

Is Durkheim Right?: *The worldview of a classical literary curriculum*

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Abstract:

Our exploration will highlight the ways that liberal arts education develops students towards a characteristic vision of humanity. Historical comparison shows that forms of education tend to reproduce a character ideal. Provoked by Durkheim the sociologist and educator, I explore whether a Christian university's reliance on classical liberal arts education might work against its desires for the character of graduates. Durkheim says that the personality that literary liberal arts study develops is contrary to Christian character. Durkheim's contrast is problematic, since "Christian" and "classical" were entwined from the earliest period. However, a benefit of Durkheimian worldview awareness could be an ability to sell character development as a promise of education, giving students a greater rationale than immediate economic payoff.

Biography:

Ted Newell (EdD, Columbia) has taught the final year Worldview integration course to undergraduates and B. Ed. students at Crandall University, Moncton, Canada, since 2004, as well as education theory and religious studies courses. His career stems from a CUSO assignment to develop curriculum for early school leavers on Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea, in the early 1980s. His interest is in effective higher education toward whole-person professional development.

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Education tends toward some transformation. It moves in the direction of an ideal, a telos or endpoint. The graduate may embody an academic ideal, a professional ideal, or a skilled craftsperson ideal. Any process of education tends toward some state of “virtue.” If we grant this, we can ask: toward which transformation does academic liberal arts teaching tend?

To all concerned for the future of liberal arts education, the question is urgent. Challenges to liberal arts continue to come from agencies concerned for economic competitiveness. The four years of liberal arts study are unlikely to confer immediate economic advantage to most students or to society. But economically oriented proposals would narrow the scope of university education. Since educational options compete for students, and professional education keeps nipping away at liberal arts studies, an inability to supply good reasons to study could see withered liberal arts. Selling the nature of its transformations and those longer-term and harder-to-measure social and economic benefits accruing from liberal arts education is vital for faculty replacement, if nothing more. But what’s at stake is not trivial.

Toni Morrison, the novelist and Princeton professor, fears internet universities which lack the ability to shape students values through personal contact. She shows that “the real or imagined search for ‘goodness’ in some figuration is still part of the justifying, legitimizing language of the academy,” based on the belief that “the rightly trained mind would turn toward virtue; that the commitment of higher education was to train leaders to envision, if not effect, a desirable future.” She concludes that universities must “take seriously and rigorously (their) role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices...” Her vision is not only for clearer intellects but of personal transformations for social benefits.¹

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T. Morrison, “How Can Values Be Taught in the University?,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 40, no. 2 (2001): 273–278.

Of course, universities teach in an academic way. That's nearly a truism. A preliminary, common sense, definition of academic knowledge would be *dispassionate* knowledge, *objective* knowledge, knowledge as if by a spectator, not requiring personal commitment.

The ways of teaching, in content, process and the person of the teacher, go along to promote the qualities of graduates of the institution. If traditional academic teaching is what we do, then students who adapt will tend towards the academic orientation. Prize students will be those who “go on” to a higher degree, who become equipped to be successful at academic pursuits, who may themselves become professors.

In my setting at a Christian university, the corresponding question is: Will an academic teaching style likely produce specifically Christian character? Take an essential discipline in a Christian university. Will Biblical and theological studies, taught dispassionately, tend to develop enthusiasm about Christian work in the world? Similar things could be said about teaching liberal arts disciplines. A dispassionate, objective, theoretical approach seems unlikely to engage the will or the heart.

Liberal arts teaching's lack of affectivity is by no means a concern of Christians only. Other humanists share it. John Taylor's Poetic Knowledge or Donald Finkel's Teaching with your Mouth Shut seek to structure liberal arts curricula for student engagement. Russell Hunt, an English professor at Saint Thomas University, published a string of articles pursuing relational and whole person liberal arts learning.

The foregoing underlines that to speak of transformation without mentioning the shape of the transformation is misleading. The fuller question is: Transformed toward which ideal of humanity? Toward which transformation will *academic* learning tend? Can *academics* produce more than intellectual or cognitive development? Can *academics* be taught for personal relevance without diminishing its rigor?

From 1905 to 1913, Emile Durkheim, the pioneering sociologist, taught a course on the history of education in France. Durkheim was a professor in the pedagogical faculty of the University of Paris, so one could say that sociology came by a side door. Durkheim shows how shifts in the dominant worldview altered French education over the centuries. From its pre-Christian origins, through education under church auspices, to the recovery of classical Greek learning in the early second millennium, to the French Revolution's radical innovations, to responses to the expanding scientific revolution, Durkheim demonstrates how ancient practices coexist with overlays from reforms, emphasizing education's archeology. He proves his dictum, that historical context is the necessary grounding for a grasp of educational philosophy.

Durkheim says in his chapter on the rise of literary classical education in the 1500s that Christians who supported classical education overlooked its ground-motive. Humanistic literary classical education follows in his survey after Renaissance education in the mold of Rabelais. Rabelais typified a raging thirst for learning within an ultimately mysterious and infinite universe. While not specifically Christian, Rabelais's education was compatible, maybe ironically so given Rabelais's Rabelaisian reputation. His education does not undermine ideals sought by Christians in education. By contrast, the education sponsored by Erasmus and the northern European humanists tended to nurture an honour-minded person. At the dawn of polite society, as Durkheim paints it, a feminized society, the educational focus moved to the texts of antiquity. The aim was to succeed in a new social emphasis on being personally cultivated. To be famous through a literary work corresponded with the classical motive of personal honour.

Classical education was not meant to nurture Christians. I quote:

Their motive was an entirely pagan one, one which had been all-powerful in classical culture but which was wholly amoral and whose overwhelming influence Christianity

consequently strove to diminish: for them the superior goal was to possess a name which² was upon everybody's lips.

Literary humanistic education was elitist. It could not be adapted for the masses which could only in rare instances attain its textual heights. The shift in education from the logical and practical education that preceded literary humanism brought a widening gulf between polite society and the wider society, and Durkheim implies that France's political consequences of 1789 and on flowed partly from this early sixteenth-century shift in education. The transformation from the new education seems not to have been socially beneficial.

Durkheim's lecture focused questions about liberal arts education. For a genetic and historical investigation, I assumed that academic education began with Socrates and his disciple Plato. After all, Plato founded the first Academy.

Socrates was a citizen of Athens at a time of civic instability. Democracy had replaced aristocratic leadership, so that young men could enter politics and become somebody. Socrates and Plato were distressed by non-Athenians who were teaching how to win civic leadership by influencing people. Skeptical about the old religious beliefs, the Sophists had little time for transcendence and taught without sufficient regard for truth or justice.

Skepticism was corrosive on the young of Athens, a corrosion made worse by verbal flexibility. For instance, a sophisticated character in one of Aristophanes' plays says: "I mean to say, we argue up or down—Take which you like—it comes to the same end."³ The word

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Emile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France*, trans. P. Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 210.

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Christopher J. Lucas, *Our Western Educational Heritage* (New York: Macmillan Pub Co, 1972).

“sophist,” and even “rhetoric,” still connotes the willingness to play with words. The Sophist approach gave no basis for non-corrupt public service.⁴

Socrates and company wished to counter the threat to the well being of the city. They sought to base political action on a renewed idea of virtue. *Arête* was, of course, the Greek character ideal. Homer’s narrative poem, the *Iliad*, was the founding myth of Greek-speaking peoples, internalized by Greek boys from ancient times. Homer's arete is the “virtue that bestows upon an individual a certain superiority” or honour or excellence.⁵ *Arête* was at first a warrior virtue, deriving from Ares, the god of war. Greek men strove to vindicate their manhood, avoiding dishonor or cowardice. Knightly or chivalric values in the feudal middle ages parallel the ancient Greek ones. As Greek civilization developed, as democracy rose in its cities, *arête* was transmuted to civic leadership and political renown. Here is the honour orientation seen by Durkheim.

After Socrates was condemned on charges of leading the youth away from the gods, Plato did not become resigned, nor was he drawn toward the politics of the day. Until genuine lovers of truth were able to rule, society could not be harmonious. But philosophers could be educated. Plato saw the education of better leaders as the long-term way forward. Plato sought a transformation. Individual souls must become aligned with what is genuinely good and true, to conform to the hidden order of the cosmos. Renewal thus required a credible restatement of the mythology that had underwritten the society. Plato supplied that restatement.

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The sophistic versus philosophical conflict of *paideias* is profiled by W. Lammi, “The Conflict of *Paideias* in Gadamer’s Thought,” in *Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Boston, Massachusetts, August 1998*, 10–15, retrieved from www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducLamm.htm on September 13, 2010.

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Lucas, *Our Western Educational Heritage*, 51; A. Nehamas, “Meno’s Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher,” in *Plato's Meno in Focus*, ed. J.M. Day (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 221-224.

How can Platonic leaders achieve integrity? Integrity is when souls are brought into harmony with the order of the world. Underlying the way things appear is an ultimate world of forms, called also types or ideals. The cosmos does not present itself to us as it really is. No-one can see the world's order directly; it is not empirical. But a person can see into the structure of reality by developing spiritual insight or wisdom. Spiritual sight is anthropologically possible because the human soul participated before birth in those cosmos-forming ideals. Richard Tarnas notes that an idealistic way of thinking had marked Greek thinking far back in time. It is present in the identification of, say, Aphrodite as goddess of love. Plato gives that idealistic tendency a clear new expression. While the mind is clouded and the way to clarity not easy, still, human souls can be re-aligned by recollecting our true selves, literally by an activity of reminiscence. Platonic learning is nothing more or less than coming to your true self. Humans are microcosms, able to be attuned to the cosmos. While not all persons will be capable of seeing into ultimate reality, still, Plato's is an optimistic way of looking at human beings.⁶

Knowledge will develop virtuous persons. Purposeful thoughtfulness -- contemplation -- can educate the will.⁷ The crucial idea is that right thinking will lead to right action. The idea is glimpsed in Plato's division of his ideal city into classes. In the Republic, the honor-loving city guardians and money-loving producers, lesser classes in the Republic, could have their souls clarified only as much as their nature allowed. The top class is the philosopher-kings, wisdom-lovers, led by rational desires only. By education, they have become dispassionate: purely rational rulers. According to Plato, those who respond best to academic education are the virtuous future leaders of society. Some people have potential for virtue in them; others not as

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R. Tarnas, *The passion of the western mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view* (Ballantine Books, 1993).

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D. H Kelsey, *To understand God truly: What's theological about a theological school* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 73-77.

much.⁸ The high school with streamed classes is a reflection of the original academic ideal, with its college-bound stream, vocational stream, and business stream. Here is the bedrock of beliefs under non-affective -- even passion-denying – academic education.

From the beginning, Plato's Academy had a reformist motive, to form a class of leaders for society with thoroughgoing integrity. Plato was a political reformer. His intention for academic work was moral in nature, if not actually religious.⁹

It is important, however, that the Platonic model was not the only influence on Hellenistic education in the ancient Mediterranean. Historians like H.I. Marrou and Bruce Kimball make clear that the more influential source was, surprisingly, Isocrates.¹⁰ Isocrates has sometimes been bracketed with the Sophists, but examination reveals that he decried the Sophist rise too. Isocrates differed from the philosophers by his emphasis that clear thinking is to be confirmed by clear speech. Speech and its ability to prompt action is the central human trait.(Marrou) Isocrates's rhetorical model of education was less theoretical, and less critical, than Plato's, and so proved more acceptable than never-ending truth-seeking to a practical people like the Romans. Isocrates's emphases were picked up by Cicero, Varro, Quintillian, and others up to the first unambiguous statement of a seven-element liberal arts program by Martianus Capella in the fifth century.¹¹ The shift from philosophy to rhetoric accounts, for example, for rhetoric's central

⁸ Reeve, "The Socratic Movement," 13-15.

⁹ Tarnas, *The passion of the western mind*; C.D.C. Reeve, "The Socratic Movement," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 7-24.;

¹⁰ B. A Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986); Bruce A. Kimball, "Founders of "Liberal Education": The Case for Roman Orators against Socratic Philosophers," *Teachers College Record* 85, no. 2 (1983): 225-49; I. H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. G. Lamb (New York: Mentor Books, 1964):120.

¹¹ J. Vanderleest, "The Purpose and Content of a Liberal Education," in *Liberal education and the small university in Canada*, ed. Christine Storm (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queens Univ Pr, 1996): 9-11.

place in university curricula up to the high middle ages.¹² Yet Marrou notes that it would be wrong to see Plato and Isocrates as negations of the other. Their educational schemes were contemporaneous and so more like twin pillars. Plato's dialogues in liberal arts curricula in the following centuries attests that rhetoric and philosophy are reconcilable.

A central puzzle of my investigation was that Christians of the first three centuries seemed not to have protested classical education. Since the religious basis of Greek education would have been well-known, and since the Christians were generally countercultural types, how could their movement adopt it? Marrou and Werner Jaeger's Early Christianity and Greek Paideia (1961) note as anomalous, that Christianity did not produce a distinctive education.¹³ The polarization of attitudes toward pagan learning among early Christian thinkers is well-known. The church father Tertullian's question, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" is at one pole. At the other pole, some found pagan learning to be compelling. The story of Jerome's dream encapsulates the attraction. The ascetic Bible student and translator of the Vulgate edition of the scriptures found himself on trial, when the divine judge accused him of being no Christian but a Ciceronian.

Christians were willing to employ Greek education, even if few gave it their whole hearts. Its virtue orientation made Greek education acceptable. Paideia was the way that a person attains wisdom and virtue, first as a pupil and then in life. What Marrou calls indeed the Civilization of Paideia saw life as a training ground. Jaeger suggests that despite a generally antithetical stance to their culture, Christians understood a person's overarching task in this world similarly. Christians saw that their way of life had its paideia, rather, a better paideia that led to eternal

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K. Egan, "Competing voices for the curriculum," in *The Struggle for Curriculum: Education, the State and the Corporate Sector*, ed. M. Wideen and M.C. Courtland (Burnaby, BC: Institute for Studies in Teacher Education, Simon Fraser University, 1996): 7-26. Egan shows that trying for the incompatible aims of Plato, Rousseau and socialization in public school education achieves none of them.

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Marrou, 424

¹⁴ life. Probably the more basic reason, from Marrou, is that classical culture provided its pupils with the literate culture on which the Christian religion, as a religion of the Book, is based. Religious literacy and sensibility, so to speak, was the province not of schools but of the family and church. Those Christians who did not insist on Scripture only might well send their children to pagan schools to learn their letters. But Christians countered the shaping power of culture with their own story. The upshot was that the dominant education was never absorbed uncritically.¹⁵

The Platonic paideia included a distinctive approach to teaching. David Kelsey writes to promote affective knowing in theological seminaries, is also the transformative desire of Christian universities. Allow me to quote him at length:

...theological schooling on the model of paideia requires divinely assisted conversion of the one who learns. This has implications for who can teach and what teaching is. It means that the identification of who is qualified to teach and the character of the relationship between "teacher" and "learner" are very complex matters. In principle, the relationship must be indirect. No one can directly give another person gnosis of God by teaching. In part this is because, as Plato held, knowledge of the Good cannot be taught. Additionally there is the theological reason that the condition of having gnosis is that one undergoes a conversion which finally only God can give. At most, the teacher "teaches" only indirectly by providing the context in which the student may be graced himself or herself to come to that combination of immediate self-knowledge and God-knowledge which is
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 the aim of paideia.

Notice the parallel "conversions" of Christianity and Plato. Kelsey also helps us understand the frustration that traditional academics sometimes express at students' lack of engagement: If a student's switch has not been turned on, well, no one can give knowledge except God. A course gives information, but connection to life is an issue for individuals.

¹⁴ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [1934] 1961), 90

¹⁵ Marrou, 429

¹⁶ Kelsey, *To understand God Truly*, 72.

Paideia is, in fact, in the original documents of Christianity.¹⁷ Diana Swancutt's study of Paul of Tarsus's use of paideia shows that the terminology is intended to make the message about Christ intelligible. But it is crucial that Paul did not use the terminology without reinterpreting it. Paul appropriates paideia, but completely reshapes it. He says that the event of the crucifixion is the negation of worldly wisdom. In Acts 17 and 1 Corinthians 1-4, he emphatically dismisses or redirects Greek insights. He moves Christian faith away from accommodation to Greek wisdom. The Cross is God's foolish wisdom. Swancutt calls it "a redirection of hegemony." Paul takes a theme of the dominant culture and reconfigures it. The redirection strategy is visible in the earliest Hebrew and Christian scripture, from Genesis 1 onwards. Accordingly, second-century Christian teachers redirected the "hegemonic cultural power of *paideia*, imitating it within Christian communities to create a uniquely Christian paideia that was thought, quite literally, to somatically (re)make 'catechumens' into mature men

(*teleioi*) in this new, civilized faith."¹⁸ The Greek theologians are sometimes thought to be Platonizers of Christianity but Greek Orthodox scholars dispute that vigorously. Even to them, Plato was put in the service of the church, not vice-versa. Hellenized and Romanized Jews did similarly to preserve their worlds. The antithetic edge must have dulled in the centuries after Christianity's establishment as state religion, but the apostle himself overturns Greek conceptions of wisdom. Paul's redirection of the dominant form of education could be an example for present-day educators.

In summary, I am asking if academic teaching can sponsor Christian transformation. I conclude that its methods and content taken straight are inconsistent with Christianity. But liberal

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Lammi notes that Shaun Gallagher's authoritative source makes "paideia" simply equivalent to "education."

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Diana Swancutt, "Scripture 'Reading' and Identity Formation in Paul: Paideia among Believing Greeks," paper presented at Society of Biblical Literature, Paul and Scripture Seminar, Nov. 2006, 7.

arts education is essential for the literacy required by the faith. No wonder that liberal arts have always been prerequisite to theological training.

Lessons, observations, and tensions

Every form of education tends toward a transformation. So a university may reasonably aim at *affective* student development as well as intellectual development. That a requirement of community service is a common practice attests to the transformative impulse. Yet a two-fold intellectual-and-affective goal is controversial: the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) in its investigations of academic freedom questions whether developing Christian character is a legitimate goal in a university. In the USA, the parallel AAUP six decades ago wanted Christian institutions to call themselves colleges, reserving the honorific “university” for apparently more open and non-ideological institutions. The 2010 controversy overlooks the way that any university, Islamic, Christian, research oriented, or humanist, will wish graduates who develop character in line with its worldview. As Morrison said, “We teach values by having them.” Graduates equipped with facts with no desire to act is not enough. Two often-cited goals of liberal education are before critical thinkers and good citizens.¹⁹ That is, university education can and must aim for changes in volition. It will wish to move students toward a character ideal. A real contribution of postmodernism has been to undermine the claims of major social institutions to be authoritative and neutral, validated by science or social science. But in our time the pretense of neutrality and freedom from ideology is still giving way. Education is inevitably worldview-loaded. Let us recognize that economic interests are bound to wish immediate economic benefit from the university, and that from many faculties they are already able to get it. For liberal arts to survive and to underwrite a civilization worth living in, let it make the case clearly that the four years are not merely for enrichment but for life enrichment. Let humanists

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David G. Winter, David McClelland, and Abigail Stewart, *A New Case for the Liberal Arts* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1981).

speak out for the value of the tradition and of critical thinking. Let them bust the idea that an undergraduate business degree is likely to get one a more responsible or higher paying job. Over the long haul, genuine education will out. Let it be sold that way, as a long term investment for a more humane life.

A Christian university reasonably wants learning that is God-affected and God-confident. On one hand, full and fair examination of the alternatives is essential. Any university seeks not indoctrination but genuine appropriation. On the other hand, the rigorous, critical academic model cannot simply be borrowed. The Platonic way sought reintegration of soul and cosmos by a process of intellectual review. By contrast, Christian knowledge, like Hebrew knowledge, always carries a moral implication. Intellection is not enough. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures never imagine persons to be incipiently aligned with the universe. Rather, any fact potentially confronts one with a demand to accept responsibility before its Creator. This approach is of Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch thinker credited with the outburst, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry ‘Mine!’”²⁰ The right point to make is that, like Christians of the first centuries, it is reasonable to provide liberal education with an interpretation consistent with the faith. There will be room for students to disagree with the interpretation, of course, otherwise the education would be indoctrination.

For Christian education, transformation requires a consistent model of how persons come to know. Such a model will unite cognitive knowing (if there is such a thing) and actions. In parallel fashion, a consistently Christian education will also have a unique model of knowing and a view of persons. One set of hints will flow from Jesus Christ who is fully human in time and space while being fully divine, the perfect ideal in time and beyond time. A Christian view of

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Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998): 461.

how persons come to truth will have to take its place. There is no reason that the model should be based on a wooden epistemology, an uncritically realist approach that yields big jug to little jug teaching methods. Much constructivist thinking can be accepted. At the same time the rigor of realism can unite subjective constructivism with objective realism.

Durkheim was right. Humanistic literary education made paramount the desire for individual recognition or excellence. No education that contradicts basic commitments is acceptable unless reinterpreted. Paul's counter-hegemonic, counter-cultural strategy is only reasonable in worldview perspective. Durkheim's comment about humanistic literary education accords with Marrou's observation that successive renaissances in European culture were followed by revivals of neo-paganism. For a religious minority like evangelical Christians, not to teach from its worldview as if it were true amounts to an agreement to go out of existence in the next generation.

If education tends toward some transformation, a benefit of Durkheimian worldview awareness should be an ability to sell character development as a promise of education. Humanists and Christians are fighting severe headwinds from the intensifying stress on economic benefit. The only way to resist the headwinds is to spell out the nature of the desired transformations, both in our advertising and concretely in our programming. Understanding the nature of the transformations sought can give students a better rationale than short term payoff. Our livelihoods and the quality of the civilization may be at stake.

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