

The Public Value of the Liberal Arts

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Let me offer this as a rough understanding: The liberal arts are the method by which we hope to discover the truth about the most important matters of human life through reason and reflection. By "most important matters" I mean everything from what is justice, why am I here, what do I owe others, what do I owe myself, to how might I live an admirable life, through what makes some things beautiful, to how do the heavens work, and what can we know about nature?¹

Now, the more important a question is for life, the greater the likelihood that the answer is all around us, publicly available. All or almost all questions are already answered for us by our culture—more specifically, by our religion, our poets, and our parents. That is, truth is found in faith: God has already told us how to live. Or, truth is found in insight: Our culture's literature shows the way. Or, truth is found in tradition: We do this our way because this way is *our* way; this is the way our fathers and their fathers have always done it. Why would you question them?

But the liberal arts, in so far as they seek to discover what is really true through reason and reflection, necessarily stand in tension with the public view. While needing to take seriously conventional or inherited wisdom, the liberal arts still say "Yes, you may be right; but first let me check it out myself."

In looking at the liberal arts' endeavor of finding truth through reason, truth isn't, at first, the problem. Reason is the problem. Yes, the ancient skeptical attack on knowledge and contemporary relativist, historicist, and postmodernist views all controvert the notion of truth itself, but for now we can put them aside. Historically, the antagonists to the liberal arts have controverted reason, not truth. Let's begin by naming three: dogmatic faith, insight through direct often emotional experience of the truth, and tradition. The West's first recorded liberal artist, Socrates, was condemned for corrupting the youth, teaching them to question established answers (i.e., undermining parental as well as ancestral authority), mocking the poets (i.e., he said that knowing is superior to feeling), as well as for undermining faith.

So the liberal arts get off to an awkward start. In their first incarnation in Athens, the liberal arts show themselves to be in no little tension with public belief. The attempt to substitute knowledge for opinion (which is another way to view the enterprise of the liberal arts) shows, in that very formulation, the tension, if not the initial opposition, between this inquiry and public views.

Let's look at the issues in another way: Why are they *liberal* arts? Well, originally, in part, because the liberal arts are for the *free*. More particularly they are for leisure—*schole*—and for those who have leisure; that is, for those who needn't work. Liberal arts are anciently contrasted to the servile arts: They do

not aim at production and they do not aim at producing producers. The study of the liberal arts is the aristocratic endeavor *par excellence*. That is, at first blush, they do not in themselves seem to aim at any public good.

But perhaps more importantly for our purposes, a liberal education is a *freeing* education. But freeing from what? From, again, priests, poets, parents, and the past. That is, it is a movement from opinion (i.e., from that which is handed down by the community) to knowledge.

This means that the liberal arts seek both to overturn and to establish. They seek to overturn unfounded opinions (i.e., false views commonly held) and to establish that which is much harder to establish—correct views. The liberal arts are at base a critical and even radical activity. But the public likes its views. It has made peace with them; it works with them. It may well be true that, upon reflection, Sparta is better than Athens. But knowledge of this is hardly comforting to Athenians.

The liberal arts *begin*, then, as the miners and sappers of public authority and the established culture of a people. In this sense, Hobbes seems to speak the words of the public-minded citizen when he says that the universities are to the nation as the wooden horse was to the Trojans.

Only if true knowledge can be established by the liberal arts, and only if truth is always and everywhere salutary to the public, will the liberal arts and the public good be coterminous. Yet Socrates and Plato knew full well the immense difficulty of the first—establishing truth—and the implausibility of the second—the salutary nature of truth always and everywhere. They knew the necessity for truth to cover itself by telling, sometimes, noble lies. Or, to put it somewhat differently, perhaps only when philosophers rule, i.e., when knowledge governs our actions and not stupidity or opinion or emotion or passion or patriotism—only then will the liberal arts be fully compatible with their culture, i.e., never.

Let me approach the question from a third perspective—*cui bono*? Who benefits from the liberal arts—society or the individual recipient of the liberal arts? The obvious and most candid answer is the individual. That I now have a greater appreciation of the elegance of a Euclidean proof or that Suzie is studying Latin may well be exciting to me or Suzie, but it hardly seems of great benefit to the world at large.

Or, less glibly, stop and notice how personal, how personally comforting and fulfilling, the liberal arts are: I will study mathematics and learn order and clarity of thought; I will study rhetoric and language and literature to speak well, listen well, be amused, gain insight into the acts and motives of others, be better able to persuade others to my views or desires; I will learn music and art perhaps again to gain a sense of an order that predates my making and to appreciate the wonder of human creativity, or to be amused, comforted or stirred. History, philosophy, science—the list goes on. The liberal arts train and strengthen our minds the way exercise trains and strengthens our bodies—yet both types of exercise, mental and physical, are first and

foremost, personal. They perfect us, *each* of us. The arts that most obviously benefit others are not the liberal arts but the servile arts: making, doing, producing, growing, and selling. To study electronics is, in our older language, servile. To study philosophy or Latin, liberal. But, again, why should the country care that Suzie is studying Latin?²

We all know that, when aunts and uncles say to our students, "I'm happy that you're studying history, but what are you going to do with it?" they are asking a perfectly reasonable *civic* question, to which the answer, "I'm going to be much smarter and know more about the world I live in," is both correct and somewhat beside the point.

But more. Every day we see people—lawyers, doctors, merchants, electricians—returning to the liberal arts to recapture what they say they've missed, what they've *personally* missed. These returning students always talk in terms of personal "growth," of broadening their minds. No one, it seems, returns for adult education in the liberal arts to ameliorate the condition of society. No one really believes that his physician is now a better physician because this doctor now knows how to read Homer in the original Greek.

In sum, I'm sorry to report that the liberal arts are seen by the public as personal, as an activity with perhaps immense private benefit, but with limited social utility. This is why (I know from experience) liberal arts colleges rely on their alumni and friends—those who received a personal benefit from such an education—for continuing financial support. The public will always support medical research, or a political candidate, or a social welfare charity far more readily than support a liberal arts college and the education of other people's children. That is, people support what they've benefited from or what they imagine will help their society as a whole. But the social benefits of the liberal arts are all too often hidden and difficult to articulate. At worst, the public sometimes gets the feeling that the liberal arts not only do not contribute to society, but are a positive danger to their way of life, their faith, their hopes, and their comfortable opinions. Even Socrates had to admit that undermining beliefs was easy, but attaining the truth was hard and most often unattainable. My guess is that sometimes, in secret, the public gets the feeling that in killing Socrates, the Athenians might well have been on to something.

Yet we know that this isn't the whole of the story. We know, for example, that even the most introspective of philosophers wrote what they thought. But why write if the hope for the good of the public were not an end in view? Did they merely write for the personal edification of one or two subsequent great minds? For the private delight of a few? We rarely are so cynical as to think they wrote from pride or merely for fame and self-aggrandizement. No, my guess is they wrote for us, with the expectation that what they said might make the whole world better.

We know, as Americans, that our most philosophical president, Lincoln, was also our greatest public benefactor, and his public usefulness was increased, not decreased, by his study of Euclid and Shakespeare. We know that the lib-

eral arts were the foundation of his statesmanship, not simply an ornament of his private life and quiet times. Much the same would be said of Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, Adams, and Marshall, as well.

So the first thing that we might say in public defense of the liberal arts is that, even if philosophy will never rule, still, smarter laws and rulers are better than stupid laws and rulers. And while it is true that the liberal arts teach skills as well as truth, and that the skill of rhetoric, for example, combined with an evil disposition can make a Gorgias or a Caesar as well as a Lincoln, still, not to give our best students the liberal arts is to abandon the field to Caesar and Gorgias.

Second, let us move from democratic statesmen to the democracy itself: What is it that democratic man lacks most and needs most? Perhaps it is some idea of greatness and accomplishment. Perhaps what he cannot find in the newspaper and on television are models of human excellence, human possibilities. Yet the liberal arts and the liberal arts alone preserve these great books, great acts, great men for democratic man to view.

If it be argued that this simply restates the fact that the liberal arts are private teachers, that they teach the individual what he might do to be excellent, let us broaden it: If democracy is mass rule and you, with your neighbors, rule, what character would you like your ruler-neighbors to have? Should they be crude? Blind to beauty? Devoted to their tasks and little else? Unaware of the "lessons of history"? Easily moved by emotional or demagogic appeal? Easily duped because they lack a conception of the evil possibilities of our natures? This is a more modern than ancient view of the benefit of the liberal arts and I think Cardinal Newman is its deepest exponent: liberal education "aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles for popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, [and] at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age."³

This is part of the great defense of liberal education that began in the nineteenth century and included Newman and Arnold and T. S. Eliot in our century: Liberal education is that cultivation of mind and spirit that gives the benefits of aristocracy to all of democratic life.

To do this we have to recognize, as I haven't yet done, not only the radical nature of the liberal arts, but today their conservative side as well: The liberal arts keep alive Homer and Shakespeare and Bach. By an odd amalgam, the liberal arts at their best take the finest of past minds and works and hold them up for our viewing, our absorption, or our criticism. Only the liberal arts preserve the heights of human imagination and the breadth of the human mind. What once began as a critique of culture has become, in part, the bastion of culture.

Sorry to say, this conception of the liberal arts as the best way of making gentlemen out of mere democratic men or as the way to make democracy approach aristocracy is less and less heard today. Today's defense of the public virtue of something so private and radical as the liberal arts rests on arguments purely utilitarian. First, "skills." The liberal arts don't teach greatness,

or culture, or insight into the perennial questions. Rather, they teach skills: How to write better, speak more persuasively, listen attentively, analyze, calculate, describe, organize. And most of these skills, to be sure, have rather clear social benefits: A country might have enough philosophers, we might be told, but what country has enough good “analyzers”?

This public defense of the liberal arts from the perspective of skills leads directly to its sibling, the last and most common public defense of the liberal arts: the liberal arts as the best grounding for ultimate professionalism. In a world where next year’s job has yet to be invented, where people change career four, six, eight times in a lifetime, what better “preparation” can there be than a broad and varied basic education. What does the country need more than people ready to move technology and the economy forward in ways not yet conceived? What the nation needs are individuals ready, prepared for whatever might come next. Now, the ancients might think it strange to defend an education into freedom on the ground that such an education is actually preservable but I guess we are forbidden to have so judgmental and snooty an opinion. So, we defend the liberal arts as a “preparation for life,” and swallow the truth that such an education might be the highest life itself.

In sum, we want, desperately, the liberal arts to be the simple friend of society, but what I’ve tried to show is that it’s a complicated and uneasy, even strained, friendship. We want the liberal arts to be of manifest public benefit; but its benefits are simply less tangible than society generally looks for and less easy to point to.

For liberal education to survive in a healthy way it needs, first, to recognize its private as well as its radical nature. Second, it needs to defend its aristocratic and conserving nature to a society that needs these attributes more than it is willing to recognize. And finally it needs to show why knowledge—if it can be achieved—is superior to opinion, why leaving the cave is good both for people and for whole nations, and why doing that really gives, to all people, as Socrates said, the greatest benefit. We also have to be sensitive to the fact that they didn’t believe him.

Notes

1. For various formulations of the definition and nature of the liberal arts, I am indebted throughout this paper to Jim Carey, dean of St. John’s College in Santa Fe, and to Leo Strauss’ writings on education.
2. The publicly useless nature of the liberal arts was so apparent to some public-spirited men—I have Locke in mind—that for the sake of the public good, they publicly disparaged the liberal arts even as benefiting the individual. To continue our reference to Latin, no father who loves his child, Locke tells us, will ever have his son “learn the Roman language” “for which he will have no use . . . [and] which he is never to use in the course of a life that he is designed to, and neglect all the while the writing a good hand and casting accounts, which are of great advantage in all conditions of life, and to most trades indispensably necessary.” To the most public spirited of men what we later would call “the cultivation of the mind” was suspect even as a *private* activity.
3. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1959), 191.