

## THE ORIGINS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Liberal education has always been controversial. That is true today and it was true in the fifth century before our era in classical Athens, when we first begin to hear about “liberal” learning. Since that term is poorly understood today, it is worth looking closely at its earliest extant usages. They come amid a robust argument about leadership in a society that valued freedom in all its many aspects. “Liberal” education, in other words, was for them an education in and for freedom. That is what I believe it should be today. But let us begin with the evidence.

Athenians of the classical age spent a lot of time arguing about education. We can readily see that in the comedies of Aristophanes when, for example, in the Frogs Aeschylus is represented arguing with Euripides about the education of the young, or in the Clouds the “Just Argument” battles it out with the “Unjust Argument.” The Platonic dialogues, moreover, repeatedly examine education, for example, when in the Protagoras Socrates tries to determine whether moral excellence can be taught.

One passage in Plato Protagoras (312 b) is especially revealing – and influential. Socrates is conversing with an ingenuous young man, Hippocrates, who has been swept off his feet by the sophist Protagoras. Socrates puts him through a mini-dialectic that leads poor Hippocrates to the false conclusion that if he studies with a sophist he must be trying to become a sophist himself. Socrates suggests that his purpose in studying with Protagoras need not be to become a sophist. The analogy, Socrates suggests, could be to studying grammar with a school teacher, or the kithara with a guitar teacher. One need not aspire to be a teacher of grammar or the kithara; one may simply seek to master what is being taught:

“... not with a view to making any of them a profession, but only as a part of education, and because a private gentleman and a freeman ought to know them.”

That is the translation by Benjamin Jowett, (1817 – 1893), the master of Balliol College Oxford, who did so much to shape British, and indirectly American higher education.



Benjamin Jowett depicted by [Sir Leslie Ward, 'Spy'](#), 1876 from the Wikipedia article on Jowett,

Jowett's translation remains perennially popular, and when we look at the Greek of this passage we can see why. It resonates with a social structure with which we are familiar. When the Greek says "demiourgos, meaning a "skilled workman, craftsman," Jowett's translation alludes to something more upscale - "making any of them a *profession*." And when the Greek has ton idioten kai ton eleutheron, literally "the private citizen and the free person," Jowett turns it into "a private *gentleman and freeman*."

By translating in a way that brought the passage closer to his audience, Jowett, one could argue, has simply made more contemporary tendencies already present in Plato, the idea that the education under consideration should have nothing to do with craftsmen or skilled workers. Jowett simply makes the idea more contemporary by using the word "profession." The education being discussed in Plato is for men, definitely *men*, who do not need to make a living for themselves -- "gentlemen," in the proper British sense of that word. When Jowett adds the adjective "private" we may imagine a country gentleman who

chooses not to seek election to parliament. That's not Plato's idea of the idiotes, a citizen who does not participate in civic life at all.

Extrapolate and you have one understanding of liberal education today. It is for people of means, who don't need to worry about a job and do not want to get their hands dirty with either hard work or politics. It is for rich kids, who don't have to worry about a job, and for for personal enjoyment, not for anything to do with money-making or civic life.

When Plato alludes to an education for an idiotes, he is taking a direction quite contrary to other writers of that period who thought about education. Their interest was in leadership. This approach to education is writ large -- eight books large -- in Xenophon's Cyropaedia, the education of Cyrus the Great, king of Persia in the sixth century before our era:

Believing this man to be deserving of admiration, we have therefore investigated who he was in his origin, what kind of natural ability (physis) he possessed, and what sort of education he had enjoyed that he so greatly excelled in governing men.

Cyropaedia 1.1.6, trans. Walter Miller, modified.

What follows is far from a historically precise analysis of the actual educational system of sixth century Persia. It is Xenophon's own imagining of an ideal educational system, much as Plato was imagining his ideal commonwealth in the Republic.

The concern with the education of leaders which can be seen in Xenophon (ca. 428 – 354 BCE ) can be traced back to an earlier generation, if we are willing to read between the lines. There is a hint of that in Thucydides' digression on Athens' great leader in the Persian War, Themistocles. In 1. 138 the historian goes out of his way to emphasize that:

Themistocles most emphatically demonstrated the power of natural ability (physis), and in this respect he, more than anyone else, deserves admiration. By his innate intelligence, alike unformed and unsupplemented by study (oute promathon... oute epimathon), he was at once the best judge in those sudden crises which admit of little or no deliberation, and best at conjecturing about the future, even to its most distant possibilities.... ... To sum up, by the power of his talent and the brevity of his training this man became the most capable to improvise, ex tempore, what was needed."

1.138.3 ff., trans. Crawley, modified.

Thucydides is clearly at odds with one of his predecessors, as so often in the first book, when he challenges Homer, Herodotus, Hellanicus and perhaps others as well. Someone must already have argued that Themistocles was well trained for

the leadership role he took on. Thucydides emphatically rejects that view. With Themistocles, he is sure it was not skilled teaching, but sheer talent that made him the most dazzling (lamprotatos 1.138.6) Athenian of his time.

We cannot identify with any confidence with whom Thucydides was differing. But we can feel confident that an argument about the training of leaders was going on in Thucydides' day, that is, well before he completed his history of the Peloponnesian war early in the fourth century BCE. The evidence comes from a much later source, Plutarch of Chaeronea, who in the late first or early second century of our era wrote biographies of Greek and Roman political and military leaders. In several of his Lives of fifth century Athenians Plutarch cites a treatise by one Stesimbrotus of Thasos, assuring us, as other authorities do as well, that this author was a close contemporary of these leaders.

In his biography of Themistocles (ch. 2) Plutarch reports that Stesimbrotus said that Themistocles had attended Anaxagoras' lecture and studied with Melissus, the natural philosopher (τὸν φυσικόν). As Plutarch notes, Stesimbrotus' chronology is implausible since Anaxagoras seems to have flourished well after Themistocles' death in 462 or so. Melissus may also have come too late for the young Themistocles to sit at his feet, but perhaps Stesimbrotus was no more worried about chronology than Xenophon was about the details of Persian court life. He may have been trying to make the point that Themistocles had a top flight education -- the exact opposite point to that which Thucydides later made. In Stesimbrotus' view Themistocles was very well educated, the sort of person who would have been attentive to the teaching of famous natural philosophers.

In his Life of Cimon, the Athenian general and statesman active in the 460s and 450s before our era, Plutarch again quotes Stesimbrotus, touching once again on the education of a prominent Athenian. Here is what Plutarch reports:

Stesimbrotus of Thasos, who lived around the approximate time of Cimon, says that he [Cimon]  
-was thoroughly trained neither in literature (mousike), nor in any other of the subjects that are liberal and widespread among the Greeks;  
-was entirely devoid of cleverness and Attic chattering;  
- and had in his disposition great good breeding and truthfulness;  
-and rather Peloponnesian was the structure of the soul of this man.

The vocabulary (words such as stomulia, "chattering," a favorite of Aristophanes, and deinotes, "cleverness," which Thucydides uses to good advantage), and the carefully balanced structure of the clauses in Plutarch's report are all consistent with what one finds among other fifth century writers, and so give reason for confidence that Plutarch has kept close to his source.

If we are right in concluding that Plutarch accurately reports what Stesimbrotus said, we have in fragment 4 of Stesimbrotus *the earliest extant use of the term "free" or "liberal" in an educational setting*. It's our first allusion to liberal studies, and right from the start, the term occurs amid a controversy. For clearly the idea

of “liberal studies” was already in circulation when Stesimbrotus wrote this passage. He doesn't need to stop to explain it or introduce it as a new idea. It's already in circulation, and already, it seems, under fire.

The controversy can be seen in an anecdote that reflects the image that Cimon himself wanted to project, as we can see from an anecdote told by another contemporary visitor to Athens, Ion of Chios. At a symposium Cimon was asked to sing and did so quite creditably. When the guests praised him as “cleverer” (dexioteron) than Themistocles, he said he “had never been taught how to sing or play the kithara, but he knew how to make a city great (megalēn) and wealthy (plousian)” (Ion of Chios FGrHist 392 F 13, apud Plutarch Cimon 9.1). Cimon clearly wanted to draw a contrast between himself and the great Themistocles, and saw his own allegedly modest education as part of that contrast.



Reconstructed ancient Greek kithara, from [Ancient History Encyclopedia](#)

So what are these "liberal studies," the eleutheria mathemata to which Stesimbrotus refers? Mousike is at the head of the list, a term that includes not only music in our sense, but also the other gifts of the Muses, especially knowledge of poetic texts, often memorized and then performed with musical accompaniment, and sometimes with dance. The names of the nine Muses were already established centuries before the texts we are examining. According to Hesiod the names of these daughters of Zeus and Memory are Cleo, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Calliope and Urania (Hesiod Theogony 77 – 79). Only later sources indicate that each Muse had a specific artistic domain, but most of the names hint at poetry, song, dance and delight in performance. Even the one apparent exception, Urania,

"Heavenly One," may allude to poetry about the creation of heaven and earth, for example, Hesiod's own Theogony 105 ff.

Mousike comprises them all. But Stesimbrotus recognized that mousike did not encompass all "liberal studies." His phrase "nor any other" in fr. 4 indicates that he thought other subjects were also numbered among them. What did he think they were? Mathematics, especially geometry, are likely to be included. Pythagoras, one late source (Proclus VS 58 B 1) tells us, treated geometry, as part of the structure (schema) of liberal education. The phraseology may not be Pythagoras', but the respect for geometry is evident in other settings, for example in Plato's Meno.

Rhetoric, on the other hand, seems not yet to have become sufficiently "widespread among the Greeks" to be included among these liberal studies. It may instead have been seen as a route to the deplorable "cleverness" (deinotes) associated with Athens. In Stesimbrotus, then, we may have a glimpse of what advanced education was like among the Greeks before the Sophistic revolution that made rhetoric a central part of the learning of a free person.

Finally, there is to physikon, natural philosophy, which Stesimbrotus (FGrHist 107 F 1) asserts was part of Themistocles' education. As we have seen, the chronology implied by this passage is implausible, but another passage in Plutarch indicates that Pericles studied with teachers both of "music" and of philosophy. In his life of Pericles he reports the consensus of most of his sources about Pericles' education:

His teacher of ta mousika, most writers say, was Damon (whose name they say should be pronounced with the first syllable short). But Aristotle [actually Plato in Alcibiades I 118c] says he had a thorough musical training at the hands of Pythocleides... Pericles was also the pupil of Zeno the Eleatic, ... But the man who most consorted with Pericles ... was Anaxagoras of Clazomenae.

Plutarch Pericles 4, passim, trans. Perrin, modified

"Liberal studies," then, may well have included subjects that might today be considered among the performing arts, mathematics, philosophy and the natural sciences. (I am sorry to report that there is no evidence for the inclusion of foreign languages or history in "liberal studies" at this early stage.)

But why the name "liberal"? In what sense might these subjects have been considered "free," or "liberal"? Was the term simply a status marker—the things with which people of leisure amused themselves? But before agreeing, we need to hear the other side of the debate. That's difficult because, as so often in the study of classical Athens, we hear the anti-liberal voices more clearly than their opponents.

On the other side, however, is Damon, the teacher of Pericles. He not only taught music, he wrote about it in a theoretical way. Plato in the third book of the Republic takes him very seriously as someone who has explored the psychological effects of different rhythms, “which ones are the suitable underpinnings of un-freedom (aneleutherias), of hybris, or madness, or other depravity (kakia), and which rhythms are to be reserved for the opposite [of these bad results]” (400 b). The core idea that rhythm, and, presumably all the gifts of the Muses, should be understood as having powerful moral effects fits nicely with Plato’s own views about the importance of harmony and rhythm in the education of rulers. In this context the word aneleutheria, must not be reduced to “meanness,” as Jowett and his followers would have it; it must be the lack of a more general freedom, of “free-spiritedness,” perhaps, caused or exacerbated by certain musical patterns.

In this context the lack of freedom is grouped with other depravities (kakia), evident at the personal level. Hence its opposite, eleutheria, should be a form of personal moral excellence (arete). It would include freedom *from* anything that blocks virtues such as wisdom (sophia), bravery (andreia), justice (dikaiosyne), and moderation (sophrosyne). These are in the first instance personal virtues, but they are also, as Plato saw, the basis of a well-run society.

The emphasis on freedom is also to be found in a summary of the views of Damon’s followers in Athenaeus’ Deipnosophists. With Damon Pericles was likely to hear a rational for mousike of this sort:

*A tenet of Damon's school was that songs and dances necessarily occur as the soul is moved in certain ways, and the free (eleutherioi) and beautiful (kalai) ones produce the same effects in the soul, opposite ones the opposite effects.*

Damon VS 37 B 6 apud Athenaeus 628 c

The phrasing is compressed and opaque, but once again the idea of freedom is front and center in Damon’s thinking about mousike. Along with beauty, freedom in the rhythms of poetry and in the movements of dance, moves the soul toward freedom and beauty; poetry and dance of the opposite kind have just the reverse effect.

Freedom, in both its personal and civic sense, was much prized and celebrated throughout Greece, not least in Athens. That term spans freedom of many kinds, from absence of slavery, to personal magnanimity, to the civic freedom especially prized and venerated in Athens.

Damon, then, provides an otherwise missing rationale for an education that valued beauty and freedom. It is a theory based on mimesis, that is on the belief that one will imitate in other parts of one’s life that which one has experienced in poetry, music and dance. Someone who is trained in these activities will, in this view, over time transfer them into other realms. So it would not have been surprising if someone with political aspirations, Pericles for example, would value



an education of this sort, and perhaps over time becoming a clarion voice for freedom in his society: "The freedom we [Athenians] enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life" (Pericles in Thucydides 2.37.2, trans. Crawley).

Is there a comparable rationale for the study of mathematics or to physikon (what we might call "natural philosophy")? There's one hint, but it comes from an unexpected source, Callicles in Plato's Gorgias. He was perhaps Socrates' most formidable opponent. In the Gorgias he warns Socrates against continuing the study of philosophy. It's all right for a young man, but an older man risks thereby being an effective speaker in his own behalf:

When I perceive philosophical activity in a young lad, I am pleased; it suits him (πρέπειν), I think, and shows that this chap is someone eleutheros. A boy who doesn't play with philosophy I regard as aneleutheros, a chap who will never raise himself to any fine (kalos) or noble (gennaios) action.

Gorgias 485c, trans. W.C. Helmbold, modified.

In this context eleutheron cannot mean just a freeman, a non-slave. Jowett overtranslates when he renders it "a man of liberal education". But perhaps this time he is not so far off the mark. The contrast with aneleutheron in the second sentence shows that Callicles has in mind mental and personal qualities that can lead to great achievements – once the lad has had his fill of philosophy. The best translation of eleutheron in this setting is not "liberal," but something like "free-spirited," or perhaps "aiming high." The aneleutheros, then, is a person of confined aspirations, and hence unlikely to achieve much, while the eleutheros, the free-spirited one, is headed for great achievements.

If that was indeed the rationale for liberal studies, then mousike and to physikon (and perhaps some other unidentified "liberal" studies") share the goal of ambitious, free-spirited action -- reaching high, aiming at great things. Their advocates would say that they were the appropriate preparation for a leader, and that some of Athens' greatest leaders, Pericles for example, had precisely that kind of education. It was an education in and for freedom.

But liberal education was born and raised amid controversy. Its critics, it appears, pointed to other leaders whose achievements came from sheer talent, not elaborate education. Cimon seems to have been a case in point.

The controversy sounds familiar today, and that, I believe, is a good thing. A vigorous argument about the goals of higher education is an essential part of a robust civic discourse and recognizes its benefits. But classical Athens has one great and often overlooked contribution to make to such discussions. It frames the issue as preparation for leadership in a society that values freedom in all its many forms. That, I believe, is what "liberal" education meant then, and why, for all the differences between our society and theirs, eleutheria mathemata are still so important today.

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