

“What is a ‘Liberal Arts Education?’”

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Introduction

During my first few years at Belmont Abbey College, I taught the freshman introduction-to-college course, called First Year Symposium. Since that course tries to communicate the College’s mission, I developed a few ideas about liberal arts education to explain to the freshmen. When I taught the First Year Symposium again recently, I began to wonder how well I really understand the Liberal Arts.

This essay takes up one of the most fundamental questions, how to explain the liberal arts to students. According to today’s prevailing view, the liberal arts develop critical thinking skills and intellectual literacy in a variety of academic disciplines in order to solve the problems of the democratic and capitalist society. Although this view echoes ideas within the liberal arts tradition, it loses the foundational goal of wisdom and compatible habit of the virtues as means to wisdom. To enlarge my own perspective, I looked back to some defining texts in [The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History](#), edited by Bruce Kimball.¹

The Liberal Arts are inseparable from the Greeks

In his introduction Kimball outlines the six prevailing opinions about the origins and nature of the liberal arts.² The first opinion, which is probably the most widely known, holds that ancient Greek culture developed the liberal arts during the fifth and fourth centuries BC. A second opinion holds that the Greeks initially learned the liberal arts from the ancient Hebrews and that the ancient Hellenistic-Hebraic-Christian conversation engendered a refined liberal arts tradition.³ A third opinion holds that Greek civilization drew its learning from the ancient Middle Eastern cultures that colonized the Greeks around

¹ Bruce A Kimball, ed. *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, 1-12.

³ Saint Augustine developed this view, recognized the forced nature of its argument, and later retracted it. But, as Kimball notes “the argument remains popular for the next 2000 years, partly due to the authority of Augustine’s text, and it was still being credited by learned individuals as late as the 15th century in Western Europe.” *Ibid.*, 4.

1500 BC and that Western culture later denied these origins precisely in order to assert its superiority over those cultures in the forms of modern racism and colonization. A fourth opinion holds that Greek culture and learning were refined by Islam, which not only transmitted ancient Greek texts to the West but also gave the West “the best of what [Islam] had learned from classical cultures and what it had added by its own creative genius.”⁴ The fifth opinion holds that ancient classical thought and culture was refined by Modernity, either by the 17th century political philosophy of liberalism or by the 14th-15th century retrieval of classical literature. The final view holds that the liberal arts originates in and reflects ancient hierarchical cultures and should be refined by the feminist critique of its hierarchical traces.

The Liberal Arts are inseparable from Greek thought and culture, even if one thinks that this tradition originated in some Middle Eastern culture, has been refined afterward by Christianity, Islam, or modern philosophy, or should be refined by feminism. As a system of education, the liberal arts formed the moral and intellectual foundation of one of the world’s great civilizations. This observation seems to exclude *non*-Western thought from the liberal arts.⁵ After all, no one argues that the Greeks learned the liberal arts from the ancient East. This observation does exclude the idea that non-Western thought might simply be mixed into the curriculum of a liberal arts college simply because it contains some of the same wisdom and originates in the ancient world. For example, I would not represent the liberal arts in a curriculum with a study of Confucius, even though I recognize the excellence of his teaching. But this observation certainly does not exclude the idea that non-Western thought might be studied in a liberal arts college and compared to Western thought. The areas of consistency and compatibility, for example, might bring truths about the human person into clearer light.

Religions and philosophies have generally found something of enduring value in the liberal arts. The Greeks and Romans used the liberal arts to educate society’s leaders, and many other societies since then have done the same. Apart from this practical goal, people have turned to the liberal arts to consider the human condition and the conduct of life. Some even claim that this tradition introduces its students to perennial truths about reality and the human meanings to be made of it.

⁴ Ibid., 6, quoting Mehdi Nakosteen, “*History of the Islamic Origins of Western Education.*”

⁵ I acknowledge but leave aside at this time the difficult question of defining non-Western thought.

While many religions and philosophies find enduring value in the liberal arts, they differ about what that value is. They put the tradition to different uses. For example, Christians such as St Augustine saw the study of the language as an aide to discern the truth of scripture and the study of rhetoric as an aide to preaching the gospel. Modern philosophy, including feminism, uses the liberal arts to promote a particular view of society and politics.

Three Hellenistic goals for the liberal arts: speech, reason, and truth

And so we might ask, what is it about the nature of the Liberal Arts, especially in its most widely recognized, if not original, Greek version that attracts? It is at least its ability to develop abilities of reasoning and oration, if not also to represent truths of human nature in many diverse and compelling ways. These three goals—developing abilities of speech and reasoning and representing enduring truths of human nature—are evident in Kimball’s analysis of what he calls “three competing propositions” within the Greek liberal arts tradition.⁶

The first proposition maintains that the Greek liberal arts education formed the youth to ‘pursue an ideal conception of the human being.’⁷ Plato gives the fullest account of this ideal conception. With a very different epistemology, Aristotle gives a no less comprehensive and systematic account. This approach to the liberal arts sees a certain superiority in ancient Greek philosophical texts, studies their version of what it means to be human, and draws lessons for today. These texts enable their students to envision a life of high quality but are not considered to express perennial truths about reality and the human meanings to be made of it.

The second proposition places the study of literature, language, and rhetoric, rather than philosophy, at the center of liberal education. An important proponent, Isocrates, was a contemporary of Plato and attracted more students to his school than the philosopher did to his famous academy. Liberal education might still have the goal of pursuing an ideal conception of the human being, but philosophy not recognized as being the only, or even the

⁶ By identifying the abilities to develop reason and speech and to represent truths about nature or the human person on the other, I represent differently than Kimball the fundamental dynamics within the liberal arts. His central thesis is that the liberal arts “can be understood in terms of two basic traditions: one emphasizing ‘reason,’ including its various denotations of a rationale, the faculty of thinking, and the active thinking; and another emphasizing ‘speech,’ including its meanings of the pronouncing of words, the faculty of talking, and a formal act of communication.” (9) I think that reason is like a hinge, or a connecting point, between speech and the realities that transcend both reason and speech.

⁷ Kimball 2, summarizing the work of Werner Jaeger, who wrote *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture* in the mid-1930s before fleeing Nazi Germany and teaching at the University of Chicago and then Harvard University.

best, means of pursuit. At the very least, this approach tries to perfect its students' abilities to communicate and to persuade.

The third proposition focuses upon understanding perennial truths relevant to human life. Kimball offers John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University* as the quintessential expression of this view. Newman finds in Aristotle the greatest expression of the perennial truths that humanity has grasped: "While the world lasts, will Aristotle's doctrine on these matters last, for he is the oracle of nature and truth. While we are men, we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians for the great Master does but analyze the thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions of humankind. He has told us the meaning of our own words and ideas, before we were born. In many subject matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle; and we are his disciples whether we will or no, although we may not know it."⁸ This view differs from the first, which emphasizes the philosophy of Plato, because it seeks abiding, always-relevant truths about the human person rather than merely a conception, however ideal, of the human person.

In sum, some people have prized the Hellenistic liberal arts tradition for its aid in developing an ideal conception of the human person through the study of what great minds of the past have said about the human person; others have valued it for aid in developing eloquence through the study of language, literature, and rhetoric, and still others for pursuing knowledge of the truth of things, especially of the human person, again through the study of philosophy. In other words, practically speaking, does one teach the liberal arts merely to develop eloquence through literature or also to develop an understanding of the views that these writings express with a depth and excellence? If also an understanding of those views, then does the goodness and soundness of a particular view depend merely upon its ability to cultivate and reflect the values and standards of society or also upon its ability to illuminate underlying truths of human nature and personhood?

Let us look at two examples of widely recognized liberal arts texts and ask how they help us understand the goals and methods of a liberal arts education and how it might be pursued today. In doing so, however, I will not try to tackle the difficult problem of whether these views teach us something about human nature itself, or merely about the societies in which the authors lived.

⁸ Kimball 3, quoting John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University, Defined and Illustrated* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), Discourse V, part 5.

Seneca “On Liberal and Vocational Studies”

The letter of the Seneca the Younger, “On Liberal and Vocational Studies,” is widely considered a *locus classicus* for the liberal arts. One of his last works, it outlines the subject matter and purpose of liberal studies and emphasizes the cultivation of virtue in order to deal rightly with others and to confront adversity. A quick survey of his life shows that he considered these topics both as a philosopher and as a politician. As a young man he studied law, politics, and philosophy in Rome and studied geography and natural science in Egypt. Possessing a great deal of intelligence in natural speaking talent, he became a leader in the Roman Senate and was later appointed to the tutor of the future Emperor Nero. However, as Kimball puts it, “Seneca made significant compromises in this severe Stoic morality expressed and much of his [early] writings, sacrificing principle to political expediency and acquiring great wealth at the same time.... The inconsistency between his practice and his philosophical teachings became the basis of a campaign of denunciations by jealous competitors for Nero’s favor....”⁹ Seneca retired from politics and spent his last three years composing works of philosophy, literature, and drama that survived to influence Medieval and Renaissance thought.

In this letter, Seneca says that the liberal arts offer a study of wisdom in order to prepare its students to live a virtuous life. Seneca recalls the classic definition of liberal studies as those “worthy of a free man” and considers wisdom the *only* study that makes a person free.¹⁰ This wisdom involves an ability to manage property and generate wealth and influence, but it is neither the measure of things nor the measure of a set of exemplary people but the measure of the human person as such. Seneca is certain that the pursuit of wealth can undermine wisdom and in any case aims at another sort of learning. The philosopher vehemently excludes from the liberal arts “any study which aims at making money” but nonetheless includes a study of generosity in using wealth.¹¹ The standard for generosity is not a quantity, as in a portion of an estate, but a relation of things to persons, as in what proportion is “enough for man” and why a person should prioritize doing well by other persons over acquiring things. Seneca writes,

A geometrician teaches me to measure my estates rather than how to measure the amount that is enough for man.... What is the good of my knowing how to divide the plot of land into sections if I don’t know how

⁹ Kimball 37.

¹⁰ Seneca, in Kimball 38.

¹¹ Seneca, in Kimball 38.

to divide it with my brother? What is the good of carefully computing the units of an acre,... if I get upset by an arrogant neighbor who encroaches on my land?¹²

Although we might tell students that the liberal arts teaches the “measure of man,” we cannot say, according to Seneca, that it ensures the measure be taken and used well. Seneca observes that the liberal arts cannot make people virtuous, but only “prepare the mind to receive [virtue].”¹³ The liberal arts imparts knowledge, and Seneca identifies the “unalterable knowledge of good and evil” not only as the most excellent knowledge but also as the characteristic knowledge that the liberal arts teaches.

In sum, Seneca offers a vision of the liberal arts founded on these key ideas: true freedom is based on wisdom rather than skill in generating wealth and influence; the liberal arts teach knowledge of good and evil and teach virtue while encouraging, but not forcing, the student to live a life of virtue; being educated does not transform the student into a good person, but few other experiences help more.

Pier Paolo Vergerio

In 1402 Pier Paolo Vergerio wrote *On Noble Character and Liberal Studies of Youth*, and it became “the most frequently copied and reprinted Renaissance pedagogical treatise” for the next century and a half.¹⁴ Reading through his treatise, one detects ideas that are still with us today as common expressions of a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education promotes a freedom based on the knowledge of a good life and the virtue to live accordingly. One also detects arguments that clarify some of today’s assumptions. Some will say that a liberal arts education teaches ideas that are “not useful,” meaning not oriented toward producing things and gaining wealth. Vergerio cautions us, however, against dismissing the close connection between liberal learning and the formation of character necessary to lead the economic and political life of a society.

In his preface, Vergerio says that a goal of liberal education is to lay the foundations of a morally good life in the young people of a society. It will seem

¹² Seneca, in Kimball 39.

¹³ Seneca, in Kimball 39, 40.

¹⁴ Pier Paolo Vergerio, “On Noble Character and Liberal Studies Of Youth,” in *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History*, Bruce Kimball, ed. 159-168.

shocking to some, then, that his opening sentences emphasize what today we call “upward mobility”:

Parents cannot provide any surer resources or more steadfast protections for life for their sons than if they have them instructed in honorable arts and liberal disciplines. If they have been endowed with these, they are found to elevate and render illustrious both the name of their clan even if obscure, and the father even if humble.¹⁵

But as he continues, he expresses a core idea of the liberal arts tradition: wealth without moral worth tends toward corruption. He urges that the pursuit of worldly things without the habits of “a good life” generate “perverse arts” that must be undone later in life if one is to live and work happily:

But surely, unless someone should have been instructed in the good arts from adolescence, or if he should prove to have been infected with perverse arts, he would not easily hope to be able in later years either to throw aside the latter, or straightaway provide himself with the former. Therefore the foundations of a good life must be laid in youth...¹⁶

We see in his goals for the liberal arts what goods Vergerio has in mind: freedom, recognizing the “best” things, wisdom, virtue. Following the classic definition, Vergerio tells us that the liberal studies are those “worthy of a free man.” He means those studies that orient the mind and body toward “all the best things,” that teach the virtue and wisdom to attain them, and that enable us to recognize and honor their attainment. These “best of things” are found within the person—in virtue and wisdom itself—rather than outside the person—in money and pleasure.¹⁷

These goals sustain practical affairs as well as contemplative pursuits, and in that way they promote the protection of life and the arrangement and defense of property, both of which are essential for full human freedom. In his era, Vergerio observed that actual freedom requires military arts as well as liberal arts to protect lives and property.¹⁸ In democratic and capitalist societies today, we might emphasize the habits around maintaining the rule of law and promoting public discussion of important political matters, and the habits of property management and trade. Although it is true that military arts today exert as much, if not more influence upon the shape of society, the increased

¹⁵ Vergerio, in Kimball 161.

¹⁶ Vergerio, in Kimball 161.

¹⁷ Vergerio, in Kimball 161.

¹⁸ Vergerio, in Kimball 161-162.

sophistication and power of weapons means that fewer people need be trained in their use, while more citizens need to be educated to understand the conditions of their use.

Although liberal studies teach wisdom and virtue, they do not necessarily cultivate those qualities in students. Vergerio would agree with Seneca that a liberal education will not make one virtuous, but Vergerio emphasizes that those who wish to enjoy the best of society has to offer, especially the privileges of leadership, have a prior responsibility to develop the best version of themselves. He writes, “For it is fair that those who want the best of everything should offer up the best of themselves. Nor is there any more secure or stable legitimation of rule than if those who ruled be judged by all the most worthy of all to rule....”¹⁹ Liberal education, therefore, sets and tests a standard necessary for the leaders of society.

In an educating society, these standards work as a double-edged sword. Where leaders rise to the standard, the members of society recognize a need to honor them. Where leaders fall short of or reject its standards, they challenge and even convict. Vergerio claims that “literary training” enables students to demonstrate the flaws of poor leadership effectively, in his words to amass “evidence revealing folly,” and to recognize in leaders a “pernicious disposition to injustice.”²⁰ Vergerio’s example of the latter is the Emperor Nero, whose superb education apparently piqued his conscience (to no avail), got in the way of his will to power and led him to pretend virtue:

Nero once said, with a pretense of clemency, that he wished he was ignorant of literature, because that would have to be his wish if he could not be clement on any other basis than as ignorant of literature. If he had been able to eject literature completely out of himself (and he was no proper dwelling place for it), my view is that he would have done it as quickly and gladly as he cast off that clemency which he simulated for a time...²¹

This “simulating” implies knowing the standard and knowing the failure to rise to it. In Vergerio’s dramatic example, Nero revels in his moral failure but is so well educated that he cannot claim moral ignorance, so he must pretend. Vergerio’s point is that others will recognize his feint, and do so more easily with the help of the same kind of education.

¹⁹ Vergerio, in Kimball 161.

²⁰ Vergerio, in Kimball 162.

²¹ Vergerio, in Kimball 162, quoting Seneca, *On Clemency* II i 2 as his source about Nero.

For those of better character than Nero, liberal learning challenges rather than convicts. The liberal arts tradition cannot be mastered perfectly and exposes continually the limitations of one's learning. Thus an important liberal arts goal is to preserve a lifelong willingness for learning. Vergerio's example is Jacobus of Carrara, one of the ruling lords of Padua and the grandfather of Ubertinus of Carrara, to whom Vergerio addresses *On Noble Character*. Vergerio describes Jacobus as "a prudent man and a magnanimous prince,... [but not] very learned himself." Vergerio nonetheless honors the aging leader's willingness to learn despite the lack of preparation for it as a youth: "... [Jacobus] cultivated the learned to an admirable extent, because he judged (as much as a modest man might be permitted to judgment) that the one thing lacking to his fortune was that he was not learned."²² Vergerio might just as well have mentioned the wisest person of his age, who would recognize the limitations of learning as a motivation to continue learning, rather than as a deterrent.

We might think of this lifelong willingness for learning as one among many spiritual strengths that a liberal arts education seeks to cultivate. This set of spiritual strengths enables the educated person to perform well in all of the different areas of human life, which Vergerio summarizes as active and contemplative: "[T]here are two kinds of liberal ways of life: one which is totally composed of leisure and contemplation, and a second which consists in activity and affairs."²³ Despite the stark contrast expressed here, Vergerio says that the educated person lives both liberal ways of life and that each contributes to the overall development of spiritual strength. Liberal learning –which Vergerio here calls "the knowledge and use of books" and "letters" – provides both education in governance and recreation from its fatigue:

Those who apply their mind to the conduct of affairs (regardless of how important) can become more prudent by reading the precepts and the examples found in letters. Whether they are managing the republic or are occupied in wars abroad or in their own or their friends' affairs at home, there is no other means able more pleasantly to provide recreation from their fatigue.... [W]henver we can accomplish nothing outside our walls, reading and books will come to our rescue...²⁴

Liberal learning forms character to perform well in the variety of public and private matters that a leader confronts. It offers both education in governance

²² Vergerio, in Kimball 162.

²³ Vergerio, in Kimball 162.

²⁴ Vergerio, in Kimball 163.

and recreation from its fatigue, and both modes of liberal thinking seem to have something to offer the other.

Conclusion

So how might we explain the liberal arts education to our students? We could begin by saying that this education has its roots in Greek thought and culture, and may go back even farther into more ancient Middle Eastern cultures. The ancient Greek civilization is reasonably identified among the great civilizations of the past, and the liberal arts education was one of the moral and intellectual foundations of that civilization. It is therefore no wonder that later civilizations have used it to educate their people, especially their leaders. Those civilizations have valued the ability of liberal education at least to develop skills of persuasion and oration if not also to propose views of the human person based on high ideals or perennial truths about human nature.

The liberal arts education exposes students to a series of experiences, especially of exceptional readings such as “great books,” but also of great art and sport. Such experiences form the minds of students to understand important realities, make sound judgments about important matters, and to explain these realities and judgments in compelling language. Over time, this tradition has accumulated a body of knowledge to take “the measure of man,” though the standards of that measure vary according to the religion, philosophy, or ideology making use of the liberal arts.

The liberal arts curriculum privileges authors such as Seneca the Younger and Pier Paolo Vergerio, who studied and wrote from experiences of both governance and contemplation. Exposure to such writings, those authors observe, will not make any person great, although living a good life requires developing the best version of oneself, an essential task of a liberal arts education. This tradition identifies good goals to pursue over a lifetime and teaches the wisdom and virtue needed to pursue them. The wager of education is that time spent forming youths in the foundations of a good life will help them to avoid the traps into which we already know that they can fall and to avoid having to unlearn the habits that would ensnare them.