

# Philosophy and Modern Liberal Arts Education

Freedom Is to Learn

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palgrave  
macmillan

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction	1
<b>Part I</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
1 Antiquity: Finding Virtue in Necessity	11
2 The Seven Liberal Arts: Varro's Secret Path	25
3 Renaissance Humanism	37
4 <i>Bildung</i> and the New Age	50
Conclusion to Part I	63
<b>Part II</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>73</b>
5 Metaphysical Education	83
6 Natural Education	98
7 Social Education	112
<b>Part III</b>	
<b>The Song That Dialectic Sings</b>	<b>127</b>
8 Divine Comedy of Barbarian Virtue	133
9 The Work of Education	146
<i>Notes</i>	160
<i>Bibliography</i>	189
<i>Index</i>	196

# Introduction

Dante, in *Convivio*, notes that ‘the supreme desire of all things, and the one first given to them by nature, is to return to the first cause.’<sup>1</sup> Liberal arts education expresses this desire for a *universal* understanding, beginning in the experience of awe and wonder at the natural universe and of life within it. This experience expresses itself in the doubt that accompanies curiosity, the same doubt that leads the great minds of Western antiquity to ask how and why the universe was formed, to seek its first principles – those universal principles which are the condition of the possibility of the existence of anything and everything. For Aristotle, the sensation of awe and wonder leads thought to enquire ‘about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe.’<sup>2</sup> Experience then leads thought to associate different ideas, leading in turn to wisdom regarding universals. As such, says Aristotle, wisdom deals with ‘the first causes and the principles of things.’<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most famous first principle in liberal arts education is Aristotle’s Prime Mover. But it is more than just an abstract idea. It is something like an archaeological artefact imprinted with ancient thinking regarding truth, nature, politics and property. The Prime Mover is deemed true because it is a self-completing whole, a One, something in-itself; it is nature because its necessity is self-animation; and it is independent because it is free from any prior or heteronomous cause. It is its own condition of possibility. Everything else is derivative or composite, that is, not in-itself but for-another; not self-animation but moved by another; and not independent but dependent upon another. This self-animating One, therefore, is truth not error, freedom not slavery, harmony not disorder, liberal not barbarian, life not death, tranquillity not unrest, certainty not uncertainty, knowledge not doubt, immanent

not contingent, God not man, single not composite, substance not subject, harmony not difficulty and absolute not relative. Liberal arts education has always set itself to work for the former and against the latter in each pairing.

The nemesis of this first principle is *infinite regression*. If there is infinite regression, there can be no first cause and therefore no existence, because the regression never ends. Since we exist, and does the universe, Aristotle reasons logically that there cannot be infinite regression; 'the series cannot go on to infinity, [therefore] there must be some first mover'<sup>4</sup> – a logic that survives for 2,000 years to Descartes, who confirms that 'although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea.'<sup>5</sup> What must be logically presupposed as preventing infinite regression is a first cause which must itself be eternal and its own condition of possibility so that it is not dependent on a prior stimulus for its beginning. The first cause must be the most simple, single, complete thing possible, for if it were composite it could be reduced to something simpler and would not therefore be its own self-determining, self-animating principle.

The logic that judges the One superior to the composite, the natural superior to the artificial and the master superior to the slave expresses itself as the logic of possession and property. Individuals can immunise themselves against the chaos of infinite regression, against that which does not have its own principle in-itself, by having it as *property* owned by (and therefore kept separate from) the owner. The object that is owned becomes the site of pure infinite regression and pure dependency, never being in-itself, and only ever having its principle in something else – in the owner. Liberal arts education was forged in this structure of a first principle. To the self-completing identity of truth, of the owner and of the first principle is assigned a life of leisure. To the barbarian who had no such principle in-itself, and to the object, is assigned a life of work.

Ancient liberal arts, working with this dualism of free man and barbarian, owner and owned, single and composite, reveals how the ambivalence of such dualisms pertains both to *property* and to *thinking*. Property and thinking are always unavoidably in relation to their objects. Ownership is the *work* of property, compounding individuals and their possessions, yet property is the *independence* of the master lived as his own first principle. Similarly, thought is the *work* of philosophy, compounding thoughts and objects; however, philosophy is the *leisure* of thought lived as a first principle and free from composition. The ambivalence of property and thought here has defined liberal

arts education, and the logic of first principles, to the present day. It is an ambivalence within which I will retrieve a modern liberal arts education and a modern educational logic of first principles.

In this ambivalence of thought as composition, or in bringing one thought to another – including bringing the thought of itself to itself – thought could only judge itself to be the work of infinite regression. Since infinite regression could never arrive at truth, logically, thought could never arrive at truth either. The unity that escaped thought – the unity of the One – became defined by thought here as ineffable, requiring ecstatic or other immediate states of consciousness to overcome thinking seen here as merely a tool. Two things followed which are still with us today. Truth became unknowable to thinking, that is, truth cannot be known by us; and thinking became associated with the work of infinite regression and with relativism. Liberal arts education has never escaped the ambivalence that thought is needed to be the work of truth, and that in being the work it cannot also be the leisure, the principle in-itself, of truth. We will see in Parts I and II some of the attempts made to claim tranquillity for the work of thinking. The modern controversies that currently haunt liberal arts education have their origin and their logic precisely in this continuing ambivalence. If Allan Bloom perhaps argues for leisure over work, and Martha Nussbaum perhaps argues for work over leisure, neither is able to find the truth that is re-educating us about how this ambivalence can be a modern educational first principle.

I will suggest that the logic and the character of ancient first principles are no longer fit for purpose in the Western world. Theirs is the logic of harmony. But this harmony now exists – or, rather, its universality has ceased to exist – within modern negation, deconstruction, fragmentation and alienation. More generally, harmony in the modern world is now seen for what it is: a vision of universal truth forged in the image of the leisured West over the rest of the working world. What liberal arts now requires is a new logic of first principles forged in the image of the West working within the imperialism, sexism, racism and colonialism of its leisured, propertied and masterful existence. I will argue that in the explosive challenges of relativism and imperialism, there is a modern logic and a modern shape of first principles waiting to be retrieved.

This logic has its own educational necessity (and its own form of harmony) in *difficulty*. This difficulty is experienced in the way ancient first principles and the ancient logic of harmony are opposed by the modern shape of relativism and the critique of imperialism. The experience

of this difficulty is our education and can be understood as a modern liberal arts education regarding first principles. This difficulty, this education, will involve learning to retrieve the barbarian in the virtuous, the relative in the true and infinite regression in first principles. It will commend that we retrieve difficulty as its own educational logic and necessity or as *learning*. It will also ask that we re-educate ourselves to understand oppositions no longer as dualisms but as experienced in an educational logic of *relation*. Relation here does not mean the middle ground between two elements. As Galileo and Newton observe, all observers are in motion, lacking a fixed point of reference in the universe by which motion and non-motion could be differentiated. This changes fundamentally the idea of what a relation is. A relation can only be a middle ground between two elements if one assumes the fixed position of the two elements by also assuming that the observer of the relation – the third party – is also fixed in relation to the relation. But both philosophy and science agree that this is not the case. The two elements are not in a definitive relation because they are in relation to a third party who is also in relation to others, ad infinitum. This is the crisis of relativity opened up by Galileo and Newton in science, and by Kant and Hegel in philosophy. Everything is in relation to everything else, with no fixed point available by which anything can be fixed or stabilised. In the natural universe, as in metaphysics, all is in flux, nothing is fixed, and the idea of truth or tranquillity dissolves into movement in all directions all the time(s). This is now the modern world of science and philosophy: relativity.

In the three relations that the West has defined itself within – metaphysical, natural and social – relation has become infinite regression, being relation in relation in relation ad infinitum. The most important consequences are the loss of truth in metaphysics, of objectivity in science and of shared humanity in social theory. I will argue for a modern understanding of these three relations that finds a different significance to this infinite regression of mediation and retrieves from within this regression to nihilism an educational truth. I must add here, against an all-too-common misconception, by relation I do not mean inter-subjectivity, mutuality or any magical position that can calm the difficulty of relation. The only truth that relation has which is true to itself is learning *of* relation *as* relation. But the temptation to turn it into something else, something that guarantees the resolution of relation of relation of relation ad infinitum, is very strong, including the guarantee of action in the world which can be described as ethical or virtuous. The power of relation demands that we re-consider the

educational significance of the failure of such guarantees, asking us to be more sensitive to riding roughshod over the educational difficulty of relation.

This re-education regarding the logic of learning involves, in part, returning to a set of specialist philosophical terms. These are in-itself, for-another, for-itself and of-itself (I will sometimes abbreviate them collectively as ‘the work’ of education). I will explain these terms below, but in addition I will find within them three stages in the history of education regarding the Western notion of freedom. The in-itself is *freedom is to think*; the in-itself that is for-itself is *freedom is to think for itself*; and the in-of-and-for-itself in relation to otherness is *freedom is to learn*. I will argue that this latter is the basis of modern metaphysics and of a modern liberal arts education. There is an additional complexity here. I will also argue that these three shapes of freedom are not just stages in the history of Western freedom, but are actual shapes of *subjectivity*; they are real people, you and me. It is these shapes of subjectivity which then relate to truth, nature and humanity as, respectively, the metaphysical, natural and social relations. The relation to otherness employed in liberal arts education over the last 40 years or so has enabled the tradition to critique its own mastery. However, my argument for subjectivity will not be trusted, I suggest, by the post-men and post-women for whom subjectivity is just another Western logocentric mastery. I ask their patience. The notion of subjectivity I am working with is neither an abstract mastery nor an avoidance of mastery. It is subjectivity as the complicity of mastery, one which opens up the opportunity for a modern liberal arts education to do justice to the inequalities and prejudices of its own history. It is precisely this *learning subjectivity* which gives modern liberal arts education the chance to be a significant culture of the present and of its own time apprehended in thought.

Finally, I will be describing the modern educational logic of difficult education in general, and of the relation between discipline and freedom in particular, as a divine comedy of errors. Divine comedy concerns actions in the world. Tragedy characterises the way ethical forces – of the gods or of the community – oppose themselves in the actions of individuals. Tragedy expresses one’s vulnerability to the hostility between these powers. Comedy characterises the absurdity of individual actions which lack universal significance and are folly and self-defeating. Together, tragedy and comedy are ‘pathos’ or the ‘moving power in human decisions.’<sup>6</sup> But they are also the divine comedy of our *education* regarding human actions in the world. Liberal arts has its own divine comedy in the collision and opposition of discipline and freedom. This

is the divine comedy of first principles, that is, the tragic and comic experience of their collision with other powers, their thwarted actions and their unanticipated consequences.

In liberal arts, this divine comedy has been the sublime experience of leadership, specifically the magnanimous, noble and virtuous practice of the liberally educated gentleman (*ars liberalis*). Plato's educated man and woman have a moderation in all things which creates a harmony of all the parts. Under this leadership, all in the city 'sing the same song together.'<sup>7</sup> Aristotle's great-souled man (*megalopsychos*) is also the man of moderation, 'intermediate between excess and defect,'<sup>8</sup> neither 'over-joyed by fortune nor over-pained by evil.'<sup>9</sup> Newman's liberal, philosophical and educated gentleman has a universal knowledge which 'puts the mind above the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement'<sup>10</sup> and whose attributes are 'equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom.'<sup>11</sup> But this understanding of first principles grounded in the ancient logic of masterful freedom, collides with democratic ideals. I will argue that first principles are now to be found in difficulty, and difficulty belongs to everyone. No longer can liberal arts education excuse its elitism on the grounds that the difficulty of first principles is relevant to and comprehensible only by the few. Difficulty is essentially democratic, and in this difficult universality all find themselves within the comedy of God trying to be man and of man trying to be God. Neither of these 'work' – in the sense of being successfully accomplished – and this repeated incompleteness is the 'work' – the comedic work – in which they are engaged. Dante's pilgrim lives and dies in this comedy. It is Dante's genius that he can hold together impossible and contradictory elements knowing that this comedy has its truth as education. It is with this in mind that I now invite the reader to pursue a modern liberal arts education in the divine comedy of the freedom and discipline that defines liberal arts education.



# Part I

## Introduction

### Philosophers and orators: Discipline and freedom

The dualism in liberal arts between philosophy and rhetoric carries its own educational significance. Here I take as my guide Bruce Kimball's book *Orators and Philosophers*. He presents the history of the *artes liberales* as the 'story of a debate between orators and philosophers,'<sup>1</sup> which he says is carried by attitudes towards dialectic and rhetoric. In general terms, for the philosophers who are steeped in the rigour of dialectical reasoning, rhetoric is merely an appeal to 'emotion, sensitivity, and predisposition in order to effect persuasion.'<sup>2</sup> The philosophers see rhetoric attending 'more to devising persuasive techniques than to finding true arguments'<sup>3</sup> while the orators see in philosophy an endless search for 'that highest truth [which] is never attained.'<sup>4</sup> To the orators, rhetoric is 'the supreme art'<sup>5</sup> that relies on dialectic for the logic of an argument, but has for itself the art of settling the 'great and important questions'<sup>6</sup> of public concern and significance. From Zeno this debate has achieved its own rhetorical flourish, characterised as between the open palm of interpretation and the closed fist of absolute or scientific knowledge. One of the aims of Kimball's book is to show that some of the confusions which plague the recent history of American higher education are due to liberal education having Socrates, rather than Cicero, 'as its paragon.'<sup>7</sup>

I will rehearse Kimball's thesis in Part I now, by reading the history of liberal arts education according to the opposition between philosophy and rhetoric. With Zeno, I characterise philosophy as the closed fist because it deals with eternal and unchangeable truths, and rhetoric as the open palm of the changeable, of interpretation and of creativity. The closed fist of necessity is, at different times, the method of philosophy,

the logic of the in-itself including truth and God, the first principle of the natural universe, the empiricism of science, the dialectic of scholasticism, the core curriculum, generalist education, teaching and the tradition of the Great Books. The open palm of freedom is, again at different times, the virtue of the liberally educated person, the logic of the for-itself including reflection and self-critique, the freedom of human culture, the creativity of oratory, the humanism of classical literature including reading, writing and emulating great characters from antiquity, the system of electives and specialist research and expertise.

In advance of the arguments made in Part II, I re-read this history as characterising the ambiguous relation between the disciplined and predetermined nature of a skill or principled practice – *ars* – and the freedom conveyed by *liberalis*: in sum, the contradiction carried in *artes liberales*. One can then re-read the relation between philosophy and rhetoric as a difficult relation which has its own kind of educational truth. I argue that the dualism of philosophy and rhetoric, of the closed fist of discipline and the open palm of freedom, is not just a dialectic between two elements. It is also the relation of two elements whose struggle against each other is its own educational logic. I concur with Kimball's analysis that interpreters deny the ambiguities expressed in this work in the search for clarity and certainty. But I go further, and argue for preserving these ambiguities as having meaning in their own right and with having profound educational significance. I argue that it is the difficulties posed for a liberal arts education in the relation or work between philosophy and rhetoric that can be said to define liberal arts. If philosophy is the art or method of arriving at true knowledge, and rhetoric requires its imaginative and creative use for the good of society, seen in this way, liberal arts education exists in the contradiction between discipline and freedom.

It is with this in mind that in Part I, I survey a history of liberal arts education played out as the dualism between discipline (philosophy) and freedom (rhetoric), and in Part II, I retrieve a philosophy of education from within their relation. More specifically, in Part I the heavy hand of philosophical necessity appears as philosophy, harmony, the Prime Mover and logic (Chapter 1); doctrine, the encyclopaedic seven liberal arts, *humanitas*, theology, philosophy and discipline (Chapter 2); Aristotelian logic, dialectical scholastic method including in teaching, philosophy, the church, history and the university (Chapter 3); the state, philosophy, law, humanity, duty and the US-style faculty-led generalist classical curriculum (Chapter 4). Ranged against such necessity are various shapes of the open palm of freedom: rhetoric, virtue, sophism

and language (Chapter 1); humanism, *humanitas* and faith informed by education (Chapter 2); humanism, the *studia humanitatis*, classical emulation of Latin and Greek, subjectivity, civics, freedom and education (Chapter 3); individuality, inwardness, aesthetics, humanism, growth, development, freedom, culture and the electives of a specialist type research-based higher education (Chapter 4). It is an obvious point that these divisions look forced in that they cross each other all the time. But that is the point. I want to illustrate how frail such separations are, and to illustrate how the educational concepts of liberal arts, *paideia*, humanism, rhetoric, *Bildung* and philosophy try to express just such difficult relations. From this survey of difficulty, focussed around the relation of the universal as the iron fist of speculative and scholastic necessity and freedom as the open palm of practical, humanistic rhetorical creativity, we find not the victory of the one over the other, but their sustained relation to each other. What emerges here are the conditions for a modern conception of liberal arts education and for a modern educational first principle.

# 1

## Antiquity: Finding Virtue in Necessity

### **The virtue of harmony**

In antiquity a first principle rests on both the logic of its own necessity and the necessity of its own logic. Together these are its *logos*. Aristotle's Prime Mover is its own necessity because it has no condition of its own possibility beyond or outside itself. This necessity is the logic of its existence as a first principle. It is moved by itself, caused by itself, and therefore is a truth in-itself. It is entirely independent. In addition, being the first principle of itself, it is also the condition of the possibility of everything else – the universe and everything in it. All things can trace their own necessity back to the necessity of the self-sufficient first principle. Liberal arts education has its origin in the attempt to discover such first principles and does so by relating first principles to the intellectual, natural and social worlds.

The ancients define this logic of necessity as harmony and proportion.<sup>1</sup> In metaphysics this is truth, in physics this is nature and in the social world this is freedom. In each case the ancients make a virtue out of necessity. Harmony describes that which is at peace with itself because all the parts find their perfect place within the perfect whole. The ambivalence carried by this idea of harmony as a perfect totality will be felt in the tension between philosophy and rhetoric, in particular, and between discipline and freedom in general. We will follow this ambivalence through to Hutchins' call in the 1930s for the miraculous metaphysical reconciliation of these tensions.

The logic of harmony was becoming evident to the ancients in the mathematical harmonies and proportions of the natural universe. They sought to apprehend every object, and every individual, as integral to an overall pattern, and to educate in ways which would reveal where

in the totality one truly belonged. ‘The Greeks were perhaps the first to recognise that education means deliberately moulding human character in accordance with an ideal.’<sup>12</sup> To learn of one’s place in the totality of the intellectual, natural and social worlds is thereafter to lead a life of the highest virtue (*areté*). It is to be at one with the harmony of the universe, and therefore to be at one with its first principles.

That such an education and such a life are a struggle is highlighted by Aristotle in his *Hymn to Hermias* in praise of worth or virtue.

O worth! Stern taskmistress of humankind,  
 Life’s noblest prize:  
 O Virgin! For thy beauty’s sake  
 It is an envied lot in Hellas even to die  
 And suffer toils devouring, unassuaged...<sup>3</sup>

The Athenian idea of harmony is summed up by the philosophical proverb, credited to Solon (c. 638–558 BCE), ‘nothing in excess.’<sup>14</sup> Excess is an imperfection compared to moderation and to the perfect harmony of the totality, which are, in turn, central to the education for virtue expressed by Thales dictum, *know thyself*.<sup>5</sup>

### **Pythagoras (c. 570–500 BCE)**

Pythagoras is perhaps the first in the Western tradition explicitly to seek the first principle of harmony and perfection in educating mind, body and soul to the one end, or according to the one logic of necessity. His group of followers apparently followed a strict regime of diet and behaviour. He selected them ‘with great care, and subjected them to a long novitiate, in which silence, self-examination, and absolute obedience played a prominent part... Food, clothing, and exercise were all carefully regulated on hygienic and moral principles.’<sup>16</sup>

What Pythagoras gives to the West is the idea of a universe whose order and proportion were essentially mathematical. Aristotle says that the Pythagoreans (he often, rather dismissively, calls them ‘so-called’ Pythagoreans) were devoted to mathematics and saw number as the first principle of anything; ‘they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale or a number.’<sup>17</sup> ‘It was this tendency, too, to construct universal patterns, which distinguished Greek music and mathematics from those earlier nations, so far as they are known to-day.’<sup>18</sup> Music at this time is a broad concept and includes poetry. It is the form in which the tensions of

man and gods are unfolded. If writing or the art of letters began with the attempt to record the oral tradition, then music could be deemed to be the source of all the liberal arts.<sup>9</sup> Pythagoras may have related mathematical cosmology to his own disciplined life and that of his followers, but neither Plato nor Aristotle give him much credit as a philosopher. They refer to him as the founder of a disciplined way of life and as being knowledgeable of what happens to the soul after death.<sup>10</sup>

The most well-known story of Pythagoras is of him passing a blacksmith and deducing the octave from hearing hammers striking the handle.<sup>11</sup> The Tetraktys, seen as one of the founding metaphysical principles of the universe, reveals how the first four numbers not only add up to the perfect number ten but also contain within them the musical ratios of the octave, the fourth and the fifth. Regardless of what can or cannot be attributed to Pythagoras himself, in terms of the development thereafter of liberal arts education, he can be seen to be the person in whom the *logos* expresses itself as the desire to understand the first principles of the universe and to live in harmony with them.

After Pythagoras the idea of harmony, or of first principles, comes to be expressed in the experiences of metaphysics, physics and ethics. The Greek world after Pythagoras becomes reflective and calls upon the world traditionally understood to give an account of itself. Answering the call one finds the Sophists, the philosophers and the orators, each taking a different approach to the education deemed appropriate for the perfect emulation of the harmony and necessity of first principles, but each, too, understanding the need to make the emerging idea of political culture conform to first principles. Each seeks to educate for harmony and moderation in the political culture of the *polis*.

## The Sophists

Jaeger credits the Sophists with being the first to conceive of *paideia* as 'educating man into his true form, the real and genuine nature.'<sup>12</sup> He sees this as the genesis of the notion of *humanitas* which appears as 'the universally valid model of humanity which all individuals are bound to imitate,'<sup>13</sup> 'bound' by the logic of necessity that is at work in discerning the truth of humankind, or its first principles. It is here, with the Sophists, that there emerges the idea of human perfection, of human beings in harmony with the totality of the *polis*, and of a logic of necessity called virtue.

The Sophists' political awareness arises in the transition in ancient Greece from the aristocratic ideal of *areté* to the political notion of *areté*.

The new democratic city-state requires a new kind of education for the newly invented concept of the political citizen. The aristocratic ideal of Homer is based on the nobility of bloodlines. A new *areté* is required, which could extend such kinship beyond blood and into a political community, a requirement which is fundamentally educational in nature. The aim of the Sophists here is to 'transcend the aristocratic principle of privileged education... by the application of logical reasoning,'<sup>14</sup> or by educating the mind and therein forming human character. This is intellectual virtue, designed to prepare the citizen for the democratic *polis*. But if the new law is to avoid reproducing old aristocratic iniquities, it would need 'a universal insight into the true nature of human life,'<sup>15</sup> one which could not just understand political and intellectual virtues but, equally important, could educate for it. 'Protagoras' claim that cultural education is the centre of all human life indicates that his education was frankly aimed at humanism,<sup>16</sup> since it sought to subordinate technical knowledge (including that taught by other Sophists) to universal political culture. This original notion of humanism is the true *paideia* of 'ethics and politics, taken together.'<sup>17</sup> As such, 'humanism is essentially a creation of the Greeks.'<sup>18</sup>

If this is so, then humanism is born as the cultural education befitting human beings who, in distinguishing the political from the natural (including 'natural' aristocracy and/or religion), sought the first principles of human life. It is in essence the moment when natural religion and culture are understood to be separate and, even more significantly, when this separation is understood as human education. This has three elements: it is where tradition becomes self-conscious and has itself as an object; it is where this relation is understood to be what is essentially human; and it is where it is understood that what is essentially human here is education. This is the birth of a new standard for education, a standard of being human. To the *mathematica* of Pythagoras the Sophists add the *techne* of this culture as grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, or education in language, oratory and thought. Since nothing is heard of them prior to the Sophists, 'they must have invented them.'<sup>19</sup> As such,

The new *techne* is clearly the systematic expression of the principle shaping the intellect, because it begins by instruction in the form of thought. This educational technique is one of the greatest discoveries which the mind of man has ever made: it was not until it explored these three of its activities that the mind apprehended the hidden law of its own structure.<sup>20</sup>

This is the origin of the *trivium*, of the idea of human culture and of humanism. Harmony and rhythm are retained in the notion of *areté* which now becomes political *areté* – the beauty and harmony of living in balance with the laws which express human nature. Protagoras demonstrates the relationship between humanist education and harmony as a first principle. ‘The idea of shaping the soul is implicit in Protagoras’s assertion that harmony and the rhythm of poetry and music must be impressed on the soul to make it rhythmical and harmonious.’<sup>21</sup> This is an expression of *paideia* as humanism in its earliest form. Sophism, here, is the culture of humanism, because the new standard that is chosen is the ideal form of human being, ‘the *form* of man.’<sup>22</sup> The Sophists are ‘the first to conceive of the conscious idea of culture,’<sup>23</sup> not just as a training for the young, but to include the ideal of being educated, the higher education of the human being in regard to the whole spiritual, political and intellectual ideal of what it was to be a human being. Alongside this came the realisation that the individual and the state could be improved by reason and the will. Hence, in the West, the idea of culture is for the first time consciously formulated as education.<sup>24</sup>

An important part of this culture is that it changes the relation between nature and the formation of character. Technical education builds upon nature, upon natural talents, but culture creates a second nature. This is a conflict between ‘aristocratic *paideia* and rationalism: it abandons the aristocratic idea that character and morality can be inherited by blood, but not acquired.’<sup>25</sup> This second nature is human cultural nature. Its universalism is expressed by ‘human’ nature, its contingency is expressed by culture and, as I will argue below, their opposition has its own truth expressed in metaphysical, natural and social relations. For Jaeger, culture, or education, is not just political self-consciousness, it is also the understanding of the nature of political self-consciousness as education. This is an example of the relation – here between nature and culture – relating to itself as learning, or as the relation of the relation. This is expressed in antiquity in the ambiguities of recollection, that is as that which can recollect itself, or know thyself. This culture of recollection looks backwards to the loss of the golden age of tradition, and forwards to its own cultural development, its own ideal. It is ‘the climax of autumn, not of summer.’<sup>26</sup> Minerva’s owl flies only at dusk, in the remains of the day. ‘The domination which the Greek spirit was to win, and which was first practised by the Sophists, was got by Greece at the expense of her youth.’<sup>27</sup> But that is the cost of wisdom. Culture, then as now, means ‘an inevitable loss, and yet we cannot resign ourselves to sacrifice the powers achieved by that development. We know that it



is only through these powers that we are enabled to admire the earlier irrational stage so freely and so fully.<sup>128</sup> Today we know the ambiguities of such recollection as the philosophy of history.

There is one aspect of *paideia*, or of the culture of humanism, that is as unavoidable as it is difficult. As Aristotle demonstrates in the *Politics*, the Greeks saw a natural hierarchy in the nature of ruler and ruled. But the emergence of human culture adds to this the idea that the rulers are somehow ahead of the ruled, that their education has progressed beyond the ruled. The reflective is seen as an advance of humanity over nature. For the Sophists, and for Plato and Aristotle in particular, this became the urgent question of political leadership. How could this new reflective culture reproduce itself truthfully unless it now accepted as a natural and cultural necessity the hierarchy of teacher and student, or of the reflective over the unreflective, or the political over the traditional, or, of philosophy over nature? The educated could work to provide the means for the education of all citizens. But to do so by eschewing the accompanying hierarchy would be bad faith and unnatural. If *paideia* is the root of humanism, then humanism, from the moment of its inception, has carried the weight of hierarchy, the divide between the learned and the unlearned.

### The philosophers – Plato (427–346 BCE)

Plato's approach to the questions raised by human culture and the search for first principles is to advocate philosophical education. Where philosophy organises itself systematically then 'this content, according to Plato, begins to fall into three parts which we can distinguish as the logical, natural and mental philosophy (*spekulative, Natur – und Geistesphilosophie*). The [speculative or] logical philosophy the ancients called dialectic.<sup>129</sup> For Hegel, Plato's *Parmenides*, *Timaeus* and *Republic* are the whole system in its three parts.<sup>30</sup>

Plato is perhaps the first to draw the harmonic mathematical universe of the Pythagoreans into a model of higher education, and particularly into a model of philosophical education regarding the first principles of proportion in the universe. Humanism is based on a distinction between man the individual as given by nature and man the higher self. It is Plato who makes it possible for humanism to have this philosophical foundation. In the *Republic* the philosopher is 'a new ideal of humanity.'<sup>31</sup> 'For humanism means education which is deliberately moulded on a certain ideal conception of human nature.'<sup>32</sup> It is 'impossible to mould men without an ideal of humanity,<sup>33</sup> or without the movement from nature

to culture. In the *Republic*, the cave analogy shows the beginning of an education beyond that required for everyday life. Early education is to consist of gymnastics, music and poetry. But Plato designs a higher education for those who leave the cave and are prepared to toil and struggle for balance and harmony in the individual soul, in the city and in the relation between them. 'The just man,' he says, 'won't differ at all from a just city in respect to the form of justice.'<sup>34</sup> The individual soul consists of (irrational) appetite, the calculation of balance in regard to desire, that is, reason; and the tensions felt between them, spirit (*thumos*). Reason needs spirit to side with it if the appetites are to be kept proportionate, with nothing in excess. In the *Phaedrus*, this notion of self-control is described as the struggle between self-restraint and excess.<sup>35</sup> They are likened to two horses driving a chariot – one good, one bad, and requiring the charioteer to try to hold to the desired direction.<sup>36</sup> If *logos* is the struggle for proportion and harmony, then here it is reason and spirit working together to limit personal greed. The city is made up of the same elements of the soul. Appetite defines those in the market-place, spirit defines those who are courageous in the face of the enemy and reason defines the wise who, in combination with spirit, will seek their own worth in the government of the just and worthy society.

There is, therefore, a need for a specialised education for the men and women who will serve the *logos* or the first principles of the soul and the city. The early education of physical training, crafts, music and poetry will have been an education in harmony through habit rather than through knowledge. The higher education needs to abstract itself from the material world and become an intellectual training. First is arithmetic, then geometry (both needed for successful warfare, but also for truths which do not 'attach to visible or tangible bodies'<sup>37</sup>) and astronomy, in which Pythagorean harmonics might be included.<sup>38</sup> These areas of study will form the disciplines of the mediaeval *quadrivium*, but Plato has no such term in mind. The goal of all this learning put together is to learn of the truth which is to be found in 'the song that dialectic sings.'<sup>39</sup>

### The orators – Isocrates (436–338 BCE)

The third response to the call for first principles to be grounded in political culture comes from the orators. Zeno describes the relationship between the openness of persuasion and the rigidity of knowledge as follows: the open palm is perception (*phantasia*); a closing hand is assent; the closed fist is comprehension (*katalepsis*) or that which is fit

to be grasped; while this fist enclosed by the other fist is knowledge of what is comprehended.<sup>40</sup> Diogenes Laertius notes that the Stoics held dialectic to be the logic of question and answer, while rhetoric was the form of speaking well in plain narrative.<sup>41</sup> Cassiodorus says that Varro (116–27 BCE) perhaps reduced Zeno’s four elements to two: ‘dialectic and rhetoric are like man’s closed fist and open palm,’<sup>42</sup> which sees the one ‘compressing its arguments into a narrow compass, the other running about the fields of eloquence with copious speech.’<sup>43</sup> The closed fist represents the ‘“compactness” and “brevity” of dialectic, while the open hand with the fingers spread out was intended to simulate the “breadth” of rhetoric.’<sup>44</sup> The reduction from four stages of perception, assent, comprehension and knowledge to a duality of open and closed loses the subtleties of a process of persuasion, comprehension and knowledge. But it gains a sharpness of character in opposing dialectic and rhetoric as, respectively, closed and open.

Kimball carefully demonstrates how it is unreliable to assign the origin of the seven liberal arts, and especially perhaps the idea of liberal education, to any one distinct or stable line of inheritance, be it of theory, etymology or curriculum, harvested from ‘the “pedagogical century” extending from about 450–350 BCE.’<sup>45</sup> Instead, Kimball notes that this pedagogical century is a response to the decline of the tradition where virtue was passed on through the recitation of (often) Homeric poetry. The Sophists respond with an art of persuasive speech-making; the philosophers respond with a quest for truth; and Isocrates seeks *areté* and character formation in the orator. The case often made for the origin of liberal education in the philosophers requires, says Kimball, judging against the oratorical tradition which has an equally strong claim to being the source of liberal education.

My argument expressed below is that the origin of the tradition is in the tension between philosophy and oratory, and between discipline and freedom, an ambivalence expressed in the ambiguous relation of *ars* and *liberalis*. These tensions and ambivalences are represented by Isocrates and Plato. Plato distrusts rhetoric, seeing it as an art of convincing crowds by means of stylistic techniques whatever the content happens to be. It is itself incapable of providing rational explanations either for ideals or for the principles of putting them into practice. Eloquence alone is morally indifferent. In *Gorgias* Plato tells us the orators do not ‘set their sights on making the citizens as good as possible [because they are] bent upon the gratification of the citizens and [in] slighting the common good for the sake of their own private good.’<sup>46</sup> His target here is the Sophists. Isocrates too sees the Sophists having

no interest in truth and seeking only large crowds, practising without knowledge or understanding of the virtue or first principles of rhetoric. However, Isocrates also criticises the philosophers who 'pretend to wisdom and assume the right to instruct the rest of the world.'<sup>47</sup> They give the impression that 'those who choose a life of careless indolence are better advised than those who devote themselves to serious study.'<sup>48</sup> Platonic philosophy here is seen as mere disputation over absolutes that can never be known and therefore never put into practice in real life. Indeed, he ridicules those philosophers 'who think that their moral paradoxes really contribute something to the spiritual upbuilding of the state.'<sup>49</sup>

Isocrates claims for rhetoric, as he understands it and teaches it, a respect for study and virtue together that is missing in the Sophists and the philosophers. He sees it as a cultural education embodying the older Greek tradition of education by poetry and imitation, and as the truth of form and content which is virtuous in-itself. It is an education that has relevance to the ordinary citizen, offering recognisable aims and goals, unlike philosophy. Its political vocation is to inspire nation-building and to bring peace to the constant state of war between Greek states. Isocrates is not himself an orator, suffering from agoraphobia, but he makes it his life's work to shape rhetoric into an education of high moral intent. 'He wished to educate the statesman who could give new direction to the efforts of the misguided masses and to the politics of the Greek states,'<sup>50</sup> and he set about 'to inspire every pupil with a passion for the new aims,'<sup>51</sup> and to instil in him duty and moral responsibility. This sense of citizenship, of an elite trained in the moral responsibility of governing, underpins one particular vision of liberal arts education as the birth-right of a class who see themselves born to govern.

For Isocrates, and as in medicine,<sup>52</sup> the educational task is 'to analyse the individual case into its general aspects,'<sup>53</sup> so that meaning can be acquired. This he shares with the philosophers. But in addition, the orator has to assess the perfect expression of each singular and unique moment in social and political life. This is the 'highest law'<sup>54</sup> of oratory, expressed by Isocrates in *Antidosis*. It is speech that has always laid down the best in human society. As such, 'the power to speak well is taken as the surest index of a sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul.'<sup>55</sup> The virtue of the orator is in having disputes internally on matters in thinking, and externally as public debates. Speech is best employed 'by those who have the most wisdom.'<sup>56</sup> Here a humanist interest emerges which will become a principal feature of liberal arts education thereafter.

The wisdom of knowing the general in the particular and the skill of its perfect public expression suggest that Isocratean oratory is 'imaginative literary creation,'<sup>57</sup> a unity of the aesthetic, the rational and the practical.

It is important to note that the notion of moral perfection in the orator is also related to the idea of harmony expressed by first principles. The graceful speech will know the music of a speech, will encompass the higher moral virtue of the whole over the parts and will comprehend the patterns and forms of speech that are most in harmony with singular events or topics. This is why Isocrates considers his orators to be philosophers. The orator will imitate these harmonies and virtues, else he will not be a good man or an effective speaker. He will be a model for his students who will become virtuous by imitating him. The key to its creativity, its open palm, lies in its having its practice in opinion rather than in immutable absolute truths, but this does not rule out the orator choosing the correct means for the correct political end. If the absolutes of the philosophers are permanently and necessarily out of reach, then the practical truth, or the first principles of oratory, makes a virtue out of this necessity. Based on the strength of this case for retrieving Isocratean rhetoric in the origins of liberal arts education, Kimball discerns seven characteristics of an ideal liberal arts education. These are: training the virtuous citizen to lead society; prescribed standards for character and conduct; respect for those standards; knowing the classical texts which contain the virtues; selecting an elite who have these virtues; holding this to be true; and to be an end in itself. Seen in this way Isocrates can be seen to be 'the father of modern liberal education.'<sup>58</sup> In the struggle between philosophy and rhetoric in antiquity what emerges for Kimball regarding the history of liberal education is that the philosophical tradition does not have exclusive claims to the heritage.

Kimball also notes the rhetorical tradition claimed to be the true pattern of culture. Isocrates, for example, saw culture carried in speech, the name of which was *logos*, the creator of culture. Speech lets man rise above the animals, invent the arts, establish laws, create the possibility of collective life and enact justice. The ability to speak correctly underpins each of these essential aspects of human life. Jaeger says, 'If we sum up the character of this power, we shall find that no reasonable thing is done anywhere in the world without *logos*, that *logos* is the leader of all actions and thoughts, and that those who make most use of it are the wisest of mankind.'<sup>59</sup> The *logos*, as defined by Isocrates, is therefore 'the embodiment of Isocrates' ideal of *paideia*.'<sup>60</sup>

Isocrates may be ‘the father of “humanistic” culture’<sup>61</sup> because a line of heritage can be drawn back to him, but for Jaeger this is not the whole story. Isocrates is the ‘chief representative of rhetoric, [and] personifies the classical opposition to Plato and his school.’<sup>62</sup> From this opposition stems ‘the rivalry of philosophy and rhetoric, each claiming to be the better form of culture.’<sup>63</sup> This rivalry then runs ‘like a leitmotif throughout the history of ancient civilisation’<sup>64</sup> and, if Kimball is right, through to the present day. But Jaeger is keen to restore the role of philosophy in the rhetorical and humanistic tradition which ‘academic humanism’<sup>65</sup> has overlooked. The history of humanism is ‘far broader and richer’<sup>66</sup> than being merely ‘a continuation of the rhetorical strain.’<sup>67</sup> It contains ‘all the manifold survivals of Greek *paideia* – including the world-wide influence exercised by Greek philosophy and science.’<sup>68</sup> Jaeger says that philosophy, and especially Greek philosophy, ‘has played a decisive role in the development of modern humanism, which would have no impetus without it, and would not even have been able to expound its own aims.’<sup>69</sup>

### Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

In Plato the logic of first principles is applied consistently across the three philosophies, aiming to integrate truth, nature and justice into the one harmony of the Republic. This is not quite the case with Aristotle who deals with the tension between discipline and freedom differently. Here, the open and creative notion of political wisdom and virtue is differentiated from the closed and systematic truths of speculation. In time this unfolds more fully into the division between practice and theory. In this sense, it is Aristotelian and not Platonic logic which creates the template for the dualism in liberal arts education between the iron fist of theory and discipline and the open palm of practice and freedom.

In the *Topics* Aristotle divides philosophy into speculative, practical and productive.<sup>70</sup> Each defines a specific type of relation to an object: speculation to knowledge, the will to actions and production to things. Each has different types of virtue associated with it. Of the five intellectual virtues, *episteme* (knowledge), *nus* (comprehension) and *sophia* (wisdom) define the virtues of speculation, while *phronesis* defines the virtue of practical wisdom, and *techne* defines the virtue of production. Here Aristotle introduces a division of labour into the notion of virtue, and the effect is to define three different kinds of harmony, and three different kinds of principles, for thinking, doing and making. Each virtue is a logic of the necessity by which something is its own truth. But

whereas Plato retains the dialectical logic of necessity as the truth of the experience of the relation between nature and culture (and this is dealt with more fully in Part III), Aristotle separates nature and culture from each other and assigns different notions of truth to each. To nature, that is to the 'nature' of something, he gives the virtue of certain and unchangeable knowledge discovered in and by the sciences. The logic of necessity here dominates Western thinking for the next two thousand years 'for it alone exists for itself.'<sup>71</sup> It is the logic of non-contradiction, wherein the truth of an object, its logic of necessity, its totality, is that it cannot be other than it is, is unchangeable and defies any further regression into a prior cause or identity. Philosophy or metaphysics here is the science of first principles.<sup>72</sup>

But where the will is concerned, wisdom is changeable, because it has to reflect different circumstances and experiences. As such, practical work occupies a difficult place, where logic has to be related to experience, and forms a different kind of truth. Culture here is defined as other to nature, as other to the logic of non-contradiction, and as other to the unchangeable truth of a first principle. Harmony is to be found in the moral development of virtuous character which is grounded in the first principle of *phronesis*. The practical art of rhetoric, for example, has its scientific and logical principles made into artistic practice, suggesting to some interpreters that *phronesis* or practical wisdom avoids both the rigidity of conformity to science and the mindless repetition of skills.<sup>73</sup> This flexibility and creativity makes *phronesis* a popular choice for those who are critical of the fixed nature of scientific knowledge. The third kind of harmony is, in a sense, the best of both worlds. The natural element of production is the rules (discipline) of procedure required for making an object while the changeable allows the craftsman to react (freely) to difficulties he might encounter.<sup>74</sup> This ambiguity describes the dualism of philosophy and rhetoric that comes to be understood not as the educational logic of their relation, but as the Aristotelian logic of their opposition to each other. *Techne* here lacks the philosophical resources needed to make a virtue out of its own ambivalent necessity and freedom or needed to understand work as the difficulty which expresses the logic of an educational first principle.

The Aristotelian logic of necessity taken up as the first principle of a liberal arts education is therefore a logic of non-contradiction, a logic of identity. The certain principle or harmony of an objective truth is that upon which 'it is impossible to be mistaken'<sup>75</sup> and the basis of all logic, all certainty, and all truth, is this: 'it is impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be... [for] it is impossible that contrary

attributes should belong at the same time to the same subject.<sup>176</sup> This has to be presupposed as ‘the starting-point for all other axioms,’<sup>177</sup> but it cannot be demonstrated by anything prior to it, for if there had to be a demonstration of everything ‘there would be an infinite regress’<sup>178</sup> and nothing would ever be demonstrated at all. This positing of truth as that which in-itself is its own most simple being, and of error as that which is compound and always changeable in being of-and-for-another, is the logic underpinning not only the necessity of first principles in liberal arts but also of metaphysics, nature and freedom up to the late 18th century.

Aristotle also discerns a hierarchy of intellectual virtues. Because the natural philosopher ‘deals with things that have *in themselves* a principle of movement . . . [so] natural science must be neither practical nor productive, but theoretical.’<sup>179</sup> In the *Physics* he explains that of all things which exist, there are those such as animals and plants which exist ‘by nature’<sup>180</sup> and have a principle of movement and rest within them, whereas products of art or skill have no such innate principle and cannot (re)-produce themselves. In the *Metaphysics* he notes that natural science deals with things which have just this principle in themselves, but sees also that the principle cannot exist outside of the matter of the object. With regard to mathematics there is an ambiguity as to whether its objects are immovable and separable from matter.<sup>81</sup> In fact Aristotle decides that in mathematics objects are only partly unmoved and unlikely to be able to exist independently apart from matter.<sup>82</sup> If neither physics nor mathematics, which are both theoretical or speculative, deal with things which are both immovable and independent, then they cannot be considered to be the highest sciences, for they are not dealing with first causes or first principles. If ‘there is no substance other than those which are formed by nature, natural science will be the first science; but if there is an immovable substance, the science of this must be prior and must be first philosophy.’<sup>83</sup> And this too must be ‘the divine.’<sup>84</sup> There are, then, three kinds of theoretical sciences – natural science, mathematics and theology. ‘The class of theoretical sciences is the best, and of these themselves the last named is best; for it deals with the highest of existing things, and each science is called better or worse in virtue of its proper object.’<sup>85</sup>

There is also a discernible shift in Aristotle’s thinking regarding the relation of theory and practice. In the *Protrepticus* Aristotle sees *phronesis* as Platonic *nus*, an intuitive divine philosophical knowledge. But in the *Metaphysics* and especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *phronesis* is no longer *nus*. It is no longer mere speculation. Instead it is now ‘a practical



faculty, concerned both with the choice of the ethically desirable and with the prudent perception of one's own advantage.<sup>86</sup> The prudent here are not *sophoi*, but *phronomoi*. When Aristotle moves away from his teacher, the necessities and harmonies of theoretical and practical reason are separated, and the liberal arts will play its part in turning this into a division between sciences (the *quadrivium* of disciplines) and arts (the *trivium* of virtue).

In Aristotle, then, the three types of knowledge, speculative, practical and productive, become the three realms of metaphysics, ethics and the illiberal arts. This is the categorisation that comes to define not only what is to count as liberal arts education. It also reinforces the divide between speculative philosophical virtue and political rhetorical virtue which, as Kimball says, defines the central struggle of liberal arts education thereafter.

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Kimball works with this sharpened opposition between the closed fist of scientific truth and the open palm of creative rhetorical expression. He sees two ideal camps which, in the history of liberal education, represent the open rhetorical ideal of the *artes liberales* and the closed dogmatic philosophical or theological truths. To the ideal *artes liberales* tradition belong the Sophists, the school of Isocrates, the emerging *trivium* of Roman education including the *studia humanitatis* of Cicero, the retrieval of Greek literary sources in the humanist Renaissance, the defence of classical literature against the emerging empiricism of the natural sciences in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the defence of classical education against the specialism of University research. To the philosophical tradition belong Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the early Christian educators, Augustine and Aquinas, and the modern era of enlightenment philosophers. Kimball argues that the Enlightenment saw a shift from the liberal arts ideal to the liberal-free ideal where the oratorical virtues of breadth and public engagement are threatened by the new critical spirit of individualism, specialisation (including in philosophy), education and research which, practised for their own sake, are detached from responsibility for the good. We will follow this path in the remaining chapters of Part I, around tensions that define the dualism of the closed fist of philosophical discipline and the open palm of rhetorical freedom.