

Freedom is an Art: A Personal View on Classical Education

John R. Rose, Live Oak Academy, 11/2006

Classical education is both a goal and a journey. The goal, simply stated, is to live well as a free adult. That this should be a goal is simple human nature, and the methods of classical education are also rooted in human nature. These methods are shaped in detail by the experience of those who have made the journey before us. Their experience is distilled in the collective wisdom of about three thousand years of civilization. The weight of this wisdom makes it difficult to summarize. Instead, I would like to share a few of my own “traveler’s notes” on some of the key milestones, pleasures, and challenges of the classical road to freedom.

At the center of classical education are the Liberal Arts. When listed, they often number seven, but the number is not so important as the purpose. By “art” we simply mean a skill, a learned and practiced technique. An art is “liberal” if it supports my life as a free person. By contrast, a servant is one who works for others (or for their money). My ability to make bricks or stock picks or computer chips is a respectable art but not a liberal one.[†]

In ancient societies, there was a stark division between slaves and freemen, and it was obvious who had to learn the liberal arts. Today a division between slave and free still exists, but (contrary to some politicians) it divides each of us somewhere down the middle. In truth, every person is partly free and partly bound. When I am meeting a deadline at work or washing the family dishes, I am serving a practical need imposed on me. At other times, I am responsible to make free decisions, such as what career to take, or how to govern my household, or what causes to support, or how to spend or invest my free time, or how to build up my community. In those moments of responsible freedom I need the liberal arts.

The seven liberal arts are traditionally listed as follows: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy. These particular arts are found in extremely ancient texts throughout the world, are discussed in detail by Plato and other ancient philosophers, and have been in continuous use through the medieval period and up to the present.

But after the build-up of the previous paragraphs, the skeptical reader will ask questions like, “What happened to algebra, physics, economics, painting, Spanish, ...?” Or, “So is astronomy a requirement and biology just an elective?” Or, “Why should grammar help me choose a way of life?” (I pause for your questions, O skeptic.)

[†] Is it jarring to see the word “liberal” used in this sense? C.S. Lewis once wrote a book chapter on the concept of freedom, at the end of which he complained that modern political use of “liberal” had murdered it as a useful word. Perhaps it can be resuscitated.

The first question is relatively easy. There are seven liberal arts in about the same way that there are seven colors of the rainbow or seven wonders of the world. Seven is a convenient number for arbitrarily dividing up a continuum, or choosing a list of representatives. Just as you can name more colors or find more wonders, you can add more liberal arts to the list, if you want. Some ancient lists have ten arts; some include architecture or medicine. But the initial examples already cover the field adequately, and the shorter list is more easily learned.

The first three liberal arts are called the Trivium (“three-way”), and constitute a preparation for the latter four, called the Quadrivium (“four-way”). As Dorothy Sayers admirably describes them, the first three are a developmental roadmap of the first twenty or so years of a human life. First we learn isolated facts by rote (grammar), then we learn to connect them according to their meaning (logic), and finally we learn to communicate them clearly and cogently (rhetoric). The abilities of the child seem to change fluidly as he grows from one phase to another. The toddler absorbs vocabulary at a reckless pace, and the preteen is not so fond of memorization but loves the “why” and “what then” of things, while the youth is ready to move the world with his passionate ideals. (These phases, which arise from universal human nature, can be described in other ways, but the classical formulation described here has been continuously active over 2500 years of history.) As a description of human development, the Trivium provides a useful set of compass points for guiding a young person through his education.

The connection to freedom is simple. If my development is stunted in any of these areas, I will not be able to enjoy the full use of my freedom as an adult. A weak vocabulary will prevent me from understanding what others are saying, unless they talk down to me. If my thinking habits are lazy, I will fall prey to every passing scam artist or crooked politician. Even if I have great ideas, I will be permanently frustrated if my poor speaking prevents my friends from understanding me. All this might be true even though I make a good living from some salable skill. Though I am politically and economically free, without the Trivium I may still be forced to live as a slave to ignorance, deceit, and irrelevance.

The Trivium, in summary, is about the skilled use of language. The remaining liberal arts, the Quadrivium, are more like math and science. They build on competence in language, and deepen it, by applying it to certain areas of study. These areas are in some ways comparable to college majors or faculty departments. There are two key differences: All parts of the Quadrivium are necessary to the general education of a free person; they are not “majors” or areas of specialization. Also, while Plato and Aristotle would have welcomed most of the newer disciplines found on college campuses, they would have ranked some merely optional. In their ancient academies, everybody took math, music, and astronomy, but there was no Persian Studies department.

I think the primary reason for such a choice, in the ancient world, was the fact that 2500 years ago the few well-developed scientific disciplines were those of the Quadrivium. Below philosophy and theology, they were the intellectual crown jewels of the ancients.

It is odd for us to think of music as a science, but that is because we take the technology of music for granted. Back then, the Greeks had recently acquired the skill to accurately measure and classify tones, harmonies, modes, scales, and rhythms. The person who could learn the complexities of all this, and then make use of it to perform music, would have gained considerable poise and strength of mind, not just for music, but for other complex tasks. It is still true today. Beyond that, musical ability, both to perform and to listen, is a kind of wealth well suited to those who are free.

Arithmetic and geometry are unified today in a sort of continent of mathematics along with algebra, calculus, and so on. In ancient times, they were more like two lone islands. They still stand as representatives of what we would call discrete and continuous mathematics. Or, as the medievals would say, arithmetic is about counting and geometry is about weight and form. Or, as a neurologist might say, left brain for accounting and right brain for spatial reasoning. These are distinct and complementary mental functions or modes of thinking, and the well-trained mind should be completely comfortable (so says the classical model) with both. In the ancient and modern worlds, “innumeracy” is almost as destructive as illiteracy to one’s freedom.

Geometry, as taught in the classical tradition, is more than just a skill with measuring. It is an advanced level of logic. In ancient times, it was the course of study which required the student to reason with the greatest of precision, of rigor. In our world, which rests lightly on the labors of three millennia, logical rigor is often deprecated or taken for granted, but in the days of the Greeks, it was a new revelation. Euclid’s geometry textbook, *The Elements*, is a standard of sustained clear thought that was previously unheard of, and has since been only rarely equalled. We remember Abraham Lincoln for his rhetorical skills, informed by Shakespeare and the King James Bible, but Lincoln said it was Euclid’s *Elements* that taught him to reason accurately. This sort of reason was so prized at Plato’s Academy that over the front door was inscribed the following entrance requirement: “None But Geometers Shall Enter Here.”

Finally we get to astronomy. In the days before hyper-accurate clocks and calendars, the sky was everyone’s timepiece, and it behooved the educated person to be able to read it fully. Though astronomy is less useful today, and even somewhat unfashionable, it still retains one special claim on the educated person. When one is out of doors, the sky is fully half of what is visible (on an unclouded day), and surely it is important to have an appreciation for what is going on up there.

I might include several other modern sciences (physical, social, or historical) on the short list as soon as astronomy. Today it is a truism that students need more science. The

rulers of the schools generally reason that this would make the graduates more productive in technical careers. This is (in the terms defined above) an illiberal goal. But science is, I believe, pre-eminently a liberal art. As a discipline, it (like mathematics) strengthens the mind and prepares it to reason through difficult decisions, and to evaluate and criticize the claims of experts. For these reasons, every citizen in a democratic state should be able to think scientifically. Beyond that, science is an irreplaceable way of knowing, contemplating, and wondering at the world we live in. It is a kind of intellectual music, a joy in itself suitable to the mind of the free person.

If we were forced to choose just four representatives of the sciences, there is a certain fitness to choosing the Quadrivium. Just as arithmetic and geometry are complementary modes of thought, concerned with number and shape, so also music and astronomy are also concerned number and shape, but with the addition of movement and change. Music may be regarded as the movement of number (number in rhythm, tone, and harmony). Today, we study change and movement by means of a historical outgrowth of astronomy—calculus, invented by Isaac Newton to describe the heavenly motions.

You may have noticed that the Liberal Arts are not an encyclopedia of all useful facts. Rather, they are the intellectual tools needed to read—or write—any given encyclopedia. They stretch out the mind to its full capacity, able to reason in all of its inborn modes, ready to sift truth from falsehood. In these days of increasing tsunamis of information, we need the Liberal Arts to keep us afloat and masters of our own course.

Finally, the Liberal Arts are not the whole story of human growth; they are not enough to complete us. Plato wanted entrants to his Academy to be well versed in the Liberal Arts. Only then were they ready for the final step, the study of ultimate realities, which he called philosophy. The Christian medievals required a student to become a Master of Arts (the liberal kind, of course), before attempting a doctorate in theology. They viewed theology as the “queen of sciences”, the final knowledge to which the other arts were but handmaids. The Greeks had a saying that the mature mind is a spear’s throw away from philosophy. So it is. The mature mind is ready to tackle the most important questions of all: Who am I? What are we here for? How shall we live? And finally, the noblest question for any free person, a question unknown to the pre-Christian sages: Whom shall I serve? If I yield myself, heart, mind, and strength, to God, then God can baptize the human freedom conferred by the Liberal Arts (and every other form of education), and fulfill it in the spiritual freedom granted by Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.

The Liberal Arts will never make a quick profit. In fact, they can be painful to acquire. It is rightly said that freedom is never free. But freedom, wisely used, is the key to all kinds of wealth, and certainly the noblest kind of wealth, the life rightly lived. I cannot yet lay claim to such a life. I can say that the pleasures of intellectual growth have been well worth the difficulties, and that they can point toward wisdom and a better sense of what is worthwhile in life. Let us journey together on the well-marked path.