

Misunderstanding & Misdirecting the Liberal Arts

What is *liberal* about the Liberal Arts? When people are asked this question they often give answers of the following sort:

- not objective, not black-and-white, no right-or-wrong answers
- soft subjects, fairly easy to learn
- loose, non-cumulative, curricular structure
- no mathematics

So the word 'liberal' is taken to mean something like easygoing, undisciplined, slack.

These things may be true, to some degree, of the subjects we now group together as Liberal Arts. But in that case, something really strange has happened: a 180° turn has been taken. For in the classical and mediaeval periods the Liberal Arts were through-and-through hard-edged mathematical studies.

Think about it: the seven Liberal Arts of antiquity and mediaeval times (going back at least to Plato) were: Logic, Grammar, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, and Music. Logic and Grammar were extremely black-and-white subjects, a matter of learning up and meticulously following clear and definite rules. Rhetoric was perhaps the softest-edged of these disciplines, though it too was a body of crisp rules. Arithmetic and Geometry speak for themselves. Astronomy was understood as visible Geometry, and Music was audible Arithmetic. There was nothing at all mushy or loose about the Liberal Arts of tradition.



So why were *those* subjects called *liberal*? The answer is surprising and not generally known. It is that they were thought to be the fit subjects of study for *liberi*, that is, free citizens – as opposed to slaves. (In 18th century English, the liberal arts were opposed to the *servile* arts!) They were the subjects that taught how to think, speak and argue, and that conveyed the basic ideas of science of the time. They gave the broad fundamental knowledge of how to be a serious player in the world. That is why they were the proper subjects for free citizens, for the people who make the decisions – in a word, for leaders.

The Liberal Arts of our own day have to some extent been a victim of an etymological misunderstanding: liberality as slackness, as flabbiness, is no part of the tradition. They should perhaps relearn and take to heart the correct etymology of their name, and be unafraid to be the proper subjects of study for leaders. And they should get some mathematics back into themselves: numeracy is as important as literacy in our world!