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Rockmore

WHAT ARE THE Arts AND Sciences?

Dartmouth

edited by Dan Rockmore

# What ARE THE Arts AND Sciences?

[ a guide for the curious ]

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What Are the Arts and Sciences?



## Preface

This book is meant to be a brief tour through our evolved world of ideas. It is very much inspired by W. H. Gombrich's *A Little History of the World*, a wonderful book that I read to my son Alex when he was eight. Gombrich's book is a friendly, condensed world history meant for young inquisitive minds, but it's written in that avuncular Victorian-in-the-armchair manner and so is pretty erudite in many ways, perhaps too erudite for most contemporary American eight-year-olds. I didn't know that, though—and was aware of the many gaps in my own world history knowledge—so we read the book together, chapter by chapter, and enjoyed it and both learned a lot. I am grateful for the opportunity it afforded to sit in the big rocker in his room, to read aloud and chat about big ideas and events like the Big Bang, the Roman Empire, colonialism, World War II, and lots of stuff in between and beyond.

It made me think about how most of us—if not all of us—irrespective of age, don't really know what the big subjects of inquiry are about, but we want to know! We get some sense through the usual educational trajectory, but even those who choose to go to college and even “the academy” enter higher education not knowing what kinds of things a professor of  $x$  thinks about, and leave only getting a sense of a few. Every year I sit with prospective students, or the children of friends wondering about university, and am asked the question, “What do mathematicians do?” My colleagues all across the campus have analogous conversations about their own disciplines. These kinds of conversations are hardly limited to those looking for colleges or careers. They happen between adults and even between colleagues. In the best of cases they are driven by a sincere interest in the world of ideas.

With these thoughts in mind, I arrived at the idea of collaboratively writing a book, analogous to Gombrich's, but explicitly organized according to ideas rather than time. So this collection of essays is the result of that initial rocking chair-inspired idea, which could be viewed—as per the title—as collection of



answers to a broader question, “What are the arts and sciences?” It is by design organized by subjects, written by various of my colleagues, who are in turn, by the nature of the organization of our college and almost any other, sorted into disciplines of which each of us are professors of various ranks and stripes. This organization of the academy (why we have the departments we do) has its own interesting evolutionary story, too long to go into here. On the level of metaphor, I like to think it resembles the universe: ever expanding, replete with beautiful, dynamic, and diverse clusters of coherence, linked across time and space, whose overarching structure is born of simple forces—in this case, the urges to understand, create, and even predict.

This book is in some sense also a brief introduction to the subjects of today’s liberal arts by members of a faculty at a liberal arts college. The liberal arts ethos is built on a curiosity about the world at large and a belief in the importance and necessity of inspiring and fostering that broad-based curiosity. The kinds of flexible minds and critical thinking engendered by such an education have perhaps never been more in need than they are today. While the labeling of subjects might suggest that there are strict disciplinary boundaries, in fact all of the subjects represented here are now frequently pursued in an interdisciplinary fashion, and the present-day organization of the academy and almost every university reflects those porous boundaries too.

Throughout my time at Dartmouth I have always been grateful to have so many colleagues happy to patiently explain their work to me or to answer my naive questions about their discipline. I am lucky to have so many colleagues eager to share the love of their subject with their students and beyond, for without them this idea would have died on the vine. I apologize in advance to those whose disciplines are missed herein. Constraints of space, not of interest or import, make it impossible to explore all the worlds comprised by the universe of any university. Similarly, at the next scale, each essay here is but a doorway opening into a world of fascinating ideas within a given subject, rather than an exhaustive study, shaped (sometimes more, sometimes less) by the interests and expertise of the author.

But of course, this collection is not meant to be an end, but rather a beginning. Suggestions for additional reading and viewing materials appear at the end of the book. The subjects that appear here are only a sampling of those that we study here at Dartmouth and at other institutions of higher learning. The essays are written—again, as per the title—for the curious person of any age, and with

that intention, citations have been placed as notes at the back of the book. We hope that you enjoy the collection and that this brief tour starts or continues a lifetime of exploration of ideas.

*Dan Rockmore*

HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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## WHAT IS African American Studies?

Derrick E. White

What if I told you that most of the great American histories were half-truths and some were outright lies? Many of the great American heroes fell far short of heroism. In the “land of the free and home of the brave” slavery and cowardice reigned. The American Revolution was not for all.

A central reason for the falsity of many great American histories has been the minimization or exclusion of African Americans (and other ethnic minorities) from this history. Many Americans can recall the deeds of the Founding Fathers in the country’s rebellion from British colonial rule. But few Americans remember that the first person killed in the 1770 Boston Massacre, which sparked the American Revolution, was Crispus Attucks, a man of African and Native American descent. The United States’ political, economic, and cultural expansion was not solely the province of white Americans, but was intertwined with the institutions of slavery, segregation, and racism. When one considers the legal impact of the civil rights movement, true American democracy is barely five decades old. America looked and looks different with African Americans at the center of the story.

The great abolitionist, statesman, and former slave Frederick Douglass declared in 1857, “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightening . . . This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both . . . but it must be struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.” Unlike many academic disciplines that trace their origins to the early reaches of the Western tradition, African American Studies was born from the struggle for African American civil and human rights in the late 1960s.

After America's founding, its government, courts, and majority-white population treated African Americans (and other ethnic minorities) as either noncitizens or second-class citizens. Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney encapsulated the majority of white American thought when he declared in 1857 that African Americans had "been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race" and they "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." The institutions of slavery and later Jim Crow segregation denied African Americans citizenship rights. Emboldened by the antifascism of World War II, however, black reformers were determined to make the United States live up to its "all men are created equal" credo. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s made African Americans equal, legally. Through a combination of the legal victories, protests, and political agitation African Americans slowly ended their unequal legal status.

However, many activists realized that each legal and political success revealed additional layers of American racial thinking and ideology. Frustrated by the slow pace of change, the stubbornness of the American public, and the revelation of the pervasiveness of American racism, both interpersonally and institutionally, some reformers advocated for Black Power, which was a declaration of black humanity in the face of white supremacy and a demand for African Americans to take immediate control of their lives and destiny. When civil rights and Black Power crusaders turned their attention to changing America's racist culture, they knew that education, especially higher education, was a central issue.

The modern American university is the product of the convergence of several socioeconomic forces that were in play after the end of World War II. First, the US government's GI Bill (officially the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) provided monies that allowed more than 2 million men to attend college or gain additional training. Take, for example, the student population at the Ohio State University (OSU) before and after the war. OSU was already one of the largest universities in the country, with more than 15,000 students attending in the 1930s. In 1943 the loss of men to military service reduced OSU's student body to 8,000, the lowest number since 1926. Three years later enrollment soared to more than 26,000. Colleges nationwide had similar stories of rapid growth. Second, the civil rights movement opened doors for more African American to attend predominately white colleges. Southern white colleges, which had barred African Americans before the 1950s, started to enroll small numbers of African American students. Other universities in the North and the West, which had a variety of racial policies ranging from exclusion to integration, expanded their