

# WHAT IS EDUCATION?

by Martin Cothran

One of the problems in discussing and debating the right way to educate our children is a confusion about what education actually consists of. We talk about education when we mean training; we talk about the importance of STEM subjects like mathematics as if math has nothing to do with the liberal arts; we talk about the liberal arts as if we were referring to the humanities. And the humanities? We hardly talk about them at all.

So the first matter of business in talking about education is getting our terms straight.

The best way to do this is to go back to the two terms that most fundamentally constitute the work of education: arts and sciences. We know these terms if for no other reason than that we have seen them on the sides of buildings while walking across a college campus.

The words, having quite literally been etched in stone, have a sort of Delphic quality: They seem to embody a noble meaning and yet they are ambiguous, at least to us. They sound oracular, and yet the respectable oracle would be so unclear. The entryway to the Oracle at Delphi was not nearly so inscrutable: "Know Thyself," it said. It may be hard to do, but we know what it means.

And yet these words—arts and sciences—do mean something, and understanding their meaning will tell us what we need to know about what education is. The mystery they constitute to us is not the fault of the words, but the fault of successively more ignorant generations who have left them to the wind and weather.

When we modern people hear the word "art," we think only of a painting or a sculpture or a piece of music. But art is also the activity practiced by artists, those people who wield a brush or a chisel or an instrument. The word "art" comes from the Latin word *ars*, which is closer in meaning to what we would call a "skill." An art in the context of education is the developed form of some human capacity or ability.

In this respect, we would call the ability to read an art, or the ability to write, or even the ability to calculate.

But even when the term is being used this way in the context of education it is often misused. The vast majority of references to the "liberal arts" are actually

references to the moral or human sciences (the "humanities")—literature, history, philosophy—rather than to the linguistic and mathematical *arts* or *skills* of the traditional liberal arts.

Similarly, the term "science" is now wedded almost inextricably to the idea of the natural sciences. When we hear the word today, the idea conjured in our minds is of biology, chemistry, and physics. What is a "scientist," after all, but a person with a laboratory smock peering at cell structures through a microscope, or at the stars through a telescope?

The term "science" also comes from Latin. The Latin word *scire* means "to know or understand." Rather than referring to the natural sciences in particular, older writers like St. Thomas Aquinas used the word to mean an organized body of knowledge. Used this way, the study of history and literature are just as much sciences as biology or chemistry.

## THE THREE ARTS

The arts and sciences, properly defined, constitute the two primary divisions of the educational curriculum. There are three categories of basic arts and three categories of basic sciences. The three arts are the manual arts, the fine arts, and the liberal arts.

### 1. The Manual Arts

The manual arts would include cooking, sewing, typing, woodworking, and machine repair—all arts that have to do with the use of one's hands (the word "manual" comes from the Latin word for "hand," *manus*). To say that the manual arts should serve a very minor role in education is not to say that they are inferior to the fine and the liberal arts but simply that they are not essential to the main purpose of formal education, which is the development of the minds and souls of students.

### 2. The Fine Arts

The fine arts have a stronger claim for inclusion in the educational curriculum. They called "fine" because they are the arts which involve activities performed for their own sake. The word "fine" comes from the Latin *finis*, which means *end* (as opposed to *means*). The fine arts are ends in themselves. We do not sing or act or paint or dance for any other reason than the satisfaction of doing so. These are not done in order to have or do anything

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else. Unlike all the other arts, they are their own end. And, unlike the manual arts, they have direct relevance to the development of the human soul.

### 3. The Liberal Arts

In the traditional accounting, there are seven liberal arts—grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The first three, which constitute what we now call the "trivium," are the basic *language arts*: grammar, the skill of the proper expression of language; logic, the skill of language and its use in argument; and rhetoric, the use of language for the purpose of persuasion. The last four, which constitute what we now call the "quadrivium," are the basic *mathematical arts*: arithmetic, the study of discrete number; geometry, the study of continuous number; music, the application of discrete number; and astronomy, the application of continuous number.

Along with the sciences, the liberal arts form the core of a classical Christian education.

## THE THREE SCIENCES

While the first of the two major divisions of education is called "arts," the second is called "sciences." With the exception of the fine arts, the arts are directed toward the exercise of a human faculty for some further purpose. But the sciences, as bodies of knowledge, are primarily ultimate or final in the sense that knowledge is valuable for its own sake, although some kinds of more basic knowledge can be viewed as instrumental in relation to other kinds of more ultimate knowledge. The three categories of basic sciences are the moral sciences, the natural sciences, and the theological sciences.

### 1. The Moral Sciences

The moral sciences (also called the "human sciences" or "humanities") are those bodies of organized, systematic knowledge having to do with human concerns, ideals, and aspirations. The three most basic studies included under the human sciences are literature, history, and philosophy.

Literature consists of a study of the exemplary texts of Western culture—those works that best represent the main lines of thought about the true, the good, and the beautiful. By calling it "Western" culture, we do not mean to exclude the texts of other cultures which have also been accounted great, since one of the unique features of Western culture is its inquisitiveness concerning other cultures. Over the centuries, other works have made their way into the Western consciousness and have been valued and studied as works that can give us insight into the nature of God, man, and the world.

History is a knowledge of the people and events that constitute our past. Younger children develop from these an idea of the general course and structure of history—the shape of history—so that they can more easily relate one event to another. A study of history includes not just the study of our chronological past, but an analysis of the actions of its most exemplary figures, their motivations, and their influence on later events consequent on what they thought and did. This provides for us a solid basis for making judgments about the thoughts and actions of those living today.

Philosophy takes the ideas expressed in history and literature and considers them solely as ideas. Speculative or theoretical philosophy studies things according to their quantity (the philosophy of mathematics), according to their sensible properties (the philosophy of nature), and according to their being (metaphysics). Practical philosophy studies man according to his ability to create (the philosophy of art) and according to the absolute good of man (moral philosophy).

In all of the moral sciences, the focus is on man viewed in his proper nature, viewed as he is governed by moral laws, and viewed as he relates to those around him in society.

### 2. The Natural Sciences

The natural sciences are the bodies of knowledge having to do with different aspects of the natural world. The two main divisions include the life sciences—biology, including zoology and botany—and the physical sciences—physics, the study of nature according to the nature and properties of matter and energy; chemistry, the study of the chemical composition of natural objects; earth science, including geology, hydrology, and atmospheric sciences; and astronomy, the study of the heavens.

### 3. The Theological Sciences

The theological sciences are the bodies of knowledge that relate to God and the supernatural. The traditional divisions of theology are three: dogmatics, the study of Christian belief; ethics, the study of Christian morality; and apologetics, the study and practice of the intellectual defenses of the faith.

The modern curriculum has become a welter of random subjects. Our culture has abandoned the classical Christian conception of learning—that of a curriculum divided between the arts and sciences, the skills and the content, the how and the what—and replaced it with a hodgepodge of subjects that constitute little more than psychological and utilitarian enthusiasms. Just a little dose of order and clarity would go a long way toward solving this problem.



# EDUCATION

## ARTS (Skills)

## SCIENCES (Content)

