



*The Formation of Civil Society:  
Cicero's Role in artes liberales  
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CICERO ON *ARTES LIBERALES*. MERITS AND PROBLEMS\*

The well-known Latin formula of *artes liberales* appears first in Cicero and was coined, in all likelihood, by no other than him<sup>1</sup>. It had an extraordinary success with the generations to come. Some random examples may suffice: it was taken up and discussed by Seneca; in later antiquity a canonical list of seven liberal arts was set up: we currently have abundant information about Martianus Capella and his three plus four canon. Early universities established “Arts faculties” catering for “arts” students, known as “artistes”. In Paris, around the Sorbonne, there are several bistro-bars called “Des artistes”, “Salut les artistes” or the like, patronized by many who are probably unaware of what these names originally meant. The pros and cons of Liberal Arts have always been under intense discussion right up to the present day. The *artes* wander about in various attempts to simplify academic degrees: in mutilated form, as BA and MA, the A often being a mystery for the degree holders themselves – *expertus loquor*. And yet we find ourselves here assembled under the auspices of the Warsaw Faculty of “Artes Liberales” which is an active and productive institution. All these numerous and varied manifestations prove the vitality of the formula. Cicero would be satisfied.

The general line is clear enough: Cicero advocates, chiefly in *De oratore*, overall education as opposed to specialized studies – in German a catchy opposition: *Bildung* vs. *Ausbildung*. A most welcome admonition these days, when there is a widespread tendency to establish highly specialized university curricula – to enhance economic efficiency and to raise the output of graduates. Here we side, emphatically, with Cicero.

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\* The original form of this introductory lecture, as a speech to an audience on a special occasion, is maintained, with a few new passages inserted. I am indebted to Ivor Ludlam (Haifa), for emending my English.

<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, in Cicero the exact formula appears only twice: *inv.* 1, 35, *quos habuerit artium liberalium magistros*; *fam.* 4, 4, 4, *a prima aetate me omnis ars et doctrina liberalis [...] delectavit*. But there are numerous variations, synonyms and paraphrases, as will be evident from the passages discussed in what follows. For a comprehensive review cf. Christes 1975, 196-201, 235-236 with n. 301; shorter Pöschl 1995, 201.

No question, then, that Cicero's concept of education could – and should – serve largely as a model for modern programs.

For all that there are some points, where, in my view, Cicero's ideas need clarification and modification. Let us start with the wording. What is the actual meaning of *liberalis*? It may help, as is so often the case, to try a translation. In some modern languages the phrase is rendered cautiously: *arts libéraux*, *liberal arts*, *arti liberali* – superficial linguistic adaptations rather than translations. The standard German equivalent is *Freie Künste* (mostly, following Capella, *Sieben Freie Künste*), similarly Russian *семь свободных искусств*, Polish *sztuki wyzwolone*. But these terms are not correct. It is not the *artes* that are “free”. Besides, it would prove difficult to explain what a free *ars* might be – not subject to censorship? Free in the sense of free selection as to topics? I do not know. Anyhow, Cicero nowhere mentions *artes liberae*.

*Liberalis*, semantically, is far from identical with *liber*. The difference appears most clearly in Cic. *de orat.* 1, 72, *artes, quae sunt libero dignae* – those arts which are worthy of a free man; cf. also *Luc.* 1, *omnis liberalis et digna homine nobili doctrina* – every doctrine liberal and worthy of a gentleman; *Tim.* 1 (on Nigidius Figulus), *fuit enim vir ille cum ceteris artibus, quae quidem dignae libero essent, tum [...] ornatus*; similarly Seneca (following Cicero) *ep.* 88, 2, *liberalia studia dicta [...] quia homine libero digna sunt* – the liberal studies are so called, as they are worthy of a free man. Besides, the same difference holds true in Greek ἐλεύθερος = free, ἐλευθέριος = worthy of a free man, noble. Certain arts and crafts are considered ἐλευθέριοι τέχναι. Aristotle, in a fine chapter of his *Politics*<sup>2</sup>, discusses at large how far liberal arts should be taught to young Athenians and stresses the disadvantages of “banausical” (ignoble, narrow-minded, manual) crafts. It is more than likely that Cicero has been inspired by such Greek models, imparted perhaps by Posidonius<sup>3</sup>. But it is not by chance that Cicero's Latin formula, rather than the Greek equivalent, found its way into the European tradition. The semantic field of Lat-

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<sup>2</sup> Arist. *pol.* 8, 2-3, 1337b5-25: there are ἔργα ἐλεύθερα as opposed to ἔργα ἀνελεύθερα, ἐλευθέριοι ἐπιστήμαι vs. βάνασοι, μισθαρνικαί (moneymaking) ἐργασίαι. Both should be taught and learnt, to a degree. There is a short (neutral) list of arts and crafts in b23-25: grammar, gymnastics, music, graphical arts. – Ps.-Plato Axiochus (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) 369b: «Statesmanship is ἐλευθεριωτάτη ἐπιστήμη».

<sup>3</sup> Stückelberger 1965; Edelstein-Kidd 1972-1988 Posidonius F 90 (extensive commentary); Isnardi Parente 1993.

in *ars* is wider and more appropriate to the idea of “liberal arts” than the Greek τέχνη. Just imagine a *technicians’ faculty*, a *Café des techniciens*...

Back to Cicero. Obviously, a sort of restriction is implied. Cicero’s appeal to acquire and to become familiarized with *artes liberales* is addressed to “free” persons only: no slaves, of course. The restriction becomes even greater elsewhere. “Free” comes near to the notion of “independent”, financially independent, in other words: not dependent on earning one’s living by one’s own hand, by commercial actions, and the like. Those “arts” are called *sordidae*, «dirty»: Cic. *off.* 1, 150, *inliberales* [...] *et sordidae quaestus mercennariorum omnium* («illiberal and dirty are the activities of all persons engaged in commerce»); Sen. *ep.* 88, 1, *nullum (studium) suspicio* [...], *quod ad aes exit* («for no study whatever I have any respect, if it is for earning money»)<sup>4</sup>.

Liberal studies just for an élite, then, more or less identical with Roman nobility. Pride (or arrogance?) of a social newcomer, a *homo novus*? No middle class, and certainly no women. That is hardly today’s concept of general education – and here we keep our distance from Cicero.

My second point.

A widely held modern view has it that *artes liberales* are studied for their own sake, not as a useful means for achieving something else, e.g. a specific profession. Put more bluntly, they are useless in a common sense. An increasing number of critics and foes declare that the *artes liberales*, being useless for practical life, should be reduced to what (if anything) is useful in them.

We are all, I take it, under the constant pressure of state authorities to curtail the syllabus of our studies as far as necessary for professional training. Some years ago, the classics department of Cologne University was ordered to «clear the curricula of junk and lumber». Rudolf Kassel replied, on the same note, that he could not obey: «I am afraid I cannot help you, not having at my disposal any lumber». A fine defence of classics as an *ars liberalis*. About the same time there was a general move in my country to do away with certain disciplines, favoured by quite a few applicants, as the students would never have a solid chance to find a professional post; hence teaching such studies would be a regrettable waste of public money. This sounds plausible – but also narrow-minded. It was

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<sup>4</sup> More in Dyck 1996 on *off.* 1, 150.

immediately countered that studying a field of personal preference, albeit without any hope for a solid income, would enrich life and give thorough satisfaction. Unexpectedly, this was accepted, in part. A good number of minor disciplines are still very much alive in their ivory-towers, and rightly so. *Artes liberales* are values in themselves, and should be defended as such. I suggest it is in this sense that they are also called *ingenuae et humanae artes*.

One more actual example: in the United States of America there is, besides universities, a special type of academic education: the Liberal Arts Colleges, with no specific professional training. These colleges, *per definitionem*, aim at general education in a number of different fields – none of them qualifying for a certain post or profession. Typically, after World War II, when there was an urgent demand for active manpower, the Liberal Arts Colleges came under pressure, and the number of students went down. But they survived, and the graduates proved successful: 19% of US-presidents and 23% of Pulitzer prize winners held a diploma from a Liberal Arts College. The same is true in Britain. It is regarded as a normal career to read e.g. for a classics degree and thereupon become government officials, bank managers, politicians or the like. It is gratifying to learn that our host, the Warsaw Faculty of “*Artes Liberales*”, follows a similar line.

Liberal arts as an end in itself, as a means to a fuller life? Is Cicero with us, here? He is not very clear in this respect. It may be objected that, at least in *De oratore*, the *artes liberales* are considered useful for a specific superior end: the perfection of the ideal *orator*. But the matter is complex. On closer examination, a quite different line of arguing may be detected. In *De oratore* 3, 21 Crassus, largely a mouthpiece for Cicero himself, refers to *ingenuae et humanae artes*. Are these “arts” identical with *artes liberales*? *Ingenuae* may be read as a synonym of *nobiles*, *ingenuae artes* as equivalent to *artes dignae libero*. Not so *humanae*: no hint of a restriction to an élite – on the contrary. *Humanae* points to the human race in its totality. Similarly, in *Arch.* 2, *artes, quae ad humanitatem pertinent*: a certain number of *artes* is given pre-eminence as specifically “human”, and it is evident that these “arts” coincide largely with the *artes liberales*. To a degree, both terms are interchangeable. No wonder that “humanistic”/“human”, now and then, may function as a synonym for

“liberal” education. A Faculty of Liberal Arts might just as well be called a Faculty of Humanities<sup>5</sup>.

As to the philosophical background, I suggest Antiochus of Ascalon. His position cannot be followed up, here, in detail, but briefly: for all human beings it is a moral duty, to develop all levels (*partes*) of their person and their specific virtues to full perfection – as they are all *per se expetenda* (*fin.* 5, 47). The highest level, for Antiochus, is virtue and wisdom: man in perfection<sup>6</sup>. Seneca (once more in his famous *ep.* 88, 2) links the idea with *artes liberales*, evoking and correcting M. Tullius, *unum studium vere liberale est [...] hoc est sapientiae*, «(only) one type of effort is truly liberal: aiming at wisdom».

To sum up: the concept of *artes liberales* as values *propter se expetendae* is Ciceronian as well. True, this is hardly compatible with the restriction of “liberal arts” as a privilege for a certain social class. But then well-balanced contradictions are, to a degree, a hallmark of Cicero’s thought<sup>7</sup>.

Let us ask next: what are the actual contents of *artes liberales*, and which *artes* are *liberales* in the sense outlined before? There is a list in *de orat.* 3, 127: geometry, music, familiarity with literature and poets; then natural sciences, ethics, and politics. An impressive list. Couldn’t it be adopted as a program for today’s general education? Yet, looked at more closely some deficiencies come to mind. No word on fine arts, or aesthetics in general. True, poetry is mentioned. But here Cicero is, probably, thinking of dramatic and epic poetry. Lyrics he despises, *negat Cicero, si duplicetur sibi aetas, habiturum se tempus, quo legat lyricos* («Cicero declares, even if he were given a double lifetime, he would not find time to read the lyric poets», *Sen. ep.* 49, 5). No less vehemently Seneca, *non [...] adducor, ut in numerum liberalium artium pictores recipiam, non magis quam statuarios aut marmorarios* («No one could convince, me, he says, that painting should be counted as a liberal art, nor sculpture, be it of marble or bronze», *ep.* 88, 18) – all, in our view, essential constituents of a liberal arts canon. Looking at modern high school programs, one more lacuna appears: no word on studying a foreign language... But a solid knowledge of Greek was indispensable for higher education. Did Cicero take it for granted that Greek was taught

<sup>5</sup> For a modern instance of actual “interchange” cf. below n. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. Cicero *fin.* 5, 46 (quoting Antiochus), *cum omnes natura totos se expetendos putent, nec id ob aliam causam, sed propter ipsos, necesse est eius etiam partes propter se expeti, quod universum propter se expetatur*. For a detailed interpretation cf. Görler 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Görler 1974, 197; Gawlick-Görler 1996, 115-118.

to everybody in the grammar school?<sup>8</sup> Interests and tastes inevitably change over the centuries. One more telling example: in a recent edition of Larousse's *Dictionnaire encyclopédique* we read, as definition of *artiste*: «Personne qui exerce un art libéral» – *d'accord*, but then it continues: «le peintre, le sculpteur etc.» – just those arts which Seneca had energetically rejected<sup>9</sup>. So all attempts to draw up a conclusive list of truly “liberal arts” turn out to be elusive. Why not, then, have recourse to Cicero's list, albeit with additions and modifications?

One last point.

Cicero holds that all *artes liberales* form a solid corpus, an indivisible unity: *orat.* 3, 21, *est [...] illa Platonis<sup>10</sup> vera [...] et tibi [...] certe non inaudita vox omnem doctrinam harum ingenuarum et humanarum artium uno quodam societatis vinculo contineri*, «that all fields of these noble and human arts are held together by a certain bond of community»; cf. also 3, 136 (about narrow-minded specialists), *omnium bonarum artium, denique virtutum ipsarum societatem cognationemque non norunt*, «they do not know the community and relationship of all fine arts, nor the interdependence of virtues themselves»; *Arch.* 2, *etenim omnes artes, quae ad humanitatem pertinent, habent quoddam commune vinculum et quasi cognatione quadam inter se continentur*, «in all arts engaged in humanities there is a certain common tie; they are held together by a sort of relationship»<sup>11</sup>.

The tie-simile is often quoted, mostly with respect and approval. But there are problems. Let us ask, unbiased and modestly: what does it actually mean? Does it imply that all *artes liberales* are interdependent in a

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<sup>8</sup> J.V. Muir (Oxford Classical Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> edition 2011): «Competence in both languages [...] a feature of upper class education». But there will have been differences in grades of competence.

<sup>9</sup> In modern times, there is a dazzling variety of terms and definitions. «*Fine arts* (after *bonae artes*?): those appealing to a sense of beauty, as poetry, music, and esp. painting, sculpture, architecture» (OCD); similarly, German *Schöne Künste*; *Beaux arts*; *Belle arti*. But *Belles lettres* (hence German *Belletristik*): literary arts; *Schöne Wissenschaften* (found in Goethe): *Philologie*, *Sprachstudien*, *poetische Übungen*.

<sup>10</sup> Ps.-Plat. *Epin.* (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC?) 992a, δεσμός πάντων τούτων (numbers as constituents of the universe in all its parts) εἰς ἀναφανήσεται διανοουμένοις. Cf. also Plat. *rep.* 7, 531, τούτων πάντων [...] τὴν ἀλλήλων κοινωνίαν καὶ συγγένειαν.

<sup>11</sup> One more version is found, unexpectedly, as a wall inscription in the conference room of the Warsaw Faculty of “*Artes Liberales*”: *omnes enim artes liberales habent quoddam commune vinculum* – a sort of “condensation” of *Arch.* 2, *quae ad humanitatem pertinent* is replaced by *artes liberales*. That is bold, but no garbling, *artes humanae* and *artes liberales* being de facto interchangeable. Cf. above pp. 516-517.



strict sense, i.e. he who holds and exercises one of them holds all of them? All or nothing – a bold thought, comparable to *antakolouthia* in Stoic ethics: the reciprocal implication of all single virtues<sup>12</sup>. Cicero does not pursue this line. Or are we to understand, less sweepingly, that some arts are prerequisites of others? This is plausible in some relations: geometry/mathematics may be seen as a precondition for music and astronomy. But it is not easily seen why knowledge of political affairs (*quae de rebus publicis dicuntur*) should precede sciences of nature. Cicero is not explicit in this respect either.

A different interpretation is suggested by Cicero's argumentation preceding the *vinculum* metaphor: *de orat.* 3, 20, *nullum est [...] genus rerum, quod aut avulsum a ceteris per se ipsum constare, aut quo cetera si careant, vim suam atque aeternitatem conservare possint*, there is no class of things which, torn away from the rest, could subsist on its own forever, nor could the others, separated from the first-mentioned class, keep up their specific character for all eternity; and following the *vinculum*-metaphor, *de orat.* 3, 21, *ubi [...] perspecta vis est rationis eius, qua causae rerum atque exitus cognoscuntur, mirus quidam omnium quasi consensus doctrinarum concentusque reperitur*, once understood the full reach of yonder reason which makes us see (and understand) the origins and decline of every single thing, an admirable accord and harmony of all doctrine will emerge.

Such a view, that all parts of the universe are thoroughly linked up with all others, comes near to pantheism, as taught by the Stoics, whereby divine pneuma pervades all parts of the universe. Both, the anonymous author of the *Epinomis* and Cicero, may well have been influenced by Stoic ideas. Now, clearly, if everything is connected with, and dependent on, everything else, this would be true of all arts and doctrines as well. But if so, then there is no special feature in the *artes liberales*, no *differentia specifica* – yet Cicero had presented them as something very special, out of the ordinary. It appears that even the “pantheistic” interpretation cannot help to precisely understand the character and the function of the *vinculum*/δεσμός. It will remain a mystery.

But that is of no great significance with regard to the *artes*. Let us simply take the simile for what it is: a warning not to split up learning

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Long-Sedley 61 C; Forschner 2018, 197.

and knowledge into a number of specialized disciplines, an urgent appeal for a general, all-round education.

The *vinculum*-metaphor (the arts held together by a “tie”) comes near to another image, not found in Cicero, namely that the *artes* form a well-rounded circle: (inter alios) Quint. 1, 10, 1, *ut efficiatur orbis ille doctrinae, quem Graeci ἐγγύκλιον παιδείαν vocant*, «that the (well-known) “circle of knowledge” is brought about, which the Greeks call ἐγγύκλιος παιδεία». Seneca *ep.* 88, 23 asserts that the Latin *artes liberales* is just a translation of the Greek ἐγγύκλιοι τέχναι. But that is hardly correct: ἐγγύκλιος παιδεία, in Greek, is primarily elementary education (Capella’s trivium) – a far cry from Cicero’s liberal arts, being higher in rank. No need to remind you that the idea of arts in a circle (ἐν κύκλῳ) has proved no less successful in subsequent centuries than Cicero’s formula of *artes liberales*.

That is what has come to mind since I started musing about the general banner of our meeting. I am aware there are more questions and problems than answers. But my aim was not to carp about Cicero or to find faults with him – how could I, being a registered “amico di Cicero-ne”. No, he is the root of all later concepts as to liberal arts and his voice should be heard in today’s debates on *artes liberales*. It is no small achievement to be incessantly discussed, improved, corrected, and complemented throughout the centuries.

It has been a stimulating experience, and I am grateful, both for the honourable invitation and for the opportunity to present my somewhat spontaneous and informal reflections.

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