

## CHAPTER NINE

# An Essay in American Liberal Education

## University of Dallas's "Core Curriculum"

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It belongs to the very essence of a philosophical question that it cannot be answered in the same sense in which it is asked.

—Pieper, *For the Love of Wisdom*

Liberal education has the power to open one's intellect and imagination to dimensions of reality that are unimaginable prior to that education. The transformation amounts to an enlargement and elevation of reason's and imagination's capacities for seeing, distinguishing, and judging. It is accompanied by a self-knowledge that recognizes the nobility of the human person as an agent of truthfulness. Most commonly, such an education takes place in schools, and it requires teachers. What follows is a discussion of one attempt to carry on such an education.

The Core Curriculum of the University of Dallas's Constantin College of Liberal Arts represents the first phase of a program of liberal education distinctive for its practice of ordered, disciplinary learning. All of the University's undergraduates pass through it on the way to their disciplinary major in one of the University's three schools: Liberal Arts, Business, and Ministry. The curriculum has a structure—a set of distributed course requirements and objectives stretched over the better part of four semesters. I shall presently detail that structure. Its proof as a curriculum ultimately lies in the qualities of mind acquired in the course of submitting to that course of studies. Its meaning, worth, and requirements are the subject of ongoing dialogue among the quick and the dead of the University community. At the University of Dallas, the heavy mist of rhetoric and the lengthening shadows of myth sometimes make it difficult to write in simply descriptive and critical ways about the Core Curriculum, which many regard as its most distinctive achievement as an institution of American higher education. In this chapter, I can only gesture toward that significance.

Permit me to say at the outset that this chapter does not propose to be a history or to represent the equivalent of a committee consensus. It is a personal effort of one who has twenty-five years of experience teaching in the Constantin College of Liberal Arts. I aim to recapitulate key achievements in the University's development of its program of liberal education and to propose interpretations of some of its distinctive features. I speak very much in my own voice as I offer various normative assessments and interpretive descriptions. For much of its history, the University of Dallas has been a community that has prized frank discussion of high matters of common interest. I am confident that the living will speak for themselves. The dead shall little care, for the good of their works and the truth of their words will suffice for them. It is enough for most men and women that such words and works bear some fruit in the lives of those who continue after them.

In what follows, I shall first describe three structural features of the Core Curriculum design: course work requirements, the Rome program, and the role conceived for the Core within the larger design of the undergraduate curriculum. Second, I will offer several exploratory reflections on the habits of mind engendered by liberal education in the Core: strands of unity in the curriculum, wonder and the idea of liberation, the poetic imagination, the place of theology, and an image of wholeness or totality in liberal learning.

## Structure

### *Content and Dimensions*

At the risk of overwhelming the reader, let me pass in review the details of the course of studies very much as the incoming freshman is asked to anticipate his or her first two years of course work. It will be helpful to have before us a simple schema of the Core's contents and dimensions as a basis for later discussing its intended purposes and the order of its parts. The Core course requirements vary between a minimal seventeen courses (fifty-two credit hours) and a maximal twenty-three courses (seventy-one credit hours). The credit hours are spread over eleven subject areas with teaching responsibilities distributed across at least fifteen academic disciplines or departments in Constantin College. In order to satisfy these requirements, students can draw from a menu that includes more than sixty different course offerings. In the current centrifugal atmosphere of the University, the course offerings in the menu are likely to grow more numerous. The distribution of disciplinary subject matter and a required number of credit hours is displayed in the following chart.

Philosophy	9 credits	History (American and European)	9 or 12 credits
Mathematics	3 credits	Literature	9 or 12 credits
Natural Science (Life and Physical)	7-8 credits	Language (Classics or Modern)	0-12 credits
Politics	3 credits	Fine Arts	3 credits
Economics	3 credits	Theology	6 credits

Table 9.1 Basic Requirements of the Constantin Core Curriculum (= 17/23 courses; 52/71 credit hours)

The previous distribution of course work hangs on a structure and serves distinctive educational ends that are not at all evident in the simple schema. There are, for instance, sets of sequencing that allow for the development of basic habits of thinking and the accumulation of

experience within a discipline. Not every core course, therefore, is approached as a first course in the discipline. Furthermore, at least one-half of these required courses are common to all undergraduate students and are governed by paradigmatic syllabi. This common experience means teachers can call upon substantive common references both within and across disciplines. It also means that at any given time on the University's modest campus in Irving, Texas, as many as 1,000 undergraduates hold in common their intellectual encounters with the same classic works and enduring questions. Following is a chart listing the twelve common courses with some indication of stipulated content.

Literature	Philosophy	History	Politics	Economics	Theology
<b>Literary Tradition 1</b> (Homer <i>Iliad</i> , <i>Odyssey</i> , Virgil <i>Aeneid</i> , <i>Beowulf</i> , <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> )	<b>Philosophy and the Ethical Life</b> (Plato <i>Republic</i> , Aristotle <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Aquinas on natural law, selected modern text)	<b>Western Civilization 1</b> (Primary texts include <i>Job</i> , selections from Thucydides <i>History of Peloponnesian War</i> , Livy <i>History of Rome</i> , Boethius <i>Consolation</i> , Einhard <i>Charlemagne</i> , More <i>Utopia</i> )	<b>Principles of American Politics</b> (Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, <i>The Federalist</i> , de Tocqueville <i>Democracy in America</i> )	<b>Fundamentals of Economics</b> (with emphasis on the exchange economy and its prosperity; Smith <i>Wealth of Nations</i> , John Paul II <i>Centesimus Annus</i> )	<b>Understanding the Bible</b> (selections from both Old and New Testaments)
<b>Literary Tradition 2</b> (Dante <i>Divine Comedy</i> , Milton <i>Paradise Lost</i> , selected lyrics)	<b>Philosophy of Man</b> (Plato <i>Phaedo</i> or <i>Symposium</i> or <i>Phaedrus</i> ; Aristotle <i>De anima</i> , Augustine <i>Confessions</i> , Aquinas and Descartes selected texts)	<b>Western Civilization 2</b> (Primary texts include works and selections from Calvin, Diderot, Kant, Edmund Burke, Marx, Leo XIII, Elie Wiesel)			<b>Western Theological Tradition</b> (Texts include <i>Didache</i> , works of Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Athanasius, Augustine, Benedict, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Council: Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II)
<b>Literary Tradition 3</b> (Tragedy and Comedy: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Shakespeare)	<b>Philosophy of Being</b> (Plato selections, Aristotle <i>Metaphysics</i> , Aquinas <i>On Being and Essence</i> , Kant or Heidegger selected texts)				

Table 9.2 Twelve Core Courses constitute common course work for all UD undergraduates. Paradigmatic syllabi for each course specify primary literature.

The isolation of these twelve courses is not intended to suggest that they constitute something of an "inner core." The fact that mathematics, natural science, fine arts, and foreign language are not studied in course work prescribed in common for all UD undergraduates does

not imply that they are any less essential to the University's integrated program of basic liberal education. The case of foreign language may need little justification as to why students may satisfy their Core requirement by choosing from among classical (Greek or Latin) and modern (French, German, Italian, or Spanish) languages. The range of course offerings in mathematics and the natural sciences that satisfy the basic liberal education requirement of three courses currently number no less than thirteen. The rationale for the range of elective choices seems tied in part to a desire to accommodate the specialized expertise of the departmental faculty and to appeal to the specialized interests of the students. In part, the promotion of diverse course work is also conditioned by the conviction that the contributions of mathematics and the natural sciences to liberal education lie in the appreciation of formal and methodological considerations equally accessible in study of a wide range of physical phenomena and mathematical topics.

The community of common course work as actually experienced by undergraduates is more extensive than the second chart suggests. In addition to what is required of all, most undergraduates study in common the following four classes: Literary Tradition 4 (The Novel: *Moby Dick*, *Mansfield Park*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Go Down, Moses*); American Civilization 1 (Franklin's *Autobiography*, Jefferson's *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, *Declaration of Independence*, *U.S. Constitution*, *The Federalist Papers*, *Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions*, Douglass's *Narrative*); American Civilization 2 (Turner's *Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Adams's *Education*, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Kennan's *American Diplomacy*), and Art and Architecture of Rome (a course taken in Rome with required site visits to major monuments and museums in Italy and Greece).

### Rome, Italy

A second element of the structural framework of the Core Curriculum has to do with place and travel. The University's undergraduates—80% of those who graduate with a bachelor's degree—will have studied abroad together for a semester, usually during their sophomore year, in the University's highly structured Rome Program. The intellectually formative influence of this program is difficult to overestimate. Seniors frequently recall their Rome semester as the point in their education when the idea of liberal learning became personal for them. Most of our students know the streets of Rome better than any American city other than their hometown. The fixed curriculum in Rome is restricted to Core classes: Western Civilization 1, Philosophy of Man, Western Theological Tradition, Literary Tradition 3 (Tragedy and Comedy), and Art and Architecture in Rome. Together the Rome student body will read cross-disciplinary, seminal works by Plato, Sophocles, Augustine, Livy, Clement of Rome, Boethius, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Athanasius, Martin Luther, Thucydides, Benedict of Nursia, Descartes, Shakespeare, and John Calvin. Equally important, they will visit selected sites and monuments in Rome and its environs, Florence, Venice, Assisi, and Naples. A required trip to Greece takes them to Athens's Acropolis and Agora, the classical center of healing at Epidaurus with the ruins of its magnificent theater, the citadel at Mycenae, the ruins at Corinth, the sanctuaries at Delphi and Olympia, and the sacred spaces of the Greek Byzantine monastery, Hosios Loukas.

For undergraduate students at the University of Dallas, the Constantin College campus in Rome becomes closely identified with their experience of liberal learning. Our students, by and large twenty-year-old sophomores at the time of their Rome semester, often recall it as a transformative experience in which the ideas, books, and questions of the classroom are elevated in

their imaginations and conversations and made more personal. Thoughtful engagement with the many poetic, philosophical, political, historical, and theological traditions of Western civilizations become for four months the warp and woof of everyday life. The conditions of travel, schedule, and camaraderie, as well as the foreignness of it all, befit learning to a form of life that takes on the shape of a transformative adventure.

### *The Core as a Part*

Men and women pursuing a baccalaureate degree at the University of Dallas give only the better part of their freshman and sophomore years to studies in the Core Curriculum of the Constantin College of Liberal Arts. Their junior and senior years are largely devoted to a chosen major course of studies in conventional academic disciplines such as English, business, history, biology, psychology, and so forth. This concentration of studies holds not only for students of Constantin College, but also for undergraduates pursuing major courses of studies in functional areas of business and pastoral ministry in the University's College of Business and its School of Ministry. Regardless of the college or school, the Core Curriculum provides the liberal arts foundation for all University of Dallas undergraduate degree programs. By its original intent, as evident in its founding documents and earliest academic bulletins of the 1950s, undergraduate education was simply liberal education. For a period of four years, the one goal of liberal learning subtended the common requirements of both the Core and the specialized course work in each student's elected major, be it, for example, economics, physics, or classics. Articulating that overarching goal has been an ongoing dialogue within the University since it was chartered in 1957.

There are currently different models available within the University as to how the education of "the Core" forms a whole with the student's subsequent education. The bachelor's degree in the College of Business differs from that in Constantin Liberal Arts in that its major program is decidedly ordered to concerns with functional areas such as marketing, finance, and accounting. Similarly, in the case of the School of Ministry, its program of major studies is tailored toward "hands-on service" of pastoral ministry. The innovation of undergraduate degrees outside of Constantin College, which were designed to serve directly the missions of professional education, sparked a decade of controversy within the University of Dallas and its various constituencies—faculty, administration, students, and alumni. When the controversy was fruitful, it generated sharp criticism of and renewed commitment to the meaning and means of liberal education in the University's undergraduate programs.

In sum, education within the Constantin College Core Curriculum is outwardly described as a prescribed set of course work in eleven liberal arts disciplines, highly structured within each distinct discipline and in the order among them. Participation in the Rome program weaves a measure of existential reality into the bookish, classroom appreciation of liberal learning. What is learned in the Core, with its breadth across fundamental disciplines, is meant to be completed by the student's subsequent submission to an elected major discipline.

## **Reflections on Meaning and Unity**

In what follows I offer five distinct reflections that in different ways explore the meaning and unity of the Core Curriculum. On this topic the University of Dallas has no authoritative position, nor could it really. This is not to say that the subject is a will-o'-the-wisp. The unity or

coherence of a curriculum is a function of the order of its parts standing in relation to the ends of learning that it serves. In his time, John Henry Newman spoke of the “circle of knowledge” (*Idea of a University*). The earlier model of the “tree of knowledge” suggested by Francis Bacon (*The Advancement of Learning*) was developed by d’Alembert (*Preliminary Discourse to Encyclopedia of Diderot*). In the Middle Ages, Bonaventure found order in the arts and sciences by analogy to the classical four senses of scripture (*On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*), and in Questions V and VI of his *Commentary on the “De Trinitate” of Boethius*, Thomas Aquinas assimilated Aristotle’s divisions among the productive, practical, and theoretical sciences. Plato’s “Divided Line” (*Republic* 509–534) also has its virtue in organizing the hierarchy of learning. In my own reflections, I have found no privileged model to justly represent the coherence of the parts and its order to the ends of liberal learning. Each of the previous models, however, has its insights, and one might find some parallels to them in my own try at identifying unifying principles or structures at work in the University of Dallas’s Core Curriculum.

### *A Network of Interlocking Interests*

The Core Curriculum possesses a distinct but flexible identity by virtue of its conscious attention to four intellectual interests that overlap, complement, and contrast the pathways of learning in surprising and creative ways. Let me introduce them with minimal comment.

First, liberal learning is grounded in the consideration of classical works of Western civilizations. The practice of reading classical works is very much tied up with the cultivation of a refined imagination, which is one of the more effective features of the University’s curriculum. It should be emphasized that the liberal education in Constantin College is not a “great books” program, even if we do study many great books. Education is pursued with a decided sense of the variety of academic *disciplines* and the University’s faculty work within *departments*.

Second, the curriculum is undertaken with an understanding of the American Republic viewed in the light of its founding principles and from within dialectic that takes pre-modern accounts of justice as seriously as modern accounts. This intention is not restricted to the politics requirement; one finds it prominently in the Core requirements of economics, history, and even to an extent in literature. In the University’s 1962 statement of aims, one reads this: “An understanding and criticism of the political, economic, and social institutions which operate in the nation are obligatory efforts for the University, but beyond the analytical concern lies a less dispassionate attention to the values that have motivated the construction of American society. This University recognizes an obligation to engender in its students a proper piety toward the land and the nation which enfold it.” The pious impulse still drives learning today.

Third, undergraduates are asked to engage the intelligibility of material nature through contemporary scientific methods. The University of Dallas has always promoted the study of exact science of the natural world as an essential feature of liberal education. Acquaintance with the methods and findings of contemporary science complements the students’ study in the so-called “humane” disciplines, such as economics, politics, history, literature, philosophy, and theology.

Fourth, the Core maintains a distinctive interest in the primary sources of Revelation that are foundational for theological inquiry. Questions of doctrine and practice grounded in Christian faith inform major works of literature, for instance, *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. Western history, politics, economics, philosophy, and art and architecture are deeply influenced by ideas and passions that spring from and are sustained by Christian experience. A

measure of learned acquaintance with the sources of Christian Revelation is therefore a critical element in the intellectual formation of the Core. It should be emphasized, however, that the sources of Revelation are studied not so much with the goal in mind of enriching one's cultural literacy, as useful as that might be, but primarily in the interest of gaining an ear and a voice with respect to the evidences of Christian understanding.

The broad scope of education in Constantin College is informed by all four of these intentionalities. By virtue of the network of mutual influences that crisscross the different disciplines and subject matters of the Core, students come away with an integrated experience of the world of learning. It appears as broad and rich, and its many ideas and distinct disciplines and subject matters show remarkable interconnections. The four strands of meaning knit together the separate elements of the Core into something of a whole. Minds and hearts schooled in its curriculum can be expected to manifest some measure of breadth and depth and discrimination in their understanding and judgment with regard to human experience and the truths that matter most.

### *Wonder and the Idea of Liberation*

My second try at identifying a unifying principle of the Core considers the meaning of freedom or liberation in liberal education. I approach this topic by way of a reflection on Jacob Klein's essays on liberal education. He describes human learning progressing through four stages in the pursuit of knowledge. The critical point for our purposes is his understanding of an intellectual conversion that draws one into consideration of intelligibilities that transcend our pragmatic interests. Our first taste of learning comes with the acquisition of the language, customs, and manners of our families, clans, and civic associations. We assimilate sentiments, expectations, and pre-judgments as to what is important or trivial, worthy or shameful, beautiful or ugly. We adapt ourselves to the everyday pragmatics of getting the ordinary things done. These early, specifically human developments, grounded in language and discrimination, are what Jacob Klein calls education at its *elemental* stage. It is elemental in the sense that it is inescapable, though it is certainly of a different order than the instincts or acquired adaptabilities that govern the behavior of the insects and brute animals. Every human person acquires the elemental sort of education. Elemental education is also personally or subjectively foundational in the sense that it constitutes the horizon for any future learning.

Klein goes on to explain that the elemental intelligence that begins in a predominant mode of passive receptivity soon enough becomes more active as we encounter surprises, disappointments, sufferings, and obstacles. The world we live in does not simply and readily adjust itself to our received expectations. *Experience* becomes part of our elemental education. In experience, reason elevates itself beyond the necessary but simple transfer of "understanding" from generation to generation. Experience's encounter with a problem or question forces or, at the least invites, a move beyond elemental education into the next level, which Klein calls *formal* education. What we have come to call the "arts and sciences" are the refined responses to the insufficiency of experience. We want to know *why* things have come about and *how* they work. Such a turning of the mind from experience to explanation represents a huge development in interests in human understanding. Aristotle recognized that by pressing the questions of *why* and *how*, we could hope to discover universal, explanatory principles and causes.

The central point to hold in mind is the role of the "turning of the mind." The sustained pursuit of the *whys* and *hows* in an art or a science requires that we intellectually disengage

ourselves from the direct givenness of the particularities and familiarities of experience. In a moment of *reflection*, the intellect permits itself to regard what is given as a question—it learns to convert what is given along with the received pre-judgments of culture into something unfamiliar and unknown. It is what Aristotle understood as the wonder that is the beginning of philosophy (*Metaphysics* 1.2; 982b12). Liberal learning is grounded in that moment in which the formal intelligibility of things rests on the poise of wonderment:

We burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so? To be sure, we have raised the question “why” before. I can certainly ask: Why did it snow yesterday and does not snow today? Why did Mr. X say this or that to Mr. Y? But this “why” I am talking about now is of a different kind. It does not lead to any discovery or recovery. It calls myself into question with all my questioning. It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me. It gives me the freedom to go to the roots of all my questioning.

The freedom of wonder manifests itself in two ways. More immediately we recognize it as the leverage that permits *exploratory* reason to develop in its many disciplinary modes. Formal education gets underway in the first place when we look for an answer to “why” in the rigor, repeatability, and stability that must always elude experience. In this regard, the developments of history, mathematics, and the sciences are themselves fruits of and even manifestations of the liberal turn of mind.<sup>10</sup> Maintaining the vitality of one’s conversion of the mind in the midst of disciplinary studies should become a preoccupation of self-conscious liberal education. Learning within a given discipline, however, too easily consumes itself with mastering the formal elements of vocabulary, techniques, lines of research and experimentation, and the organized body of explanatory concepts. It becomes important within disciplinary learning to be attentive to the substantive role of wonder.

Yet wonder not only liberates one *for* the sort of questioning that turns one toward the formal intelligibilities that make up the subject matters of, say, physics, mathematics, history, or even literature, but also liberates one *from* that sort of focused questioning. It brings one to know oneself as a knower who in wonder’s moment knows no-thing, as one detaches oneself from any interpretive tie that situates one within the world’s horizon. We know ourselves as knowers, as those who can confidently question until what is given as known becomes for us a question. Inquiry that springs from wonder, as Klein says, “gives me the freedom to go to the root of all my questioning.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most essential achievement of liberal education is one’s recognition of one’s self as knower in the freedom of wonderment before what is given. Is not this most liberated mode of inquiry what we call *philosophy*?

Philosophy’s role in liberal education can be ambivalent. On the one hand, it can be considered as a distinct formal discipline that takes its place alongside history, mathematics, the natural sciences, and literature. It is a systematic, rational pursuit of fundamental concepts and first principles. The resulting view of intellectual order sheds light on perennial questions. On the other hand, it stands for that most liberal mode of *reflective* inquiry evident at the source of all liberal studies. In this second sense, philosophy is not so much a discipline with its distinctive subject matter; it is rather an intellectual cast of mind that sustains the modalities of withdrawal and detachment able to hold at bay the tendencies to routinize study into methodological specializations and to order knowledge to the possibilities of its worldly applications, important as these may be.

When students entered the classrooms of University of Dallas for the first time in September 1956, they were offered “the opportunity to achieve for themselves a liberal education emphasizing philosophy as the integrating principle in the various disciplines.”<sup>12</sup> Over the years the general education course requirements in philosophy have fallen from fifteen to twelve and recently to nine credit hours; however, its integrative role in liberal education has not diminished. Whether three courses in philosophy are sufficient to engender the rudiments of the philosophical habit of mind is an important practical curricular question. If Klein is correct in his understanding of the liberal origins of the *formal* disciplines, such as history, literature, physics, and biology, then a diminishment of philosophical learning in the Core can lead to a diminishment of the spirit of liberal learning across the Core and as well in Constantin College’s major programs.

### *Poetic Imagination*

In the midst of a biographical account of how she came to take “on the process of reading serious literature more closely,” Louise Cowan describes an early encounter with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.<sup>13</sup> It was for her the beginning of a romance with literature, which she soon recognized as a way to follow in the dual quest for self-understanding and the fullness and complexity of reality. In a certain sense, Cowan’s discovery was the “way of the imagination”:

Not until a literary work of art awakened my imaginative faculties could the possibility of a larger context than reason alone engage my mind. I had been expecting logical proof of something one was intended to recognize. What was needed was a way of seeing. I had to be transformed in the way that literature transforms—by story, image, symbol—before I could *see* the simple truths of the gospel.<sup>14</sup>

There is much in this passage that is significant for understanding what is distinctive and excellent in Constantin College’s pursuit of liberal education. Classic works of literature have the power to “seize our imaginations and make us commit ourselves to the self-evident, which we have forgotten to recognize.”<sup>15</sup> Story, image, and symbol—works of poetic fiction—are objects of vision resplendent in meaning. Learning to read classic literature in ways that awaken one’s imaginative faculties becomes a dominant goal in the Core. The heightened esteem for the imagination shares much in common with Romanticism’s rebellion against the spiritual desiccation of reality and its diminishment of the range of reason, which is the enduring inheritance of rationalism.

Perhaps the following reflection on a poem will illustrate concretely the “way of the imagination.” In his poem “Driftwood” (1948), Richard Wilbur sees, cast up on the beach, pieces of once greenwoods, hewn from the forest and fitted to the masts and oars and planks of the great sea vessels long since smashed or sunk. Weathered by the “great generality of waters” and “shaped and flowingly fretted by the waves’ ever surpassing stress,” they now look to him “curious crowns and scepters...here on the gold sand, warped and wry, but having beauty of excellence earned.” He goes on to wonder that “in a time of continual dry abdications and of damp complicities, they are fit to be taken as signs...emblems...that have saved in spite of it all their dense ingenerate grain.” The point I wish to take from this recitation is the image of the wood’s ingenerate grain. Begotten in forest growth, it endures through service in war and commerce and despite the indifference and calamities of the sea. The poet is taken by the beauty and the dignity reserved in the driftwood’s “ingenerate grain.” The imagination’s capacity to see, displayed in Wilbur’s poem, is what the University aims to awaken through its students’ thought-

ful encounters with classic works of art and literature. One can view “ingenerate grain,” if I’m not mistaken, as the lineaments of wisdom, reserved in poetic works, originally begotten in various cultures and civilizations, that have endured the vicissitudes of nature and history. It remains but for well-formed intellects to actually see it.

As I have said, studying the classics and awakening the imagination are two features that walk hand-in-hand at the University of Dallas. They are conditioned by what might be characterized as a neoromanticism, at least in its contra-rationalist impulses. There is a third formative influence that follows not far behind, as it were, along the way of the imagination. It is the epic figure of the hero and a cultivation of the ethical ideal of greatness. Its influence confers a measure of self-evidence to the norms of nobility, for which much of modernity has lost its powers of recognition and acknowledgment, but which seem requisite for any ethics responsive to human dignity. Discussion of ethical quandaries and moral judgments, largely unavoidable in philosophy, politics, economics, and increasingly in the natural sciences, can be more discerning and alive to a broader range of human possibilities in minds quickened along the way of the imagination. At the very least, the easy cynicism of the contemporary “whatever” mentality is challenged by literary encounters in the Core. It must be acknowledged, however, that academic studies are insufficient for the moving of wills and the setting of steady, ready dispositions for morally good action. The high road to moral excellence may not lead through the academy. Nevertheless, it need not be irrelevant or counterproductive. For it is within the resources of a liberal education to provide prompts to intellect and moral imagination for developing habits of discernment and judgment. The spread of irreligion in Europe and North America and the banalization of popular culture leave ordinary people and elites little to fall back upon.

The point in all this is not to enter into a critical exposition of Cowan’s theory of the imagination. I only want to indicate how it influenced one of the formative and unifying features of liberal learning in the Core Curriculum in Constantin College: the practice of quickening and refining one’s powers for imaging the range and subtleties of human existence through the study of classic works of literature. It does not influence the curricular and pedagogical interests of just literature and the fine arts; one finds it as well in history, the modern and classical languages, and politics. Reading classics in order to awaken the imaginative faculties, to recall one to the self-evident, and to “elevate the consciousness” to wider visions of humanity is pursued throughout the core curriculum. One finds curricular interest in the imagination even in mathematics and the natural sciences.<sup>16</sup>

### *Theology and “The Full Range of Reason”*

Theology is an essential pathway in the Core’s approach to liberal learning. The required courses, *Understanding the Bible* and *Western Theological Tradition*, are exercises in disciplinary theological inquiry—or at least the rudiments thereof. They are decidedly *not* courses designed for the purposes of catechesis, apologetics, or evangelization (which are intended for the practical building up of one’s faith). This is not to deny, however, the significant fact that the data and the very rationality of the proper objects of theological inquiry are given from within the context of faith and its living tradition. Christian understanding makes truth claims about man, the world, and God that have profoundly informed basic ideas about reality, and especially about the nature of the human person. Within the Core Curriculum, men and women are asked to direct their powers of inquiry toward reality that faith has transmitted in the

Christian theological tradition. As such, it complements the understanding of reality pursued in the traditions of poetic, scientific, historical, and philosophic inquiry.

The study of Christian understanding extends and inwardly intensifies the intellectual commitment to attend to the truth in all of its manifestations. It follows on liberal learning's refusal to acquiesce to the constraints of the modern Enlightenment culture of positivism.<sup>17</sup> The University of Dallas's practice of liberal education refuses to restrict reason's range within the limits of what is material and empirical. Just as its refusal gives intellect leave to find reasoned understanding in the pursuits of the poetic imagination and in philosophy's theoretical speculations on transcendent reality, it also extends the range of reason to theological inquiry. The disciplinary study of Christian theology is part of "reason open to the language of being."<sup>18</sup> As a moment in liberal learning, Christian understanding disposes men and women to attend to an ongoing tradition of personal encounters with a transcendent divine being. Far from silencing questioning, it puts one in conversation with those who have, for more than 3,000 years and across many different civilizations, sought wisdom and understanding in dialogue with God in the midst of often harsh human experience.

### *Totality of the Core Curriculum*

Is there some objective or formal basis to the order of courses that make up the total requirements of the Core Curriculum? As constituted over the last several decades, there is a significant concentration of course work in three disciplines. Most (even if not all) university undergraduate students will take *four* courses in literature, *four* courses in history, and *four* courses in philosophy.<sup>19</sup> These requirements total thirty-six credit hours. Why this concentration in these three disciplines? What is privileged about them?

I propose that the rationale lies in the three-fold distinction among the types or kinds of bearers or sources of intelligibility and in the fact that these three disciplines are paradigmatic of the liberal exploration of those sorts of intelligibility. The idea is that learning is a matter of acquiring the capacity to receive or attend to the intelligibility of the objects of one's interest. The term "object" used here is a term of art. It names the reality encountered precisely insofar as in it resides the intelligibility of what we come to understand. Think of objects as things-in-their-intelligibilities. In personified language we could say that the *formal objects* of an art or science or discipline are the particular dimensions of reality that speak to the ears of inquirers who have learned to hear them. Not everyone who walks a stretch of wetlands, for example, recognizes the web of intelligibilities that sing out to the environmental biologist, nor would they catch the play of light that would attract the artist. Disciplines train us to see pervasive, determining aspects or dimensions of things. An academic discipline develops distinctive modes of intellectual receptiveness to specific, intelligible features of reality. Generally speaking, there are just three very broad categories of formal objects. They are: things or necessities of nature, human choices and actions, and things made (and especially works of literary/artistic imagination). Perhaps there is also a fourth, which we will speak about shortly. We can call these categories the natural (scientific/philosophical), the practical (historical),<sup>20</sup> and the poetic (or artistic). Each category of object represents its distinctive source of intelligibility. And together they exhaust the possibilities. Indeed, the many distinct arts and sciences—or sets of arts and sciences—cluster around or specify just these three. Each formal intelligibility calls for its own mode of attention.

*Literature* engages the student in works of literary imaginations. These are poetic artifacts. Men and women made the works we read. They are not harvested from the land, nor culled from the inner structures of nature. They are the *factum*—the thing having been made. It is no easy matter to engage the intelligibility of literary masterpieces, be they epics, dramas, lyrics, or novels. The meanings held by these texts subsist in the memories and imaginations of readers and hearers, not unconnected from how they first sprang from the imaginative insights of their makers. Literature's inspired and crafted works of imagination give access to the truth of reality in a manner filtered through the ideal and graced by the beautiful. Fine arts and foreign languages fall under the same category: Their intelligibilities are borne by the *factum*—the made thing. With the concentration of twelve credit hours in literature, one can have confidence in acquisition of the rudimentary habits for attending to the elements of truth and wisdom accessible in poetic works.

The objects of *history* are of a different sort. They are deeds or actions—the *actum*. At the center of the study of history lie the judgments, decisions, and actions that have shaped human societies and cultures. Acts of war; exploration of and migrations to new territories; promulgation of edicts, constitutions, treaties; acts of murder, philanthropy, invention, protest, and revolution—all variously figure into history's accounts of how institutions as well as individual men and women of the past have responded to opportunities and challenges of their times and what marks they have left in their societies and culture. Judgments, choices, and acts of free will alter the web of human relationships. The study of history gives the student access to modes of intelligibility that are borne in the reality of human judgment and action. The disciplines of politics and economics share much in common with history's interest with intelligibilities borne by judgment and action. With the concentration of twelve credit hours in history, one can have some confidence in the acquisition of rudimentary intellectual habits for attending to the elements of truth and wisdom discernible in the practical sphere of action and judgment.

*Philosophy* can get by without works of literature and historical accounts of the past. The intelligibilities it engages are not primarily borne by the thing made or the deed done. The philosophical mind primarily targets the necessities of things. The earliest philosophers called it Nature. Philosophy's focus objects are things that either always are or that are begotten and not made—the *natum*. It engages the student with basic concepts or principles culled from the necessary structures of reality, apart from what individual men and women have done or made. It aims for ideas that are terminal and universal. To that extent, it abstracts itself from the particularities and contingencies that constitute the proper objects of literature and history. Nature's truths are borne by things indifferent to what men say and do. Mathematics, the natural and human sciences, politics, and economics, themselves offshoots of philosophy, discipline their inquiries by distinctive methodologies and the selection of objects cut off as part of the whole of natural intelligibilities. Methodological considerations can filter out or separate off additional distinct intelligibilities. For instance, the philosopher's holistic understanding of the human person might, for the best of reasons, be methodologically filtered or abstracted so that one "hears" only the intelligibilities of matter and energy, or only those molecular structures and chemical forces, or only the organic dimensions of the fuller reality at hand. It is the responsibility of the philosopher to accommodate the delimited truths of natural science in an account of what it means, for instance, to be a human person in the fullness of its intelligibility, prior to the scientific act of separating off a privileged portion of its intelligible structure. With the concentration of twelve hours in philosophy, one can have some confidence in the

acquisition of the rudiments of an intellectual habit for attending to the elements of truth and wisdom discernible in being or nature in its more basic necessities.

A fourth, *Theology* is the discipline or science that explores what is given in Divine Revelation. The Triune God himself reveals his truth in history, nature, and most fully in or through his Church and the books of Holy Scripture. Although God's Word cannot be reduced to the intelligibilities of nature, human action, or human artifice, he nevertheless speaks through them. Capacity in philosophy, history, and literature are indispensable instruments in theological inquiry. And, for its part, the wisdom of theological understanding provides an always-surprising completion and critique to the achievements of human reason conditioned by philosophy, literature, and history. The two courses, Understanding the Bible and Western Theological Tradition, together form a unit that asks one to attend to the fundamental sources of Divine Revelation. In their study the student acquires the language and categories of Christian understanding.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the point of liberal learning in the University of Dallas Core Curriculum is not to master subject matter. Nor is it to acquire an authoritative voice. Its end is to become the kind of person who is perceptive and thoughtful in the face of reality. The intelligible dimensions of reality are manifold. The ideal of liberal education presumes that human persons are essentially agents of truthfulness and seekers of meaning. The curriculum is only successful insofar as its students experience an enlargement and refinement of their reason's capacity for seeking truth and meaning in the poetic, practical, and natural realities that make up the vast world in which we live. The Constantin College Core Curriculum proposes a range of course work ordered to the four sources or bearers of reality's intelligibility: creative works of *poesis*, human action, things of nature, and the Divine Word. It recognizes that liberal learning is not easy and that it takes time and some measure of concentration to subtilize and enlarge reason's aptitudes.

## Conclusion

The University of Dallas's essay in liberal education succeeds when a spirit of wonder and a quickening of the poetic imagination accompany the study of the core disciplines. It is likewise measured by its transmission of an understanding of and piety for America's system of constitutional rights and political liberties. The liberality of such education invites both generosity and responsibility. It represents learning that becomes attentive to truths beyond the sort that measures its success by its utility, its serviceability to human purposes. Modern civilization has benefited greatly from formal education adapted to the practical interests of human purposes. The point is not to undervalue technical, specialized education. Rather, it is to prize learning that provides a framework for appreciating the place and character of intellectual and imaginative habits keen to follow the tracks of inquiry into regions of totality and transcendence, where interest exceeds our pre-conceived purposes. It is in the search for knowledge for its own sake that one comes to self-knowledge in the keen awareness that we *are* agents of truthfulness. Societies of friends, civic associations, and religion are made more secure and vital by minds and hearts that have been transformed by liberal education. Once acquired, even in its rudimentary stages, the intellectual habits of liberal learning need not be forgotten; and they can, with experience, bring wisdom. At its best, liberal education in the Constantin Core Curriculum inculcates attraction to and rudimentary capacities for intellectual generosity and personal responsibility before truth in its various dimensions.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

1. I wish to remember four splendid teachers who, in their tenures as academic leaders, made enduring contributions to the practice of liberal education at the University of Dallas: Eugene Curtzsinger (+2008), Donald Cowan (+2002), Jack Paynter (+2005), and Glen Thurow (+2010).
2. The introduction of undergraduate majors in business and pastoral ministry are relatively new. The College of Business awarded its first B.A. in December 2004, and the School of Ministry's first B.A. lies still in the future as of this writing in 2012.
3. The commonplace practice of following general education requirements with a course of studies in a major discipline was put in place at the University's founding. It was given an attractive rationale as an effective approach to liberal education by Donald Cowan, President of the University (1962–1977), "College Education and Leadership," in his *Unbinding Prometheus: Education for the Coming Age*, pp. 144–48 (Dallas TX: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988) and reaffirmed by Glen Thurow, Provost and Dean (1993–2001), in "Two Approaches to Constructing a Liberal Education: An AALE Scholar's Debate," Speeches delivered at the American Academy of Liberal Education annual meeting, November 13, 1999. Its commitment to liberal arts in Constantin College, however, has not precluded Constantin College from offering complementary pre-professional concentrations or tailored course distributions in areas such as pre-law, pre-medicine, or primary and secondary education. These pre-professional studies do not constitute a major and do not propose themselves as disciplines.
4. *The Initial Self Study Report of The University of Dallas*, prepared for the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, 1962, p. 7.
5. As an enterprise in American higher education, I do not think the Constantin Core Curriculum is distinctive for any one of these four self-conscious interests that condition learning in the Core. But I do believe it is likely distinctive in its insistence on precisely these four taken together.
6. "The Idea of Liberal Education," in *The Goals of Higher Education*, ed. by W.D. Weatherford, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) and "On Liberal Education," *The Bulletin of the Association of American Colleges* 4:2 (1966); reprinted in Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays*, ed. by Robert B. Williamson and Elliot Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1985), 157–70 and 261–68, respectively. I do not wish to imply any sort of directly studied or personal influence of Klein's thoughts upon the founders of the University of Dallas. If there is a shared vision, it is likely because Klein and UD's founders were looking at the same thing or were influenced by overlapping intellectual traditions.
7. Klein, *Lectures*, 164. One can trace in Klein's hierarchy of education the stages of ascent in Plato's Divided Line (*Republic* 509c–511e): music (elemental education–cultural receptivity), gymnastic (elemental education–experience), "mathematics and science" (formal education–pursuing the "why" beyond familiar experience, but within the horizon of life's concerns), and philosophy (formal education–inquiry detached from the concerns of life's necessities).
8. *Metaphysics* 1:1–2 (980a22–983a23).
9. Klein, *Lectures*, 162.
10. Klein, *Lectures*, 164–66.
11. Klein, *Lectures*, 162.
12. *Bulletin of the University of Dallas Catalog 1956–57*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Dallas, TX), p. 3.
13. Louise Cowan is perhaps the University of Dallas's most celebrated teacher. She served as English Department Chair (1959–1970) and Graduate Dean (1972–1977). For these reflections on the poetic imagination, I draw upon her essay "Importance of the Classics," in *Invitation to the Classics*, pp. 19–24, ed. by Louise Cowan and Os Guinness (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998). Also see her "Jerusalem's Claim on Us," *Intercollegiate Review* 36:1–2 (Fall 2000/Spring 2001), 17–23, and "The Necessity of the Classics," *Intercollegiate Review* 37:1 (Fall 2001), 14–23. I have also learned from Christopher Lynch's unpublished notes to his public lecture "Three Visions of Liberal Education" (2012 ACTC Conference, Milwaukee, WI).
14. Cowan, "Importance," 20.
15. Cowan, "Importance," 20.
16. Physicist Donald Cowan offered sage observations on the role of the creative imagination in the sort of liberal learning that takes place in the study of the natural sciences; see his *Unbinding Prometheus: Education for the*

- Coming Age* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), especially “Imagination, Redundancy, and the Act of Learning,” pp. 104–17, and “Scientific Discovery and Gratitude,” pp. 201–210.
17. Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).
  18. The phrase is taken from Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” Address to the German Parliament, Berlin, September 2011 [[http://www.vatican.va/.../benedict\\_xvi/.../hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110922\\_reich...](http://www.vatican.va/.../benedict_xvi/.../hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reich...)]. In a passage taken from his 2006 address on the harmony of faith and reason, before representatives of science at the University of Regensburg, Benedict XVI speaks of theology’s role within the order of disciplines in a complete university as “the courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur—this is the program with which a theology grounded in Biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.” “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections” [[http://www.vatican.va/.../benedict\\_xvi/.../hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg](http://www.vatican.va/.../benedict_xvi/.../hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg)].
  19. Although only a nine credit-hour sequence is required of all undergraduate students (as the result of the University’s most recent Core review), most of the University’s major programs hold to the previous universal requirement of a fourth philosophy course. The exceptions are politics, biology, chemistry, mathematics, and pastoral ministry. In effect, the large majority of University of Dallas undergraduates will graduate with at least four courses (that is, twelve credit hours) in philosophy.
  20. “Historical” here does not signify just those realities that have slipped off into the past and are subject to the discipline of reclaiming them for present understanding. As employed here, the term refers to the sort of realities that are the objects of decisions and action, whether completed and fallen into the past, being acted on in the present, or anticipated for the future. The reality of *praxis*, especially when situated within an ample view of the meaning of human existence, claims the interest of the disciplines of politics and economics as much as history.
  21. For those who are believers, the truths of their faith take on a measure of understanding attuned to God’s Word.
  22. Conversations with and criticisms of Scott Crider, Ger Wegemer, Therese Frank, Clare Hairstans, Bill Berry, and John Alvis aided and encouraged me in writing this essay. I am grateful to Sybil Novinski for directing me to archival documents from the early history of the University of Dallas. Needless to say, my acknowledgment of their collegiality implies no assent on their part to the claims or interpretations of the essay, for which I bear sole responsibility.

# The College Curriculum

## A READER

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