# TWO APPROACHES TO CONSTRUCTING A LIBERAL EDUCATION:

# AN AALE SCHOLARS DEBATE

*Addresses delivered at*

*The American Academy for Liberal Education*

*Annual Meeting*

*November 13, 1999*

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# About AALE

Founded in 1992, the American Academy for Liberal Education is a broad-based, bipartisan organization dedicated to defending and nurturing excellence in liberal education and in assuring access to a quality liberal arts education to all who seek with understanding the benefits it portends. The Academy works with a distinguished and nationally representative list of cooperating institutions to develop procedures for assessing general education programs and accrediting liberal arts institutions. AALE is listed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education as a recognized national accrediting agency for the accreditation and preaccreditation of institutions of higher education and programs within institutions of higher education that offer liberal arts degrees at the baccalaureate level. A principal purpose of the Academy is to accredit these institutions and programs in order to enable them to participate in programs authorized under the Higher Education Act (as amended) and other Federal programs not authorized by this Act.

# Advantages of an Integrated Liberal Arts Program

Peter Kalkavage, Tutor

St. John's College, Annapolis

# Liberal Education and the Disciplines

Glen E. Thurow, Provost

University of Dallas

> "For the man who is capable of an overview is dialectical while the one who isn't, is not." *Republic* 7.537C7

My goal is to place before you the advantages of an all-required, integrated liberal arts curriculum. Such is the liberal arts program at St. John's College, where every student undertakes the following: four years of seminar, in which seminal works of the Western world are read and discussed, four years of mathematics, four years of language study (two of ancient Greek, two of French), three years of laboratory science, and two years of music. In mathematics and laboratory no less than in language and seminar, students engage in the careful study of original texts. Throughout the program, the mode in which this study takes place is conversation. The teachers — tutors, as we are called — are not professional knowers who teach by lecture. We are instead the *tutores* or guardians of the

What is to be said about conducting liberal education through disciplines? I believe a great deal, but in order to make this assertion comprehensible I must first make clear that I do not mean by a "discipline" what commonly goes under that name in today's universities, and that by a disciplinary education I do not mean one in which one spends all, or even most, of one's time pursuing one's major.

In the modern university departments and the specialized studies that are contained within them can be, and often are, enemies of liberal education. In the various fields of study, departmental professors work diligently to dig moats of jargon, to erect ever growing ramparts of secondary literature, and to aim their bows of professionalism at any rapacious neighbor who might dare to encroach. Any attempt at transdisciplinary knowledge quickly reveals the intruder to be a dilettante, the lowest form of life in this academic world. Even within the walls of a discipline, the cultivation of ever increasing

students' self-sustained act of learning. Like our students, we are expected, regardless of our background, to work our way through the various parts of the curriculum. We teach largely by asking questions and by enacting what it means to be a paradigm student.

Before I proceed to say more about our curriculum and the advantages of a completely integrated approach to liberal education, I must emphasize what I take to be the single most important fact about St. John's College. Our College is above all a community of learning — a true *collegium*. Learning at St. John's is not confined to the classroom, oral exams or other formally scheduled meetings but pervades all aspects of college life. Talk about books and ideas goes on all the time everywhere among students — at the gym, on the quad, in the coffee-shop and dining hall, at parties. And while students are expected to engage in their own individual efforts at learning, they are also expected to use their classes for learning with and by means of other students. They are encouraged to be one another's colleagues rather than competitors. None of this is possible without the constant expectation that students practice the virtues of civility, responsibleness, spontaneity and in general the proper uses of freedom. I shall have more to say about this communal nature of learning as my essay goes on.

Now the term "interdisciplinary" does not really apply to St. John's. The reason is that this term presupposes an initial separateness of isolated disciplines that are somehow brought into union with one another. The St. John's program takes its cue not from such isolated disciplines but from the traditional liberal arts — the trivial arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the quadrivial arts of arithmetic, geometry,



specialization often makes conversation even among the cognoscenti impossible (after all — modern knowledge is so vast and complex, who can master it all?). The life of learning becomes the industrial, sometimes tedious and sometimes diverting, task of producing books, articles, and professional presentations, and students who will go and do the same. Neither teachers nor students would dream that what is learned has any bearing on the questions life actually poses, such as "Which God shall I worship?" or "Should I marry this man or woman?" No one is opened in wonder to our world as a whole. At best one may learn some useful skill, but the ends that skill should serve are shrouded in mute incomprehension, and all strive mightily against any attempt to open that shroud. Such fields or disciplines contribute nothing to liberal education; they are its enemies.

Nor should an undergraduate spend the bulk of his or her time in a discipline; there should be a common core curriculum of considerable extent. Only through a common core, in which all of the students read the same books, can a basic necessity of the kind of community necessary for liberal education be met — a community in which all students have some significant reading in common. Only then can they meet on a thoughtful level with something to discuss other than the latest TV shows, or the imitation of TV shows that is too often college life. And the bulk of that read should be the great books which for the most part are the great classics of the Western tradition. In a world that has become global, how better could we have our understanding of the possibilities of human life broadened and deepened than by meeting the vivid characters found in Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare? In a world where traditional morality has broken down and we are faced with constant choices and temptations both individually and in the

astronomy and music. These arts, we believe, have an organic rather than an external relation to each other. The distinction between the trivium and the quadrivium reflects a certain complementarity in human nature and human rationality. At our most fundamental level, we are beings defined by our capacity for speech on the one hand and for counting and measuring on the other. To develop these, our most fundamental human powers, in a way that is both rigorous and reflective, is what it means to be, as the Greeks so provocatively put it, *mousikoi* — musical or educated.

I hasten to point out that, in its devotion to interconnectedness and to the complementarity suggested by the trivium and quadrivium, our program of study must exclude some things from its domain. We believe, however, that for our distinctive way of reading books and pursuing liberal education, this is an acceptable sacrifice.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle tells us that not all activities are capable of the same degree and kind of precision. It was a point on which Pascal too, that cunning stylist-believer-mathematician, was most sensitive. To study the liberal arts as a coherent whole of different yet intersecting disciplines — to study, for example, mathematics along with music and poetry — is to gain first-hand experience in the all-too-easily forgotten truth to which Aristotle points. A completely integrated program of the liberal arts compels teachers and students to explore various forms of precision and to compare them with one another. It inspires questions such as these: What is the difference between a mathematical demonstration and a piece of brilliant rhetoric? What is the difference between the just-rightness body politic, where could we find more thoughtful, or more rigorously argued, opinions about justice than in Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, or Kant's *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals*? In this overly busy world, how could we better learn to avoid wasting our energies in transient affairs than by studying the great works of mathematics and the contemplative life? If we can turn a difference into a dispute, the dispute between the curriculum at St. John's and that at the University of Dallas is not whether great books should be read in common, but rather whether those great books should be read through a disciplinary perspective.

So by arguing for a disciplinary approach to liberal education, I mean neither to defend today's narrow departmentalization of knowledge nor to argue against the central role that great books should play in education.

What then is a disciplinary approach to liberal education and what is the argument for it? The disciplinary approach to liberal education is one in which there is a significant core of courses taken by all, but taught through a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and a major field of study in one discipline.

A discipline was originally understood to be the education given a disciple. A disciple is to be distinguished from an apprentice who learns the skills and techniques of his master. A disciple, in contrast, is one who learns, not simply skills and techniques, but a way of life and thought. His discipline is the exercise and practice of that way of life and thought. Christ's disciples were those who practiced the way of life he taught and exemplified, and their discipline was the discipline of being Christians. A discipline in a college is a way of viewing and thinking about the world. It typically is rooted in some common experience of, or opinion about,

of a word in a Shakespeare sonnet and the just-rightness of a step in one of Euclid's proofs?

This question of precision and kinds of precision takes on one of its most powerful forms in the moral and political realm. I am speaking of that intellectual virtue Aristotle calls *phronesis* or practical intelligence. This is our capacity for perceiving the morally "just right." Aristotle uses the language of mathematics to describe it; he calls it "the mean." I would suggest that perhaps mathematics is of greater use in moral and political discourse than we tend to think, this in spite of the fact that mathematical precision is one thing and moral precision another. Perhaps Socrates in the *Gorgias* was right when he told Callicles that the reason he Callicles was championing the life of self-indulgence was that he neglected geometry — in other words, that he was ignorant of that beauty that comes from a clear and demonstrable knowledge of shapeliness and proportion.

Seminar at St. John's is considered the heart of the program. On Monday and Thursday evenings, students meet with two tutors, who alternate asking opening questions on successive nights. In seminar students read and discuss a wide range of books that include great works of philosophy, literature and history. Here too — here especially — students confront the different kinds of precision found in Plato, Homer and Thucydides. In the course of their discussion of such authors, they also develop that peculiar search for the precision of serious conversation. Such precision is the hardest of all to identify and achieve. A great deal of imprecision, falsehood and sheer lostness must not only be tolerated in seminar but even cherished as a fruitful life, and is developed by reflecting on this experience or opinion. As developed, it becomes a particular way of both opening up and giving order to men's thoughts.

Let me try to make this clear through some examples. The discipline of literature is rooted in the common human capacity for, and delight in, making images in speech. The possibilities of that capacity for penetrating the mysteries of our lives are most fully revealed in great works of literature. These works bring delight to their readers, broaden their experience, deepen their insight, and vividly portray the alternatives one should consider in making choices of life. In studying great literature, we develop our own imagination, and we are able to meet and understand a variety of characters we might have little chance of actually meeting in life and experience circumstances and actions that might be unavailable, dangerous, or even immoral in life outside the book.

To cite another example, the discipline of politics arises out of the common human desires for justice and honor. In reflecting on what men say about justice and injustice, one is necessarily led far from the starting point while keeping it ever in mind. The student of politics may broaden his perspective by examining the major alternative forms of political life men have led through the ages, may expand his grasp of the possibilities of human action by looking at the deeds of great statesmen, and may deepen his understanding of justice and honor by following the thoughts of the great political philosophers.

At the heart of both of these examples and of every discipline worth its salt are some great, or at least very good books, that arouse thought and reflection about some of life's most pressing and profound questions. A proper discipline is not a chute to narrow the path of a student or a wall to block his view,

and necessary means to the insight gained from free inquiry.

As I noted earlier, our all-required curriculum ministers to our rationality in its twofold aspect. I must limit my examples of the concrete effects of this attempt to a few instances. In the freshman year, students at St. John's study ancient Greek at the same time that they are working their way through Euclid's *Elements*. It is fairly common for mathematics classes to explore the implications of Euclid's Greek. When mathematics and language are studied simultaneously, it is natural, indeed unavoidable, that questions about the one lead to questions about the other. The two sides of our rationality — the fact that we speak and the fact that we count and measure — are, as it were, compelled to face each other. Indeed, the word *logos*, which means both rational speech and ratio, embodies the ultimate union of these two aspects. The sort of thing I am describing happens regularly throughout all four years of the students' career. Students are thereby enriched. They learn not only from the books they are reading in their individual classes at any given time but also — sometimes in ways that are not immediately obvious to them — from the program itself, that is, from the temporal *order* in which books are read and from the correspondences that emerge among books read roughly at the same time. An integrated program of study in this way encourages students, in a systematic way, to form the habit of looking for connections between apparently remote disciplines.

The study of music in a liberal arts program has a special power in this regard. If studied as a liberal rather than as a fine art, music gets students to look beyond but, literally, a discipline to bring out the possibilities in some vital aspect of life which, properly pursued, become a window upon the larger whole. Disciplines are not collections of techniques but ways of knowing and being.

What, then, is the argument that it should be through disciplines that liberal education is pursued? When the University of Dallas was founded for a second time — fortunately very shortly after its initial founding — its president, Donald Cowan, established a disciplinary approach to liberal education with the observation, "One cannot become nothing." What he meant by this was not merely the obvious truth that most people need to have a job in life to live and thus must become lawyers, doctors, bricklayers, ditchdiggers, or what have you. He also meant that, leaving aside perhaps extraordinarily rare exceptions, each one of us must and will become a certain kind of human being in a deeper sense, in both character and intellect. Achilles is not Odysseus. Churchill is not Heidegger. If we keep this truth in mind, we can begin to see the argument for a disciplinary education.

Men become certain kinds of human beings first of all because most human beings have a natural bent to their character and mind. They are attracted by things which appeal to that bent. To stay with the disciplines, some instinctively love poetry; some philosophy, some politics, some physics. Should one allow scope to this bent? Whatever else might be said, an obvious observation is that one gains an initial advantage in education by using in its pursuit what the student is naturally attracted to and good at.

But what gives this initial advantage also gives advantage in reaching the end. There is an old dispute about right- and left-handedness going back to Plato and

surface distinctions in order to seek out deep, underlying *harmoniai* or bonds between things apparently remote. Is there a connection, for example, between music and mathematics, or music and physics? What did Einstein mean when he called Niels Bohr's paper on the hydrogen spectrum "the highest musicality in the realm of thought"? What did Socrates mean when he said that philosophy was the greatest music?

Students study music theory in their sophomore year, the year in which they also read the Bible in seminar. The serious study of music can be a tremendous ally in grappling with the Bible. By analyzing and discussing religious music — in particular Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* — students can explore the possible link between our receptivity to music and our receptivity to faith. Music helps to explore the passions. In the story of David — king, musician and adulterer — we see how the passions have an awesome power both to bind us to our God and to transgress His law. The connections to which I am referring can arise in a precise and sustainable way only when a curriculum attempts to coordinate its various parts and strive for wholeness. In this way the juxtaposition of things apparently remote is made to feel natural rather than forced by an arbitrarily chosen theme.

Another advantage to an all-required, completely integrated curriculum is that all students in a given year study roughly the same things at the same time. This means that they can continue the inquiry begun in their own classes with students from other classes in the same year. Freshmen in one seminar, for example, can (and do) continue their conversation about the *Republic* with students in other freshman seminars. Discussions can be



Aristotle. Which hand should one use? It would seem clear that the best human being would be ambidextrous. Yet most are born with a greater capacity in either the right or the left hand. Should one force all to write with both hands, to bat with both hands, to fight with both hands? Or should all do their activities primarily with the right hand, the most common hand to be favored? Or should education attempt to perfect the use of the hand toward which the individual is naturally inclined, whether left or right? I will observe that most people will in fact write better if we strive to perfect the hand toward which each is naturally inclined, than if we force all to write equally well with both. Similarly it is better for his education that someone masters literature and flunks history than that he be a mediocre polymath. This is not because success is the goal, but because he will see and understand life more deeply by following his bent — he will be more liberally educated — than he will by neglecting what he can best do for the sake of acquiring mediocrity in something else. The attempt to become everything has an element of hubris about it, and may paradoxically result in one's becoming nothing because it neglects both the limitations and the strengths which almost everyone has.

Now I have spoken so far without much attempt to say what liberal education is. I could say that I assume that everyone who would come to a meeting of the American Academy for Liberal Education surely knows what it is. But to strengthen my case for the disciplines, I must at least bring out a certain ambiguity that lies at the heart of liberal education. What is the end of liberal education? If we follow its name and say that it is the education that makes one free, we must note that freedom may mean at least two different things. On the one hand it may refer to the liberty of the individual, a liberty

compared. This keeps alive the community of learning I mentioned earlier. There is also this advantage, although students at other liberal arts colleges might understandably regard it as a deprivation. I am referring to the fact that, since all classes at St. John's are required (except for what we call preceptorials in the junior and senior year), students are relieved of the burden of having to invent their own program of study. They can devote themselves directly to the program and to the books that have been chosen for them without the distracting "What should I do next?" More often than not there are pleasant consequences of this practice. Students who, left to their own choice, would never have embarked on the study of mathematics, find out that they love it and are actually pretty good at it.

In summary, here, to my mind, are the advantages of an all-required, fully integrated program of study like the one at St. John's College. First, the simultaneous study of disciplines as diverse as mathematics and language offers students first-hand experience in various forms of precision. Second, the careful combination of trivial and quadrivial arts addresses in daily practice the two most fundamental facts of our rational humanity: the fact that we speak and the fact that we count and measure. Third, students are continually invited to deepen and extend their understanding of books and ideas in one discipline by comparing them with books and ideas in another. Fourth, an integrated program conduces to a true community of learning by giving all members of that community a fixed point of reference and a common intellectual history. This takes the form of a highly organized if necessarily incomplete array of disciplines and great works of the Western world.

in which he is free from the ignorance and prejudices that block his ability to achieve human happiness, a freedom which perhaps achieves its end in the philosophic life. On the other it may refer to forming free men and women in the sense of those capable of governing themselves. This points not simply towards individual happiness, but also the happiness of the political order. Does liberal education mean to form the free men and women who can together govern themselves and others; or does it mean to form the individual who contemplates the world in order to understand it, not to govern it? In Aristotelian terms, is the aim of liberal education wisdom or prudence, both of which are perfections of the intellect?

Now in our easy democratic way, we might be inclined to say, well, both. But of course that does not do. For the theoretical and the practical life are not only different ways of life, but stand in important respects in opposition to one another. To live the practical life one must make decisions with conviction before one has the complete knowledge that would guarantee a correct decision; to live the theoretical life one must be always willing to question — one must be the observer rather than the actor. Churchill might question the goodness of a democratic Britain, but he could not do so while Hitler's Luftwaffe was bombing London. He needed to act, and be seen to act, with complete conviction. Larger questions must be laid aside.

There is something about the academic life, of course, which inclines toward the view that the theoretical life is best. But I believe that one of the essential qualities of a liberal education is that it regards this fundamental dispute as an open question even while in practice having to make some resolution of the matter. Liberal education through disciplines, as compared with a non-disciplinary or interdisciplinary liberal

Fifth, this same fixity of program allows students in a given year to learn through conversation with all other students in that same year.

I end with what I consider to be the greatest advantage of a fully integrated program of study. Both the *Republic* and the *Federalist Papers* focus our attention on a persistent political problem: Who will guard the guardians? In education this question becomes: Who will teach the teachers? At St. John's College the existence of a single coherent program, coupled with the fact that all teachers, regardless of background, must teach widely in that program, provides a powerful incentive for the continued learning of the faculty. In its fixity and interconnectedness, the program points the way to *our* continued education in the liberal arts. It suggests paths not yet taken and new beginnings. Indeed, this is the main reason why prospective tutors apply to the College — to continue and in some cases re-found their own education.

The St. John's program in this sense is the teacher of the teachers. One effect of this teaching is to furnish a check on complacency. By virtue of its breadth and technical demands, the program prevents us from becoming comfortable, from resting on the laurels of what we already know or think we know. It is demanding, and we are reminded daily in our classes and our conversations with one another of our limits — as teachers, as students and as thinkers. We are reminded too of the extreme importance of collegiality as an aid to learning. Earlier I mentioned that students are to one another not competitors but colleagues. This also holds true for the faculty. We ask each other for help constantly — believe me, we need to! And the more experienced tutors serve as education, is better designed, I believe, to keep this question open and before the minds of the students. Or, to put it another way, it better recognizes the force of the argument for the life of prudence. Prudence is the capacity to discern the human good in the circumstances and act to achieve it as far as possible. To repeat it is a capacity that necessarily must be exercised before one knows the whole. But that is a fundamental condition of human life — we must act before we fully know the meaning of our action.

Disciplinary education both reflects this condition and is better designed to develop the prudence to deal with it. Let me make a simple point. In an education organized by disciplines, one must choose one's major before one knows the whole, and therefore on the basis of imperfect knowledge. That choice is itself a lesson, and how one makes it, a chance to learn. One should learn, for example, that one should not choose one's major solely on the basis of one's instinctual bent. Non-disciplinary education, on the other hand, gives the illusion that no choice is necessary. That one can have it all. By its very structure it creates the illusion that one does not have to choose a path, that one can simply live in the whole. Consequently, it implicitly assigns a low place to the cultivation of prudence — it pales beneath the brilliance of the sun of inquiry. It teaches that one does not need to take a particular path because one can simply live in the whole. This is, I would suggest, an illusion if a sometimes noble one. Of course one might say that the world will teach one prudence after graduation through the school of hard knocks, but that is to demean prudence and reduce it to shrewdness or opportunism.

But if we remember that a college is an association of many parts, we may wonder whether even the philosophic aspect of liberal education is best carried out in a non-

guides and mentors for the less experienced. Many of us find ourselves playing the role of Dante the befuddled pilgrim one minute and Virgil the mature guide the next.

We tutors at St. John's College are not merely the benevolent mechanics and overseers of other people's conversations any more than we are professional knowers. Like our students, we are called upon by the program to be open to the daily possibility of being corrected, deepened and transformed — one might even say, periodically converted — by our commitment to liberal education.



disciplinary setting. Should the whole be a collection of uniform parts each of which embodies the character of the whole, or is it better to have diverse parts that fit together to make a whole distinguishable from any of its parts? In a disciplinary setting, of course, professors and students inevitably will be partisans of their disciplines to a greater or lesser degree, with the attendant danger of parochialism. But a discipline, properly formed, will not be a narrow specialty, but reflect a fundamental alternative way of viewing and living our lives. Both the structure of the education and the professors who teach will reflect in some way the alternatives about which philosophy reflects. Is the life of action — that of politics — the best life, or the life of contemplation — that of philosophy? Is life best viewed through reasoned imagination — literature — or through reliance upon revelation — theology? These different views clash for both students and faculty as they meet in the core curriculum and in the daily life of the campus.

For example, at the University of Dallas, Plato's *Republic* is taught in several different courses through different disciplinary perspectives. As students participate in learning the same work from this variety of perspectives, they not only come to a greater appreciation of the richness of the work, but they also come face to face with fundamental alternatives reflected in the different approaches, assumptions, and passions seen in the men and women teaching. The fundamental alternatives in life become less abstract because they are embodied in the lives, thoughts, and passions of professors and the structure of the school itself. This makes real the choices facing men and women, and prevents complacency. On the other hand, where there are no disciplinary boundaries, all disputes may tend to become merely intellectual. There is no territory to defend, and thus little to lose in the debates. One's own being and choices are not visibly at stake in the argument. One will not lose in the eyes of a student who loves philosophy if one does not have to publicly reveal that one loves literature more than philosophy. These stakes, which would at first appear to be an obstacle to philosophy, become in practice an ally to the pursuit of wisdom in the whole of the education. The whole of life appears not in each of the parts of the institution, but as it does in life itself in reflecting on the very clashes found within the institution. The institution becomes better than any of its parts taken singly may be.

A good liberal education organized through disciplines and one organized without them share many characteristics — and these in general are the more fundamental ones, I believe. Yet there are nevertheless significant differences between them in making liberal education attractive to students, in following or not following the natural bent of students, in recognizing the claims of the life of prudence upon us, and in warding off the danger of turning the profound disputes of life into games that do not go deep into the soul.

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