



# What is a Liberal Art?

*Christopher Schlect*

**ABSTRACT:** The term *liberal arts* is widely used but seldom defined. While casual usage allows license for flexibility, academics should exercise care with terms that probe the vitals of their calling. This paper proposes a workable definition of liberal arts. It draws upon historical usage to address several concerns that figure into such a definition: it clarifies what an art is, it differentiates arts from sciences, it distinguishes liberal arts from other arts, and it also distinguishes liberal arts from humanities. Alternative definitions may also be viable, but only if they duly recognize historical usage and differentiate the term liberal arts from terms related to it.

What is a liberal art?<sup>1</sup> The term is so common that we seldom consider what, exactly, we mean by it. If we parse the term's usage in American research universities, we find a catch-all label that includes a wide array of provincial interests. The University of Texas at Austin (UT) offers a typical illustration. How is the term *liberal arts* used across the wide expanse of Longhorn Nation? UT's College of Liberal Arts, like everything in Texas, is big, comprising no fewer than forty major fields of study. Included among these liberal arts are African and African Diaspora Studies, American Studies, Asian Studies, Asian American Studies, Asian Cultures and Languages, French Studies, Italian Studies, Jewish Studies, Latin American Studies, Mexican American and Latina/Latino Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and more. Thus far we might infer that, in Texas, the liberal arts entail the study of a particular social group. But the term is more

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to my colleagues on the faculty of New Saint Andrews College whose input helped me develop this paper, especially Tim Griffith, Jonathan McIntosh, Brent Pinkall, and Mitch Stokes. My friends Brian Williams and David Diener also contributed important refinements.

Christopher Schlect is a Senior Fellow of History at New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho, where he also serves as Head of Humanities and Director of the Classical and Christian Studies graduate program.

elastic than that, for it also includes the fields of Humanities and History—which, surprisingly, are distinct from one another. Also included within UT’s basket of liberal arts are Economics, Psychology, and Sociology, which many would classify as social sciences rather than liberal arts. Considering all the fields UT classifies as liberal arts, it is hard to discern what attributes they share that identify them as liberal arts.

Perhaps we can gain clarity about the liberal arts in Texas by considering which fields fall outside that designation. This brings us to UT’s College of Natural Sciences, where we find fifteen major fields of study. They include Biochemistry, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Public Health, Nutritional Sciences, and Textiles and Apparel. UT also places Mathematics and Astronomy among the natural sciences, not the liberal arts. This is curious because educators in earlier eras included these two fields among the traditional seven liberal arts. Graduates from the University of Texas’ College of Liberal Arts hold a degree bearing the liberal arts name, but I am not sure what sort of learning such a degree represents.

Other large universities slice their academic pies differently. Some, like the University of Maryland, have organized a College of Arts and Humanities. Are *arts* the same as *humanities*, or does the word *humanities* point to domains of knowledge, or to intellectual skills, that the term *arts* does not capture? Other institutions, such as the University of Oregon and the University of Colorado, have Colleges of Arts and Sciences. How are *sciences* different from *humanities*? In what ways, if any, does a *College of Arts and Sciences* differ from a *College of Arts and Humanities*? Suppose I wanted to study history: would history look different if I pursued it under the auspices of a College of Arts and Humanities versus a College of Arts and Sciences? When we pair the term *arts* with other terms of the trade, do these pairings pull the meaning of *arts* in different directions, or does the term *arts* remain stable regardless of what other terms we pair with it?

American research universities are chillingly prodigal in their use of terms such as *arts*, *liberal arts*, *sciences*, and *humanities*. Insofar as these terms arise in casual, everyday conversation, we can forgive imprecision. But specialists within a guild should take greater care with terms that probe the vitals of their trade. How much more should we expect of a guild that trades in scholarship? Indeed, those of us who direct curriculum and pedagogy ought to know what we mean when we use the term *liberal arts*.

The US Department of Education bears witness to this muddle. The Department organizes various degree programs into sixty-one different classifications, one of which is “Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities.” According to the Department’s data, there are 4,642 degree programs that fall within this category in colleges and universities across the United States.<sup>2</sup> Such a

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics, accessed August 3, 2022. <https://ies.ed.gov/>.

broad designation testifies to the wide range of meanings we now associate with the *liberal arts*, *sciences*, and *humanities*.

Perhaps one reason for our confusion arises from the varied usage of the term *liberal arts* through the ages. We traditionalists who draw inspiration from great educators in the past find that history confronts us with a wide array of visions for liberal education. Plato's Academy in Athens differed substantially from Quintilian's school of rhetoric in Rome; neither of these ancient schools closely resembled the monastic schools of the early Middle Ages, and these, in turn, differed again from cathedral schools run by scholastics. If we want to classify all these schools as standard-bearers for "the traditional liberal arts," we may be forced to stretch our own idea of liberal arts with the same elasticity we find in the term's usage across Longhorn Nation.

History offers no stable consensus on a definition of the term liberal arts, nor on which arts are, actually, the liberal ones. But we do encounter a fairly robust conversation about the liberal arts, a conversation involving many voices across millennia. While these voices differ with one another, they contribute to a cogent and fruitful conversation that began in the ancient world. The Roman educator Varro promoted nine liberal arts, and his countryman, Vitruvius, believed there were eleven. A canon of seven emerged in the fifth century when Martianus Capella constructed a delightful myth about the origins of learning. Martianus' seven were grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. He departed from Varro and Vitruvius when he jettisoned medicine and architecture from his curriculum. Cassiodorus retained Martianus' canon of seven when he founded a school for scribes in southern Italy, but he insisted that they serve other essential fields of study, including theology, scripture commentary, church history, and even medicine. Cassiodorus deemed these essential for study, but he distinguished them from the liberal arts. Isidore of Seville elevated Martianus' seven liberal arts to a privileged place in his broad encyclopedia of learning. Later, Hugh of St. Victor, who deeply admired Isidore's work and quoted him approvingly, slotted Martianus' seven arts into a much broader curriculum composed of some twenty different arts. Hugh classified three of Martianus' seven (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) as logical arts, and the other four he assigned to a different class, the theoretical arts, which also included physics and theology. By the time we come to the learned Italian educators of the quattrocento—Vergerio, Piccolomini, Brunini, and others—we find them less interested in listing which arts warrant study than in identifying which authors, and which particular works, are worthy of study. Apparently, these humanists felt no need to identify a canon of liberal arts, let alone seven of them. Vergerio elevated letters and arms as the most important of the liberal arts, whereas other humanists subordinated their reflections on the liberal arts to their larger concern for *studia humanitatis*, the

humanities. As we have seen, great educators of the past, from Plato to Vergerio, have weighed in on the liberal arts. While they all joined the same conversation, they did not all express the same views.

Which of the arts are the liberal ones? How do these arts relate to one another, and to other fields of learning? We who identify as “classical educators” claim we have history on our side, and we too embrace differing notions of the liberal arts. One popular formulation highlights the trivium (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric), treats them as essentially pedagogical, and insists that they follow a specific sequence. On this view, the arts of the trivium are methods of learning rather than domains of knowledge. This view relegates the arts of the quadrivium—mathematics, geometry, astronomy, music—to the margins.<sup>3</sup> A different proposal assigns an equally essential place to the arts of both the trivium and the quadrivium—which together make up “the seven liberal arts.” According to this view, each of these seven arts represents a field of knowledge rather than a method of learning, and they do not require a particular sequence. These seven arts comprise everything that can possibly be taught; even computer science and biology find their place within the purview the seven liberal arts.<sup>4</sup> We also encounter a third formulation of the liberal arts among the ranks of classical educators. This view assigns an important but more modest role to the seven liberal arts. These arts are fields of knowledge, but they do not comprise everything that can be taught. Instead, they are situated within a broader framework of education that includes other key elements like gymnastic, music, philosophy, and theology.<sup>5</sup> Proponents of classical education who align with one or another of these formulations can locate precedents in the past to substantiate their ideas, but they justify their claim to tradition only by picking and choosing some precedents and, necessarily, overlooking others. What they gain in coherence and practicality comes at the cost of being selective with history. This should come as no surprise, for most of today’s classical educators are adapting historical insights to contemporary circumstances; we are not staging a reenactment. Despite the differences we encounter among the various formulations of the “traditional liberal arts,” at least each formulation achieves a measured coherence and a partial footing in history. The same cannot be said for the education we find in today’s big box-store universities. Their vision for the liberal arts—if it can

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning: A Paper Read at a Vacation Course in Education, Oxford, 1947* (London: Methuen, 1948); Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991); Susan Wise Bauer and Jessie Wise, *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home* (New York: Norton, 2016).

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

<sup>5</sup>Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain, *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education, Revised Edition* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2019).

even be called a vision—lacks both an internal coherence and any meaningful connection to the past.

We who are educators should be clear about our ideas on education, and we should be just as clear with the vocabulary we use to represent those ideas. We who are *classical* educators, we who esteem the past, will invariably defer to some voices from history more than others; if we gave all an equal voice, cacophony would result. What follows, then, is one attempt at sounding clarity. Different institutions of classical learning may adopt different formulations depending on how they align with various authoritative voices from the past that still speak to us. The key is to settle upon a coherent formulation so that educators, students, and others can understand what a given institution means by liberal arts and the ancillary ideas that cluster around them.

What do we mean by liberal arts? Here is our concise formulation. The liberal arts teach us how to learn—how to freely gain knowledge and understanding. Insofar as they are arts, they produce something, in this case, the ability to learn. Because they are liberal arts, they liberate us not only from ignorance, prejudice, and provincialism but also from servile dependence on the tutelage of others. The liberal arts, then, are particularly important for leaders, who themselves must be guides. Moreover, I would argue the liberal arts are not value neutral but, like all arts, are rightly ordered to the love and worship of the triune God. What follows is an exposition of this brief statement and how it aligns with the heritage of classical education. Such exposition involves, first, clarifying what we mean when we classify such pursuits as arts, which allows us to then distinguish arts from sciences. Next, we differentiate various kinds of arts in order to indicate how liberal arts differ from other arts, and also from the humanities.

### WHAT IS AN ART?

Before we can distinguish which arts are liberal and which are not, we need to settle what an art is in the first place. What is an art? An art joins reason to practice in order to produce something. Thus, art is productive reason.

Let me illustrate. Imagine someone producing a loaf of bread. She does this by applying a particular process to certain materials. Now suppose this same individual adds memory to her experience: by adding memory, she can now repeat the same process and produce another loaf of bread. Thus, by joining memory to her experience, she develops a habit of producing bread. At this point she makes bread not by chance, nor by luck, but by her skill. We can now refer to her as a baker.

Suppose another individual observes our baker and does what the baker does. By imitating the baker, he too produces a loaf of bread. If he also adds memory to his practice, he becomes capable of repeating the process; eventually, he too becomes a baker. The first individual became a baker by joining memory to her own direct experience, and the second became a baker by joining memory to

the observations he made of the first baker—the first by experience, or by trial and error, and the second by imitation.

These illustrations present the activity of baking as a skill, a habit, a notion, or a knack. It is not an art—at least not yet. But once reason enters the picture, then baking is elevated to an art. The art of baking arises when someone identifies precepts that explain why and how bread is made—why it is that whenever someone applies this process to those ingredients, she invariably produces bread. Aristotle explains, “Now art arises when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgment about a class of objects is produced” (*Met.* 981a).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, elsewhere he defines *art* as a “reasoned state of a capacity to make” (*EN* 1140a).<sup>7</sup> When we define art as productive reason, we simply echo Aristotle, who classified arts as intellectual virtues. Put another way, art is reason that informs how to do something.

This definition of art—as productive reason—allows us to distinguish the term from other terms related to it. Whereas the term art refers mainly to the precepts by which something is produced, the term craft indicates the act of producing. Art points to the theoretical or the preceptive aspect of production, and craft indicates the act of production itself. But art is no mere theory, for art cannot be decoupled from practice—arts are ordered to making, to producing, to acting upon something in order to yield an effect. The Puritan and scholar William Ames captures art’s orientation to activity in his definition of art, claiming, “Art is the idea of *εὐπραξία*, *eupraxia* or good action, methodically delineated by universal rules.”<sup>8</sup> Art is the *idea* of good action, and craft is the action itself. A

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Works of Aristotle, Volume 1*, trans. W. D. Ross, vol. 8 of *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952). Aristotle’s notion of art influenced educators for centuries. Consider, for example, Hugh of St. Victor, who echoes Aristotle: “But when men considered that use can be transformed into art, and what was previously vague and subject to caprice can be brought into order by definite rules and precepts, they began, we are told, to reduce to art the habits which had arisen partly by chance, partly by nature—correcting what was bad in use, supplying what was missing, eliminating what was superfluous, and furthermore prescribing definite rules and precepts for each usage” (*The Didascalicon of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 1.11).

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, trans. W. D. Ross, vol. 9, *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952). Aristotle elaborates: “Now since architecture is an art and is essentially a reasoned state of capacity to make, and there is neither any art that is not such a state nor any such state that is not an art, *art* is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning. All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e., with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made” (1140a).

<sup>8</sup>William Ames, *Technometry*, trans. Lee W. Gibbs (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), Thesis 1.

thing produced by means of art—for example, a sculpture or a loaf of bread—is appropriately termed either a work of art, a work of craftsmanship, or an artifact.

Because arts are a form of reason, they can be broken down into precepts. Consequently, arts can be taught. Aristotle says of artists,

thus we view them as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes. And in general it is a sign of the man who knows and of the man who does not know, that the former can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot. (*Met.* 981b)

Arts are best taught by means of theory, imitation, and practice; and it is the presence of theory that makes an endeavor an art. If there is no preceptive element—in other words, if what you know is known only by imitation or by experience—then you do not possess an art. It may be a habit, or perhaps a knack, but it is not an art. Because arts involve reason, they can be taught.

While arts can be taught, there is yet a difference between teaching an art and practicing one. Excellent practitioners are *technicians* or *artists*, for they have mastered an art. However, it is possible for one to excel as a technician and still be a poor teacher of the art. Indeed, many artists are better practitioners than those who excel at teaching the same art, just as the best athletes do not necessarily make the best coaches. It is teachers, more than mere practitioners, who lead in artistic pursuits, for teachers excel at guiding others into possessing the art themselves. While the old adage, “those who cannot do, teach,” is a bit of an overstatement, it does have a ring of truth to it. Because art is a type of reason, all arts can be taught, but not all great artists make great teachers or great leaders in their artistic pursuits.

### ARTS AND SCIENCES

Having defined the term art, we may now distinguish art from science. By making this distinction we sharpen our understanding of what an art is, and consequently, we will sharpen our understanding of the term *liberal arts*.

You will recall that arts are ordered to making, to production, or to good action. This means that every art entails a maker who does the making, a producer who does the producing, or an actor who does the acting. Thus the precepts of any art describe human behavior. This human element is captured in the reason aspect of our definition of art. Humans have a unique capacity to reason, thus only humans can be artists, for only humans are capable of deploying theory (or precepts) to the service of their productivity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Here I distinguish humankind from other created beings. Of course, there is an important sense in which God is an artist. Yet we acknowledge that God’s reason is unlike human reason in some important respects, much like God’s productivity differs from human



This human element explains why the precepts of any art can vary: they are flexible. The precepts of an art are not unchanging laws. This brings us to the key difference between arts and sciences. The truths in the sciences are necessary and invariable. Arithmetic and geometry, in their purest, abstract forms, are examples of sciences.<sup>10</sup> Consider that the sum of two and two is always four, and the sum of two supplementary angles is always 180°. These are necessary, unchanging truths. The precepts of an art behave differently. Consider precepts in the arts of grammar and rhetoric. Because the precepts of these arts describe human language and human persuasion, they undergo change and vary from situation to situation. Whenever we speak of “rules” of grammar and rhetoric, which are arts, we understand such rules can sometimes be broken. We can discuss the proper ordering of nouns and verbs in a sentence, or the proper arrangement of ideas in an oration, but this is a rather different sort of propriety than, say, the proper ordering of  $10 \div 2 = 5$ , and the proper ordering of  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  for any right triangle. Rules of an art are “rules of thumb,” arising from human judgments, whereas the rules of a science are inflexible.<sup>11</sup>

productivity in many ways. For one helpful reflection on this matter, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1987), 18–49.<sup>10</sup>With the important qualifier, “in their purest, abstract forms,” I indicate a Pythagorean notion of these sciences, which limits their scope to disembodied objects of pure intellect. See, for example, their treatment in book seven of Plato’s *Republic*. However, arithmetic and geometry become arts when they are ordered to the description, understanding, and manipulation of the physical world—that is, when they are ordered to making, to producing. The descriptive type of geometry, which is an art, differs from the science of “pure” geometry in that the former aims to measure physical objects and routinely involves tools and instruments. “Pure” geometry, on the other hand, considers intelligible objects exclusive to the intellect—objects such as lines that have length but no breadth, and planes that have length and breadth but no depth. Such objects are governed by universal and unchanging laws and, following a distinction expressed by Aristotle, Cassiodorus, and Hugh of St. Victor, they are not subject to judgment or opinion. However, when arithmetic and geometry are ordered to production—that is, when they are treated as arts, they might go by other names, such as drafting, surveying, architecture, and the like. And when arithmetic and geometry are treated as the foundation of such pursuits, they become *liberal* arts, for they open to further knowledge. In this paper I embrace the Aristotelian distinction between art and science because it supplies definitional clarity in a conversation about curriculum. Aristotle’s distinction between art and science is helpful here, but like most distinctions between theory and practice, its helpfulness is limited.

<sup>11</sup>Cassiodorus explains that “an art involves working in an accustomed state with things that have the possibility of being other than they are; a discipline [or science], however, is concerned with those things that cannot turn out differently or other than they are,” (*Inst.* 2.3.20) and, “Disciplines [or sciences] are those pursuits that are independent of opinion and therefore never deceive; they are called disciplines because they are obliged to observe their own rules” (*Inst.* 2.3.22). Cassiodorus, *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning* and *“On the Soul”* trans. James W. Halporn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004). See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b–1141a, Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* 1.1, Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* 2.1.



A science is a body of knowledge. To learn a science is to become informed, to master a collection of facts; whereas to learn an art is to become equipped to do, to act, to produce, to create. Now it is possible to extract the theoretical elements of an art and consider them in isolation, treating them as matters purely for contemplation, apart from the work of producing. For example, a student can learn about painting without learning to paint, and he can learn about rhetoric without learning to persuade. These students gain a body of knowledge, so they are becoming scientists—but they are not necessarily becoming artists, for the knowledge they gain is not ordered to production. However, those who are artists usually do attain a body of knowledge—that is, they learn some science—as they grow in their artistic proficiency. We point to an essential difference between a science and an art when we differentiate between *learning about something* and *learning how to do something*.

### ARTS AND VALUES

Thus far we have clarified what we mean by art, and we have distinguished art from science. Now we further refine our idea of what an art is by considering the ethical dimension of art.

Arts are bound up with values. All arts are ordered to productivity, but not all production is good production. Arts, properly understood, are ordered to the production of something worth producing, something good. Thus the reason that informs an art's productivity is reason that discerns what is good, and it directs an art to a good and proper end. This is where values come into the picture. Arts are never value neutral. To take just one example, consider the art of medicine.

Medicine is indeed an art, for it is a type of productive reason—reason that is ordered to the production of human health. But what is healthy and what is unhealthy? A practitioner of the art of medicine might take a scalpel and cut into a patient, thereby wounding the patient's body. If the physician does this in order to remove a cancerous tumor, most of us recognize that the benefit of removing the tumor outweighs the cost of inflicting the wound. Considered by itself, a wound inflicted by surgery is a setback to health; but in view of the fact that it is necessary to remove a life-threatening tumor, surgery becomes a means toward achieving greater health.

Some surgeries are not so straightforward, however. What about a surgical procedure that terminates a pregnancy? Some claim that such a procedure could serve the cause of health; whereas others consider it inimical to health insofar as it ends a human life. Or consider various applications of plastic surgery. We might imagine a plastic surgeon performing surgery on a burn victim, repairing damage to the victim's face. But the same surgeon could apply his art to another patient, narrowing the healthy nose of a healthy woman, or augmenting her breasts, in order to satisfy her vanity. And again, what about a surgery that removes a patient's healthy reproductive organs in order to change that patient

from a man to a woman, thus pursuing an end other than bodily health? Are each of these applications of the medical art performed in the service of health? The same artistry might promote health according to one value system, but harm according to another.

No art is value neutral. Art is productive reason, but one person may consider a particular action as productive, whereas another person may regard that same action as destructive. One person's productive reason is another's destructive madness. Here I am simply pointing to the fact that values reflect the ends to which arts are employed. In Aristotelian terms, all arts have a *telos*, or a final cause. A clear-minded approach to any art must take the art's ultimate purpose into account. A thoughtful Christian brings his Christian values to bear upon his approach to the arts, as will a thoughtful Platonist, Hindu, and so on. Puritan William Ames captures this notion in the way he defines art as "the idea of *good* action." If art is the idea of action that is good, we should acknowledge that there are competing notions of what goodness is.

Arts, from a Christian point of view, will produce artifacts, or products, that honor God and duly regard how he designed the world. Augustine rooted these norms in the two greatest commandments: that we love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength; and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. "The person who lives a just and holy life is one who is a sound judge of these things," he wrote. "He is also a person who has ordered his love, so that he does not love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, or love too much what should be loved less (or love too little what should be loved more), or love two things equally if one of them should be loved either less or more than the other, or love things either more or less if they should be loved equally" (*doc. Chr.* 1.59).<sup>12</sup> The one who has rightly-ordered loves is one who loves God first, loves neighbor second, and whose love for neighbor is ordered to one's ultimate love for God. For the Christian, then, every human endeavor—including every artistic endeavor—is, fundamentally, an exercise of service and love offered up to God. Here again we recognize that the liberal arts, like all arts, are not value neutral.

Because arts invariably draw upon value systems, teachers and institutions bring clarity to their work and focus to their missions whenever they identify the system of values that directs their instruction in the arts.

### TYPES OF ARTS

We have settled what arts are, and we have distinguished arts from sciences. We have also noted that arts implicate values. Now we are ready to consider the different varieties of art.

<sup>12</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

*Mechanical arts* are arts that are ordered to the production of useful objects. Thus the art of baking produces bread, the art of carpentry produces shelters and furniture, the art of cobbling produces shoes, the art of smithing produces metal tools and other metal implements, the arts of weaving and sewing produce fabric and clothing, and the art of farming produces crops. These arts, and others like them, are mechanical arts.<sup>13</sup>

*Fine arts* are arts that are ordered to the production of objects that exist for their beauty. The art of sculpting produces statues, the art of flower arranging produces bouquets, the art of songwriting produces songs, the art of embroidery produces decorative pillowcases and tapestries, etc. These are all fine arts. Fine arts produce objects that we appreciate simply for what they are, as ends in themselves. We do not value such objects for their capacity to accomplish something else. In this respect they are final, and thus we refer to the arts that produce such objects as fine arts.<sup>14</sup> Many educators classify the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, theater, and dance as fine arts.<sup>15</sup>

Now we finally arrive at the liberal arts. What distinguishes the liberal arts from other arts is this: liberal arts are ordered to the production of knowledge. Hugh of St. Victor explains that the liberal arts are arts “to be mastered by those who were to be educated . . . [they] so excel all the rest in usefulness that anyone who had been thoroughly schooled in them might come to a knowledge of others” (*Didasc.* 3.3). Those who are properly schooled in the liberal arts are equipped to take up other domains of knowledge—whether sciences or other arts. Casiodorus noted that the liberal arts enable students “to reach the entrance of the disciplines through open doors” (*Inst.* 2.3.19). This harmonizes with Quintilian’s formulation: “what else do we aim at by teaching them except to ensure that they do not always need to be taught?” (*Ora. Ed.* 2.5.13).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>See Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, trans. Zachary Hayes (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1996), chap 2, 11–14; see also Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, 2.20–27.

<sup>14</sup>The Latin *fine* indicates terminal or end, so the opposite of *fine* is “beginning” and not “rough” or “coarse.” In the Christian tradition, no art is final in an ultimate sense; the fine arts—as with all arts and, for that matter, all human endeavors—are ordered to doxology. See Augustine’s discussion of “things to be used” and “things to be enjoyed” in book one of his *On Christian Teaching*.

<sup>15</sup>My usage of the term “fine arts,” designating a class of disciplines or fields of study, follows a fairly recent convention. The term gained currency in academic discourse with the rise of programs and degrees in “fine arts” around the turn of the twentieth century. My brief treatment here follows that convention. For a more thorough presentation of this usage, see Sidney Colvin, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “Fine Arts,” 1911.

<sup>16</sup>Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education, Books 1–2*, trans. Donald A. Russell, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

It was the Romans who coined the term *artes liberalis*. The term first appeared in Cicero's early work on invention.<sup>17</sup> This Latin antecedent lies back of our English term *liberal arts*. As the term suggests, the Romans indicated a class of arts that they associated with liberation or freedom. Here they borrowed from the Greeks who came before them. Greek and Roman intellectuals had disparaged human activity that served the material necessities of food, clothing, shelter, and procreation. Thus the liberation they associated with the liberal arts was freedom from having to perform subsistence work. Aristotle had suggested this notion of freedom when he used the Greek terms liberal and illiberal to distinguish the occupations of freemen from those of the vulgar. Freemen, he said, occupy themselves to be "fit for the practice and exercise of virtue," whereas craftsmen occupy themselves with "paid employments" that "absorb and degrade the mind" (*Pol.* 1337b).<sup>18</sup> Many Roman teachers followed Aristotle, and Greeks like him, when they characterized the liberal arts as the arts taught exclusively to freemen. Consider Seneca the Younger, who wrote the following to his friend Lucillus:

I respect no study, and deem no study good, which results in money-making. Such studies are profit-bringing occupations, useful only in so far as they give the mind a preparation and do not engage it permanently. One should linger upon them only so long as the mind can occupy itself with nothing greater; they are our apprenticeship, not our real work. Hence you see why "liberal studies" are so called; it is because they are studies worthy of a free-born gentleman.<sup>19</sup>

Seneca identified the liberal arts by distinguishing them from arts taught to slaves and other laborers—craftsmen and practitioners of the various trades. The liberal arts are liberal precisely because they free students from the supposedly base pursuits of subsistence work and wage labor.

Some Greek and Roman intellectuals linked such pursuits to the body, which they saw as a source of corrupting passions. Some Christian thinkers followed suit. Their way of thinking associated liberal arts with disembodied activity—activity that is purely spiritual or mental, intellectual rather than practical. On this view, the liberal arts are defined not so much on the basis of a social distinction between freemen on the one hand and slaves or craftsmen on the other, but more upon a metaphysical distinction between spiritual or intellectual pursuits associated with the mind over against physical pursuits associated with the body. We find

<sup>17</sup>Marcus Tullius Cicero, "De Inventione," in *De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library 386 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 1.25.35.

<sup>18</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*, in *The Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, vol. 9 of *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).

<sup>19</sup>Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library 75 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), Letter 88.

this association in some historical formulations of the liberal arts, formulations that aim to separate liberal arts from practicality, as though practicality is base or vulgar, a lower-order concern that virtuous humans should try to escape as they pursue supposedly higher-order concerns about matters that are universal and unchanging—and thus immaterial and disembodied.

Some medieval educators rejected such dualism. Their theological convictions about creation and Jesus' incarnation led them to assign dignity to the material world. Consequently, teachers such as Hugh of St. Victor and Bonaventure refused to disparage the mechanical arts. Bonaventure wrote, "we shall see there the Word begotten and incarnate, that is, the divinity and the humanity and the integrity of all faith" (*De red. art.* 12).<sup>20</sup> These and other Christian teachers reject dualism because it undercuts the inherent goodness of the material world, a world which God declared to be "good" at creation. Dualism undermines the inherent dignity of work that was part of the original vocation Adam and Eve received in the garden. The early Protestants carried this tradition forward when they celebrated the divinely endowed creational goodness of material reality. Whereas eating is bodily nourishment, the reformers taught that eating is freighted with deep spiritual meaning. Clothing and shelter adorn and protect the body, and at the same time they are lofty, even heavenly adornments. And while sex is a bodily act of pleasure and procreation, they also held that sex carries eternal dignity. And so the reformers refused to disparage these good bodily and material things that some presentations of the liberal arts had disparaged. Martin Luther cut through the Greco-Roman distinction between liberal and servile, spiritual and material, when he famously set forth his theological notion of the priesthood of all believers. "A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, every man," he wrote, "are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man should by his office or function be useful and beneficial to the rest."<sup>21</sup> Like Hugh, Bonaventure, and the protestant fathers, our notion of the liberal arts need not be grounded in a dualism that sets matter against spirit, nor in a class distinction between lordly status and servile vocation.

What, then, do the liberal arts liberate us *from*? If not from materiality, and if not from subsistence work—as some formulations would have it—then from what? Because the liberal arts are productive of knowledge, they liberate us from our own ignorance and prejudice. But even more uniquely, one who has been properly schooled in the liberal arts is liberated from his dependence

<sup>20</sup>See also Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, 2.20–27.

<sup>21</sup>Martin Luther, "Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," in *Reformation Theology: A Reader of Primary Sources with Introductions*, ed. Bradford Littlejohn and Jonathan Roberts (Moscow, ID: Davenant Institute, 2017), 139.

upon teachers. The liberally educated person is equipped to obtain knowledge on his own. He has a capacity to take responsibility for his own productivity in learning. He can be a producer in his own right, a truly free maker of his own knowledge. His productivity in learning is original to himself, not a mere extension of his tutor's productivity. Thus a liberally educated individual enjoys a unique kind of freedom—a freedom from teachers—which enables him to serve others freely: originally and not derivatively. Thus he is equipped to lead and to shape the culture he inhabits.

This distinctive of liberal arts finds its roots in the Christian tradition. Once again, Hugh of St. Victor is a case in point. As we noted earlier, Hugh wrote that the liberal arts “excel all the rest in usefulness that anyone who had been thoroughly schooled in them might afterward come to a knowledge of the others by his own inquiry and effort rather than by listening to a teacher” (*Didasc.* 3.3).

From the liberal arts as your starting-point, Hugh says, you can carry yourself forward in your own learning; from these arts you can go anywhere else, to any field of knowledge. We follow Hugh's suggestion by proposing this as a key attribute that differentiates liberal arts from other arts. Our formulation departs from the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca, insofar as they disparage the material world and subsistence labor. But we retain another key dimension of liberality, which we also find in ancient formulations, and which Hugh of St. Victor makes explicit, when we say that the liberal arts liberate us from teachers.

This notion of liberality does not exclude teachers, and it certainly does not suggest any radical notion of independence. Indeed, a liberally educated person continues to learn from teachers, and even relies on them. But he no longer depends upon any one teacher, nor upon a particular school of teachers, to initiate and direct his learning for him. A liberally educated person becomes the master over his own progress in learning. He is equipped to advance his learning at his own direction rather than at the direction of another. This means that, for the liberally educated person, the whole world of teachers is opened up to him. He is equipped to summon entire libraries of teachers, and their writings, to his service. He has the fullest and most complete access to the greatest teachers—to teachers like Plato and Aristotle, Tertullian and Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin; Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare; Locke and Hobbes; Hume and Kant; Newton and Einstein. His teachers include the scholars he hears at conferences or meets with over coffee. A liberally educated person is equipped to learn even from his own students, and from young children, just as he learns from other sources.

We distinguish a liberal art from other arts when we note that its precepts are ordered to the production of knowledge. One trained in liberal arts is equipped to overcome his own ignorance, and to do so on his own initiative and direction. The liberal artist can be his own teacher by enlisting other teachers into his service. He produces what he knows by taking command of how he comes

about knowing it. He is equipped to close in upon his own knowledge. This distinguishing feature finds its way into our definition of liberal arts, for such arts liberate a student not from the material world, nor from subsistence labor, but rather, *from servile dependence on the tutelage of others*.

### LIBERAL ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Finally, for clarity's sake, we should differentiate the liberal arts from the humanities. The program of study known as the humanities emerged in fifteenth-century Italy—the quattrocento—and extended from Italy across much of Europe. This curriculum aimed to cultivate virtue, a priority these educators, the humanists, carried forward from educators in the classical and medieval eras. What set apart their program had to do with the way virtue is formed. Humanist teachers believed that students become virtuous through their immersion in the best writings of classical antiquity. Such writings are important not only for the information and ideas they contain, but also for their style and manner of presentation. While we can trace this notion back to some earlier teachers in the classical world, the humanists elevated it to an organizing principle of instruction. Thus they insisted that students read whole works, in their original languages, for, they believed, a great author's style is part and parcel of his substance. As Pier Paolo Vergerio stated, "whatever is written in an undistinguished way is not given credibility and cannot long endure."<sup>22</sup> Not only did this conviction shape education, it fueled advances in philology and textual criticism.

The humanists reached back to the Greek and Roman past in order to saturate students with the best examples of virtue and eloquence, examples that promote imitation. Vergerio explains,

What way of life, then, can be more delightful, or indeed more beneficial, than to read and write all the time for moderns to understand things ancient; for present generations to converse with their posterity; and thus to make every time our own, both past and future? What excellent furniture books make! As we say; and as Cicero says, What a happy family books make! Absolutely honest and well-behaved! A family that does not fuss or shout, that is nether rapacious, voracious, or contumacious, that speaks or remains silent as it is bidden, that always stands ready to execute your very command, and that you never hear saying anything you don't want to hear, and that only says as much as you want to hear.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Pier Paolo Vergerio, "The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth," in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, trans. Craig W. Kallendorf (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), chap. 36.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., chap. 37.



Humanists like Vergerio maintained that whenever students read a classic work, in its original language, they encounter the writer's charisma: an eloquent author, though long dead, leaves an imprint upon later audiences who read his words. When students read many great authors, they learn to discriminate between virtues and vices in their own pursuit of moral and stylistic excellence. And when they read old stories about great deeds of the past, they participate vicariously in a hero's achievements. They can also encounter the consequences of folly. By this mimetic process, students take up virtue and build up their resistance to vice.

The humanists of the quattrocento differentiated themselves from their scholastic predecessors in important ways. Because scholastic teachers mined texts primarily for the ideas they contained, they had been comfortable teaching from compilations, summaries, and Latin translations of Greek works. But humanist educators refused to divorce form from content and insisted that students read whole works (not selections), as originally presented (not summaries or synopses), and in their original languages (not translated into Latin from its source language). When scholastic teachers mapped out a curriculum, they listed what topics or subjects students should consider, whereas humanist teachers listed specific authors and works students should read. When the humanists did list subjects, they did so as a way of grouping various writings into broader genres. Thus, their program of *studia humanitatis*, or humane studies, included grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Scholastics, on the other hand, organized subjects according to a systematized taxonomy that broke down philosophy into its constituent elements: the formal divisions of knowledge. Scholastic teachers enjoined students to learn virtue as they wrestled with great ideas, whereas humanist teachers enjoined students to learn virtue as they imitated charismatic examples. In other words, humanist instruction was primarily mimetic, whereas scholastic instruction was primarily analytical.<sup>24</sup>

Educators today who adopt the *humanities* label provide instruction from a particular collection of historical ideas and literary works that are formed by a particular set of cultural values. The more educators become aware of the culture that governs their own instruction, the better they can remain true to their mission. Which culture's heritage does humanities instruction promote? Options abound. The Italian humanists of the quattrocento embraced the classical culture of Greco-Roman antiquity. Some humanities programs locate themselves within the wide cultural stream of Western Civilization. Still others extol the modern multicultural forged by global commerce and cross-cultural interactions. Institutions that offer humanities instruction should clarify which

<sup>24</sup>Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance," in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, *Storia e Letteratura* 54 (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984), 553–83.

cultural heritage they identify with. This, in turn, will inform which body of writings they adopt for instructional use, and how those writings might serve as examples, guides, or warnings.<sup>25</sup>

### A FINAL CALL FOR CLARITY

We educators, like those in many professions, use a dedicated vocabulary to describe the work we are called to. Unfortunately, the meanings of many key terms of our trade have descended into ambiguity. We use terms like liberal arts, sciences, and humanities with too little reflection about what, exactly, we mean by them. In this paper I have sought to overcome this besetting ambiguity by laying out clear definitions and their derivation from historical usage. The definition of liberal arts presented here reflects the unique commitments of my home institution, New Saint Andrews College:

The liberal arts teach us how to learn—how to freely gain knowledge and understanding. As *arts*, they produce something, in this case, the ability to learn. Because they are *liberal* arts, they liberate us, not merely from ignorance, prejudice, and provincialism, but also from servile dependence on the tutelage of others. The liberal arts, then, are particularly important for leaders, who themselves must be guides. Moreover, the liberal arts are not value-neutral, but, like all arts, are rightly ordered to the love and worship of the Triune God.<sup>26</sup>

Other educators might adopt a different formulation than ours; indeed, historical usage supports a range of ways to construe liberal arts. The same can be said of related terms such as arts, sciences, and humanities, which I have also addressed in this paper. My aim is to urge educators—especially classical educators—toward greater clarity. Definitions matter. We who provide liberal arts instruction have a duty to make clear what the liberal arts entail, and what we mean by the term. This duty is especially pressing in today's educational environment that is dogged by muddled categories and imprecise terminology. When we define the terms we use to refer to the instruction we provide, we set ourselves up to be more faithful to our own mission.

<sup>25</sup>At New Saint Andrews College, where I teach, our undergraduate degree is in “liberal arts and culture.” The term *liberal arts* in this name indicates that we aim to teach our students how to freely gain knowledge and understanding. The term *culture* highlights the humanities element of our program, denoting a heritage with which we identify. New Saint Andrews is committed to the reformed tradition of confessional Protestantism.

<sup>26</sup>This statement has been formally adopted by New Saint Andrews College and regularly appears on course syllabi.