



Why Read the Classics?

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Four Reasons Why We Should Read and Discuss the Classics:

1. Reading and discussing the classics make us better human beings.

Classical educators have always touted liberal learning as inherently humanizing. The ultimate purpose of education is to make us better people, to cultivate wisdom and virtue, not simply provide career preparation. The ancients referred to classical education as *liberal* and *humane*, emphasizing virtuous participation in a free society. By living a wise and virtuous life, one is able to fulfill the purpose of his humanity (thus the term, *humane*). As H.I. Marrou said, “Classical education aimed at developing men as men, not as cogs in a political machine or bees in a hive.” Similarly, John Stuart Mill said, “Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians.” The goal of education is not utilitarian; it is humane.

The content, the means by which this humanizing occurs, is the liberal arts, rooted in the classics. The classic texts “not only exhibit distinguished style, fine artistry, and keen intellect but create whole universes of imagination and thought.” They portray life as complex and multi-faceted, illustrating human glory and tragedy, beautifully depicting the drama of man’s most significant struggles. The classics uproot our assumptions and display epic human struggles. They compel us to examine our own lives and contemplate what is good, true, and beautiful. The impact on the reader is transformative.

In Werner Jaeger’s summary of Socrates’ teaching, he states, “Education is not the cultivation of certain branches of knowledge... The real essence of education is that it enables men to reach the true aim of their lives.” The classics provide an education that indeed requires us to struggle with the true aim of our lives. By doing so, they make us better men.

2. Reading the classics keeps us from acting as Cyclops.

Immanuel Kant, the dense and controversial 18th century German philosopher, railed his students for being Cyclops. “What constitutes them as Cyclops is not their strength,” as Fredeirich Paulsen points out, “but the fact that they only have one eye; they see things only from a single standpoint, that of their own specialty.” The task of philosophy and learning, according to Kant, is to furnish us a second eye. According to Kant, “The second eye is the self-knowledge of human reason, without which we can have no proper estimate of the extent of our knowledge.” While we may argue with Kant concerning the identity of the second eye, or what it should be, his point that education broadens one’s perspective is indisputable.

The classics “lift the readers out of narrowness and provincialism into a wider vision of humanity.” They help us see our lives, our vocations, and our culture through a broad lens. Polymaths such as Plato, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Milton, and Jefferson were able to draw from a sea of ideas found in the ancients. They studied math, science, history, economics, theology, philosophy, literature, and virtually everything else. From their broadly informed perspectives, the great thinkers of the West were able to make incredible contributions to society and move from one subject to another with ease and enjoyment. Their immersion in and facility with the classics provided a liberating, expansive, two-eyed vision that enriched their understanding and mitigated the narrow short-sightedness of specialization.

3. Reading the classics compels us to ask the most important questions of life.

Hegel referred to a classic as “a question, an address to the responsive breast, a call to the mind and the spirit.” Think of the enduring questions that have emerged from the great texts of Western civilization: Is man free? Does God exist? What is the nature of the universe? How do we know truth? Does man have a soul? What type of government is best?

The classics provide enduring questions of a transcendent quality. That is, they ask questions that continue to be asked again and again, despite ages and sages. The classics present questions that are profound, or even very simple, that exceed human comprehension, yet if not asked, detract from our humanity. Enduring questions are ones that challenge the greatest minds and intrigue the simplest ones (i.e., children). They make life engaging and interesting. Enduring questions lead to more questions and to thoughtful, soul-searching reflection about great ideas. The classics ask these questions like no other texts we encounter.

The classics compel us to ask who we are, why we are here, what is true, and what is good. We are obliged to struggle with Hamlet’s gut-wrenching turmoil over whether to seek retribution and justice. We are faced with Achilles’ dilemma, when he proclaims:

I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death.

Either, if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,

My return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting;

But if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,

The excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long life left for me

And my end in death will not come to me quickly. (Iliad)

These kinds of texts prompt weighty questions. *How do we respond to feelings of retribution? What do we value as our legacy? For what are we willing to die?* Thus, the classics ask us the most penetrating and humanizing questions in ways that capture our imaginations and emotions. Andrew Kern, President of the CiRCE Institute, once asserted, “The quality of your life depends upon the quality of the questions you ask.” If he is right, we ought to read the classics.

4. Why Christians should read and discuss the classics.

Robert Lundin claimed, “The Christian student of culture would never wish to confuse the power of the classic with the authority of the Scriptures. The Bible is the Word of God while the greatest classics are only supreme embodiments of human insight.” Nevertheless, we would be wrong to dismiss them simply because they are not authoritative in the same way as Scripture. The most influential Christian thinkers in church history read and engaged the classics. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Aquinas, and many others understood classical languages and literature, having been educated in the liberal arts tradition.

They recognized the value of conversing with the great ideas of the West even while “taking every thought captive for Christ.” They grasped the controversies with which the church struggled and were able to both think carefully and speak persuasively about truth in their own age. These men of God possessed the ability to think biblically, and in Pauline fashion, could plunder the pagans. They could employ apologetic skill by thinking thoroughly and carefully about the opposing philosophies of their time. These scholars could empathize with their detractors and yet speak boldly from an informed understanding. While there have certainly been those, like Tertullian, who would condemn any association between Athens

and Jerusalem, there are many more, such as Basil, who saw the value of young Christians stimulated to exercise their discernment through a wise engagement with pagan literature.

Ultimately, if classical education (reading the classics) is about who we are as human beings and not what we *do* for a living (our vocation); if it is about who we become and not what skill we can perform, we must have an ideal for what, or rather whom, we should be like. Jesus is the full expression of what it means to be human and thus is the ultimate aim of education. He is Truth and Wisdom incarnate. In Christ, the apostle Paul declares, are “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:8). He embodies truth and virtue. Therefore, we must seek to conform our lives to knowing Him and being like Him. In our pursuit toward becoming better human beings, we must keep the Incarnate Christ, the perfect human being, as our standard. Understanding this truth provides a rich and unique approach to the humanities by examining the enduring questions of man in light of God’s revelation through His Son.

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