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The Lost Purpose of Learning (Chapter 1 of On Education, Formation, Citizenship and the Lost Purpose of Learning)

Joseph Clair

George Fox University, jclair@georgefox.edu

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The Lost Purpose of Learning

The apparent problem facing higher education

College is a rich part of the Western cultural imagination and a canonized plot line in the American middle-class mythos. Although it is costly and time-intensive, there are good reasons to be proud of this tradition and to go away for four years to become adults. After all, college leaves an indelible stamp on the soul: the formative lessons of newfound independence, hard work, and leisure in preparation for the business of life. Few institutions have more nostalgic and patriotic bonds of affection that last as long—and procure as many donations—as college and university alumni associations. Americans talk and think about college all the time. Americans eagerly read the *U.S. News & World Report's* college rankings—despite criticisms about its validity—as a way of dreaming of the future and measuring oneself against the world. Many Americans begin saving when their children are born. Many stay up late worrying about their kindergartener's grades and violin lessons. Many spend thousands of dollars on college prep tests and campus visits for their high schoolers.

But is it worth it? What is college? Contrary to the popular image of the exhausted student amidst a pile of books, recent reports by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal that the average college student only spends 3.5 hours a day on educational activities (a combination of class and study hours) compared to the 4.0 hours of leisure and sports activities and 8.8 hours of sleep. Lest one think this is because all college students work three jobs and pay their own way

through school, the study also reveals that students spend 2.3 hours a day on average at non-college-related jobs. Not only do students give significant fractions of time to a variety of endeavors, but they seem unsure about what to do with their primary purpose of being in college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 80 percent of students change their major at least once; and for those who do change it, they do so, on average, at least three times.

After the recession of 2008, the value of college education itself seems to be hanging in the balance. For the fifth straight year college enrollment is down. Fall term enrollment this academic year (2016–17) in the United States dipped by 1.4 percent to 19.01 million students according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. This decline represents a 1.59-million student decrease from the 20.6-million enrollment peak in 2011. Part of this dip may represent a decline in adult students (over the age of 24) who are increasingly interested in ditching the degree in favor of a job. Yet in *The Atlantic* last year, Alia Wong pointed out that this trend also continues a widening gap between high school graduation and college enrollment in this country: In 2013–14, 82 percent of high school seniors made it to graduation (an all-time high), yet only 66 percent immediately enrolled in college (down from 69 percent in 2008).¹

One plausible explanation for the decline in enrollment is the skyrocketing cost of college tuition and the resulting student debt. The average cost of tuition at private colleges in 2016–17 was \$33,480, and in 2015, 68 percent of college seniors graduated with an average of \$30,100 in debt, a number that has been steadily climbing over the past ten years. The reasons for the cost spike are multiple—new student services, amenities, sports programs, etc.—many of which have to do with increasing competition for the sacred but slimming

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/where-are-all-the-high-school-grads-going/423285/> (accessed January 11, 2016).

pool of applicants who are both academic high-achievers and well-to-do—in other words, excellent students whose families can pay their way. This contest and associated cost spike is what is referred to as the “brand new rock climbing wall in the student center” phenomenon in the new college admissions hustle.

Colleges and universities are increasingly sensitive to the cost spike and debt overload. In their effort to control costs, many schools have begun closing “ancillary” departments (mostly in the humanities) and focusing on professional programs (e.g., nursing, engineering, education)—those easiest to connect degree with salary. Some traditional liberal arts colleges have had to close their doors. It amounts to a veritable shake down of traditional liberal arts education in the United States. The causes underlying the maze of statistics are still unclear—a befuddling mix of data that leaves social scientists and educators to forever search for the real causes of the college enrollment decline. It is time to ask more incisive questions. What is a liberal arts education for? Has the traditional four-year liberal arts college or university experience become a rote cultural practice, emptied of significance and value—a ritual for which the original motivating reasons cannot be recalled? Why go to college at all?

The real problem facing higher education

The problem facing higher education is tied to the inability to provide an account of the value of a traditional liberal arts education—the value of college itself—apart from very narrowed economic considerations related to career success, expected incomes, and paychecks. When one asks the question of the value of a college education purely in economic terms—of cost in relation to financial return—the account of the overarching purposes of a college education is restricted to the singularly instrumental question: What will I make?

The liberal arts tradition, out of which American colleges and universities have grown, includes a robust set of answers to the question of the value of a college education that can be boiled down to four essential categories of purpose: intellectual, economic, moral, and spiritual. Today, the intellectual purpose of a college education—expressed in the question: What should I know?—is subordinate to the purely economic, perpetually trying to define and justify itself by its instrumental value, answering the question: What will I make? This approach gives the impression that if one can conceive a relationship between the intellectual purpose and the economic purpose, then college's existence is justified and there is no longer any need to think about the second two purposes—the moral and spiritual—which are increasingly difficult to discuss in a secular and pluralistic society.

Yet today, just as the economic purpose has triumphed, the intellectual purpose of college and university life has been called into question. As Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa persuasively demonstrate in their landmark work, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago, 2010), a disproportionately large percentage of students (over 45 percent in their studies) demonstrate no significant improvement in a range of core skills for which they are ostensibly being trained (e.g., critical thinking, communication) across their four years of education. Their studies suggest that the intellectual purpose of a liberal arts education needs to be ordered toward something other, something higher—perhaps toward the noninstrumental values and goods traditionally associated with liberal arts education—in order to retain its vigor. If the intellectual is ordered solely toward the economic—that is, if education is reduced to utter instrumentality—it will die. The intellectual purpose of a liberal arts college requires a balance between the materially, instrumentally, and economically *useful* on the one hand and the morally and spiritually *praiseworthy* on the

other. The intellectual purpose of college is unstable on its own. It needs an aim beyond itself to justify the costs of time and leisure necessary for study. And the economic purpose alone is insufficient to sustain the intellectual enterprise over the long haul. Or so the current cultural crisis over the values of a college education seems to suggest.

Studies generally support the idea that the economic purpose of college remains real—the U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard Web site boasts that college graduates earn, on average, \$1 million more than high school graduates over their lifetime. Such details and justifications are of course complex when one takes all the factors—tuition cost, student debt, university alumni salaries, etc.—into account. Take, for example, the 2015 study published by the *Wall Street Journal* that revealed that college graduates (ages 25–29) in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics related (STEM) disciplines earn on average \$76,000 a year compared with humanities majors who earn only \$51,000 a year. If the sense of the value of a college education is purely economic and it can be proven that one would be able to make more than \$51,000 a year as a young adult, is this a good reason not to go to college and study philosophy? To let one's sense of the value of a college education be exhausted by paychecks is to allow the economic (What will I make?) lead the intellectual (What should I know?). This cultural conversation reveals how deep the economic instrumentalization of education has gone, and it is not merely a matter of the modes by which one goes about justifying college tuition. It has to do with a culture's deepest values—the ones that are implicitly inculcated in students long before they get to college. According to the traditional models of liberal arts education—the ones that gave rise to the modern college and university—to let the economic purpose lead the intellectual is to shape students who navigate knowledge without a North Star. It is to form students who have knowledge and technical mastery over the

world without adequately training them in what to do and who to serve with that knowledge and mastery.

To answer the question of the value of a college degree purely in economic terms is to have already lost the battle. In the age of information delivery, online courses, flipped classrooms, and digital fluency, there are already cheaper and shorter routes for career preparation, especially in the lucrative STEM subjects—routes that do not require the onerous and lengthy residential requirements and core curricula found in traditional liberal arts colleges.

Take, for example, the Thiel Fellowship—founded by technology entrepreneur and investor Peter Thiel in 2011. This two-year program offers young people willing to skip college a scholarship of \$100,000, a broad professional network of supporters, and a chance to “build new things,” things they actually “care about.” This fellowship presupposes that, in general, eighteen-year-olds care about the right things and know what the world needs. The Thiel Fellowship should be applauded because it merely makes explicit the instrumentalist view of higher education prevalent today—a view aimed at practical efficiency and lucrative life outcomes. This approach to education dispatches once and for all the stuffy questions: What kinds of people ought colleges aim to form? Who or what ought to be worshiped as the culmination of true learning? These questions of moral and spiritual purpose feel increasingly irrelevant and out of date in liberal education.

The contemporary conversation about the value of a college education reveals all that one needs to know about the crisis—there is no shared language to speak about the moral or spiritual purposes of learning. Western culture is strangely mute about how these purposes relate to economic value and their relevance to the decision to attend, fund, or reform contemporary institutions. This silence about the moral and spiritual purposes of learning reveals a shared confusion about the true nature of education.

A brief history of the soul of education

As mentioned above, the liberal arts tradition out of which American colleges and universities have grown includes a fourfold set of purposes for education: intellectual, economic, moral, and spiritual. For the most significant thinkers in this tradition, the intellectual purpose (What should I know?) and the economic (What shall I make?) are only intelligible in light of, and should be guided by, the moral (What should I do?) and the spiritual (Who or what should I worship?). The latter two purposes—the moral and the spiritual—and their corresponding questions form what I call the soul of liberal arts education. A brief history of this soul reveals three distinct phases or stages—the Platonic in the classical period, the Augustinian Christian in the medieval and early modern periods, and the Romantic in the modern era. Each movement synthesizes the four purposes of learning and attempts to establish the moral and spiritual purposes as the signposts that guide the intellectual craft and economic outcomes of a liberal arts education in a specific historical moment and cultural context.

The moral and spiritual purpose of liberal arts education was born in ancient Greece in Socrates’ view of the human being as naturally ordered to pursue truth and to flourish in a learning community. This view was then extended and adapted by Plato and Aristotle in the formation of the liberal arts as a discrete set of disciplines or fields of inquiry to be pursued in formal schools. The seven classical liberal arts—forged in Rome and sharpened in the early Middle Ages—were divided between the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). The trivium focused on the language arts—the relationship between language and reality—and the quadrivium focused on quantity in all of its stunning diversity in the material world. These foundational subjects branch into the many disciplines or fields of inquiry systematized by ancients like Aristotle—including subjects such as philosophy and the

natural sciences. Thus the liberal arts were seen as the foundation of the many disciplines that we now think of as the different departments in a college or university. Indeed, accrediting bodies for colleges and universities still require broad training in the seven liberal arts as partial requirements for graduation. These arts—not merely the fine arts—were labeled *liberal* in the ancient world because they were preparation for being a good citizen—a *liber* in Latin—a “free person” worthy to participate in a self-governing society. They stand in contrast to the servile or mechanical arts aimed solely at manual training in practical crafts. This view of education entails a substantive view of human nature, in which development in the “liberal” modes of learning accords with our essence as creatures and provides the intellectual and moral formation for a good life and a good society.

It is thus a *teleological* view of education—learning ordered both toward an overarching moral purpose or goal as well as a spiritual *telos*. (The term *telos* in Greek denotes a “purpose, aim, end, or goal”—terms that I will use interchangeably throughout this book.) For the Platonist, God appears as the final goal of all true learning. All of the liberal arts—and the more specific fields of inquiry—provide pathways by which our minds may travel to God by means of his creation. Liberal education becomes an exercise in ascending from the created world to the uncreated Cause, Source, and Origin of all that is.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) was educated in and taught the classical liberal arts. He was the imperial professor of rhetoric in Milan before his conversion to Christianity. For Augustine, the Platonic view of liberal learning as ascent takes on special significance after his conversion to Christianity and his discovery of Jesus’ summary of the “law and the prophets” in the two “greatest” commandments: “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34–40). The moral and spiritual purposes of learning find their center in these high and lofty divine commands, and Augustine sets

himself to the task of understanding how liberal arts education can lead simultaneously to obedience of these two divine commands and to fulfillment of the deepest teleological moral and spiritual purposes of intellectual beings.

How precisely does a liberal arts education help one to fulfill their ultimate calling to be a good lover of God and neighbor? It does so in two ways, for Augustine. First, learning about the world of nature and culture is an expression of the desire to love both God and neighbor. Careful and patient consideration of God’s world in all of its vibrant beauty and bewildering complexity is inherently reverent, worshipful, and honoring of both God and neighbor. By learning about creation, one learns about the Creator. By learning about human culture—and its many expressions throughout history and around the world today—one learns about one’s neighbors, and the Creator who created them in his image, calling them to be cocreators with him. Even confused, darkened expressions of human civilization contain rays of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Liberal arts education properly conceived, for Augustine, is not merely learning about the Creator, but, indeed, it is a learning *toward* God and neighbor. Learning consists in both intellectual capacity for knowing but also the will’s capacity for loving. Intellect and will (along with memory) are the preeminent powers of the human soul—they must be united for true learning to occur. The attention required to properly understand some feature of the world is thus an expression of desire—desire to understand, desire for God. Genuine learning unites proper knowing with proper loving. The soul possesses the inherent capacity to ascend from knowledge of any particular truth or facet of the world to love for he who is the Source of all that is. One can follow the traces of truth, goodness, and beauty scattered throughout nature and human culture (e.g., social arrangements, art, government, institutions, architecture, literature) to the Source itself. It is a lesson Augustine learned from Plato. By properly tracing these

values to their Source in God, one is strengthened in the ability to discern and appreciate the relative value of these earthly things. In the same way, one's knowledge of the world of human culture is an expression of loving, careful attention to one's neighbors, living and dead. Even the capacity to form judgments about the relative value of human culture reveals inwardly a connection to God as the Source of all truth, goodness, and beauty. All truth, beauty, and goodness is God's truth, beauty, and goodness. There is nothing of which one can learn that does not derive its ultimate existence from God.

Thus the second great phase in the soul of education is Augustine's Christian baptism of the liberal arts and reinterpretation of their Platonic moral and spiritual purposes through the lens of the double commandments of love—a reinterpretation of the classical view of the human person that I will explore more fully in the next chapter. The Augustinian Christian vision held sway for over a millennium after Augustine's death in 430 AD, giving rise to the university in the late Middle Ages and to the birth of the Protestant liberal arts college in early modern America.

Modernity witnessed the secularization of the liberal arts—that is, the repudiation of its historical purpose—and the slow erosion of the Augustinian Christian vision of the soul of education. The changing conception of the human person in the wake of scientific naturalism, Enlightenment rationalism, and Romantic individualism tells the story of Augustine's Christian view of liberal learning undergoing full secularization, whereupon love for God and neighbor were replaced by moral autonomy and spiritual authenticity as beacons in the pursuit of knowledge. The Romantic movement in the nineteenth century, especially in thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, was an inspired attempt to renew the moral and spiritual purposes of liberal arts education and elevate the aim of intellectual life in a time of tremendous economic upheaval in the United States. Emerson's transcendent individual soul and moral authenticity is deeply indebted to the Platonic

and Augustinian visions of the moral and spiritual purposes of liberal learning. Emerson offers a metaphysical picture of the individual, shorn of its dogmatic and sectarian Christian commitments, suited to an increasingly pluralistic and secular democratic age. Yet the erosion even of this secularized Augustinian vision over the past one hundred and fifty years suggests that this nonsectarian picture of the moral and spiritual purposes of learning is still too narrow. Liberal arts education today is entrenched in a kind of naturalist *secularism* that presumes freedom from and neutrality in regard to all spiritual, religious, and metaphysical beliefs, and a kind of materialism with regard to the purposes of human life that has no room for shared or public appeals to transcendence, sacredness, or religious value.

Where is the transcendent or theological framework robust enough to replace the Platonic, Augustinian, or Emersonian visions of the moral and spiritual purposes of a liberal arts education? Losing all sense for the teleology of education threatens to reduce it to an instrumentalized materialist race in which students compete for degrees that entitle them to smart, beautiful lives with respectable careers and paychecks.

Renewing the Augustinian Christian vision

If history is our guide, then we should know this is a crisis of epic proportion—not only for higher education, but for civilization. This is a time of tremendous change in higher education in terms of its intellectual and economic purposes. This is a moment of unprecedented advances at the frontiers of scientific knowledge and economic production. The forces of cultural pluralism, economic globalization, and information technology demand reconsideration of the economic and intellectual questions of education—What should I know? What should I make?—in entirely new ways. How

can the connections between these questions and the moral and spiritual purposes of learning be renewed in order to reunite the fourfold purpose of education once more? Much is at stake, including the formation of the next generation in the moral ideals and spiritual values that have formed the social fabric and animated modern democratic life. My argument in this book is that, in order to construct a new connection between the four purposes of learning, there is a readily available therapy in the best of the liberal arts tradition. The life and thought of St. Augustine provides guideposts in the pursuit to renew the conversation and commitment to the fourfold purpose of learning.

Why Augustine?

A similar retrieval could employ other classical authors—such as Plato—or modern authors—such as Emerson—but there are compelling reasons to turn to Augustine as the patron saint of the soul of education today. Paradoxically, Augustine saved liberal arts education from perishing at the end of the Roman Empire by abandoning it. Although I do not want to overdraw the comparison between Augustine's age and the present, there are striking similarities between his narration of liberal arts education at the end of the Roman Empire and this historical moment. In Augustine's telling, the liberal arts had become a hollow shell, detached from their roots in his own lifetime. This drove him to imbue them with new moral and spiritual purpose, refreshing their vitality. He did all of this *after* he quit as imperial professor of rhetoric (rhetoric is the crowning liberal art of eloquence) and began pursuing a Christian version of the liberal arts outside the institutional borders of imperial education.

Because Augustine is perhaps the most famous convert in Christian history, it is easy to miss that his spiritual autobiography,

the *Confessions*, is both about his conversion and his lamentation of the lost moral and spiritual purposes of education. His renunciation of a profound academic career should be read, at least in part, as a protest against the moral enervation and vacuity of liberal arts education in the later Roman Empire. Conversion led Augustine to reinvent the moral and spiritual purposes of education and establish the first-ever Christian liberal arts curriculum. Although Augustine ostensibly abandoned this curricular project after his ordination as a priest, one finds throughout his vast corpus of writings a vision of moral and spiritual formation suited to liberal education—a project that never left him even though the context of his classroom changed dramatically as bishop of Hippo. Augustine's educational journey is the story of his restless pursuit of the moral and spiritual purposes of learning.

Augustine's *Confessions*

Augustine was born in the year 354 in the town of Thagaste in what is now Algeria. He lived in the waning years of the Roman Empire and experienced firsthand the tension between pagan and Christian Rome. Born to a Christian mother, Monica, and a pagan father, Patricius, he spent the first three decades of his life running from his mother's faith and chasing ambition, pleasure, and spiritual enlightenment. At the ripe young age of thirty-one he found himself as imperial professor of rhetoric in the capital city of Milan (something akin to being the endowed chair of government at Harvard) and yet somehow felt empty and unfulfilled amidst this massive achievement. He converted to Christianity and moved first to the lake district town of Cassiciacum in Italy and then back to North Africa to pursue liberal arts education in the light of his newfound faith in a community of fellow learners. Eventually, he was ordained—somewhat against his

will—as pastor and then bishop of Hippo and spent the rest of his life there in ministry.

Amidst his extensive duties as bishop, Augustine wrote—tirelessly. More of his writings survive, by far, than anyone else in the ancient world: more than 100 treatises, 250 letters, and 1,000 sermons—more than 5 million words in all. After Jesus and Paul, no one has done more than Augustine to shape Western Christianity. Born from real debates in the church, Augustine pioneered the great debates about faith and reason, grace and works, and church and state. And his *Confessions* stands tall among the many works that exert this influence. Although today the genre of spiritual autobiography and spiritual memoir is quite common, the *Confessions* is the very first work of this kind in Western history, an innovation and achievement of form and content that may never be matched.

Given the bright lights of Augustine's conversion scene in book eight of the *Confessions*—where he hears the voice of a child singing “take up and read”—it is easy to lose sight of the book's subplot: the story of the miseducation of a Roman elite. It is the lamentation of one of Rome's “excellent sheep,” to borrow William Deresiewicz's contemporary characterization of super-achieving Ivy Leaguers.² Augustine's sense of intellectual purpose remains stunted throughout his education due to disconnection from his moral and spiritual aspirations. His intellectual formation was oriented solely toward the external goal of career—the *economic* purpose in the broad sense of money, class, and power and their inseparability in Roman culture. Augustine reports being frustrated by this instrumentalization as a student, yet he so internalizes it, that by the time he is a teacher, he instills it in his own students.

From his first day in school, Augustine laments the disconnection between moral formation and intellectual training. The only kind of

moral formation he detects at school is obedience training. He learns to obey authority:

The program for right living presented to me as a boy was that I must obey my mentors, so that I might get on in this world and excel in the skills of the tongue, skills which lead to high repute and deceitful riches. To this end I was sent to school to learn my letters, though I, poor wretch, could see no point in them. (CF 1.14)

Augustine particularly bemoans the rough treatment he and his classmates received as punishment for their lazy behavior. Punishment for playing around at school instead of studying struck Augustine as perverse once he began to recognize the higher forms of play among his teachers. Their power to punish was arbitrary and their punishment was hypocritical.

All the same, we were blameworthy, because we were less assiduous in reading, writing and concentrating on our studies than was expected of us. It was not that we lacked intelligence or ability, Lord, for you had endowed us with these in a measure appropriate to our age; it was simply that we loved to play, and we were punished by adults who nonetheless did the same themselves. But whereas the frivolous pursuits of grown-up people are called “business,” children are punished for behaving in the same fashion, and no one is sorry for either the children or the adults; so are we to assume that any sound judge of the matter would think it right for me to be beaten because I played ball as a boy, and was hindered by my game from more rapid progress in studies which would only equip me to play an uglier game? Moreover, was the master who flogged me any better himself? If he had been worsted by a fellow-scholar in some pedantic dispute, would he not have been racked by even more bitter jealousy than I was when my opponent in a game of ball got the better of me? (CF 1.15)

Augustine's lamentation strikes the central point. The intellectual purpose of learning has been so thoroughly geared to the economic—

² William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014).

“high repute and deceitful riches”—and so hollowed of a genuine “program for right living” that he could only see it as a falsely dignified and overstuffed game. Education had become a contest of intelligence aimed at a larger cultural charade, a mental competition for the external rewards of prestige, power, and paycheck. Although the aims of his intellectual formation were misdirected, Augustine was grateful nevertheless for the core skills of speaking, writing, and reading he acquired in this period—gifts that he later put to good use (*CF* 1.24).

From an early age, it was clear to himself and his family that Augustine was peculiarly intelligent and gifted with words. Augustine reports that although he hated school, he carried on in academic excellence out of a “vain urge to excel” (*CF* 1.30). The brightest career prospects for such talent in eloquence lay in the field of public affairs—where there was a premium on the ability to persuade an audience.

Augustine came from a middle-class family of modest means, and a good liberal arts education in those days required one to leave home. So Augustine left home for the regional city of Madaura and later the larger metropolis of Carthage. During his spell in Madaura—as a sixteen-year-old—his studies were interrupted by a return trip home: “The reason for this was that my father was saving up to send me farther afield, to Carthage, though it was his shameless ambition that suggested the plan, not his wealth, for he was no more than a fairly obscure town councilor at Thagaste” (*CF* 2.5). Augustine regrets that his father’s “only concern was that I should learn to excel in rhetoric and persuasive speech” (*CF* 2.4). Yet Augustine seems to have internalized the purely instrumental view of education propounded by his teachers and father and was fully converted to this vision of education by the time he finished his studies in Carthage:

The prestigious course of studies I was following looked as its goal to the law-courts, in which I was destined to excel and where I would earn a reputation all the higher in the measure that my

performance was the more unscrupulous. So blind can people be that they glory in their blindness! Already I was the ablest student in the school of rhetoric. At this I was elated and vain and swollen with pride. (*CF* 3.6)

Augustine’s mother and father reveal the two purposes to which intellectual formation can be directed: acquisition of economic ends on the one hand, and moral and spiritual development on the other. His father Patricius held an unqualified instrumentalist view of liberal arts education as the pursuit of economic ends, and one can almost feel Augustine’s anger in remembering the pressure this exerted.

Both my parents were very keen on my making progress in study: my father, because he thought next to nothing about you and only vain things about me; and my mother, because she regarded the customary course of [liberal] studies as no hindrance, and even a considerable help, toward my gaining you eventually. (*CF* 2.8)

Augustine’s mother Monica, however, expected liberal arts education to aim higher, toward the spiritual purpose of “gaining” God himself.

The hollowness of his liberal arts education led Augustine to join an esoteric religious sect called Manicheanism, a cult that viewed the cosmos as a duality of warring oppositions—light and dark, good and evil, material and immaterial—with special focus on spiritual purification through denial of the body. But when Augustine finally met one of the intellectual exemplars of the sect—a Manichean bishop named Faustus—he became sorely disappointed. Faustus was touted as “extremely well informed” in all “branches of reputable scholarship” and particularly “learned in the liberal arts” (*CF* 5.3). But,

[w]hat I found was a man ill-educated in the liberal arts, apart from grammar, and even in that schooled only to an average level. He had read a few of Cicero’s speeches and one or two books by Seneca, and some volumes fairly well written in Latin for his own sect, and

because in addition to this he was accustomed to preach daily, he had acquired a fair command of language, which was rendered the more glib and seductive by his skillful management of what ability he had and a certain natural charm. (CF 5.11)

By the time of this encounter, Augustine had acquired the skills and commitments needed to see through Faustus, along with the astrological and superstitious pseudo-philosophical myths of the Manichees. His liberal arts education equipped him with skills necessary to pursue truth and metaphysical reality, even as those things related to religion and ultimate matters (CF 5.12).

At Carthage, in the advanced course of Augustine's studies in rhetoric—the equivalent of undergraduate study—he discovered Cicero's *Hortensius*. A Platonic exhortation to the philosophical life, the book awakened in Augustine a strong desire for true wisdom—a wisdom behind and beyond mere persuasion—and inspiration to study philosophy. So instead of moving to Italy to pursue a career as a law-court orator, Augustine returned home to Thagaste in Africa to teach the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) to introductory students. Augustine then moved to Carthage to found his own school of rhetoric for advanced students. He continued there as a teacher for eight years but was disheartened by the rowdiness and ill-preparedness of his students. When the opportunity came to teach rhetoric in Rome, Augustine claimed it. Rome's students were better, he reports in the *Confessions*, but they liked to cheat and often avoided paying tuition. Eventually Symmachus, the mayor of Rome, approached Augustine and offered him a major post in Milan as imperial professor of rhetoric—a much bigger job and great assurance of upward mobility in terms of prestige and pay. But in 384 AD, while in Milan, Augustine's disillusionment with academic careerism hit a fever pitch, so he took up the study of the Platonists (especially the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry) in earnest.

What Augustine learns from the Platonists

Augustine's discovery of Platonist philosophy amounted to an intellectual and spiritual breakthrough—especially in terms of how he understood liberal arts education. The moral and spiritual purposes of learning he so longed for finally rose to the surface. The happy life—*beatitudo* or *felicitas* in the Latin of Augustine's translated editions of the Greeks—is a deep and true form of human flourishing that ensues from a life well-lived, a life of moral and intellectual excellence. In his treatise *On Order*—which contains the proposal for a Christian adaptation of the Platonic vision of liberal arts education he drafted in Milan immediately following his conversion—Augustine writes: “[i]nstruction in the liberal arts, in moderation and to the point, produces lively, persevering, and refined lovers of truth. Their aim is ardently to desire, constantly to pursue, and eventually lovingly cling to what is called the happy life” (OD 1.24).

For the Platonists, the moral and spiritual purposes of a liberal arts education ultimately converge in *contemplation*—that is, in an unadulterated understanding, awareness, and appreciation of inherent cosmic *order* for its own sake, as its own kind of delight. In essence, the liberal arts have the power to lead the mind to God. A disciplined study of the world should result in a disciplined grasp of reality. Such discipline involves an inward ordering of the soul in greater attunement to the world and greater attunement to the divine order that undergirds it all. Augustine fully adopts this view of the doubled moral *and* spiritual purpose of contemplation and endorses it with his own Christian vision:

The truly learned are those who, not allowing all the different realities to distract them, attempt their unification into a simple, true, and certain whole. Having done so, they can soar on to divine realities not rashly and by faith alone, but contemplating,

understanding, and retaining them. These realities are forbidden to the slaves of pleasure, or to those hankering after perishing things ... To go further, one has to have a good mind, be of mature age, enjoy leisure, and have enthusiasm for study, enough to pursue the order of the disciplines ... Getting acquainted with the liberal arts, however, whether pursued for the sake of usefulness or for the sake of knowledge and contemplation, is extremely difficult. It is necessary to be most clever and to start from childhood with unfaltering attention and perseverance. (OD 2.44)

It is noteworthy that, in this passage, Augustine views sound intellectual formation through the liberal arts as ordered to both instrumental usefulness and contemplation. The moral-spiritual purpose of contemplation, however, is higher and stands as the terminus of intellectual striving.

What Augustine most treasured in the Platonic picture of liberal arts education was its sense of wholeness: "The truly learned are those who, not allowing all the different realities to distract them, attempt their unification into a simple, true, and certain whole" (OD 2.44). This is a picture of reality in which metaphysics (the study of being), epistemology (the study of how we know), and ethics (the study of right living) all connect and interrelate. Intellectual formation in the range of liberal arts disciplines and their interrelation is integrally linked to both the pursuit of a good life and the ascent toward God. The Platonist picture makes the most sense of liberal education's fourfold purpose, in Augustine's eyes, as an interconnected whole—where healthy pursuit of intellectual growth and material security are reconfigured in the light of the highest moral and spiritual aspirations. In the Platonists' implicit hierarchy of purposes, the economic realm matters but remains unclear until the intellect stretches toward the Highest Good. Augustine inherits this metaphysical picture and slowly begins to revise it in the light of his developing understanding of the Christian faith.

What Augustine does not learn from the Platonists

Augustine inherits the Platonic view of liberal education as a progressive ascent that culminates in contemplation of the divine. Contemplative fulfillment is made possible—and the world intelligible—by a vestige of divine order in the human soul. This harmony between Platonism and Christianity, for Augustine, is rooted in a shared anthropology in which human beings are image bearers of the divine. For Platonists, as for Christians, contemplation makes one more like God; it inculcates godlikeness.

Yet Augustine's experiments in the ascent of Platonic liberal arts education in book seven of his *Confessions* leave him unfulfilled in the pursuit of this culminating intellectual vision. He reports coming very close through disciplined study of reality—he catches a glimpse and can still remember the "fragrance"—but ultimately he is forced back from a stable and lasting knowledge of this divine reality.

Thus I pursued my inquiry by stages, from material things to the soul that perceives them through the body, And from there to that inner power of the soul to which the body's senses report external impressions ... I proceeded further and came to the power of discursive reason, to which the data of our senses are referred for judgment ... and then my mind attained to *That Which Is*, in the flash of one tremulous glance. Then indeed did I perceive your invisible reality through created things, but to keep my gaze there was beyond my strength. I was forced back through weakness and returned to my familiar surroundings, bearing with me only a loving memory, one that yearns for something of which I had caught the fragrance, but could not yet feast upon. (CF 7.23)

Augustine says he is beaten back from contemplation—from the contemplative consummation found in the alignment of internal and external order and intellectual and affective awareness of a divine designer. This holy frustration in learning, this lack of

consummation for his active intellect, corroborates the Scriptural truth of Incarnation.

In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, Augustine believes, the upward movement of intellectual ascent culminates in the downward movement of divine descent—God is revealed as a person who forms the bridge on which the weakened human intellect crosses over to behold the Highest Good face to face.

There are two ways of getting through this darkness [toward divine contemplation]: either by reasoning or by certain authority. Philosophy does it by reasoning, but brings freedom to very few. It forces these few not only into not despising those mysteries, but to understand them insofar as possible. True and, so to speak, genuine philosophy can do no more than teach the First Principle of all things, itself without principle; what great knowledge is in it, and what riches issue from there for our immense benefit and without decrease on its part! This is none other than the one God almighty and thrice powerful, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ... And how great, to cap it all, is the mystery of the Incarnation. For our sake God lowered himself to assuming a human body. The more demeaning such a thing appears, the more merciful and the farther away and out of the grasp of proud minds it is. (*OD* 2.16)

From the Platonists, Augustine says, he glimpses the moral-spiritual goal of divine contemplation, but not the way there. By the Incarnation Augustine learns that the high spiritual purpose of liberal arts education is not ultimately found in rational pursuit of the prime knowledge Object but rather in relationship to the ultimate Subject who initiates and acts. The ramifications of Incarnation for education—especially for the moral-spiritual purpose of contemplation—are vast and I will continue to explore them throughout this book, but let me highlight the heart of the matter here.

Although Augustine finds the Platonist's moral-spiritual purpose of contemplation a huge advance over his own instrumental sense of

the liberal arts, his experience of being “beaten back” from the goal and his newfound faith reveal a new angle on the virtue of intellectual humility in liberal education. Unlike Socratic skepticism—“I know that I don’t know anything”—Augustine’s sense of intellectual humility is best understood as a kind of radical awe or wonder in the face of ultimate reality that is experienced as one’s place before God. This awareness, coupled with a sense of divine intimacy and approachability in the Incarnation, puts one in the proper intellectual posture to receive contemplative vision as a divine gift.

This experience teaches Augustine both the limits of reason as a mechanism for ascent and highlights the necessity and importance of faith in one’s approach toward the moral-spiritual goal. Belief, for Augustine, is the ability to trust in that which has been revealed about the divine (in his case the historical event of the Incarnation: Christ’s life, death, and resurrection) and represents a necessary element in one’s pursuit of ultimate understanding or divine contemplation. Ascent to a contemplative vision of the divine order in all that is requires both illumination by reason and humble trust in that which can only be taught on the basis of authority (for him, Scripture and Christian doctrine encapsulated in the creeds). Motivated by awed acknowledgment of one’s place in a masterful and vast cosmic mystery, ascent requires humble submission to another’s teaching on the basis of authority. It is not an unbridled appeal to arbitrary gullibility on Augustine’s part, but a sensitive picture of the soul’s ascent in learning through reason and trust in authority. In other words, contemplation, or the moral-spiritual purpose of liberal arts education, is best pursued by faith seeking understanding.

Augustine’s experience of the limits of contemplative ascent and the truth of Incarnation free him from what he sees as the Platonic fantasy of a harmonious natural liberal arts theology by which the mind moves seamlessly from the visible to the invisible, from the created to the uncreated, toward absolute knowledge of *That Which*

Is—a “knowledge of your invisible reality through created things” (CF 7.23). His insistence on humility and faith as constitutive elements in the contemplative fulfillment of learning deflates some of the spiritual ambition and confidence found in the Platonic picture, shrouding it in a new sense of modesty and mystery better suited to the enterprise of liberal arts education and the knowledge of God.

Faith should make room for humble acceptance of the mystery of ultimate reality and appreciative tolerance for competing visions of learning’s ultimate fulfillment. Augustine strips the Platonist’s moral-spiritual purpose of its rational mysticism—freeing it from the despair that ensues in the discovery that there is no purely rational ascent from knowledge of the disciplines to God’s nature. This despair quickly pivots toward the nihilistic belief that because there is no purely rational ascent, there must be no transcendent aim or purpose for education. Augustine’s emphasis on the Incarnation of the Word leads to an increasing sensitivity to the ways in which knowledge of the divine—the ultimate goal—always requires faith, and for him, is always encoded in the words of Scripture, enigmatically recording the events that bring one to the core of God’s self-revelation. If contemplation of the divine is the Object of learning, the Incarnation brings that Subject to the enfleshed and sensible world in a new way. It is no longer solely the story of humankind’s rational search for God, but God’s loving search for humankind. As Augustine progresses in his Christian faith, he becomes more suspicious of the Platonic view of a solitary, wordless, disembodied, rational ascent to God and godlikeness. Augustine’s Christian faith loosens the tidy Platonic picture and creates more room for the mystery of truth, bodily life, and human happiness in its recognizably earthly forms. I will turn to these refinements of the Platonic picture in the following chapters. Even so, what Augustine gains from the Platonic picture of ultimate learning is vast and essential. It is the interconnectedness of all things and the interrelation of the four purposes of learning.

Augustine’s journey in the *Confessions* is transformation from excellent sheep to restless heart. It is the story of not only his own education but his role as an educator in the liberal arts. It is a story that climaxes in his discovery of the Platonists and his conversion to Christianity as well as his conception of a form of Christian liberal arts education outside the matrix of instrumental Roman education—and far outside the conventional institutional channels of imperial liberal education.

What we can learn from Augustine

Turning to Augustine in the present makes sense, given his vast influence not only in the history of Christianity but in the history of education. Shrouded now as it may be, Augustine’s vision of liberal arts education is the moral and spiritual background of the contemporary college and university. It was Augustine’s innovative Christian adaptation of the Platonist moral and spiritual purposes of learning that gave birth to the medieval university and Protestant liberal arts college in early modern America—a vision that has been slowly secularized and eroded over the past 200 years. Augustine’s life and thought reveals that liberal arts education is inherently moral and spiritual—that is, to do liberal arts education presupposes answers to the questions of learning’s moral and spiritual purposes. To deny this or to pretend that it is otherwise is to do something other than liberal arts education. Answers are always being offered—no matter what—and if left unacknowledged as a core element of the project of liberal learning, they will remain mere semblances of what they should be.

This is the crisis facing higher education, that the instrumentalization of education presumes an implicit, inarticulate, unexamined answer to the questions: What should I do? Who or what should I worship? Augustine’s testimony from 1600 years ago suggests that this crisis is nothing new. Losing the purpose of learning

is a perennial challenge. Proceeding as if liberal arts education is not inherently and irreducibly connected to the moral and spiritual is to convert it into something more akin to trade school—a place where students are making things but not being made into anything. There is nothing wrong with trade school, but such training could be completed much more cheaply if it were stripped of the veneer, expensive accoutrements, and cultural prestige. Thus, the call to recover the Augustinian vision of education amounts to a gauntlet thrown to liberal arts institutions to make their own animating visions clearer and propose answers to the questions of learning's moral and spiritual purposes, rather than satisfying themselves with justification for intellectual purpose through the lens of economy. Moral and spiritual questions of purpose are not ancillary to liberal arts education. Many liberal arts colleges and universities—both secular and religious—are trying to keep these questions alive (or the four purposes together), often through the medium of the core curriculum, but such attempts often fall short of becoming a whole or inspiring vision. The challenge is wholeness and inspiration. Augustine's vision offers both.

From Augustine there is a single insight that he borrowed from the Platonists that may be gleaned as an antidote for the present age's great instrumentalization of education: the idea of an inherent connection in all things. Augustine restlessly searches through his studies for one architectonic idea that will bring everything together, that will offer a grand sense of coherence: where there is a connection among subjects, connection among the purposes of learning, and connection between himself and all that can be learned. The ground and glue of creation—in all its diversity and profusion and beauty—is God, the ultimate Subject of inquiry. God stands over and within all other subjects of inquiry. This produces a radical sense of wonder in Augustine—a grounding disposition for his inquiry into all branches of learning. This sense of connection reveals Augustine's place before the ultimate Subject of

inquiry, and humble recognition of the divine craftsmanship, causality, and containment of all things grants him a keen sense of his relation not only to God but to all of the other things about which he can learn. This rational and affective appreciation for connection is what makes liberal arts education properly moral, in Augustine's eyes, for it allows one to recognize one's place in and responsibility to the order of things.

Augustine's thoughts about the liberal arts in the *Confessions* echo the Roman philosopher Seneca's lamentation over fragmented education:

The question has been posed whether these liberal arts studies make a man a better person. But in fact they do not aspire to any knowledge of how to do this, let alone claim to do this ... If you really want to know how far [the teachers of the liberal arts] are from the position of being moral teachers, observe the absence of connection between all the things they study; if they were teaching one and the same thing a connection would be evident. (Seneca, *Letter 88*)

Seneca's Letter 88 drips with cynical criticism of Roman liberal arts education on just this point—there is no connection between liberal arts education and character formation insofar as none of the teachers connect all the subjects of their studies. The camps of academic expertise in the Roman Empire, and in the present day, reveal more than the fragmentation of disciplinary inquiry: They betray an inability to connect education with character formation. I will turn to the question of liberal arts education and character formation in the next chapter.

Antidote for our own age

The sense of connection that can be gleaned from Augustine's journey is the antidote for the present age. Augustine's miseducation allows one to see what a great disservice is done to students when they are offered a purely instrumental description of the value of education,

and there is silence about the inherently moral and spiritual purposes of learning. For without any intelligible account of learning's moral and spiritual purposes, the justification for the intellectual purpose of liberal arts education is submerged solely in the instrumental, economic, and external—when we make these moves, we still offer implicit answers to the moral and spiritual questions: What should I do? Who or what should I worship?

America has witnessed a recent spate of thoughtful reflection on the hollowness and pervasiveness of an achievement culture in higher education, and the clever careerist students that know how best to climb the system. These “exemplary” students are the products of this culture's instrumental view of education. William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* is a stunning view inside the over-achieving lives of this generation's most competitive students—those who make it into the Ivy League. These are students, like Augustine, who are not only over-achievers, they are super-achievers. They have learned three languages, launched a small tech start-up, mastered all of Chopin's piano concertos, and traveled to the North Pole to study arctic fauna even before they apply. These are thinkers and learners who have so thoroughly internalized the instrumentalist picture of higher education as career and achievement preparation that they seemingly do not need the four-year experience of college apart from the instrumental opportunity for elite networking that it affords.

Super students are devoted to the “résumé virtues rather than the eulogy virtues,” to use David Brooks's helpful phrase:

The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kinds of relationships you formed.³

³ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), xi.

It makes sense that the best college students are devoted almost single-mindedly to their résumé virtues. They have been given an educational system that provides no other, broader, deeper sense of the purpose of education; no sense of connection; no space to reflect on the moral and spiritual purposes of learning, and they have been promised a degree that will provide them with real value in the form of economic return on investment.

Such an educational system reflects back the most deeply cherished and commonly held values and beliefs about the world in American culture. Such values produce students who are increasingly uninterested in learning for its own sake, submerged in grade calculation, outside career networking, and material achievements. There is nothing wrong with networking and achievement if they are done in service of a higher purpose. Do such students have a higher purpose? The crisis is that the economic purpose, what I call the manufacturing *telos*, has reduced the three other questions of higher education's value—What should I know? What should I do? Who or what should I worship?—to a single, utility-minded concern: What will I make? Even the tense of the question shifts away from moral concern for the present to a future vision of acquisition. As Allan Bloom writes in *The Closing of the American Mind*, “Every education system has a moral goal that it tries to attain. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being. This intention is more or less explicit, more or less a result of reflection; but even the neutral subjects, like reading, writing, and arithmetic, take their place in their vision of the educated person.”⁴ There is no neutral ground in higher education. Educational institutions are always forming and shaping a certain kind of person, and even without a pursuit of moral knowledge, there is always an implicit moral and spiritual vision that undergirds

⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 26.

the work of learning. Excellent sheep are the kinds of people that a purely instrumentalized understanding of liberal arts education produces.

By presuming to evade the questions of moral and spiritual purpose the purely instrumentalized view of education enshrines economic value as the moral and spiritual purpose of liberal education. By this I do not mean to suggest that there are no educators left who preach the value of learning for its own sake or who embody a vision of the intrinsic value of liberal arts education ordered toward higher goods. Assuredly higher education is full of these sorts of teachers—just consider the meager salaries of many professors. Yet it is surprising how silent and inarticulate many teachers and administrators are when it comes to explaining the moral and spiritual purposes of the enterprise.

Many have become rightly suspicious of the kind of college professor who deconstructs everything and then starts talking about the universal meaning of life—as if a crusty Shakespeare professor with soft hands holds the keys of wisdom. Indeed, in higher education there seems to be a full and final disconnection between learning and morality—between knowledge and wisdom. No one dare ask their professor for spiritual advice. Yet ironically this comes at a time in our culture when secularization has shifted much of the cultural authority for matters of morality and the life of the spirit into the hands of such experts, making college the new temple and professors its priests. Indeed, many professors preach a form of intolerant tolerance toward any ideas outside the mainstream of liberal progressive politics, providing a kind of formation for their students. And students can be very good disciples—take, for example, the recent student protests and demonstrations at Middlebury College against any expression of ideas that do not agree with and support their own progressive values. Such protests amount to deep moral energy closed to further inquiry.

Explicit answers to the questions of the moral and spiritual purposes of liberal learning must be given. Today, liberal arts education seems stuck between an increasingly hollow form of clever careerism (the moral formation provided by a thoroughly instrumentalized view of education) and a sharpened moral progressivism that demands perfection and purity of ideas in society and on campus. Is there a way beyond these to another option? Augustine's journey provides a clue. College ought not be a pen of excellent sheep or a guild of progressive acolytes but rather a restless hearts club—a unique institution devoted to the widest learning possible, unafraid to ask the biggest questions in the most rigorous way.

Colleges are unique institutions historically—often related to the church yet serving a separate mission, a place where questions and inquiry lead the way, a place where the enterprise of learning touches the third rail of morality and spiritual life. The intellectual role of the college is distinct but complements the pastoral role of the church: Each pursues the great end of contemplation but from different starting points, along different paths. Augustine's personal advance beyond the Platonic view of the spiritual purpose of liberal arts education—into the terrain where faith is required—speaks to another antidote that the Augustinian vision of liberal arts education might provide for the present: the importance of faith—of faith seeking understanding—as a framework for thinking about the moral and spiritual purposes of liberal education.

A range of secular authors—for example, David Brooks and William Deresiewicz—have recently praised faith-based liberal arts colleges as one of the last bastions of holistic formation, places where intellectual inquiry remains yoked to moral formation and spiritual aspiration beyond instrumental concerns. Such unlikely praise is welcome encouragement for Christian liberal arts colleges, but is the praise warranted? The Augustinian vision of liberal arts education—one that requires religious faith as the frame that holds

the four questions together—is the way forward as a model for liberal arts education. It certainly presents a challenge to a purely secularist vision of liberal arts education that is either silent about or openly rejects the move to link the economic and intellectual purposes of learning with the moral and spiritual. It is a challenge to take up the conversation and become articulate once more, and to make explicit the moral and spiritual purposes that animate liberal arts education. The Augustinian vision is also a challenge to faith-based liberal arts colleges—especially Christian ones—which pride themselves on the connection of these fourfold purposes in their mission, vision, and values. Do these expressed purposes make a difference in practice? Do they filter down? Do they form the fabric of learning and a coherent way of life?

An Augustinian liberal arts college should be at the vanguard of liberal arts education, demonstrating that learning happens best when there are limits and constraints that make, what Alasdair MacIntyre calls, “constrained” agreement and disagreement possible.⁵ Such constraints make substantive moral and spiritual inquiry within the curriculum meaningful, according to MacIntyre. The modern secular university aspires to be a place of unconstrained agreement and has thus abolished all religious and moral statements and exclusions. Yet counterintuitively, MacIntyre argues, this has not led to a deepening of liberal education or agreement about moral and spiritual matters but to a flattening, an endangering of the very enterprise and the humanistic values necessary to sustain it. What is needed, thinkers such as MacIntyre and Brooks argue, are places of shared frameworks and constrained agreements about revisable sets of beliefs and practices that provide the starting point for a common inquiry and debate—in short, new forms of tradition-shaped liberal arts education. The relationship between the kind of religious authority mentioned

above and the ongoing revisability of beliefs is the central tension that animates an Augustinian liberal education. Humility renders all knowledge provisional in the faith-filled sense, for Augustine, and faith names not an arrogance of certainty but a tireless starting point in pursuit of deeper understanding.

The Augustinian Christian vision is one option among such tradition-shaped approaches that might be selected to animate the enterprise of liberal education once more. My argument in the remainder of this book is that it should be seriously considered, for it coherently connects the four purposes of learning and it has had tremendous influence in the history of Western liberal arts education—its vital seeds of influence lay dormant and are ready to give life once more.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 230–1.