

Speculative Knowledge in Liberal Education

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Descriptive Definition.

Knowledge can be practical or theoretical. Practical knowledge comprises art, skill, profession and specialization. In liberal education—sometimes called classical liberal education—practical knowledge must always be considered of lesser importance to speculative knowledge usually referred to as the theoretical, the hypothetical, the notional, the conceptual or the abstract. Practical knowledge is utilitarian. In life, liberal education must include both the speculative and the practical, especially because liberal learners have to learn practical skills to earn a living and because they are morally obliged to share and apply their speculative knowledge for their own welfare and that of others. Speculative knowledge helps people to identify and distinguish practically what is authentically beneficial to human beings from what is destructive to them.

Integration of speculative and practical knowledge, virtue, action and ethics. In liberal education, speculative knowledge teaches people what is authentically good for human pursuit and what is authentically good behavior for dealing with self and with others. When speculative and practical knowledge combine to produce human behaviors habitually realized for noble ends, specifically human acts—called human acts or moral acts—are the outcome; they are called virtues. Habitual behaviors realized for ignoble or evil ends are called vices. The morality to which liberal learners aspire is called virtue ethics.


Speculative knowledge, the elevation of human thinking. Highly developed speculative thinking enlightens individuals in the best use of this world's material things. Speculative thinking keeps liberal learners focused on the ultimate end and purpose of their lives. Today's expedient pragmatism that might be successful for the moment, in the long run leaves individuals intellectually myopic and volitionally weak in their ability to make good decisions.

Proximate and ultimate ends: practical and speculative knowledge. Liberal education's purposes or ends are a combination of the practical and the theoretical. Since knowledge comes primarily through the human senses, the first contact with exterior reality, the proximate end of liberal education is to prepare students so that they can live a fulfilled life in the company of their family, friends and coworkers in a civil society; while the ultimate end—the most remote to the individual—is to be able to know the true, the good, the beautiful, and the one—all of which are found in God, the source of all created things. The world surrounding the student contains clues for the existence for God and for the objectiveness of human nature—that is, *objective norms* that are found throughout creation. With regard to human behavior, it is the personal responsibility of each naturally endowed human being to search for those objective standards by means of which human beings know whether or not their behavior is truly *human* or *moral*. It is in this sense that human and moral become synonymous. Personal opinions, hunches, inklings, desires and intense wants that something be or become reality, are inadequate criteria and irresponsible guides for human behavior.


Structural Description.

Too many people make a sharp and clean-cut dichotomy between the theoretical and the practical, as if one did not have anything to do with the other. The great minds of written history teach how theory and practice are important for personal and social development and how the very intimacy of the theoretical-practical relationship demands of the critical thinker the effort toward depth of understanding and the desire for serviceable insight: History and common sense demonstrate the importance of knowing what is veritably good and of being able to recognize and make use of the appropriate means to secure true happiness. The disciplined development of the intellectual and moral virtues are essential to the fashioning of a theoretical framework for correctly assessing reality, to the attainment of an over-arching understanding of the dynamics for healthy human relationships, and to sensitive recognition of implicit reasoning that warns of dangerous steps and dire consequences resulting from defective relationships and warped thinking.

Catholic liberal education, speculatively, is about the same pursuit of truth, but extended to a higher, spiritual degree: namely, to the level of God and of revealed truth. God is truth. Morally, also, learners of liberal education arrive at higher levels, soaring at lofty heights when they are virtuous.



Excuse me America,
this is tissue.



This is not.

In fact, an unborn baby's heart begins to beat at 18 days.
At 40 days she has measurable brain waves.
An unborn baby shouldn't be thrown away like a piece of tissue.

What kind of thinking is required to deal with the social problem?