

What is CLASSICAL EDUCATION?



by Andrew Kern

MOST OF US, MOST OF THE TIME, do not know what we are doing. It's not that we can't tell where we were on a certain date, or what we had for dinner last night, or who we had a meeting with this morning. It's not even that we are incapable of performing our tasks. What I mean is that, too often, we cannot articulate the meaning and purpose for those tasks.

We classical educators suffer from this problem like everyone else. As a consultant to classical schools from around the country, I have spoken to hundreds of teachers, administrators, board members, parents, and even students over the last seven years about classical education. But when I ask them to define what they are doing—in other words, what classical education is—many respond in vague generalities, undefined formulas, or, occasionally, confusion. Happily, I also find that classical educators are VERY anxious to understand what they are doing and why.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

As classical educators, it is essential that we be able to say—to others and ourselves—what classical education is. But the various definitions I hear of classical education remind me of the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant. You've probably heard some version of it.

Six blind men wished to find out what an elephant was. When they encountered one, each of them touched a different part of the animal, and each described his conclusion. The first man touched the elephant's side, and concluded it was like a wall.

The second man touched the tusk, and decided it was like a spear. The third felt its trunk, and thought it was like a snake. To the one who felt the elephant's leg, it was like a tree, and to the one who touched its ear it was like a fan. To the last man, who grabbed the elephant's tail, the animal seemed like a rope.

Each man drew different conclusions about the elephant, and each disputed the opinions of the others, who, he was quite confident, were mistaken. "Though each was partly in the right," said the poet John Godfrey Saxe, "and all were in the wrong." Each could say what one part of the elephant was like, but each missed the nature of the whole elephant.

The Cultivation of Wisdom and Virtue

In a way, classical educators are in the same predicament as the six blind men. To quote Saxe again, we "rail on in utter ignorance/Of what each other mean/And prate about an elephant/Not one of them has seen." Some define classical education as the Trivium: Latin, logic and rhetoric; others define it as a great books education; still others associate it with the conventional (please don't describe them as

Reflections on the whole elephant

traditional) classroom practices they remember from when they were in school. We have all been led to the classical education beast, and we have all come away with different impressions about its essence.

How, then, do we describe the whole "elephant"? When I talk with teachers and educators who are doing classical education, I point out to them that classical education is something much more than the Trivium, or the great books, or "the way education used to be done." Classical education, I tell them, is the cultivation of wisdom and virtue by nourishing the soul on the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

Western Civilization

There is another way we could express the meaning of classical education. We could say also that it is the passing on of Western civilization: that civilization that was conceived on the fields of Ilium, gestated in the womb of the Greek dark age, and born, with Homer as its midwife, in the text of the *Iliad*. It is the culture that reached adolescence in the argumentative sophists, approached maturity in Plato, embraced manhood in Aristotle, grew senile in Hellenism, and died in the academics. It was the civilization

that was resurrected and raised to glory in the Christ of John's gospel.

This last point is crucial. Western civilization is the civilization of the idea. It is rooted in the belief that there is a central organizing and originating

(the word in John's gospel that we translate "Word"). Some, such as Plato and Aristotle, more often used the Greek word "nous," but they were referring to essentially the same thing. The belief in the Logos and that

The beginning words of John's gospel are an implicit affirmation that Christ is the central organizing principle sought by the ancients. Wisdom and virtue, two expressions of this principle, have been presented to us in Christ, and only by cultivating an understanding of them can we say that we are engaging in education—classical, Christian, or otherwise.

The Logos—the wisdom and virtue incarnated in Christ—came, in part, so that the blind might see. And only by being cured of our blindness will we see the whole elephant.

Andrew Kern is an educational consultant working with private schools across the country and is the director of the Circe Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is the author, along with Gene Edward Veith, of Classical Education. He can be reached at the web at www.circeinstitute.org.

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!



principle of all that is—a "rational governing principle of the universe" as the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* expresses it. Greek philosophy was the quest for that idea. They often labeled this idea with the Greek word "logos"

Christ is its incarnation is what makes Christianity, and thus Christian education, what it is. And it is this understanding, and this understanding alone, that enables classical education to find its fulfillment in Christian education.

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