

Brief Introduction to the Classical Liberal Arts

Many parents have a sense that the intellectual formation that young people received in times past provided a powerful, unique preparation that led to a true understanding of the natural world. This, in turn, nourished the soil of their souls for both receiving the seed of the Gospel message and cultivating it in their own lives to produce good fruit. People generally describe this course of study as liberal, humanistic, or classical; from those common names, however, there have arisen a wide range of programs that differ in both general approach and particular course of study.

God first revealed Himself to human beings through creation at a level that is available to all humans.¹ St. Paul, writing roughly 1500 years before the Scientific Revolution, makes this clear: “For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; his eternal power also, and divinity” (*Rom 1:20*). Our everyday life experiences consist of interactions with created things, and the rational study of these created things can yield a certain knowledge of the existence of one omnipotent God.² What’s more, God revealed both the Old Testament and the New Testament in this same context: “He brought forth first the blade, i.e., the Law of Nature; then the ear, i.e., the Law of Moses; lastly, the full corn, i.e., the Law of the Gospel”.³ With the Revelation of God’s Son Jesus Christ, God’s Revelation is complete,⁴ and it is manifest that countless saints, including most of the doctors of the Church, achieved their ends as human beings in direct continuity with this three-part Revelation. While there are many ever-expanding developments in the arts and sciences that may help make God’s message more explicit,⁵ it is good to recognize these, however tantalizing, can only serve an *auxiliary* role in our understanding of Revelation, and the study of creation at the primary human level has an enduring, irreplaceable value.

The natural world offers students a *vestigium*,⁶ that is, a trace or footprint, of God’s order. Due to the nature of human reason, we have the capacity to consider the natural world from different perspectives, focusing on different objects. The classical liberal arts engage this *vestigium* in a consistent, interrelated way as each art focuses on and builds from some aspect of reality. Each art begins with a self-evident unity, and by necessary steps, builds certain knowledge in the student, which in turn, both fulfills part of the student’s intellect and advances the student’s understanding of the wisdom discernible from the natural world. It is beautiful to

¹ CCC 36; CCC 2500; cf. Wis 13:1.

² CCC 54.

³ St. John Chrysostom. *Comm. on Mark 4:28*.

⁴ CCC 66-67.

⁵ CCC 66.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas. *In Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, I, 3, 2, 2, resp.

recognize that God has created the natural world and the human person so that the former can be used by the latter as a means to understand God's existence with certainty.

With this, however, we must realize that not every study of the natural world will lead students towards this knowledge. It is crucial that teachers present the liberal arts in a particular fashion, as Aquinas writes:

One is said to teach another insofar as he manifests to the other by signs the discourse of reason itself, which he makes in himself by natural reason, and thus the natural reason of the student arrives at knowledge of unknown things by the things of this kind proposed to him, as if by certain instruments.⁷

Aquinas continues to explain, that if teaching does not proceed from a self-evident unity and is not followed by clearly discernible, necessary steps, students do not gain certain knowledge:

If however someone proposes to another those things, which are not included in principles known through themselves,⁸ or they are not manifested to be included, he does not make knowledge in the student, but perhaps opinion or faith.⁹

Considering that the nature of the human being does not change, and that God made the world of created things as a constant means to lead to Himself, it is no surprise that the liberal arts contain a core, unchanging content. To understand the principles that direct their own cognitive faculties, humans must study the rules of language, thought, and persuasion (*Trivium*). To understand the root characteristics of the material world, humans must study the principles God uses in ordering creation, knowledge about creation that flows from these principles, and man's place in creation (*Quadrivium*). While students today may certainly pursue study beyond the classical liberal arts, delving into all of the developments of mathematics, natural science, and technology, these latter subjects ought to be understood as supplements to and dependent on these primary studies which are essential to correctly form students for further philosophical and theological inquiry.

From the above, it is clear that the classical liberal arts not only have particular objects of study with necessary, unchanging content, but they also have a common method of development that is essential for teachers to communicate. Both of these are required to form a right study of the seven classical liberal arts. Some classical programs offer instruction in works of literature

⁷ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 11, 1, resp.

⁸ self-evident principles

⁹ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 11, 1, resp.

that presuppose and flow from the studies of the classical liberal arts without teaching the arts themselves. The hope is that the exposure to the artistry of the author, the ideals he presents through the protagonist's experiences within a certain formative culture will influence students to understand the true, the beautiful and the good. Some programs offer some amount of study in some of the actual arts, but these are cursory and lack the overarching integration necessary to properly inform later philosophical and theological study. Both types of programs lack the curriculum that teaches the primary linguistic and mathematical thought necessary so that students can later rightly philosophize to recognize the existence of one God, who created heaven and earth, and further can account for and integrate the unfathomable diversity of beauty that flows from this order in our contemporary arts and sciences.

An immediate criticism of this brief essay can't be far from the mind of any reader. "Mr. Ruckdeschel claims," one may think, "X and Y about the nature of the classical liberal arts, but he hasn't done much to *prove* such assertions." This is fair. I haven't. In this brief essay, I only have attempted in everyday language to suggest generally what I have attempted to prove specifically in my small book *On the Nature of the Classical Liberal Arts*. In your charity, imagine someone reads and accepts the premise of that book, which asserts a necessary, irreplaceable character of those arts, now largely lost. This reader ought to further ask: "You've outlined the nature of the studies well enough *in theory*, but you've offered no actual coursework for students today to use." This is fair. I haven't. In that book I only have attempted to sketch out the theoretical framework of these seven liberal arts. We are creating this coursework today through our online interactive classroom *Septem Artes Liberales* as well as through published texts that follow after those courses. If this brief essay has interested you, please consider reading *On the Nature of the Classical Liberal Arts*, and if you have children interested in such study, further consider studying with us through *Septem Artes Liberales*.¹⁰

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¹⁰ salve.septemartesliberales.org