chooses with perfection.