

RESTORING REASON

*Using the Ancient Liberal Arts
to Defend Against
Modern Manipulation*

DR. TRAVIS M. CORCORAN



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*George Orwell said, "In a time of universal deceit,
telling the truth is a revolutionary act."
This book is dedicated to everyone who is
courageously seeking and speaking the truth.*

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INTRODUCTION

What attracted you to start reading a book about restoring reason?

I'm guessing it's because you have a sense of unease about your life and the world around you. If so, you're not alone. I regularly talk with people who aren't making progress with their business or career, have trouble navigating relationships, can't make confident decisions about their health, and are deeply frustrated with politics.

On an even more basic level, many people are troubled by the thought that they aren't in control of their own lives. Instead of being a self-possessed person of reason who makes good decisions, many fear they're wasting their precious lives trapped in emotional turmoil.

If that describes you, I've got good news and bad news.

The bad news is you're absolutely right to be troubled. That deep sense of unease is because you're being manipulated by big institutions that impact all our lives in toxic ways, and you lack the intellectual tools to defend yourself. If you're feeling personally like you're not in control, it's because you likely aren't. You're letting yourself be dominated by too many differing internal emotional voices.

The good news is that there's a way out. It's not the latest self-help fad. It's not based on the teachings of a charismatic guru, or some recently discovered social science research that will fade away in a few years.

It's grounded in ancient truths about how our minds actually work. It's been around for centuries, and it can restore reason to its proper place in your own life. If enough of us start practicing these ancient arts again, it can also begin to restore reason to our chaotic culture.

Before I tell you about these ancient arts, I want to address some skepticism you may have. I've no doubt you've heard or read claims before that promise they can transform your life for the better, and things didn't turn out as advertised. In some cases, the advice may have even made things worse. Why might this time be different?

For one, most self-help advice these days focuses on the emotions: improving your emotions, managing your emotions, recommendations to force yourself to feel positive

emotions. There are a million different spins on the subject, but the fundamental problem is that all these “solutions” preach keeping emotions at the center of your life. This book teaches something radically different. It dethrones emotion and restores reason. Emotion should not be the highest standard you use to judge the quality of your life.

Maybe the thought of giving less power to your emotions and more to reason appeals to you. But that still leaves the question of how to do it. This book offers the answer, which is this: the key to restoring reason is to learn how to practice three ancient liberal arts that together are known as the *trivium*.

Some of you may be aware of this term, while others are thinking, “Triv-vee-what?” Whatever your level of knowledge about the trivium, don’t let the unfamiliar name put you off. Properly understood and correctly practiced, nothing is more natural to how the mind works than these three arts.

As a quick bit of background: in traditional learning going back centuries, there are actually seven liberal arts. The trivium refers to the first three and most important of these arts: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. (The other four are mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy, which aren’t relevant to this book’s purpose, so we won’t cover them.)

Don't let the words grammar, logic, and rhetoric throw you off. Grammar isn't only about where to put commas, logic isn't all that complicated, and rhetoric isn't what politicians use when they want to lie to you in a fancy way.

A helpful way to talk about grammar, logic, and rhetoric is to call them by their ancient names: knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. This is how the ancient Greeks thought about these concepts. Grammar is equivalent to knowledge, logic is the same as understanding, and rhetoric is how you express wisdom.

To put it in even more modern terms, you can see these arts as input, processing, and output. Input is the knowledge in, processing is how you order and understand that input, and output is how you express those results.

We'll use all these terms in this book to refer to the three liberal arts. It's not crucial which labels you use; the point is to understand the underlying concepts.

I also want to explain how I'm using the word reason. As with many important words, reason has a lot of different meanings and senses. For our purposes, reason is a method of thinking and expressing yourself that accords with the arts of the trivium, particularly the second art of logic or understanding.

To clarify even further, restoring reason in your life means you'll stop making impulsive decisions based on

whatever emotion is pulsing through you at the moment, and instead become more deliberative and logical in your thoughts and actions.

Grasping these arts and practicing them can dramatically improve the quality of your mind. And once that happens, your life will change for the better. We'll return to this theme at the end of the introduction, but first we have to take a darker detour.

*Not Everyone Wants You to Take Back
Control of Your Own Mind*

There's never been a time in history where taking charge of your own thinking has been easy. No matter what era people lived in, mastering the liberal arts has always taken effort, focus, and commitment.

But it's going to be even harder for you.

That's because you live at a particularly challenging historical moment. We live in an age of cultural chaos and a time dominated by big institutions that don't have your best interests at heart. In fact, they don't want you to succeed in gaining control of your own mind. If you do, they won't be able to easily manipulate you. And if they can't manipulate you, they lose power over you.

The five dominant institutions in our lives are:

- Academia
- Big Corporations
- Big Government
- Big Tech
- Legacy Media

Chapter 1 is all about how much the “Big 5” seep into our lives at the deepest levels, often in ways that we don’t fully realize. This theme will thread its way through the entire book because you need to understand what you’re up against. If you don’t control the quality of your mind, these institutions will be happy to do it. You need to defend yourself against their influence if you want to have any chance of liberating your mind and staying free of their manipulations.

So one way to use this book is as a manual of intellectual self-defense techniques against the relentless efforts of huge institutions to control the culture down to the level of the individual. Knowing and practicing the trivium is an antidote to their poison.

A Quick Guide to Getting the Most Out of This Book

This book is divided into two major sections. The first six chapters start with a brief tour of what you’re up against,

and then show you how to use the trivium to put logic and reason at the center of your life. By the end of Part 1, you'll understand the basics of each art and how it can help you to think better.

The second section of the book is devoted to understanding more specifically how to put the theory you'll learn into practice. Chapters 6 through 10 of Part 2 will point out how emotion has replaced logic and clear thinking in key areas of our lives: business/career, relationships, health and wellness, and politics.

The last chapter and the conclusion will bring this all together and show you that when you become a person of reason, you'll find people's respect for you naturally grows. You become a successful person of preeminence and influence that others look to for wisdom.

You should also know what this book does not promise. For one, this book will not tell you what to think. I have my own conclusions about specific issues, but one of the points of this book is that you shouldn't let other people or institutions tell you what to think.

This book is not going to tell you things like who to vote for (politics), how to treat a fever (health and wellness), when to sever a friendship (relationships), or specific ways to market your startup (business/career). I will give you some examples and show you pitfalls to watch out for, but I

won't tell you what to think. I want to teach you the tools of thinking. What you do with them is up to you.

This book is also not intended to give you a graduate level understanding of the trivium. Its aim is not to be a logic textbook, or to list and explain every technique of rhetoric. My purpose is to give you a solid understanding of what the trivium is, why it matters, and some basics on practicing it in your own life. There are suggestions for further reading at the end of many of the chapters, and I hope you're inspired to keep going.

The Trivium Changed My Own Life

The trivium is not something I knew anything about for the first two decades of my life.

I'm guessing my education was probably a lot like yours. It was compartmentalized, with almost no attempt to connect one subject to another. The central focus was on rewarding the ability to regurgitate knowledge as presented, with little concern about how to evaluate that knowledge. In other words, it was the run-of-the-mill kindergarten through twelfth-grade education that most of us receive.

After high school, I studied nuclear engineering in the US Navy, and later went to a state university, where I earned a degree in philosophy with a minor in biology. My

philosophy degree required some basic logic classes, which turned out to be something of a revelation for me.

Up to that point, I considered myself a logical person, as I think most people do. But when I started studying the field of logic in a more systematic way, it was an eye-opener. I wasn't as logical as I thought.

I also discovered that logic is at the heart of philosophy. Logic is to philosophy as mathematics is to science. Whether it's chemistry, biology, or physics, mathematics is crucial to the application and understanding of science. In a similar way, logic, which includes both deductive and inductive reasoning, is crucial to philosophy. Philosophy is unrecognizable if we don't follow the same rules of logic and a chain of reasoning that others can scrutinize.

Understanding the key role logic plays in a life of reason evolved for me into an appreciation of the importance of the other two parts of the trivium. Logic sits at the center, but a full awareness of how to practice it requires a solid grasp of grammar and rhetoric.

When I began to apply the trivium to my own life and decisions, everything improved. I used the trivium to help make decisions in my business, and it skyrocketed. I applied it to my relationships, and they took a turn for the best. I also started thinking about the trivium in relation to decisions about my health. I could analyze what the "experts"

were saying with logic and come to my own conclusions. And sure enough, as I close in on the sixth decade of my life, I'm in better health than I was at half my age.

I even started applying it to politics. I'll be honest and say that sometimes that feels like a mixed blessing. When you take emotion and manipulation out of politics and analyze it through the prism of logic and reason, it can be a little depressing to see the shocking lies at the heart of our current politics. Still, I'd rather be clear-eyed and healthy-minded instead of manipulated and not even know it.

The bottom line is that restoring reason with the trivium works. It did for me, and I've witnessed firsthand how it works for others. I've now built a large team around me, and I regularly give workshops on these topics. I'm sought after for mentorship and coaching.

Practicing the trivium leads to real transformation, and it's liberating.

Get Ready to Be Uncomfortable

It's only fair to give you a warning as you proceed. Putting knowledge (grammar), understanding (logic), and wisdom (rhetoric) at the center of your life can get profoundly uncomfortable at times. Cherished beliefs based on childish ideas, cultural programming, or emotional

needs must be eliminated if you want to practice these arts with integrity.

As you grow in these arts, you'll also find yourself in opposition to the groupthink of our culture. For example, as you deepen in your understanding, you'll grasp that the frequent refrain that "knowledge is power" is wrong. Power comes from your ability to evaluate the accuracy of knowledge presented to you, and your skill in applying logic to that knowledge. It can sometimes feel easier to float along and let those big institutions tell you what knowledge is.

But if you can push through discomfort and learn to genuinely think for yourself, the rewards are great. Instead of constantly being buffeted by a schizophrenic chorus of conflicting voices centered around emotion, you can listen to the clear and consistent voice of reason.

As you take your journey through this book, remember that it's the quality of your life that is at stake. The chain of reason behind this statement is quite simple:

- The quality of your life will be based on the quality of your decisions, and...
- The quality of your decisions will be based on the quality of your mind, and...
- The quality of your mind is dependent on the proper use of the arts of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

In other words, the trivium is the sure path to an increased quality of mind, and therefore a better life.

That's what's on the line. It's an opportunity to transform the quality of your life by restoring reason to the center of your decision-making. But before we tackle how to do it, we need to grapple more fully with the malignant influences of the five formidable institutions that dominate our culture.

Chapter 1

WHY IS OUR CULTURE SO POISONOUS?



There's a well-known saying, originally attributed to business sage Jim Rohn, that says, "We are the average of the five people we spend the most time with."

There's some real truth in that expression, but I'd argue that most of us are more influenced by five big institutions than by individuals. Academia, Big Corporations, Legacy Media, Big Tech, and Big Government create the cultural air we breathe and have a fundamental impact on our daily lives. And remember that those five people you spend the

most time with are inhaling that same cultural atmosphere, influenced by the same exact institutions that you are.

By influencing us *all* on a daily basis, the impact of these institutions becomes enormous. It's something you'll see clearly if you pause and think about it. Walk through your own day and consider how many touch points you have with these institutions.

The moment you wake up, it's likely to the alarm sound from a smartphone, smart watch, or mass-produced alarm clock. All brought to you by a megacorporation.

Next up is breakfast. Possibly a bowl of cereal produced by a mammoth agricultural/food company like Kellogg's or Unilever, Cargill or Monsanto. Or maybe you stop at a ubiquitous coffee chain that spends millions on marketing to assure you that you'll love their beverages.

While you're consuming breakfast, you turn on a news channel or news radio brought to you by Legacy Media. Impeccably dressed news readers and authoritative voices tell us what's worth talking about, and how to talk about it.

You'll also likely take time in the morning to check your social media feed (Big Tech), or if you're old school, read a major daily newspaper (Legacy Media owned by Big Corporations).

Now it's time to jump in your car, produced by a massive car company. You'll presumably obey all mandated seat

belt and traffic laws set by Big Government. If you have children, you may be dropping them off at schools (funded by the government) that teach your children according to whatever educational theories are currently trending in Academia.

There's a good chance that you'll next report to your job at a large corporation—a job you were judged qualified for because you went to college to get Academia's stamp of approval. Whatever your job, there's a good chance you're living in a very insular world, because most of the people around you will have received the same kind of education and obtained that same stamp of approval.

Or maybe you're attending college right now. If so, you'll be under the influence of Academia more directly. You'll discover the path to approval and academic success is the path of least resistance: to think in lockstep with fashionable academic theories that will be handed to you ready-made.

Whether you're in school or at work, you'll need lunch and dinner, and again for most people that will mean meals grown, processed, and packaged by mega corporations. Even if you make an effort to eat organic, non-GMO, or vegan, it's still from some megafarm.

All throughout the day, you're probably checking your social media. Doing lots of Google searches. You're going through your day careful to follow all government

regulations and laws. You'll also be catching snippets, or maybe whole stories, from Legacy Media sources as your day progresses.

At night, it's time to relax, and you'll spend your time consuming social media, surfing the internet with algorithms provided to you by Google, and maybe settling in for some entertainment from a huge streaming platform like Netflix.

There really is no escape.

You might be thinking that in some cases you don't want to escape. Perhaps you enjoy your cereal from Kellogg's. You like the idea that the government has set up traffic signals and enforcement for those who fail to obey them. Maybe you loved that movie last night on Netflix.

This book is not going to try to tell you how to think about any of your specific interactions with these institutions. That's for you to think through and decide for yourself. But I do want to point out just how pervasive "Mother Culture" is at this point in human history, and that its all-encompassing presence may not be what is best for human flourishing.

I first read about the idea of Mother Culture in a terrific novel by Daniel Quinn titled *Ishmael*. (I highly recommend it.) One of the key concepts in the novel is that we're born to Mother Nature, but we are raised by Mother Culture. We get our biology from nature, but almost everything else from culture.

To see this more clearly for yourself, go back and again consider your typical day. But this time ask yourself different questions: How many times do you interact with nature on a daily basis? How often did you think of natural processes and how you can align yourself with them? We're so enmeshed in our cultural world that it's hard to come up with touch points with the natural world.

Why does this matter? It's because nature is better input for humans and provides a better blueprint for thinking. Throughout the book we'll talk more about the importance of input (also known as knowledge or grammar in the trivium), but you probably already intuitively grasp that your well-being is better enhanced by a sixty-minute walk in the woods than by an hour of scrolling through Twitter.

Our lives are overwhelmingly artificially constructed, which is already problematic. But it becomes downright poisonous when Mother Culture is controlled by powerful and rich institutions that use emotional manipulation to coerce compliant thinking.

*The Big Legacy Institutions Find It More
Profitable to Keep You Dependent*

Let's go a little deeper and analyze how the big cultural players keep us dependent. Once you start noticing how these

institutions foster dependency, you'll be better equipped to identify their influence in your own life.

You'll also have a better grasp of why you need the tools of intellectual self-defense to keep your mind free from their constant encroachment.

Proverbs sometimes get a bad reputation for being bland clichés, but some are quite profound. Here is a proverb directly relevant to this discussion:

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Legacy institutions want you to be dependent on them for all your “fish.” They have no interest in teaching you to fish. They want you to eat the fish they produce, and then when you're hungry again, to return to them for more. It's a cycle of dependence that is quite profitable for them but keeps you from living a truly full human life.

Here are some specific examples of how each institution nurtures dependence at the expense of independent thought and action:

Academia

- Instead of encouraging you to think for yourself, Academia is happy to provide you with ready-made sociological and political theories.

- Academia will provide you studies dressed up in scientific language, even when what is presented fails to meet rigorous scientific criteria.
- Academia hopes you don't notice that many of their studies are blatantly contradictory.

Big Corporations

- What consumer goods do you “need” and how can a big corporation make it easier? They are in the business of spoon-feeding you their products and services.
- They pay enormous sums to elite advertising agencies to play on your emotions and keep you buying their products.
- They don't want you to make buying decisions using logic, because then you'll buy less; they prefer emotion and dependence because it's more profitable.

Big Tech

- Big Tech likes to narcotize you by providing a constant stream of social media content that washes over you in a wave of emotion.

- These huge tech companies can arbitrarily cut off certain kinds of content, often with no explanation. (In other words, they'll decide what kind of fish you can have.)
- The most emotional content is usually what goes viral on their platforms. They're not concerned that this further erodes the value of reason in our culture. For them, the formula is simple: more eyeballs = more money.

Legacy Media

- The big Mainstream Media outlets go beyond facts; they'll decide for you the "context" of the facts and present it pre-thought out for you.
- The media will give you a steady diet of infotainment to keep you hooked on entertainment and emotion.
- Media often aid and abet the other big institutions by amplifying their messages, all the while proclaiming themselves to be "fact-checkers" and an "adversarial press."

Big Government

- Entitlements from government only seem to go in one direction: up. This is to keep the “fish” coming in ever-increasing amounts, and to hook as many people as possible on government spending.
- Government prefers you always leave your defense to the police instead of having the tools and training in self-defense.
- Government takes great interest in education; compliant students who are easily manipulated become compliant citizens who are easier to control.

You might object to some of what you just read. You’re probably thinking, “Hey, I like some of the ‘fish’ provided by these institutions.” To pick some random examples, you might enjoy being able to go to the grocery store and purchase a jar of spaghetti sauce instead of growing your own tomatoes. Or you like the option to call the police instead of defending yourself. And you want to be able to take advantage of academic resources and knowledge produced by others.

Those are fair points, so let’s return to our original proverb and extend it a bit and say this: taking a fish that is given

to you is not the problem. The problem is this: What if your “benefactor” stops providing you fish? Or what if they keep lowering the quality of the fish they provide? Then you’re stuck wallowing in dependence.

The crucial concept is that the more you can become self-sufficient (teach yourself to fish), the more control you have over your own life. Then you can choose what fish you want to accept, and what fish you want to catch for yourself.

I’m not teaching that you should never shop at a grocery store, or never call the police, or ignore everything that academics produce. My counsel is to learn the arts that allow you to analyze your choices with reason and logic. When you improve your mind’s quality, then you’ll be able to separate mindless, emotional dependence from the free choice to accept what’s offered.

Knowledge Is Not Power

There’s a false concept that makes it easier for institutions to mislead us, and that’s the oft-heard phrase, “Knowledge is power,” as I mentioned in the introduction.

It sounds good. But it’s not true.

Properly defined, knowledge is simply a statement about reality. Absorbing knowledge is easy, which is why it’s not power. (Nothing easily gained gives you real power).

Here's some examples of knowledge statements, selected completely at random:

- Water is a molecule made up of two parts water, and one part oxygen.
- My shirt is red.
- Diamond cuts glass.
- All humans are mortal.

Anyone of normal intelligence can imbibe an arbitrary collection of facts.

I don't want to give you the idea that knowledge isn't important. It is, and the trivium can't work without accurate knowledge as the first step. But for knowledge to become useful and give you power, you need to apply logic to it. We'll dive deeper into this as the book progresses, but for now all you need to grasp is that knowledge is not the same thing as a conclusion drawn from that knowledge.

Institutions do this all the time; they tell you what your conclusion should be, but label it as knowledge. This is how the talking head on television can confidently assert he's "reporting the facts" but fail to acknowledge all the assumptions and logical missteps he's made on the way to the "knowledge" he's presenting. (Sadly, I believe some of these institutional messengers don't even realize what they're doing.)

You should get as much of your knowledge as possible from direct experience. If it doesn't grow out of your own experience, you're getting it from culture. But what if that culture is not healthy, and that well of knowledge is poisoned?

This false idea that knowledge is power has some accomplices. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

In our culture, literacy is celebrated and put on a pedestal. Don't get me wrong, I'm not anti literacy. Literacy is necessary, and you can't fully practice the trivium without it. But it should be considered the first baby step toward a life of reason, not celebrated in and of itself. It's analogous to the falsehood that knowledge is power.

Let's walk through how you become literate to understand better what I'm driving at.

Your first step toward literacy starts with hearing language, primarily through your parents in the beginning. You start connecting the word "mom" with this person, and "dad" with that person. You identify "cat" with that furry thing, and "banana" with those funny-shaped yellow objects you like to eat. In other words, you're gaining knowledge, but your brain hasn't matured enough to understand how to process that knowledge into rational conclusions.

That's why parents are constantly using language about what's right and wrong, and what actions are safe and unsafe. They're doing the processing and logic for their

children and telling them what the conclusion should be. This is totally appropriate for children until they reach the age of reason (usually around age seven or eight).

During this first stage, you begin to make the transition to reading and writing. But even with this new way of consuming language, you aren't truly understanding it. You're still simply collecting all this language data and gathering knowledge through mimicry and memorization.

And reading is an amazing skill. If we simply celebrated literacy as a wonder of early childhood, that would be fine. But instead, it becomes the pattern for the rest of our journey through typical educational institutions. The focus stays almost exclusively on taking in knowledge, and there's relatively little interest in teaching you the tools to evaluate that knowledge. (We'll talk about this more later, but why do almost no high schools offer courses in basic logic? It's equivalent in importance to teaching mathematics, but somehow we don't.)

In the end, literacy is simply an effective conduit for inputting data into a human mind. And that data you're absorbing through literacy could be accurate, or not. Even if the knowledge is accurate, it has little value if you don't know how to evaluate it and come to truthful conclusions.

Seen in this light, literacy is a neutral skill, a tool, not something to be worshipped for itself. So even though our

culture presents literacy as something to be proud of, it's more like holding a hammer. Everything depends on how you're going to use that hammer. Will you be building a house, or will you be swinging it to smash all the windows in the house?

I believe the idea of literacy as a great good in itself is a holdover from history when only wealthy aristocrats could read and write. It's a great historical achievement that literacy is much more widespread in most modern cultures.

But this worship of literacy blinds us to the fact that many times all we're reading is propaganda produced by a toxic culture that discourages thinking independently about that knowledge. In this way, the hammer of literacy is used as a tool to pound us into mental bondage.

If too many people can't think for themselves and simply parrot what they learn, the cultural environment becomes toxic. In this way, literacy can be even worse than illiteracy if it's used to fill you with false ideas. Without understanding how to reason we can only shout at each other in emotional outrage.

The question becomes, how do you heal from this? How can you start cultivating and nurturing a better quality of mind? How can you begin to evaluate knowledge, and judge what has value and what doesn't? If you can't do this for yourself, you're left trapped, having to always take

conclusions on the faith of authorities, or being guided only by your feelings.

There are many self-help gurus who say they have an answer to these problems. Let's see if they can help us.

