

Trivium and Quadrivium

Adapted from an original publication and reiterated by Excellent Companion James C. Landerkin. Presented at Cherrydale Masonic Lodge, July 17, 2019.

A key focus in the Fellowcraft Degree is the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. Why are these important, and what does that have to do with the Royal Arch Degree?

Plato initially came up with the idea of a formal syllabus for study, building upon an idea formulated by Pythagoras, of a school where both men and women could study. The idea was expanded in a book by a moderately obscure author of the 5th Century, a pagan living in North Africa called Martianus Capella. In his book *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury), he outlined the seven liberal arts and sciences in a wordy book full of allegory and poetry, in which each Art or Science is explained in great – sometimes bizarre – detail by seven maidens who will serve Philology on her marriage to Mercury.

The reason attention was drawn to the fact that Martianus was a pagan is because it was this book which ultimately led to the establishment of the formal educational system throughout Western Europe. Of course, all early schools and universities were run by or controlled by the Church, and so it is interesting to note that the very skills taught as a means towards greater understanding of the world and man in the context of theology should be formulated by a non-Christian!

The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences were divided into two courses, reflected even today in most European University Degrees by a division into two streams of basic and advanced studies. For example, in Oxford the first two or three terms lead to examinations called Preliminaries, or Prelims; while the next two years of study lead to the Finals, or 'Schools'.

So in the classical educational system, we find the Arts and Sciences presented in two groups, called the trivium (or three roads) and quadrivium (or four roads). The trivium comprised Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric; while the quadrivium was made up of Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy.

This approach to university education lasted from the early Middle Ages right up to the 18th Century. Its function is well described in an article in *The New Atlantis*: "At the center of the liberal arts were the humanities, the education of how to be a human being. Each new generation was encouraged to consult the great works of our tradition, the vast epics, the classic tragedies and comedies, the reflections of philosophers and theologians, the revealed Word of God, those countless books that sought to teach us what it was to be human — above all, how to use our liberty well."

As Freemasonry in its present form began in the early 18th Century, it was expected that all educated men would have been taught the liberal arts and sciences at university, and no doubt those members of the Royal Society and many founders of

Freemasonry would have had that background. Therefore, an education in these subjects was seen as an essential part of becoming a refined gentleman, capable of holding elegant discourse in parlors and possessing the skills to discuss the important topics of the day, and to participate in the great social and scientific experiments of the Age.

It was not until later that, despite ferocious opposition from the establishments and the church, the subjects taught in universities began to move away from the subjects which had been taught since their creation, and a more objective and scientific approach began to replace it. However, this new form of thought had little time for the introspection and philosophy of old educational values, and subjective contemplation was replaced by objective observation.

It is interesting to see that the Fellowcraft Degree still retains the lesson that it is valuable for us to study the original topics which lead to philosophical inquiry, and ultimately a better understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God and man. Now, it is no coincidence that there were seven liberal arts and sciences, not six or eight! Seven had always been seen as a powerful and mystical number, which signifies completion or perfection. Just as the trivium and quadrivium were made up of three and four grades, degrees or steps, so we see that our own rituals reflect this perfect journey of seven steps in the three Lodge Degrees and four Chapter Degrees.

The first three subjects of the trivium are Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric. By studying Grammar we are given a framework in which to work. Then by studying Logic we are given the tools to analyze a situation; and finally, with Rhetoric, the ability to communicate this effectively. Indeed, these three subjects have been referred to as: Knowledge, Understanding and Wisdom, words familiar to a Mason. The Blue Lodge is the realm in which the basic tools are provided to allow a man to work upon himself and to knock off the 'superfluous knobs and excrescences' thereby allowing him to become a perfect living stone, fit for the celestial temple.

Another way of looking at the trivium is that it gives us the skills to formulate, to build hypotheses about what we experience, and finally to communicate these ideas to others. This realm is dedicated to man, to the individual and to mankind. Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, an 18th Century French philosopher and mystic, accorded to the Great Books of learning, the Book of Man and the Book of Nature.

The trivium refers to the Book of Man. The quadrivium refers to the Book of Nature. It considers the cyclical nature of all things, how they come into existence or are born, live, and die, or are destroyed. We see this in all of Nature, in seeds and flowers, in the harvest, in animals and in mankind. In a slower cycle we learn in our history books about the rise and fall of clans or royal families – even of civilizations and nations. We identify patterns and learn to apply these in order to learn. If the trivium focuses on language, the quadrivium focuses on number.

Arithmetic considers Number. Geometry considers number in Space as dimension. Music considers number in Time. Finally, Astronomy considers number in Space and Time. In studying these, we come to appreciate the oneness of everything, and how everything is interrelated. We also learn to use those skills of communication we received in the trivium to analyze what we perceive with our five senses and learn the art and science of mind as well as the art and science of matter.

Freemasonry does not require us to make a personal study of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences (though there is nothing to prevent the interested Mason from doing exactly that!). When it talks about the Arts and Sciences it is employing allegory and analogy as it does so often in its lessons. It is telling us to look beyond the obvious, deeper than the superficial, to examine and contemplate the symbols it places before us to see the truth within.

If the seventh Liberal Art is astronomy, the study of Time and Space, an Art which requires you to look up at the sky and consider in humility our unimportance in the great scheme of things – yet also our centrality in the Divine Plan – then we should expect this Degree, the Royal Arch, to contain messages and lessons which will lift us out of the mundane world and furnish us with an appreciation of an altogether higher plane of existence, where we will learn important truths about ourselves.

The previous six Degrees will then have been but a preparation for this final, seventh step. Here we arrive on the threshold of Time and Space where learning ends, and, having examined ourselves, and then the universe around us, it is now for us to put the pieces together and understand the profound lesson we are being led to learn.

Finally, some questions for debate:

1. Do you think we have lost anything by removing the subjects of the Liberal Arts and Sciences from most syllabi? There are many people who think the Liberal Arts are nothing more than self-indulgence and so do not prepare a young man or woman for the so-called 'real world'. Do you agree or disagree?

2. The Age of Reason is seen by many as a necessary step in man's evolution to remove mankind from prejudices and limitations artificially put in place by religion and state. It gave men the freedom to think scientifically and philosophically without fearing censure or death at the hands of the establishment. However, there are many who also lament the separation of religion, science and art into mutually exclusive fields, and see common ground where all might come together once more. For example, quantum physics and string theory are two areas where observations defy scientific expectation, and may indicate that there is still 'far more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our philosophy', to paraphrase Hamlet. Do you think the separation of these fields is a good or bad thing? Should art, science, and religion be mutually exclusive areas with no overlap?