Virtue: the True End of Education

**Can Virtue Be Taught?**
Andrew Kern introduces the theme and addresses the basic questions to be considered.

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John Heaton reviews *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* by Josef Pieper.
One way among many which causes those of us involved in Christian Classical education to be seen as dinosaurs is our emphasis on the importance of virtue. Virtue is a lost concept in our modern age; it is certainly no longer part of the common vocabulary. C. S. Lewis says that when a word dies, disappears from use, the idea it represents disappears as well. He calls this “verbicide.”

In her book The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values Gertrude Himmelfarb analyzes the vocabulary we use to talk about morality:

It was not until the present century [the 20th c.] that morality became so thoroughly relativized and subjectified that virtues ceased to be ‘virtues’ and became ‘values.’ This transmutation is the greatest philosophical revolution of modernity, no less momentous than the earlier revolt of the ‘Moderns’ against the ‘Ancients’—modern science and learning against classical philosophy…So long as morality was couched in the language of ‘virtue’, it had a firm, resolute character. The older philosophers might argue about the source of virtues, the kinds and relative importance of virtues…But for a particular people, at a particular time, the word ‘virtue’ carried with it a sense of gravity and authority, as ‘values’ does not.

Values, as we now understand the word, do not have to be virtues; they can be beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices, even idiosyncrasies—whatever any individual, group, or society happens to value, at any time, for any reason. One cannot say of virtues as one can of values, that anyone’s virtues are as good as anyone else’s, or that everyone has a right to his own virtues.

The old concept of virtue is based on the belief in absolute Goodness, a belief our age has jettisoned. We need but consider the changed understanding of the phrase “the good life” from ancient times to the present. For the ancient Greeks “the good life” was the well-lived life, the life of one who practiced virtue. Today “the good life” denotes the pleasurable life, the life which satisfies my cravings whatever they may be. How alien this is to the ancient understanding of virtue; Aristotle taught that virtuous acts are done for their own sakes, not for some other purpose. Virtue is not a means to an end; it is an end for which we were made.

We in Christian Classical schools are in the business of resuscitating virtue as the supreme goal of education. I hope the articles in this issue will aid you in this most crucial task.

Linda Dey
Editor
100 years ago, Europe began its long, slow suicide in The Great War. It may well have been the greatest tragedy of the last millennium.

A year earlier, Vienna, capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was shocked by the treachery of one of its rising military stars. Colonel Redl, among the highest-ranking commoners, hope of the middle class in a steeply hierarchal society, recently head of Austrian counter-intelligence, was discovered selling highly classified information to the Russians. It seems that his need to provide luxuries for his paramour, a young officer called Stefan Hromodka, had driven him to betray the Empire. “Like a riptide the disaster churned through the Empire,” said author Frederick Morton.

C. S. Lewis famously said in The Abolition of Man, “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst.”

What is a man without a chest, and what is the link between the chest and virtue? And what has all this to do with Christian classical education in our 21st century? Lewis is defending a position that is ancient because it is perennial: that humans possess an organ that resides between the head and the heart, the tending of which determines the well being of the soul and of society. Contemporary education disdains that organ. Following Homer, Plato, and others, Lewis calls it the chest.

It is in the chest that we are sensitive to honor, which opens us to the possibility of great evil (such as eating fruit when told it will make us God-like), yet also raises us above the utilitarian striving of the beasts, whose goal consists of comfortable survival and who put no thought into the artistry of their songs, homes, prayers, or meals. Lewis wisely sees the link between virtue, honor, and the chest.

Homer also believed that virtue depends on a healthy chest (“thumos” was his word for it). His love of virtue compelled him to write two nearly perfect epics that revolve around the two noble virtues of wisdom and justice. In the one on wisdom, Homer went so far as to give the name Arete to the queen of his idyllic, “faery” island. Arete is Greek for virtue.

Plato’s Odysseus, questing for wisdom through many wanderings and transformations, shows Meno an answer that Meno seems unable to hear. He teaches virtue before his very eyes by teaching a slave-boy geometry. Socrates opens the boy’s mind to a truth the boy had failed to see previously, and he also whispered a truth into the minds of those of Plato’s readers who had ears to hear.

Plato had inherited the tradition of the “four cardinal virtues” on which every other virtue hinged (“cardinal” is Latin for “hinge”): wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. When Christ came, He showed that the truth sought by the Greeks depended on the spiritual virtues of faith, hope, and love. These three plus four became the seven cardinal virtues on which all human society and personal growth depend.

The attentive reader is perhaps wondering why I argued that Socrates was teaching virtue to a slave-boy when he was teaching him a simple geometry lesson. He may also wonder what that has to do with the seven cardinal virtues. These are such pregnant questions that I will encourage you to make them the matter of your own reflections and will content myself to take only one of the multifarious paths that open before us.

The Christian classical tradition speaks of at least four kinds of virtue: physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual. Each is good, because each enables us to function as human beings. Strength is better than weakness, memory than obliviousness, justice than bias, and faith than distrust. The four depend on each other.

It is fascinating; in a way it is a relief to see that each of these virtues is taught after the same pattern, which I will call Socratic coaching. Briefly, it involves modeling, imitating, reviewing, and refining the virtue taught, which is how Socrates taught the slave-boy intellectual virtue through geometry.

Consequently, we can observe how Socrates teaches the slave-boy, how Christ disciples the twelve, how a wise parent cultivates his children’s moral sensibilities, and how Vince Lombardi prepares his players. These reveal the challenging simplicity by which every master can cultivate the fitting virtues in his disciples.

Sadly, the teacher without a virtue can neither model nor assess it. That may explain why we teachers tend to fall
back on rituals and moralism (like the Imperial Austrians) and affix the label of rebellion to any movement by the student toward self-mastery.

The second great pedagogical question is whether everybody can be taught. In Socrates’ day, most assumed that slaves were not teachable. Thus most could never see Socrates’ answer to Meno. Shakespeare deals with the same question in his magisterial wonder *The Tempest*. In it, Prospero the schoolmaster numbers among his students his daughter Miranda (whose name can be translated, “She who must be wondered at”) and Caliban (whose name seems to be an anagram for an early spelling of canibal).

Prospero gives up on Caliban, though perhaps Shakespeare does not. You and I, however, teach neither admirable Miranda nor incorrigible Caliban. We teach humans, neither angels nor beasts: potentially, men with chests.

The standard of our teaching cannot be the college and career focus of the Common Core for geldings. It must be the cultivation of virtue in those Mirandas we teach - those who must be wondered at first and taught only in the light of that wonder. For it is only in that wonder that we can fulfill our duty to awaken them “from the slumber of cold vulgarity” (Lewis again) and turn their opened eyes to the splendors of the virtuous soul. “For the glory of God,” said St. Irenaeus, “is the man fully alive.”

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In the contemporary discourse about education, discussion of virtue as the goal of education is strikingly absent. If “virtue education” is mentioned, it is generally treated as an add-on to the curriculum, not as the overarching goal of everything that is studied. This is at least partially due to the fact that in the 21st century most people simply assume that the primary purpose of education, if not its only purpose, is to equip students with the knowledge and technical skills that they will need in order to go out into the world and “be successful.” Typically the definition of “success” people have in mind in this context is to a large degree financial. In other words, the common assumption in contemporary culture is that education is a necessary means to an economic end. Even among educational leaders discussions focus overwhelmingly on the “how” of education, on how educational methods can be tweaked to better serve this economic end, while the consideration of any further “why” of education is almost completely overlooked. Very little is usually said, for example, about the kind of human persons that we should be trying to cultivate through education or about the role that virtue plays in guiding how we go about the process of education. In 1944 Sir Richard Livingstone summed up this illiberal approach to education in a way that trenchantly depicts our current educational milieu quite well:

It is characteristic of to-day that, when we discuss which subjects should be studied, or which languages should be learnt, the first consideration is nearly always utility; we ask what is most useful for the machine, not what is most likely to make a good human being . . . At times, the right motto for our education seems to be *Propter vitam Vivendi perdere causas:* ‘For the sake of livelihood to lose what makes life worth living.’ The material in life tends to dominate . . . Spiritual and moral life is forgotten: wisdom and even judgment recede into the background.¹

In a 1975 essay Wendell Berry similarly writes that, “We think it ordinary to spend twelve or sixteen or twenty years of a person’s life and many thousands of public dollars on ‘education’ – and not a dime or a thought on character.”²

What is remarkable about these descriptions of education is that they stand in stark contrast to the centuries-old tradition which views the formation of virtuous character as the highest and most important goal of education. The vast majority of great educational thinkers throughout history have understood that the primary task of education is to cultivate people’s character, not to equip them for specific occupational tasks or functions within society. The ultimate goal of education, in other words, is to form people of virtue. While this understanding of education can be seen across a wide swath of thinkers throughout history, I am going to examine the centrality of virtue in the ancient understanding of education by focusing on two key ancient thinkers: Plato and Aristotle. Both Plato and Aristotle were seminal thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition, and their understanding of education has had a profound and pervasive effect on educational theory and practice from the time of the Greeks and Romans onward. While Plato’s and Aristotle’s educational views differ on a number of points, both thinkers accord virtue a central place in their understanding of education. Both agree that the primary purpose of education is not to transfer to students a body of knowledge, or to teach practical technical skills, or to prepare students for a specialized vocation. Rather for both of these thinkers, the primary purpose of education is to cultivate students into virtuous human beings who have a robust and wise disposition toward learning, themselves, and the world around them. To demonstrate that this is so, in the following I offer a brief examination of the central role that virtue plays in each thinker’s understanding of education.³
Plato

Throughout his works Plato is explicit that the purpose of education is to form people who are virtuous. In the Republic, for example, he writes that, “The final outcome of education, I suppose we’d say, is a single newly finished person, who is either good or the opposite.” He goes on to argue that, “The form of the good is the most important thing to learn about” and that, “It’s by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial.” In the Laws he similarly clarifies that what he means by “education” is not training for a particular trade or business but “education from childhood in virtue.” He goes on to explain that this virtue consists in having one’s loves properly aligned such that one adores what is good and abhors what is not: “There is one element you could isolate in any account you give, and this is the correct formation of our feelings of pleasure and pain, which makes us hate what we ought to hate from first to last, and love what we ought to love. Call this ‘education,’ and I, at any rate, think you would be giving it its proper name.”

This understanding of the goal of education significantly affects how Plato understands the value and purpose of various curricular subjects. In fact, he is explicit that the subjects he thinks should be studied are selected not on the basis of their content per se but rather because of their ability to turn the soul away from darkness and toward goodness and truth. He admonishes that, “Each of us must neglect all other subjects and be most concerned to seek out and learn those that will enable him to distinguish the good life from the bad and always to make the best choice possible in every situation.” Plato thus recognizes that the curricular subjects are not ends in and of themselves but are educationally valuable only insofar as they promote the formation of virtue. To put it another way, for Plato the principal question that must be asked of any educational proposal is not what practical or economic impact it will have but whether or not it fosters virtue in those toward whom it is directed.

Plato furthermore maintains that knowledge without virtue is worse than useless – it is pernicious. The goal of education is, therefore, not merely to impart knowledge but also to nurture in students the virtue and wisdom necessary for that knowledge to be used for the good. In the Republic, for example, he points out that, “The one who is most able to guard against disease is also most able to produce it unnoticed” and that the person who is clever at guarding money “must also be clever at stealing it.” Knowledge, in other words, is not an intrinsic good, for without a moral compass to guide its use it can bring about great evil. Thus the most significant educational question according to Plato is not what a person knows but how a person lives. In the Laws he is explicit that the acquisition of supposed goods such as wealth, health, knowledge, etc. must not be taken to be the purpose of education: “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.” The purpose of education is therefore intrinsically moral in nature, and the ultimate goal is to form students who are equipped with wisdom and an understanding of the good such that they can use whatever knowledge they may possess in ways that are virtuous.

Aristotle

Aristotle’s understanding of the purpose of education is grounded in his understanding of human beings’ purpose. Thus before examining some of his comments on education in the Politics, I am going to begin with a brief overview of his understanding in the Nicomachean Ethics of the telos, or purpose, of human activity.

At the outset of the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle writes that every craft, line of inquiry, action, and decision seeks some good and that he wants to examine what the highest good is that all of these ultimately seek. The question, in other words, is what the ultimate goal or end of human activity is. The answer he gives is that the highest good is eudaimonia, or happiness. According to Aristotle happiness is the highest good because all other goods are desirable for its sake and because it is desirable in and of itself, not as the means to some other good. After describing various common views on happiness, Aristotle concludes that, “With those who identify happiness with virtue or some one virtue our account is in harmony; for to virtue belongs activity in accordance with virtue.”

In Book X Aristotle returns to his analysis of happiness as the chief end of all human activity. He again emphasizes that happiness is an activity that is desirable in and of itself and is not merely a means to some other end. Virtuous actions are of the same nature, he argues, since doing noble and good deeds “is a thing desirable for its own sake.” He thus concludes that happiness “does not lie in amusement . . . The happy life is thought to be one of virtue; now a virtuous life requires exertion, and does not consist in amusement.” He claims that complete
happiness consists in activity in accordance with proper virtue, and he furthermore contends that this activity is the activity of contemplative study since contemplation “alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating.” Thus the highest good of mankind consists in a life of virtuous contemplation.

This discussion of humanity’s highest good plays an important role in Aristotle’s understanding of education, for it is through education that people are able to achieve their ultimate purpose of virtuous contemplation. Thus with a brief overview in place of his understanding of the chief end of man, we are now positioned to understand his treatment in the Politics of the goals toward which education should be directed. Regarding the relationship between virtue and education, he writes that, “There are three things which make men good and virtuous; these are nature, habit, reason . . . We have already determined what natures are likely to be most easily molded by the hands of the legislator. All else is the work of education; we learn some things by habit and some by instruction.” In other words, according to Aristotle education plays an essential role in the actualization of mankind’s ultimate purpose by directing students toward a life of virtue.

In his discussion of the rationale for teaching subjects such as reading, writing, gymnastic exercises, and music, he reiterates that leisure, which facilitates happiness, is the goal: “It is clear then that there are branches of learning and education which we must study merely with a view to leisure spent in intellectual activity, and these are to be valued for their own sake; whereas those kinds of knowledge which are useful in business are to be deemed necessary, and exist for the sake of other things.” Children should be taught drawing, for example, “not to prevent their making mistakes in their own purchases, or in order that they may not be imposed upon in the buying or selling of articles, but perhaps rather because it makes them judges of the beauty of the human form. To be always seeking after the useful does not become free and exalted souls.”

In considering what other subjects should be taught, Aristotle notes that, Occupations are divided into liberal and illiberal; and to young children should be imparted only such kinds of knowledge as will be useful to them without making mechanics of them. And any occupation, art, or science, which makes the body or soul or mind of the freeman less fit for the practice or exercise of virtue, is mechanical; wherefore we call those arts mechanical which tend to deform the body, and likewise all paid employments, for they absorb and degrade the mind. . . . The object also which a man sets before him makes a great difference; if he does or learns anything for his own sake or for the sake of his friends, or with a view to virtue, the action will not appear illiberal.

It is important to note that Aristotle does not mean to imply here that learning mechanical arts is necessarily worthless. His point is that the reason for which something is learned is of the utmost importance in determining its value. Learning carpentry, or foreign languages, or economics can be worthwhile, provided that it is learned “with a view to virtue.” He is highly critical, however, of his fellow Greeks who fail to embrace a system of education “with a view to all the virtues, but in a vulgar spirit have fallen back on those which promised to be more useful and profitable.” The purpose of education is for Aristotle therefore not primarily utilitarian in nature. Rather education’s highest purpose is the formation of human beings who can fulfill their highest purpose – living a life of virtue.

Both Plato and Aristotle thus take the development of virtue to be a central and necessary component of the well-lived life. They, furthermore, both consider the primary purpose of education to be helping people fulfill their ultimate purpose by fostering in them virtuous thought and action. The development of virtue, in other words, is the sine qua non at the heart of what education is all about.

In closing, I want to emphasize that this centrality of virtue in the understanding of education is not particular to Plato and Aristotle or even to the ancients. Rather it is a commonly accepted understanding of education that endured for centuries and was supplanted only in the second half of the 19th century. Far from being the historical anomaly, this view is thus the dominate conception of education that throughout history has undergirded Western educational thought and practice. In our contemporary society, the prevailing paradigm conceives of education as a completely secular and “value-free” enterprise. In the course of history, however, education has almost never been thought to be a solely secular enterprise but rather one that is intimately connected to the development of morality and virtue in students. The contemporary charade of
value- and virtue-free secular education is thus not only a philosophical and practical absurdity but also demonstrates a stubborn refusal to accept the nearly universal recognition of the importance of training in virtue that has existed throughout the history of education.

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Endnotes

1 Sir Richard Livingstone, Plato and Modern Education (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), 22.


3 It is important to note that the Greek word for virtue (arête) is broader in meaning than the English word “virtue.” “Arête” is an interesting word that is most often translated as “virtue” or “excellence.” At times the term is used to refer to specific virtues (courage, justice, temperance, piety, moderation, wisdom, etc.). It also can be used, however, in a more general sense as a broad category that includes multiple individual virtues. While the word does have moral overtones, it is not an exclusively moral term. Rather it refers to the capability or power of a thing to fulfill its purpose or nature. Thus a knife is “excellent” insofar as it is able to cut well, i.e. to fulfill its purpose as a knife. A cow is “excellent” insofar as it is capable of producing milk – i.e. of fulfilling its purpose as a cow. Similarly, the “virtue” of a person is the quality that enables a person to fulfill his purpose and live according to his true nature.


5 Ibid., 505a2-3.

6 Plato, Laws 643e4 (emphasis in the original).

7 Ibid., 653b6-c4.

8 Plato, Republic 521c4-d1.

9 Ibid., 618b8-c3.

10 Ibid., 333e6-7.

11 Ibid., 334a5-6.

12 Plato, Laws 644a3-6.

13 Although “happiness” is the most common English translation of “eudaimonia,” etymologically it means something more like “good spirit” or “well-being of spirit.” It does not carry the connotations of joy or pleasure that the English term “happiness” does, and thus perhaps a better translation of eudaimonia is “human flourishing.”


15 Ibid., 1176b7-8.

16 Ibid., 1176b28-1177a3.

17 Ibid., 1177b1-3.

18 Aristotle, Politics 1332a38-b11.

19 Ibid., 1338a9-13. For Aristotle, leisure and education are closely entwined notions. He understands education as an activity of leisure in that students can devote themselves freely to it as an end in and of itself. In fact, it is from “skole,” the Greek word for leisure, that the English word “school” is derived. I should note, however, that in my experience students are not always easily convinced that they are “at leisure” while in school.

20 Ibid., 1338a41-b3.

21 Ibid., 1337b5-20.

22 Ibid., 1333b9-11.
Virtue and Volunteerism: Why Schools Should Stop Clarifying Values and Start Instilling Virtue

by Louis Markos

It is a sad thing that our modern world has redefined virtue in negative terms. Rather than define a virtuous man as someone who actively practices the positive virtues of prudence, courage, justice, and temperance, we turn things on their head and celebrate the goodness of those who don’t succumb to folly, don’t betray an excessive amount of cowardice, don’t violate anyone’s rights, and don’t drink or smoke. Such is the case with the four classical virtues, but it is even more so with the three theological ones. We celebrate those who press on, who don’t give up, rather than those who actively put their faith in an unseen Creator and their hope in his promises.

In Screwtape Letters (#26), C. S. Lewis critiques his age for replacing the positive love (caritas, agape) of the Bible with a negative form of unselfishness. Although the highest pagans (Aristotle) and the great Christian ethicists (Aquinas) taught that virtue is a habit gained by practicing virtuous actions, we of a more “enlightened” age have embraced a distinctly hands-off ethos. Had Lewis lived today, I think he would have said that the reigning virtue is not unselfishness but tolerance—a pseudo-virtue that manifests itself, not in active charity, but in a negative acquiescence to the “rights” of others.

I say it with sadness, but modern education in our country seems interested only in fueling the negative virtue of tolerance (together with the equally negative virtues of inclusivism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism). Rather than encourage young people to reach out in love, we teach them to refrain from any and all judgment. Love does not mean helping others to grow into the people God created them to be; it means turning a blind eye and telling them that whatever they believe is right is right for them.

Given the negative nature of tolerance, I was initially thrilled by the rise in volunteerism among grade school students. Since then, my ardor has cooled. Most public school volunteerism is first mandated and then overly celebrated. Such a mixture tends to instill feelings of pride, self-satisfaction, and entitlement, rather than humility, compassion, and thankfulness. The message is not “you have been blessed so bless others,” or “there but for the grace of God go I.” It’s much closer to: “He put in his thumb, / And pulled out a plum, / And said, ‘What a good boy am I!’”

Worse yet, students are taught to evaluate the success of their volunteerism on the basis of how it affected them, not how it impacted the lives of those they purportedly went out to serve. The attention is turned inward, causing the child to delight in his own goodness and kindness, when it should be turned outward toward a true love of God and neighbor. Feelings are given precedence over actions and introspection takes the place of David’s “Search me, O God” (Psalm 139:23-4).

That is not to say that the giver of charity should not take joy in the giving. To the contrary, as Aristotle, Aquinas, and Lewis all knew and taught, one of the greatest rewards of charity is that the giver manifests itself, not in active charity, but in a negative acquiescence to the “rights” of others.

But we can’t put the cart before the horse. We must not teach young people: you’ll feel good if you help at the soup kitchen. We must teach instead: help at the soup kitchen because it is the right thing to do, and, in time, you will come to have feelings of love toward the people you help. Indeed, if those feelings don’t come in time, it is likely a sign that the giver of charity is giving out of wrong motives (to gain social approval) rather than out of love for God and neighbor. Can there be anything more unlovely than a person who hands out charity but who radiates bitterness, contempt, even hatred toward the people he is helping? As G. K. Chesterton once quipped, a humanitarian is someone who loves humanity but hates human beings.

When Christ tells us to love our enemies, he does not mean that we should try to manufacture nice feelings...
toward them. He means that we should treat them with love (charity). The husband is not to wait around for his wife to do something loveable before he loves her, just as the wife is not to wait around for her husband to do something respectful before she respects him. The actions come first; the feelings follow. The husband who treats his wife with love will come to love her, even as the wife who treats her husband with respect will come to respect him. But that is only half the reward. Wives and husbands who are treated thus will themselves become more loveable and worthy of respect.

Now here’s the terrible irony. Making middle and high school students log in a hundred or so hours of volunteerism should work. Young people who get in the habit of extending charity to the less fortunate should come to feel charitable. Better yet, the practice of charity should instill in them the virtue of caritas. So why isn’t it working? #

I have a deep and enduring love for Hamlet; the play simply cannot be seen or read too often. Unfortunately, for all its beauty and power, it has had one negative legacy that Shakespeare could not have anticipated. Early in the play, Polonius, the advisor to the king, regales his son with a lengthy catalogue of proverbial nuggets. A close reading of the scene will reveal that Polonius is a windbag and that his advice is hackneyed at best, but that has not prevented the last several generations of teachers and students from enshrining one line out of Polonius’s jumbled litany as the be all and end all of virtue: “To thine own self be true.”

Don’t worry if you scandalize your parents or blaspheme God or violate all standards of decent behavior. As long as you are true to yourself, then your actions are justified. You are the center of your own moral universe. You are an autonomous individual with no ties or obligations to the past, to tradition, to your family, or to your Creator. You are the maker of your own destiny, the captain of your own soul. Learn to think for yourself, and everything else will fall into place.

Near the beginning of Orthodoxy, G. K. Chesterton argues that the core problem with the modern world is that it has taught us, not, as in the past, to doubt ourselves and believe the truth, but to doubt the truth and believe in ourselves. Charles Williams, a friend of Lewis’s who, like Lewis, was strongly influenced by Chesterton, explains, in chapter VIII of The Figure of Beatrice, that the Medievalists “believed it to be less important that men should think for themselves than that they should think rightly.”

Ask ten random teachers why they went into teaching, and I guarantee that more than half of them will say that they became educators so that they could teach students to think for themselves. If they are English or art teachers, they might add a second, closely related reason: to inspire and foster self-expression in their students. Their goal is not to produce traditional artists who seek after the truth and then try to capture that truth in their art; it is to create a race of mini-Picassos who consider it their calling and their right to throw onto the paper or the canvas or the screen or the airwaves whatever they feel is good or true or beautiful.

More to the point of this essay, their job is not to instill the classical and theological virtues in their charges, but to help them (a la John Dewey) to “clarify” their own personal sense of virtue and vice, right and wrong, truth and error. Students are not trained to learn virtue at the feet of Moses, the prophets, and Jesus, nor even at the feet of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, but to assert (Nietzsche-like) their own personal understanding of virtue. It is up to them to choose their own standards of beauty, their own definition of goodness, even their own sexual identity.

Enforced volunteerism should work, but it does not, because it is carried out in a values-free zone apart from any traditional understanding of why we should be charitable in the first place. Darwinism, of which Dewey was a disciple, certainly offers no ultimate basis for charity (or any of the virtues), and the default religion of America, utilitarianism, offers a paltry pragmatic basis that quickly deconstructs itself. The “to thine own self be true” ethos of values clarification may work for a little while, but it doesn’t last, for it is powerless to instill virtue in students.

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How then can we instill virtue in our students? The same way it was done in the two dozen centuries that precede the modern age. We teach them classic works of literature, not just to hone their critical thinking skills, but to provide them with role models of virtuous and vicious behavior. When Bill Bennett published his Book of Virtues, it was hailed (or despised) as revolutionary. Had he published it before the modern period, it would not have been considered revolutionary at all. It would have been
considered common sense. The classic works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton must not be presented as relics of the past to be read quickly and then ticked off. They must be offered as arenas for wrestling: training grounds where students can flex their moral and ethical muscles against Achilles and Hector, Odysseus and Aeneas, Dante pilgrim and our original parents.

The literary, historical, and philosophical classics, especially the pre-Christian classics of Greece and Rome, should be used first to instill the classical virtues of prudence, courage, justice, and temperance in students. Once those are (partially) achieved, then they will be ready to move on to the higher virtues of faith, hope, and love. It is not a bad idea to first teach courage and chastity as practices that will save us from dishonoring ourselves and our family, and then lift them up to the higher Christian understanding of these virtues: that courage and chastity ultimately rest on a knowledge of who we are in Christ, why God gave us our bodies and our sexuality, and how we can stand firmly on the promises of God.

And as the virtues (and vices) are taught, the emotions appropriate to those virtues (or vices) must be taught as well. In chapter VIII of A Preface to Paradise Lost, Lewis argues that one of the main functions of art is to instill stock responses toward virtue and vice: “All that we describe as constancy in love or friendship, as loyalty in political life, or, in general, as perseverance—all solid virtue and stable pleasure—depends on organizing chosen attitudes and maintaining them against the eternal flux . . . of mere immediate experience.”

Values clarification inevitably champions “immediate experience.” Our gut response to a work of literature or art or philosophy must always be the right one: for it is the right one for us, and that is all that matters. In our modern/postmodern world, insincerity is considered the worst of sins. As long as a student’s reaction to a work or an event or a behavior is “sincere,” then it must be respected. Lewis, together with Aristotle and Aquinas, would disagree.

Training a child to feel a certain way toward courage or cowardice, beauty or ugliness, loyalty or treachery, purity or perversion does not result in a warping or falsifying of his emotional responses. To the contrary, it helps him to properly order his desires in a way that will not only bring him greater happiness but help prevent the community he is part of from regressing (or progressing) into barbarism.

The real danger with young people today is not that they do bad things: all people at all times do bad things. The danger is that when they do bad things, they feel no remorse whatsoever, only anger that they got caught. That lack of remorse is a warning sign that highlights the failure of public schools to instill proper stock responses. Instead of teaching students to feel shame when they do something immoral or unethical, schools today “protect” them from feelings of self-disgust, lest their self-esteem be damaged. This aspect of values clarification is particularly deadly, for it “instills out” of students a necessary internal moral censor. Apart from that censor, civilization becomes a precarious thing indeed.

And what then of volunteerism? Should we continue to send students out into the community to volunteer their time and resources? By all means! But when we do so, let us make sure to provide them with the proper context for doing so: 1) we don’t help others because they are “entitled” to our help, but because we are called to love as we have been loved; 2) charity is right and proper, not because it makes us feel good when we give it, but because the second greatest commandment compels us to love our neighbor as our self; 3) charity is good, not because it helps us to be true to ourselves as we are, but because it helps us to be true to the true selves that our Creator would have us grow into; 4) since charity means wanting the best for the other person, it must not manifest itself in a weak-kneed tolerance that overlooks, and thereby enables, self-destructive behavior.

A teacher who fails to provide such a context for volunteerism risks producing students who neither acquire the virtue of charity nor experience the real joy that accompanies the virtue.

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How to Grow Virtue
by Sam Vanderplas

When I settle down for bedtime reading with my boys, we frequently return to one of our favorite stories from *Frog and Toad Together*, in which Toad, after admiring Frog’s garden, plants seeds of his own. Eager for his seeds to grow, Toad tells them to begin.

“Now seeds,” said Toad, “start growing.”
Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow.
Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, “Now seeds, start growing!”
Toad looked at the ground again. The seeds did not start to grow.
Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, “NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!”

Again, there is no response, and Toad, frustrated, is left to reconsider his methods. He cannot command growth. But perhaps he can encourage it.

Selecting the Seeds: Which Virtues?

Beans and broccoli require different care regimens. Beans are planted anytime after the last spring frost, for example, whereas broccoli is started indoors 6-8 weeks before the last spring frost, then transplanted outside 4-6 weeks later. If a gardener tries to grow beans on a broccoli care plan, they may not survive the transplanting.

Similarly with the virtues, it makes sense to decide which virtues to plant before planning their care regimen. A clear vision of which virtues one intends to encourage is a prerequisite for encouraging them.

It is good to cultivate desire for the virtues that are most central to a well-lived life so that one’s efforts to live well are productive. A misplaced emphasis on a non-central virtue can undermine one’s whole pursuit of *arete*. This point is illustrated in Aesop’s fable of the miller, his son, and the donkey, in which the trio prove overly deferent to counsel. On the road, they are criticized by passersby first for not riding the donkey, then for making the young son walk, then for leaving the elderly father to walk, and then for overburdening the donkey. After each critique, they adjust their traveling formation, and finally, after the miller and his son tie the donkey’s feet to a pole and carry it between them, it kicks two feet free, falls into a river, and drowns.

The miller was practicing the virtues of humility and openness to counsel, but he fell short in more central virtues: prudence and temperance. Because he emphasized non-central virtues, he fell short of excellent living.

The virtues are all bound together. They are like a large branch that I saw my son Jack trying to relocate one day during his outdoor play. He tried once to pick it up, but failed, as part of the branch dragged on the ground. He tried again, gripping it at a different spot, but failed for the same reason. Finally, he grasped the branch at its most substantial point, the point most central to its balance, and was able to lift it with ease.

Like Jack’s branch, a life of excellence, including the minor virtues, is attainable to one who practices the central virtues. Because these central, or cardinal, virtues are so vital to excellent living, the great minds of the West have long labored to identify them. Plato named the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance in *The Republic* and added a fifth, piety, in *Protagoras*. The four cardinal virtues were affirmed in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* along with five others, and they were affirmed on their own by Cicero in *De Inventione* and *De Officiis*, by Augustine of Hippo in *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*, by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, and by others counted among our great thinkers.

Each of the virtues is a habit. They are not features of one’s personality, although some temperaments favor certain virtues, nor can they be acquired once and for all in this life. Rather, acquisition of the virtues is like acquisition of mastery in baseball or chess.

The most central virtue, prudence, is the habit of practical wisdom. It encompasses both assessing situations and making good decisions. The next, justice, is the habit of giving to each his due. The next, fortitude, is the habit of acting with enterprise in deciding to pursue a worthy goal, with courage in overcoming fear and obstacles to success, and with endurance in pursuing the goal despite tedium or difficulty. Finally, temperance is the habit of controlling one’s impulses.
Planning the Garden

In one of my first gardens, I expended great effort in digging up the earth, preparing the soil, and planting my seeds, but I realized several weeks after planting that I had left too little room between my plants. They were sprouting too closely together, and the garden held too little water and nutrients to nourish them all. I tried to make up for the mistake by picking excess plants to reestablish adequate spacing, but the damage had been done, and the growth of all the plants had been stunted. Because I did not plan the garden with the right conditions for my plants to thrive, by the end of the growing season, they had produced only miniature vegetables.

Like my garden, a school brings forth fruit most abundantly when it is planned with the right conditions for virtue to thrive. Some preliminary conditions are whether the school’s branding, policies, and curriculum reflect and support its goals for encouraging virtue. Does the school crest or logo incorporate the virtues, and do teachers, parents, and students hear the explanation of its meaning? Do the virtues figure prominently in the school’s mission? Is the dress code designed well enough to temper inclinations toward undesirable attire? Is the dress code itself temperate in that it does not exceed a manageable level of complexity? Are disciplinary procedures commensurate to infractions? Are they prudent in that they are practical and likely to redirect students toward appropriate behavior? Does the academic program highlight and praise paragons of virtue? Does it, especially in English and history, nourish the moral imagination? As Vigen Guroian says in Tending the Heart of Virtue, “stories, especially fairy tales, are invaluable resources for the moral education of children” (33).

It is good for a school’s teachers to reflect and support its goals in educating for virtue. One of a headmaster’s most effective methods for keeping a school true to its mission is the hiring of excellent teachers who model and love the virtues and are driven by a desire to pass on virtue to students.

In examining a prospective teacher’s college transcript, especially if the teacher has graduated recently, one can look for serious courses and high marks in them. It takes prudence to select serious courses, and to excel in them it takes fortitude in study and temperance in other activities.

In a phone interview, one can listen for habits of speech and ask prudent questions. Does the teacher speak with dignity and eschew base language? Does he show temperance and avoid overstatement? One can ask the teacher to resolve a hypothetical classroom-discipline scenario. His answer here can attest to any or all of the cardinal virtues. What is he reading, and does the selection display prudence?

In examining a writing sample, one can look for precision of thought. Does the teacher avoid hyperbole? It takes temperance to restrain exaggeration, and it takes justice to give each idea its due. Does the teacher exercise prudence in staying on topic and progressing logically from one point to another?

In watching a sample lesson, one can look for virtues. Does the teacher temper the passions of the class? Has the teacher worked diligently (with fortitude) to prepare the lesson? Does he treat ideas, events, and students with justice? Does he exercise prudence in engaging students, ensuring that they understand key points and modifying his lesson on the fly as appropriate?

In checking references, one can gather information about the teacher’s virtues. Does the teacher make prudent decisions? Does he treat students equitably? Does he assign homework and grades in a just manner? Does he work diligently? Does he devote his time to worthy projects? Does he see tasks to completion? Does he restrain the passions and behave with moderation?

Even excellent teachers, however, who have shown themselves supportive of the school’s mission, benefit from training that gives them a thorough knowledge of the mission and the school’s methods of implementing it. Explanation and discussion of the school’s mission, rules, and procedures is worthy of significant summer training time, as is detailed study of the curriculum, in light of the mission. Summer training is a valuable time in which administrators can set the tone, communicate the vision, and help teachers structure their classes to support the mission.

Preparing the Soil: What Seeds Should Parents and Students Expect?

It is good for the school to devote significant time to prospective parents, encouraging them to participate in school tours that include thorough information on the school’s mission, curriculum, and methods. If the parents do not support the mission, it is best for them to discover it before they apply or enter, before the time of the teachers and the resources of the school have been expended.

The headmaster can communicate the school’s vision and set expectations for current parents by promulgating messages on topics of benefit to the
community. While these letters can address day-to-day matters too, it is good both to keep them to a readable length and to reserve a significant portion for communication of vision.

He can also communicate the school’s vision by holding talks with parents during the school year. These talks can take the form of a mini-lecture on a facet of virtue, classical education, or the school’s mission, followed by discussion. The talks may draw only a fraction of the school’s parents, but parents that care enough to attend are likely to be very involved in the activities of the school and influential in shaping the opinions of others. The school will benefit from their informed support.

In school furnishings, one can emphasize what is meaningful, noble, specific, and subtle. In quotations and posters, rather than banalities such as “math is fun,” for example, one can select meaningful and cherished words such as, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8). Instead of cheap or gaudy illustrations, one can select noble images from nature, history, and fine art that are consistent with one’s goals in educating for virtue. Finally, in some cases, and especially for the upper grades, instead of posters that heavy-handedly shout the names of virtues, one can select subtle images such as Cincinnatus surrendering his commission. Allow the minds of students to rise to the occasion of subtle art.

**Cultivating the Virtues**

David Isaacs, in the invaluable *Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*, notes that a teacher can cultivate prudence by staging activities in such a way that both reading comprehension and listening comprehension are essential, training students to gather and retain information in a way that leads to accurate assessment of a situation. He can insist on memorization and accuracy of information in a way that leads to accurate assessment of a situation. He can insist on memorization and accuracy of information in a way that leads to accurate assessment of a situation.

One prerequisite for prudent decisions is the restraint of one’s impulses. Isaacs notes that temperance includes distinguishing between what is reasonable and what is self-indulgent. A teacher can insist that children control themselves and behave in an orderly manner. He can teach them to practice temperance in the use of their time—both an opportunity to grow in virtue and an important study skill. He can teach children that temperance is not rightly associated with a dour or ascetic disposition, but with an order and balance that brings health and joy to its practitioner (115-124).

Teachers can take advantage of the special role of literature and history in cultivating the moral imagination. They can lift up the examples of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance shown, for example, by Gandalf, Atticus Finch, Lucy Pevensie, and Jean Valjean, by Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Winston Churchill, and Fabius Cunctator.

Classroom management and discipline is an essential baseline, but cannot be taken for granted. It is a good habit for teachers to regularly and gracefully remind their students of their expectations for classroom behavior. When correction becomes necessary, one good approach is for the teacher to minimize the loss of class time and, as appropriate, speak with the student after class, taking care to speak with kindness and taking care that the student understands the reason for the discipline and agrees with its justice. Some of a teacher’s most effective moments in educating for virtue can take place in helping a student understand why an action is undesirable or a consequence is just.

One of the most important daily jobs of the headmaster is sitting in on classes and offering feedback for teachers. This is how the headmaster improves the quality of the school’s instruction in both content and virtue. He
can take notes both on the teacher’s delivery, classroom management, and methods, as well as on students and any potential problem spots in terms of content or virtue. It may be most edifying for the teacher if they meet the same afternoon, while the memory of the class is fresh for each of them, to offer insights in a collegial and productive manner and, as fitting and necessary, consider possible solutions together.

It is also helpful to encourage teachers to observe each other’s classes and share resources and assessments from time to time, especially but not exclusively for teachers of the same course. We can learn a great deal from our colleagues. This practice will give teachers recourse to a steady flow of new ideas for training in virtue.

The headmaster is also the guardian of class time. A vibrant school will offer a variety of edifying extracurricular activities. These are good for students, and it is good to encourage them. In some cases, however, the headmaster may need to defend the greater good by keeping the tide of extracurricular demands, insofar as it is possible and reasonable, from washing over class time, which can disrupt the daily labor of the liberal arts and stunt the growth of fortitude.

Is it Growing?

In the *Frog and Toad* story, after his initial frustration, Toad begins a different kind of seed-growing program. He reads stories and poems to the seeds, sings to the seeds, plays music for the seeds, and finally falls asleep, exhausted. When he wakes up, lo and behold, little green leaves are poking up through the earth of his garden. The seeds have finally sprouted.

To assess the growth of virtue in the short term, of course, one can attend to the behavior of students, which gives evidence of whether the intellect grasps and the will desires the virtues. The words of Christ apply: “You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” (Matt. 7:16) When thorns or thistles are brought forth, teachers can discern whether the problem is one of intellect or will and prepare themselves to make a persuasive, attractive case for the virtue in need of nourishment.

We should also note, however, that the seeds sprouted while Toad slept and that the activities in Toad’s seed-growing program did not actually cause the growth. Like Toad, who slept while his seeds sprouted, we may not observe the seeds of virtue sprouting after students have left our purview. And like Toad, we cannot cause students to embrace virtue. We can, however, leave a beautiful icon in their minds to fire the moral imagination in years to come. A seed of virtue planted by a teacher’s example or a story from history or literature may be choked by weeds, and a plant that flourished early may wither. Conversely, a seed that lay dormant, never breaking through the soil, may in the teacher’s absence take root, thrive, and produce a crop many times that which was sown.

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Men without Chests: Heroes in Post-modernity

by Sam Cox

In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ [the heart] and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.
—C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
—Judges 21: 25

Most of you by now know the story of the best cyclist in the history of the sport, Lance Armstrong. An enormously gifted athlete at the top of the cycling world, Armstrong suffered from stage IV cancer and was given a high probability that he would not live. He not only survived his cancer, of course, Armstrong became the seven-time winner of the prestigious Tour de France, transforming the sport as the greatest in its storied history. His success ran so deep that it was seen as unbelievable, defying natural human ability. Armstrong defended himself for years against critics accusing him of using performance-enhancing drugs, usually very vociferously and defiantly, including winning millions in successful lawsuits. And, of course, we all know that he recently admitted that his success was not so natural, that he indeed had the assistance of the most sophisticated drug machine known in all of sports and destroyed the careers, the reputations, the bank accounts, and, to a degree, even the lives of untold others who got in his way. And, now that he has come “clean,” he does so with virtually no remorse or contrition, unrepentant in his confession. His only crime, he implies, is that he was caught. He lied and destroyed, and angrily defended himself in the process, to protect only himself, a self-absorbed narcissist of epic proportions.

There is outrage by many at Armstrong—and outrage at those not outraged—because of his lack of honor and virtue. But Armstrong, I argue, is merely the fruit of our cultural tree. The shocking things are not his lies and seemingly unrepentant, unremorseful attitude, but our feigned outrage at Armstrong’s lack of honesty and lack of soul. Should we really expect any more from a culture based on falsehood? Armstrong’s mantra of “everyone’s doing it” may seem weak, but it is one of the mantras of our postmodern world, a world of relativism so similar to the tenth century BC when the writer of Judges proclaimed that, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Armstrong is by no means alone at the judgment seat; we read and hear of Manti T’eo’s lies and the subsequent Notre Dame cover up, the affairs of General Petraeus, the Benghazi cover up, the slightly less-recent Enron deceit and debacle; the list can fill volumes.

Our society undermines honesty in every way imaginable. Underhanded behavior is glorified. Unfaithful spouses are glamorized. Untouched photos are gone. In our nation, politicians are not elected based on their deeply held convictions or their ability to accomplish great things. We choose men and women who are most able to deceptively convince the most people that they agree with them. Lying is not frowned upon. Quite the contrary; it is expected. For truth, you see, has become relative, and therefore ever illusive.

Every photo published is almost expected to be a lie of some sort. Photoshop and filters make pictures seem as if the subject were perfect. Magazines portray a false life as the object of desire. Never mind that it is literally unattainable. Chasing the lie will keep you buying more things. In sports, like so many other areas of our culture, the frequently repeated phrase is, “It is not cheating unless you get caught.” Armstrong, then, never really cheated. He never was caught while competing, only after retirement. We told him performance-enhancing drugs were perfectly fine, so long as we believed our naïve fantasy about “LiveStrong.”

Manti T’eo was embarrassed about being conned in such a heart-wrenching manner, so instead of coming clean, he perpetuated the very fraud that was committed against him. And his university—my dear wife’s alma mater, by the way—covered it up. It was more important to the school to keep its squeaky-clean image during its national football
championship quest; it was more important to T’eo to remain respectable in the eyes of others than to be honest. What’s that? Respectability is the opposite of honesty? That is our culture. In a world where “image is everything,” integrity is nothing. In a culture where there are no longer absolute truths, you can create your own truths, your own reality. And, all is fine unless you get caught.

In his book, The Abolition of Man, C.S. Lewis included an essay entitled “Men Without Chests.” In it, Lewis depicts one of the problems with our culture: we ask for a virtue while cultivating the opposing vice. Lewis was prophetic in pointing out that relativism—the idea that there is no absolute truth—would lead to the decay of morality and a lack of virtue within society. Without a belief in and the teaching of universal moral laws, we fail to educate the heart and are left with intelligent men who behave like animals, or as Lewis puts it, “men without chests.” Lewis’ treatise (written in 1947) is about the failed educational system, and he asks the question: Can we really divorce truth and values from education? Many of the “experts” of Lewis’s day thought so. Since that time, the idea of “values neutral” education has been all the rage. It began with the simple relativistic assumption that there is really no such thing as transcendent “right” and “wrong.” This is, of course, the ultimate conclusion we are forced to draw when we adopt some form of naturalism and place humanity as the ultimate arbiter of reality. As we proceeded into the postmodern era, that assumption spread like cancer through academia. From there, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “The philosophy of the school room in one generation [became] the philosophy of government the next.” Today, there is hardly a part of Western culture—including the church—that isn’t infected with the idea.

Before long, the educational theorists realized that they must teach some form of truth and morality, if for no other reason than crowd control. In keeping with their attempt to be values-neutral, they settled on a hollow secular humanism that simply compounded the problem, demanding that children act morally while giving them no compelling reason to do so. Ultimately, students essentially were led to believe that it only pays to be morally upright when you think that someone will catch you.

This dilemma is precisely what Lewis predicted. As a culture, we produce men and women “without chests” and we expect them to do the right thing anyway. Heads may appear to have swelled in our time, but largely because chests have atrophied. Lance Armstrong and Manti Te’o and General Petraeus and so many others may indeed be men without chests, but they are our men without chests. That doesn’t make what they did excusable. It makes what each of us do each day to affirm honesty and truth, particularly God’s Truth, so very important.


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Following the White Stag
by Linda Dey

At the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the four children, now mature rulers in Narnia, are hunting a White Stag which leads them to the lamp post where all their adventures in Narnia began. In spite of their foreboding that “strange adventures or some great change” in their fortunes will come if they pass the lamp post, they decide to continue following the White Stag. Peter makes the case for this course of action: “…never since we four were Kings and Queens in Narnia have we set our hands to any high matter, as battles, quests, feats of arms, acts of justice, and the like, and then given over.” This argument convinces even fearful Susan who says, “Let us go on and take the adventure that shall fall to us.”

It’s no accident that the word adventure is repeated twice more in the closing paragraphs of the book. C. S. Lewis the philologist is fully aware that the word adventure, from the Latin *ad venire*, means literally “that which comes to us.” And what is it that comes when the children pass the lamp post? What comes is the children’s return to their own world and the adventure of living in that world with a new vision given to them by their time in Narnia.

What has Lewis done here? He has given us a picture of what good stories can do. In his essay “Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” Lewis writes:

The value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the ‘veil of familiarity’; by putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves. This book applies the treatment not only to bread or apple but to good and evil, to our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.

Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, as stand-ins for all children coming to the end of the final chapter of a good story, return to World War II England more able to see the challenges, difficulties, and choices before them as “high matters – battles, quests, feats of arms, and acts of justice” that require of them the same fortitude, magnanimity, and sense of justice they have learned to exercise in Narnia.

Children (and adults) need stories to show them how to fulfill their part in the Story. Each of us is a character in this real Story. What being in Narnia did for the Pevensie children can be done for anyone by the reading of a good book. Children can learn what virtue and vice look like through stories. Exhortation to act virtuously is important and good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough; it does not touch the heart and fire the imagination in the way that Peter’s slaying of the wolf Maugrim in order to rescue his sister does. Sir Philip Sydney makes this point in his *Apology for Poetry*. In an article on Tolkien’s moral vision Donald T. Williams paraphrases and quotes Sydney:

So the philosopher has the precept, and the historian has the example—but ‘both, not having both, do both halt.’ They stumble and fall short of the ultimate goal of education: inspiring and enabling virtuous action on the part of the reader himself. But look, says Sydney, at what the poet can do: ‘Now doth the peerless Poet perform both. For whatsoever the Philosopher saith should be done, [the Poet] giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done…a perfect picture, I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as the other doth.’ Literature, then, has the serious moral purpose of providing role models that help us form the ideals and aspirations we live by; it achieves this purpose through concrete images of virtue and vice.

Virtue and vice are best understood in the context of a narrative. Characters in good stories who act with courage or perseverance provide children with a vision of goodness. They help counter what Peter Kreeft calls one of the chief
stories

heresies of our age: “the dullness of goodness and the beauty of badness.” Exposure to good stories also helps children understand that they inhabit a story and that their individual choices and actions are part of a narrative which gives those actions meaning and their lives a sense of purpose.

In After Virtue Alasdair MacIntyre makes the point that our lives are “enacted narratives.”

…man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal…But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories of wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.

As Christian teachers we must help our students see and understand the Story of which they are a part. The modern world tells us that we are self-created, autonomous beings who write our own stories and who can be whatever we want to be. There are no “roles into which we have been drafted.” This is meant to be a message of freedom, but it is actually a source of alienation and a route to meaninglessness; nonetheless, this message permeates our culture and works against the culture of virtue we are trying to provide in our schools.

As belief in moral absolutes disappeared at the end of the 19th century, what some have called a culture of character was replaced by a culture of personality and a new view of what it means to be a person came into being. In the culture of character people understood themselves as essentially moral beings and, as David Wells explains in Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision, the growth of the person was understood in terms of “virtue to be learned and practiced and private desires to be denied.” Character formation through training in virtues was a central goal of education. Virtues were seen as moral absolutes to which people were meant to conform. The culture of personality has overturned this understanding of who we are. No longer is the focus on moral virtues to be cultivated; the focus is now on one’s image which can be fashioned. Life becomes a performance, a self-created narrative, in which people seek to look good and make themselves appealing to others. In the culture of personality there is no fixed or objective view of what a person is meant to be beyond what one makes of himself. We write our own stories and model ourselves after celebrities who have successfully created appealing images. Ken Myers in analyzing this phenomenon says: “The culture of celebrity and personal performance which permeates our society is profoundly destructive. It’s not just that being well-known for simply being well-known (in Daniel Boorstin’s classic formulation) is a thin and vapid achievement. More fundamentally disordering is the way in which the deeply sensed notion of ‘identity as performance’ promoted in the culture of celebrity undercuts the very idea of reality or real life; more than the work of nihilistic philosophers, the prominence of performers in our society nudges us toward referring to ‘reality’…rather than to Reality…In a culture of celebrity and performance the existence of reality becomes dubious and persons aspire to be desirable commodities.”

This, of course, is not surprising when people insist on creating their own reality. What has been lost is the Reality that we are all players in a narrative which we did not write for ourselves. We are created beings and the Creator is the Author of our story, a story which began with the Creation of the world, a story in which we each have a unique part to play. This understanding gives meaning and purpose to our choices and individual actions. It can motivate us and our children to persevere through hardship for the sake of a higher good. And best of all, the Author has already told us how the story ends; we know it has a wildly happy ending.

Children need stories; stories are not frills to be fit in somewhere after the grammar, math, history, and science
are attended to. Good stories are food for their souls. Be careful not to kill and dissect the stories; C. S. Lewis warns us against efforts to teach children to appreciate good literature. That’s not our job; they need to discover a love for stories on their own. Create an environment that encourages reading stories; read to them; show them how much you love to read and help them become lovers of stories. And most important, be sure they know the Great Story of which they are a part. Help them come to understand that they have an important role, just as David, Esther, and Daniel did, in an adventure story in which virtuous actions matter.

As Bilbo says to Frodo near the beginning of The Lord of the Rings: “Do adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry the story.”

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Works Cited
The Socratic Method is Utterly Pagan and It’s a Good Thing Too

by Grant Horner

I.

Central to authentically classical teaching is Socratic dialogue. It is a major attraction for parents and students considering classical education and a core reason highly motivated and serious intellectuals love working in such institutions. The drudgery, boredom, and ineffectiveness of so many other teaching styles and systems stultifies both teachers and students; classical pedagogy invigorates and inflames them with a passion for learning.

When I ask for definitions of Socratic dialogue, even seasoned teachers who use it are often at a loss. I hear variations of “well, we talk about the reading, and I ask lots of questions instead of lecturing.” We describe the event instead of thinking through why it works. Certainly very few of us run discourses exactly as Socrates did, where someone is led down a garden path by a slightly ironic master spirit only to discover their own ignorance unfolding before them. Such a method can be a hard sell when also discussing tuition payment plans.

But the real hard sell is elsewhere. How many times have we heard, “But wasn’t Socrates a pagan? Why use a ‘Socratic method’ of asking questions, instead of just telling the kids what to think?” Toss in some problematic pagan content (Ovid, anyone?) and you have a serious recruiting and retention problem. As Tertullian asked, what has Athens to say to Jerusalem? Shall the former dare charge tuition to the latter? And would that conversation be a Socratic one?

We would indeed be wise to ask, how Christian or biblical is Socratic discussion, exactly? Did Jesus use it? Did he simply imitate a Greek philosopher who preceded him? Did he claim like Socrates to know only that he knew nothing? Both showed with revelatory efficiency that none of us know what we think we know. And while there are certain parallels between Christ and Socrates, there are far more differences than similarities, including the ultimate difference – namely that, after drinking the hemlock, Socrates remained dead.

So the question must be asked: is education which is Classical, Christian? Why use content and methodology derived, even in part, from darkened minds? This question is beyond the scope of a short article, but one piece of the puzzle is the nature and workings of Socratic dialogue, and it is this which I would like to consider here.

A common defense for Classical Christian education goes rather like this: God is sovereign over all; all truth is God’s truth; even pagan culture functions under God’s rule, including worldviews, belief systems, and cultural tropes; these cultural expressions are all partial, shadowy imitations or reflections of God’s ultimate truth. Thus pagan content and even methodology are worthy of study and of some use to Christians.

It does not take particularly keen observation to recognize this formulation as absolutely Platonic and perhaps a weak apologetic for Classical Christian education. A skeptic would say the premises contain the desired conclusion – that paganism has already infected Classical Christian education at the level of foundational justification. Yet a similar critique could be mounted against this objection, which is built upon an unproven assumption that there is no value in studying the pagan conception of the world. Stalemate.

Which brings me to my thesis: that there is in fact a theological reason why Socratic dialogue is so effective, and why Christians should utilize it in the educational setting.

II.

But first, what exactly is the classical pagan theory behind Socratic dialogue? It did not just suddenly appear fully-formed on the tongue of an annoyingly inquisitive Greek philosopher. Surprisingly, few who use it are familiar with its origins. A brief glance towards a few ancient texts can provide the basic framework. In Cicero’s marvelous little book on aging, De senectute (44BC), we find lodged among manifold Ciceronian gems this nugget: “And a strong argument that men’s knowledge of numerous things antedates their birth is the fact that mere children, in studying difficult subjects, so quickly lay hold upon...
innumerable things that they seem not to be then learning them for the first time, but to be recalling and remembering them. This, in substance, is Plato’s teaching” (xxi.78). Cicero refers to Plato’s *Meno* and *Phaedo* and to a lesser extent the *Phaedrus*.

This educative “remembering” as opposed to learning something entirely new is called *anamnesis*. Etymologically it suggests “not-not remembering”, what we could call “not-forgetting” or, better, “remembering”. The Greek and Latin prefixes, a double-negation before the root “remember” (*an+a+mnesis*) is significant. The word’s form is a roadmap of its function. In the Platonic and Socratic conception, learning is an unforgetting. You knew something; you forgot it; it was brought back into your consciousness. Who brought it back?

A teacher, asking questions.

We see this in narrative form in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Book 6. Here Aeneas, legendary founder of Rome, imitates the heroes of antiquity by descending into the underworld to gain advice from his dead father Anchises. He sees many dead Trojans and Greeks (who scatter before their dread enemy) and has a most decidedly awkward encounter with Dido, his ex-lover who committed suicide after he abandoned her. Aeneas wonders at a massive throng of the dead drinking from Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness; souls doomed by Fate to suffer again through bodily human life. But why leave pleasurable Elysium for another round of human tribulations? Anchises explains that souls are continually reincarnated until they reach perfection. After death, souls that were relatively bad go to Tartarus to be purged of evil habits and deeds; relatively good souls enjoy Elysium temporarily but must eventually return to the world to live better and better lives with each incarnation. Anchises then shows Aeneas a long line of souls awaiting rebirth – his Trojan ancestors, waiting to be reborn as his Roman descendants. Aeneas is the link between them; the last Trojan and the first Roman, watching his past becoming his future. Aeneas will be reborn as Marcellus, nephew to Caesar Augustus, who in actual history died shortly before Virgil read the *Aeneid* at Caesar’s court. (According to Seutonius, Marcellus’ mother Octavia – Caesar’s sister – fainted as Virgil read his heartwrenching passage describing her freshly dead son as the reincarnated Aeneas.)

So why, when a soul is reborn, are we ignorant children – blank slates? The combination of the birth trauma and drinking the waters of Lethe causes us to forget what we have learned. The idea seems to be that excellent character is more habit than rational choice — a person’s nature is made wholly good, in a Platonic sense. Goodness is the result of bringing to mind the wisdom learned in past lives and the underworld; this is Virgil’s reworking of Plato’s doctrine of recollection. You don’t learn so much as you remember: *anamnesis* – the not-not forgetting. Socratic teaching is a kind of midwifery delivering up by questions the goodness buried in the soul. This is all very interesting – and very pagan. The book of Hebrews couldn’t be clearer: “It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.”

III.

It is now vividly apparent why Christians may rightly look askance at a teaching method of such pagan provenance. But let us put this in theological perspective.

In Romans 1 Paul delineates the primary marker of the human condition – the rejection and suppression of truth:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:18-23 ESV)

As I argue extensively in *Meaning at the Movies* (Crossway, 2010) this passage is a crucial locus for understanding the origins and nature of human cultural production – not just what we make, but why we make anything at all beyond the bare necessities for survival. Where does culture come from? What is the ultimate source of our ideas, conceptions, values, practices, desires? Paul also addresses this issue indirectly in Acts 17. He quotes – apparently from his well-educated memory -- several pagan philosopher-poets in the well-known words of verse 28, asserting that even their own poets know core truths about the invisible and immaterial God. Then he rebukes the Athenians for producing material
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idols: “Yet he is actually not far from each one of us; for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.” Paul knows and quotes the Phaenomena of the Cilician poet Aratus and the Hymn to Zeus by Cleanthes of Assos. Pagans ironically rebuke pagans: the Athenians should know that we are the offspring of God and that he is unknowable through the “art and imagination of man.” This final phrase is worth close examination, and will bring us back to the suppression of truth in Romans 1.

Paul’s phrase in Acts as recorded by Luke is τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως – two feminine genitive singular nouns linked by the conjunction ‘kai’ (‘and’). “Technes” is consistently translated as “art” but this is problematic; it is the root of “technique” and “technical” and is more than painting and sculpture. Its sense includes making objects for practical and/or aesthetic use. But it is not merely material. It was used equally in the plastic arts as well as medicine and farming, and even the techniques of ruling a city, as in Plato’s Republic. We could call it “production”, whether material or non-material. The other word, “enthumeseos”, is equally interesting. It is often translated “device”, “thought”, “invention”, or “design”. It is used of “thought” or “thoughts” in Matthew 9:4 and 12:25, and Hebrews 4:12; it is quite rare in classical literature but shows up in Hippocrates, Euripides, Thucydides, and Lucian. There it means thought, imagination, and in some cases, intense desire or drive. I think we need to consider these phrases in Acts in terms of both Romans 1 and another, seemingly unrelated passage: Genesis 4.

In Genesis 4, the origins of two sets of practices are contrasted: the descendants of Cain settle in the “land of Nod, east of Eden” and develop early cultural expression in music and metallurgy. “His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron.” This seems to powerfully suggest idolatrous worship. This worship originates, I believe, from what Paul calls enthumeseos in Acts 17 – a pattern of thoughts, an imagining, even an intense desire for meaning, grounding, a workable view of everything -- all lost in the Fall. Man now desperately desires to fill that vacuum with cultural production, teche, culture which is made – and which replaces God. The replacement is always a partial imitation of truth, simultaneously accurate (because it knows the truth and acknowledges a need for God) and blasphemous (because it ultimately rejects God as he truly is and suppresses the truth).

The final lines of Genesis 4 complete the picture. Adam and Eve’s third son, Seth, produces Enosh, and then we read “At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” Here is the apparent beginning of some kind of formalized worship of the one true God, clearly set over against the idolatrous “culture” in music and metallurgy of those who can now properly be called “pagans” as they sing and dance around metallic statues — those who know the truth but have suppressed it.

IV.

Romans states that what can be known of God is built into man by God himself. He hardwires this core knowledge about His existence, nature, and workings into all of us; this knowledge is not a salvific understanding or faith, and in any case it is rejected. The primary effect of this knowledge is to remove the possibility of excuse from the unrepentant soul: no one can claim “but I didn’t know about God!” Because humans are by nature lost in sin, the response to this built-in knowledge of God is the act of suppression. Humans are actively, continually “forgetting” the knowledge of God. This brings about an interesting conundrum. How do you deliberately forget something? The act of suppression necessarily forget something. The act of suppression necessarily brings to mind the very subject being suppressed. In other words – suppression – deliberate forgetting – is doomed to failure, because you have to remember to forget. Since the knowledge of God is unbearable for those who reject Him, the acts of suppression continue, though futile. And this is not all that is suppressed. The act of suppression itself must be forgotten, denied, suppressed. You can’t suppress something successfully if you remember that you did so. The remembrance reverses the forgetting. Suppression requires suppression. We are most decidedly not like Aeneas -- who has forgotten what Lethe does to the memory … because he drank from it himself. Aeneas is a mere human fantasy embodying our desperate desire to forget.

And so humans end up in a terrifying loop from which they cannot escape: they are aware of God and His commands; they suppress this knowledge; the suppression is ineffective because they can neither forget their suppression nor entirely escape truth; this set of circumstances is unbearable; the answer is more


[See “Socratic Method,” continued on page 27]
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Believing and Behaving

by John H. Heaton

It’s the most profitable 54 pages you could read in the next month. I’m talking about Josef Pieper’s, A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart. Pieper’s clarity and style – even the clunky passages woodenly translated from the original German – quickly induced me to welcome him as I would an old friend.

But first, some background if you haven’t read anything by Pieper. As a Catholic Social Philosopher, he was part of the neo-Thomistic revival of the twentieth century. Pieper isn’t well known among English-speaking Protestant Evangelicals, having spent the bulk of his career at the University of Münster where he taught from 1950 to 1976. Thereafter, until his death in 1997, he continued to lecture as Professor Emeritus. If you have hung out at SCL conferences, however, you’ve no doubt noticed on the table his better-known book, Leisure the Basis of Culture, an outstanding read that we’ll save for another day.

His gift to the German-speaking world was his translation of Lewis’ The Problem of Pain, suggesting his appreciation for brothers across traditions. His gift to us (one of them!) is this little reader nicely packaged in a thin 5x7 paper cover – suitable for your coat pocket. It’s so small it doesn’t even get notice on his Wikipedia entry, no doubt because it is a digest of his longer works on the virtues. As such, it’s a valuable introduction.

Pieper must be read with an awareness of some basic commitments. His sympathies are in the Scholastic tradition, notably with Aquinas, while remaining surprisingly more Platonic than Aristotelian. As Gilbert Meilaender noted in his obituary of Pieper in First Things, he had “inhabit[ed] a system of thought long enough to see the world in its terms. He had so digested Aquinas as to make him his own.” And, while Greek thought is not far beneath the surface, it is transcribed into theological constructs, viewed through the corrective lenses of biblical reflection. For example, Pieper says that “all duty is based on being. Reality is the basis of ethics. Goodness is the standard of reality” (11). In other words ethics is based on metaphysics.

The book begins boldly by asserting that “virtue is...the realization of the human capacity for being” (9). Thus, a “man is wise when all things taste to him as they really are” (21). Reality – and knowledge of it – is essential to an ordered and flourishing life.

When Pieper talks about reality, however, he doesn’t mean brute reality the way the Greeks talked about it. He insists that reality is the Triune God, and a Christian is one who, in faith, not only embraces this, but strives in hope for the fulfillment of his being in eternal life. This brings us to the heart of Pieper’s thought, the virtues: love, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. These are the means by which one apprehends the truth of God. “Becoming a moral person occurs in the individual’s appropriate response to reality” (17). This is a common theme not only here, but across Pieper’s writings, the close connection between intellectual and moral virtue. In order to grasp the reality of God, which is ultimate and final, we have to become a certain kind of person. If Augustine taught us to believe in order that we might know, Pieper reminds us that we have to behave, in order that we might know. “For us, the...connection that links the knowledge of truth to the condition of purity has vanished from our consciousness” (42). For the classical, Christian teacher, the implications for moral formation in education are profound. We teach in a culture that intentionally and powerfully attempts to separate a student’s behavior, and his loves, from his intellectual development. Pieper says that this cannot be done.

Drawn out in summary in the Reader, Pieper shows us progressively how the virtues link together as pathways to truth. I can reduce them to some axioms; you’ll have to read the book to connect the dots fully:

- On prudence: Prudence belongs to the definition of the good; it is the birth mother of all human virtue (14-15); false prudence is really covetousness, “the anxious senility of a frantic self-preservation bent on only its own assurance and security” (19);
suppression. Unregenerate humans are trapped in a suppression whirlpool unless released by conversion, in which case the truth is unearthed, accepted, and becomes the transforming agent that sets you free. Until then truth remains rejected, suppressed, and “forgotten.”

If this is in fact an accurate picture of the human condition, then we have a better way to understand the superstructure of ideas supporting the ancient pagan theory and practice of Socratic dialogue. And we are in a better position to strategically utilize this technique and defend its usage from a theological rather than merely practical basis. Christians do not believe in multiple reincarnations leading to perfection via recollected knowledge; we believe that the suppressed Truth about Christ, when brought back to life in a dead heart, will set you free. Since studying human culture in light of Scripture inevitably shows us what we are, such study can, when well-guided, lead to deep self-knowledge. And it starts with questions.

All human culture – even the Socratic/Platonic doctrine of recollection – is a kind of tension between the wistful looking back towards a desired but lost Eden and a violent attempt to suppress the truth about that loss. Wise Christian Socratic teaching actually unpacks suppressed knowledge of God and his world, and of our condition. It reveals the truth about ourselves to ourselves. The fallen heart is cor incurvatus ad se “curved in on itself”; a Christian Socratic teacher gently unbends the heart by reminding it of the truth, which Christ and Scripture may then unfold from within the recesses of even the most resistant heart. Christian Socratics brings forth an unforgetting of the forgotten and suppressed truth. And that is why it works so well. The Greek word for Truth is of course aletheia – “not forgetting.” No Lethe.

“The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” Proverbs 20:25 (ESV)

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