



A Brief History of Classical Education

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Lesson 1: Classical and Medieval Ideas of Leisure and Learning

Outline:

What is scholé ?

- “Leisure” – the typical definition
- “To be at ease”
- But what does it mean to truly be at ease? – It does not mean a distraction (i.e. TV or Social Media) because this is not ultimately fulfilling. You eventually realize and are made uneasy by the fact that you are wasting your time.

What is the beautiful?

- One of the three “transcendental” (truth, beauty, and goodness)
- Transcendental: Independent value or validity beyond fleeting impressions or passing desires
- Distinction between a passing desire and something beautiful:



“Sappho and Alcaeus” by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

- The beautiful fulfills a deep longing/desire.
- The Ancients and Medievals said that you can tell the distinction by “study.”
- The sort of “study” is from the Latin Studere and the Greek Spoudazein (σπουδάζειν) which mean “to be zealous or earnest about something.”

- It is this Studere/Spoudazein

zealousness that allows us to distinguish between passing desire and true beauty.

What do we do when we are at ease?

- We expect there to be some pleasure in leisure activities – Zealous study is not typically seen as pleasurable
- Leisure is not idleness or distraction because this only brings anxiety about wasting your life.
- To be at ease: relaxed without waiting your time

- A walk, bike ride, skiing, etc. are all leisure activities, but they still require work and pain while they are also pleasurable.
- Ancients held that leisurely learning cannot be geared towards a goal like success or power – this instrumentalizes it.
 - i.e. – If you want to learn something to gain power to implement a policy... - You make the learning a mean tool for something else.
- True leisure activity has no goal beyond itself. Go for a walk because it is good in itself, not because of some further end.
- The highest things are worthwhile by themselves.
- For the Ancients, the appreciation of beauty is the most worthwhile activity in itself.
 - They saw Study (Studere/Spoudazein) as seeking the appreciation of beauty – this is something
 - that is an end in itself.
 - This is a sort of true leisure – requires work but also provides pleasure

Connection of *Scholé*, Study, and the Beautiful

- *Scholé* has appreciation of beauty as its goal and Study (Spoudazein) as the method by which it is achieved.
- This understanding helps make sense of various dilemmas – i.e. difference between Pornography and Greek Statue
 - *Pornography* – Uses subjects to elicit lust
 - *Greek Statue* – Show beauty of human person and nature as exhibited in human health and fitness
 - Posture, dress/undress, etc. are quite distinct – You know by study seeking true beauty.
 - This distinction helps make what is beautiful clear – judgments are not relative



Laocoön and His Sons

What Classical Education Is (and Isn't)

- Does not avoid things just because they are new and popular – judges to see if truly great (if it is something Classical Education ought to integrate)
- Looks to past – particularly to see the wrong turns that lead to wrongs today
- Search framed by the question: “What are the conditions for human flourishing?”
 - Flourishing can be understood as self-expression.



- There are good and bad forms of self-expression – the question is which sort it is.
- If any kind of self-expression is what is necessary for human flourishing, there are problems because destructive forms of expression.
- Good self-expression – What sorts of expression honors the dignity of yourself and others?

What went wrong in education?

- Wrong turn: Education was separated from virtue and seen as merely instrumental. (Obviously, there is utility in education, but that is not all of it.)
- Morality is not seen as relative in classical education. This is because it studies the other transcendentals (true and good).
- Understanding of the true and good gives a backbone to Classical Education (focused on virtue).
 - Student realizes there are things true and standards of right and wrong (true moral principles).
- Beauty seems like a different sort of transcendental from the true and good.
 - In comparison to true and good, beauty initially seems relative as tastes and cultures have different notions of beauty.
 - It also might seem like too much beauty might incline someone to vice.
- The enlightenment concluded that beauty is different category than true and good.
- The Medievals did not hold that taste for beauty is relative.
 - Said taste of beauty is connected to prudence.
 - Prudence – the ability to make a moral judgement in a particular set of circumstances (this judgment has universal moral validity)
 - Held that taste is the same sort of judgement as prudence – Someone who has good taste can make universal judgments about beauty.
- By the cultivation of taste can make a true judgement – i.e. banging on an instrument less beautiful than a Beethoven Symphony
- We can arrive at taste through long, in depth study.
- People have different tastes and make different moral judgements - these of judgments are similar.
- Historically, when beauty is seen as relative, soon morality is also, then soon the truth follows.
 - The transcendentals stand or fall together.
 - We now can say “beauty is skin deep” instead of “false beauty is skin deep”

The Structure and Method of this Course



- Major themes of the course: (1) Education and (2) The object of education (its goal as the appreciation of the beautiful and how the beautiful contributes to the understanding of the good and true)
- The wrong turn: We did not feel the impact of some changes until later.
- We must be impartial and honest when we look at history since it is easy to allow passions to overtake honesty.
- We should never think of education as part of the “culture wars”
 - Education is NOT a war – when children are educated well we all win together and if not we all lose together
- There was no time when education was perfect.
 - The early modern period was a time of flourishing classical education, but this education failed to bring students into the beauty of the lesson and was overrun with extreme authoritarianism and corporeal punishment.
 - In Medieval times (though classical education greatly admires the educational achievements), students were notoriously not expected to be virtuous and were not help to the law.
- There is no time in the past without a plurality of views.
 - Even in the Medieval times, some rejected the Trivium and some espoused nihilism.
- Do not despair that there was no perfect age. Classical Education does not seek to go back and fix a particular turn in educational history, rather it seeks out the good and better arguments from the past.