

A Thomistic Restoration of the Liberal Arts

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Abstract:

The notion of liberal arts, since Aquinas, has dramatically changed in its content, method, and aim. Today the liberal arts are understood synonymously with liberal education or general education, which calls for its restoration and rediscovery. For Aquinas, the seven liberal arts—which by his time were already composed of the *trivium* (i.e., grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (i.e., geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy)—are contrasted to the mechanical arts and the speculative sciences. The current conception of the liberal arts as holistic education came from a gradual conceptual shift in the last two centuries. Liberal arts studies have been progressively reduced to teaching “subjects” rather than giving students the tools, the “art,” of learning, of liberal education. The loss of the sense of the liberal arts—especially its Thomistic sense—brings certain repercussions in how the nature of “education” is understood. As such, this article aims to (1) clarify the situation of the liberal arts, (2) retrace the history of the liberal arts, (3) explore its Thomistic conception, and (4) consider the need to recover them as necessary for the proper order of learning befitting man.

Keywords: Liberal arts, *trivium*, *quadrivium*, education, speculative sciences, mechanical arts

The situation of the liberal arts today, often mistakenly interchanged with “liberal education,” has a history often taken for granted. When we think of the liberal arts, the most spontaneous reaction is to think of it as the arts that free the person, the arts that liberate man. Another interpretation these arts receive is that they are a set of disciplines that give sufficient human tools to enable the person to engage in more demanding disciplines, like the hard sciences. This is much closer to the original conception of the liberal arts, but it still is far from being an accurate representation of what the liberal arts *are* and what they are *meant for*. A third interpretation of liberal education, which is perhaps the commonest one, is that it is taken to be interchangeable with the humanities or interdisciplinary studies: that the liberal arts are the same as the humanities and interdisciplinary studies. This seems to be one of the gravest errors which speaks of a great deficiency in the understanding of what the liberal arts are.

More forgivable is the association between the liberal arts and liberal education. The two are both “liberal” studies, but what sense of “liberal” do liberal *arts* and liberal *education* adopt? The

confusion between the two comes from the distinction in the Aristotelian-Thomistic scheme of knowledge between “liberal knowledge” and “liberal arts knowledge.” The former is the same as theoretical knowledge, sought for its own sake, while the latter is constructive knowledge, sought for the sake of *making* something else. What is specific to liberal arts knowledge is that it is *constructed for the sake of liberal knowledge*. That is to say, liberal arts knowledge is for the sake of liberal knowledge. This aspect of the liberal arts, of being “for the sake of,” was lost in its history and thus tended to be equated with liberal education, which has as its chief end liberal knowledge (Mullaney 1956, 499).

The liberal arts, traditionally, have been classified into two stages: the first phase, *trivium*, and the second phase, *quadrivium*. The *trivium* is composed of the subjects of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; the *quadrivium* is composed of the subjects of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.¹ Their etymological roots help us understand their nature as a set of disciplines. *Trivium* comes from the Latin *tres* (“three”) and *via* (“way”), which combined means “three ways.” In a similar fashion, *quadrivium* comes from the Latin *quattuor* (“four”) and *via* (“way”), and this means “four ways.”

But what are they *ways* toward? What are they *ways for*? In the Middle Ages, particularly in the Aristotelian sense that was adopted by Scholastics, these “ways” were understood to mean ways in which the person could advance from the active life to the contemplative life, from the practical to the speculative, from the arts to the sciences (Aquinas, “Summa Theologiae” [ST] II-II 182.4). As Aquinas wrote, “the reason why they are divided into the *trivium* and *quadrivium* is that they are as it were paths introducing the quick mind to the secrets of philosophy” (Aquinas, “Super Boetium de Trinitate” [In De Trin.] 5.1.3).² In other words, the liberal arts dispose the human person for the attainment of wisdom, the knowledge of the highest causes (ST II-II 45.1).³

Now, this demands further elaboration and will be treated in a later section, but for the moment it suffices to say that the liberal arts, in its centuries-long history, has assumed so many shapes and forms, but it seems to stand in its obscurest form today, in the twenty-first century. Hence, for this investigation, an attempt will be made to make patent the situation of the liberal arts today. Second, the history of the liberal arts will be retraced from its origin in the ancient Greeks and Romans. Third, this brief survey will elaborate on the Thomistic conception of the liberal arts. The final section will consider the need to recover the Thomistic character of the liberal arts as a proper order of learning befitting man.

1. The situation of the liberal arts today

Advocates for a liberal arts curriculum are scrambling to find ways to make relevant the education they either give or receive. This is largely due to the growing popularity of STEM-related (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) disciplines. Now this fact is something that cannot be taken lightly, because it is something very real in the educational atmosphere of today. The reason for this exponential increase in the preference for STEM subjects can be primarily attributed to the growing phenomenon of “scientism,” an approach that absolutizes the scientific method, claiming that the only real way of arriving at legitimate knowledge is through scientific

inquiry. It is no surprise that among the principal advocates of scientism are the so-called New Atheists (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, etc.).

There is a long history of how this came to be, and this is not the proper place to discuss such a dense subject matter. I must defer to Sir Roger Scruton's magnificent work, *On Human Nature* (2017), which discusses in depth the various dimensions of scientism, particularly the ills it causes on our perspective of the human person, and the possible remedies for it.

A partial reason for the decadence of the liberal arts is the progressive intrusion of other disciplines into the structure of the original seven arts, which disrupts their unity and meaning. One of the factors that contributed to the saturation of foreign disciplines comes from the claim of some scholars that, "historically, the aim of a liberal arts education, in the most general terms, has been to inculcate a set of cultural values through texts and traditions believed to exemplify those values. In other words, the purpose of such education has been to pass on 'culture'—to transmit the values, practices, and institutions a culture believes to be its fabric and framework" (Atwill 1998, 1).

However, as we shall see, this is a mistaken view of the liberal arts because it appears to distort both what the seven arts have meant and what they are supposed to mean—to say nothing of the irrepressible tendency to synonymize liberal arts with liberal education, which has had catastrophic consequences on the way education systems posture themselves. Admittedly, the "liberal arts" is somewhat of an elusive term, at least in the history of what it has meant for man, for there are "a great many arts which are not liberal, and a great many liberal studies which are not arts. All this makes it extremely easy to lose one's way" (Mullahy 1949, 362).

One need only look at the gradual pace of educational decadence by observing the "general education" curriculum, which supplanted the apparently outdated "liberal education" curriculum. There should be a moderate amount of suspicion toward general education; after all, in the medieval period, the liberal arts were taught prior to higher education. There were what were called grammar schools which instructed the youth in literacy (i.e., the Latin language and Latin literature). This sort of education was a prerequisite as it laid the foundation to make the study of the other liberal arts possible (especially the great dependence logic has on grammar).

There was a turn in how the liberal arts were understood to be "liberal." At a certain point in the history of the liberal arts, they became identified as the arts that make man free, the arts that liberate man (Lewis 2013, 129-30). From those questionable premises, one easily concludes that the liberal arts must be a holistic education that frees man from the bonds of his brute tendencies. But yet again, this is not an adequate view of the nature, or at the very least the function, of the liberal arts. The problem with this perspective is that it equates the liberal arts (an education for skills) with liberal education (an education for the whole of the person).

Proponents of such a radical change in the trajectory of the liberal arts defend the idea that knowledge has become so multifaceted that holistic education necessarily had to expand its scope to accommodate social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, and that a truly liberal education is a formation in all these areas. One might ask, where have the liberal arts gone? The fields of

learning now appear divided into those three: the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Some would apply the liberal arts as congruent with or as encompassed by the humanities. But that will not do. The crux of the problem is the loss of what the liberal arts meant in their original Thomistic conception which, consequently, meant a loss in the sense of urgency and necessity for the liberal arts.

Far from what they mean to many today, the liberal arts are not a curriculum that gives man all the tools for holistic human development. The use of the term “tools” is deliberate: students are now more concerned with the expectations of employers rather than the education that ought to be had, that is, the kind of education befitting the human person. Since employers tend now to look for “experience” and “hard or soft skills,” among other vague qualifications, students seek the sort of education that fulfills just that. And that appears to be the direction in which attempts to define liberal education are being done (Schneider 2009).

Not only does the current general education curriculum undermine liberal education, but it also appears to have erased the liberal arts from education, as much as this sort of curriculum professes to preserve them. Only remnants of the liberal arts remain beneath the core curriculum courses. One could argue that different “skills” have replaced the “skills” (*ars*) of a liberal arts education, and that the advancement of knowledge and the expansion of domains of learning admit of a need to adapt the skills learned in school to contemporary circumstances.

But to such a claim only a simple refutation is needed: that the “skills” that contemporary education offers are simply a knowledge of “know-how,” which is distinct from the knowledge of “know-why” that the liberal arts have proven to bestow. With “know-how,” one is given a sort of knowledge—i.e., *useful* knowledge—that resembles the capabilities of machines; but with “know-why,” one is given a sort of knowledge proper to human persons. That is what the liberal arts prepare persons for, and that is precisely what general education takes for granted. But before the rapidly changing and globalized world forgot the liberal arts, the seven arts had relative stability for many centuries, until around the nineteenth century, when liberal arts colleges began to be the pedagogical vogue of higher education, especially in the United States.

2. The origin of the liberal arts in the ancient world

Scholars have debated on the origin of the liberal arts, but the most likely theory has been presented by Pierre Conway and Benedict Ashley. There they argued against the claim that the liberal arts have a Platonic origin and were systematized by the Stoics. They acknowledged that the first mention of the liberal arts as seven in number is in the writings of Martianus Capella, a Roman writer from the fifth century, who is taken to be a Stoic (Conway and Ashley 1959, 462). It is not difficult to imagine the Roman and Stoic origin of the liberal arts because the first recorded usage of the term liberal arts was in Marcus Tullius Cicero’s *De Inventione*, where he refers to an “*artum liberalium*,” liberal arts (1968, 72-3). It is doubtful he meant the seven liberal arts as they were later to be known by, but this goes to show that it is no surprise that the liberal arts were systematized by the Romans.

Some other scholars propose that the liberal arts have Platonic origins. Robert Brumbaugh noted that all the seven liberal arts are mentioned, in one way or another, in book seven of Plato's *Republic* (Conway and Ashley, 1959, 463). But it is unlikely that these two propositions hold because, firstly, the liberal arts precede Plato and thus precede the ancient Romans. The mathematical arts of the *quadrivium* can be traced back to Pythagoras and his school, while the arts of letters and symbols of the *trivium* are found already in the dialogues of some of the pre-Socratics, particularly Zeno and Empedocles. In any case, the liberal arts could not have had a Platonic or Stoic origin. Rather, the liberal arts can be found imbued in the form of ancient Greek education, which was called *παιδεία*, *paideia*.⁴ This term is not adequately translated as “education” in the understanding of the term today, but more properly an intense form of education that could be called “erudition” (McKeon 1949, 292).

But what is particularly interesting is what Aristotle thought of the liberal arts because, though he does not apply the terms *trivium* and *quadrivium*, he speaks of the liberal arts in detail. For Aristotle, there is a difference between liberal and servile studies, the studies meant for their own sake and the studies meant for something else. But what did this liberal studies consist of for Aristotle?

We know that among the liberal studies he included grammar (reading, writing), and the study of music, to which he says that drawing might be added. Music, of course, is connected with poetry, which in turn, like rhetoric and dialectics, is rooted in logic in the strict sense. Hence, it is safe to say that Aristotle considered the *trivium* as the basis of education, although for him the tripartite division is not significant (Conway and Ashley 1959, 464).

Appended to this is the mathematical studies of the *quadrivium*—though not identified as such by Aristotle—in his belief that mathematics “*precedes* the study of the natural science” (Conway and Ashley, 1959, 464). Aristotle writes, “...one might ask this question too, why a boy may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist. It is because the objects of mathematics exist by abstraction, while the first principles of these other subjects come from experience” (Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” [NE] 1142a15). Hence, for Aristotle, mathematics, as practical wisdom, is an introductory study to speculative wisdom. This is thus the basis for the Aristotelian character of the *quadrivium*. Nevertheless, the defined disciplines included in the liberal arts (and in two levels, as *trivium* and *quadrivium*) were yet to take form during this period.

As early as the first century B.C., Cicero admitted that they—the Romans—owed much of their learning to the Greeks and the arts that were transmitted to them. In fact, the ancient Romans appropriated the Greek idea of *paideia* and translated it into the Latin *humanitas*. Yet the Latin *humanitas* did not simply mean “humanity” but, more than that, it was a reflection of the “result of the impact of Greek arts on Roman life” (McKeon 1949, 292). Cicero wrote:

We are therefore bound to do our utmost to make good this claim not in our native arts only but also in those that belong to the Greeks themselves. However, words which the practice of past generations

permits us to employ as Latin, e.g. the term ‘philosophy’ itself, or ‘rhetoric,’ ‘logic,’ ‘grammar,’ ‘geometry,’ ‘music’ we may consider as being our own (Cicero 1931, 220-1).⁵

3. The liberal arts prior to its Thomistic conception

Even before the medieval period—an era that spanned almost a millennium, from the fifth century to the thirteenth century—when the liberal arts were situated firmly in the cycles of study, the seven arts were already held in high esteem, especially by Augustine, who in fact was working on a compilation of commentaries on the liberal arts called the *Disciplinarum Libri*, which by some turn of events was never completed. He holds that “the liberal disciplines (if, of course, moderate and concise), produces lovers more lively, more persevering, and better groomed for embracing the truth; and as a result they more ardently desire, more consistently pursue, and finally, more sweetly cling to that which is called... the happy life” (Augustine 2020, 36-7). It is worth pointing out that there is unanimity in what Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas believe the goal of the liberal arts is: *eudaimonia*, flourishing, the happy life, the contemplative life.

This goal of contemplative life is crucial to understanding the role of the liberal arts in the formation of the human mind. Aquinas, commenting on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, said that “perfect happiness evidently should consist in contemplative activity” (Aquinas “Sententia libri Ethicorum” [*In NE*] 10.12.2121).⁶ Hence, it follows that if one were to form his mind and faculties, it must have as its aim contemplative activity. Aquinas argues that there are stages in the attainment of contemplative life; that, unlike the intellect of angels, the human person must make his way through premises and must undergo a process (i.e., the operations of the mind: simple apprehension, judgment, and reasoning) before arriving at the perception of truth. Nevertheless, this series of intermediate acts arrive at a “final act,” the “crowning act,” which is contemplative activity (Aquinas “Expositio libri Posteriorum Analyticorum” [*In Post. An.*] 1.1 and *ST II-II* 180.3).

Further revealed by the series of acts leading up to the crowning act of contemplative activity is the idea, articulated by Augustine, of moderation. As mentioned, he stipulated a condition for reaching the end of the liberal arts (i.e., the speculative sciences, the kind of knowledge necessary for human happiness), which is to be educated in the liberal disciplines *with moderation*. In what does this moderation consist? One interpretation of this is that one must not perpetually spend his energies pursuing the skills perfected by the liberal arts (i.e., the products of reason: a syllogism, composition, discourse, etc.). One should advance to the speculative sciences somehow, to greater or lesser degrees of immersion, since these sciences are the higher end of learning. If one were to remain in the liberal disciplines all his life, he would be groomed to embrace truth but perhaps would not have yet embraced truth itself.

Another interpretation of the need for moderation in the study of the liberal arts can be derived from Aristotle’s claim that “amusement is needed more amid serious occupations than at other times (for he who is hard at work has need of relaxation, and amusement gives relaxation, whereas occupation is always accompanied with exertion and effort)” (Aristotle “Politics” [*Pol.*])

1337b35-40). Hence, the liberal arts could also be seen not only as studies preparatory for the disciplines proper to speculative truth, but also the arts that provide man the *sufficient relaxation* to prepare for the speculative studies. Hence, “music, and generically poetics,” to which one could relate rhetoric, “...are in addition singled out by Aristotle as especially appropriate for the relaxation in the leisure devoted to intellectual activity” (Conway and Ashley 1959, 487).

4. The Thomistic conception of the liberal arts

Aquinas was not the one who formulated the liberal arts, nor was he the one to define what the liberal arts were meant for. Rather, Aquinas expanded the potential of the liberal arts to the fullest breadth of its rich Aristotelian character. That is to say, he enriched the seven liberal arts by identifying how they are “liberal” and why they are “arts,” drawing especially from the Aristotelian explanation for the development of the mind. This order in intellectual progress can be found in the prologue to his *Super Librum de causis expositio*, where he writes:

Hence the chief aim of philosophers was to consider all things in order to arrive at knowledge of first causes. That is why they placed knowledge of first causes last, in the final stage of life, and began first with logic which treats the mode of the sciences, went on second to mathematics, of which even children are capable, third, to natural philosophy which requires time for experience, fourth to moral philosophy of which the young are not suitable students, and finally they turned to divine science which considers the first causes of beings (Aquinas “*Super Librum de causis expositio*” [*In LDC*] 7-8).

This order of learning—from logic to mathematics, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and finally the divine sciences—might appear as if Aquinas excludes the other liberal arts (i.e., grammar, rhetoric, music, and astronomy) as part of the order of learning. This is not so. Rather, Aquinas uses the terms “logic” and “mathematics” as general headings to refer to the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, respectively (Conway and Ashley 1959, 500).

Aquinas further states in the prologue to his *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*: “Now all the sciences and arts are ordained to one thing, namely, to man’s perfection, which is happiness.” Although science and art are ordained toward man’s attainment of *eudaimonia*, Aquinas holds that science is generally a superior kind of knowledge to art. He comments, “Therefore, since many useful arts have been discovered (some to provide the necessities of life, as the mechanical arts, and others to introduce us to the sciences, as the logical disciplines), those artists must be said to be wiser whose sciences were discovered not for the sake of utility but merely for the sake of knowing, that is to say, the speculative sciences” (Aquinas “*Sententia libri Metaphysicae*” [*In Met.*] 1.1.32). Furthermore, “science... pertain[s] to the speculative part of the soul, which [Aristotle] speaks of in [the *Ethics*] as the scientific part of the soul...” but “art belong[s] to the practical part of the soul, which reasons about our contingent courses of action” (*In Met.* 1.1.34).

Hence, Aquinas thinks, as earlier mentioned, that what comes first in the formation of the intellect is the art of reasoning, logic, and then mathematics, the art of numbers and symbols, which

are the crowning skills of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, respectively. These seven arts prepare the mind for those highest truths which “are less and later known for [man]” because the knowledge of causes is made only through their effects (*In LDC* 3). Once this has been achieved, men can proceed to the speculative studies, natural and moral philosophy, and more importantly, divine sciences (theology and metaphysics) (Aquinas “Super Boetium De Trinitate” [*In De Trin.*] III 5.1.10).⁷ But this order of learning, Aquinas says, is not exclusive to the philosopher. Instead, this is the “fitting order of learning” for *all* men. This is short of saying this order of learning constitutes the framework of any education.

A second aspect of interest in what Aquinas said here is that it reveals the end of learning: the speculative sciences, that is to say, contemplation—which Aristotle famously regards as the “highest form of activity” (*NE* 1177a18). One could thus consider the liberal arts as those products of reason which dispose it for higher activity. The formation of the intellect is meant to lead the human person to the speculative disciplines. But, for Aquinas, following Aristotle, the order of knowledge comes from what is apprehended by the senses. There is nothing in the mind that has not gone through the senses. This Aristotelian principle is all over the famous introductory lines of the first book of the *Metaphysics*. Similarly, Aquinas believes that learning happens this way, in accord with the order of knowledge: from the active life to the contemplative life, from the practical to the speculative, from the arts to the sciences. This is why Aquinas thinks it is not aligned with the fitting order of learning for man that he engage immediately in the divine sciences, in theology and metaphysics, without first having a firm footing in the basic arts.

These basic arts, which are preparatory to the speculative sciences, are precisely the liberal arts. Now this term “liberal arts” might appear as somewhat of a contradiction, Mullaney observes. The reason is that “liberal” means that which is sought for its own sake, while “art” has an inferior role of being *for* something else. But this is not so because, as Conway and Ashley note, the liberal arts are only “arts” by extension, that is, only “according to a certain likeness” (1959, 474). A preliminary consideration for this may be found in a text from Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*:

Similarly, the other seven are called liberal either because they require minds which are liberal, that is, liberated and practiced (for these sciences pursue subtle inquiries into the causes of things), or because in antiquity only free and noble men were accustomed to study them, while the populace and the sons of men not free sought operative skill in things mechanical (1961, 75).

Apart from this text of the *Didascalicon*, a work Aquinas frequently referred to for insight concerning the liberal arts, it is likewise evident in his own writings. In his early work, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, he stresses the “productive” character of the liberal arts, which qualify them as “arts” but distinguish them from the servile, mechanical arts, or arts of utility (*In De Trin.* 5.1.3).⁸ He writes, “these [liberal arts] are called arts because they involve not only knowledge but also a work that is directly a product of reason itself; for example, producing a composition, syllogism or discourse, numbering, measuring, composing melodies, and reckoning the course of the stars” (*In*

De Trin. 5.1.3). Grammar consists of producing a composition; logic, producing a syllogism; rhetoric, producing a discourse; arithmetic, the art of numbering; geometry, the art of measuring; music, the art of composing melodies; and astronomy, the reckoning of the course of the stars.

Not only are the liberal arts products of reason, but they are the only arts directed to knowledge—wholly opposed to the arts directed toward useful ends. Aquinas comments, “[O]nly those arts which are directed to knowing are called free [or liberal] arts, whereas those which are directed to some useful end attained by action are called mechanical or servile arts” (*In Met.* 1.3.59). This distinction Aquinas makes between the liberal arts and servile arts, *artes liberales* and *artes serviles*, refers to the division of intellectual life: the contemplative intellect and the practical intellect. The former concerns the “knowledge of truth itself” while the latter “some external action” (*STII-II* 179.2). Since the liberal arts are products of reason, that is, their effects are “internal,” they qualify under the contemplative intellect, not the practical intellect. In other words, the liberal arts “are not ordained to anything outside the intellect” (Mullahy 1949, 364).

In all this, it is interesting how Aquinas nuances the function of the liberal arts. First, as we observed earlier, Aquinas says that the liberal arts are *liber* in two senses: in the sense that they are arts befitting free men and in the sense that they are for their own sake or, more precisely, for the sake of the speculative sciences that are for their own sake. Second, the liberal arts are *ars* because they have a certain product: a composition, syllogism, discourse, etc. But they are products totally unlike the products of the mechanical or servile arts which have an external product. The products of the liberal arts are *internal*. Human reason *makes something*. The kinds of arts, the mechanical arts and liberal arts, are distinguished by the “fact that ‘art’ in the strict sense has a product which goes out into external matter, while the ‘liberal art’ does not have a material product but a product primarily in the mind, and one ordained to knowledge” (Conway and Ashley 1959, 474).

This idea of internal creation done by the liberal arts is also accounted for in the *Summa Theologiae*:

Even in speculative matters there is something by way of work: e.g. the making of a syllogism [logic] or of a fitting speech [rhetoric], or the work of counting [arithmetic] or measuring [geometry]. Hence whatever habits are ordained to such like works of the speculative reason, are, by a kind of comparison, called arts indeed, but “liberal” arts, in order to distinguish them from those arts that are ordained to works done by the body, which arts are, in a fashion, servile, inasmuch as the body is in servile subjection to the soul, and man, as regards his soul, is free [*liber*] (I-II 57.3.3).

The third nuance Aquinas presents is that the liberal arts are preparatory to the speculative sciences. Although he says that they are ends in themselves because they are *liber*, they remain preparatory studies for the speculative sciences. What seems to be this dual end of the liberal arts is an idea already articulated by Augustine in his proposition that “liberal arts are learned, partly for their usefulness in living, partly for the knowledge and contemplation of things” (Augustine 2020, 89). Aristotle and Aquinas believe that logic and mathematics are indispensable to acquire the

method of science before one can engage in the sciences themselves (Conway and Ashley 1959, 471). Hence, although it is for all men to study logic and mathematics (the liberal arts) as the basic stages of learning, not all men can engage in the study of the divine sciences, theology and metaphysics.

The sequence of the liberal arts and how they are directed to the speculative sciences is further concretized thus: the mathematical *quadrivium* is the last of the liberal arts but the first of the speculative sciences (Conway and Ashley 1959, 489). In effect, the progression of learning begins with the most basic art, logic, which is the crowning skill of the *trivium*, then the learning proceeds to the *quadrivium*, in which the mind is immersed in mathematics, which is the crowning skill of the *quadrivium*. Then the study of the speculative sciences begins. But here the learner experiences a shift: in the final stage of the liberal arts he learned mathematics as an art, but proceeding to the speculative sciences, he begins by learning mathematics as a science (Conway and Ashley 1959, 490). This is consonant with Aristotle's idea that "a boy may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist," because the latter two areas of knowledge require experience, which, for Aristotle, is contingent on time (which the youth do not yet have) (*NE* 1142a15).

The meaning of the liberal arts' "preparatory" nature could also refer to Aristotle's idea that "it is absurd to seek simultaneously for knowledge and for the method of obtaining it" (Aristotle "Metaphysics" [*Met.*] 995a13-4). Aquinas interprets this to mean "that we must investigate the method of scientific thinking before the sciences themselves" (*In De Trin.* 5.1.3). For this context, that is to say the liberal arts and the speculative sciences cannot be pursued *at the same time*. One must acquire the skills of the method—the liberal arts—before endeavoring into the speculative sciences themselves—e.g., metaphysics and theology.

It is also interesting to note that Aquinas says not all the liberal arts are necessary for the speculative sciences. Aquinas identifies logic, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy as indispensable to the speculative sciences, while rhetoric and music have a supplementary function. This means that the liberal arts have a specific "ministerial function" to the speculative sciences, but rhetoric and music have no direct contribution to this ministerial role of the liberal arts (Conway and Ashley 1959, 497). The primacy of logic in the *trivium* and the mathematical skills in the *quadrivium* are firmly founded on the Aristotelian premise found at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (*Met.* 9800b25 and Conway and Ashley 1959, 478).⁹

Finally, we can observe from Aquinas account of the liberal arts that he thinks of them as ordained to the perfection of man, as the order of learning that helps man attain his happiness (Conway and Ashley 1959, 482, 504). The reason is that the liberal arts, as we have been saying, is necessary for the study of the speculative sciences; and it is the grasp of the speculative sciences which is the measure of man's achievement of contemplative life. This is why "the man who by his intellect is able to tend through the speculative liberal arts to the speculative sciences, is more fundamentally free than the man who is only legally free" (Conway and Ashley 1959, 479). In other words, the human person can be "freer" with the liberal arts than simply being legally or physically free.

Aquinas claimed that perfect happiness cannot be attained by the consideration of the

speculative sciences. However, he admits that the speculative sciences permit the human person to have, as it were, “a certain participation of true and perfect happiness” (*ST* II-I 3.6).¹⁰ It has been made clear that the liberal arts are introductory to the speculative sciences; and because the speculative sciences facilitate one’s participation in true and perfect happiness, it follows that the liberal arts have an indirect contribution to the attainment of happiness. In other words, the liberal arts can be characterized as being preparatory, and therefore ordained, to man’s happiness. Hence, not only do the liberal arts perfect the mental faculties of man—the “skills of reason”—but also, and more importantly, perfect the human person *qua* human person.¹¹

This conclusion is not explicit in Aquinas doctrine of the liberal arts. Nevertheless, it can easily be implied when one strings together the ends of each level of learning: the liberal arts are for the speculative sciences, and the speculative sciences are for happiness; therefore, the liberal arts are for man’s happiness. But one must *not* presume that the liberal arts, in and of themselves, constitute the adequate means for attaining happiness. Such is contrary to the ideas of both Aristotle and Aquinas for two reasons: (1) the liberal arts are not for their own sake, and thus not ends in themselves (which is an attribution proper to happiness), and (2) to say that the liberal arts are adequate for attaining happiness is to say that the arts (*τέχνη, tékhnē*) are adequate for reaching happiness (*εὐδαιμονία, eudaimonía*), which is not the case because art always has a certain product, and is therefore not sought for its own sake.

Aquinas comments on the *Metaphysics*, “free men exist for themselves *inasmuch as they acquire things for themselves* and work for themselves [emphasis added]” (*In Met.* 1.3.58). That is to say, those activities sought for their own sake are what increase man’s freedom. This is the exclusive contribution of the liberal arts among the other arts (i.e., fine arts and mechanical arts), because “their construction takes place within the very soul of man, within the very principle from which all of man’s liberty flows, [thus] they are not art in the most strict sense of the term,” but only by extension, so much so that Aquinas attributes to the liberal arts the name of “speculative arts” (Mullahy 1949, 372 and *ST* II-II 47.2.3).¹² In this manner, the liberal arts constitute “the beginning of the life of contemplation whose final fulfillment and complete realization is wisdom” (Mullahy 1949, 386).

5. Recovering the Thomistic conception of the liberal arts

Many scholars have attempted to lay the groundwork for re-establishing the liberal arts curriculum in secondary and higher education. The most draconian proposal to my knowledge is from James Mullaney. If not for the serious conviction for his unsettling conclusion, his article could have been one of the great contributions to the study of the nature of the liberal arts in the twentieth century. He concluded his work with the proposal of revising the content of the *quadrivium* and replacing arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music with the humanities (which he defines as the “integrated study of a given culture in its history, its philosophy, its literature, and its art” (Mullaney 1956, 501). Apart from the multiple contentions that can be raised against

his characterization of the humanities, Mullaney stands to be corrected in his claim that the *quadrivium* ought to be revised because of the simple “fact of educational usage that ‘liberal arts’ means humanities” (Mullaney 1956, 504).

He draws this conclusion from (1) the “actual education practice” and (2) because of his claim that the content of the *quadrivium* is not art but science (i.e., mathematics and physical science) (Mullaney 1956, 505). He further suggests that the actual education practice, currently, understands the liberal arts as the humanities; thus, it becomes proof enough to reconsider the nature of the liberal arts and to subsume the study of the humanities under the liberal arts’ *quadrivium*. But it appears that he has forgotten the simple difference between what *is* practiced and what *should* be practiced; or put another way, between “actual education practice” and “proper education practice.”

Dorothy Sayers likewise proposed a revival of the liberal arts curriculum, but with more tempered claims. She identifies the liberal arts, particularly the *trivium* (i.e., grammar, logic, and rhetoric) to be the “art of learning,” the transferable tools man applies in order to be acquainted with new fields of learning. Sayers lamented the ideal of modern education which finds no fault in bombarding students with “subjects.” She said that “modern education concentrates on *teaching subjects*, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one’s conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along” (Sayers 2017, 16). For Sayers, the capital crime of modern education is the disintegration of logic in the curriculum of the youth, much more the loss of its relevance in higher studies (2017, 29).¹³

What we need, as Mullaney and Sayers have called for, is to return to the liberal arts, to recover the “lost tools of learning”—the liberal arts. But not just any kind of liberal arts, for as the history of the liberal arts has testified, the liberal arts have assumed so many meanings. The kind of liberal arts we need is the Thomistic one, firmly rooted in its rich Aristotelian character. This claim does not come from any suspicious Thomistic leanings, but from the simple fact that the liberal arts, in the way Aquinas has conceived of it, has shown to be a formidable educational method that conforms to the human person’s order of learning.

In fact, Aquinas does not justify the proper order of learning based on the liberal arts; rather, he justifies the liberal arts based on the proper order of learning. “Had there been no *trivium* or *quadrivium*, Aquinas’ reasons for the sequence of studies [i.e., logic, mathematics, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and divine sciences] would still be the same” (Conway and Ashley 1959, 500). The reason is that Aquinas derives the order of learning, “not from the ‘liberal arts’ of his day, but from his consideration of the order of studies in Aristotle—to which order he shows the conformity of the ‘liberal arts’ system of his time” (Conway and Ashley 1959, 500). This fitting order of learning is what the liberal arts serve, not the other way around.

However, modern education does not recognize this as a consequence of the fluctuations in the meaning, content, method, and aim of the liberal arts. “Since the concept of the liberal arts is vital, it grows and changes and evolves as does man, without impairment of nature but with ever

fuller development” (Wise 1947, 200). Furthermore, “[i]t may be readily admitted that historically there has been considerable fluidity in the use of the term liberal art. Yet, in the midst of this fluidity, there has for many centuries been a persistent tradition in Western culture which restricts the term to a few well defined studies—the three studies of the *trivium*... and the four studies of the *quadrivium*” (Mullahy 1949, 365).

In any case, as the situation of the liberal arts today so clearly shows, we have lost the wonderful Thomistic sense of its being “liberal,” that is, for its own sake and as preparatory for the speculative sciences, and “arts,” as skills which have a certain product of reason, as a perfection of reason. The liberal arts is so muddled up with various disciplines and fields of learning that it has ceased to be “liberal,” that is, it has ceased to be sought for its own sake. Aquinas’ conception of the liberal arts appears to be a sure way to recover the power of the liberal arts as a means for human perfection, especially the perfection of human reason. The fluid understanding of the liberal arts has been in vogue for longer than it should, and we need to find firm grounds for establishing the formative potency of the liberal arts. This is most effectively done if we can recover the liberal arts’ Thomistic meaning which seemed to have been buried deep centuries ago, to the detriment of man’s progression.

This brief investigation should aptly conclude with the words of Mullahy which evoke a tone of hope and confidence in the revival of the Thomistic conception of the liberal arts: “If the modern world is to be saved from the devastation of science and technology, there must be a return, not merely to the liberal arts, but to liberal education in all its dimensions, and especially to wisdom, which is the culmination of all liberal knowledge” (1949, 386). Today’s increasing threats of scientism and the overwhelming preference for STEM-related disciplines may very well serve to reverse the wheels of progress unless authentic liberal education, through the integrity of the Thomistic liberal arts,¹⁴ is given its rightful place in the formation of the human person.

Endnotes:

1. Sister Miriam Joseph described the seven liberal arts and their content thus: (1) logic, the art of thinking, (2) grammar, the art of inventing and combining symbols, (3) rhetoric, the art of communication, (4) arithmetic, the theory of number, (5) music, the application of the theory of number, (6) geometry, the theory of space, (7) astronomy, the application of the theory of space. See Sister Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002).
2. “[E]t ideo distinguuntur in *trivium* et *quadrivium*, eo quod hiis quasi quibusdam viis vivax animus ad secreta philosophiae introeat.”
3. “...it belongs to wisdom to consider the highest cause.”
4. For an extensive discussion on the history, meaning, and trajectory of the Greek *paideia*, see Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vols. 1-3, 2nd ed., trans. Gilbert Highet (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1945-1947).
5. “Quamquam ea verba quibus institute veterum utimur pro Latinis, ut ipsa philosophia, ut rhetorica, dialectica, grammatica, geometria, musica, quamquam Latine ea dici poterant, tamen quoniam usu percepta sunt nostra ducamus. Atque haec quidem de rerum nominibus.”
6. “Et dicit, quod hoc, quod felicitas perfecta consistat in quadam speculativa operatione...”
7. “Mathematics should be studied before natural science, for the young can easily learn mathematics,

- but only the more advanced natural science, as is said in the Ethics. This is why the ancients are said to have observed the following order in learning the sciences: first logic, then mathematics, then natural science, after that moral science, and finally men studied divine science.”
8. “Other sciences (such as divine and natural science) either do not involve a work produced but only knowledge, and so we cannot call them arts, because, as the *Metaphysics* says, art is *productive reason*; or they involve some bodily activity, as in the case of medicine, alchemy, and other sciences of this kind. These latter, then, cannot be called liberal arts because such activity belongs to man on the side of his nature in which he is not free, namely, on the side of his body.”
 9. Aristotle says, “The animals other than man live by appearances and memories, and have but little of connected experience; but the human race lives also by art and reasonings.”
 10. “...consideratio scientiarum speculativarum est quaedam participatio verae et perfectae beatitudinis.”
 11. This conclusion is further justified by Aristotle’s claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b14-5: “happiness... comes as a result of virtue and *some process of learning or training* [emphasis added].”
 12. See Mullahy, “The Nature of the Liberal Arts,” 369-70, for a detailed elaboration on how the liberal arts qualify as “speculative arts.”
 13. “The disrepute into which formal logic has fallen is entirely unjustified; and its neglect is the root cause of nearly all those disquieting symptoms which we have noted in the modern intellectual constitution.”
 14. See Robert Hutchins, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1984), 4-5. “The method of liberal education is the liberal arts, and the result of liberal education is discipline in those arts. The liberal artist learns to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. He learns to reckon, measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange.”

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