Liberal Arts and Liberal Education[1]

By Christopher Flannery

Our Greatest Need

Students entering college are frequently more concerned with how to make a living than with how to live a good life. The two things are related, and a complete education should prepare them for both, but liberal education is concerned primarily with the latter of the two. It is concerned not primarily with the acquisition of technical skill—job training—but with learning how to live well. What is the distinction between technical training and liberal education, and why is it essential for students entering institutions of higher learning to understand this distinction?

A passage in Martin Gilbert's monumental biography of Winston Churchill suggests an answer to these questions. There we are reminded of a grim episode in modern history that we forget at our peril. In the autumn of 1942, in the midst of world war, information was smuggled out of Nazi Germany through neutral Switzerland revealing to the outside world "the extent of the German slaughter of Jews on the eastern front, the murder by gas of Polish Jews in three special 'death' camps at Chelmno, Belzec, and Treblinka, and of the deportation of Jews from France, Belgium, and Holland to an 'unknown destination' in the East."[2]

It was only two years later that this 'unknown destination' was identified as Auschwitz, where Jews were being gassed at the rate of about 12,000 men, women, and children a day. As Churchill wrote at the time, this was "probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world, and it has been done by scientific machinery by nominally civilized men."[3] The German people were the most

technically advanced—one might say highly educated—people in the world at that time. Doctors, nurses, psychologists, educators, scientists, engineers, accountants, lawyers, and the whole array of other highly skilled and "nominally civilized" men and women, were devoting their considerable skills, acquired at great effort and expense, to the extermination of a people.

The twentieth century, the most technologically advanced century in history (until the twenty-first), with more technically skilled people per square mile than could once have been imagined, stands out as a century in which genocide was a term with which every grade school child must become familiar. As communism continues to take its uncertain and much awaited departure from the world, let us not forget the horrors of the Gulag Archipelago, the Bolshevik extermination of the Kulaks, the millions sacrificed to China's political experiments, and of course the "killing fields" in Cambodia—all in the name of scientific socialism and progress, but in fact amounting to a new phenomenon in the world: scientific savagery. More generally, if less dramatically: human beings throughout history have proven as apt to use their acquired skills to take advantage of one another as to confer benefits on one another.

What does this tell us about education and about the relation between liberal education on the one hand and the acquisition of technical skill—job training—on the other? It points to the heart of the matter.

Every art, or craft, or technical skill (what the ancient Greeks called "*techne*") may be used in the service of justice or injustice, good or evil. It may be used to dignify our humanity or to degrade it. As Socrates points out in Plato's *Republic*, the medical art, for example, is equally able to guard against disease and to produce it.[4] For this reason, the

urgent practical question arises: How do we learn to do what is good and avoid what is evil? And this question compels us to contemplate the theoretical question: What is good?

These, of course, were the kinds of questions posed by Socrates to the ancient Athenians, and for doing them this service, they gave him the hemlock. Nonetheless, in his death Socrates proved victorious over his judges, as he predicted he would. His life became the source of the idea of liberal education in the West. His questions became the central questions of the liberal arts curriculum as it developed through the Middle Ages and into the modern era. They were the human questions, and they animated the study of what came to be called the "humanities."

These questions reflect the ultimate human need—the need to know the source and reason of all goodness. Because of this elemental need, as Plato's Socrates would put it, every education is radically—decisively—deficient or incomplete to the extent that it is not informed or illuminated by "the greatest study," the study of that "for the sake of which" we do all that we do.[5] The "human questions" arise from human nature itself. "Man by nature desires to know," as Aristotle wrote.[6] And what man by nature ultimately most needs to know is the final end, or highest good, or that for the sake of which all things exist.[7] The Christian heirs to the classical tradition gave their own distinctive expression to the ultimate human need toward which all profitable human inquiry is directed: It is the need to know God.[8]

The consequence of forgetting this need and the world of questions arising from it—of replacing these questions with the acquisition of technical competence or job training—is brutally clear. It is to risk producing computer programmers, scientists, business managers, doctors, and lawyers, who are at best technocratic barbarians. It is to

place in the hands of succeeding generations ever greater power over their world and their fellow human beings, and to fail to teach them the ends to which this awesome power is to be used.

However much America—and the world—needs technically skilled workers and professionals, there can be no doubt of the critically greater need for liberally educated citizens and human beings, who can distinguish good from evil, justice from injustice, what is noble and beautiful from what is base and degrading.

The Living Tradition

Liberal education is commonly associated with education in the liberal arts. What are the liberal arts, and what is the relation of the liberal arts disciplines to one another, to education as a whole, and to higher education in particular?

These basic if not simple questions are, in effect, already answered by every institution of higher learning that includes among its avowed purposes education in the liberal arts, or liberal education. That these questions have been answered, however—in mission statements, institutional structures, and curricula—does not necessarily mean that they are being asked. Colleges and universities like other institutions perpetuate themselves in part by taking certain things for granted. Among the things necessarily taken for granted are sometimes the most important things, including the central purposes of the institution itself. At the most established institutions, these purposes are most deeply imbedded in tradition.

A tradition is something that is in a sense taken for granted; it goes without question. It would seem to be, in this respect, at institutions where they have been answered

by the strongest traditions that our questions most need to be asked. They need to be asked by those specific men and women who are responsible for understanding and carrying forward the traditions, the avowed educational purposes, of the institutions. It is the active understanding in the minds of presidents and provosts, deans and faculty, that breathes life into these formal purposes; and it is in the learning that takes place between teachers and students that these purposes are fulfilled, these traditions become living traditions, and the questions posed here receive their most important answers.

Our contemporary understandings have arisen in self-conscious response to a particular twenty-five-hundred-year tradition or history of the liberal arts. It is, therefore, from the standpoint of the thinking of the preceding two and a half millennia that reflection on the meaning of the liberal arts may naturally begin. But, the liberal arts, though they have a history, are not reducible to that history. While it is possible to speak of a tradition of the liberal arts, it is necessary to observe that this is a tradition rooted in the questioning of the most familiar and authoritative traditions. One might say that in the world of the liberal arts all roads lead to a Socratic question—not just to the historical record of the question but to the living question in a living mind.

Pillars of Wisdom

What, then, speaking historically, is the tradition of the liberal arts?

As we have said, the tradition has its origin in the classical thought of ancient Greece. It originates in response to the most needful questions, arising from human nature, and posed by incipient philosophy—What is being? What is wisdom? What is virtue? What is good?

An unprecedented search for truth accessible to reason about the whole world led necessarily to the search for truth about the place of humanity within this world.[9] This revolutionary endeavor of the human mind—rightly associated above all with the names of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—gave rise to a structured and systematic body of reflection. After Greek philosophy had reached full flower in the fourth century B.C., scholars and teachers sought to establish a curriculum to prepare students for the higher and more difficult studies. Out of these efforts came what was called the *enkuklios paideia*, the learning circle, from which we get our word encyclopedia.[10]

A first century B.C. scholar and statesman named Marcus Terentius Varro codified this slowly developing curriculum into nine disciplines and introduced it to Rome. His work provided a model for Latin scholars ("encyclopedists") of the later Roman period; such famous names as St. Augustine, Boethius, and Cassiodorus refined and developed the tradition; and by the fifth to sixth century A.D. a canon of seven liberal arts (dropping Varro's architecture and medicine) had been established and incorporated into Christian education.

These seven arts were divided into the two familiar categories: the trivium, consisting of the verbal arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric; and the quadrivium, consisting of the numerical arts of mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy. These disciplines came to constitute the liberal arts, which "provided the basic content and form of intellectual life [in Europe] for several centuries." The liberal arts were, in effect, regarded as "the seven pillars of wisdom."[11]

The Hierarchy of Disciplines

How, in this tradition, are the liberal arts related to one another and to education as a whole? The trivium and quadrivium mean literally "the three ways" and "the four ways." These disciplines are, as Thomas Aquinas said, "paths preparing the mind for the other philosophic disciplines."[12] The liberal arts are basic; they are foundations of a full liberal education, which rises from them and reaches beyond them.

There is a distinctive mode of reasoning appropriate to the different disciplines. As Aristotle noted, an educated person does "not require precision in all pursuits alike, but in each field precision varies with the matter under discussion."[13] The carpenter and the geometer investigate the right angle in different ways. One should not demand mathematical precision of a statesman defending the cause of justice; nor should one accept enthymemes from a mathematician demonstrating the Pythagorean theorem. Yet both mathematical and moral or political discourse reveal elements of the truth about the world in which we live.

There is an inherent hierarchy within the liberal arts themselves and in the whole educational edifice of which they are the foundation. According to the tradition, a student should first acquire a facility with language (*logos*, which means both speech and reason) because this discipline is necessary for all other studies (for the liberal arts, as elsewhere, "in the beginning is the word"). Youth is also traditionally held to be capable of acquiring the art of mathematics, because it is abstract, whereas certain other disciplines require experience to be understood. The practical disciplines of ethics and politics, for example, depend upon the accumulation of experience and, most important, the development of the capacity to subject one's passions and appetites to reason.

Last comes the most difficult and the highest study, the study of first causes. For the pagan Greeks and Romans, this study culminated in metaphysics. With the assimilation of the pagan tradition to Christianity, the highest study became, of course, theology, the divine science. And the liberal arts were throughout Christendom, from the time of Augustine to the time of Aquinas and well after, understood as the necessary preparation for the lofty and rigorous discipline of understanding in its fullness " . . . the truth [that] shall make you free" (John 8:32).

The Unifying Principle

Within the historical development of the liberal arts themselves, the question is continuously raised of the meaning, purpose, and unifying principle of the liberal arts. For some two thousand years, the nature of this question and this principle remains in a decisive respect the same. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a radical reorientation or disorientation occurs, a revolution in thought marking a departure from the previous two millennia and inaugurating the modern era. It is impossible to understand the significance of this modern revolution, however, without understanding fully the still living—if battle-scarred—tradition it was intended to replace.

In this tradition, the liberal arts, the *artes liberales*, are literally arts of freedom. Traditionally this meant, among other things, the arts of free men as opposed to slaves. A slave is one who is subjected to the will of another, who is a mere tool or instrument of alien purposes and cannot choose purposes for himself. People are subjected to slavery by conquest. To prevent such conquest, to preserve that freedom which is a condition for the exercise of the liberal arts, requires other arts, arts of necessity, most notably the art of war.

Other necessities also encroach upon our freedom and our very survival--the needs for food, shelter, and clothing, for example. Arts are developed to secure the necessary material conditions for existence. Economics (from the Greek *oikonomike*, household management) is the name given to the general art of acquiring such necessary material goods. The successful cultivation of the arts of necessity seems to be a necessary condition for the flourishing of the arts of freedom.

Unlike the compulsory arts of war and economics the liberal arts are not forced upon us by the needs of mere life but are chosen for the sake of a good life. They are arts not for the acquisition or accomplishment of necessary things but for the use of choiceworthy things. They were distinguished traditionally, for this reason, from the manual or mechanical arts as well. That is, they are not merely instrumental arts but arts that are in some respect an end in themselves. They are arts to be exercised, as it were, after the battles are fought and won, and the fields are plowed, and the buying and selling are done. They are, as Aristotle would say, the "leisure" arts.[14] Our students are (perhaps painfully) amused around exam time when we recall to them that our words "school," and "scholar," and "scholarship" are derived from the Greek word "*scholē*," which means leisure—and that "schools" are places where "scholars" learn to make the best use of their "*scholē*."

Our young scholars know only too well that school involves toil, not to say drudgery. Where is the *scholē* for our scholars? Where is the *libertas* for our liberal artists? The idea of the liberal arts involves a tension—inherent in human nature itself—between freedom and ruling purpose. An art is a skill (*techne*). What is done with art is distinguished from what occurs by chance or by nature. Arts do not grow like the grass in

the fields. Human purpose, design, and conscious method infuse the arts. Rigor and precision are involved in acquiring and in exercising every art. It is not by chance that the various liberal arts are traditionally called "disciplines." This suggests to us that leisure properly speaking is not mere idleness and that freedom is not random meandering or arbitrary willfulness. The liberal arts are, paradoxically, the leisure disciplines, the disciplines of freedom. They prepare us to deserve, by using well, "the blessings of liberty."

The liberal arts have to do with that element of our being in which our freedom most essentially resides—namely, our mind or soul—as opposed to what is subject to physical compulsion, our bodies. This is why medicine, for example, came to be excluded from the canon. One might say that the first principle or axiom of the liberal arts is—in the words of Thomas Jefferson—that "Almighty God hath created the mind free."[15] And the first task of the liberal arts is to secure the liberation of the mind from those many fetters that can bind it: notably ignorance, prejudice, and the influence of the passions. In and through this essential freedom, the freedom of the mind, our "humanity" is revealed. The integrative principle of the liberal arts is this idea, *humanitas*, which gives us our word for the humanities.

The way in which this unifying idea was expressed for some two thousand years was in the form of a vital question, the central animating question of the liberal arts tradition—asked alike by Greek and Roman classical rationalists, Roman Catholics, Renaissance humanists, and protestant Christians. In the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism, words that would be as familiar and understandable to Aristotle in the fourth

century B.C. and Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century A.D. as they were to protestant communicants in the seventeenth century: “What is the chief and highest end of man?”[16]

The Revolution of Modernity

Even as late as the seventeenth century, the ancient tradition of the liberal arts was still intact--though certainly under siege. Thomas Hobbes could still write in 1640 that it was Aristotle, “whose opinions are at this day, and in these parts of greater authority than any other human writings.”[17] And the idea of Aristotle against which Hobbes and other founders of the modern world would rebel was an idea essentially in harmony with the “divine writings” held in authority by both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity, an idea which, in a sense, was the animating idea of Western civilization itself—the idea of the final end or highest good toward which all human endeavor should be directed. As Hobbes wrote,

> There is no such finis ultimus, utmost aim, nor summum bonum, greatest good, as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. . . . Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter. . . . So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.[18]

The rejection of the idea of a final end or highest good as the central concern of life and education marks a decisive break in the two-thousand-year tradition of the liberal arts. With this break, the arts of freedom begin to be replaced by the arts of (mere) necessity. Education oriented to the highest good is replaced by education in the service of the lowest

common denominator—avoidance of death or preservation of life and physical comfort. Mastery of nature for the relief of man's estate begins to become the governing objective of education. The highest aim of education becomes the aim of a distinctively modern science in which "knowledge and human power are synonymous." The aim is no longer to teach men how to live well; it is to "enlarge the power and empire of mankind in general over the universe."[19]

Modern thought is characterized by a wholesale rejection of the most fundamental premises of both classical learning and revealed religion, and therefore of the liberal arts tradition that to a large degree brought Athens and Jerusalem together in Rome. From the time at least of Thomas Hobbes, our most influential thinkers have in a variety of forms rejected both revelation and reason; they have denied both God and the freedom of the mind with which God had been held to have endowed human beings.

When Friedrich Nietzsche, summing up the state of the modern mind at the end of the nineteenth century, infamously proclaimed and lamented that "God is dead," he understood perfectly well that this alleged death encompassed the idea of humanity which was coeval with civilization itself; and with humanity, of course, must go the humanities or the liberal arts.[20] This nihilism remains, nonetheless, consciously and unconsciously the dominant mode of thought in the teaching of what are still called the liberal arts in American universities. This fact is the source of the most challenging questions for teachers and students of the liberal arts today.

Conclusion

The tradition of the liberal arts is, in a decisive respect, the Western Tradition, and the fate of the liberal arts will be inseparable from the fate of the West. The liberal arts came into formal and self-conscious being in the last glow of the political greatness of Athens and Greece. They were systematized as Rome reached and passed the apogee of its ancient pagan greatness. They were transformed by the centuries-long cultural and political spread of Christianity and again transformed by the rise to ascendancy of modern natural science. In the late twentieth century they patiently endured deconstruction in the service of the dogmas of a postmodernism that is now passé. There has always been—as there continues to be—lively disagreement about how the various disciplines are related to one another and, indeed, which are essential and why. This disagreement ascends to the greatest height of controversy: to disagreement about the most urgent question--the question of the highest good, the question of the end or purpose of human existence. It is because of the seriousness of this question that the meaning of the liberal arts and liberal education has been and will continue to be so fervently disputed. We need not feel an undue sense of crisis if we find ourselves, on this small "bank and shoal of time," compelled again to ask basic if not simple questions. Is it not precisely our crisis that we have learned to ignore them?

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[1] This essay is adapted from a chapter in *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education*, edited by Diana Glyer and David Weeks (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998).
[2] Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: The Road to Victory*, *1941-1945*, Vol. VII (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), p. 245.
[3] Ibid., 847.
[4] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991), 332d-333e.
[5] Ibid., 505a2, 505d7-8.
[6] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, first line.
[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a1-26; 1177a12-1178a8.
[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 94, Second Article , Objection 3 (http://www.knight.org/advent/summa/209402.htm).

[9] Socrates describes the historic turn in his own relentless search for the truth in *Phaedo*, 96a-100.
[10] The Academy founded by Plato—a leading center, to say the least, of liberal education—endured for some nine hundred years. It had some difficulty preserving and perpetuating in their full breadth and depth the teachings of its founder, as have American universities and colleges with far less to live up to. What brought the Academy to an end after nine hundred years was an edict of the emperor Justinian in 529 A.D. as part of an effort to impose religious conformity throughout the Roman Empire.
[11] David L. Wagner, ed., The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983), 1, 256; see especially 1-57, 248-272 for general treatments of the development of the liberal arts tradition.
[12] Wagner, ibid., 251.
[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Prentice Hall, 1962), 1098a26-28.
[14] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337b27-1337b42; 1333b37-1334a34. It is worth reflecting on what Aristotle means when he says that leisure is "the first principle" (the *arche*, the beginning and end) of all activity.
[15] Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 346.
[16] http://www.reformed.org/documents/larger1.html
[17] Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (1640, I, ch. 17, sec. 1), http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/elelaw.
[18] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 63-64.
[19] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I. 3; I. 129, in *Advancement of Learning and Novum Organum* (New York: Willey Book Co. 1900), 315, 366. We need not deprive ourselves of the many useful discoveries of modern science merely because we remind ourselves of the ancient insight that what is "useful" can only be understood in light of what is "good."
[20] "'Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not heard anything of this, that *God is dead*?'" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 124.