

SAINT JOHN'S AND THE LIBERAL ARTS TRADITION

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Saint John's is a liberal arts college operated by the Benedictine Order of the Catholic church.

Liberal arts education is a 2300 year old antique. Its precursor is the Greek academy of Plato, 385 B.C. One might expect that no one would pay attention to a product that old -- but like most antiques it has grown in value over the years. In these stressful times when both political and educational institutions are beginning to show hairline cracks it may be well to examine some common assumptions of both that come out of the academy.

Plato built his curriculum on one assumption -- that human beings are different in kind from the rest of living things; and that the education of man as well as the quality of his institutions lies in developing that distinctiveness and thus widening the gap between man and the rest of animate creation. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other liberal arts educators ever since have devoted themselves to explicating exactly in what this particular distinctiveness termed by some, human excellence, consists.

The rationale is fairly simple. Every existing thing has an essence or nature of its own that distinguishes it from other things or beings. Its excellence is a function of that nature. By examining this essence or nature we should be able to determine what particular skills or excellence of function is suggested by the composition of the entity.

For instance, what makes a horse different from a dog, cow, or ox? Its particular nature suggests that it performs its proper function relative to its nature as a horse by being able to run fast and/or carry a heavy burden. A virtuous thing is one which performs its peculiar or distinctive functions well. Thus all of us can envisage an image of a GOOD horse; a GOOD teacher; a GOOD politician. This assumes each of these is doing well what it ought to be doing. Likewise, examination of the nature of man suggests what his appropriate functions are as a human being. Aristotle (for one) said he is a rational, social animal, and then proceeded to build an educational system upon this image. Liberal arts education ever since has been a constant unraveling of our knowledge of man and how he should respond to his nature by developing his proper functions, which we call excellence or virtue.

The liberal arts curriculum has centered around the development of moral virtue (how man ought to live); intellectual virtue (development of intel-

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lectual excellence); aesthetic virtue (appreciation of the beautiful); and civic virtue (the skill of living in society by a proper appreciation of rights and duties). Some call it (too succinctly) a cultivation of the good, the true and the beautiful. It is a type of education that raises man above his animal nature and enables him to act as a free human being instead of a determined one. Hence, the appellation "liberating arts."

And so such curriculae have been strategies aimed at the development of these excellencies. And while such curriculae vary from college to college, they have in common this cultivation of human virtue. Liberal arts asks a different question than pure professional or vocational education does: not "how can man earn a good living" but rather "how can man live the good life."

One is entitled to ask of a tradition this old whether indeed the liberal arts approach might not have become obsolescent, archaic? Recently at an educational meeting I heard the dean of one of the nation's leading agricultural schools paradoxically express concern (in a burst of educational altruism) that so many students today were approaching education from a purely pragmatic and vocational perspective. He bewailed the possible adverse implications for the quality of future leaders that this entails!

This dean, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, is a latter day Plato. What he was saying really is that we are too often not asking the kind of questions all leaders (and perhaps most citizens in a democracy, Jefferson would say) should be asking -- the questions the Greeks asked. What is "good" and "evil?" What is justice? Happiness? Authority? Freedom? Man? The good citizen?

Others too have in our times asked these questions: Christopher Dawson and Walter Lippman, for example. Both ask whether Western democracies are degenerating because they cannot formulate images of the good statesman; the good citizen; the good man.

Plato said it well: "Constitutions grow not from stone to stone but from the character of the men who preponderate and draw the rest of the state after them." Liberal arts has been asking such questions from its inception. These questions are perennial. These questions are for men who want to remain free. These questions are for our times. And if they are, then the Platonic model is not obsolescent.

Where does Saint John's of Collegeville fit into this tradition? What additional input, if any, does the 1500 year-old educational experience of the Benedictines add to the schema of the Platonic Academy?

Firstly, there are the subsequent insights of the Judeo-Christian heritage that add another dimension to our understanding of man, one perhaps that Plato could not see with complete clarity and one that secular institutions cannot entertain with any degree of conviction.

Secondly, there is the integration that springs from the long Benedictine experience with education -- an integration of the natural and the supernatural; the sacred with the profane; the body with the soul; the animal with the intellect; prayer and study with physical work; contemplation laced with action.

For instance, the Benedictines remind the Greeks that servile work far from being confined to slaves is a tempering, necessary, and good experience for all men -- "ora et labora." Plato, you remember, confined servile work to slaves from whence it got its name. Liberal arts education was for leaders who would shape the conditions of social living. The Benedictines, however, do not deny the philosophic point of view in order to make of man a stone mason, chemist or accountant. Alfred North Whitehead, that revered scholar of our times, recognized the balance of this viewpoint when he pithily said: "The Benedictines brought Plato down to earth."

The Benedictine contribution has not gone unrecognized at the highest levels. Pius XII (Fulgens Radiatur) has depicted them as the first peace-corpsmen (in as many words) of the Western world. "From the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean; from the Atlantic ocean to the green plains of Poland, the Benedictine legions spread out and with the cross, with books, with plow, tamed the intractable and barbaric nations." Everywhere these emissaries asked in imitation of their father, Benedict, (will you) ... listen my son to the maxims of your father, Benedict?" Untold generations of students have listened to the Benedictines in their educational mission of preserving and adding to the "imago hominis" of the Greeks.

The issue for a college like Saint John's today is keeping the objectives clear -- development of human virtue or excellence -- without allowing the means to become obsolescent. No one ought to advocate change for the sake of change, of course. But new perspectives on the unraveling knowledge of man and new ways of combining the traditional liberal arts to generate relevancy must be incorporated into the curriculum from time to time. Failure to do so will surely render the relevancy of our liberal arts programs suspect to increasingly pragmatic and skeptical students. Without an acceptable delivery system the ends of liberal arts may ultimately be rejected with dire consequences for society. A college like a biological organism must prudently adapt itself to the external environment or become extinct.

Until the past several years the continuously expanding student body and the willingness of society to devote a sizeable segment of GNP to higher education allowed colleges to be somewhat careless about curricular revision. More income was just over the horizon. But in an era of relatively static or even declining resources shifts within a college will unleash all the frictions that budgetary reallocations arouse in any institution -- educational as well as governmental or business. But colleges are organized more on the democratic model than the authoritarian one. Faculties must impose on themselves curricular revision that may have adverse consequences for some of them. It makes the job of adaptation particularly trying -- perhaps for some institutions impossible until too late.

Saint John's, like others, is faced with a number of crucial decisions:

1. What constitutes a balance between bowing to the market place and upholding rigorous traditional arts programs?
2. If revision of curricula is called for, how can positive attitudes be engendered given the context of limited or static resources that requires taking from some and giving to others?
3. How can new viewpoints be fed into Saint John's on a regular basis, given the institution of tenure and the possibility of shrinking staffs?
4. Should Saint John's aim at what is the fastest growing segment of collegiate student bodies -- the non-traditional and older students -- and, if so, how do we gear our methods and curriculum to meet their needs without jeopardizing unduly our liberal arts aims? Or should we become an institution with dual purpose -- liberal arts and vocational preparation?

These are significant questions that must be satisfactorily answered even before the great debate over the specifics of keeping the classic liberal arts model current can begin.