

THE PARADIGM OF THE LIBERAL ARTS TRADITION

The Christian classical liberal arts model is as complex and harmonious as the great medieval synthesis that gave birth to it. In his masterpiece *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis writes that the medieval synthesis is “as unified and ordered as the Parthenon or the Oedipus Rex, as crowded and varied as a London terminus on a bank holiday.”¹ Lewis’s image is instructive for us as we emphasize both the unified integrity and the inner connectivity of the liberal arts tradition. The traditional seven liberal arts are part of the wealth we have inherited from the classical world. Many in the Christian classical renewal reflect this heritage by identifying the major divisions in their schools according to the names of the first three of these liberal arts—*grammar, dialectic, rhetoric*—the three arts constituting the medieval *Trivium* (from the Latin meaning “the three paths”). The latter four liberal arts—*arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music*, known as the *Quadrivium* (from the Latin meaning “the four paths”)—have been somewhat less celebrated though they are just as traditional. The ancients believed that these seven “arts” were not merely subjects to be mastered, but sure and certain ways of forming in the soul the intellectual virtue necessary for acquiring true wisdom.

The Christian classical renewal is indebted to the insights Dorothy Sayers enumerated in her famous essay “The Lost Tools of Learning,”² and to the vision for the recovery of those tools that Doug Wilson pioneered in his foundational book *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*.³ Their identification of the crisis in modern education as the failure to

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

2. Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning” (New York: National Review, 1961).

3. Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991).

cultivate these traditional arts of learning is prophetic. In addition to this, their exposition of the classical educational tradition—especially the Trivium—has effected a seismic shift in Christian education. We are also indebted to the suggestions of Littlejohn and Evans in their stimulating book *Wisdom and Eloquence* for offering a living model.⁴ Their contribution could be summarized succinctly, perhaps, by the proposition that the Trivium is not enough: a full-orbed education requires not merely cultivation of the *language arts* of the Trivium, but also the cultivation of the *mathematical arts* of the Quadrivium and the formation of moral virtue as well. There are many other thinkers and teachers who have shaped the movement at various levels, but these three represent well the philosophical trajectory the Christian classical renewal has taken thus far.

What we present here is a vision of the liberal arts as a central part of a larger and more robust paradigm of Christian classical education.

Continuing in this trajectory of recovering the tradition and applying it to contemporary contexts, we seek to enlarge upon our predecessors' visions for a classical liberal arts education. Hitherto thinkers in the renewal have understood the Trivium itself (Sayers and Wilson) or the Trivium and Quadrivium together with moral formation (Littlejohn and Evans) *as constituting the Christian classical curriculum*. What we present here is a vision of *the liberal arts as a central part of a larger and more robust paradigm of Christian classical education*. Our thesis is simple, though perhaps controversial: the seven liberal arts were *never meant to stand on their own* as the entire curriculum, for they are designed particularly for cultivating *intellectual virtue*. Since human beings are more than just intellects, however, the curriculum must develop more than just intellectual virtue. Creatures formed in God's image must be cultivated in body and soul—mind, will, and affections. As we will seek to show, the Christian classical educational tradition embodies just the kind of holistic and fully integrated curriculum that

4. Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence: A Christian Paradigm for Classical Learning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

a thoroughly Christian understanding of human nature demands. It does so, however, *only when the seven liberal arts are taken as part of a larger model* consisting of what we here term piety, gymnastic, music, liberal arts, philosophy, and theology. This full-orbed education aims at cultivating fully integrated human beings, whose bodies, hearts, and minds are formed respectively by gymnastic, music, and the liberal arts; whose relationships with God, neighbor, and community are marked by piety; whose knowledge of the world, man, and God fit harmoniously within a distinctly Christian philosophy; and whose lives are informed and governed by a theology forged from the revelation of God in Christ Jesus as it has been handed down in historic Christianity. We propose this model for a truly integrated Christian classical education—where the intellectual tools of the seven liberal arts are formed within the context of a Christian life and moral imagination that is governed by a thoroughly Christian philosophy and theology—as at once a faithful summary of the Christian classical educational tradition and a compelling model for schools in the Christian classical renewal.⁵

This paradigm will doubtlessly challenge some of the categories commonly held by our schools. It is, as we said previously, however, a faithful re-presentation of crucial elements of a long and varied tradition. We hope to show that it is also a reflection of the educational philosophy that most Christian classical schools already embrace, whether consciously or not. Our summary of the classical curriculum adapted by the medieval Christian universities and schools can be represented by the ordering of the six curricular categories we have mentioned, each subsequent one depending on and expanding upon the prior. These categories are piety, gymnastic, music, liberal arts, philosophy, and theology reflected by the mnemonic PGMAPT (the *A* stands for liberal arts).⁶ Drawing from these categories, one can then offer a brief definition

5. For more depth on the roots of our approach, Appendix I: Modernity and the Christian Classical Alternative offers a brief but dense critique of modernity and the biblical alternative offered by Christian classical education which reverberates throughout this work.

6. There is a strong parallel between our ordering and what Dr. John Senior refers to as the “Five Modes of Knowledge: Gymnastic...Music...The Liberal Arts...Science...Practical Science.” John Senior, “*The Idea of a School*” (unpublished manuscript, printed copy, consulted March 15, 2013), 19.

of Christian classical education. Grounded in piety, Christian classical education cultivates the virtue of the student in body, heart, and mind, while nurturing a love for wisdom under the lordship of Christ. This thesis can be further explored through four points which we will state in summary in this preface and which will provide a compact snapshot of this book. The ensuing discussion may be too dense for some readers. Those that stumble may profitably move on to the next section and use this preview as a summary after finishing the book. But since following tradition requires us to listen carefully to the dialect of another era, we thought it wise to offer at least a preliminary sketch of how their genius gave us a coherent and holistic education.

Grounded in Piety, Governed by Theology

The foundational distinction between traditional education and modern education is that the ancients believed that education was fundamentally about shaping loves. What one loved and treasured could be right or wrong according to how that love accorded to the structure of reality. A prescribed set of cultural norms reflected this understanding and these values could indeed be taught. It was an education in love. Personal values were not simply explored or discovered on one's own but were passed down and lived out. This required trust and commitment, and thus piety, the proper love and fear of God and man, was the critical virtue. It aligned one's will with the family, society, and God, and expected the young pupils' desires, beliefs, and habits to be shaped over years in the process of incarnating them. Piety required faithful devotion manifested in action. Education was enculturation in piety, virtue, wisdom, and grace, and the curriculum served the culture.

In this context, the words of St. Anselm are intelligible, *credo ut intelligam*, "I believe that I may understand." Thus theology, the science of Scripture, rested at the apex of education after belief and active dependence on faith had been cultivated. Growth in piety was the foundation and preceded by many years the critical study of doctrine which could only be done with great intellectual care and wisdom. But the metaphysical and theological beliefs passed down through the culture,

church, and universities truly governed the form and content of the curriculum as the faculties of universities sought to understand the ways of God at work in the world. Theology was the queen of the sciences, but she was a servant queen. So from Augustine to today the Christian tradition has recurrently affirmed that “grace does not set nature aside but perfects it.” Thus theology was not supposed to intrude upon the lower disciplines from without but to offer nourishment to their basic principles from within, allowing each subject to explore the artistry of a creative God. Education in this manner, coupled with the grace of Christ, was not a matter of indoctrination, but about bringing each nature to its fullest potential in a living and vibrant community. Thus the curriculum was grounded in piety and governed by theology.

Gymnastic and Music: The Training of the Bodies, the Tuning of the Hearts

The ancients recognized that humans are not disembodied minds, but unities of body and soul—mind, will, and affections. The gymnastic and musical educations trained the bodies and tuned the hearts of the young and were the next stage following the early development of piety. Developing the virtue of an athlete was an essential element of the gymnastic training. The musical (coming from the same root word as “museum”) education was an education in wonder. It formed the heart and the moral imagination of the youth. The musical education was not primarily or exclusively about instruments and singing. It studied all the subjects inspired by the Muses (from epic poetry to astronomy) in a pre-critical manner. “Imitation precedes art,” went the ancient maxim. The musical education, directed toward joyful engagement with reality, offered this imitative foundation for the later learning of the arts and sciences. The musical and gymnastic educations fitted the students’ hearts and bodies to reality, thus forming virtue in them. They taught passions more than skills and content. They sowed the seeds which would grow into a lifelong love of learning.

The Liberal Arts Are the Tools of Learning, Both Linguistic and Mathematical

The exponential growth of information today overwhelms the student. The liberal arts, on the other hand, offered a particular canon of seven studies which provided the essential tools for all subsequent learning. The subjects of the liberal arts were not only linguistic but included mathematics and mathematical science as well. The significance of the study of mathematics has often been downplayed by those in the Christian classical renewal, but this represents a misappraisal of its historical prominence. Mathematics is a central discipline of traditional Western education and owes its inclusion in the curriculum to its role at Plato's Academy. Moreover, the role of Latin for the language arts also plays a more significant role than has often been expressed. Recovering the primacy of both the language arts and the mathematical arts is a pivotal piece of this paradigm. Together they help train the student not just in what to think but in how to think.

The liberal arts then winnow the infinity of available arts and sciences to a canonical set of seven crucial liberal arts that provide the tools of learning needed in the three branches of philosophy or science. One may ask, what are *arts*? According to Aristotle, *scientia* (science) is a body of knowledge justified by reason which can be in the mind alone. But an art is imitation (action) joined with reason, or a science joined with practice. An art is, in short, a skill. What then are *liberal arts*? The liberal arts are the seven unique skills used to create and justify *scientia*. How would a scholar justify that his knowledge is true? He would do so through the liberal arts. The arts of the Trivium—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric—are the tools of language. The arts of the Quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—are the tools of mathematics.

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The liberal arts, even coupled with piety, gymnastic, and music, are not enough for an entire education. The liberal arts are only intended to be the *tools* of learning to be used in all other studies. The three branches of philosophy and, in addition, theology, then contain the integrated tapestry of all other knowledge as represented by the innumerable particular sciences, such as biology, ethics, economics, and chemistry. Moreover, professional degrees, to be acquired later, recognize that other skills (arts) are needed for one's vocation. There are as many arts for these other skills (law, medicine, business, etc.) as there are countless sciences, and the skills of these would be understood as the other *techne* (Greek for "arts" or "skills"). It is, in fact, this idea of an art as an applied science that leads to the word *technology* (study of the arts or skills), a wholly legitimate pursuit in the right context. The study of the liberal arts is not intended to substitute for the legitimate later studies of other illiberal arts and sciences. It is, on the contrary, the path that is designed to make the acquisition of all later studies more simple and effective.

Philosophy Is the Love of Wisdom in Natural, Moral, and Divine Reality

The label *philosophy* should not be misunderstood as contemporary academic philosophy, but it is the word used, from the fourth century BC until the turn of the twentieth century, to describe the unity of knowledge which covered all subjects. In the medieval system, philosophy had three branches: natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and divine philosophy (metaphysics). Natural philosophy is the traditional home for modern natural science. Moral philosophy is the traditional home for modern social science. And metaphysics, the study of being, guards the secrets of reality and discloses its transcendental unity. For these reasons the terms *natural science* and *moral science* were often used as cognates for natural and moral philosophy.

Particular natural sciences such as mechanics, biology, and alchemy would have all fallen under the umbrella of natural philosophy. The particular moral sciences such as ethics, politics, or economics would have been contained by moral philosophy (called practical philosophy by

Aristotle). The term *scientia* meant a demonstrable knowledge of causes. For Aristotle there were four causes which were to be studied in science: material, formal, efficient, and final. Formal cause represented the essence of a thing and final cause was an object's purpose. Contemporary natural and social sciences have generally discarded these two types of causes and reduced everything to matter and energy (material and efficient causes). All four of these causes—material, formal, efficient, and final—should be recovered in order to restore a holistic approach to natural, moral, and divine philosophy.

Moreover, if *scientia* is knowledge, according to the standard contemporary definition, all knowledge is true, requires a knower, and must be justified. The prime tools of justification were the liberal arts, since appeals to reason were the strongest form of medieval proof. Appeals to experience and authority were also considered, although the medievals weighted them less than reason. Today application is the central justification given to students for the truth of a matter, which would not have been sufficient demonstration for medieval or ancient *scientia*. In order to recover a robust justification for knowledge, all seven of the liberal arts are required in philosophy and all four causes must be reinstated.

The ancients believed that art imitates nature and therefore the medievals often studied natural philosophy as preparation for moral philosophy. Metaphysics (or divine philosophy) helped connect the moral with the natural as well as the created with the divine. The belief that the transcendent Christ of Colossians 1 could reconcile the one and many, quantity and quality, body and soul is a tenet of theology that would have implications in the sciences. It was the job of metaphysics to guard and adjudicate these kinds of principles. It was also within the subject of metaphysics that the battle between nominalism and realism would play out. Moreover, metaphysics would eventually explore how Christ the incarnate Word could redeem the possibilities of mathematical form for matter. These three philosophies—natural, moral, and divine—would have contained all the subjects and disciplines of a contemporary university, though they would have been geared toward justified knowledge (science) and not application (technology). The other arts could be later learned in professional degrees or apprenticeships. Thus the variety of

contemporary subjects such as chemistry, biology, or economics would largely fall under the ancient and medieval category of philosophy.

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While these four theses are dense, we believe they tersely encapsulate the significance of returning to the tradition. It is certainly a grand endeavor, but one we believe is worthy of our devoted efforts. Let us now begin our exploration of the six categories: piety, gymnastic, music, liberal arts, philosophy, and theology (PGMAPT).