In this essay, I will analyze Aristotle’s conception of “liberal” and “illiberal” activities and individuals. This investigation will examine, first of all, Aristotle’s tangled account of the liberal education in the Politics. In particular, I want to explore the kind of freedom which characterizes “liberal” arts and activities and, correlativey, the non-freedom which marks the “illiberal” or, as they are more commonly called, the “banausic” arts (banausoi technai). Secondly, I will discuss Aristotle’s conception of that most liberal of all pursuits, philosophic contemplation. As we will see, “liberal” activities are defined by Aristotle as useless, nonproductive and not performed for the sake of anything other than the activity itself. But is contemplation intrinsically nonproductive? Is it possible for the contemplative philosopher to be useful and, indeed, banausic? By examining Aristotle’s notion of “illiberal” activities and individuals, we can approach these issues from a new angle.

Aristotle, of course, was not the first Greek thinker to discuss the liberal arts. Indeed, as Raaflaub has shown, this topic was already circulating in Athens in the late fifth century. But Aristotle’s discussion of the liberal education is the only extant account of this topic from the classical period which is fully conceptualized and articulated. Given that it was in this period that the first institutions of higher education were created in the West, Aristotle’s account of the “liberal” education can be seen as a sort of foundational discourse. As I will suggest, some of Aristotle’s most basic principles continue to inform—one might almost say “haunt”—our modern notion of the “liberal education.” Aristotle’s conception of the liberal arts is thus an excellent starting point for our own efforts to reconceive the field of humanistic or “liberal” studies.

1 Raaflaub 1983.
Before turning to Aristotle, I want to discuss the ancient notion of the "illiberal" or "banausic" arts, since it is difficult to understand the liberal education without a firm grasp on its antitheses. Although the word "illiberal" (aneleutherios) is readily understood as designating any person or thing that is "unfree," the term "banausic" (banausos) is harder to apprehend. Yet these two words are regularly linked together by fourth century writers, and even used as virtual synonyms. It is worth noting that the word banausos is generally rendered as "mechanic" or "base mechanic" by English translators (including Liddell and Scott). Unfortunately, the word "mechanic" (at least in modern parlance) conjures up something quite different from the banausic worker, and actually obscures what is most important about the notion of banausia. I will begin, then, with a brief analysis of banausia and the banausic worker.

In the most general terms, banausoi is the label for people who earn their living by plying a "craft" that involves the use of the hands. The word "artisan" (used in the broadest sense) is thus a more accurate translation of banausos than "mechanic," though even "artisan" is far too limited. "Banausos," however, is not merely a descriptive term, since it invariably marks a person as mercantile and servile. It is for this reason that Aristotle places the "banausic" arts in the category of "wealthgetting that involves exchange" (Pol. 1 11, 1258b20-6), and identifies them as a form of "labor for hire" (μισθαρμία b25-6). It is noteworthy that the word banausia and its cognates is not found in oratory or comedy (whose authors tend to reflect demotic sentiments); in fact, in texts from the classical period, it is virtually monopolized by Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle. As David Whitehead has rightly observed, "the 'definition' of a banausos ... can only be articulated by

---

2 I have followed the chapter breakdown and numeration in Ross's OCT edition of the Politics.

3 Exceptions are: Sophocles, Ajax 1121; Herodotus 2.165; and Hippocrates, De morbo sacro 18 (Littré) and De decente habitu 2, 5 (if indeed this is a 4th century text). For passages in Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle dealing with banausia, see Xenophon, Oec 4.2-3; 6.5-8; Symp. 3.4.; Cyrop. 5.3.47; Plato, Alc. 1 131b; Amat. 137b; Symp. 203a; Rep. 522b; 590c; Th. 176c-d; Laws 644a; 741e; 743d; Epin. 976d; Aristotle, EE 1215a; EN 1107b; 1122a; 1123a; MM 1205a; Pol. 1258b; 1260a-b; 1264b; 1277a-b; 1278a; 1289b; 1291a; 1296b; 1317a-b; 1319a; 1321a; 1326a; 1328b-1329a; 1331a; 1337b; 1338b; 1339b; 1340b-1342a; Rhet. 1367a.; Aph. 996a; Oec. 1343b. Rüssler 1981, 203-43 offers a detailed survey of the notion of banausia in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.