

A Case for the Importance of Liberal Arts Today

Author

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[Brief background]

Born in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1946. Kondo graduated from the Department of Liberal Arts at the University of Tokyo in 1971. He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 1972. He became the Deputy Secretary-General of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1999. After serving as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and Permanent Delegate of Japan to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2006 and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Denmark in 2008, he was appointed Commissioner for Cultural Affairs from 2010 to 2013. **Current positions:** President of the Professional Institute of International Fashion, Chairman of the Yokohama Arts Foundation, Co-Representative of the Jin-Bun-Chi Forum, and Director of the Shizenkan Center for Liberal Arts and Leadership, and others. **Publications:** "Seiichi Kondo: Complete Works I, II, III, VI," Kamakura Shunjusha, among many others.



In the "Biotechnology in Japan" series, we share contributions on Japanese culture and traditions. In this sixth installment, Seiichi Kondo writes about why liberal arts are necessary in this modern world of advanced science, based on his years of experience in official roles at the forefront of Japanese cultural diplomacy and a subsequent post as Commissioner for Cultural Affairs.

The concept of "liberal arts" used to mean the two years of general education students spend at university before entering their major. Recently, however, the concept is gaining renewed attention as the number of specialized academic disciplines continue to increase and our lives become ever more permeated by advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence. This is because the liberal arts are considered important for mastering small but particular areas of expertise or skill to ensure that they can contribute to the betterment of humankind from a broader perspective. It is regarded as something needed for living a fulfilled life, in both one's work and private life.

However, that begs the larger question, what exactly are liberal arts?

This concept originated in ancient Greece and became widely discussed at universities in medieval Europe. In a society where slavery was the norm, liberal arts were considered necessary for those who wanted to live as a free man. The "seven liberal arts" were the subjects thought to best exemplify the field those days. They were grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.

What is important when discussing liberal arts

today, however, is not which specific subjects one picks up, but rather upholding a commitment to free thinking and action. Our thoughts and actions ought not to be swayed by particular areas of expertise or bound by external constraints. In modern-day society, where there is no slavery and where we can study anything we like, you may be wondering why we are talking about liberal arts at all.

However, although we may seem free, we must pay attention to how we are unconsciously being kept enslaved by prejudices and fixed ideas. Prime examples of this are conviction that the economy must grow infinitely, and optimism that science and technology are all powerful and will eventually solve all the problems that arise during that process. There is also the assumption that in order to win in business, it is important to increase efficiency and achieve results in the short term, and that such things must be quantified and evaluated using such criterion as price and time performance. Behind this are the ideas of modern Western rationalism.

It is true that science and technology, as well as economic growth, have made a great contribution to the achievements of civilization. But as a result, we humans have become arrogant in thinking that we are the masters of the planet. It is clear to see

that not only has this led to the worsening of climate change and the destruction of ecosystems, but it has also created disparity and division within our own societies, and brought the possibility of a great catastrophe through war before us. Even so, we are unable to find a fundamental solution to these issues, even with our vaunted science and technology. Instead, we continue to turn a blind eye to the worsening state of the world and settle for stopgap measures.

Liberal arts can provide useful hints for eliminating this arrogance people in modern-day society have fallen prey to and for regaining the freedom to think about and implement long-term policies. It taps into not only the findings from analytics of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities but also the intellectual activities—including the classics, history, culture and the arts—that humans have created over the centuries.

It is impossible for a single person to be an expert in all fields. However, while pursuing further knowledge in one's own field, people can familiarize themselves with the classics, history, culture and the art, as well as engage in free, creative discussions with experts in other fields. Such pursuits then allow us to gain unexpected insights and inspiration.

The Bible seems to teach us to reflect on the fact that humanity's failure to properly use the science and technology it acquired by eating the "forbidden fruit" has led to a divergence from nature, or in

other words, to the "expulsion from paradise." The Tower of Babel is another story that warns against human arrogance. The famous opening sentence of the Buddhist reflection on solitude, Hojoki, touches on the nature of life that science has yet to unravel (*).

No matter how busy we may be, if we are able to remain curious about things outside our fields of expertise, engage in discussions with other experts, familiarize ourselves with the classics and history, enjoy our hobbies, and create opportunities to stay in touch with nature, both the individual and society as a whole will naturally benefit from the power of the liberal arts.

** The flow of the river is incessant and yet its water is never the same, while along the still pools foam floats, now vanishing, now forming, never staying long: So it is with men and women and all their dwelling places here on earth.*
Kamono-chomei Hojoki (Iwanamibunko)



The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man



The Tower of Babel