

## The Birth of Classical Education

By Andrew Kern

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## *History of Classical Education: Aristophanes to Socrates*

By Andrew Kern

From the fifth century B.C. until well into the nineteenth century A.D. Classical Education defined and dominated the education of the Western world. Albert Jay Nock captures this truth, as well as something of the motive force behind this ancient and permanently modern approach to life:

The literatures of Greece and Rome comprise the longest, most complete and most nearly continuous record we have of what the strange creature known as *Homo Sapiens* has been busy about in virtually every department of spiritual, intellectual, and social activity. That record covers nearly twenty-five hundred years in an unbroken stretch of this animated oddity's operations in poetry, drama, law, agriculture, philosophy, architecture, natural history, philology, rhetoric, astronomy, logic, politics, botany, zoology, medicine, geography, theology—everything, I believe, that lies in the range of human knowledge or speculation. Hence the mind which has attentively canvassed this record is much more than a disciplined mind, it is an *experienced* mind. It has come, as Emerson says, into a feeling of immense longevity, and it instinctively views contemporary man and his doings in the perspective set by this profound and weighty experience. Our studies were properly called formative, because beyond all others their effect was powerfully maturing. Cicero told the unvarnished truth in saying that those who have no knowledge of what has gone before them must forever remain children; and if one wished to characterize the collective mind of this present period...the use it makes of its powers of observation, reflection, logical inference—one would best do it by the one word *immaturity*.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I explore the development of Classical Education from its beginnings in ancient Greece through its development in Rome. The structure of classical learning gradually took the form of the seven liberal arts. The focus of my inquiry, therefore, is the development of these seven liberal arts. I thus attempt something of a formal analysis of classical learning, although throughout I will be aware of the more spiritual and psychological impulses that underlie the forms.

Before beginning an outline of the history of the liberal arts, we must discuss

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<sup>1</sup> George Roche, *A World Without Heroes*, pp. 222, 223.

their definition. Any number of sources will testify that there were seven liberal arts, and that they were divided into two groups: the trivium and the quadrivium. The trivium, sometimes called the verbal arts, consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The quadrivium, sometimes called the mathematical arts, consisted of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. We call them arts after the Latin word *artes*, which was a translation of the Greek word *techne*, which indicated a “systematic and complete body of knowledge deriving from a clear beginning point (or principle).”<sup>2</sup> The seven arts combined were just such a *techne*. So was each art on its own. In addition, the trivium and the quadrivium each were seen as *technes* within themselves. Once the seven arts were mastered, the mind was trained and then equipped to specialize in a way that only a broadly trained mind could.

Some object to the trivium being limited to the verbal arts. They believe that every field of learning has its own trivium, and that the stages of grammar, logic, and rhetoric are in fact the only way to learn anything. Mark Van Doren, for example, argues that “All human work has its grammar, rhetoric, and logic; every man practices them his life long. He practices them better when he knows that he is doing so and can name the processes; when he knows that he is incessantly an artist, either of the trivium, when he distinguishes the kinds of things, or of the quadrivium, when he handles their quantities.”<sup>3</sup> We may see this more readily if we consider Van Doren’s definitions of the arts. Grammar he describes as “the operation of particular things in discourse.” Rhetoric is “the signifying of some particular things through other particular things.” Logic is “the relation of all things to universals.”<sup>4</sup>

With these preliminary definitions in place, let us consider how these ideas have taken substance in the history of the human soul. As we do so, we will clarify and

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<sup>2</sup> David Wagner, ed. *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages*, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Van Doren, *Liberal Education*, p. 83. Mr. Van Doren has an especially useful discussion of the seven liberal arts on pages 81-85 of this book.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

expand upon the definitions. In understanding the development of the seven liberal arts, it is necessary to go back to their roots in the recesses of Greek history.

### **Greek Education**

We can neatly divide Greek education into two periods. The first of these we will call, following Aristophanes, the “Old Education,” and the second we will call the “New Education.” Thomas Davidson asserted that, “the history of Greek education—that is, of education in free Greece—is divided into two fairly distinct periods by two contemporaneous events, the conflict with Persia and the rise of philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> The Old Education, preceding the rise of philosophy, prepared young people for practical life, while the New prepared one for what Mr. Davidson called the “diagogic” life, a rather idealistic life of reflection, centered on the knowledge and development of oneself through cultured leisure.<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Old Education*

Greek education before the Sophists arrived consisted of two elements: physical education and music. For boys it consisted of physical exercise, dancing, singing, playing, reading, and writing. Davidson described the goal of this education as, “to make strong, well-balanced, worthy, patriotic citizens, capable, through bodily strength, courage, social motive, and intelligence, of meeting every emergency of civil and military life...it aims at developing capacity and not at imparting accomplishments or knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes, in his play *The Clouds*, expressed the aim of the old education as the attainment of moral excellence. From very early on, the Greeks pursued an ideal harmony between the body and the mind. Indeed, the purpose behind the training of the body was to render it the “minister of the soul.”<sup>8</sup> Music, of course,

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Davidson, *The Education of The Greek People*, p.53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112. Davidson discusses this idea of dialogue throughout his work.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

included the many arts of the muses, particularly poetry. Young people studied and memorized primarily the works of Homer and Hesiod, works that inspired fortitude and the manly virtues.

Even to this day, something clearly remains of the Greek emphasis on music and physical education, the core of the Old Education. Yet even more important to the development of the liberal arts and to the direction of Western thought was the impulse toward rationalism.<sup>9</sup> Wagner defines rationalism abstractly as “an attitude that emphasizes (at the very least) systematic unity and generality.” The word *cosmos*, as a concrete example, means 1) a unified whole which 2) derives from a principle and 3) develops according to a law. These three elements amount to a summary of the rationalist pursuit.<sup>10</sup> When the Greeks began to view the *cosmos*, or the universe, in these rational terms, philosophy was at least conceived, if not born fully formed from the head of Zeus.

Early formative influences in Greek rationalism were Thales, who argued that all was water and that therefore water was the principle of all things, and the Pythagoreans, who argued that all was number and who understood nature in terms of number. The latter studied number to purify the soul, to evaluate society, and to develop the first rationalistic music theories. The Pythagoreans first joined together the four arts of the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Their fundamental principle was that “all is number.”<sup>11</sup> Pythagoras established a socialistic community of disciples who lived under his authority with the rule of “*Ipse Dixit*.”

Finally, we must not ignore the early emphasis on rhetoric in the Greek experience. The fiery speeches of Agamemnon and Achilles to open the *Iliad*, the intimate discussion of Odysseus and Athena in the *Odyssey*, the constant atmosphere of

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<sup>9</sup> Wagner, p.2ff. The following description of rationalism is indebted to Mr. Wagner’s discussion in *The Seven Liberal Arts in The Middle Ages*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

debate and speechifying throughout both of these foundational texts, the very existence of such men as Homer, Hesiod, and their kind—all of these point to the great emphasis the Greeks placed not only on persuasion and truth but on the beautiful expression of truth, (my nominee for the definition of rhetoric). As we will see, the fifth century B.C. saw a great explosion of analysis and formal abstracted training in rhetoric, but only after the Greeks had experienced centuries of highly effective rhetoric to evaluate did they begin to dissect it.

The Greeks analyzed the fundamental topics of grammar during this period as well, but only and always in the wider context of logic and rhetoric. Grammar was not given direct analysis until much later. Thus we can already see in the Old Education the seeds of the liberal arts, arts which would be subjected to rigorous analysis in the period of the New Education.

### *The New Education*

The fifth century saw tremendous changes take place in the Greek world: the defeat of the Persians and the rise of Athens, the rise of democracy, and, perhaps most significantly for the Western mind, the rise of philosophy. These social and political changes led to novel pedagogical theories and goals, to an approach which we call the New Education. The era of the New Education saw the great formative work in the creation of the seven liberal arts. This period was dominated, first of all, by the controversial Sophists, and then by the patriarchs of philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle. Their immeasurable influence will be considered in what follows.

Let us begin, then, with a brief discussion of the Sophists. While Plato's dialogues have given the world a view of the Sophists that is hardly flattering, we would deny history to overlook their catalytic influence on Greek thought. Who were these people and what did they do to provoke such heated opposition?

Aristotle explained that when the Greeks had more leisure time before and after

the Persian wars, and when they started to think highly of themselves because of their achievements, “they pursued all kinds of education, making no distinction, but beating about generally.”<sup>12</sup> This demand for every kind of knowledge regardless of the practical demands of life gave rise to a class of people that Greece had never seen before. They called themselves “Sophists,” which can be translated “one who makes wise,” and they set it as their goal to teach everything. Their foundational priority was the mind of the individual, as opposed to the mind of the community as in the old education. Their individualism set them apart from what went before, and their individualism led them into their more extreme tendencies. The Sophists helped redefine the social structure of the Greeks. While for many, the social unit was the end to which the individual tended, under the Sophists the individual became the end for which the social unit existed. Practical life became a means to the higher life of the mind. The balance between gymnastic and music crumbled, while the Sophists emphasized the intellect to the neglect of the body. Physical education became a preparation for cultured leisure. Its end became aesthetic enjoyment in the place of civil duty. Happiness replaced worth as the goal of education. However, under the Sophists, reflective thought finally asserted itself. As Davidson expressed it, “for the first time in the world’s history, rationalism became conscious of itself and demanded a hearing.”<sup>13</sup>

Under the Old Education, culture and political education took place in the individual’s experience of his world. Since the state was the individual’s priority, it could easily meet these needs, but when the individual began to turn inward, the state could no longer meet his needs for moral and intellectual culture. The Sophist intuitively saw the need for culture and moved to satisfy this need. In what many have held to be a piece of shameless self-promotion, the Sophists advertised and sold their teaching to eager young Greek men. “The Sophists,” said H.I. Marrou, “did not find any customers

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<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., Davidson, p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

waiting for them but had to go out and persuade the public to take advantage of their services: Hence arose a whole publicity system.”<sup>14</sup>

What they taught, underlying the “everything” that they presumed to teach, was that, as Protagoras said, “Man is the measure of all things.” Yet to argue that the Sophists were a unified school of thought would be misinformed. What the Sophists did have (and this was the impulse behind their rise and influence) was a common way of perceiving the world. Litfin explains that their epistemology was “a thorough-going phenomenalism,” and that therefore, “it is not difficult to see why the Sophists emphasized the doctrines of empiricism, positivism, relativism, and subjectivism.”<sup>15</sup> The Sophists rejected the idea that there was any such thing as ultimate knowledge, an abstract knowledge, but rather argued that the only possible knowledge was that of the phenomenal world, which was necessarily relative since it was dependent on the unreliable senses. They trained for excellence, therefore, not in any absolute moral or ethical sense, but in order to prepare their students for the public life. Persuasion therefore, always a high priority to the Greeks, took on enormous significance to the Sophists. Rhetorical excellence was the supreme goal of the Sophist.

This emphasis on rhetoric combined with the atomism described above, which produced an obsession with individual consciousness, were of enormous importance in the development of the trivium. Davidson again explains it most eloquently. Describing the change that occurred when the gnomic poetry of Simonides, Solon, and others replaced the epic poetry of the Old Education, he writes:

Whereas the epic poetry had turned the thoughts outward to the world of deeds and drawn the moral distinctions in it, this gnomic poetry turned the attention inward to the world of motives, and tried to draw distinctions among them. The effect of this, of course, was to foster reflection instead of action. And this reflection, once roused, turned itself to the whole content of the consciousness and to the forms in which it found expression, thus giving birth, in course of time, to

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Litfin, p. 40.

the sciences of logic, rhetoric, and grammar, all of which may be said to owe their origin to the Sophists.<sup>16</sup>

This change can be illustrated in the Sophists' treatment of dialectic and rhetoric, particularly when the Sophists began to develop handbooks for instruction in oratory. Wagner suggests that "this effort to treat oratory systematically can be viewed as the first step in the rationalization of the art."<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, because the Sophists were willing and ready to argue both sides of any case, they gave rise to the formal analysis of dialectic.

The function of the Sophists then was to challenge the old order and to prepare for a new order. They raised the individual to a new importance, and placed morality in the heart of the individual instead of the community.<sup>18</sup> They added their influence to the voices calling for a general philosophical education. In the course of this work the trivium was conceived.

### **Socrates**

When Socrates came on the scene in Athens, he found two dominant philosophies fighting for the soul, both of which were opposed to the existing order. The first was the undisciplined individualism of the Sophists; the other was the tendency of the Pythagoreans toward disciplined socialism. Davidson describes the development of Socrates' thought in response to his realization that neither of these tendencies would lead to anything but ruin. He concluded that both of these movements were wrong in principle, so his life work became the search for the principle that would lead to social regeneration. He began by investigating the principle of the Sophists that man is the measure of all things. He asked, "What then is man?" He realized that he did not know himself, and therefore he did not know anything. All that people had called knowledge was mere opinion, but opinion could not be the guide for action. Some universal truth needed to be discovered. Now the nature of truth itself was brought into question. This

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<sup>16</sup> Davidson, p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> Wagner, p.7.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, p. 90.

in turn raised the issue of the organ of truth, which was the human mind. Thus Socrates turned inward: “What are the conditions for the formation of true conceptions? and What must be the nature of the being that possesses these conditions? or, again, Who am I?” Socrates failed to answer these two fundamental questions. But he took the first steps toward answering them. He made clear to himself “(1) that truth, to deserve the name, must be true for everybody and not depend upon individual peculiarities; (2) that this is possible only if all intelligences, as such, are in some way one intelligence, or have a necessary common content.”

The measure of all things then, is not the individual as individual, but the individual inasmuch as he partakes of the common intelligence. In practice this led Socrates into the world of man to see if there was indeed a common intelligence, and to see what the content of that intelligence might be. His approach was to ask questions, leading him to develop the dialectical method. This method took any idea and drew out its limitations and internal contradictions, removed these shortcomings, and showed that the conception in all its relations and implications was the same for every intelligence. While he never succeeded in formulating a full system of universal truth, he did see that there was more to a man than his own individuality which made social order and morality possible.<sup>19</sup> Thus was born, or at least self-consciously developed, the dialectical method.

Of this method David Hicks tells us that, “Socrates identified dialectic as the form of the activity of thinking—the mind’s habit of challenging the thoughts and observations originating in itself or in other minds and of engaging in a desultory dialogue with itself until the issues are resolved.”<sup>20</sup> When Socrates and his students engaged deliberately in the process of dialectic a new level of self-conscious learning became possible: “Man could now visualize and oversee his own mind at work.”<sup>21</sup> Every mind is engaged in an unconscious dialectical process with itself, but education makes a man conscious of how

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<sup>19</sup> I am indebted for this outline of the development of Socrates thought to Mr. Davidson, pp. 105-109.

<sup>20</sup> Hicks, *Norms and Nobility*, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

his mind works when he is thinking. This allows and equips for dialectic at a much higher level. It raises the individual beyond the immediate—at least potentially—to the beginnings of something much larger. As Hicks explains, “Although he can achieve a limited knowledge of discrete parts or a skill in performing specific tasks, man’s knowledge of himself, of life’s meaning and purpose, is never final or complete. Dialectic always comes out of the whole to challenge the part...Without dialectic, man can know himself only as a part and the universe only as a set of parts, but with dialectic, he sees himself as a part of the whole and all parts in relation to the whole.”<sup>22</sup>

Socrates’ belief was that man is indeed the measure of all things, and that therefore the first and controlling need is to know oneself. He felt, however, that he was far from knowing himself and that therefore to proclaim knowledge of anything was not viable for him. Instead, he set himself to the pursuit of self-knowledge which was attainable only through the dialectical process. He did not believe, as the Sophists believed, that knowledge was impossible—he only believed that he had not yet attained knowledge. Thus the most profound effect of Socrates’ teaching was to give a tremendous impulse to the practice of dialectic.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 68.