

# Liberal Education: A Working Definition

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Put in simplest terms, classical education is *an education for freedom*. That is why for most of the Western tradition from its origins to the present day, the majority of authors have used the term *liberal education* to denote what is often called *classical education* in our time. In this brief article, when I use the term *liberal education* I do not intend to make a distinction between it and classical education. Instead, I employ the term in order to bring to light the essential nature of what commonly goes by the name *classical education* among K-12 educators in the United States today.

Any reasonable practice of education is grounded in a philosophy of education, and central to any philosophy of education is one's understanding of the human person. According to the greatest thinkers who have written on liberal education in the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian tradition, human beings are created by God to know themselves, the created order, and their Creator. They are endowed with natural faculties that empower them—to the extent each is able—to grasp the true, the good, and the beautiful. The human mind *by nature* hungers for knowledge of the truth; it is what nourishes the mind, as food nourishes the body. Since nature does nothing in vain, the very possibility of education is based upon the confidence we can have of coming to know the truth. Simply knowing the truth is not sufficient, however. The one who encounters the truth must come to recognize the vital connection between acknowledging the truth with one's mind and choosing the good through the free choice of one's will.<sup>1</sup> Knowing the truth, willing the good, and apprehending the

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<sup>1</sup> The classic text on free choice of the will is St. Augustine's *De libero arbitrio voluntatis* (*On Free Choice of the Will*).



beautiful lead to true human happiness. In the Christian tradition, all this is possible only through a willing cooperation of human nature with divine grace.

Since the human will is essentially involved, freedom is a vital condition for such happiness. Without freedom, we exist in a state of slavery. Even if we are free of external, physical bonds, we may nevertheless be fettered by internal bonds, such as disordered passions, false judgments, or even simple ignorance of our own nature and end. Education, properly understood and faithfully practiced, can contribute substantially to living a free and fully human life. For centuries philosophers have made a distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *for*. When we seek to avoid some evil, undesirable thing, we seek freedom *from* it, whether it be poverty, ill health, shame, or anything else. Even if we have freedom from all such things, we are still not free in the second sense. When we seek freedom *for*, we wish to acquire all those things that truly perfect our nature; we desire not only the *absence* of what causes us true pain and suffering—the destruction of what we are—but also the *presence* of those perfections that make our nature all that it is meant be.

These “perfections” are called *virtues*, and among the virtues we distinguish between *moral* and *intellectual* virtues. Of the four traditionally identified as cardinal (i.e., “hinge”) virtues, justice, fortitude (or courage), and temperance (moderation) are moral virtues because they dispose us to live morally good lives. Intellectual virtues, such as wisdom, understanding, knowledge (“science” broadly construed), and prudence, are called virtues because of a resemblance they bear to moral virtues. Although “virtues” only in a qualified sense, intellectual virtues are nevertheless superior to moral virtues.<sup>2</sup> Among the intellectual virtues, wisdom has pride of place, since it involves knowledge of the highest causes (see Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, I.1). As

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<sup>2</sup> The reason for this superiority has to do with what part of human nature each type of virtue perfects. The moral virtues perfect the appetitive powers (the source of desires, wishes, etc.) while the intellectual virtues perfect reason, which is the *specific difference*, or distinguishing characteristic, of man. Thus, since reason is superior to the appetitive powers, so too the intellectual virtues are superior to the moral.



Thomas Aquinas explains (following Aristotle), “it belongs to the wise man to put things in order. This is because wisdom is the highest perfection of reason, whose business it is to know order. For, although the sense powers know some things absolutely, it belongs to the intellect or reason alone to know the order of one thing to another.”<sup>3</sup> This knowledge of causes and the order of all things is that by means of which we know not only this or that truth, but how the many truths acquired through the various disciplines fit together into a well-ordered, integrated whole.

By coming to know the truth, we are liberated from ignorance and false opinion. Knowing the truth about our nature—its strengths and its weaknesses, its capacities and its limitations—enables us to make progress in the life-long endeavor of self-rule. Those capable of self-government are able to live freely, directing their whole being to contemplation and action, to thinking and acting in accord with the way things really are. So there is a fundamental, crucial connection between a well-ordered education and the good life.

As its etymology implies, liberal education is the education of a “free person,” that is, one who is willing and able to live a life that is truly free in the ways we have been outlining.

In order to orient and to commence the journey toward that worthy end, liberal education has for centuries begun with the liberal arts: the *trivium* (“three ways”) of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the *quadrivium* (“four ways”) of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The trivium comprises the basic arts of the word. The student’s formation begins with a fundamental understanding of words and how they signify and relate to one another (grammar) and continues with the relation of propositions to form arguments (logic) and finally to the employment of words to persuade others in various ways (rhetoric). The arts of the quadrivium are the four basic arts of number, or

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<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics*, lect. 1, ed. Leonine, pp. 3-4.



quantity. As words are the way human beings communicate with one another, so numbers are an important way we come to understand our world, discerning its intelligibility in a rudimentary way through quantities as well as their qualities and relations to one another. Numbers reveal the intelligibility of the cosmos and point in various (but nevertheless *certain*) ways to its Creator.

From the modest beginnings one can make through a study of the liberal arts, liberal education opens up to a broad array of disciplines—mathematics, natural science, literature, history, politics, philosophy, and theology. These and other related studies have developed over the history of the Western tradition as a natural outgrowth from the fundamental truths seen through the liberal arts. Since all these disciplines and the liberal arts themselves are ultimately grounded in the truth, students can confidently pursue a liberal education, knowing that it all has its source and origin in God, who is Truth (John 14:6).

Summing up, then, I propose the following as a working definition of liberal education:

*Liberal education is the pursuit of wisdom through a cultivation of intellectual virtue and an encouragement of moral virtue by means of a rich and ordered course of study, grounded in the liberal arts, ascending through humane letters, mathematics, natural science, and philosophy, and culminating in the study of theology, yielding informed self-rule and a well-ordered understanding of human nature, the cosmos, and God.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> This working definition is the product of delightful conversations that I've had with my former colleagues, Daniel Coupland and Benjamin Beier, at Hillsdale College; and with my current colleagues, Matthew Post and John Peterson, at the University of Dallas. I am deeply indebted to all of them and grateful for their insights and encouragement. Of course, any infelicities of style or inaccuracies of substance are my own.

