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The Principles of Classical Education

David Diener

ABSTRACT: The contemporary classical education movement has grown rapidly and is comprised of a wide variety of private schools, homeschoolers, public charter schools, policy makers, higher education programs, professional associations, journals, trade publications, and think tanks. What is it that unites this thick network of disparate individuals and organizations into a cohesive movement? This article attempts to answer that question by explaining ten principles that have characterized the tradition of classical education throughout history across millennia, continents, languages, and cultures. While not exhaustive, these ten principles represent central tenets of the long tradition of classical education and the contemporary classical education movement. The principles are thus a philosophically and historically grounded means by which to differentiate classical education from other educational paradigms and also provide a common understanding of classical education around which various constituencies within the contemporary movement can coalesce.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary classical education movement began in the late twentieth century with a renewal of classical education in Christian schools and among Christian homeschoolers. In the early years of the twenty-first century, a parallel renewal began within publicly funded charter schools. The movement has continued to grow through the work of K–12 educators as well as scholars, policy makers, undergraduate and graduate programs, professional associations, journals, trade publications, and think tanks. Contributors to the movement hold a wide spectrum of theological and political beliefs, live in different countries, work in different kinds of educational contexts, and advocate for or engage in education by means of diverse curricula and methods. While this multi-faceted

David Diener is Assistant Professor of Education at Hillsdale College and the Executive Director of the Alcuin Fellowship. He is the author of *Plato: The Great Philosopher-Educator* (Classical Academic Press, 2015).

network represents growth in the movement, it also has made it increasingly difficult to pinpoint exactly what classical education is. What is it, in other words, that unites these disparate individuals and organizations into a recognizable and cohesive movement?

This article attempts to answer that question by identifying and explaining ten principles that have characterized the tradition of classical education throughout history across millennia, continents, languages, and cultures. Explaining the contemporary classical education movement in terms of these principles is beneficial in two ways. First, the principles are a philosophically and historically grounded means by which to differentiate classical education from other educational paradigms. Second, the principles provide a common understanding of classical education around which various constituencies within the contemporary movement can coalesce.

1. THE CLASSICAL EDUCATION MOVEMENT SEEKS TO RECOVER AND CONTINUE A TRADITION

Throughout the living tradition of classical education, classical education has understood itself as just that—a tradition.[1] In other words, those within the tradition of classical education have recognized that they are practicing and developing an inherited approach to education, not inventing a novel type of education fundamentally distinct from or misaligned with the tradition they have received. The classical education movement of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries thus understands that it is part of a millennia-long tradition and is not innovatively creating a new paradigm of education.[2] The tradition of classical education is certainly a multivalent phenomenon that throughout history has included a variety of philosophical ideas and educational practices. Nevertheless, throughout its long historical presence it has understood itself as a heritage that has been received from previous generations and, like all living traditions, is continued by those within the tradition and then passed on to subsequent generations.

While thus seeking to continue a tradition, the contemporary classical education movement also seeks to recover that tradition. The need for a "recovery" or "renaissance" of classical education in our contemporary context arises from the fact that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the longstanding tradition of classical education was in large part rejected and its principles

[1]This educational tradition has, throughout history, been referred to variously as "classical education," "liberal arts education," "liberal education," and sometimes simply "education."

[2]While I am referring to the contemporary renewal of classical education as a "movement," it is important to recognize that this movement is a recovery, or renaissance, of a tradition, and not, as Brian Williams describes typical movements, a "short-term effort focused on cultural, political, or economic change, after which the so-called movement necessarily dissipates" (Brian A. Williams, "*Principia*, Tradition, and Classical Education," *Principia* 2, no. 1 [2023]: 4n6).

replaced. Educational leaders like Charles Eliot, John Dewey, and others viewed themselves as innovators. They consciously rejected the received educational tradition and replaced it with new educational ideas ostensibly based on, for example, the emerging discipline of psychology, the philosophical movement of pragmatism, and the ideals of progressivism.[3]

The contemporary classical education movement, on the other hand, seeks to reestablish continuity with the much longer tradition of classical education. Consider, for example, Brian A. Williams' description of the classical education movement as "an attempt to recover and continue the long liberal arts tradition that began with the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians, but which was overwhelmed by dominant twentieth-century paradigms. Like any living tradition, it continues to grow and change."[4] As Williams notes, the contemporary classical education movement is both a recovery and a continuation of an educational tradition that stretches back some 2,500 years. This does not mean that classical educators seek to re-create education as it existed in ancient Greece, medieval France, Renaissance Italy, or any other particular historical context. The contemporary movement is rather a recovery insofar as it seeks to reestablish the principles that guided the centuries-old tradition of classical education and then to work within and expand that tradition.

While the contemporary movement adheres to the principles that have undergirded the historical tradition of classical education, it furthers the conversation by using whatever educational insights it can to implement those principles. Throughout much of the tradition, for example, relatively little was known about cognitive science or learning disabilities. Contemporary classical education, on the other hand, incorporates recent discoveries and insights in these areas in order better to serve students who struggle with learning disabilities.[5] Classical education always has been a living tradition, and this is but one example of how the contemporary classical education movement both continues the tradition and also contributes new insights and practices to the living tradition which then will be passed on to the next generation.

2. EDUCATION IS PRIMARILY DEFINED BY *TELOS* NOT METHOD

Classical education recognizes that the principal question of any educational paradigm is not "How is it done?" but rather "What is it for?" Every approach to education has, whether they are explicit or implicit, goals toward which it is

[3]See, for example, John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 18: "The rise of what is called new education and progressive schools is of itself a product of discontent with traditional education. In effect it is a criticism of the latter."

[4]Brian A. Williams, "Introducing *Principia* and Classical Education," *Principia* 1, no. 1 (2022): 13.

[5]See, for example, Cheryl Swope, *Simply Classical: A Beautiful Education for Any Child*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Memoria Press, 2019); Amy Gilbert Richards, "Strange Vocations: Anthropology, Disability, and the Heart of Classical Education," *Principia* 2, no. 1 (2023).

directed. These goals define the principal essence of the educational paradigm, and it is from the goals that methods are derived. Educational methodology, in other words, is always downstream of educational teleology, because you have to know where you are going before you can determine how to get there. To be clear, it is not that classical education is governed by a purpose while other educational paradigms are not. *All* approaches to education are teleological in nature. In our contemporary context, however, it is a distinctive mark of classical education that it is aware of and focused on the primacy of teleology. This stands in sharp contrast to much contemporary educational discourse which focuses almost exclusively on methodology. In contrast to millennia of educational tradition, contemporary educators often dwell on the technical aspects of how to do education instead of on the teleological question of what education is for. As Neil Postman quips in *The End of Education*, "There was a time when educators became famous for providing reasons for learning; now they become famous for inventing a method."[6] Jacques Maritain similarly writes in *Education at the Crossroads* that the "supremacy of means over end and the consequent collapse of all sure purpose and real efficiency seem to be the main reproach to contemporary education."[7]

The primacy of teleology over methodology can be seen throughout the tradition as key thinkers begin with education's purpose and then, grounded on their understanding of education's teleology, develop methods to most effectively achieve those ends. Plato, for example, defines education in book 7 of the *Republic* as a process of conversion in which students turn their souls from the shadows of this world to the form of the good. On this view of education, the teacher's role is to facilitate the conversion of students' souls. Thus, according to Plato, the craft of education is "concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it."[8] The goal of education, in other words, is to reorient students' souls toward the proper things. Only after explaining education's teleology does Plato then consider the educational curriculum that best will accomplish education's goal. He explicitly selects subjects based on their ability to turn the soul from darkness toward goodness and truth,[9] thereby recognizing that the curricular subjects are educationally valuable insofar as they promote the realization of education's ultimate goals.

Similarly, in book 8 of the *Politics* Aristotle addresses the *telos* of education. He distinguishes between liberal and illiberal education in teleological terms,

[6]Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 26.

[7]Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 3.

[8]Plato, *Republic*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 518d3–7.

[9]See Plato, *Republic* 521c4–d1.

noting that "What one acts or learns *for* also makes a big difference."[10] While a branch of learning should be considered illiberal "if it renders the body or mind of free people useless for the practices and activities of virtue,"[11] a liberal education is "what one does for one's own sake, for the sake of friends, or on account of virtue."[12] Only after this discussion of the goals of education does Aristotle then examine what curricular subjects should be studied. As with Plato, Aristotle's selections are grounded on the curricular subjects' ability to help realize the final goals of education.

Hugh of Saint Victor grounds his understanding of education in the *Didascalicon* on the primary purpose of human beings: "This is our entire task—the restoration of our nature and the removal of our deficiency. The integrity of human nature, however, is attained in two things—in knowledge and in virtue, and in these lies our sole likeness to the supernal and divine substances."[13] Within this teleological context, Hugh then develops his proposals for a system of education. He advocates for the study of the liberal arts and explains that the ancients settled on the seven liberal arts of the trivium and quadrivium because they were believed to be "the best instruments, the best rudiments, by which the way is prepared for the mind's complete knowledge of philosophic truth."[14] In other words, the curriculum was selected on the basis of its efficacy in achieving education's goals.

These are but a few examples of many that could be given. Throughout the tradition, classical educators have understood that teleology is at the heart of their educational paradigm and that the primary distinction between classical education and other paradigms is one of purpose, not method. Certainly these thinkers advocate for specific educational methods (curricular sequences, pedagogical practices, etc.), but these methodological considerations are downstream from the fundamental question "What is education for?" Only after answering this teleological question does one have sufficient grounds for developing a set of educational practices.

3. REALITY IS GIVEN

Classical education recognizes the givenness of both physical and moral reality. While human beings have the capacity to alter many things, the tradition has maintained that certain fundamental truths about the cosmos, human nature,

[10]Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1337b17 (emphasis in the original).

[11]Aristotle, *Politics* 1337b10–12.

[12]Aristotle, *Politics* 1337b18.

[13]*The "Didascalicon" of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1.5.

[14]Hugh of Saint Victor, *Didascalicon* 3.3.

and the moral order simply are givens. In *The Abolition of Man*, for example, C. S. Lewis cites authors from both the western and eastern traditions such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, early Hindu masters, Confucius, and the authors of the Bible. Lewis notes that despite all their differences "What is common to them all is something we cannot neglect. It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are."[15] It follows that our approvals or disapprovals of things are not merely reflections of our own preferences but recognitions of those things' objective value. Contrary to the epistemological and moral relativism of much contemporary education, some things are true, false, right, wrong, worthy of love, and worthy of hate, irrespective of whether any particular individual or community wants it to be that way or not.

This principle of givenness pervades the tradition of classical education, sometimes explicitly articulated and elsewhere tacitly assumed. Consider, for example, the advice Marcus Aurelius offers in the *Meditations*: "Always keep the following points in mind: what the nature of the whole is, and what my own nature is; and how my nature is related to that of the whole, and what kind of a part it is of what kind of a whole."[16] This advice assumes that "the whole" has a nature, that human beings have a nature, and that there is an unalterable relationship between them. Writing specifically of classical Christian education, Ken Myers explains the centrality and importance of this givenness:

> The structure of teaching in classical Christian schools is rooted in the assumption that the universe has meaning and purpose, that human nature has meaning and purpose, and that reason itself is a capacity that is fulfilled as human beings come to know and honor the objective value present in Creation. The most urgent educative priority of parents is to enable their children to acquire a confidence in the givenness of things, a confidence which I believe classical Christian schools are uniquely equipped to convey.[17]

Classical education is based, in other words, on an axiomatic belief in the given natures of the cosmos, human beings, and the moral order. This belief, along with the next principle regarding human purpose, determine the goals of classical education.

4. HUMAN PURPOSE IS A RESPONSE TO THE GIVENNESS OF REALITY

The givenness of reality leads to the next principle of classical education, namely that our purpose as human beings involves conforming ourselves to that reality intellectually and morally. As Lewis explains, "For the wise men of old the

[15]C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 18.

[16]Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.9.

[17]Ken Myers, "Education and the Recovery of the Non-modern Mind," *The Journal of the Society for Classical Learning* 7 (Spring 2014): 6.

cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue."[18] Classical education recognizes that we should learn about the world in order to determine how we ought to live within it, not in order to manipulate it to serve our own beliefs and desires. Contemporary education, by contrast, often rejects the givenness of reality and views humans as radically autonomous beings who are thrust into existence such that becoming fully human involves not conforming ourselves to reality but rather choosing for ourselves what we want reality (including ourselves) to be.

Classical education, then, involves learning both what is true about reality and also how we ought to respond to that givenness. There are both metaphysical and normative issues that must be addressed, and thus education is both descriptive and prescriptive. That is to say, education should both describe for students what is true and also prescribe for students how they ought to respond to that truth. According to David Hicks, a key problem with the "modern school" is that it "effectively excludes the normative aspects of all knowledge (the inquiry concerning what *ought* to be done) in favor of the operational (the inquiry concerning what *can* be done). It shuns the prescriptive in favor of the descriptive."[19] Classical education, on the other hand, recognizes that because human purpose involves conforming ourselves to the givenness of reality education must be to some degree prescriptive in nature. As Myers explains, "The classical model of education—as opposed to modern models . . . assumes a prescriptive understanding of human nature and the cosmos. It assumes that human beings, individually and socially, have an objective purpose that calls us to certain ways of life."[20] This way of life involves aligning ourselves, both intellectually and morally, with the givenness of reality.

5. THE PRIMARY GOAL OF EDUCATION IS TO CULTIVATE PEOPLE WHO ARE VIRTUOUS

Based on these principles regarding the givenness of reality and human purpose as an appropriate response to that reality, the primary goal of classical education is the cultivation of human beings who fulfill their purpose and thus live well. In other words, the primary purpose of education is to cultivate people who are morally and intellectually virtuous. Plato explains in the *Laws*, for example, that what he means by "education" is not training for a particular trade or occupation but rather "education from childhood in *virtue*."[21] In the *Republic* he similarly

[18]Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 77.

[19]David Hicks, *Norms & Nobility: A Treatise on Education* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 7 (emphasis in the original).

[20]Myers, "Education and the Recovery of the Non-modern Mind," 5–6.

[21]Plato, "*Laws*," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 643e4 (emphasis in the original).

claims that, "The final outcome of education, I suppose we'd say, is a single newly finished person, who is either good or the opposite."[22]

The tradition of classical education consistently uses the term "virtue" to describe the kind of person that education seeks to cultivate, and its meaning is more expansive than what the contemporary English word "virtue" typically signifies. For example, the Greek word *arête*, typically translated as "virtue" or "excellence," refers to the capability of a thing to fulfill its purpose or function. Thus, as Aristotle explains in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> Every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good state and to perform their functions well. The virtue of the eyes, for instance, makes the eyes and their functioning excellent, because it makes us see well; similarly, the virtue of a horse makes the horse excellent, and thereby good at galloping, at carrying its rider, and at standing steady in the face of the enemy. If this is true in every case, the virtue of a human being will likewise be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well.[23]

To be virtuous, in other words, is to fulfill one's purpose or function, and for Aristotle human virtue includes the excellent functioning of both our moral and intellectual capacities.

The Latin word *virtus* comes from the Latin *vir*, which means "man." Thus etymologically, to be virtuous is to be an ideal man—to be a human being who lives excellently and thus fulfills human beings' purpose. As Josef Pieper explains in *Faith, Hope, Love*, "Virtue is the *ultimum potentiae*, the most a man can be. It is the realization of man's potentiality for being. . . . Virtue means the steadfastness of man's orientation toward the realization of his nature."[24] To say that the primary purpose of education is to cultivate people who are virtuous, then, is to say that education seeks to help students live fully human lives. While this certainly involves cultivating moral virtue in students, it is not restricted to moral virtue. Rather it involves forming people of *arête*, of *virtus*, who are enabled to live according to their nature and fulfill their purpose through their various capacities. In other words, the final end of education is "the fulfillment of man as a human person."[25]

The tradition of classical education therefore maintains that education's primary purpose is to nurture the holistic flourishing of human persons, not simply to train and equip students for a particular job or social function. This stands in contrast to contemporary education, which often views its principal goal to be students' career readiness. W. E. B. Du Bois, however, is explicit that

[22]Plato, *Republic* 425c3–4.

[23]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 1106a17–24.

[24]Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 99.

[25]Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 18.

education is not primarily concerned with job training: "If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. . . . I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men."[26] Arthur Holmes agrees, arguing that, "The question to ask about an education is not 'What can I do with it?' but rather 'What is it doing to me—as a person?' Education has to do with the making of persons."[27]

Understanding virtue in these terms makes philosophical anthropology a fundamental concern of classical education. In order to cultivate people of moral and intellectual virtue, people who fulfill their purpose and thus flourish, one has to understand human nature and purpose. As Bertrand Russell writes in *On Education*, "We must have some concept of the kind of person we wish to produce, before we can have any definite opinion as to the education which we consider best."[28] This is why the question of what it means to be human recurs throughout the tradition of classical education. The injunction inscribed at the temple of Apollo in Delphi to "Know thyself" is a fundamental precursor to cultivating virtue because you cannot become virtuous until you know what kind of a thing you are and how far short of the ideal you fall.

It is important to recognize that classical education's goal of cultivating virtuous people is not merely individualistic. Part of being virtuous, of living well in accordance with human purpose, is living in community. Thus classical education is concerned not merely with the virtue of students as isolated individuals but as people who will live within the context of their families, religious communities, and civic structures. Any individual's ability to live well depends in part on the well-being of these broader entities. The cultivation of healthy families, religious communities, and civic structures is therefore of paramount importance for classical education given the pivotal role that they play in providing a context in which human flourishing can obtain.

6. EDUCATION IS INTRINSICALLY RELIGIOUS

Classical education acknowledges the intrinsically religious nature of education given that humans are by nature religious beings. The primary goal of classical education is to cultivate virtuous people, and human virtue is defined by the

[26]W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Souls of Black Folk with "The Talented Tenth" and "The Souls of White Folk"* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 203, 217.

[27]Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 25.

[28]Bertrand Russell, *On Education: Especially in Early Childhood* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926), 38. Cf. Sir Richard Livingstone, *Plato and Modern Education*, The Rede Lecture 1944 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), 30: "The first step to good education is a clear view of what human beings should be."

purpose of human beings in accordance with our nature. Given the anthropological reality that "man is by his constitution a religious animal,"[29] any attempt to cultivate students whose lives will be characterized by human flourishing therefore is an enterprise that is religious in nature. Within the contemporary landscape of classical education some institutions articulate their identity in unabashedly sectarian religious terms, while others are explicit that they do not have any religious identity (public charter classical schools, for example). Both of these are viable options within the tradition of classical education, and both can function consistently with the principle that education is intrinsically religious. It is not the case, historically or philosophically, that in order to implement the principles of classical education one must adhere to any particular sectarian religion. It also is true, however, that by nature human beings have desires, questions, and goals that transcend mere materialistic animality. Thus any education directed toward the cultivation of human beings who will live virtuously in accordance with their nature *de facto* cannot ignore the transcendent aspects of human existence. This truth has been recognized by classical education across the centuries in various religious contexts, and it stands in contrast to contemporary attempts to artificially secularize education by ignoring human beings' religious nature.

Throughout much of the tradition, classical education has articulated the religious nature of education in explicitly Christian terms. Basil the Great, for example, argues that the goal of education is ultimately eschatological and that education should concern itself primarily with preparing students for heaven: "We, my children, in no wise conceive this human life of ours to be an object of value in any respect. . . . But our hopes lead us forward to a more distant time, and everything we do is by way of preparation for the other life."[30] Scripture is the ultimate standard of truth for Basil, and he advocates for reading pagan literature on the basis of parallels between its treatment of virtue and revealed truths found in the Sermon on the Mount. Bonaventure goes further, rejecting any dichotomy between secular and sacred learning and maintaining that all branches of knowledge are permeated by and serve the wisdom of God: "The *manifold wisdom of God*, which is clearly revealed in sacred Scripture, lies hidden in all knowledge and in all nature. . . . All divisions of knowledge are servants of theology."[31] In a 1643 pamphlet, the founders of Harvard College express the goals of their college thus: "Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed, to consider well [that] the main end of his life and studies is *to know*

[29]Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 90–91.

[30]Basil the Great, "To Young Men, on How They Might Derive Profit from Pagan Literature," in *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Educated Human Being*, ed. Richard M. Gamble (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2008), 183.

[31]Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, trans. Zachary Hayes, Works of St. Bonaventure 1 (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 1996), 61 (emphasis in the original).

God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, Jn. 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning."[32]

While throughout the classical education tradition articulations of education's religious nature often are given in explicitly Christian terms, this is not always or necessarily the case. Plato, for example, begins his treatment of education in book 2 of the *Republic* by addressing which kinds of stories about the gods should be taught to children. Much of the rest of book 2 focuses on developing a theology of the nature of the gods, and Plato explains that his educational goal is to help students become "as god-fearing and godlike as human beings can be."[33] The religious nature of education is likewise recognized by The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 in which the United States Congress gives official support for the development of schools: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."[34] This statement explicitly acknowledges that religion is necessary for human flourishing and that education should be supported because it cultivates (among other things) religion. In response to the question "What is man?" Maritain writes that, "We may give the Greek, Jewish, and Christian idea of man."[35] Maritain thus is clear that the understanding of human nature on which education is based need not be restricted to a single sectarian interpretation. He is emphatic, however, that education must be based on an understanding of human beings' religious nature: "The complete and integral idea of man which is the prerequisite of education can only be a philosophical and religious idea of man."[36]

Thus throughout the tradition of classical education it has been recognized that human nature, and hence an education directed toward the formation of human beings in accordance with their nature, is intrinsically religious. This principle has been embraced within a variety of religious contexts, and various sectarian and non-sectarian terms have been used to articulate its implications for the practice of education. The contemporary classical education movement thus includes both openly sectarian institutions and institutions that avoid articulating their understanding of education in explicitly religious terms. In order to have a coherent philosophy of education aligned with the classical education tradition,

[32]Founders of Harvard College, 1643 pamphlet (emphasis in the original; spelling and punctuation modernized for clarity), quoted in Benjamin Peirce, *A History of Harvard University, from Its Foundation, in the Year 1636, to the Period of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Brown, Shattuck, and Co., 1833), appendix pg. 5.

[33]Plato, *Republic* 383c2–3.

[34]Second Continental Congress, *An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States North-west of the River Ohio*, article 3, quoted in Robert Taylor, *The Northwest Ordinance 1787: A Bicentennial Handbook* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society), 61.

[35]Maritain, *Education at the* Crossroads, 7.

[36]Maritain, *Education at the* Crossroads, 6.

however, both types of institutions should recognize the ineluctably transcendent nature of their students and cultivate an understanding of and respect for the religious aspects of human existence and purpose. While throughout history interpretations of the implications have varied, the tradition consistently has affirmed the intrinsically religious nature of education.

7. TEACHERS AND STUDENTS SHOULD RESPECT THE WISDOM OF THE PAST

Classical education places a high value on pursuing its educational goals by studying the wisdom of the past and thereby becoming part of the ongoing tradition and conversation. This does not mean that classical education unquestioningly venerates the past simply because it is old or uncritically accepts every antiquarian idea. What it does mean, however, is that classical education respects the thinkers, works, and ideas from the past and approaches them with humility. As A. G. Sertillanges writes, "Discoveries in thought are rare. The old stock or rather the permanent stock of ideas is the best; one must take one's stand on it in order truly to commune with the intelligence of man."[37] Contemporary education, by contrast, tends to reject the wisdom of the past and to assume that the past does not have meaningful contributions to make to the issues we face today. It intentionally fosters a hostile attitude toward the past instead of a humble one. Starting with students' present experience, it looks toward the future and assumes that students can prepare for that future without seriously studying thinkers of the past.

Classical education's respect for the wisdom of the past means that the process of learning begins with receptivity, not originality. As H. I. Marrou explains, "Classical culture did not know any romantic need to make all things new, to forget the past and be original."[38] By studying the works and lives of past thinkers, students become part of the great conversation as they learn from and respond to them. Anthony Kronman thus describes how until the latter part of the nineteenth century students "did not seek to be original. The whole point of their education was to become *un*original by learning the pattern of living that men whose hearts and minds are properly ordered have always followed."[39] This stands in contrast to much contemporary education, which prioritizes students' self-expression of "original" ideas and actions over learning to mold their ideas and character by studying the ideas and characters of those who came before them.

[37]A. G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirits, Conditions, Methods*, trans. Mary Ryan (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 150.

[38]H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb, Wisconsin Studies in Classics (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 170.

[39]Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 115–16 (emphasis in the original).

Classical education's emphasis on the wisdom of the past does not mean that it discounts the value of students' manifold creativity. Indeed, becoming part of the conversation involves adding one's own contributions to it, and living well involves expressing one's humanity through creative and fruitful endeavors. By beginning with a posture of humility toward inherited wisdom, however, students are equipped with a cornucopia of resources that enable them to engage in these creative acts more profoundly and effectively than if they had begun with only their own perspectives and ideas.

Classical education therefore emphasizes studying the thinkers, works, and ideas of the past by interacting with primary sources as much as possible. Studying these inherited great works is an essential step in the educational process because imitation precedes invention. Out of piety and respect students should study the tradition, humbly learn from it, and then continue the conversation in their own place and time by adding their own contributions. As Mark Schwehn explains, the humility with which we approach texts in the tradition "does not mean uncritical acceptance: it means, in practical terms, the *presumption* of wisdom and authority *in the author*."[40] In other words, while we should not uncritically assume that past thinkers are always right (they aren't!), we should have deep respect for thinkers who have profoundly wrestled with various aspects of the human condition and articulated their ideas in rich and beautiful ways. Despite their flaws, we should approach these thinkers as important sources of wisdom as we try to figure out what it means for us to live well.

8. THE COURSE OF STUDY SHOULD BE ORDERED AND PRESCRIBED

Classical education recognizes that the goals of education will be realized best by moving students through an ordered and prescribed course of study. Because the givenness of reality and human purpose are universal, the task of becoming virtuous is common to all. The question, then, is what course of study best will cultivate students who are equipped for that task. It certainly is not the case that within the tradition of classical education every student has been educated using the same curriculum or the same scope and sequence. It is the case, however, that throughout the tradition students have been educated through courses of study that are both intentionally ordered and prescribed. This stands in contrast to much contemporary education, which gives students broad latitude to choose their own courses of study based on individual interests, whims, or plans for the future.

The importance of an ordered and prescribed course of study is based on the *telos* of education. If, for example, the purpose of education were to prepare individual students for particular jobs, then it would make sense for the education of each student to be customized based on that student's career goals. Since,

[40]Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48 (emphasis in the original).

on the other hand, the purpose of education is to cultivate students' humanity, a humanity they all share, the course of study for all students should be that which most effectively moves students toward that common goal. Throughout the history of classical education there has not been a single consensus regarding what that course of study should be (though there have been common elements such as the liberal arts). While various proposals have been made and defended, across the centuries thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, Cassiodorus, Isidore, Hugh of Saint Victor, John of Salisbury, Vergerio, and Melanchthon made prescriptive proposals that intentionally ordered studies based on the educational goals common to all students.

Despite the overwhelming shift since the end of the nineteenth century toward curricular variety and specialization, a number of thinkers have continued to emphasize the importance of an ordered and prescribed course of study. Robert Maynard Hutchins criticizes, for example, a non-prescriptive curriculum as undermining the value of education and the role of teaching:

> Educators cannot permit the students to dictate the course of study unless they are prepared to confess that they are nothing but chaperons, supervising an aimless, trial-and-error process which is chiefly valuable because it keeps young people from doing something worse. The free elective system as Mr. Eliot introduced it at Harvard and as Progressive Education adapted it to lower age levels amounted to a denial that there was content to education.[41]

Mortimer Adler similarly maintains that even at the college level liberal education should "include no vocational instruction; nor should it permit any subject-matter specialization."[42] The problem with specialization is that it is determined by goals other than the common human task of living well. As Maritain explains, "Youth has a right to education in the liberal arts, in order to be prepared for human work and for human leisure. But such education is killed by premature specialization."[43] The goal of classical education is the cultivation of human beings who are virtuous, and human virtue is common to all. The best means for accomplishing that shared end, then, is a course of study that is ordered and prescribed.

9. TEACHERS, AS MASTER LEARNERS, ARE GUIDES IN THE PROCESS OF LEARNING

Classical education understands teachers to be master learners who guide students in the process of learning. This can be seen etymologically in the Latin words for

[41]Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 70–71.

[42]Mortimer Adler, "Liberal Education—Theory and Practice," in *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, ed. Geraldine Van Doren (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 112.

[43]Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 64.

"teacher," "student," and "educate." In Latin, a teacher is a *magister*—a master. A student, on the other hand, is a *discipulus*—a disciple. The process in which the teacher and student engage together, namely education, comes from the Latin verb *educere*, which means "to lead out." Thus etymologically, a teacher educating a student is literally a master leading out a disciple on the journey of learning. As John Milton Gregory explains, the teacher's mission to students is to be "a wiser and stronger soul than they," who "guide[s] them to the paths to be trodden."[44]

For this view of the educational process to make sense, the teacher and student must be facing the same direction and moving toward the same goal. The teacher is a guide who has been down the trail before, so to speak, and uses insights gained by past journeys to lead students down the path and demonstrate for them how to navigate the trail of learning. As Banner and Cannon explain in *The Elements of Teaching*, "Good teachers are those who have made good progress in that journey [of learning], are willing to retrace their steps along it, and thus can help those behind them find their own way on the same path."[45] In an important conceptual sense, then, teachers are not facing the students in order to direct the teaching process *at* them. Rather teachers are facing the same direction as the students, a few paces ahead in their own journey of learning, as they guide students forward toward a common goal. This view of the teacher as guide stands in contrast to much contemporary education, which views the teacher as primarily an imputer of knowledge or a technician who prepares students for the next station on the educational assembly line. In either case, the teacher and student are engaged in fundamentally different activities in the process of education. Classical education, on the other hand, recognizes that the teacher and student are mutually engaged in a common activity—namely learning.

In order to fulfill their role as guides in the process of learning, teachers must be master learners themselves. Teachers are thus principally not professional technicians but learners, and a lifestyle of learning is an essential characteristic of all who wish to succeed as teachers. In his essay "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," Martin Heidegger explains that, "Only he who can truly learn—and only as long as he can do it—can truly teach. The genuine teacher differs from the pupil only in that he can learn better and that he more genuinely wants to learn. In all teaching, the teacher learns the most."[46] Gilbert Highet similarly writes in *The Art of Teaching* that, "Teaching is inseparable from learning. Every good teacher will learn more about his subject every year—every month,

[44]John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (Lancaster: Veritas Press, 2004), 113.

[45]James M. Banner, Jr., and Harold C. Cannon, *The Elements of Teaching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 25.

[46]Martin Heidegger, "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," in *Basic Writings from "Being and Time" (1927) to "The Task of Thinking" (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 251–52.

every week if possible."[47] The key difference between teacher and learner is thus not a knowledge differential nor their differing orientations in the process of education. Both teacher and student are learners; the difference between them is simply that the teacher is a master learner who has matured further in the journey of learning.

As master learners whom students follow, teachers thus serve as exemplars of what students ought to become. In a fundamental sense the teacher *is* the text, and an essential characteristic of teachers is that they model the lifestyle of moral and intellectual virtue that they seek to cultivate in their students. As Holmes explains, "By virtue of what a teacher is, his students can stand on his shoulders and peer further in their day than he did in his."[48] This is why throughout the tradition not only the knowledge but also the character of teachers is emphasized. Quintilian, for example, writes that even from children's infancy their teachers should be selected on the basis of their character: "No doubt the more important point is their character; but they should also speak correctly."[49] Christine de Pizan similarly argues that, "One ought to provide a tutor who is wise and prudent more in morals than in lofty learning. . . . I believe that it would be better to have a very discrete and wise tutor, who had good morals and loved God, rather than the most excellent and subtle philosophers."[50] Thus in the tradition of classical education what it means to be a good teacher has more to do with *being* a certain kind of person and learner than with *producing* a certain set of measurable results. Teachers are virtuous learners who embody and model for students the same kind of people they are cultivating students to become. They are, in other words, master learners who guide students in the process of learning and living well.

10. EDUCATION IS USEFUL BECAUSE IT IS GOOD, NOT GOOD BECAUSE IT IS USEFUL

Throughout the history of education, a key question has been to what extent education's usefulness should be the criterion of its value. From the pragmatism of the fifth-century BC sophists on down through the centuries, many have valued education on the basis of its usefulness. Classical education, however, maintains that education should not be valued on the basis of its practical benefits. While a proper education does in fact turn out to be eminently useful, this practical benefit is derivative of its intrinsic goodness, not constitutive of it. In other words,

[47]Gilbert Highet, *The Art of Teaching* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 12.

[48]Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 50.

[49]Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, vol. 1, *Books 1–2*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library 124 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1.1.

[50]Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, ed. and trans. Kate Langdon Forhan, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.3.

education should not be valued because of its usefulness but because it is good, and it is because education is good that it also is useful.

The tradition of classical education consistently has rejected the idea that education should be primarily concerned with what is practically useful. Plato, for example, argues that "The form of the good is the most important thing to learn about" and that it is only "by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial."[51] The true purpose of education in arithmetic, he therefore argues, is not, "like tradesmen and retailers, for the sake of buying and selling, but . . . for ease in turning the soul around, away from becoming and towards truth and being."[52] Aristotle agrees and is highly critical 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."[53]

Perhaps the most thorough treatment of education's usefulness and goodness comes from John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*. Newman unambiguously rejects the notion that education should be valued on the basis of its usefulness by arguing that knowledge is valuable in its own right prior to its practical benefits. The pursuit of knowledge is fundamental to human nature, writes Newman, such that "any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward."[54] Thus irrespective of any practical benefits we may obtain from it, he maintains that when we acquire knowledge, "we are satisfying a direct need of our nature."[55] It follows, according to Newman, that knowledge is an end in and of itself whether or not it produces anything outside of itself: "The principle of real dignity in knowledge, its worth, its desirableness, considered irrespectively of its results, is this germ within it of a scientific or a philosophical process. This is how it comes to be an end in itself; this is why it admits of being called liberal."[56] Education, then, is inherently valuable irrespective of whatever practical usefulness it might have.

While rejecting the idea that education is to be valued because of its usefulness, classical education certainly does not deny that education is in fact useful. In his treatment of the art of rhetoric, for example, Quintilian argues that if

[51]Plato, *Republic* 505a1–3.

[52]Plato, *Republic* 525c2–4. He also says that the study of arithmetic is necessary in order "to be properly human" (522e4).

[53]Aristotle, *Politics* 1333b9–11.

[54]John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 77.

[55]Newman, *Idea of a University*, 78. Newman here is echoing the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which claims that "All men by nature desire to know."

[56]Newman, *Idea of a University*, 85. He goes on to note: "There is a knowledge, which is desirable, though nothing come of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labor. . . . There is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does" (86).

rhetoric is the science of speaking well such that "the orator is in the first place a good man, it must certainly be admitted that it [rhetoric] is useful."[57] Cassiodorus similarly points out, with regard to the art of astronomy, that it provides useful information "about the right time for sailing, for ploughing, the dog-star of summer, and the dangerous rains of autumn."[58] John of Salisbury writes of eloquence that, "I am at a loss to see how anything could be more generally useful,"[59] and he later concludes that he has sufficiently proved "that grammar is not useless."[60] While there are thus plentiful ways in which education is useful, it does not follow that it is on the basis of this usefulness that education should be valued as good. Newman is explicit that education's usefulness is a byproduct of its intrinsic goodness, not the result on which its goodness is predicated. As he explains, "Though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful. Good is not only good, but reproductive of good; this is one of its attributes. . . . I say, then, if a liberal education be good, it must necessarily be useful too."[61] That is to say, education is useful because it is good, not good because it is useful.

CONCLUSION

These ten principles of classical education do not exhaustively explain the long tradition of classical education, nor do they capture every aspect of the contemporary classical education movement. These ten principles do accurately represent, however, central aspects of the millennia-long tradition of classical education. In so doing they help to explain what classical education is and how, both throughout history and today, it differs from other educational paradigms. The principles also provide a unifying standard for the thick network of teachers, professors, schools, colleges, and other individuals and organizations who together comprise the contemporary classical education movement. Whatever its faults, my hope is that this articulation of these ten principles will promote healthy discussions and debates as movement leaders and educators continue working to recover, implement, and further develop the tradition of classical education.

[57]Quintilian, *The Orator's Education,* 2.16.

[58]Cassiodorus, "*Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning*," in *"Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning" and "On the Soul,"* trans. James W. Halporn, Translated Texts for Historians 42 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 2.7.4.

[59]John of Salisbury, *The "Metalogicon": A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2009), 1.7.

[60]John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* 2.prologue.

[61]Newman, *Idea of a University*, 124.