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John of Salisbury's Metalogicon and the Equality of Liberal Arts Education

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When examining the historical development of society, perhaps the most determining factor is education. Education has a symbiotic relationship with society in that it is shaped *by* society as much as *it* shapes society. It provides a means by which humans can recall history as well as shape their own. This is why attempting to understand the educational character of a certain time period is important to a better understanding of the history of thought. John of Salisbury offers us such a glimpse into the intellectual and social climate of the twelfth century through his work, *Metalogicon*. The *Metalogicon* was written as an impassioned defense of liberal arts education, pointing to the indispensable role of education in creating virtuous and happy lives. While it is significant to the medieval development of pedagogy, it also offers insight into the corresponding social and political environment by understanding the reach and limitations of its arguments for education. The most curious insight comes, as it may seem to us, as a contrast. This is because, despite the significance given to education for a well-functioning society, John also emphasizes that not everyone can or should be educated. This raises the question then of what was suitable for what he termed, the “third tier” of society, and its quest for virtue and happiness. This article will examine these two seemingly opposed ideas in their sociohistorical context, but will ultimately argue that these positions are incompatible and incoherent given the potential John of Salisbury believed liberal arts education to have.

The *Metalogicon* is one of the best twelfth-century sources historians have regarding education during this time in history. This fact alone makes it noteworthy. During the development of Western education, there is perhaps no time more formative to modern views on education than the Middle Ages. Of the Middle Ages, the twelfth century was particularly influential in the shaping of education, and has even been called the birthplace of Western pedagogy.¹ The development of liberal arts education is a valuable part of the history of education because its influence is seen even today in liberal arts colleges and general education programs. Out of this time period emerged the first universities, and while John was writing the *Metalogicon*, there were unparalleled numbers of students involved in courses and further alongside this, a robust discussion and debate over the best methods of education.²

These pedagogical deliberations were important to the development of liberal arts education. However, to appreciate why this is so, it will first be helpful to understand the scholastic environment surrounding the *Metalogicon*. The *Metalogicon* was written in 1159 in response to a movement seeking to

¹ McGarry, Daniel D., *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A twelfth century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium- Introduction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), PDF e-book, xv.

² A.F. Leach, *The Schools of Medieval England*, (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 96-155.

lessen the emphasis placed on the *trivium* in education. Traditionally, when universities began, there were seven liberal arts that came to be conceptually divided into the *trivium* and *quadrivium*. The first category, regarded as the *trivium*, was considered to be an elementary grouping focused on language studies and included grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. The *quadrivium* focused on mathmatico-physical disciplines and consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Historically, the liberal arts were branches of knowledge taught in order to train the free man, and the division into seven liberal arts was codified in late antiquity and popularized during the Middle Ages. John's defense of the liberal arts demonstrates the widespread practice of these educational methods in the twelfth century.

The Cornificians, most likely a pseudonym for this movement attacking the *trivium*, argued that the weight placed on liberal arts in education was unnecessary. John of Salisbury fully opposed the Cornifician movement because he thought it would undermine the entire purpose of education. According to him, education's primary purpose was the cultivation of reason by which one discovers the path to virtue and happiness. Furthermore, this pursuit of virtue and happiness is what separated humankind from beast, and for that, it was the most important quest a human could take. The *Metalogicon* defends liberal education as a necessary and proper instrument, irreplaceable to the ends of social order and progress. It argues that training in the liberal arts is essential to becoming wise and successful.

John of Salisbury's own life may be a testament to the wisdom and success that a liberal arts education provides. It is likely John was born to a poor family, although very little is known about his actual childhood circumstances apart from his own writings.³ Nevertheless, John relentlessly sought to educate himself and, despite his humble beginnings, came to have considerable authority to write on education. He pursued higher education in Paris and studied under some of the greatest masters in the twelfth century for almost twelve years. While in Paris, John studied grammar, logic, and theology extensively between 1136 and 1147. He was educated with the traditional literary and dialectical *trivium*, and even had some teaching experience of his own. In addition to this, he had years of experience in governmental and diplomatic affairs. With this impressive academic and political career, he was able to write his two major works, the *Metalogicon* and the *Policraticus*, from personal experience. Befittingly, his books are filled with examples rather than a philosophical examination of the topics discussed. John was one of the recognized spokesmen against the Cornificians, and he was, at the very least, acquainted with almost all of his

³ Daniel D. McGarry, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A twelfth century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium- Introduction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), PDF e-book, xv.

generation's renowned intellectual men in northwestern Europe. By the time John was writing, he was well qualified to express views on education.⁴

The Cornificians probably began their vocal attack on the liberal arts in the early part of the twelfth century. The term "Cornificius" became known as the symbol of an inadequately trained scholar who said more than he actually knew. John used this term rather than referencing specific opponents to avoid giving the impression of an *ad hominem* argument, although he did, at times, outwardly accuse his opponents of having, "bloated gluttony, puffed-up pride, obscene mouth, rapacious greed, etc..."⁵ Still, he attempted to focus on their doctrine and arguments in order to show the mistaken reasoning therein. The Cornificians argued that the curriculum emphasizing grammar and rhetoric was tedious and that these skills were not teachable, but rather they should come naturally to students. In this view, the ability to speak and argue well was a natural gift, and time should be spent on other educational endeavors. They believed that theoretical study could not lead to acquiring skills of eloquence or critical thinking; instead, students should focus more on practical learning, such as medicine or law. According to John, these critics spent their education overly concerned with their careers and never thoroughly studied the *trivium*. He rather humorously remarked:

They [the Cornificians] would probably teach that a poet cannot write poetry unless he at the same time names the verse he is using; and that the carpenter cannot make a bench unless he is simultaneously forming on his lips the word 'bench' or 'wooden seat'. The result is this hodgepodge of verbiage, reveled in by a foolish old man, who rails at those who respect the founders of the arts, since he himself could see nothing useful in these arts when he was pretending to study them.⁶

Equipped with a better understanding of why John wrote the *Metalogicon*, it becomes easier to understand his philosophy of education. Education, to him, should be aimed at the ultimate principles and purposes of life, which not surprisingly includes engaging with further philosophical questions. While he favored classical authors of philosophy, he did not neglect familiarizing himself with contemporary thought. John also drew from personal experience, and his account of human knowledge played an important role in his educational theory. John argued that truth is an objective reality, as human reason must have some

⁴ David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1962), 135.

⁵ John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A twelfth century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), PDF e-book, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

object for its activity. Knowledge is ultimately found in God, but humans have limitations in reaching that truth. John gives three stages to understanding truth: (i.) opinion resulting from the senses; (ii.) science that is acquired by reason; and (iii.) wisdom that comes from understanding.⁷ This description of knowledge has enormous implications for his pedagogical theory. Through it, one could experience sense data, form an imperfect opinion, and then using reason, break free from deception and discover truth. John believed that human reason has a divine nature and can lead us to the truth. To attain wisdom, which John describes as a full understanding of truth, is the ultimate goal of education whereby one will come to attain virtue and happiness.

According to John, education was primarily the cultivation of reason. This also had implications for the social and political climate of a community. He considered education to be of political importance, and aptly wrote parts of the *Metalogicon* alongside the *Policraticus*, which focused on political theory.⁸ In fact, John regarded political and educational concerns as inseparable. The most prominent reason that he found the Cornifician attacks so dangerous was because John believed that the uprooting of liberal studies would in turn ruin humanity's social contract.⁹ Without this social contract, which he considers to be the bond humans make with one another for the purpose of creating a cooperating and peaceable society, he imagines that it could result in extremes such as humankind resorting back to an animal-like state lacking the gift of eloquent speech, unable to adequately communicate. According to John, eloquence and wisdom were both essential to the education of humankind because, "Just as eloquence, unenlightened by reason, is rash and blind, so wisdom, without the power of expression, is feeble and maimed."¹⁰ He fought against such trends because they not only threatened the educational community, but also the state of society at large.

What with the importance John of Salisbury placed on education to avoid disorder and produce a well-functioning society, it would seem to follow that everyone should embark on this quest for happiness and virtue. However, examining his political theory in the *Policraticus* will show otherwise. The

⁷ John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A twelfth century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), PDF e-book, Book 4, Chapters 8-20.

⁸ Stephen C. Ferruolo, *The Origins of the University: The Schools of Paris and Their Critics, 1100-1215*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 134.

⁹ John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A twelfth century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), PDF e-book, 11.

¹⁰ John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A twelfth century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), PDF e-book, 10.

Policraticus explored several aspects of ethical and political life in the twelfth century and, like the *Metalogicon*, was filled with explicit examples rather than nontangible argumentation. Here again John explained humanity's end goal by emphasizing, "virtue contains everything to be done and happiness contains everything to be desired."¹¹ This was the ultimate aim for humanity, and the *Policraticus* sought to inaugurate a societal order that would fulfill these goals.

The *Policraticus* sets up John's political theory using an analogy of the state as a body: an organic and integrated whole unified for the good of its members. This body had three tiers of government, which consisted of: (i.) the governmental authority; (ii.) those who perform governmental functions; and (iii.) the governed. This structure places the most duty and moral weight on the prince, who is the first tier of government. The prince's obligation is to love his subjects, be self-disciplined, and educate his officials. Because of this, he is to pursue and possess virtue, but also should see to it that his officials are virtuous. Those in the second tier of government cannot be required to be virtuous, but it is better that they are. John advised a rewards and punishment strategy to ensure good behavior from the second tier of government. This is one instance where John's political experiences are evident in his writing. He clearly distrusted those with power and believed that they could rarely, if ever, sustain virtue while in such powerful positions. Regardless, the *Policraticus* makes it clear that education should be available to people of both tiers, even if virtue is seldom found.

The third tier of the government consists of, as he calls it, the feet of the body. This part of society has no state function, yet is the most populous. John proposed that the well-being of this third tier is of special concern to the prince because, in keeping with the analogy, society needs its feet to progress. The third tier has no political power, but should realize that this is for the best and should respect the rights of their superiors. There is little to no mention of education for this third tier, but John apologizes in the *Policraticus* for his description of them. He hopes that they somehow find virtue, but it is not a requirement for a state's proper functioning.

His was not the first political theory, nor the last, to assert that a functioning society necessitates an uneducated working class. For example, Aristotle, who greatly influenced medieval thought, similarly argued in his *Politics* that a flourishing society involved a laboring class. The class of manual laborers served a vital role in that it freed up time for full Athenian citizens to engage in intellectual activities necessary to achieve human happiness.¹² While Aristotle has often been criticized on this point, the rigid system may have seemed

¹¹ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, trans. John Dickinson (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), <http://www.constitution.org/salisbury/policrat456.htm>, Book 8, Chapter 8.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), Book 7, Chapter 9.

necessary to Aristotle, especially considering the time period it was written in. In Athens, the criteria to be a full Athenian citizen excluded many, like women and immigrants, so this stringent setup would not have seemed so harsh. It is troubling, however, to note that hundreds of years following this, a theorist came to similar conclusions about the exclusivity of education. Still, in the twelfth century, freedom was not all-inclusive, but unlike Aristotle's educational theory, the *Metalogicon* consistently praises the potential of liberal arts education to bring about freedom to the individual.

This seems to entirely contradict John's position on the *telos* of humankind. How can he have written such a significant piece on the importance of liberal arts education i.e., freedom for the individual, and then maintain that not everyone in society should pursue this end? This becomes an even more curious position for him to hold when one recalls John's own humble beginnings. From the little information known of his early life, historians can assume with some certainty that his family would have belonged to this third tier of society. So, was it John's own natural ability that allowed him to achieve understanding and rise to another tier? If this were true, it would only seem to confirm the Cornifician's "natural gift" argument against the necessity of practicing the liberal arts. In the *Metalogicon*, John makes it clear he believes training is essential for the strengthening of these abilities, and it is rather odd that he would not extend this to his theoretical state body.

Understanding the prince's role in the state may lend itself to reconciling the peculiarity of this position. In the *Policraticus*, the responsibility of the prince is immense. The prince is chosen and appointed by God, which can happen in a variety of ways, e.g., election, inheritance, or a decision of the priest. The prince is solely responsible for the well-ordering of society, ensuring its proper functioning. His responsibility is to seek wisdom through education, which will lead to the best functioning society. If he trains his officials, who perform the governmental functions, in this wisdom and understanding, then it will ideally result in more unified efforts toward virtue and happiness. Because the third tier will never hold political power, it was not necessary in this conception for them to either understand or practice reasoned judgment.

According to the body analogy, there is a strong interdependence among each member and the only way the body can function properly is if all individuals are playing their parts well. The feet of society owe it to their superiors to produce material goods just as they are given security and proper order. John explains,

Then and then only will the health of the commonwealth be sound and flourishing when the higher members shield the lower, and the lower respond faithfully and fully in like measure to the just demands of their superiors, so that each and all are as it were members one of another by a

sort of reciprocity, and each regards his own interest as best served by that which he knows to be most advantageous for the others.¹³

The set up is similar in its rigid construction to Plato's *Republic*. It is said that John's view is Platonic in that societal relations are fixed, and the world has a design in which the body works perfectly if all accept their roles.¹⁴ In this way, contentment in life and politics relies on all individuals accepting and fulfilling the duties appropriate to their stations in life. He appeals to a classical conception of societal happiness, stating that a commonwealth could only be happy if it were governed by philosophers, or if its rulers, at least, became students and lovers of wisdom.

Taking into account the social and political climate of the twelfth century helps to make this rigid construction more understandable because John's era was one of strictly drawn social distinctions. In fact, not everyone was allowed to seek education, and to John, perhaps it was more probable to create a fair, operating society through a few good rulers than to instill virtue into every citizen. While this opinion may have been advanced for the twelfth-century, given the impassioned way he advocated for the transformative nature of the liberal arts, his final conclusion—excluding a significant part of society—seems disjointed. Still, attempting to read this work in its sociohistorical context, the modern reader must take into account the extent to which concepts of freedom and basic human rights have changed and, in many ways, advanced. Certainly John of Salisbury took the third tier of society into consideration when setting up his theoretical nation; however, an understanding of his educational theory and its potential, i.e., freedom for the individual, makes it difficult to accept the rest of his political theory. If one had a tool that could improve the lives of everyone—including those who find themselves on the bottom rungs of society—then to restrict this tool to those already at the top seems knowingly unjust.

It is certainly disappointing to have, on the one hand, such a piece dedicated to the importance of liberal arts education, and on the other, such clearly drawn social class distinctions. John of Salisbury argues passionately for liberal arts education and how it can provide freedom for the individual, but in this society, it also necessitated that the individual already be free. The incoherency of John's position lies in the cyclic nature of this relationship.

A liberal arts education provides freedom for people to think and speak for themselves, but it still has its critics today. There are noticeable similarities between the Cornifician arguments and those critics who find liberal arts education impractical. In fact, many of John's arguments against the Cornificians

¹³ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, trans. John Dickinson (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), <http://www.constitution.org/salisbury/policrat456.htm>, Book 6, Chapter 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Book 4, Chapter 6.

still have relevance today. Modern advocates of liberal arts education can appreciate the importance he placed on this subject, but before he is regarded as a champion of the liberal arts, his educational and political ideology serve as reminders of how history and philosophy should work together to untangle some of the confused thinking of past.

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