

Hope and contradiction: the practical arts in the educational thought of late antiquity

Daniel O'Neill*

School of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

This paper looks at tensions arising in the educational thought of late antiquity from the conflict between assumptions regarding the low worth of practical knowledge and the contribution practical education can make to the wider purposes educational thinkers assigned to learning. Drawing on the educational writings of Augustine, Martianus Cappella, and Boethius, I argue that there are vagaries and contradictions in their depreciation of the practical and a fuller, more hopeful, appreciation of the potential of practical education emerges. This assertion has contemporary significance due to the ancient binary's foundational and contemporary status as a tool of legitimation to reinforce the lower status of the practical and justify societal and economic determinants at the base of educational stratifications.

Key Words: Practical Education; Late Antiquity; Vocational Education; Augustine; Boethius; Martianus Capella

I. Introduction - the liberal and vocational binary

In 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson vowed to end the “pointless, nonsensical gulf” between university and vocational education, following in a long tradition of prime ministers and education secretaries who have vowed to resolve, or placate, this perennial divide (Stewart 2020). Johnson’s subsequent term did not necessarily give substance to this rhetorical gusto, yet the binary between liberal and vocational education is a deeply embedded one with ancient origins. John Dewey (1916: 260-261) argued that the split between vocational and liberal education in early twentieth century education emerged in Ancient Greece. The ancient economy divided the population into those capable of a life of reason and those capable of only desire and work. Those deemed capable of a life of abstraction and intellectual exploration were considered suited to autonomy in their education, while the rest required their educational purpose to be provided by others. The two distinctions were deemed by Dewey to have affected an ancient division in Western educational thought between that of a liberal education, having to do with the self-sufficing life of leisure devoted to knowing for its own sake, and a useful, practical training for mechanical occupations, devoid of intellectual, moral and aesthetic qualities.

Dewey’s divide may be crude but is powerful in heuristic purpose. This ancient divide, elucidated and reinforced within the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus has substantial cultural resonance beyond its time and is often drawn upon in providing the philosophical and intellectual ballast for the sharp educational divide that Dewey highlights. That is not to say that the divide arose because of this ancient distinction, but rather it has acted as a tool of legitimation for a stark and enduring division. Max Weber never sought to establish a causal link between Protestantism and capitalist development, unlike R.H. Tawney, rather he highlighted that the Protestant ethic was particularly well-suited to providing legitimation for the rise of capitalism (see Skinner 2002: 156). In a similar fashion, the sharp separation

attributed to the ancients offered a comparable function in providing justification for a divide that has been characteristic of mass education in Britain and other European models. The ancients furnished resonant myths that elegantly justified the societal and economic determinants at the base of educational structures and stratifications. Parallels may be seen outside of the European context, for example in China, where Confucianism has historically provided the institutional logic for the devaluation of vocational education, despite state challenges to this logic during the Socialist Era (1949-78) and presently (see Wang 2022). Dewey's binary strikes a particular stark resonance with British education, where historically a non-technical bias was combined with the laudation of the disinterested amateur.

Swift and Fisher's 2012 study of the reasons behind young people's choice of vocational courses in Britain indicate how these cultural myths are deeply embedded in the educational fabric within which learners make their choices. The young people interviewed in the 2012 study highlighted that the 'traditional value placed on relatively elite, pure 'academic' education in Britain is deeply engrained, even amongst young people who have had little direct exposure to the associated processes of enculturation and the economic benefits that ensue from access to it' (2012:212). Thompson's 2009 study similarly found that vocational options are seen as an educational route for those who cannot achieve academically or as a second chance for those who have failed previously.

Avis (2016) has rightly highlighted the class dimension to this binary and how such binaries are a tool of class reproduction. Vocational education may be seen as a tool of social stratification, diverting those from lower social classes into the jobs of lower status, rather than primarily a societal good or personal fulfilment in itself. Thompson (2009) has drawn attention to the institutional divide where colleges of Further Education, with their vocational component, are more likely to attract students due to lower socio-economic backgrounds compared to sixth form colleges. Students on the vocational route often inhabit an ambiguous

zone officially equal to the academic route but separate and unequal (Allen and Ainley 2007). Completing qualifications of formal equal value, but in reality, leading to lower paid careers with lower status, pay and conditions. Similarly, sociological research has drawn attention to the uninspiring role vocational and practical education often inhabits; acting as a safety net for school leavers diverting them from unemployment into usually low paying jobs and secondly diverting them from higher education and the potential that this may offer (Di Stasio 2017). This is despite the undoubted economic importance of vocational education (DBIS 2013, City and Guilds 2015), practical arts having their own standards of excellence (see Winch 2010, MacIntyre 2007), being a means for exploring virtue and the good (Murdoch 1970) and being capable of comprising of a complexity equivalent to academic study. Sennett eloquently highlights ‘the unity of head and hand’ and the intricacy of the exercise of ‘the intelligent hand’ in craft (Sennett 2009:149-178).

There is a sharp underestimation of the educational potential of the practical and vocational. Winch (2010:45) highlights the conceptual deflation in relation to skill, where key attributes of skill are stripped away creating a limited version of the concept. He points to the common practice of training in the UK where a thick fuller understanding, including perceptual, judgemental, epistemic and moral dimensions, are replaced by a thinned-out behavioural conception.

This paper will seek to argue that the key transmitters of the ancient curriculum to the medieval period, who reinforced, and in some ways created, this sharp demarcation that the Western tradition inherited, were contradictory in their depreciation of the practical and within their wider writings contained hope for the fuller potential of the practical. I will specifically focus on the educational writings of Augustine, Boethius and Martianus Capella.

II. Late antiquity and the solidification of the ancient curriculum

The crucial point of consolidation of this pervasive demarcation within educational thought occurred during late antiquity as the ancient translated to the medieval. As Colish (1997) argues the foundations of the western intellectual tradition acquired its character not only from the traditions that flowed into it, Greek, Roman and Judeo-Christian, but from the distinct concerns, tastes, sensibilities and interpretations of the medieval period.

The solidification of the influential Hellenistic curriculum into what was translated to the Middle Ages, and beyond, occurred relatively late during the end of the classical period. It was during this period that the culmination of the Greco-Roman curriculum petrified in the permanence of the codex. Three thinkers were crucial in translating the classical educational model into what became the Western educational tradition; Theologian and Doctor of the Church (Saint) Augustine of Hippo (354- 430), sixth century philosopher and author of the *Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius (480-524), Carthaginian author of the prolific liberal arts handbook *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* Martianus Capella (430?-?). Monastic pioneer Cassiodorus's *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning* may also be noted as an important work in this regard being attributed with sanctifying the pagan arts.

All these figures possessed roles as transmitters of ancient thought. Augustine went far beyond just a transmitter and is firmly within and at the head of the patristic tradition. Boethius was a philosopher, theologian and political figure in his own right. Capella's influence was formidable, his presentation of the liberal arts becoming a prolific school-text book across Europe (Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks* X, 449, 14). Where Capella lacked in originality or understanding, he made up in the attractiveness of his invention, C. S. Lewis (1963: 78) notoriously opined that "the universe, which has produced the bee-orchid and the giraffe, has produced nothing stranger than Martianus Capella".

Writings on education in late antiquity were firmly in the debt of Plato and Plotinus' creative interpretation of Plato, which saw an attempt to reconcile Plato with Aristotle while drawing on Greek religious and philosophical traditions (Baine Harris 1976). Wedded into the Platonic, and particularly the Neo-Platonic, perspective was a sharp preference for the abstract over that which resided in the material or practical. Indeed, Neo-Platonic perspectives were keen to emphasise that the closer one is to the material the further one is from what is good. This often led to a dogmatic dismissal of the worth of the practical arts amongst those who sought to speculate on the higher ends of education.

With Plato, learning was firmly placed within the life of the wealthy, economically independent citizen unburdened by the need to work. The Hellenistic educational model was distinctly a product of the slave economy of ancient Greece. It was an education for citizens of the polis and the educational models of Isocratic and Platonic inspiration were aimed at that stratum of Athenian citizenry of independent means. It must not be forgotten how deeply that autonomy was revered within Greek society, represented by the archetypal landowner who participates in forum and the battlefield when required. Indeed, for Aristotle's *eudaimonistic* philosophy, independence allows the architecture for human flourishing to be achieved. De Ste Croix (1981:114) argued that the most important single dividing line between different groups of free citizens in the ancient world was between those who had to work for a living and the propertied class who could live without spending more than a fraction of their time on work. Large landholdings enabled the few to achieve the Aristotelian ideal of the independent autonomous life. This elite formed a minority of the population with small peasants and other freemen, such as artisans and shopkeepers, forming a majority of free citizens until the third century A.D. For the elite a cultivated leisure was the ideal. Much like the English aristocracy of the 19th century, labour was regarded as degrading, and paid employment of any sort a mark of inferior status and partiality.

Within the higher levels of education, achievable for the few in ancient Greek society, there existed an enduring conflict between rhetoric and philosophy, both offering a model to which Hellenistic education should aspire, seen in the figures of Plato and Isocrates.

Plato, who was of such a powerful influence on the writers of late antiquity, saw philosophy as being the highest end of education. Within Greek culture there was a deep reverence for intellectual contemplation and *theoria*. They were particular in their wish to seek to develop self-sufficiency in thought as well as in status and position. Husserl states, at the heart of the Greek reverence of *theoria* was a belief in ‘the universal critique of all life and all life goals’ aiming at ‘an absolute self-responsibility on the basis of absolute theoretical insights’ (Husserl 1970: 283). Plato turned towards abstraction, believing here lay truth and the good, and emphasised those tendencies of the mind that lent towards the abstract. For each of the liberal arts, Plato sought to strip away practical concerns and focus on each of the disciplines as an abstract intellectual exercise. It was seeking the Durkheimian sacred in excluding the realm of the profane and heralded the inwardness and unworldliness of the medieval universities.

Where Plato’s education aimed for a philosophical truth, Isocrates’ laboured towards the beauty of speech; where Plato prized mathematical truths and the dialectic above all else, Isocrates prized literary culture and oratory. Though he believed that foundational principles underpinned the use of rhetoric, Isocrates teaching focussed on practice of speech and creation of rhetoric (Marrou 1956: 79-91). Isocrates believed in the power of humane culture and word to inspire virtue in oneself and in others.

Yet it was Plato’s compelling vision that held sway compared to the perceived flippancy of Isocrates and the decline of the oral deliberative culture from which he sprang. Neo-Platonism emphasised the distance of man from God while insisting that the divine is contained in every soul and all that is good in man emanates from this divine element of the soul. Matter corrupts

and contaminates and is therefore responsible for evil. Thus, to achieve happiness man must pursue the divine within. Plotinus optimistically states in *Ennads* ‘Let everyone become divine, become beautiful, if he wishes to contemplate God and the beautiful’ (*Ennads* I.II.I). God, or the One, is the pinnacle of goodness. This concept of ascension is common to the educational writings of Augustine, Martianus Cappella and Boethius. And all end with some form of illumination. They also all shared Plato, and latterly Plotinus’ belief that true knowledge is beyond conventional knowledge and the belief that the material and empirical are inferior to abstract knowledge.

III. Augustine, Boethius, and Capella: chalking the boundaries

Augustine in his early writings, such as the *Cassiciacum Dialogues*, was exacting in specifying that increasing knowledge of the immutable and incorporeal would lead to the good life. This was framed by his particular approach to the problem of evil and the Platonism endemic in Augustine’s early thought, which postulated the dualism of matter and soul, with the former being responsible for evil. For Augustine evil was privation from the good. He argued that this occurred in the mortal expending her love on the temporal rather than on the immutable, eternal and divine.

As expected with someone who glorifies the abstract, Augustine has a sharp separation between the theoretical and the practical. In his earlier writings and dialogues Augustine was assured of learning’s increasing abstraction leading closer to God. Though the older Augustine moved to an emphasis on the centrality of the scriptures rather than the glories of *theoria*, Augustine was dismissive of the practical arts claiming that the Christian student only needs a superficial knowledge of these and that they provided nothing of virtue. In *On Christian Education*, he

argues that the Christian student only needs enough knowledge of the practical so that ‘he may not be wholly ignorant of what the Scripture means to convey, when it employs figures of speech derived from those arts.’ (*On Christian Education* II.47).

This is not to say that knowledge of practical utility is to be completely excluded. Augustine marked a distinction between *scientia* (knowledge related to physical existence and well-being) and *sapientia* (knowledge which enables one to live the good life). Knowledge of *scientia* is necessary, so that the body is maintained, and a person may dedicate her time to knowledge of *sapientia*. *Scientia* is useful in that it enables one to maintain a livelihood. Yet it is distinctly a secondary concern and something which should be delegated by those who had the resources. This form of learning was an unfortunate necessity.

Martianus Capella influence on the medieval curriculum was profound, along with Boethius shaping the form of the liberal arts. Capella was in all probability a self-taught Cathagian peasant with some familiarity with the practice of law and rhetoric (Monceaux 1894: 445, Curtius 1990, Raby 1953: 101). Martianus’s only surviving work *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* (*De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*) may be described as one of the most prolific liberal arts textbooks of the early Middle Ages. Tracts on seven of the liberal arts, assembled from various sources, are woven into an elaborate tale of the marriage of learning, depicted by Philology and the Roman and Greek god Mercury on her ascent into the heavens. Dressed in myth *De Nuptiis* may be seen as an extravagant and baroque ode to learning. While many worthier educational texts books fell into obscurity *De Nuptiis* was prolific. Indeed, it could be argued that the work was vital in transmitting the Greco-Roman academic curriculum to the medieval age and contributed to the revival of learning during the renaissance. Dill (1898: 412) rather bemusedly comments: ‘It is difficult to conceive of the state of culture where a mixture of dry traditional school learning and tasteless and extravagant mythological ornament, applied to the most incongruous material, with an absolutely bizarre effect, could have been

applauded as a sweetener of the toils of learning.’ Yet, Martianus was not unaware of his failings and constantly points his audience’s attention to it. There is a striking optimism over the power of learning within *De Nuptiis*. In a world of fickle fate and cantankerous gods the wise man seeks what is best, which is the world of learning which provides the soul with whatever ‘beauty and embellishment’ the soul is able to acquire (*De Nuptiis* 23).

Capella’s *De Nuptiis* is steeped in, not necessarily understood, Neo-Platonic assumptions and theurgy. Education’s role consists in seeking to develop the divine nature of the soul, reason, to the detriment of more earthly concerns stemming from matter. Therefore, emphasis in presenting the arts is placed on disciplines which appear to focus purely on reason, and on the immortal and eternal concerns, such as mathematics and dialectics. Subjects which Capella dismisses, such as architecture and medicine (*De Nuptiis* 891), are of lower forms and not fit for the gods or the divine portion of the soul since they dwell on earthly matters. Capella states they ‘are concerned with mortal subjects and their skill lies in mundane matters and they have nothing in common with celestial deities’ (*De Nuptiis* 891).

The central character of Martianus’ elaborate myth which he embeds his textbook within is Philology, the embodiment of earthly learning. She is recommended to Mercury by Virtue, the goddess of human moral virtue, who praises the powers of her knowledge. Before Philology can ascend to the courts of heaven she is instructed to vomit forth books of earthly learning which choke her breast and prevent her taking the throne of immortality.

The girl strained hard and with great effort vomited up the weight she was carrying in her breast. Then that nausea and laboured vomit turned into a stream of writings of all kinds. One could see what books and what great volumes and the works of how many languages flowed from the mouth of the maiden. (*De Nuptiis* 136).

There are various intriguing interpretations of this passage (see Reihlan 1987), however it does seem to be a shedding of practical earthly knowledge which is not deemed worthy of a place among the gods. This is not true of all knowledge. For example, Philology is guided by Philosophy, who can freely travel to the heavens and admit others to the heavens, reflecting the Ciceronian belief that those of exceptional merit can enter heaven and live alongside the gods (*De natura deorum* 2.62 *De legibus* 2.10) (*De Nuptiis* 131). Again, knowledge of practical is seen as an embarrassing convenience and glorification comes through the shedding of it.

Reilhan (1987: 63) reads this ascent to divinity being dependent on a rejection of earthly knowledge in order to understand the unknown in a similar fashion to the leap of faith in Augustine's *De Ordinare*. He believed that at this point at the end of Book II, Philology receives a glimpse of ultimate truth, however, as soon as earthly learning returns in the form of the seven maidens of the liberal arts this highest stage of wisdom is lost. He insists 'One might say that there are two heavens in *De Nuptiis*; Philology perceives the true one when emptied of her learning; but as she gets her learning back she becomes a member of the false one, the traditional comic and Homeric Olympus of Menippean satire, known from Seneca and various dialogues of Lucian' (Reilhan 1987: 64). The *De Nuptiis* forms a divide between two types of knowledge, earthly learning and the higher Neo-Platonic mystical truth. Earthly knowledge at its face value qualifies one only for the absurd and Homeric heaven which praises the virtues of the seven liberal arts, rather than the higher union with the One.

Whereas Martianus can be accused to trivialising learning to a garish ornament, Boethius can certainly not be accused of such flippancy. Boethius composed his most influential work *The Consolations of Philosophy* during his incarceration, that eventually resulted in his brutal

execution. Before falling victim to a palace plot, Boethius was Master of Offices under Ostrogothic King Theodoric. He translated Aristotle's works on logic into Latin and provided commentaries and produced several textbooks on logic. He also contributed to contemporary theological debates, predominantly in the *Opuscula sacra. Consolations* dismissed the luxuries of his previous life and exalted the pre-eminence of philosophy.

Boethius and Augustine share a view of education as an individual pilgrimage which leads from the flawed objects of temporal experience to a greater wisdom. It is a teleological framing of education that sees learning as much wider than the mere acquiring of skills and knowledge. Rather the knowledge that education provides leads man to a greater wisdom. This wisdom liberates her and allows her to recognise what is virtuous and good in life and it empowers her to find her place, and consequently peace, in the wider cosmos. For Boethius, the path to this is via learning and philosophy, it plays a redemptive role and allows man to realise, or rather remember, what it is to be human. This teleological edifice sees God as a self-sufficient, unitary good towards which all men are by their nature pulled towards, and it asserts that his light is to be sought by turning inward and freeing oneself from interest in the trivial and material.

For Boethius the final goal of education is moral and ethical (*Institutio Arithmetica*). Man is trapped on the seas of fate, enamoured of the false goods of wealth, fame, glory, power, and lust. Her dependency on these false goods leads her to forget what it is to be truly human and leads her to fail to recognise the divine part of her nature. Fixation on ephemeral goods leads to unhappiness as it leads man to fail to see the intrinsic and inexplicable goodness in the cosmos. Suffering results from failure to realise this good and recognise that there is no evil in the world apart from absence of the good. Knowledge leads to virtue through realising the futility of earthly passions and recognising the end of knowledge is the ultimate good, God.

Through study of the arts, specifically the mathematical, man can recognise herself in relation to cosmos and consequently realise the goodness of this. Boethius, in the Platonic tradition, focuses specifically on the mathematical disciplines in this mission he also emphasises the literary arts of grammar and rhetoric. Underpinning all of the arts is logic and the art of the dialectic. The role played by the liberal arts in the *Consolation* as a whole may be seen. The levels of the *quadrivium* (Arithmetic, Astronomy, Music and Geometry) providing a mean between earth and Creator, reveal the physical universe as a mirror of the divine plan, and so make it possible for man to reach the higher level of metaphysics. This consummation of the mind's ascent results directly in the return from slavery, chained to the whims of fate to freedom, to home in the soul's realisation of the goodness of the cosmic order.

For Boethius, all the liberal arts should lead towards this purpose. For example, in Astronomy the planets are not studied for themselves but to reveal the orderly arrangement and the movement of celestial bodies which reflect the cosmic order. Similarly, abstract speculation and understanding cosmic harmony is the true focus in the study of music rather than music that is heard by human ears (*Di Instiutione Musica*). A true musician is 'one who has gained knowledge of making music by weighing (i.e., forming judgement) with reason, not through the servitude of work, but through the sovereignty of speculation' (*Di Instiutione Musica* 51). The muses, who inspire music and poetry in the actual, are rejected, and condemned when they try to help the Boethius character at the start of the *Consolations* (I.I.7). Lady Philosophy declares that 'these ladies with their thorns of emotion choke the life from the fruitful harvest of reason.' (*Consolations*. I.I. 9). With Boethius the tangled roots of the disdain for the practical within educational practice can be seen.

IV. Augustine, Boethius, and Capella: The vagaries of the binary

Yet within the strictures of the three thinker's glorification of the abstract, at the expense of utility, there are tensions, even hope, when the practical is placed within the wider perspective of their educational philosophies. Despite the pronounced metanarratives that regarded such a distinction as crucial, the reduction of the study of the practical to such a diminished role jars and a thicker and fuller potential of the vocational asserts itself in the three writers. All writers do self-consciously silence the potential of the practical but within their wider approach there is hope.

For Augustine, education is not an end in itself; rather education has a purpose in allowing us to realise the best way to live. Education that is based on nothing but knowledge for itself is little more than a 'revolting ostentation' (*Conf.* 10.36.59). Education's purpose is to enable the student to recognise what is good in life, what it is good to love and what it is not. At the heart of Augustine's ethics is a correct ordering of one's loves. For Augustine, education should facilitate this by bridging man's natural inclination to love what is immediately attainable and lead one to love that which leads to greater satisfaction, through effort and self-sacrifice. This is the difference between the 'City of God' and the 'City of Man', with the 'City of Man' settling for the immediate and superficial and the 'City of God' seeking what is truly good and lasting. The correct ordering of one's loves allows man to live the good life. Education should, therefore, be approached within the framework of human flourishing, education should play a part in seeking what true human flourishing is, for 'No man knows the happy life and is unhappy' (*Eighty Three Different Questions* 35). This is not an immediate revelation, but a slow process of realisation (*On Free Will* II.25). It is not something which may be directly taught, since higher wisdom comes through the student's internal journey, rather than delivery of didactic instruction (*The Teacher* 40). It is, for the student, the turning aside from the trivial and transient towards the true educational effort of seeking the good life. The true teacher should enable the student to seek *sapientia* (wisdom, the knowledge which enables one to live

the good life), something which may not be taught in itself, however, it is something which through assisting the student's educational effort, one may enable. *Sapientia*, may often not be communicated in human language. It is something which escapes language.

The distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* is not rigid. Augustine concedes that *Scientia* sometimes gives fruit to *sapientia*, with Augustine believing that 'nothing is lost which we enquire into with serious purpose' (*On Music* 6.23). So, for Augustine, it may be the case that the concentration dedicated to the construction of a table or the drawing of map may provide insights that help in the consideration of what constitutes the happy life. The process itself in the exercise of skill may enable the exercise of virtues that allow the correct ordering of one's loves. In this belief he may have some sympathy with Iris Murdoch who believed that practical and craft studies contribute to the good life through encapsulating representations of virtues such as justice, humility, courage, truthfulness and love within their practice (Murdoch 1970: 87). As Augustine's philosophy was eudemonistic in its origin, shifting from the classical virtues to the Christian (MacIntyre 2007: 184), it does seem to be unrealistic to omit the practical and situated as offering the potential for this overriding moral purpose. Indeed, Christ's teaching and actions are situated in the actual and it is through earthly and mundane examples in the parables that greater wisdom is taught. Augustine often alludes to places where craft, skill and learning connects with the greater profundities of life. For example, like Pythagoras, Augustine saw numbers as the principle of order in the physical world as he elaborates in *The Principle of Order*. The delight felt in the contemplation of beautiful shapes or in the experience of musical harmonies derives from the numerical relationships we find there. Artists and musicians come to know the unchanging laws of number in their composition and craftsmen regulate their operations by number;

‘They move their hands and tools, until what is fashioned in the outer world, being referred to the interior light of number, receives such perfection as is possible, and, being reported on by the senses, pleases the internal judge who beholds the transcendent numbers.’ (*On Free Will* II.41)

Augustine does often adopt a wider more expansive regard for the powers of the practical in that ambition of achieving the good life. He insinuates the arts of direct practical utility having not just a necessary role in that they allow one to maintain oneself but they, through their very nature, offer insights that lead to this.

Rather Augustine’s condemnation seems to be more vehement against superficiality in education rather than necessarily its form. He condemns the reduction of education to the satisfaction of selfish whims. Augustine is disapproving of those who see education as nothing more than ‘a greater opportunity of acquiring temporal riches, of winning a wife, of attaining high office, and other things of this sort’ (*Letter* 118.6). For Augustine, this undermines the prime purpose of education for him, which is seeking the best way to live. If practical arts are reduced, conceptually deflated to echo Winch (2010), to a purely instrumental, or economic value then Augustine would see time spent on this as unproductive if necessary. However, there is space within Augustine’s approach to see practical arts within that fuller and richer appreciation of cultivating virtue and encouraging the realisation of what is good in life. As yet another route to God.

For Augustine achieving human flourishing is beyond just the cognitive. He argues that the human is only able to achieve the good life and knowledge about God through the development of faith and a pure heart (*Eighty-Three Different Questions* 48; 68). In the latter years of Augustine’s life his confidence in the liberal arts was diminished with him, in the *City of God*,

noting, rather pointedly, that Christ's disciples 'were uneducated, not versed in grammar, not armed with dialectic, not puffed up with rhetoric' (*City of God* 22.5). In *Retractions*, he says that in his early years he attributed too much to the liberal arts which were unknown to many of the saints (*Retractions* 1.3). This reinforces Augustine's argument in *The Good Life* that knowledge of the truth is to be sought, not for purely academic purposes, but to bring true happiness. The older Augustine sees greater potential beyond the abstract and intellectual and could have some sympathy with a richer appreciation of the potential of the practical as an element of human flourishing.

Boethius, like Augustine, set his educational approach within the wider vision of the ethical life. Along with early Augustine, though not the older, Boethius saw learning as a development of what was best within the soul, reason. This development led to a realisation of the goodness of the cosmos, leading one to distinguish the true good from the false goods that lead to misery and alienation. It is a journey from ignorance and fear to wisdom and peace. This path enables one to recognise what is virtuous in life and accept one's place within the wider world. Learning brings tranquillity and allows man to understand what it is to be human.

Boethius' vision of education is one that is diligent to the ethical. He adopts the Socratic belief that vice comes through ignorance and that greater knowledge leads to virtue. A recognition of man's futility in the face of fate and a recognition that dogged pursuit of ephemeral goods such as wealth, glory, power and lust will never truly bring happiness. Such superficialities take man away from thinking about what it is to be human within the whole.

For Boethius, education should cultivate an examination of the values we hold, and what we believe it is to live well, as a human being. It should be a journey towards wisdom and the good, exploring one's nature and seeking to find peace and fulfilment through adherence to that. It should also be an exercise in modesty, in recognising one's small place in cosmos. The

liberal arts reflect their etymological heritage in that Boethius sees the pursuit of these arts as a spiritual and intellectual escape from slavery to the immediate, to a wider freedom. A journey mirroring Boethius' own progression in the *Consolations*.

As with Augustine, for Boethius the moral and ethical purpose of education takes priority. Boethius' character of Philosophy at the end of book five of *Consolations* attaches paramount importance to moral action and the importance of virtuous behaviour within his understanding of providence. The understanding of the good and seeking to live in harmony with this is the true telos of education. Boethius does possess that Roman aristocratic disdain for the practical reinforced by metaphysical assumptions. However, Boethius in his wider work must be somewhat open to routes, such as the practical arts, that do offer spaces where that search for wisdom, the good and how to live have the potential to be explored. He states that 'the efforts of all mortals...do indeed proceed by various paths, and yet they strive to reach one end – happiness' *Consolations* III.2.2.

For Boethius, one's education will never be complete. The purposes of learning are inexhaustible, unending, never finished and will encapsulate a life. The achievement in learning is becoming the person we are, rather than a specified model of what we should be. The end will be with God for outside of Eden we all see through that glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Martianus Capella is notably distinct from the thoughtful and considered approaches adopted by Augustine and Boethius. Though the Menippean satire is couched in confused Neo-Platonic and theurgical assumptions, Capella offers a much more grounded view of education that is in many ways more Isocratic than it is Platonic. Capella certainly did not have much tolerance for those who dedicated themselves to the abstract, he dismisses philosophers as 'abstruse and ostentatious' (*De Nuptiis* 812) and as 'starveling and unkempt.' Despite the lack of information

regarding the life of Capella himself we can say that he is certainly not a member of Roman elite and seemed to be a herdsman on a modest income with a side-line in rhetoric and the courts (though there is dispute over this see Stahl et al 1971: 19-20). A life of speculation was not an option for him.

Despite the grand illusions of Capella for the pretensions of learning with his use of Neo-Platonic imagery, we can draw from him a more grounded and practical view of education. His familiarity with rhetoric seems to demonstrate a life where his learning was put to defined use in Cathage; 'a fosterling settled in a neighbourhood of slothful herdsmen, barely managing on a small income, drowsy by day and blinking his eyes with effort- when I could fittingly quaff the Pegasean draught' (*De Nuptiis* 100). The pretensions he houses may have more to do with a certain vanity or self-regard in projecting himself as a refined and learned man, though he is not beyond cutting self-depreciation and mockery of himself (*De Nuptiis* 1000, 576, 997).

As with textbook writers of the period, the work on the liberal arts is assembled from other sources, however each section is introduced with an original introduction by the liberal art's avatar. The handbooks despite starting with grand claims for the art veer towards the practical application. For example, the section on grammar, despite starting with a wide-ranging justification of the art's extravagant capabilities, focuses on a basic introduction to letters, pronunciation, syllables, analogy and anomaly. Dialectics, where you expect the focus to be on Platonic true knowledge, focuses on Aristotelian logic mainly with a view to its use in rhetoric. He provides a guide that would be helpful to the petitioner in the courts. Oddly his book on Geometry focus' exclusively on the geographical, possibly he thought his audience would not be interested in such a dry subject. His book on Harmony boasts of the practical use of music from inspiring armies (*De Nuptiis* 925), medical applications such as soothing

deranged minds in the fashion Asclepiades recommends (*De Nuptiis* 926), charming animals such as cobras (*De Nuptiis* 927) and calming rowdy crowds and drunks (*De Nuptiis* 926).

So, Capella while clinging onto to Platonic illusions that glorify the abstract, in practice he has a more embodied view of education. While the ornate myth may plot an ascension to Olympus, in his approach to the uses of the liberal arts and in his existence itself, we see a necessary commitment to knowledge rooted and flourishing in the practical.

V. Hope within contradiction

These figures, who were so crucial to our conceptions of the curriculum, had a place within their wider visions where the practical arts emerge in fullness and have power in realising the larger moral and ethical conceptions of the purpose of education. At the place where this ancient binary between the practical and the academic solidifies there was contradiction and hope for the fuller potential of the vocational and practical. Yet in the current educational climate in Britain the competency-based behavioural curriculums of the practical can be accused of a rudimentary deflation of the power of vocational education. This enables an unhelpful dichotomy where questions of a profoundly moral and political nature are the preserve of academic knowledge. This creates a rhetorical space for the devaluing of the vocational.

It must be noted that the thinkers discussed in this paper were responding to ideas of their time and not necessarily seeking to answer the dilemmas of posterity of which they know nothing (see Skinner 2002). Yet educational institutions, educational practice and educational knowledge, require justifications by which they can be explained (Berger and Luckman 1967, Angus 1975). Educational ideas may be used to provide a rationale and legitimatisation for aspects of the social order, particularly the differentiation of status and income in highly

stratified societies. Habermas argued that the education system is a vital space where the state mobilises and maintains an uneasy consensus around unequal social (Welch 1991: 520). The legitimisation of the superiority of one form of knowledge over another knowledge is a useful tool in maintaining social stratifications that may be questioned.

To claim ideas and words from the past, with the status or prestige attached to them, to legitimise and justify contemporary practices is common. Skinner (2002: 147-6, 167) highlights how proponents of commercial culture in seventeenth century England sought to legitimise their practices by reference to the most highly approved moral and pious terms. Skinner refers to the use of spiritual vocabulary such providence and the word religious itself to refer to commercial virtues of foresight, punctuality and exactitude. Words such as shrewdness, ambition and frugality were revived from previous neutral or negative connotations. Commercial practices which were often associated with wickedness and ungodliness were associated with moral fortitude. Skinner notes 'the rhetoric...helped to construct for their descendants a new and more comfortable world' (Skinner 2002: 155). Wang (2002: 9-11) notes the pervasiveness of ancient ideas, drawing attention to the power of Confucism in providing legitimisation for academic/practical hierarchy during the Imperial era in China and its marked re-emergence after the Iron Rice Bowl system as market mechanisms were introduced into the labour market during the reform period. This has prompted state attention in the recent period as concern has grown regarding the shortages of skilled labour (Wang 2002:11)

The writers included in this paper had two components to their legitimisation of the academic/practical divide. Firstly, along with Cassiodorus, their great influence in the historical transmission of the Hellenistic curriculum within their own wider visions as well the influence of their own interpretation of classical authorities. They were crucial in establishing what the ancient heritage was. They were instrumental in establishing a long-standing

educational architecture and language. An architecture that moved practical education from education proper and was inherited by subsequent ages. They were also crucial as authorities in their own right. For example, Augustine's educational thought was profoundly influential until the seventeenth century and provided a subtle influence beyond as Howie notes Augustine's thought 'breaks through at moments when the achievement of scientific knowledge seems less than sufficient to lead a man to a happy life' (Howie 1969: 304).

A more productive way to approach these three foundational thinkers, and their legacy, is that they may reject worth of practical and vocational, but primarily, if it does not go beyond the achievement of trivial temporal goals, for example wealth. The goal of practical education may have a defined end-product; however, this does not mean that the process cannot encourage moral exploration and practice of virtue both in vocational practice and the wider context.

This raises the question whether the practical and vocational offers similar opportunities for the enrichment, self-fulfilment and self-realisation of learners that may be achieved by the study of traditional academic subjects and whether these two aspects are complimentary rather than antagonistic. A substantial number of the learners engaged in the practical arts approach vocational education having felt alienated by the traditional academic education of their youth. It is often the case that the practical arts are providing an education that the academic arts failed to achieve for these learners. It is through initiation into the practices of these vocational arts that these learners may reflect on the virtues they respect, the goods they value and the goods they wish to achieve in their own lives and for the recipients of their arts. If education is valuable in itself for enriching one's life, considering what is good and, to adopt Michael Oakeshott's phrase, making the best of oneself then the practical arts may fulfil this function. This process of realisation of the good is the basis for Augustine, Boethius and even Capella's wider educational philosophies and offers a useful lens to appreciate and understand the historic

origins of the practical/theory binary. The cracks in the deification of the abstract may yet shine light on the potential of the practical.

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Note on Contributor

Daniel O'Neill is a Lecturer in Education Studies at Liverpool Hope University.

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