

HISTORY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

R. Glen Coughlin

It is common among modern educators to consider the study of history a fundamental component of liberal education. It was not always so. The medieval universities, for example, seem to have set little store by history, as witnessed by their curricula.¹ This is not to say that there was no history at all studied in these schools, but that it did not have the centrality we are accustomed to grant it. One might attribute this fact to the loss of the ancient historical texts and to the general decadence of learning after the fall of Rome, a decadence only slowly overcome. But in any case, it is a commonplace that the "historical sense" is a relatively modern phenomenon. While the change in the role of history in curricula, from addendum to architect, would itself be an interesting topic, I would like to concentrate on what the role of history in liberal education should be, not on what roles it has historically played.

It does seem plausible to say that history is the cornerstone, or at any rate one of the most important stones, in the edifice of liberal education. How, first of all, do we explain the nearly unanimous agreement that it is a crucial part of liberal education if not by saying that this statement is true? More importantly, if liberal education is an education for a free man, does not that free man need to know the genesis of the culture and institutions prevalent in his times in order to

R. Glen Coughlin is Dean of Thomas Aquinas College.

¹ For an interesting review of the development of medieval learning, cf. David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, Second Edition, (New York: Longman, 1988).

direct his life prudently? And even on the level of theoretical disciplines, how intelligible is the work of Hegel without an understanding of Kant, or of Kant without an understanding of Hume?

The Christian might be inclined to this view for theological reasons as well: the history of the world is the history of the working out of salvation; it is an intelligible process because it is directed by the divine mind to a determinate end—history is the work of Christ the King. The emphasis on history is also found in the Hebrew scriptures, where the history of the Jews is presented as the providential plan of God for the salvation of His chosen race. Even in a pagan work such as the *Odyssey*, human events are supposed to be directed to an end by the gods. It is not surprising, then, that some thinkers wish history to be a liberal art or at least a fundamental part of liberal education. The view underlying this claim, in this case, is that there is a pattern to history, determined by God or the gods, visible to the human mind, and revelatory of the designs of the ultimate cause.

I propose to argue, nevertheless, that history is not a central part of liberal education, that is, the education appropriate to a free man. This statement is perhaps too bold and broad—it should at least be qualified; nevertheless, because the predominant assumption that history is architectonic, or nearly so, for liberal education, it is better to begin here with the negative, and go on afterwards to indicate the proper place of history in a liberal arts curriculum. The position I will argue for does not simply reject the study of history in liberal education, but rather subordinates that study to others. It is not a question of whether one should study history, but when and how. I have no quarrel with those who simply wish to study history as a major; I will only quarrel if they insist that they have chosen the best sort of liberal education.

It is essential to any inquiry to know what the subject of inquiry is. We must try to understand what liberal education is and what history is before we can show that history does

indeed belong to liberal education and before we can make a reasoned judgement about where history fits into a liberal education.

But how shall we proceed to discuss what liberal education is? If we merely survey the curricula of self-proclaimed liberal arts colleges, we will be slaves of the status quo at best, and, if there is disagreement about what liberal education is, confused at worst. And of course there is fundamental disagreement about what liberal education is, even among the supposed experts. (The reasons for these disagreements are, naturally, even more fundamental disagreements, as we shall see later.) An inductive approach, unless coupled with a sense of the traditional understanding of liberal education, is apt to lead us astray.

We might also attempt to arrive at a notion of liberal education by division of the genus which contains it, “education.” We could begin with a notion of education, and then try to divide “liberal” from what we might call “illiberal” or “non-liberal” education. Since we hope to arrive at a notion of liberal education which is not merely accidentally one, like “blue figure” but essentially one, like “three-sided figure,” we would have to have a good basic notion of education before we could be sure we are speaking of the sorts of differences which make an essential difference. For example, on the assumption that education is about the truth in some way, we do not want to divide education into eastern and western, unless we think that cultural differences are the ultimate arbiters of truth. The consequences, on the other hand, of saying that all differences between sorts of education are merely accidental are clearly absurd.

Perhaps it would be best to clear away this last possibility first. What would be implied by saying that all education is of one type? It is clear enough that education ought to be defined in terms of its goal, since it is a practical endeavor, a sort of production of something in the mind of the student. Just as carpentry is defined in terms of its product, tables and

whatnot, and generalship in terms of its end, victory, so is education defined in terms of what it produces. There are only two or three things education could reasonably be thought to aim at: truth, learning a skill, or propaganda (what Plato might call opinion-forming). If all differences of education are merely accidental, then all these goals are only accidentally different. But if so, truth is fundamentally the same thing as the opinion of those who have power of some sort over the student, or at least, if one (rightly) rejects propaganda as a goal of education, the same as skill. For if we claim that the only differences between skills and truths are accidental, we are by that very fact claiming that they are essentially the same sort of thing. This is tantamount to saying that the goal of all knowledge is to change the world, for we cannot claim that practical disciplines like carpentry are sought merely for the sake of knowing, but it is not entirely unreasonable to say, in fact it is very commonly thought, that all knowledge is for the sake of doing something practical, whether it be to build a better mousetrap or to convert the nations.

This opinion, however widespread it may be, is false. For if all knowledge is practical, then either all things are in our power, or at least the proper good of the intellect is not the truth. For if speculative and practical knowledge do differ, they differ in that practical knowledge is ordered to human action whereas speculative knowledge is not, but is sought for its own sake. So if there is no such thing as speculative knowledge, if all knowledge is practical, we might conclude that everything must be subject to our action (the first option). Moreover, there will no longer be such a thing as prudence, because prudence presupposes an objective order of the goods among which we choose, some goods being better than others. The man who chooses the lesser good over the greater, when there is no compelling reason to do so and that one is moved by passion, shows himself to be imprudent by that very act. But if there is no speculative knowledge, even the order among goods will be subject to man's will. Man will

choose what is good, and his choice will make it good. Art, too, presupposes something not in our power, since it requires materials to work upon. The carpenter makes chairs out of wood, but he does not make wood. But if everything is subject to our power, there would be no matter out of which to produce artifacts. Thus, the denial of speculative knowledge entails the denial of practical knowledge as well; and if there is practical knowledge, there must be speculative knowledge as well. Consequently, we may say that the denial of speculative knowledge in every sense will destroy the possibility of prudence, leaving the naked will as the only principle for determining choice; and also elevate art into the highest and only intellectual virtue. For if everything is subject to our power, so are the very natures of things. There will be nothing which man cannot alter, including his own nature, the status of other people as citizens and even as persons, and so on. Such a view is a perfect excuse for tyranny.²

Now, one might try to avoid these consequences by granting that there is an objective moral order and an objective nature to man (thus granting that there is objective truth), but adding that there is no value in such knowledge except a practical value. One might say, e.g., that there is something called health, something called healthy food, exercise, etc., and there is an objective order between these, an order based on an immutable nature, but go on to say that it is perfectly worthless to know all this, unless one is going to do something with this knowledge.

Let us consider this position briefly. This position amounts to saying that the truth is not a perfection of the intellect (the second option mentioned above). For if it were, one would be compelled to say that it is good, even if useless, because a perfection is always desired as a good; whence, if the truth

² Cf. Karl Marx's famous dictum: "Up to now, philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." *Theses on Feuerbach*, IX. John Dewey's so-called "pragmatism" is just a pale version of Marx's understanding.

is not good in itself, it is not perfective of the intellect. Nevertheless, one might say that, though good in itself, truth is ordered to living well, just as strength is good, but is intrinsically ordered to something beyond itself. This position is not unheard of: Seneca, for example, condemns those who study what he considers useless sciences and contends that liberal education is purely for the sake of living a morally good life.³ But experience teaches us that those who disdain speculative thought, those who do not love the truth for itself, generally have little regard for moral virtue. It is possible that Seneca was an exception, though he has been criticized as a hypocrite; in any case, the more common type is as I have described. This is enough to put us onto the scent of a contradiction. Perhaps the contradiction can be stated thus: to grant that there is a truth which should rule one's life, that to be reasonable is good, is implicitly to grant the intrinsic goodness of the truth. For if truth is the measure of the good life, that can only be because the measure, truth, is intrinsically good. We can also state this negatively. If truth is only good as a means to what we desire, even if what we desire is somehow noble, then desire is the only principle according to which the goodness of truth is determined. This is to say that desire measures truth, which is in turn to say that truth is what we want it to be. On this view, it would be good to be willful.

Returning to our earlier point, we can now say that at least this difference in types of education, that between practical and speculative education, is essential. Moreover, it seems plausible to suggest that this is the first and most radical difference possible in the genus of education. Like other practical endeavors, education attempts to produce something, in an obviously extended meaning of "produce." What it "produces," when successful, is knowledge. But, again like other practical endeavors, education seeks its goal because that goal is a good, and there can be no more basic distinction among

³ Cf. Epistle 88.

goods and reasons for a thing being good than the distinction between what is good in itself and what is good because it is good for getting some other good. For a good is a sort of term or end of desire and the end is either the final end, a good "in itself," like happiness, or it is an intermediate end, an end sought in order to aid one to a further end, like money—a good which is useful for another good and even has its goodness due to the goodness of that other good. Thus, the difference between seeking knowledge for its own sake and seeking it for the sake of some other good is an essential difference and in fact follows from the most essential difference among goods.

One should add as well that there are some objects of study which are better than others. For example, while both entomology and cosmology are speculative disciplines, the latter is in some way the better discipline, because it deals with the whole universe in a way, and the whole is what we naturally want to know. Whenever we know a part, even if we know the part fairly completely, we then look to a greater whole to see the "context." This is because parts are as such dependent on the whole, and therefore, as our mind goes forward in seeking causes, it naturally moves toward the whole. Similarly, it is better to know even a little about divine things than to know a great deal about, e.g., California White Oak trees, since the latter are causes of less than the former, and the mind seeks causes. And the fact that God is a cause of more is not incidental to what He is; rather, He is a cause of all other things because He is intrinsically more perfect than all other things. Thus, He is better to know than anything else. Among objects of speculative study, then, some are more desirable than others, and a man devoted to the study of speculative things will naturally seek first of all to know the best things. This difference, however, seems to be one of degree and not of kind, even though the things studied may be different in kind. For each such study is undertaken for the same reason: out of that wonder which is the beginning

of philosophy; and so aims at the same thing: the satisfaction of that wonder in knowledge. Nevertheless, this difference is an important one, as we will see, for determining what liberal education is.

Earlier, I argued that if we could see what education is and see what essential differences there are in the genus "education," we might be closer to knowing what liberal education is. Of course, we could investigate many other aspects of the genus education, e.g., we could contrast it with other practical endeavors,⁴ or we could ask what its proper "material" is, i.e., what sort of person is a good student, or we could investigate what the proper beginnings of education are, or we could dwell on the use of language in instruction. It suffices for us to note here that it is a practical undertaking directly ordered to the knowledge of truth, whether practical or theoretical. And we are now in a position to say that there is an education which is an attempt to lead a student to the truth, simply because it is good to know the truth, i.e., which is ordered to speculative or theoretical truth. We might at this point arbitrarily label such education "liberal," but because that term has been used for a long time to indicate a certain sort of education, we should try to show that education for speculative truth is indeed what is meant by liberal education in the best sense.

As Aristotle observed, we sometimes see the nature of a thing most clearly by looking at its birth,⁵ and we can sometimes see the birth of a notion by looking at the etymology of the word expressing that notion. The word "liberal" comes from the Latin adjective *liber*, which means "free." When used substantively, *liberi* indicates free men or their sons. It is clear, then, that liberal education is tied up with human freedom. But how is it so tied? It seems that one could understand the

⁴ We have to be clear that, although education is itself a practical endeavor, it may aim at speculative truth or practical truth, e.g., at biology or medicine.

⁵ *Politics*, Book I, ch. 2, 1252a24-26.

link in one of two basic ways. Either one could think that an education is called "liberal" because it promotes or safeguards political freedom, or because it is the sort of education which is or ought to be sought by men who are free. These, of course, may not be contradictory; in fact, one might think that they are merely two ways of speaking about the same thing, for one might think that the politically free man ought most of all to be educated so as keep his freedom intact. On the other hand, one might say that the views are not contradictory, and both are partially true, though one is primary. This is the view I will defend.

Hugh of St. Victor, writing in the twelfth century, said that the seven liberal arts are "certain ways by which the lively soul enters into the secrets of philosophy." This implies that liberal education is ordered to philosophy, that is, to the pursuit of speculative truth. John Henry Cardinal Newman agrees with this: "This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called liberal education."⁶ The mind's "own proper object," of course, is the truth.⁷ Other evidence may be cited, but perhaps here it will suffice to note that "liberal education" is the education undertaken when one is not forced by the press of events to study something profitable.⁸ As such, liberal education will

⁶ *The Idea of a University*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), Part I, Discourse VII, ch. 1, p. 135.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134; cf. also Part I, Discourse V, ch. 2, p. 91, ch. 3, p. 93.

⁸ Exactly this is the objection raised against liberal education by the more business-minded: it is useless, it does not train one for a particular job. The objection fails not because liberal education is useful or does train one for a particular job, though it is in many ways the most useful of educations, but because it is a mistake to identify the good and the useful. Happiness itself is not useful, yet no one would deny it is good. So too, liberal education is not primarily for the sake of any good other than speculative knowledge. It may be useful, but the student who

be the education most worthy of choice. Our considerations, therefore, have brought us to the question of what is most worthy of choice and whether education has any bearing on it. As Socrates was fond of saying, this question is the most important one, for it amounts to nothing less than the question, "how should one live?"

A complete consideration of this question is obviously beyond our scope here (not to mention my powers), and so we must content ourselves with a somewhat cursory investigation. It is clear enough, though, that certain kinds of life are not really suitable to man. The life of the plant or animal is clearly below man: no one could be said to be happy or perfected as a man merely because he eats and reproduces. One might think that the life of pleasure,⁹ which animals also share in, is the proper life for a man, but could it really be true that a life shared in by cows is the best thing we can hope for? It seems unlikely at best. Moreover, certain considerations about the nature of man make it apparent that this life is not a sufficient life for man. We are by nature political animals; we live in communities both for the sake of the necessities of life and for the sake of having some share in art, literature, learning, the noble actions of the state, etc. A sign of the naturalness of our desire to live in a political whole is the use of solitary confinement as punishment. However, the man who lives for sensual delight alone is not a good member of society; and this is just because he is concerned with his own private good, pleasure, as opposed to the common good of the community. The man who lives for pleasure, in effect, has no criterion beyond pleasure, and so will not, and really (were his philosophy, such as it is, right) ought not to subordinate his own sensual desires to anything else, neither to the community nor to the good of others in that community. On

enrolls for a liberal education simply because it is useful is precisely an illiberal student.

⁹ I am not here concerned with the possible extended uses of the word "pleasure"; I simply mean physical pleasure.

the view that the good for man is pleasure, the father ought to abandon his family rather than tire himself out working to provide for them and the mother ought to abandon her children rather than spend her youth in their service. Pleasure is in the end a hard task master, because it is not naturally man's highest good. The man who tries to serve pleasure as his master will become its slave, for he will not do what he most wants to do, but will betray all that he cherishes for the sake of that master.

At least better, as the examples I just gave indicate, is the life directed to the community. The citizen, who ought to direct his activities to the common good, and not merely out of some abstract and impersonal sense of duty, but rather out of a genuine love for a good greater than his own private good but still his own good, has in the common good a criterion according to which he can order his love for pleasure under another, greater, and more perfect good. And this need to order one good under another makes it clear that the political life is a sort of life lived by reason, for only reason can perceive, operate, and direct other powers with an end in view. Since the political life is a life according to reason, and the political life is a life more proper to man than the life of plants or animals, it follows that the life of reason is more proper to man. And this is not an accidental connection: man is by his nature a rational beast, and it is this which sets him off from plants and other animals. It is no surprise that the most perfect activities of human life have to do with that perfection which most makes him what he is, just as we would think that the most perfect activity of a hammer is not related to what it has in common with saws, e.g., falling down, but what sets it apart from saws, i.e., its shape.

Now, if we ended our argument here, we would agree with those thinkers who hold that the liberal education looks for knowledge which is ordered to preserving and promoting political freedom or personal moral freedom. We must go on a little further to show that it is more concerned with specula-

tive knowledge. But what criteria can we use to show that, though the political and ethical life is proper to man in so far as it utilizes his reason, speculative knowledge is more the goal of liberal education than practical knowledge? We have seen that liberal education is that education which is most choosable, so we must ask whether speculative or practical knowledge is most choosable.

This is fundamentally to ask which is the greater perfection, since what is choosable is a good, and a good is a perfection. Here we should rest content with an inductive argument for this premise, for a complete discussion would take us far afield. No one would think that a horse is a good one if it only has two legs. And if it had four, but was slow and clumsy, it would still not be a good horse, but it would only be good if it had the various perfections of a horse: speed, strength, endurance, training, etc. So too, a man who is not a geometer may be a good man, for he may have other perfections, especially the moral virtues, but he is not as good as a man can be. Why? Because he lacks a perfection of which he is by nature capable. Of course, nobody has every perfection possible to man, but that only shows that we are complex creatures with a finite amount of time and energy at our disposal, not to mention dispositions to sloth, sensuality, etc.; it does not show that goods are not perfections. It is clear from induction, then, that goods and perfections are the same thing. This is not to say that the words "good" and "perfection" mean the same thing. They point to the same object, like the words "concave" and "convex", but from different points of view. "Good" seems to name the object as desired;¹⁰ "perfection" names that same object as being the completion of a power or potency.¹¹

Taking this as given, then, we can see that speculative knowledge is more a good than practical knowledge, and therefore

¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, ch. 1, 1094a1-4.

¹¹ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 4, a. 1, Obj. and Resp. 1.

more "choosable." For we can see that a good will be greater either because it is the perfection of a higher power or because it is a greater perfection of the same power. The life, then, which leads to the highest perfection of the highest power will be the life most worthy of choice. That the highest power in man is reason seems reasonable on the face of it, both because reason is what sets man apart from other living things, and because reason is admittedly the element in us which ought to rule.

St. Thomas, in an extraordinary passage, goes further to claim that intellectual perfection is the highest possible kind of perfection: "Among the perfections of things, the most powerful is that a thing be intellectual, for through this very thing it is in a certain way all things, having in itself the perfections of all things."¹² The claim that the intellect is in a way all things is taken from Aristotle's *de Anima*.¹³ There we see that when we know something, it is somehow in us. When a thing is in us as known, it does not give us our own being, as if we exist because we have something in mind, as we *are* hot because we have heat in our body. We are not hot because we are thinking about heat. In fact, if this were so, we would be unjust simply because we know what injustice is, and, since knowledge of injustice is a corollary of knowledge of justice, we would even have to say that we are unjust because we know what justice is. If I know what a dead man is, I would be a dead man. Rather, when we know we have the known in us but without thereby becoming an instance of the thing known. This is in fact what it is to know. For it is clear that knowing is somehow having the known in us, in mind as we say, but it cannot be having it so as to become the known

¹² Inter perfectiones autem rerum potissima est quod aliquid sit intellectivum, nam per hoc ipsum est quodammodo omnia, habens in se omnium perfectiones. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, ch. 44.

¹³ *De Anima*, Bk. III, ch. 8, 431b21. Aristotle actually says that the soul is all things, but the context makes it clear that he means that the soul is all things because the mind is.

or another instance of the sort of thing the known is. This would be mere natural transformation, as when water receives the heat of the fire and so becomes another instance of a hot thing. And such natural transformations always involve the loss of a previous quality. It is by knowing, then, that a thing can come to be another in some way without itself ceasing to be in some way. Thus, if one is to have a perfection which will by its own presence make all the perfections of other things accessible to one, without the loss of any perfections already had, that perfection can only be intellect. And since it is clearly better to have all perfections instead of only some, intellect is the greatest possible perfection.

It follows from what has been said, however, that the sort of thing known will also make a difference to the perfection of the act of knowing. For if knowing is possessing another, then the perfection of knowledge will depend both on the security of the possession of the other and on the nature of the other itself.¹⁴ The more important of these criteria is the nature of the thing possessed, just as having secure possession of a pound of gravel does not compare to having a more tenuous hold on an ounce of gold. Knowing a more perfect being is a more perfect operation, that is, knowing a better thing is better. For example, no one would think it a great perfection or a very desirable thing to know all the details of Mrs. Periwinkle's life; but to know even a little about God and in an uncertain way is nevertheless a great delight.

The best knowledge, then, the one which is intrinsically most choosable and therefore the object of liberal education, is the knowledge of the best things. If the best thing is man, then psychology, political and ethical philosophy, and history will be the crowns of liberal education. But if the best things are above man, the man who is not slavish will most want to know these, since he most wants what is most desirable in itself.

¹⁴ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 1, a. 5, c.

Here we see that the particular object of liberal education depends upon what the world is actually like. Consequently, the beginner is not able to determine what he ought to study, since that would suppose knowledge of the natures of things, which the beginner lacks by definition. Willy-nilly he must take on faith, whether human or divine, the starting points of his study. If somehow he chooses wrongly, he is practically condemned to remain in error forever, since the beginning determines all the rest. And there is much more likelihood of being led astray than of being led well since it is difficult to know the truth. This is why the history of philosophy is almost entirely a history of error, and also why philosophers have such a bad reputation.

I will not here try to show that the best thing is not man but something above man. This is certainly an acceptable premise to any theist, and those who question the premise must look elsewhere for its defense. Here I only intend to point out the dependence of the nature of liberal education on the truth of things. This is only to be expected, since education is always aimed in some way at knowing the truth of things, even if only at the practical truths of healing or bridge-building.

From all this we may conclude that liberal education is primarily ordered to speculative knowledge of the best things. In fact, if it aims at knowledge of the things above man, and the things above man are God and the ordered whole of creation (even if man were the best thing in creation, the whole would still be greater than the part), then it is by that fact aimed at speculative knowledge. For we cannot affect the fundamental order of the universe, nor can we do anything to or about God.

Another reason may be offered for saying that the pursuit of liberal education is first of all the pursuit of speculative knowledge. Just as no one would study medicine if no one ever fell ill, so no one would study ethics if everyone were naturally virtuous or study political philosophy if every state were by nature perfect. We study practical disciplines like medicine,

carpentry, and even ethics and politics, because they lead to a good. Though they are themselves perfections of our minds, they are, like agility or strength, perfections which are by their nature ordered to other goods. Speculative knowledge, on the other hand, is not aimed at a good beyond itself. It is simply good to know, and very good to know very good things. Since what is good in itself is better than what is good only for the sake of another, then the better knowledge is speculative. This, then, will be the primary aim of liberal education.

I have argued that liberal education is an education which aims primarily at speculative truth about the best things, but also at the practical principles of the good life. This education is called liberal because it is such as the free man should choose; it is intrinsically the most "choosable." It remains to see what history is and where it fits into liberal education.

We should note that we are speaking not of the past but what contends for a place in liberal education, i.e., a branch of knowledge; we are not concerned, then, with that sense of the word "history" by which we intend the past events themselves. We are rather concerned with knowledge of those past events. But are we concerned with any knowledge and any events? Merely random recording of facts does not seem to qualify as history, at least not in any sense in which we might be interested here. The number of events which occur every day to every person is simply beyond calculation. It would take us years to record all the events of the last hour, and then events of the hours spent recording would themselves go unrecorded. Even in our personal lives, we do not try to remember everything; we select what seems to be "important" for special attention, and other events, which are perhaps intrinsically less important, are remembered, sometimes despite our efforts to forget, because of their novelty, the forceful impressions they make on us, etc. There clearly must be some selection of facts before knowledge of the past has any claim to our attention at all.

What are the principles of selection? One may be stated

immediately and without controversy: we select the important facts. But this is perhaps a truism. What is important and how do we tell whether an event is important? We have all seen histories of trivial subjects like plumbing fixtures and "Monopoly" board games. It is difficult to understand why anyone would devote time to such subjects. If we ask ourselves why such studies seem worthless, we pretty quickly come up with the answer, "the events they study have no import, no impact on larger issues." While it is abstractly conceivable that such events might influence something more significant, and occasionally we are surprised at what does turn out to be "important," such studies usually remain isolated oddities.

It is this very isolation which makes them of less interest. Like any intellectual endeavor, history looks for causes in the way it can. Just as there are some "histories" which are beneath our notice, so there may be dull enumerations of facts, perhaps of intrinsically important facts, which are not worthy of note simply because they do not link the facts in any intelligent account. In looking for an account, the historian is bound to consider more and more of the context of the events he is primarily interested in. The historian of a medieval battle, e.g., studies tactics, weaponry, perhaps even becomes acquainted with horsemanship and metallurgy. He also looks to the political and economic causes of the battle. He is drawn to causes in two directions: down into the details of the materials and forms of the medieval warrior; and upward to the reasons for his doing what he does. Thus, in the very search for the causes of a battle, for example, the historian is compelled to look to a greater whole. The more his study reveals such wholes and the universal causes of human action, e.g., the political and religious motivations of the protagonists, and even on occasion, one might imagine, the providential hand of God, the more his study will have a place in liberal education. And in fact, if we agree that history is not an enumeration of any old facts about past events but the selection of

those facts which are of importance to ourselves or to a large group of men, and that "importance" is largely if not entirely determined by the influence of such past events on the lives of men, and, further, that history as an intellectual endeavor for the causes of past events demands the arrangement of those important facts into a causal account, then a history which gets at the causes more perfectly more fully conforms to the notion of what history is. Such histories would be about political and religious wholes, and the "history of ideas," since these concern what has the greatest influence on the lives of men and because they are most concerned with the ultimate reasons for men's acts. A history of plumbing fixtures is simply less of a history, because it explains less, than the history of the Catholic Church or even a biography of Churchill. In the light of the forgoing, perhaps we are not too far off if we define history as a causal account of significant past events.

Having looked at what history and liberal education are, we are now well positioned to consider where history fits into liberal education. We have seen that the free man, being a man who lives not for the sake of another, like a slave, but for his own sake, will be primarily interested in those things which are worth knowing in themselves, and not for any utilitarian end. His education is not undertaken merely to live more comfortably, or to obtain power or wealth. He is not the sort to live in the Cave. His education is primarily about speculative things, since the best things to know are the causes of the universe, and these are not within our power. Perhaps we can know them; we certainly cannot do anything about them. It follows from this that theology will be the queen of the sciences, for sacred theology, being founded on God's self-revelation, will the most perfect knowledge of the inner life of the first principle of the universe. The ancients, especially Aristotle and Plato, attained to the highest knowledge of God yet attained by man through purely natural means; but even their knowledge is surpassed by the humblest man of faith. Sacred theology, then, based on the revealed word of

God as found in the scriptures, will be the goal of the liberally educated man. He will undertake other studies for its sake, and his study of other disciplines, far from being replaced by theology, will be given good guidance and a greater purpose through theology. Other studies will be, in the traditional phrase, the handmaidens of theology.

Now, theology is unique among the sciences in many ways.¹⁵ One is by being both practical and speculative. This is not so easy to understand as it seems at first. We might think that it simply means that some revealed statements are practical, like "Enter by the narrow gate,"¹⁶ while others are speculative, like "In the beginning was the Word."¹⁷ But when St. Thomas addresses this question,¹⁸ he gives as the reason that sacred doctrine considers all things insofar as they are knowable by the light of the divine mind. This implies that the divine knowledge is both practical and speculative, that God, by one act of knowing, knows all things, whether the things He can make, like men, or the thing He cannot make, namely Himself. The man of faith, who has "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16), sees all things with the divine light, which is at once speculative and practical. Nevertheless, St. Thomas goes on to point out in the same article that theology is more speculative than practical, "because it treats more principally of divine things than of human acts, about which it treats according as man is ordered to perfect knowledge of God, in which knowledge eternal beatitude consists."¹⁹ Theology is

¹⁵ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 1.

¹⁶ Matt. 7:13.

¹⁷ John 1:1.

¹⁸ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 1, a. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid. "quia principaliter agit de rebus divinis quam de actibus humanis; de quibus agit secundum quod per eos ordinatur homo ad perfectam Dei cognitionem, in qua aeterna beatitudo consistit." Incidentally, here St. Thomas hints at another argument that the highest sort of knowledge is speculative. Christ said, "Eternal life is this, to know You, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." (John 17:3) What is promised us as our eternal beatitude and highest perfection is know-

most of all about God, and we cannot do anything about Him. So far, so good: the liberally educated man is still aiming at theoretical knowledge primarily. But theology is also practical, though secondarily; so liberal education also must have a practical component. This is consistent with the arguments we saw above.

For now, let us concentrate on the speculative, in order to see that history is not the sort of discipline which can be considered among the speculative sciences. I will consider how history compares to science in the ancient sense and then how it compares to science in the modern sense.²⁰ After this, I will compare history to literature. All of this will be ordered to showing that the subject matter of history precludes it from being a primary part of liberal education. Having shown this, in the last part of this essay I will try to show that history does have an important part to play in liberal education, as an adjunct to the secondary aim of comprehending the principles of political and ethical science.

What the speculative sciences have in common is this: they concern the things about which we can do nothing. We cannot make a rectilinear triangle have angles equal to more or less than 180 degrees; we cannot make the laws of physics suit

ledge of God, the beatific vision, and God is clearly a subject only for theoretical knowledge.

²⁰ The ancients, at least Aristotle, meant by science in the strict sense a knowledge of the necessary predicates of things in the light of a grasp of what things are. We know what a triangle is and so can prove that every triangle must have three angles equal to two right angles. Modern science is something significantly less rigorous. It is sufficient for Newton that inertia and gravitation predict previously unknown phenomena and explain previously known phenomena. He need not and does not try to prove from essential definitions of mass, body, motion, or whatever that bodies must be subject to inertial motion and gravitational interaction. Aristotle lays out his understanding of strictly scientific knowledge in the *Posterior Analytics*. There are many texts on the nature of modern science. I would recommend as a beginning *The Hollow Universe* by Charles De Koninck. (Québec: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1964).

our fancy; we cannot make or unmake God. Knowledge of things which are beyond our power is necessarily speculative: practical knowledge is nothing other than know-how, some skill or prudence about how to do something. The things we can do something about, then, are able to be otherwise. If they were not, it would certainly be foolish to try to learn how to affect or effect them. In contrast, the things with which speculative knowledge deals are necessary, or at least are considered insofar as they are necessary. Perhaps the triangles which a mathematician thinks about need not exist; nevertheless, it is necessary that what a triangle is implies that it has three angles equal to 180 degrees. Triangles come and go; what it is to be a triangle, and the consequences of that nature, do not. So too, a natural scientist or philosopher studies what moves and can be destroyed, but he only studies what is permanent about such things. He studies, e.g., the rules according to which elements combine, or the law of gravity, or the definition of motion.²¹

But historical events or situations are not necessary. Today's situation is a result of yesterday's, and yesterday's of the one before that. And no one of these situations is necessary or follows necessarily from the one before it. If Churchill had been killed in the Boer War, the world would be very different today. His survival, though not a necessary event, and not necessarily leading to other events, did in fact lead to consequences of the utmost import. So too, if Bucephalus had thrown and broken the neck of the young Alexander, the Macedonian Empire and then the Roman Empire might never

²¹ One might jump to the Platonic conclusion that there are eternal patterns or forms which are the real objects of knowledge, for what we know when we know best are things that cannot pass away, but all the things we see can pass away. Still, the sorts of principles which are the objects of speculative thought are corruptible, but not in themselves, or, in St. Thomas' words, "per se." A man can die; what it is to be a man cannot. Nevertheless, what it is to be a man can be destroyed in this or that case by the man's dying.

have arisen. Chance rules the affairs of men. If Alexander's mother had not been willful, Alexander might have been an ineffectual king, or more likely not been king at all, with consequences for our lives today which simply cannot be imagined. If Alexander had not impetuously cut the Gordian Knot, would he have conquered Asia? Or would his men have lost heart watching him fumble around trying to untie it? Would Persia have conquered Rome? History unfolds in some small measure determinately, but mostly as a result of chance, character, and spontaneous will. And yet history deludes us by perspective: because what is past has already happened, it is easy to think that it could not have happened otherwise, as if the fact that the past cannot *now* be otherwise proves that it could not *then* have been otherwise.

One might think that because historical events are no longer changeable, they have the sort of character needed by objects of strictly scientific knowledge.²² This is not so. The contingency of historical events is in the very nature of such events and is incompatible with that certainty which accompanies what is knowable in the fullest sense. In mathematics, e.g., one can see what a triangle is, and so see that this or that attribute must belong to every triangle. It is precisely because we can see what a triangle is and can see that certain properties follow from that essence necessarily that there can be a science of mathematics. So too, because we can see what motion is, though with a great deal more effort, we can see that motion can only exist in bodies.²³ But one cannot see that, because Alexander is a man, he must do this or that; nor can we see that because he is this or that sort of man, he must act in any particular way. If what he did followed from his being a man, every man would do what Alexander did. On the other hand, if Alexander's actions followed from his character with *a priori* determination, there would be never be a need for a

²² Once again, I am bearing in mind the distinction between Aristotelian science and modern science. Cf. note 20.

²³ Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, Bk. VI, ch. 4, 234b10-20.

change of heart or repentance and no need to take thought for the future. A man's character is his destiny, true enough; but inconsistency of character is also man's destiny. We know more or less how a friend *might* react to some event; despite this, we are not astonished when we find that "he is not himself today," or that he is acting "out of character." History, then, falls away from the perfection of knowledge because it cannot consider its subject from the point of view of what it is. History must simply consider what in fact happened to it or what in fact it did, but can never show that it had to be that way.

The historian will, of course, attempt to find in the events and characters he treats the natural dispositions which cause the results which history records. In this, he is akin to the modern scientist. He will formulate hypotheses to explain the events, he will amass evidence for his view by picking out from the flux of history the significant points and showing how they fit his theory. Tacitus finds in everything Tiberius does, even in his early, apparently generous acts, the marks of a cruel and ambitious man. But human affairs are not lucid; they are dim, and are surrounded by those shadows which are nothing but dumb facts. And it is finally mere historical fact which the historian intends to relate. If a man acts out of character and so does something which affects the historian's tale, it is this which the historian must relate. He may try to formulate an hypothesis which will explain the anomaly, as Ptolemy uses the eccentricity of the sun's orbit to explain the anomalies in the lengths of the four seasons, but his subject matter, involving as it does the human will, is not such as to allow even the best analysis to attain to the level of science.

For the similarities between history and modern science are not too profound. The modern scientist assumes that he is getting at the nature of the thing he is studying, however obliquely and imperfectly. There is, he assumes, due to the regularity of phenomena, some nature to be known; our minds are just too dim to see that nature. If we could see it, we would

be back with Aristotelian science. But the historian's problem is not in the weakness of the human mind, but in the nature of the thing he is studying. In itself, it could be otherwise, for when dealing with men we have always to take into account free-will, and there is no accounting for that. Of course, I do not mean that there is no nature of free-will, but only that this or that act of free-will cannot be accounted for sufficiently by any pre-existing conditions in the man or in the environment. A sufficient account could only be had by looking into the secret plans of the divine mind, and this is not open to us. A theological historian might claim that so and so did such and such because God planned things that way, and no doubt he would be right. But one could say the same thing about both the acts which are in character and those which are out of character, and about the important acts as well as the trivial ones. While such a stance is not very satisfying, even though true, the purely secular historian is even worse off. He cannot even give the general answer which the man of faith can give. In any case, the flow of human events is not the subject of science because it is not for man to see the vagaries of fortune in their ultimate root, nor even to approach that root through the use of hypothesis and experiment.

So history falls away from the perfections of science in both the Aristotelian and the modern senses. It seems from these considerations, then, that there is no place for a separate study of history in the curriculum of a liberal arts college. If history has determinate and intelligible principles, they are not open to our inspection, being hidden in the mind of God; for us the course of history is a result of particular chance events, particular characters, and particular acts of will, none of which have the sorts of determinate natures the mind can fix upon so as to comprehend them.

It seems, rather, that history is more comparable to literature than to the sciences. For one thing, they both seem to deal primarily with human action, and so to consider, in their different ways, character, institutions, political organizations,

human relations, etc. Being about human action, both must respect the fact that such acts are not the results of necessity. But even literature has a certain advantage over history, due to the author's power to create the relations between the characters and their actions. It is just this relation of character and action which Aristotle has in mind when he says that "poetry (in which he includes any fictional work) is something more philosophical and more serious than history."²⁴ In literary works, the author focuses the story on what is likely to happen. He does not move his plot forward through the copious use of coincidence, though some chance episodes can be used without loss of verisimilitude simply because life really is full of inexplicable happenstance. A plot without internal reasons is a dreary enumeration; what the author aims at is what used to be called an "argument." MacBeth, faced with the death of his wife and the immanent collapse of his tyranny, says life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. While the world may look that way to the character MacBeth, Shakespeare the author has formed a tale told ingeniously, signifying to the audience a great deal about ambition and pride. The likely, the probable, is what moves the audience; and this sketching of plausible events, plausible because the characters are determinate, is superior to history just insofar as it removes the blindness of fate and the merely pathetic or ludicrous accidents to which mortals are subject.

In this way, by affording a clearer vision of the relation of certain principles of human actions, namely characters, and those actions, literature is closer to the heart of liberal education than is history. It has more universal import because it represents the fates of different sorts of men as indeed rooted in those men's characters. In our fallen world, ambitious and ruthless men may happen to be successful and go to the grave surrounded by loving family and friends. It is the historian's

²⁴ *Poetics*, 1451b2-3.

job to relate this when it happens. But the plot of the poet removes luck and moves on the level of a sort of universal, for the actions and fates of the characters are fitted to their individual traits. This is not to say that the poet does or should treat his creatures as "types", but that the poet makes even idiosyncratic characters act in a way appropriate to their personalities and that the natural outcome of their doings is not distorted by the merely irrational meddlings of fortune. By studying great literature we can learn a great deal about human action, character, virtue and vice. In any case, if history and literature have places in liberal education, as I shall argue below, they have those places mostly if not exclusively due to the secondary aim of liberal education, practical wisdom.

It seems, though, from what we have said, that history is too much a matter of Plato's shadows to be part of liberal education. Why, then, do so many thinkers wish to make history central to liberal education? This view arose, it seems, from the sophisticated elevation of history into a science by Giambattista Vico. That elevation was followed by the historical determinism of Hegel and Marx. These thinkers claim that there is a necessary order in human affairs, an order which is visible to the human mind. For Marx, that order is a necessary consequence of economic conditions; for Hegel, it is the necessary working out of the Spirit of the World. It comes to our place and to a slightly earlier time than our own in the guise of "progress", the gradual and inevitable bettering of man's lot. Historicism²⁵ reaches us old and tired; a weary substitute for living thought made by a dying skepticism. De-

²⁵ By "historicism," "historicist," etc., I mean not any view which claims that history is intelligible to men or at least to some mind, but the view that history is more or less perfectly intelligible to men. The historicist in this sense holds that there are natures or at least historical laws which men must follow, and these are intrinsic to men and their institutions. One thing that is typical of such views is that nothing is intelligible apart from historical analysis. A non-historicist view which nevertheless holds to a kind of intelligibility in history is the doctrine of St. Augustine in *The City of God*, where he argues that history may

terminism in history carries as its consequence the obligation to consider every text in its context of history, and has as its contemporary premiss the assumption that nothing can really be known except that historical context.

But the historicist who concerns himself with literary or argumentative texts treats these texts in a way utterly foreign to the way the authors of the texts themselves wrote them. Newton did not think he was writing English physics, Thomas Aquinas did not think he was writing medieval theology, nor did Shakespeare concern himself with historical niceties in writing *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet*. Even Marx and Hegel, the paradigmatic historicists, thought that what they said was true for all times and places. Moreover, the work of historians seems to overturn the claims of historicists. The more the historian studies the careers of men like Alexander and Napoleon, the more he finds those careers are the result of chance and human reckoning. Historians are well aware of the impossibility of *a priori* deductions about human events, and are painfully aware of the lack of historical evidence in many areas. The pattern of Western and world history would be different in completely unknowable ways had not Rome attained hegemony over Europe, and this may well not have happened had Scipio not been a bold and clear-thinking general. But his character alone would not suffice: he might have been killed fighting at the river Ticinus to save his father, or in any number of other ways; he might never have been born, or might have been born blind or crippled. Hitler might have been killed when he ran as a messenger between the command posts and trenches of World War I, or killed when the Munich *putsch* was suppressed. The historian is aware of this; but the historicist seems to think that the world as it happened is the

be understood as the unfolding of divine providence. This is of course manifestly the view which the Bible presents as well. "All things work together for the good of those who love God." (Romans, 8:28) But apart from the divine revelation, history is intelligible only in a very limited sense.

only world which could have happened. It seems, rather, that the more one is familiar with the events we think are important, the more we are struck by the possibility that they might never have occurred at all. The historicist is also obliged to consider those very events of which we have some record to be the events which are of ultimate importance in the story of man. But it is not even clear that we are more than just beginning the story. Nor do we have much reason to think fortune has been kind enough to preserve those bits of the past which do have significance for all of history.

The more radical historicists, Hegel especially, hold not only that human events follow a pattern discernible by the human mind without revelation, but also that what is true or false is relative to the time at which a statement is made. At least some of the absurdities of this view are manifest. If truth is historically conditioned, so is the statement that truth is historically conditioned. Consequently, historicism may one day, perhaps even tomorrow, be false. Moreover, there is no telling that tomorrow's men will not say that truth is not and never has been historically determined, and, since truth is what the *Zeitgeist* imposes, both views are equally true. But the historicist's view is that all truth, and therefore tomorrow's truth, is historically determined, while tomorrow's men may hold that no truth, neither today's truth nor their own, is historically determined. The historicist is compelled to say, then, that the truths held by the men of tomorrow will be both true and false tomorrow. But the non-historicist is by no means bound to utter nonsense. He will simply say the historicist is wrong permanently: he is wrong today and will still be wrong tomorrow.

A more benign historicism might hold that there is some truth which cannot be worn away, but that we must nevertheless study the historical context of whatever we study in order to understand it. But this tends to degenerate into pure historicism. If everything we study is subject to its time, then so is our study of everything. Our own studies of Newtonian

mechanics or the Athenian constitution are as much subject to the peculiarities of our time as Newtonian mechanics or the Athenian constitution were subject to theirs. Just as, according to the historicist, the Athenian constitution cannot be understood on its own terms, or rather in terms of an experience which we and the ancient Athenians share, so neither can our understanding of that constitution be understood on its own terms. If the historicist is right, we may well be as benighted as all the men whose work they pretend we have surpassed.

The only way out of these puzzles is to say that we do have an experience in many ways like that of the ancient Athenians or of Newton, and that we can understand what they say, and whether it is true or false, by looking at our experience and the conclusions which follow from it. We can condemn tyranny because we know, even if imperfectly, what a man is and what a state is. We can commend private ownership of land because we know, even if imperfectly, what liberty is and what property is. Aristotle and Newton can only be said to disagree about physics if they have some shared experience and ideas of motion, rest, causality, etc. If the historicist were right, it would not only be true that men of different ages could not agree; they could not even disagree. If true, historicism would make liberal education impossible; it is only by somehow having contact with a reality not subject to flux that we can have intellectual knowledge at all.

If I am right to say that the arrival of history in a central place of liberal education is due to the rise of historicism, then we have reason to doubt that place simply on the basis of pedigree. Nevertheless, both the historicism which claims that history is intrinsically intelligible and the more radical brand which claims that truth itself is historical are distorted shadows of truths. Having looked a little at some distorted reasons for including history in liberal education, I would like to turn now to the real reasons for including history in liberal education.

Let us begin with the speculative part of liberal education, and in particular with salvation history, since this sort of history overcomes the objections raised against history in a fuller way than the others. In salvation history we have the history of Israel and of the Messiah as presented in the revealed word of God. Particular events, like the wars of conquest of the promised land and the exile, are seen in the light of the divine mind. Since that light is infallible, we can rest assured that the reasons given in scripture for the events narrated are in fact the true reasons. We thus escape the objection that history is only able to formulate hypotheses which cannot even pretend to approximate some really existing necessary cause. For though God does not coerce the will, He nevertheless governs every action of men, ordering all things to the good of those who love God.²⁶ His knowledge, which we share in by faith, permits us to see the interior reasons for the history revealed to us. Of course, there are events which may remain puzzling, but others are clear enough. Most obviously, the history of Israel is the preparation of the Jews for the Incarnation. Thus, while other sciences require of their subjects that there be a nature which the human mind seizes upon and discourses about, and human affairs are not such a subject, sacred history, having access to the ultimate root of all man's actions, can remain history and yet attain to the most perfect explanatory principle of all. It does really what the historicist wanted to do (and so is perhaps the original of which historicism is the distortion), but without denying the radical freedom of the will. For God is the Lord even of the heart.

But once we move outside of the revealed text of scripture, we no longer have such certitude. The church historian, like his secular counterpart, can develop hypotheses, more or less plausible, to explain human events. He has a certain advantage, too, namely that he knows what the basic structure of

²⁶ Rom. 8:28

history is: the preparation for Christ, the advent of Christ, and the working out of salvation through the Church. He may be able to develop more detailed analyses based on scripture, but so long as his field of study is events which are not magisterially explained by scripture or the Church, he will be unable to attain to the sort of perception of causes necessary for real science. For the existence of providence or the ordering of the world to God is not a very precise explanation of the elections of 1996. Nevertheless, the religious historian may attain a sort of certitude which is beyond reasonable doubt, and in this he is like the secular historian, and both are like the modern scientist. But once again, both historians will differ from the scientist because, however far they advance they are no closer to the ultimate cause of the human acts of will which are the engine of history. Only God's own understanding as revealed to us through scripture and dogma can go that far.

Historicism has a likeness not only in sacred history but also in secular history, for while truth is not dependent on time, there are still certain philosophers whose work is intelligible only to a small extent without seeing how they were influenced by their times and teachers. Kant cannot be understood without understanding Hume. But Hume is nevertheless understandable, to a large extent at least, on his own terms. We can see why one would say that everything which is in the intellect was in the senses before, and how Hume, on his way to his implausible conclusions, makes a plausible error about how to understand this claim. So too we can understand why Kant says that mathematical truths are not merely "analytic"; but his ultimate reason for saying that such truths must therefore be *a priori* is to be found, not in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but in Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and *Treatise of Human Nature*. And of course, even when a good understanding can be had without historical considerations, the latter may shed still further light on an issue or position. In the case of those positions which are simply not understandable on their own, we either have an author who

is not telling the whole story, since he is assuming we agree with him about some premises—the arguments for which are not presented in his text but assumed from elsewhere, whether mere cultural prejudice or some unstated argument—or with an author whose thought is so unreasonable as to merit nothing but historical or psychological consideration. There is no arguing with a mad-man, since he lives in a world apart. Such a position may end up being worthy of study because it has become “historically important”, i.e., because we think it contains some of the germs of a situation which is judged to be important. It is hard to believe, though, that an author who has nothing to be said in his defense except that he was a tortured soul can have very great influence, unless he is born into fevered times. But it is likely that the reasons for the fever of the times would themselves be found in some more or less plausible error, even if it be as crude as hedonism.

The history of ideas is also useful for speculative knowledge. There is an internal logic to the history of ideas, as the example in the previous paragraph illustrates. Studying the major philosophers, theologians, mathematicians, scientists, and literary writers in chronological order highlights the natural development of ideas. This allows the students to watch as superior minds work out the consequences of initial premises, whether good or bad. The student thereby comes to see that theoretical disagreements are not isolated phenomena, but have rationales which reduce to certain basic positions, and so gives him an appreciation for the necessity of beginning well and also an ability to see the “big picture.” This also gives the student the dialectical advantage of having understood beforehand the roots of certain widespread and fundamental opinions, an advantage which both forearms him against sophistry and endows him with the means to correct in an intelligent (and one hopes charitable) way those who have fallen into error. This study of the history of ideas is best accomplished not by feeding the student a predigested summary but by letting them view for themselves the “events” in

that history: the arguments of the major thinkers as presented by those same thinkers.

We, whose colleagues and culture are shrouded by a pale historicism, must remember that historical considerations of an author’s precedents and idiosyncrasies take a distinctly secondary place in liberal education. We are not concerned with the opinions of men, but with the way things are and with living well. It is much easier, in one way, to do history than to do philosophy or science, and knowing the personal motivations of an author can, by that trick of perspective whereby the past looks necessary to us, fool us into thinking we understand his position and the real reasons for it. But the ultimate reasons for any position worthy of serious consideration are to be found not in the way a thinker was raised or the social conditions of his time, but in the world itself. This is not to say that every serious position is true, but only that when a position merits attention it does so because, even if it be wrong, it is an error which we ought to pay attention to, because the arguments for it are revealing or because the position itself is close to the truth in some way.

Up to now I have mostly been considering the place of history in a liberal education when we look to the primary purpose of liberal education, which is speculative. In fact, the historicism which attempts to make of history a science of some sort may be understood to have tried to place history on the speculative side of liberal education. If we turn now to the practical side of things, history becomes more evidently useful. Since liberal education is the education of the free man, it is not only concerned with speculative truth, but also, in a secondary way, with the principles of the proper conduct of life. It has as one of its ends the preparation for the citizen’s life, and since the reasonable conduct of that life depends on some understanding of the political whole in which the citizen finds himself, it is incumbent on the liberal arts college to include in its curriculum a treatment of the sources of the regime in which it finds itself and of the dominant cultural

forces of the time. For example, a late twentieth century college in the U.S.A. should consider the founding documents of the United States and also works which form the culture around the U.S., e.g., the texts of Marx and Nietzsche. Failure to do so can only result in a student whose powers of judgement are blunted by deep ignorance of the time and place in which he must exercise judgement.

For example, having read Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Marx, one is better able to understand many of the debates going on now over issues like abortion and euthanasia. We see in Descartes the proposal of a radical and unreachable criterion for knowledge; in Hume a consequent despair over attaining knowledge; in Kant a noble though misbegotten attempt to justify objective universal truth through the supposition that all truth has its origin in the human mind itself; in Marx a natural extension of the error to the extreme view that every last bit of knowledge is practical and the whole world and everything in it is subject to man's will. We sow the wind and reap the whirlwind: personhood becomes something we individually or collectively grant, with the predictable consequence that we treat the weak as disposable possessions. To effectively combat such errors, we need to know the reasons held for the other side, and these reasons are best seen through the history of ideas.

History can and should be in the liberal arts curriculum for another reason as well. The historians, as the poets do in another way, often give us examples of regimes, characters, and actions, examples which help us in the study of ethics and politics. We can see in the life of Alexander an example of courage and magnanimity, in that of Cicero an example of a life of civic virtue. We can see the life of the state devoted to military virtue in Thucydides' Spartans, of that devoted to wealth in the Athenians, and in the Persians of Herodotus that of the state devoted to luxury. The student often has limited experience with different kinds of characters and certainly with different kinds of cultures and regimes. Reading

history and literature can help us by supplying vicarious experience to those too young to have their own experience. The less radical sort of historicism mentioned above is in a way getting at this same truth. The historicist may be wrong to think that he can have necessary knowledge of history or even to think that history itself is intrinsically necessary (even if he thinks we cannot know that necessity), but he is right to think that there are intelligible patterns in history. It is not futile to seek the causes of what men did in their characters and social environment; it is only wrong to think that we can ever have the whole story that way. Free will precludes that. Still, in order to understand ethical and political theory, the student must have some experience by which he can judge whether the principles adduced are real or not, even if he understands well that they are not sufficient. History can help provide that experience in a way proportioned to the young. Literature, as noted above, can do this as well, and in a certain way it is superior to history in this. The great advantage of history, which advantage balances and perhaps over-balances the advantage of literature, is that it is factual; the student is consequently more inclined to think that the historical tale is more "true to life" than the fictional, even though this is not always so, in the sense explained above.

Furthermore, as Polybius says, we can either make the errors of men gone by and learn not to commit them by suffering the consequences, or we can study history to avoid them in the first place. And we can also find in history examples to follow. Some of the greatest leaders, and many lesser ones, have been inspired by the examples of Brutus or Alexander. We need to see in a concrete way what a virtue, e.g., courage, looks like in order to pursue it; we are not much moved by speeches or books telling us why we should be good or that such and such is a virtue. We learn practical things mostly by imitation, and history is an abundant source for examples. Literature too can help us in these ways.

Not only the young benefit from reading history, of course.

The study of history can make us less provincial, because through the reading of texts from different times we see that the way we are accustomed to act and think is not obviously the best way. As C. S. Lewis observes in discussing why we should read old books, we are apt to think that what we have been taught from our youth is evident and cannot be questioned. Reading old books and reading history is one way to fight that complacency. This reason is applicable both to the speculative and to the practical sides of liberal education.

Finally, we can train ourselves, to some degree, in seeing with the eyes of a prudent man by watching Plutarch or Thucydides present what he thinks is primary and what secondary. For example, having read Thucydides, we see that we ought to be wary of those who would attribute political actions to economics and nothing more. Though Thucydides does consider economics, he does not think it is the sole or principal driving force behind history. Thucydides looks to what men say about justice and expediency, what their reasons are for doing what they do. One might even say that a good historian of bad character is somewhat of a self-contradiction. To see well what motivates men, we must be prudent, and that requires moral virtue. The good man understands the bad man, but the bad man never understands the good man. In reading the really great histories we are led by the hand to judge as the wise man judges, and so led to a beginning of prudence by the example of the author himself.

All of this seems to point rather determinately to the conclusion that there is a large, if secondary, role for history in liberal education. But it is still unclear that history should form a sizable portion of the curriculum of a college devoted to liberal education. Given the current practice of being educated at a college for four years, time for any one pursuit is extremely limited. In fact, any college which claims to do more than give the barest beginning of liberal education during the students' four undergraduate years is either lying or so ignorant of what liberal education really is as to disqualify it

from performing its stated intention. The fact that the history of philosophy is mostly the history of error is testimony to the difficulty of pursuing wisdom.

Given, then, the difficulty of liberal education and the limited time available, a college ought to concentrate its energies on those aspects of liberal education which are more central to liberal education or which are more difficult for the beginner to start well on his own. As it turns out, both these criteria agree in demanding that we spend most of our time on speculative matters. Speculative study requires many prerequisites: grammar (which has its own delights and is necessary in unexpected ways for the pursuit of the very highest truths), logic (and not just the logic of the syllogism and of induction, but also of definition and demonstration), a good deal of mathematics (both to help the student grow in the knowledge that he can know, to provide a proper basis for the analysis of logic, and to provide the necessary tool for modern science), natural philosophy (the necessary groundwork of metaphysics and so of theology), natural science (the extension of the study of nature into the more particular aspects of nature and a fundamental aspect of the modern mind), and finally metaphysics and revealed theology (the natural and the supernatural culminations of the love of wisdom). Moreover, the speculative disciplines are intrinsically difficult for many reasons. One more obvious one is that, unlike the practical disciplines, error in which results in tangible evils, error in the speculative disciplines does not entail pain. An engineer who makes a mistake will kill people; a philosopher who makes mistakes may never find out. If his error is fundamental and if he is influential enough, society will suffer eventually; but by then his error may no longer be recognized as the source of the evil, because it has become ingrained and apparently self-evident to the masses. This is the very situation the west, and in fact most of the world, finds itself in today.

The practical result is that the college devoted to the best form of liberal education will spend most of its time on specu-

lative matters. It will not neglect utterly the practical, but will deal with the practical only in its principles, without trying to be in any way exhaustive, simply because it is primarily concerned with the speculative and, with limited time at its disposal, must spend that time on what is most intrinsically difficult to begin well. Its concern with politics and ethics, while these are essentially parts of liberal education, will be correspondingly limited. History, which enters liberal education in an even more remote way, as an adjunct to the studies of ethics and politics, will take even less time. Given the exigencies of the situation, the college may even be constrained to limit its considerations of history to learning what sort of thing history is and studying a few exemplary works of history.

This suggestion, that education ordered to liberty should stick to the exemplary works of history and not try to be exhaustive, is made more plausible by the fact that history is not that hard to learn. The plain fact is that history is one of those subjects which one can usually learn on one's own. One needs some initial guidance in one's choice of authors, since some authors distort history out of bias or ignorance, but, having that, it is easy enough for someone who has learned to reason and to read well (which are best learned through speculative studies) to learn history on his own. Besides, if one is instructed in history by a professor, one is simply trusting his version of events anyway; the situation is not really different from that of the student who learns history on his own. If one is planning to become an historian, then special training will indeed be necessary, but for the sake of knowing the general outlines of history or the details of some historical event most of us will not go beyond reading the relevant accounts by the experts in the field. This is not very possible in other disciplines. There are very few who need no teacher to understand a text by Aristotle or Plato or Einstein. So too in the case of theology and philosophy, mathematics and music, grammar and foreign languages, and even, to a lesser extent,

literature. In short, since the time devoted to the formal liberal education of students does not normally exceed four years of undergraduate education, the college which proposes to provide a liberal education will necessarily be quite selective in its offerings. There is simply not the time to do everything; we must use our time wisely. In fact, it would clearly be best if the student were taught history well in secondary school. This would give him the preparation necessary to read with more profit ethical and political philosophy, and remove a burden from the college. Nevertheless, even a student who has received a good high-school education needs to revisit certain histories in college so as to bring to bear on them the fruits of his longer experience of life. But the relative ease of reading several accounts of the history we are interested in permits us to move history away from the central place in education, making room for the more demanding disciplines. This argument applies to religious as well as to secular history.

The liberal arts college will therefore not require an autonomous study of history (though it will consider what history is and certain works of history) nor will it consider the discursive or the literary disciplines from a primarily historical perspective. It intends to introduce the students to wisdom. As Hugh of St. Victor said, the liberal arts are "certain ways by which the lively soul enters into the secrets of philosophy," and liberal education will be first of all concerned with these introductory studies, the trivium and quadrivium, and with those studies of the truth called philosophy (taken broadly to include mathematics and natural philosophy) and with theology. The primacy of nature over art and prudence, and of God over nature, demands that the college be ordered to theology and philosophy, and that it treat all other subjects as adjuncts to these; in particular, that it treat ethics and politics as inferior to the pursuit of speculative truth. In studying philosophy and theology, the college should not emphasize the historical situation of the authors, but should emphasize that experience which the authors and we share and in virtue

of which we shall determine where the truth lies, using historical fact sparingly, at least in introductory courses. The college will concern itself secondly with preparing the student for the life of the free man or citizen, and so will include in its curriculum ethics and politics. Since the principles of ethics and politics do have a certain universality and necessity, these disciplines can form an independent part of the college curriculum. These practical studies are, like other studies, dependent on experience, and even more dependent than most speculative studies. For the understanding of character and action requires long life. To overcome the impediment the students suffer due to their youth, examples from history and the examples of the historians themselves can be of great benefit. Furthermore, the need to know one's situation in order to act well within it demands that the liberal arts college consider those theses or texts which are foundations of the political structure and cultural climate of the student.

The consensus of the academy as to the role of history in liberal education is wrong, but not completely so. There is a real and important place for the study of history. When that study becomes our sole or principal focus, however, we are no longer pursuing the best form of liberal education. We may have simply decided to become specialists in history, and I have no criticisms of this except a general objection to early specialization in any field. The study of history is a worthwhile pursuit, just as is the study of logic or of grammar. But whereas logic and grammar (at least in some of its parts) have that necessity required for a speculative discipline, history does not. And yet to treat logic or grammar as the overarching discipline would be a serious error; much more so to treat history that way. The error I have been concerned with consists in thinking that history is identical with or at least a primary part of liberal education.

THE IMMATERIALITY OF THE INTELLIGENCE

Richard J. Connell

In his *De Anima* Aristotle offers to prove that the human intelligence is immaterial in the sense that it is not a corporeal operational power; that is, it does not have and cannot use an organ in its own operation, no matter how great its dependence on the activities of sensory powers that are themselves corporeal and that supply the intelligence with the data necessary for its operations.

Aristotle's proof has been contested, and many difficulties raised against it.¹ When, however, one looks at the *De Anima* with the commentary of Aquinas, he sees that the argument is straightforward and lends itself to a relatively uncomplicated presentation.

Since those unfamiliar with the Aristotelian argument will benefit from certain considerations belonging to the philosophy of nature which are closely based upon observation and experience, we begin with a passage from André Lwoff, who makes a very enlightening comparison of the living to the non-living:

A molecule is the smallest unit quantity of matter which can exist by itself and retain all the properties of the original substance. A molecule can be split into fragments, but each fragment is necessarily different from the original struc-

Richard J. Connell is a retired professor of philosophy who taught for many years at The College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. This article appears here for the first time, and is a rethinking of a more extensive article he wrote years ago on the same topic. (See footnote 1).

¹ See Richard J. Connell, *The "Intus Apparens" and the Immateriality of the Intellect*, (*The New Scholasticism*, XXXII, 2. April, 1958.)