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The Idea of a Discipline

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The idea of a discipline is central to the University of Dallas scheme of education. A discipline is more than a recognized set of skills and a body of information; it is a major mode of thought which governs a person's outlook on existence. According to our local scheme, the whole person takes on one and only one major discipline, though he may work in many fields. The biologist, for example, not only sees the birds and the bees through his discipline, but also philosophy, politics, economics, or any other subject. Not that his philosophy may not be valid -- even important -- but his approach to it, his insight into it will be as a biologist. Dostoevsky has been called a great psychologist, but it is only as a novelist that he conceived psychology.

Any delineation of discipline is likely to be imprecise. Disciplines are not entirely independent of one another, often overlapping, as do philosophy, theology, psychology, and politics. The fruits of one discipline may be the tools of another, as parts of math serve physics. Important fields of study lie between disciplines -- notably biochemistry and biophysics -- but the people working in these fields are one or the other: a field of application does not constitute a new discipline. All of this is to say that the disciplines do not make up a complete set of orthogonal functions neatly describing the speculum mentis. That kind of analysis must be foregone in an understanding of the disciplines.

The idea of disciplines underlay the concept of the undergraduate major as Western education developed, but German scholarship and American pragmatism combined to alter the major into a career-oriented study of an applied field. The attempt on this

campus has been to rediscover the disciplines and make them the bases of "majors." It is the relationship of the various academic majors to their disciplines I mean to explore in this series, seeing them, of course, as a physicist would in the hope that others in the discipline considered might correct and extend my observations.

Having thus taken so much space in opening the subject, let me be brief in introducing a problem. Are languages a discipline? Is there a discipline called Foreign Languages? Is there a French, a German, a Spanish, an Italian discipline? Is English any different? What distinguishes the Classics from the languages?

Consider the Classics for the moment. On this campus we can put together a very respectable "major," choosing courses from literature, art, history, philosophy, politics, and theology, as well as Latin and Greek. The languages in themselves are vehicles. Competence in them only qualifies a student to undertake the major. What is the discipline? Admittedly there is a classical frame of mind, just as there is a medieval: does this frame constitute the qualifying mode of thought? Appealing as it is, I suspect it does not -- that the classicist must be a literary man or an historian or a philosopher or an anthropologist if such a discipline exists. I should like to explore the thought further next week, then take on some other dragons if the first one does not win.