



## Course: The Seven Liberal Arts with Christopher Perrin and Andrew Kern

Lesson 4: A History of  
the Seven Liberal Arts  
with Andrew Kern

### Outline:

#### A Story of Two Mountains (2:24)

- **Mountain 1:** At Mount Sinai, God told Moses that he is, “I AM,” (Exodus 3:14). From this, Moses knew that the world is real and that God spoke it into being.
  - What we can learn from this story:
    - We live in a knowable world.
    - We can use language (which God gave to us) to know that world.
    - We can use reason as an instrument to know that world.
- **Mountain 2:** Mythically, Mount Parnassus is the mountain that inspired Homer to write *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—the first rhetoric handbooks ever written.
- In Moses and Homer (the melding of Greek and Hebrew thought), the beginnings of the Western education tradition begin.

#### Pythagorean Quadrivium (8:16)

- **Pythagoras** (born 570 BC) developed music theory and the early Quadrivium.
- Following Pythagoras, the **Pre-Socratics** looked for an explanation of the world apart from pagan gods; they developed mathematics and philosophy (Quadrivium).
- Meanwhile, the **Sophists** revered language and its power; they developed sophisticated, verbal arts (Trivium).

#### Socratic Dialectic (11:30)

- **Socrates**, an Athenian, lived through the decline of Athens. Socrates’ desire to save his world and gain wisdom led to the power of asking questions.
- Socrates (“The Great Seeker”) believed in knowable truth; *he sought to develop a new logic based on the skill of asking questions.*



## Plato (16:00)

- **Plato** (born 427 BC), one of Socrates' students, began a school based on the Socratic dialectic (Socratic questioning).
- Plato, too, believed that truth was knowable and humans must seek it.

## Aristotle's Organon

- **Aristotle** (born 384 BC), one of Plato's students, also believed in knowable truth in the form or ideal of a thing.
- Aristotle began the Lyceum and recorded notes and dialogues; he is called "the Great Categorizer."
- Aristotle's 6 collected works on logic is called the *Organon*; "Organon" is a Greek word meaning instrument or tool.
  - *The Organon was an instrument for reasoning and the foundation for classical studies*; students needed to master the Organon to think properly in physics, politics, and metaphysics.
  - *Metaphysics*: the study of 4 causes
    - Material cause—what something is made out of
    - Efficient cause—what brings something into being
    - Formal cause—the pattern or idea of something
    - Final cause—the "why" of a thing
  - Aristotle's study of metaphysics led him to ask, "What is the cause of causes?" (God)

## The Development of Grammar: Two Schools (29:20)

- School 1: Stoics
  - Greece; 300 BC onwards
  - Philosophical; this world is all that exists
  - Believed in a pure language (Logos) rooted in being itself; this Logos existed beneath all other languages and allowed humans to know the world.
- School 2: Alexandrian School, or Alexandrians
  - Greek center of Alexandria, Egypt; 300 BC onwards
  - Practical; wanted to preserve the practical
  - By the 1st century BC, Alexandrians were concerned that their children could not read Homer; they developed grammar handbooks so that Homer could be read and understood.
- As these 2 traditions came together, a greater desire to understand language and grammar developed.
  - *The Grammaticos—the earliest teachers*—took Greek students, who already knew gymnastics and music, and trained them in language arts, grammar, and Homer. This led to a strong Greek tradition of "liberating" arts!



## Greeks & the Romans (33:45)

- With the Battle of Corinth (146 BC), the Romans conquered Greece; although Greek culture caused controversy, Greek thought infiltrated Roman thought.
- Cicero
  - Born 106 BC; Roman lawyer and philosopher
  - Cicero valued the arts of Euclid and Plato, and he later became a philosophical rhetorician.
  - ***Cicero combined rhetoric and philosophy to create the Humanities, which essentially became the seven liberal arts.***
- By 2nd & 3rd centuries AD, the Romans systematized rhetoric handbooks for students.

## Roman Decline & the Rise of Christianity (38:02)

- As Rome declined in the 3rd & 4th century AD, Christian religion spread Roman culture.
- Every church father who wrote was educated in the Trivium & Quadrivium, the Humanities, and the Great Books of the Greek & Roman Empires.
- Church fathers, during ***the Great Selection***, actively preserved the best of the classical tradition (St. Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, Basil the Great).
  - Martianus Capella's *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury* presented the seven liberal arts as handmaids of Mercury and Philology.
  - **St. Augustine's *De Musica*** marks the move from the Classic Era to the Medieval Era of the liberal arts.

## Liberal Arts in the Medieval Era & Middle Ages (42:25)

- During the Medieval Era, the Encyclopedists began summaries of liberal arts curriculums.
  - **Boethius** translated Aristotle's *Organon* into Latin, and he gave us the terms Trivium & Quadrivium.
- During the Middle Ages, figures such as Cassiodorus (485-585 AD), Peter Lombard (1096-1160), and Abelard (1079-1142) adapted, changed, and wrote handbooks on the basic curriculum.
- With **Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274), the seven liberal arts and sciences reached their clearest and highest expression. (46:46)

## The Liberal Arts After Thomas Aquinas

- From the 17th century onward, the following figures shape philosophical thought, leading to the decline of classical education:
  - Francis Bacon (*Novum Organum*; experience is the mode for learning)
  - René Descartes (pure reason leads to human knowledge)
  - Jean-Jacques Rousseau (feelings lead to human knowledge)



- Immanuel Kant & John Dewey (thinking based on physics)
- Jacques Derrida (nothing holds thought together—no Logos)
- Friedrich Nietzsche (“We will not be rid of God until we are rid of grammar.”)
- Into the 20th century, the reason, experience, and emotion that classic education binds together are now in conflict with each other; logic suffers, while rhetoric is reduced to persuasion.