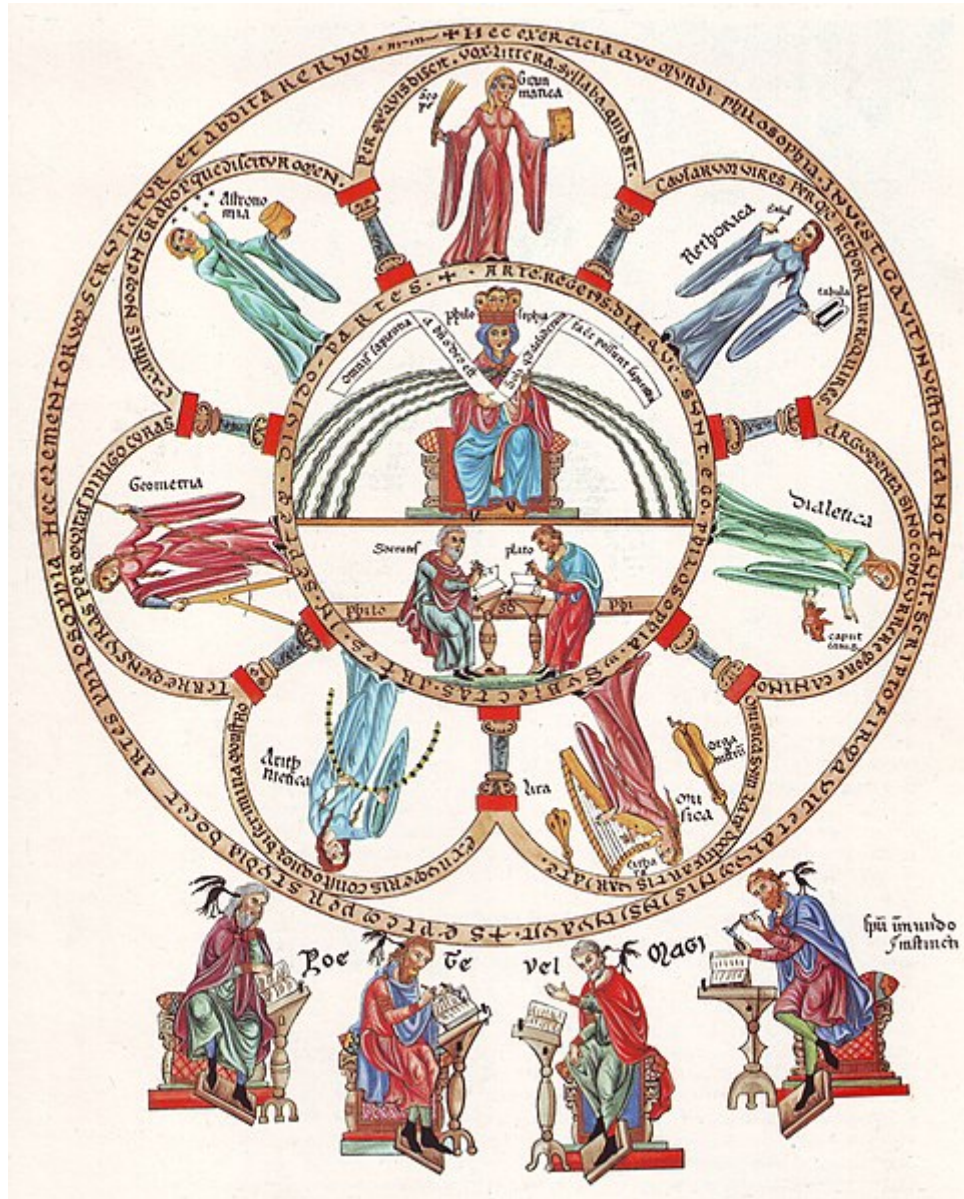


NOBLE AND USEFUL: UNCOMMON ESSAYS ON CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE MODERN WORLD



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ON THE NOBLE AND THE USEFUL
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“...what we have in mind is education from childhood in *virtue*, a training which produces a keen desire to become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled as justice demands. I suppose we should want to mark off this sort of training from others and reserve the title ‘education’ for it alone. A training directed to acquiring money or a robust physique, or even to some intellectual facility not guided by reason and justice, we should want to call coarse and illiberal, and say that it had no claim whatever to be called education.” - Plato, *Laws* 643e-644a

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Antescriptum

In her now famous 1947 essay “The Lost Tools of Learning,” Dorothy Sayers laid out a bold plan for the reform of education by means of the ancient, classical Trivium. In the second paragraph of the essay, she wrote of the likely dismal future her plan would face:

...it is in the highest degree improbable that the reforms I propose will ever be carried into effect. Neither the parents, nor the training colleges, nor the examination boards, nor the boards of governors, nor the ministries of education, would countenance them for a moment. For they amount to this: that if we are to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society, we must turn back the wheel of progress some four or five hundred years, to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages.

Seventy years later (this writing is in 2018), it pleases us to believe that Sayers' pessimism did not come true. For in fact, a well-developed and popular movement exists based upon her essay's central premises. Over the last few decades, many thousands of students have graduated from institutions styling themselves purveyors of "classical education" as it was advocated by Sayers. Indeed, to read the promotional materials of many schools in this movement, we believe we *have* gotten ourselves very far down the road to her "society of educated people fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society."

I am not quite so sanguine, for reasons I will shortly explain.

Let me be clear: I am the first to say that there is much good in the “classical education” movement. I am a product of it myself, and would be a far poorer human being and Christian had I *not* been formed by people and institutions that are an integral part of the movement. I have no trouble whatever acknowledging that as a general rule, a student who attends a classical school for a respectable length of time *will* turn out much more grounded in the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the West than attendees of generic Christian schools. Too, depending on the aggregate character of the faculty of such a school, great possibilities exist for increasing rigorous and potentially world-changing Christian thought and action.

Yet achievements in areas A, B, and C do not excuse deficiencies in areas X, Y, and Z. After some years of the classical movement growing by leaps and bounds, it is becoming apparent to a number of us that it is far less important what we have managed to do up to this point than it is to start recognizing how far we still have to go.¹ “

Classical” is not a curriculum. It is not a brand name. It is not a “method.” It is a radically and systematically different way of looking at God, the world, and the human person – a way that, I fear, we have domesticated by taking bits and pieces of it and parceling them out so that they happen to support how we already think and live. What has occurred with the radical way of thought and life we find in the classical books is, I think, what C.S. Lewis noted when he wrote about Christians and politics:

¹ See Appendix A.

You will find this again and again about anything that is really Christian: every one is attracted by bits of it and wants to pick out those bits and leave the rest. That is why we do not get much further: and that is why people who are fighting for quite opposite things can both say they are fighting for Christianity.²

This is a common theme in Christian thought. Medieval thinkers often compared the fact of divisions among Christians to the result of the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross ripping apart the seamless robe of Christ. Boethius, a 5th century Christian philosopher, wrote similarly of what had happened to philosophy after Socrates. Boethius has Lady Philosophy say:

² *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1960), pg. 80

[After Socrates' death] the mobs of Epicureans and Stoics and the others each did all they could to seize for themselves the inheritance of wisdom that he left. As part of their plunder, they tried to carry me off, but I fought and struggled, and in the fight the robe was torn which I had woven with my own hands. They tore off little pieces from it and went away in the fond belief that they had obtained the whole of philosophy. The sight of traces of my clothing on them gained them the reputation among the ignorant of being my familiars...³

In the following pages, I will engage with several issues which show something very similar occurring in the world of classical Christian education. Although it may at first sound needlessly provocative, it can be shown that although a classical school may consistently hold the line on high-profile cultural issues such as evolution, abortion, and gay marriage, it may nevertheless compromise on not-so-easy-to-see issues grounded in the large question of what fidelity to what the word “classical” means. What we need to see is that the classical tradition which underlies our contemporary endeavors is far deeper and richer than any of us, who, after all, did not receive from start to finish a classical education ourselves, have yet come to realize. A partial list of areas we often think we have mastered but have not:

³ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V.E. Watts (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pg. 39

- If classical education is really so different, why do the overall educational goals, structure, and routine practices of our schools mimic those of public education?
- What does a genuinely classical concept of the nature of the world entail for our quaint Modern belief that science has made us so much wiser than our fathers?
- What are genuinely classical principles of politics, and what do they mean for our increasingly polarized and fragmented political circumstances?
- Since so much of our lives as Moderns is concerned with money and things, what would an economics genuinely informed by the classical tradition look like?
- Have we *really* got Theology, the queen of the sciences, figured out, and are we *really* using her the way the classical tradition outlines?

As one trained in the classical Christian intellectual and ethical tradition that lies behind Sayers' essay, and also as one who spent some years working in schools that credit Sayers with their own ideology and praxis, I have written this book to explore these sorts of issues that I think belong to the next frontier in the ongoing classical education recovery movement. Let us begin the challenging work of self-reflection that the classical tradition calls upon us to embrace.

0 Philosophy ~~and~~ is the Classical School

In calling the following essay Chapter 0, I am not trying to be cute. I am intending, rather, to make the rather bold statement, right in the title, that philosophy not only must be made, but in fact *is*, ground zero of any genuinely classical education. Any program which calls itself “classical” but which does *not* exhibit a persistent sense of *wonder* leading to deeper inquiry, and, flowing from that, a robustly self-critical spirit, is just misusing the word.

We need to see that simply as a matter of history, everything that we associate with the classical world that gave us classical education was the result of philosophy defined as the activity of men who want to know seeking out the causes of things. *All men desire to know*, says Aristotle, and this being true, it follows that *philosophy is for everyone*. From the Ionian natural philosophers to the Socratic ethical turn to the great Christian experiment of *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”), there is no one for whom philosophy is not supremely relevant. Without a serious commitment to philosophy, there is no genuinely “classical” education, whatever the Sign Out Front and the Promotional Materials may say.

These are bold words. What justifies them?

Simply this: our quintessential Modern obsession with the *practical* justifies these words.

It needs no proof that Modern education universally explains itself in terms of *practicality*. Nothing that is not quickly and easily seen as *relevant* is worth our time – and *relevant* means, of course, what happens to tickle our own fancy. When it comes to education, the chief expression of the relevant, the practical, is economic: whatever else we may think important in life, the thing of supreme importance is to get a job, be productive, and participate in expansion of The Market.

Everything, including (especially?) education, is just a consumer product subject to Market logic. Reading books, writing essays, learning languages, playing sports, and all the rest – these are just tools used to pursue the end of getting a good job so as to obtain increasing material prosperity. Along the way the student may pick up some ideas, sure, but the ideas are not valuable in and of themselves. Indeed, no idea is ever worth more than its equivalent “cash value.” Witness the tiresome joke of many well-meaning people (even well-meaning *Christian* people): “The Liberal Arts? Ha, ha, what are you going to do with that? Flip burgers?”

By contrast, *thoughtfulness*, the characteristic of refusing to remain happy with surface appearances rather than probing deeper for underlying causes, marks classical education off from today’s “practical” man frantically pursuing an ever-changing, never-certain “relevance.” A genuinely classical education strives to inextricably connect daily realities and hands-on matters with a prior careful, ordered, systematic attempt to understand fundamental things. Another way to put this is that classical education is not in the Modern sense *practical* at all, because the Modern sensibility on this point is mindless, slavish, and in the truest sense of all, simply *thoughtless*.

Etymologically, *philosophy* just means “love of wisdom.” The radical idea animating my treatment here is that classical education *just is* philosophy expressing itself in various academic disciplines. Moreover, classical education properly understood and consistently practiced cannot be anything *but* philosophical. This is not difficult to prove: just open practically any Great Book to the first page and you will find discussion of huge issues and deep questions – which are the domain of philosophy. Not to mention that the whole point of learning Latin or Greek, the *classical* languages, is to enable access to these huge issues and deep questions in their original contexts and expressions.

In other words, philosophy cannot be seen as just a “class,” a finite block of time on a school’s scope-and-sequence outline. It neither begins nor ends with bells. A topic it takes up cannot be exhausted by “Units” in textbooks, and the wisdom it brings cannot be measured by scores on exams. Philosophy is not a “subject,” one of many discrete, domesticated quantities of dates, dead people, and homework assignments. It actually *is itself* classical education.

It follows that anything calling itself “classical education” that does not come to terms with the stark, “you must die to yourself and kill all the things that seem obvious to you right now” demands of philosophy should be suspected of being just a fad. There is nothing legitimately classical about trading on the connotations of a fine and beautiful old word to disguise one’s hidden conformity to the intellectual and sociological status quo of progressivism.

All of this brings up the point that confusion about philosophy permeates the classical education world. Speaking in general, Christianity in America has been distorted by anti-intellectualism for the last 150 years, so *philosophy* tends to connote mere ungodly and unbiblical thinking. For does not the Apostle himself teach us that we are to avoid being taken captive by “philosophy and vain deceit” which are not according to Christ, but according to the “elementary principles of the world”? And don’t philosophers tend to be eggheads who don’t realize the letters Ph.D. really stand for “Piled High and Deep”? Don’t they befuddle ordinary folks with torrents of ten dollar words that make simple things impenetrably complicated?

In this anti-intellectual context, classical schools can find it difficult to actually *be* classical by being actually philosophical. Beyond a small number of easily-processed tropes – “the Trivium,” “Socratic discourse,” “biblical worldview” – the classical school can miss both the fact that classical *just is* philosophy and that, *being philosophy*, classical therefore makes far higher demands upon us than suit our late Modern notions of educational practicality.

We have to grapple with our emphasis on practicality, which tries to harness everything to desires that are presumed to be self-justifying just because they are, well, *desires*. Our consumer culture encourages us on every level of our experience to assume our desires are legitimate and that someone The Market ought to produce something that satisfies our desires. We have all absorbed the business world’s dictum that “The customer is always right,” and since we are all always customers aiming to consume some product or service that pleases us, we rarely stop to *think* about how that ethos insulates our desires from external criticism. We do not ask questions about our desires, and so we do not philosophize.

In other words, the world system in which we live and move and have our being is fundamentally oriented *against* philosophy, and it takes a strenuous, sustained act of will to fight being conformed to the world. Our thoughtless desires to consume wind up consuming the very True, Good, and Beautiful we claim we are after – or worse yet, that we claim we *already have*.

Connecting the dots, then, we can see that just because we advocate classical education and read Great Books and learn Latin and Greek and write biblical worldview position papers on everything under the sun does not necessarily mean we actually *are* classical. It is no accident that Lady Wisdom’s diatribe to all passersby in Proverbs 1:20-33 focuses on people whom she describes variously as loving simplicity, scorning knowledge, hating counsel and rebuke, and filled full of their own fancies. Wisdom calls all who hear her words to *examine themselves* to see if they are proceeding according to understanding or according to what merely seems good to them.

As classical educators, we like to list the contents of that phrase “Christian worldview” in terms of specific doctrines. While that is not wrong, surely it would be fair to summarize its origin and requirements on us more simply as being cultivation of “the fear of the Lord.” In the Scriptures, “fearing the Lord” is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). Wisdom is a lady crying out in the streets for the simple to heed her teachings (Prov. 1:20). She is “the principal thing” (Prov. 4:7) to whom nothing else we desire can be compared (Prov. 8:11).

Not coincidentally, the point of ancient classical education was to pursue and live according to wisdom. Two stone-inscribed maxims at Delphi described wisdom: “Know thyself” and “Nothing to excess.” Further elaboration of these sometimes mentioned such qualities as receptivity to the world (which “speaks” to us in many ways), wonder, self-critical humility, and practical reason.

Receptivity to the world involves quieting the clamor of our own seemingly self-evident thoughts, and instead looking into the mirror of external reality. Meditating upon what we see there leads to *wonder*, or recognizing our mental and spiritual limitations in such a way as to inspire in our minds questions that spur *self-critical humility*. By asking hard questions about our own preconceptions, we are enabled to recognize the ever-present possibility of self-blindness. On the lookout for that, we can then learn to exercise *practical reason*, an always-being-refined ability to discern what only appears to be Good from what actually is Good, and to act in accordance with the latter.

These classical principles interface well with the biblical maxims related above. To “get wisdom though it cost you *everything*” requires, as the last word implies, much serious, meditative work. “Oh how I love your law: it is my meditation *all day long*” (Ps. 119:97). To meditate, to turn over repeatedly in one’s thoughts in patient, rigorous pursuit of understanding, is the same as emphasizing *receptivity, wonder, humility, and practical reason*.

Moreover, for the pre-Christian classical tradition, meditation implied the exercise of the cardinal virtues: Justice, Temperance, Courage, and Prudence. For the later Christian classical tradition, it implied both these and the biblical triad Faith, Hope, and Love. Such activity, the virtuous pursuit of wisdom, is difficult and time consuming. But Aeschylus and Job agree: wisdom comes through suffering. And Plato and Paul agree: now we see through a glass darkly, and we must strive to come out of the cave into the light. Socrates and Solomon agreed that God alone is wise, and that we must seek His wisdom by first recognizing that we *do not already have it*. Indeed, Proverbs 4:7 presents us with a paradox: “The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom.” Wisdom *starts* with getting wisdom – but there is no getting without first seeking. No one wants to *get* what he already has.

All this means that classical education is not amenable to our cultural expectation of educative busy-ness and management by scientific methods resulting in quantification of knowledge for the sake of what we tritely call “practicality.” Classical education is not about things valued for the sake of other things, but about a Lady, Wisdom, valued for the sake of herself alone. By getting wisdom we may indeed get many other things we want. But we do not seek wisdom *so that* we can get those other things.

The classical and Christian traditions are one in saying that the pursuit of this Lady can only be done by someone who *loves* her. Both classically and biblically, love is desire for what is beautiful. The problem is that although in a sense beauty is “in the eye of the beholder,” as fallen and finite human beings, our *eye* does not always see true beauty for what it is, but is often captivated by false images of it.

In this regard, piety and philosophy are the same thing. The Christian must in a very real sense be a *philosopher*, and so the classical Christian school *must* be explicitly and unapologetically devoted to philosophy, the love of wisdom. The school doesn't have to have a "class" called "Philosophy," of course, to be devoted to the love of wisdom. Rather, it needs to display an orientation toward self-critical humility and patient, unhurried engagement with recognized sources of wisdom for their own sake, not for the sake of other things.

A tall order, to be sure. Undoubtedly the above exposition seems far remote from the policy-and-paperwork-driven daily processes of the school. We have the Trivium and the school Statement of Faith and the Staff Manual. We have scopes-and-sequences and syllabi to observe, tests to administer, report cards to assemble, next year's Balance Sheet to tinker with. And the "practical" mind, ever on the lookout for simplifying complicated things (because it does not realize that simplicity is more often the mark of foolishness than faithfulness), thinks it humorous to point out that the school does not aspire to be an Aristophanic "Thinkery," absurdly fretting about "things under the earth and above the earth." A school should be inculcating the values of the home and the surrounding culture – which means the school should be a hustling, bustling beehive of *activity*, of constant motion from one thing to the next to the next. Besides, being good Americans, we know that theory is only as good as its measurable contribution to *progress* and *useful* goals. We do not have time for the old *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life). We have a culture war to win, after all.

The proper answer to this sort of “practical” mind is not to acknowledge its “real world” focus and pledge to “improve the product” along lines suggested by “consumer surveys.” Rather, the proper answer is that not only our pedagogy, but all of the books we teach, are *already* eminently practical *in and of themselves*. Practicality is not a quality distinct from reading and meditating on Ecclesiastes or Cicero’s polemics against Antony or Augustine’s musings about time or Bede’s Britons’ disputes over the date of Easter. We do not need to *add* something to the study of Latin and Greek to make them “relevant” to the lives of 21st century movie-catechized, video-game playing, Twitter-ing young people. Just because of what the former things are – insights into the human, pathways to wisdom – they *already are* relevant and practical. The problem is not with the classical materials, but with our understanding of practicality and relevance.

Of course, we may have to struggle to make this evident to our students. The little worlds on their smartphones seem more real than Herodotus’ account of Croesus and the Nicene Creed’s arcane theological terms. After school sports, the latest cool movie or pop-music song, the endless thrills of momentary socializing, spiritually affirming class experiences like those in the youth group – these are what make today’s kids tick, not wrestling with Socrates’ defense speech.

But the Lady who stands in the classrooms crying out that we not be simple and have the fill of our own devices does not accept biography and psychology as reasons not to heed her. She cares not whether class schedules meet Carnegie-Hour requirements, whether our lesson plans exhibit conformity to the Trivium and the Seven Laws of Learning. Politics, economics, science, biblical exegesis – she trashes every aspect of our worldview thinking, for her path is *listening*, not *viewing*. Indeed, she insists that we have no right to come to school and just be who we already are, keep holding what we already believe, keep doing what we have always done. She will not change to suit us. We must change to suit her.

In the end, a proper love of Lady Wisdom makes us realize that the central point of classical education is to expose what is wrong with us and put us on the right track. Philosophy ruthlessly hammers on our declensions from what we *could* be, what we *ought* to be, and demands that we do better than our best. We do not know ourselves. We do not live with no excesses. We do not already have wisdom. We must seek her, knowing that she may cost us *everything* (Prov. 4:7).

What place has philosophy, love of wisdom, in the classical Christian school? Simply this: if everything in the school is not done (however imperfectly) in accord with philosophy, we are abusing the words “classical” and “Christian,” and should erase them from our signs and stationery posthaste. For if our signs do not connect with the thing signified, we are missing the point entirely. Philosophy *is* the classical school, and we should accept no substitutes.