

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 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, "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. 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: grammar, logic, and rhetoric; others define it as a great books education; still others associate it with the conventional classroom practices they remember from when they were in school, which were anything but traditional. 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: the 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 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 (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 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.

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.