

## Editorial Introduction

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This issue of *Cosmos + Taxis* is devoted to a discussion of liberal education. The essays here address this type of education's aim, its methods, and what it has to offer in our contemporary educational context. However, it may be helpful to begin with a very brief overview of the history of liberal learning, for the ideas discussed in the essays here are each part of a tradition and conversation that has been ongoing for many hundreds of years.

The first usage of the term “liberal arts” (*artes liberales*) was in Rome, although the Romans took many of their educational cues from the Greeks. In the first century BCE, the Roman polymath Terence Varro published his (now lost) *Disciplinarum Libri IX* (Nine Books of Disciplines) where he outlined nine essential liberal arts. This list was soon narrowed down to seven, which were broken up into the *trivium* (rhetoric, dialectics, and grammar) and the *quadrivium* (astronomy, arithmetic, geometry and music). In Rome, these seven liberal arts were seen as preparation for one of three specialized branches of learning—philosophy, medicine, or law (Weisheipl 1965, p. 55).

While liberal education's septempartite division persisted in some form throughout the Middle Ages, in practice the details of each of these seven areas of study were subject to persistent contestation and revision. Significant modifications were made after Christianity became dominant in the West. For example, St. Augustine reframed the liberal arts as not only preparation for studies in law and medicine as his own Roman tradition viewed them, but as necessary for the proper understanding of Christian doctrine. Thus, scripture and other Christian texts became standard parts of the liberal arts curriculum (Kimball 1996, pp. 14-5). Over the next several centuries debate continued over liberal learning's content (Should physics be included? What about politics and ethics?), and the rediscovery of some of Aristotle's works by people like Boethius laid the groundwork for the emergence of Christian scholasticism which dominated European universities for much of the medieval period (Weisheipl 1965, pp. 58-59).

The beginning of the second millennium marked another pivotal turning point in the history of liberal education: the influence of Islamic thought. It was around this time that scientific and philosophical works from the Muslim world first made their way to Europe. Through these works, Europeans discovered both the novel advances of Islamic science in areas like mathematics, astronomy, and optics, and the works of Islamic philosophers (Weisheipl 1965, pp. 68-72). These philosophers, such as Ibn Rushd (Averroës) were often writing about Greek works, like Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, that

had been mostly unknown to Europeans for centuries but had been discovered by Muslims in the second half of the first millennium during the Muslim conquests of Byzantine territories. That these Islamic thinkers and their works—especially their translations of and commentaries on Aristotle—represented a truly new direction for Western thought can be seen in the often hostile reception they received. Many of these works were initially condemned and banned. But by the 13th century, their influence had become so great that Aristotle became known simply as “the Philosopher”, and Averroës as “the Commentator” (Kimball 1996, p. 16).

The next centuries continued to see many other innovations and developments in Western education—the creation of the university as a major institution of centralized learning; what today we call the “Renaissance” movement of “humanism” and the identification of a specific approach to and a curriculum of learning called the “humanities” (Grendler 2022); the invention of the printing press; the rise of modern scientific and rationalist methods of analysis; and the self-styled era of “enlightenment”, which had profound effects on Western education, such as increased calls for public schooling and formal education for women, skepticism about the necessary role of religion and religious beliefs in education, and an increased divide between humanities and science education (Gilead 2020).

Throughout these centuries, what was meant by “liberal education” was far from a static ideal. The content and structure of education in the West shifted and adapted in response to historical circumstance and developments in philosophic, religious, or scientific thought. As a result, the tradition of liberal learning contains within it many different and often competing approaches to education. As Bruce Kimball writes, “. . .the tradition of liberal education is not uniform and continuous, but full of variety, discontinuity, and innovation. It has been and is a conflicted tradition” (Kimball 1996, p. 11). Discussions of liberal education often focus on one particular strand within this larger tradition—e.g., the development of virtue, the preparation for the practice of politics, the progressive advancement of human culture. Thus, it is worth briefly considering, when surveying the long and heterogeneous tradition of liberal learning, if it is possible to make any claims to its overall character that bridge the various sub-traditions and historical moments that compose it.

One feature of liberal education that is consistent throughout its history is that it is distinguished from an education whose sole purpose is preparation for a particular craft or a trade. In Greece, Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle used the education of the craftsmen or the *banausoi* as a kind of foil for liberal education (Nightingale 1996). For these philosophers, “craftsman” was often a pejorative term applied to those that, though not always slaves, were not a part of the wealthier class that primarily ruled Athens at the time. Although this betrays an elitism that is not characteristic of all approaches to liberal education today (and indeed, craft learning may be an essential component of a liberal education—see Martin 2022), it is worth considering this distinction between liberal and craft learning.

An important difference between these two types of education is the relationship between the subject matter being taught and the curriculum’s goal. In craft learning, this relationship is often relatively direct. To learn pottery, one practices pottery; to learn to become a car mechanic, one practices fixing cars. In contrast, the relationship between the curriculum and goal of liberal education (whatever that goal may be) is rarely so clear. For example, in Aristotle’s discussion of liberal education in Book XIII of his *Politics*, he claims that one of the primary goals of this type of education is training in “things contributing to virtue” (Aristotle 2013, 1337a). One of these “things”, in Aristotle’s mind, is music. He writes, “just as gymnastics makes the body of a certain quality, so also is music capable of making the character of a certain quality. . .” (Aristotle 2013, 1339a). But the relationship between music and virtue is by no means obvious to all, and Aristotle devotes much of Book XIII to a discussion of it.

This indirect relationship between curriculum and goal can be seen in many approaches to liberal learning. Take, for example, the idea that a liberal education is meant to produce, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, “. . .free citizens, citizens who are free not because of wealth or birth, but because they can call their minds their own. Male and female, slave-born and freeborn, rich and poor, they have looked into themselves and developed the ability to separate mere habit and convention from what they can defend by ar-

gument. They have ownership of their own thought and speech...” (Nussbaum 1997, p. 293). Though one can find echoes of this conception of liberal education in the writings of the Ancient Greeks, it has become popular in the United States where it dovetails with the American political ideals of equality, individualism, and republicanism (see Eva Brann’s book *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, Brann 1979). The curriculum of such an education is concerned with, as Nussbaum titles her book on liberal education, “cultivating humanity”, and though curricula that achieve this “fit no general mold” (Nussbaum 1997, p. 295), they focus on instilling in students an understanding of topics like “narrative imagination”. An education in narrative imagination, as Nussbaum lays it out, is partly fostered by reading Greek tragedies, poetry, and modern literature in an effort to expose students to experiences and ways of thinking different than their own. This leads to the development of the ability to compassionately imagine and empathize with the lives of others—an essential skill in a modern, diverse republic. However, like the relationship between virtue and music argued for by Aristotle, the connection between narrative imagination and, say, reading a novel by Charles Dickens is hardly straightforward.

This sometimes-indirect relationship between curriculum and goal can make it difficult to advocate for the importance of liberal learning. Administrators, parents, and students often have a hard time understanding the connection between what is taught and what a liberal education hopes to achieve. As evidenced by Aristotle’s lengthy defense of music instruction, this is not a new phenomenon. But today, proponents of liberal learning must justify, not only the content of a liberal education, but its goals as well. This too is not necessarily a new challenge, but it has taken on a heightened intensity as universities and colleges have come under increased pressure to offer an education that is more directly concerned with equipping a student with a set of marketable skills. The question, “Will this education help me get a job when I graduate?” has begun to overshadow questions like, “Will this education prepare me to be a good citizen?”, or “prepare me to better understand myself?”

Laying aside a discussion of the social and economic factors that might be driving this dynamic, it is important to point out that in this environment proponents of liberal learning find themselves in a difficult situation. The tradition of liberal education has always contained within it some admission of its non-utilitarian character. As Aristotle wrote, “That there is a certain sort of education...in which children are to be educated, not as being useful or necessary but as being liberal and noble, is evident” (Aristotle 2013, 1338a). This does not mean that liberal learning is useless in a profound sense, but that its main concern has rarely been with building a set of skills to put on a job application or fetch a high salary. And yet, many advocates of liberal learning today find themselves arguing for why hiring students who have had a liberal education would actually bring more value to one’s banking or marketing firm. For those committed to a non-utilitarian vision of liberal education, it is difficult not to give in to feelings of cynicism when reading (or making) these arguments. However, it is helpful to put these kinds of arguments in their historical context, because they reflect a radical shift in our culture’s overall approach to education that is, many would agree, for the better.

For much of its history, liberal learning was, in practice, mainly for those who did not have to spend their lives working for a wage as a tradesman. It was, in other words, “aimed at freeborn gentlemen of the propertied classes” (Nussbaum 1997, p. 293) (and, in medieval Europe, for the religious elite and monastic communities). This was certainly the case in Ancient Athens where Aristotle explicitly connected “unfree” education with that of the craftsman or laborer. But in relatively recent times, views about education have changed such that most advocates of liberal education today believe that everybody, not just the wealthier classes, should have access to an education that is more expansive than a trade school—recall Nussbaum’s words above that it should be an education for, “Male and female, slave-born and freeborn, rich and poor”. That expansion has in fact already taken place to some extent, and this means that most students in colleges and universities, while they may be looking for some kind of general education that is not *only* focused on a specific trade, are also in a position where they need to find employment after graduating. In this environment, it makes sense that advocates of liberal learning are asked to justify its worth, perhaps not simply on the basis of marketable skills or expected salary, but this justification should have something to say about

the role of liberal education in the contemporary educational landscape—one that is filled with a much more diverse range of students, traditions, cultures, and educational aims than 50 or 100 years ago.

I have briefly detailed three features of contemporary liberal education: 1) It is a concept with a heterogeneous history that has repeatedly adapted to new influences like Christianity, Islamic philosophy, and enlightenment values. Because of this, liberal education contains within it a variety of traditions that each have their own, sometimes competing ideas about what liberal learning should look like and what its goals should be. 2) In liberal education, the relationship between the curriculum and its goal, like the relationship between music and virtue, is rarely direct. And 3) a stable feature of liberal education throughout its history is that it has generally *not* been an education offered to all members of a given society. Instead, until relatively recently, it has been for those who are neither wage workers nor craftsman, but were predominantly political, religious, or economic elites. Because of this, there is a need today to advocate for liberal learning's role in places where a general education is now available to and sought by a much wider range of students than has historically been the case. These features informed the approach to assembling the collection of essays contained in the journal issue.

The essays here represent a variety of approaches to liberal learning, giving voice to a number of the traditions found within its long history. The first two pieces in the issue are by Timothy Fuller, who has been a professor at Colorado College for six decades. These pieces, “Address to Entering Students on Politics and Liberal Learning” and “Liberalism, Modernity and Liberal Education”, explore the relationship between liberal learning and modern politics. By differentiating liberal education from the practical and progressive disposition of modern politics, Fuller places himself in the long lineage of thinkers who have identified a non-utilitarian impulse in liberal education, and who view it as a venture that is importantly sheltered from the practical demands of politics. However, as Fuller notes, this secluded character is only partial in nature, and liberal learning is necessarily connected to the larger political culture in which it is situated. In this way, Fuller's essays are an excellent introduction to the paradoxical position of liberal education in our culture today.

Fuller's essays also introduce the reader to the ideas of Michael Oakeshott, an influential voice in modern discussions of liberal learning, and known for his claim that liberal learning is an initiation into a “conversation” between various “modes” of experience (e.g., the mode of poetry, science, etc.). Oakeshott's thought features prominently in several essays throughout this journal issue. In her essay “Oakeshott and Newman on Liberal Education” Elizabeth Corey examines the similarities and differences between the approaches to liberal education of these two significant thinkers. In doing so, she explores two prominent but sometimes competing approaches to liberal learning—the belief, held by John Henry Newman, that all knowledge is part of a transcendent whole, or unifying structure (in Newman's case, this belief was informed by his Christian commitments), and Oakeshott's claim that the conversation of liberal learning is inherently plural and non-teleological. Additionally, in her explication of the three “escapes” facilitated by Oakeshott's description of liberal education, Corey, like Fuller, asserts the view that liberal education is separate and distinct from the larger world around it in important ways.

The essays by Wendell John Coats and W. L. Prehn examine two further influential but distinct traditions of liberal learning. Coats's essay “The Hidden Hand: What John Dewey Learned from Rousseau and Its Implications for Liberal Learning” compares the educational ideas of Rousseau and John Dewey and provides a critical treatment of progressive approaches to education that aim to externally guide the development of a person in a particular, preconceived direction that is believed to be better for the student and society as a collective whole. Prehn's essay “Beyond Impediments to Empedocles: Notes Toward a Post-Postmodern Liberal Education” examines the educational ventures of William Augustus Muhlenberg and the church-school movement, which were representative of a distinctly American approach to liberal learning that combines a strong Christian foundation with a republican ethos and the Aristotelian concern with the cultivation of virtue.

A number of essays also examine liberal education's relationship with ideas like plurality and diversity, undertaking the important task of advocating for liberal learning's place in an educational landscape that

looks very different than it did a century ago. As stated above, this is a world in which a larger and more diverse range of young people are seeking higher education, but are also still sensitive to the economic realities of the job market. In different ways, the essays by Kevin Williams, Anika Prather, Isaac Radner, and Sheena Michele Wilson and Trevor Aleo advocate for liberal education's salience in this contemporary educational context.

Like the essays by Fuller and Corey, Kevin Williams's essay "Liberal Learning and the Legacy of Colonialism: Revisiting Michael Oakeshott's Conversational Conception of Education" examines the thought of Michael Oakeshott. But Williams's primary concern is showing that Oakeshott's conception of liberal education is amenable to anti-colonialist critiques that seek to broaden the curriculum of works and languages that are taught. Williams's essay represents an attempt to wed a more traditional understanding of liberal education with contemporary worries about this education's narrowness. Anika Prather's essay "Faith, History, and Anti-Racism: Reclaiming Black Liberation Through Christianity and the Western Tradition" is a critical, though sympathetic, treatment of the work of Ibram X. Kendi. Much of this essay traces Prather's own, sometimes difficult relationship with Christianity and the Western tradition. As Prather's own experience reveals, criticisms of this tradition, like Kendi's own, often utilize resources from within the tradition itself. Prather's essay addresses the difficulty, and perhaps futility, of trying to reject the cultural context of Western liberal learning whole cloth. Isaac Radner's essay "The Meaning of Plurality in Liberal Education", which again prominently features the thought of Oakeshott, argues that plurality has always been a necessary feature of liberal education that informs its goals and methods. This essay also shows how clarifying the role and function of plurality in liberal learning helps to answer questions about the place in education of a traditional canon of texts to be studied. "From Liberal Education to Liberation: The Togetherness Wayfinder and Aesthetic Literacies" by Sheena Michele Mason and Trevor Aleo also takes up questions of diversity and identity, arguing that it is only by rejecting the concept of race in education that we can truly move towards an "anti-racist" society.

In Mason and Aleo's detailed examination of pedagogies like The Togetherness Wayfinder and aesthetic literacies, including examples of classroom lessons and interactions with students, their essay, and the other final essays included here, examine what liberal learning might look like in practice. Neil Dhingra and Pamela Callahan's essay "'The Fastest Known Way to Get Rid of Enemies': Children's Literature, Forgiveness, and the Liberal Arts" employs a unique combination of political theory and quantitative analysis to explore the ways in which forgiveness is articulated within children's literature. In doing so, they demonstrate how this literature can serve as an important avenue for teaching children complex ideas. Like Aristotle's argument for the relationship between music and virtue, Dhingra and Callahan's essay traces the sometimes-indirect relationship between liberal learning's goals and its methods. In "Teaching for Freedom", the final piece in this collection, Marsha Enright argues that the Montessori Method, established by Maria Montessori, is an effective educational approach to teaching students to be free individuals and free citizens. Through a detailed analysis of this method, Enright demonstrates how a relatively modern pedagogy can support a traditional approach to liberal education that has its roots in Ancient Greece and Rome.

Oakeshott describes a liberal education as one in which a multitude of voices are joined in a "conversation—an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure". In this conversation, every voice represents, "a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding" (Oakeshott 1989, p. 30). Each of the essays here contribute another distinct voice to this conversation. None of them represent the final say on what liberal education is, or how it should be taught. If there were such an essay, it would signify the death of the entire enterprise of liberal learning. This collection as a whole is instead another addition to the conversation, one that is offered only with the hope of keeping the conversation going a bit longer in the belief that liberal education still has something essential to offer students today.

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