How the Liberal Arts Opened My American Mind

Benedict M. Ashley, O.P.
Aquinas Institute
St. Louis, MO

In 1933 I came by train from the little town of Blackwell, Oklahoma to Chicago, the first big city I had ever seen. Until I entered and won a competition to attend the University of Chicago, I had never heard of it. I found life in its gray towers strange indeed. Young President Robert Maynard Hutchins and razor-sharp Mortimer Jerome Adler were battling the faculty for their program of educational reform. As a freshman I learned what was at issue for the first time when a fellow student took me to a lecture by Adler that, as we say today, "blew my mind."

Adler's title was "Have There Been Any New Ideas since the Middle Ages." He said he could name only three, as I recall: Spinoza's idea of modes, Marx's idea of the class struggle, and Freud's idea of the unconscious. I already was enamored with Spinoza by way of Will Durant and had guiltily read Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but how could this professor of the University of Chicago place so low an estimate on modernity?

Looking back I would say that the ongoing debate centered on the evaluation of *tradition*. The faculty as a whole was imbued with the educational program of its former star, John Dewey. For Dewey, genuine thinking was democratic cooperation in practical problem solving by use of the methods that had proved successful in the empirical sciences. Therefore, Dewey urged the social sciences and the humanities to adopt this same progressive methodology. For him, "tradition" was the dead weight of received dogmas blocking the solution of new problems. Hutchins and Adler, by contrast (by no means enemies of either democracy or empirical science), were convinced that science and democracy had their living roots in that very tradition they tried to sell under the neat label of the "One Hundred Great Books."

Today when Western culture is set beside other cultures, they would have argued, I think—as later Allan Bloom argued in his *The Closing of the American Mind*—that whatever the merits of other cultures, it is the West that produced the modern university, academic freedom, and modern science. Therefore, only those trained in Western culture can be democratically open to other cultures and scientifically objective in their study. Oddly, as Professor Edward Shils said in an article defending Hutchins[1] (Shils thought Adler indefensible), the faculty's main attack on Hutchins came from the social science department. Certain of its faculty accused the two of being propagandists for Roman Catholicism and Fascism! These factions prevented Hutchins and Adler from fully realizing their educational reforms in the University of Chicago. They had to settle for "The New Plan," already initiated. It established a college with professors hired for teaching ability rather than publication, a system of comprehensive syllabi by which students could move at their own pace, and delayed specialization by the prior requirement to pass comprehensives in four surveys in the Physical, Biological, and Social Sciences and the Humanities. It was difficult to get through the college in less than four years.

Disappointed that they could not have a straight Great Books curriculum, Hutchins and Adler began to gather a faculty for St. John's College in Annapolis that they hoped would implement their views more thoroughly. In the meantime, they continued to debate their reforms in the University and run an honors seminar on the Great Books. This running debate received a rather crude but effective formulation in the student-edited *The Maroon* as the "The War between Facts and Ideas."

This war was not the only one on campus. The niece of Charles Walgreen, the drug store tycoon, breakfasting one day with her uncle, let slip that in an English course she had been assigned the *Communist Manifesto*. This was a fact, though it was also a fact that the *Manifesto* was being read only as an example of effective propaganda. Uncle Walgreen, however, was greatly alarmed, and before long the World's Greatest Newspaper had made so much of it that the Illinois State Legislature launched an investigation of subversion at the Red University of Chicago. It only turned up a couple of professors with socialist leanings and the existence of an anti-war, or rather anti-draft, movement which foreshadowed that before the Vietnam War, but which then, of course, was directed at the beginnings of World War II. The National Student League was active on the campus,

[1] Edward Shils, "Robert Maynard Hutchins," *The American Scholar* (Spring 1990): 211–35.

though at most it interested only about 200 students. Furthermore, this fell under the control of a still smaller but very active Young Communist League, which was also battling a still smaller Young Socialist League, which was also more radical and less effective, since it supported the Trotskyite rather than the Stalinist version of Marxism.

I avoided the World War draft but was a recruit in both campus wars. On the one hand I joined the Great Books Seminar and continued in it for two years. I will say more about this in a moment. Originally not the least interested in politics and determined to write poetry and teach English literature, I now became fascinated with the radical movement and eventually ended up a card-carrying member of the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party. Whatever one might say for this commitment, it did have the benefit for me that it saved me from the hyper-dialectical attitude that all this intellectual debate tended to generate in students at that time. They could argue any side of any question without committing themselves to anything but academic advancement. But for me the experience of commitment to a cause eventually led to baptism in the Catholic Church, once the Great Books Seminar had introduced me to the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas. But that is another story.

Let me now say something about Hutchins's and Adler's methods in teaching the Great Books Seminar, where Aquinas and Marx were given equal time. They never lectured but pursued a rigorous Socratic method, usually beginning with the question, "What kind of book is this?" Adler, whose manner was considered by many a bit too much like an aggressive prosecuting attorney whose questioning was precise, penetrating, and relentless, pursued a logical line of questioning as long as the victim would keep striving to formulate a reasonable counter position. When things got too thick, Hutchins, very handsome, cool, devastatingly witty, would intervene and take a different, more ironic line.

The very first book was the whole Bible! The question "What kind of a book is this?" received many answers from the participants, most of which amounted to saying the Bible is "great literature." One Jewish young man said he was very surprised what was in it, since he had never opened it before. None, however, could give an answer that stood up to examination until, after long questioning, it somehow emerged that the Bible claims to be the Word of God. To most of us students, I think, the idea that God could reveal himself was so extravagant that it never occurred to us even to consider such a claim. Of course the prophets all say, "The Lord God says," but isn't that just a literary formula? But our mentors forced us to at least consider whether this claim was a clue to understanding how to read this particular book, or for that matter the

Qur'an, intelligently. The same method was followed with Augustine, Newton, and Marx.

I know now that I really did not understand any of these great books. How could one in a week apiece? But what we were doing was exercising the method that Adler later formulated in his *How to Read a Book*, which I regard as a classic.[2] We were learning to read, and in reading to suspend judgment on the value of the book under scrutiny until we at least knew what it said, not what others said about it. I later learned this lesson more thoroughly by exercising it in the Committee on Comparative Literature, where I continued my studies and eventually got my Master's under Ronald Crane, a supporter of the Hutchins-Adler program. He was the leading light of what became known as the Chicago School of Criticism, which emphasized the text as against the historical approach then in vogue. This approach to literature had something in common with the later Formalism and Structuralism in critical theory and, oddly, even with deconstructionist hermeneutics. This, however, was before Leo Strauss came to the University and initiated that "hermeneutic of suspicion" which dominates so much current thought. Yet Marxism was already giving me some suspicions about ideologies and I had begun to have my doubts about the ideology of our academies so exposed by the debate that Hutchins and Adler had initiated.

Let me now say something of my own evaluation of the views of these two educators from my subsequent experience as a philosopher, a theologian, and an administrator of the training of Catholic priests, which was what I became. As I have already said, I think the strength of this Great Books approach as Hutchins and Adler promoted it was that it returned to the roots of the modern scientific culture that now dominates the globe. The importance of such a ressourcement is that it exposes the original questions and the original insights out of which this cultural tradition was born before they became confused by a thousand conflicting half-truths at battle with each other. When Socrates, as Plato reports him, asked, "What is justice?" and Thrasymachus answered, "Might makes right," the problem is inescapable. When Jeremiah thunders, "The Lord God says," I have to ask, "Is the man mad? Or is it the unforgivable sin to shut my ears to the voice of the Holy Spirit?" Or when Newton asks, "Why does the earth go round the sun?" can I suppose that I really know? Once I really see the problem, I cannot take any of these answers for granted. No matter how advanced science becomes, we have to ask these questions again, as Einstein did, and again.

---

[2] Reissued, edited by Carl Van Doren (New York: Fine Communications, 1992).

The second value is learning to read, not just for facts, but for arguments that find meaning in these facts. I have shown how effective Adler and Hutchins were in exemplifying and inculcating these skills. Yet I now think that there was a serious defect in their method. The liberal arts, in the strict sense of that term, were formulated by Greeks and passed down to the medieval universities out which all modern universities came, as the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music. This neat sevenfold list, however, was very inadequate. It was Aristotle who developed an adequate theory of the liberal arts, but before saying a word more about it, I think the Marxists' suspicion that his theory had a certain ideological bias in defense of a slave society cannot be ignored. It requires a certain correction to which I will later refer and which might have made John Dewey give it a more favorable consideration.

For Aristotle, natural science, mathematics, and ethics are real sciences and "first philosophy" (later called metaphysics) is a meta-science that coordinates the findings of the sciences and arts in an interdisciplinary manner. For any of these sciences to be critically constructed, however, requires logic, which is also a meta-science but one that deals not with real relations between real things, but mental relations between concepts of things. Yet it is not some kind of analytic *a priori* cognition, as it was for Descartes, Kant, and most modern philosophers, but it is developed from an analysis of successful scientific thought. Nor can it be reduced to the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Instead, Aristotle distinguishes sharply between logic and grammar or linguistics, and he holds that linguistic analysis is only preliminary to logical analysis. Hence the logical positivists were more correct in turning to logic to heal the ills of philosophy and science than are the analytic or ordinary language philosophers whose concerns Aristotle takes up within logic itself.

Logic, for Aristotle, is not the symbolic logic of the logical positivists. Instead it has several levels.[3] First, and closest to non-critical but directly experiential thought, is the level of literature, poetics, in which all aspects of language including imagery and emotions as well as abstract concepts are mingled and which can be used to represent actual human life as action with meaning—beginning, middle, and end. At a second, more specialized level is rhetoric, the art of persuasive argument, with its "audience-response" analysis, which retains imagery and emotion, yet not as representing reality but as motivating action. At a third, still more refined,

[3] A historical discussion can be found in Pierre Conway, O.P., and Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *St. Thomas and the Liberal Arts* (Washington, DC: The Thomist Press, 1959; reprinted from *The Thomist* 22 [1959]).

level is dialectic (to which we can join sophistic or the exposure of fallacious arguments). Dialectic is the necessary preliminary of all scientific thought, since science begins with truths that are directly evident from experience, not achieved by argument. Depending on the science to be constructed, these so-called "self-evident" truths require a more or less extensive analysis before their evidence acquires a critical precision. Moreover, Aristotle firmly rejects the idea that one can deduce new knowledge from a few principles and maintains that in every step of our reasoning we must introduce new and more specific principles based on more refined observation. Hence dialectic is required at every new step in research to obtain these new and more specific principles. Thus for Aristotle, dialectic does not result in wider and wider generalizations which ultimately fade away in vaguer and vaguer analogies, as they did for Plato, but in ever more narrow and specific insights.

Finally, at the highest level of logical analysis comes logic proper, which analyzes the demonstrations or theorems that constitute the substance of any science in order to test whether they are certain and necessary. This goal of thought is, of course, seldom obtained, but it is the goal of science, and only to the degree that science builds up a fund of such established truths can it be said to make real progress. Moreover, it is at this highest level of logic that logic itself is verified and that the lower forms of analysis receive their ultimate accreditation. Thus a poetic analysis that fails to get down to the ultimate truth content of what a piece of good literature communicates lacks the clue to its unity as a work of fine art. Or a rhetorical analysis that does not deconstruct the surface appeal of an argument in order to expose and test its specious surfaces by sound practical criteria is useless. Strict logic, however, is not merely the study of valid forms of inference as it is usually presented today, but also a theory of the logical construction of the sciences, each of which also has its own logic and epistemology of critique. In the Aristotelian conception, logic is a discipline of learning and communication essential for one to have the tools of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking. As such it is the indispensable basis of a true education, and so also is the quadrivium of mathematical studies that most clearly manifest the methods of strict logic. In my opinion, the Great Books procedure of Hutchins and Adler failed to do justice to the Aristotelian conception.

Aristotle did not accept Plato's Pythagoreanism, according to which mathematics is the gateway to the world of ideas. Neither could he have accepted the Galilean attitude of modern science in which mathematical models rather than changing physical reality become the object of natural science. Yet he also held, against some modern mathematicians, that

mathematics is a science about reality and not, as logic is, merely about mental constructs. Hence it cannot be reduced to logic, as Whitehead and Russell tried to do. Yet it deals with reality only in an abstract manner, so that it is a great deal of knowledge about very little reality. As such it has the quality of beauty, that is, a close fit to our human mode of cognition. In mathematics, relations stand out in all their clarity and elegance. Hence mathematics has both pedagogic and epistemological advantages. It enables students to experience the joy of really seeing necessary truths without requiring them to have extensive experience or to have accumulated much information. It also provides clear models by which more obscure complexities can be represented and mentally handled. Hence the quadrivium also prepares the learner with tools of further learning. I am convinced, therefore, that the ancients were right in believing that, before learners seek to attack more difficult problems of learning and communication, they should be equipped with the liberal arts of logic in the broad sense and mathematics, at least in its fundamental theorems.

Now let us return to John Dewey and his alternate view of education as skill in cooperative problem-solving. Today Dewey is not often mentioned, but it is perfectly clear that he has triumphed in American education, which is more and more technologically oriented. The pressures are enormous to put the emphasis on training students for business and the professions that are themselves conceived as problem-solving technologies. Even in the pure sciences and the humane and historical disciplines, the thrust is to prepare students to do research that will be well funded. But "research" in this sense is more and more conceived as ingenuity in obtaining new information that can somehow be used to solve problems of practical life. The notion that the goal of thought is the illumination of meaning, in short the contemplation of truth, has been marginalized. I might note, however, that even Dewey finally wrote a book on esthetics in which he admitted the value of contemplation.[4] Yet, to fit this into his general scheme, he was forced to reduce the joy of contemplation to the joy in making a work of art, shared even by the mere spectator.

Since Dewey thus made a step toward Aristotle, let us make a step toward Dewey. We can agree with him that in a democratic society contemplation and practical work need not stand in opposition. After all, the examples of Jesus the Carpenter and of the monks who joined contemplation to farming long ago overthrew the contempt for manual work that corrupted the slave culture in which Plato and Aristotle lived. If, therefore, we grant to Dewey that cultural achievements must be a social task of theoretical

[4] *Art as Experience* (New York: 1934).

and practical persons acting democratically to solve a common problem, then a great "felt need," as Dewey would say, emerges. Jürgen Habermas has recently shown that there cannot be intellectual cooperation without what he calls "civil discourse." Such discourse is dialogue in which mere self-interest, ideology, prejudice, and semantic confusion is overcome and genuine communication and exchange of insights are fostered. Now what is skill in civil discourse but the liberal arts? Was not that why they were called "liberal," because in Greece they were thought necessary for free men to carry on fruitful communication, mutual learning, and prudent decision? Thus it seems to me that even from the viewpoint of Dewey, skill in the liberal arts of learning and communication is the foundation of good education.

Might Dewey not respond, however, that even if this be granted, the learning of these skills of civil discourse ought to be freed from the traditionalism with which, for example, Hutchins and Adler burdened them by their emphasis on a canon of the Great Books? To a degree I have conceded this objection. I have agreed that what is more educationally fundamental is not textual acquaintance with the classics, but the acquiring of the liberal arts as skills for learning and communication. I have long believed that this should begin early, indeed at the high school level, and I once wrote a textbook for high schools entitled *The Arts of Learning and Communication*. I have had frequent requests from high school teachers and others for a copy, and I am happy to report that it is now freely available on the Internet and has also recently been made available in print.[5]

Nevertheless, this point of disagreement with my revered teachers Hutchins and Adler about putting primary emphasis on the Great Books does not mean that these classics can be left on the shelf. Because some of these are masterpieces of the liberal arts of learning and communication, they are needed as the best models for acquiring the arts. Furthermore, many have not been surpassed as expositions and solutions of fundamental questions that we all have to face. If there is a better text in geometry than Euclid's, let us use it, but is there a more rounded discussion of the problems of justice than Plato's *Republic*? If there is, please show it to me! Every academic field has facts and theories that are really new and it would it be absurd not to profit from this new information. Yet in most fields the classics still lay out the broad picture better than the newest publications, which contribute only some detail that may be misleading without the classical context.

[5] Just reprinted by Wipf and Stock in Eugene, OR; available online at www.op.org/domcentral/study/ashley/arts/.

Let me now move to a different level, a consideration not of the liberal arts as the indispensable tools of higher learning, but to that of the integration of learning, the wisdom that is the ultimate goal of a life of thought. Without some vision of this goal, the arts that are the means to achieve it cannot be rightly acquired, since their purpose is not understood. For Aristotle this goal was what he called "First Philosophy," or sometimes "Theology." By "First" he really meant "Last" or final. Aristotle vehemently disagreed with his teacher Plato that certain truth about the parts of reality can be achieved only when one has achieved the truth about the whole of reality in the vision of the One. Yet Aristotle also realized that the understanding of part and whole are mutual and correlative. We cannot understand the whole perfectly without knowing its parts, and vice versa, in what is called the "hermeneutic circle." Educationally that means that an educational curriculum, while it is made up of many courses, must have an overall design and unity. It means also that a university must be a unity in diversity, an *in pluribus unum*. How is that possible in the midst of our knowledge explosion in the Computer Age?

One attractive way (and it was, I believe, seriously considered by Aristotle as well as Plato) is to reduce all the variety of disciplines to some single supreme discipline. We all know that in the modern university there is a powerful gravitational attraction by which the department with the best funding and prestige, whether it be nuclear physics or computer science or economics, pulls all others to its center. The way to avoid this collapse is to be competitive for funds, prestige, and students. Such a tyranny of one specialty over all the others, however, can only distort objective truth and produce students who in the next shift of intellectual fashion are left out in the void like homeless comets.

Somehow, therefore, a university must have a First Philosophy, a capacity to foster interdepartmental communication and research, and an ethos of developing a broader vision in which the various disciplines have relatively stable relationships and balances. The University of Chicago has a noble tradition of interdisciplinary committees that strive to accomplish this, but necessarily only within a limited scope. Aristotle believed that such a unification of all human knowledge cannot be achieved by a reduction to universal, univocal terms, but by the analogical exposition of similar concepts and principles and the search for more universal causes. He rightly said that, since this attempt presupposes considerable acquaintance with the findings of all disciplines, it cannot be the task of the beginner, but is proper to the educator who is to guide the beginner toward such a broader vision. Yet, since Aristotle says that some notion of the whole must precede the examination of the parts, even from the start

this problem of finding a larger context, a large vision, must be kept before the student of the liberal arts.

A university philosophy or theology department might undertake this interdisciplinary task. That is why Aristotle called this discipline both First Philosophy and Theology; both are concerned with choosing a worldview and a value system. Students must know from the beginning that they cannot evade the life problem of choosing a worldview and a value system within which to organize all they learn and all they do. Not to choose is to accept blindly a tradition in the bad sense in which Dewey rightly denounced it, whether this mindless traditionalism is derived from the Great Books or Dewey or Adam Smith or the pundits of TV. Sadly, philosophy departments today are on the margin of university life and theology is ghettoized in a divinity school or department of religious studies or is simply absent. This, I believe, is what Hutchins and Adler were really trying to overcome and what they were trying to say through the slogan of the One Hundred Greatest Books. For me personally, it was solved first by Marxism and then much more soundly and comprehensively by Thomas Aquinas and the Christian faith in its catholic fullness.

Obviously, secular universities cannot consciously propose a special worldview or value system, though I suspect they do so unconsciously. Today, even professedly Catholic universities seem unable to propose the Catholic worldview and value system. But what the secular university could do is to promote truly civil discourse, train all its students in the liberal arts that make such civil discourse possible. They must not be held back by economic and cultural factors from seriously confronting the competition of worldviews and value systems, and thereby preparing their students to make informed commitments. N V