

# The Objective Standard

A Journal of Culture and Politics

Summer 2007, Vol. 2, No. 2

This article is from *TOS* Vol. 2, No. 2. The full contents of the issue are listed here.

## The False Promise of Classical Education

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In E. D. Hirsch’s best-selling book *Cultural Literacy*, he cites a *Washington Post* article titled “The Cheerful Ignorance of the Young in L.A.” in which the author says:

I have not yet found one single student in Los Angeles, in either college or high school, who could tell me the years when WWII was fought. . . . Nor have I found one who knew when the American Civil War was fought. . . .

Only two could even approximately identify Thomas Jefferson. Only one could place the date of the Declaration of Independence. None could name even one of the first ten amendments to the Constitution or connect them with the Bill of Rights. . . .<sup>1</sup>

A typical study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) concludes that the average eleventh-grade student is an incompetent writer. To evaluate their writing ability, testers asked high school juniors to write a paragraph based on notes they were given about a haunted house. The performance of half the students was judged to be either “unsatisfactory” or “minimal.” The following is a “minimal” response: “The house with no windows. This is a house with dead-end hallways, 36 rooms and stairs leading to the cieling [*sic*]. Doorways go nowhere and all this to confuse ghosts.”<sup>2</sup> That is the student’s complete, word-for-word response—and represents the performance of nearly half of all eleventh graders. Most of the other half were evaluated as writing “adequate” paragraphs. Just 2 percent wrote something that was judged to be “elaborate,” a step up from “adequate.”

In *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, Charles Sykes tells a chilling story about a straight-A student in the eighth grade named Andrea, who was very eager to learn science. Unfortunately for Andrea, her school, like most today, stressed the importance of “creativity” over “dreary” facts, and of “hands-on,” “active” learning over “dull,” didactic instruction. This bright young girl with a thirst for scientific knowledge spent her time in science class picking up cereal with a tongue depressor (to simulate the way birds feed), hunting for paper moths on a wall, and drawing pictures of scientists. When Andrea wrote a letter complaining that she had gotten nothing out of the class, she was expelled for being rude and disrespectful.<sup>3</sup>

You have probably read stories like these and been horrified both by how shamefully ignorant, inarticulate, and illiterate many American students are, and, even worse, by what schools do to students like Andrea. I wish I could dismiss such stories as rare incidents circulated among cynical critics of American schools to give poignancy to their arguments. Unfortunately, my experience interviewing and teaching students at my school has shown me otherwise.

Some time ago, a woman brought her teenage daughter to visit VanDamme Academy. In an effort to get to know more about this girl and her educational history, I asked her a few questions about her current school. At one point, I asked what she was studying in history class. She looked at me with an expression of utter bafflement and said nothing. I realized my mistake and promptly changed the question to, “What are you studying in social studies?” Her puzzlement briefly dissipated—she now understood the question—but it returned as soon as she attempted an answer. After a little thought, she looked at me, shrugged her shoulders dismissively, and said, “I don’t know.” I realized that my second question was as unanswerable as my first. To state what she was studying would presuppose some connection, some integrating theme among the stories, newspaper articles, and papier-mâché projects that made up her social studies class.

One of my best, most dedicated, and intelligent students in recent years transferred to VanDamme Academy from an Orange County public school in seventh grade. In his first year at my school he studied ancient history—a subject that, I later discovered, he had also studied in sixth grade at his previous school. His mother told me that she once asked him, “Daniel, aren’t you bored repeating the same material?” Apparently he simply chuckled and said, “Mom. Everything meaningful we learned last year in my social studies class?—here we covered that the first day.”

Literature classes—or rather, the literature portion of “English” classes, which cram in literature, writing, spelling, vocabulary, and sometimes grammar—are no better. I am the junior high literature teacher at VanDamme Academy, and I often begin the year with a discussion of the value of studying literature. I intend to remind my students what they stand to gain from reading, by drawing upon novels and plays they had read in my class in seventh grade, such as Hugo’s *Ninety-Three*, Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Rattigan’s *The Browning Version*, and Corneille’s *Cinna*. I want to remind them that a character can stand in your mind as a powerful embodiment of certain traits, that the plot of a great novel can be gripping and emotionally stirring, and that a classic work of literature can capture a highly complex and abstract theme in a compelling, concrete form. One year, my class included a new student who had just completed seventh grade at St. Margaret’s, arguably the most prestigious private school in Orange County. So that I could include this new student in the discussion, I asked her mother what she had read the previous year. Her mother informed me that her daughter’s class had done a six-month study of *A Walk to Remember*, which is described by Amazon.com as a “boy-makes-good tearjerker” and which was recently made into a movie starring teen pop star Mandy Moore.

One of my most memorable experiences with a new transfer student came several years ago, when I taught my class the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats, the poem with the immortal line “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” In an effort to understand the poem’s theme, we defined unfamiliar words and discussed the poem line by line and stanza by stanza, rewriting each section in plain prose. I explained to the students that I believed the theme of the poem to concern the timelessness of art and its consequent power to inspire future generations. I showed them how I inferred this theme from each line of the poem, stressing the connection between them. I later asked my students to write an essay explaining the theme of the poem. One student, who had recently come from another school, wrote an essay that began with a line I will never forget: “The theme of this poem is that all art is sacred, whether it is a realistic painting or a smudge on a canvas.” This moment, to me, summed up an important characteristic of American education: Cultural bromides had come to replace thought. The student was not troubled by the fact that this bromide bore no relation to the poem, because, like a smudge on a canvas, she regarded her opinion as sacred. I looked at her essay, handed it back to her, and said, “Could you please go find some evidence from the poem to support this theme?” Needless to say, she could not.

What has brought education to this state of disintegration, superficiality, and mindlessness? Bad philosophy. The educational philosophy that has most influenced modern education is the school known as “progressive education.” The leading theorist of “progressive” education was 20th-century philosopher John Dewey, but the intellectual foundations of the movement lie in the writings of 18th-century philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant.

In 1762, Rousseau, a philosophical precursor of the Romanticist movement, wrote *Emile*, a book in which he describes an ideal educational program for an imaginary student. Emile was to be educated “naturally.” The role of his tutor was not to teach, but to protect him from the influence of society so that he could develop instinctively and spontaneously. Rousseau opposed lessons; he urged the importance of an inactive mind; he scorned books, calling reading “the greatest plague of childhood.”<sup>4</sup> Emile’s education was to be one of pure, unguided development.

Such a philosophy undermines the very concept of education. If education means training a child’s conceptual faculty in the process of gaining objective knowledge of reality, then education and Rousseau’s theories are fundamentally at odds.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant assaulted education on an even more fundamental level. Kant argued, with a power and a consistency never before achieved, that the human mind is fundamentally incapable of knowing true reality. It is limited, he argued, to a world of mere appearances—appearances created by the mind’s subjective filters. Reason, he declared in effect, is impotent, and objective knowledge impossible.<sup>5</sup>

Kant was highly influential on all the philosophers and schools of thought that succeeded him, including the 19th-century school known as Romanticism. (This is not to be confused with the 19th-century school of art known as Romanticism, which is radically different in its basic philosophy.) Romanticists of the 19th century reveled in irrationalism. Like Kant, the Romanticist philosophers held that reason is incapable of attaining knowledge of true reality. In place of reason, they enshrined emotion as the means to true knowledge. They upheld emotion over reason, “creativity” over knowledge, fantasy over science, and the sanctity of untouched nature over the “materialistic” world of civilized man.

The Romanticists’ approach to education was a consequence of these basic principles. In their view, the child possesses an inherently sublime soul, driven by pure emotional impulses, in harmony with nature and unsullied by societal convention. Ideally, in this view, this state of noble savage-hood should be preserved. Traditional education, Romanticists argued, destroys it.

The philosophy of Romanticism made its way to American universities, and the turn of the 20th century was a turn for the worse in the field of education. In 1901, G. Stanley Hall, a professor at Johns Hopkins and the first man to receive a graduate degree in psychology from Harvard University, promoted the Romanticist ideal at a meeting of the National Education Association:

The guardians of the young should strive first of all to keep out of nature’s way, and to prevent harm, and should merit the proud title of defenders of the happiness and rights of children. They should feel profoundly that childhood, as it comes fresh from the hand of God, is not corrupt, but illustrates the survival of the most consummate thing in the world. . . . We must overcome the fetishism of the alphabet, of the multiplication table, of grammars, of scales, and of bibliolatry. . . . There are many who ought not to be educated, and who would be better in mind, body, and morals if they knew no school.<sup>6</sup>

Falling squarely in the tradition of Kant and Romanticism is a student of G. Stanley Hall and the educational theorist most directly responsible for the state of education in America for the past century: John Dewey. Like Kant, Dewey and the philosophical school he championed, Pragmatism, regarded the mind as cut off from the outside world. Man, the Pragmatists said, is restricted to a world of subjective “experience,” and the function of the mind (or, for some Pragmatists, the sum of minds in a society) is to reconstruct reality from the material of such “experience.” Man cannot objectively understand reality; he can only subjectively reconstruct it.

Like Rousseau, therefore, Dewey attacked traditional, intellectual education—education in which facts are taught and learned—as forced, artificial, and irrelevant to the child’s true needs. He urged an approach to education that is “child-centered,” allowing for his instinctive and spontaneous development—as well as one that eventually provides for the “socialization” of the child. In *School of Tomorrow*, Dewey praised Rousseau for seeing that a proper education allows the child’s mental development to be as natural and spontaneous as physical growth. He said, “If we want, then, to find

out how education takes place most successfully, let us go to the experiences of children where learning is a necessity, and not to the practices of schools where it is largely an adornment, a superfluity, and even an unwelcome imposition.”<sup>7</sup>

If formal, reality-oriented, intellectual education is an “imposition” on childhood, it is an imposition that has long since been removed. Dewey’s “progressive” method, founded on the rejection of reason, knowledge, and intellectual training—and on the enshrinement of emotional impulse, “experience,” and “social adjustment”—has dominated American schools for the past century. The “remote,” “musty” subject of history has been replaced by the disintegrated mash of allegedly “relevant” data known as social studies. The “futile,” “lofty” attempt to systematically teach abstract principles of science has been replaced by the fun, child-focused “learning-by-doing” method of making collages and finding moths on a wall. The “distant,” “antiquated” works of world literature have been replaced with contemporary, hip “boy-makes-good tearjerkers” that appeal to the immediate concerns of the most childish children. Rigorous training of the intellect has been replaced with, in the words of the “progressive” educators, a more “practical,” “child-centered,” “humane” approach to education.

The practical result of all of this has been legions of ignorant children, unequipped for a successful human life.

Thoughtful parents find nothing cheerful in the ignorance of today’s young—or in the “progressive” movement that parents rightfully hold responsible for this ignorance. They long for an intellectual, rigorous curriculum covering the core subjects of math, literature, science, and history. And many of these parents, including many homeschoolers, seeking an antidote to the intellectual poison offered in today’s schools, have turned with high hopes to classical education.

Throughout this century of domination by “progressive” education, many movements of educators have fought to bring back a more traditional, academic, intellectual, content-focused approach to education. I will refer to these broadly as the “classical education” movement.

Classical education, which is never clearly defined, encompasses a great range of educators with a variety of educational theories. Some of the educators I will discuss prefer to describe their program as “liberal education,” whereas others use the term “classical” or “traditional” education. Though they vary in approach, they have certain fundamental traits in common: a stated reverence for the intellect; an insistence on a core curriculum that focuses on a study of the three R’s, the natural sciences, literature, and history (with an emphasis on Western civilization); and a commitment to developing critical reasoning skills in students.

The classical movement indicts “progressive” education on two basic counts: that it produces students who are both ignorant of the facts necessary to be a functional adult, and that—even more

important—it produces students who are incapable of proper, rigorous, critical *reasoning*. Thus, they say, “progressive” education prevents students from being able to effectively acquire later knowledge and paves the way for them to be seduced by irrational influences.

Foundations Academy, a leading practitioner of classical education, writes: “There is no greater task for education than to teach students how to learn. The influence of ‘progressive’ teaching methods and the oversimplification of textbooks make it difficult for students to acquire the mental discipline that traditional instruction methods once cultivated.”<sup>8</sup>

Writes Dorothy Sayers in her hugely influential essay “The Lost Tools of Learning”:

[T]he tools of learning are the same, in any and every subject; and the person who knows how to use them will, at any age, get the mastery of a new subject in half the time and with a quarter of the effort expended by the person who has not the tools at his command. . . .

[W]e let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary. . . . [They experience] the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects. . . . young men and women are sent into the world to fight massed propaganda with a smattering of “subjects”; and when whole classes and whole nations become hypnotized by the arts of the spell binder, we have the impudence to be astonished.<sup>9</sup>

A wholly different type of education, she writes, is necessary “to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society.”<sup>10</sup>

And the classical exponents claim to achieve such an education. As Foundations Academy advertises on its website:

The classical method develops independent learning skills on the foundation of language, logic, and tangible fact. . . . Classical education teaches students facts, provides them with logical tools to use those facts, and perfects the student’s ability to relate those facts to others. This fundamental skill-set is more valuable today than it has ever been. . . . Classical education helps students draw original, creative, and accurate conclusions from facts and then formulate those conclusions into logical and persuasive arguments.<sup>11</sup>

Such a goal, as stated, is noble—and seems like an educational panacea compared to most of today’s schools.

But does classical education live up to its billing? More broadly, can it provide the foundation for a positive revolution in American education? To address this question, I will divide the classical movement into two broad categories: *secular classical education* and *Christian classical education*. We will begin with the secular representatives.

### Three Secular Approaches

The secular approaches to classical education that I will discuss are those of Mortimer Adler, creator of the Paideia Proposal and the Great Books program; E. D. Hirsch, creator of the Core Knowledge curriculum; and the duo of Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, coauthors of *The Well-Trained Mind*, a book that, despite being authored by openly religious individuals, is extremely popular among secular homeschoolers.

In contrast to the “progressives,” all of these authors claim a reverence for traditional, systematic, fact-laden education. Such an education, they believe, is crucial for at least two purposes: to prepare the child to become a responsible adult citizen (including performing public political service), and to prepare the child to live a “life of the mind.”

Mortimer Adler, a former professor at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago, along with his colleague Robert Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, had a particularly developed view on the purpose of education. All men need an education, Adler and Hutchins said, because all men have political power and leisure time. The purpose of education, in this view, is preparation for responsible citizenship and for a lofty, intelligent use of one’s free time. Because each citizen has a voice in public policy, they say, he is entrusted with the responsibility of using that power wisely. He must be familiar with historic arguments regarding law, government, and morality so that he may exercise his political power in an informed, intelligent way. The leisure time that is available in modern society gives him the opportunity to exercise this political power (which he would not have were he working the fields night and day) and allows him to pursue a course of self-improvement. Adler, an admirer of Aristotle, believes that this self-improvement consists in development of the mind, in the exercise of man’s distinctive feature: the faculty of reason.

Whatever the flaws in this view (and I will argue that there are major ones), it is certainly admirable compared to the “progressives’” anti-educational view that the purpose of education is “social adjustment.”

In order to prepare children for responsible, fulfilling adulthood, each of the three authors offers a rigorous curriculum focusing on all the core subjects.

Adler’s Paideia Proposal is an educational manifesto aimed at reforming the public school system by outlining a proper approach to elementary education. This proposal argues for universal, systematic education in each of the core subjects, with a focus on the cultivation of intellectual powers. The word “Paideia” comes from a Greek word meaning “the upbringing of a child” and is closely related to the Latin word for “the humanities.” It signifies the general learning that is necessary to all human beings.

In his Paideia Proposal, Adler condemns the use of an elective system prior to the university level.

The pragmatist “progressives” had denied the possibility of universal knowledge and had given primacy to “experience.” Each child’s experiences are different from every other, the argument goes, so we need an educational program that caters to these differences—including by omitting what are traditionally regarded as crucial subjects but do not reflect these differences. Adler, by contrast, believes that all men, as rational beings, are essentially similar and have the same basic educational requirements. “Individual differences,” he says, “are always differences in degree, never differences in kind.”<sup>12</sup>

Because the Paideia Proposal focuses on the needs common to all men, the Paideia program comprises only those subjects that contribute to the development of essential intellectual skills. The core curriculum includes language, mathematics, the natural sciences, and history, with a focus on Western civilization. In defense of this highly selective list of subjects, Adler says, “They comprise the essential branches of learning. . . . They provide the learner with indispensable knowledge about nature and culture, the world in which we live, our social institutions, and ourselves.”<sup>13</sup>

Adler stresses the importance of integration within and among each of these core subjects. He says that the “interconnectedness” and “interdependence” of the major branches of science must be stressed. He says that the formal study of history should be “sequential and systematic, combining a narration of events with knowledge of social, political, and economic institutions and diverse phases of cultural development.” In contrast to the disconnected hodgepodge advocated by the “progressives,” the Paideia Proposal says that liberal education consists importantly in the ability to see the interrelations of subject matter.

Adler is also a cocreator of the Great Books program of education. The Great Books Foundation was created in 1947 by Adler and Robert Hutchins. The purpose of this foundation was to promote the use of the great writings of the Western tradition as the cornerstone of American education. Adler and Hutchins believed that the essence of a good, liberal education is exposure to the seminal works of the Western mind in the realms of religion and philosophy, literature, history, politics and economics, and mathematics and the natural sciences. Adler and Hutchins argue that it is the Great Books that teach man to think deeply about the most fundamental, most critical questions shaping man and society, about issues such as the nature of the soul, the ideal form of government, and the meaning and purpose of life.

Hutchins and Adler argue that the questions addressed by the Great Books are timeless and universal. By confronting the most abstract problems faced by man, these books present ideas that endure throughout the generations and offer eternal solutions to present problems. As such, they do not become dated or outmoded, but always remain fundamental to a good education. Hutchins does say that every new generation must reassess its traditions, and suggests that each new era will see some great works supersede others. However, he believes that this will be a rare event, because the Great

Books are abstract and universal and therefore are not invalidated by the changing times.

According to the advocates of the Great Books program, it is those who have read and understood the great works of human history who are equipped to analyze any new argument presented to them. They are armed against propaganda and unreason. The Great Books both supply the reader with essential knowledge from all the major branches of human study and train him to develop good “habits of mind.” A student of the Great Books develops powers of reasoning in the act of following the rigorous, thoroughly-argued works of the authors and through the mental effort and concentration that comprehension of them demands.

To summarize, Adler’s educational program of the Paideia Proposal and the Great Books promises to give students the crucial knowledge and thinking skills they need for adult life—with an emphasis on exposure to, and grappling with, the great works of the great minds of Western civilization.

Another approach to a classical curriculum is that offered by E. D. Hirsch, a former University of Virginia professor and an acclaimed educational author. His program is called the Core Knowledge curriculum. The Core Knowledge Foundation was created by Hirsch, who, in addition to writing the book *Cultural Literacy*, is the author of the popular educational series *What Your 1st–6th Grader Needs to Know*. The Core Knowledge curriculum is also endorsed by former Secretary of Education William Bennett in his best-selling book *The Educated Child*.

Hirsch harshly criticizes the Romanticist-progressive tradition of denigrating “facts,” “content,” or “subject-matter,” and of promoting things such as “emotional well-being” or “spontaneous development” over actual education. He urges schools to place a renewed emphasis on *content* with the goal of producing students who are “culturally literate”—which means that they “possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world.”<sup>14</sup>

The appendix of *Cultural Literacy* includes a list compiled by Hirsch of five thousand names, phrases, and ideas that he believes every educated adult should know. He argues that one must be equipped with this stock of important, communally-shared information if one is to function successfully in the modern world.

Hirsch says that cultural literacy is a prerequisite to effective communication among the members of a society. Being culturally literate, he says, allows one to enter the “Great Conversation”: an ongoing, communal discussion, through the ages, of the timeless questions faced by man. A shared educational background in the most culturally relevant concepts provides all men with a common cultural heritage; it facilitates communication among all educated men by ensuring that they share the bond of common wisdom.

Hirsch laments the generations of educators who have disparaged the teaching of facts as “drill and

kill,” and who have asserted that such didactic instruction is necessarily “dry,” “fragmented,” and “inhumane.” He argues that the fundamental responsibility of the school is to convey to students a body of core knowledge, so that they face the world equipped with a repertoire of background concepts that will enable them to grasp what they hear and read. In the words of William Bennett, “Elementary schools hold the responsibility of transmitting to each new generation what may be called our ‘common culture,’ the things that bind Americans together as one people. In its highest form, this common culture is the sum of our intellectual inheritance, our legacy from all the past ages that have gone before us.”<sup>15</sup>

To ensure the successful transmission of this intellectual legacy, Hirsch says there must be a universal, clearly defined curriculum that identifies the common stock of concepts that are to be taught to all students of a given grade. Just as a writer must be able to assume certain general knowledge on the part of the average reader, he says, a teacher must be able to assume familiarity with certain concepts on the part of his students. The ability to learn something new, he argues, depends on the student being able to accommodate it to something he already knows.

We can see in Hirsch a greater emphasis on cultural communication than in Adler, whose emphasis is more on the cultivation of the intellect. Yet both share an obvious affinity for a content-filled core curriculum and a disdain for much of the nonsense of progressive education.

A final secular classical curriculum is found in the popular book *The Well-Trained Mind*, which is subtitled “A Guide to Classical Education at Home.” This book has been a sensation among homeschoolers, in part because it provides detailed, systematic, practical advice for parents trying to give their children a superior education at home. It is cowritten by Jessie Wise, a disgruntled schoolteacher who made the decision to educate her own children at home, and her homeschooled daughter Susan Wise Bauer. Together, they have tried to create a blueprint for similarly dissatisfied parents who want to take education into their own hands.

I myself have recommended this book in the past to parents who are faced with the daunting task of creating a curriculum from scratch for every subject at every grade level. *The Well-Trained Mind* recommends resources that are superior to those used in the public schools for the teaching of such things as grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and math. It provides lists of classic novels arranged by their relevance to different periods of history. It includes a chronological outline of major figures and events as a guide to a good history course, and suggests corresponding biographies and nonfiction books that are suitable for children. Like Adler’s and Hirsch’s curricula, it focuses on intensive instruction in reading, writing, math, science, history, and geography—in addition to the less conventional subjects of logic and rhetoric.

Looking at simply the subject matter, these three curricula are incredibly refreshing compared with

what most of us have experienced or seen our children experience. They seem like the basis for a proper education. But severe defects in all three are revealed when we examine them from the vital aspect of the *method* and *sequence* by which they are taught.

The issue of the sequence in which knowledge is presented to students is, as I argued in “The Hierarchy of Knowledge: The Most Neglected Issue in Education,” absolutely vital to a proper education. Quoting that essay:

There is a *necessary order* to the formation of concepts and generalizations. A child cannot form the concept of “organism” until he has first formed the concepts of “plant” and “animal”; he cannot grasp the concept of “animal” until he has first formed concepts such as “dog” and “cat”; and so on. The pedagogical implication of the fact that there is a necessary order to the formation of abstract knowledge is that you must teach concepts and generalizations in their proper order. An abstract idea—whether a concept, generalization, principle, or theory—should never be taught to a child unless he has already grasped those ideas that necessarily precede it in the hierarchy, all the way down to the perceptual level.<sup>16</sup>

Let us explore the Classical theorists’ approach to this vital issue, beginning with E. D. Hirsch.

Hirsch explicitly discusses the issue of the sequence of teaching content in order for a child to become “culturally literate,” stressing that children must be made *familiar* in advance with the concepts or ideas used in teaching a new subject. He offers the following example: If an elementary teacher is giving his students a lesson about the circulation of electrons around the nucleus of an atom, he can make this more intelligible by analogy to the revolution of the planets around this sun. However, this analogy can only serve to illuminate the concept of electrons, he says, if his students are already familiar with the structure of the solar system. Schools must therefore have an explicit, thoroughly documented curriculum that is the same for all students so that they all have the same mental hooks on which to hang new information.

If this sounds like respect for the hierarchy of knowledge and thus the requirements of true understanding, it is not. “Familiarity” is not understanding, and Hirsch’s approach is utterly anti-hierarchical. His example of teaching elementary students about the circulation of electrons around a nucleus must necessarily stand in their minds as an article of faith; the analogy to the solar system does not change this. A young grade-schooler should not even be introduced to the concept of an electron. Nor, for that matter, should he be taught about the revolution of the planets—until and unless he can follow the evidence offered by Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo for the structure of the solar system. Hirsch does not recognize the fact that true, conceptual understanding requires a *hierarchically* sequential presentation of concepts. He hands students high-level abstractions without the more basic knowledge necessary to grasp them, and he views their passive and unthinking reception of these abstractions as knowledge.

This is not an isolated example. Here is some of the sequence of concepts that Hirsch’s Core Knowledge Foundation says should be taught in science class:

**Kindergarten:** Magnetism, the idea of forces we cannot see . . .

**First Grade:** Basic concept of atoms . . .

**Second Grade:** Magnetic fields; law of attraction . . .

**Fourth Grade:** Atoms are made up of even smaller particles: protons, neutrons, electrons; concept of electrical charge: proton has positive charge; electron has negative charge; neutron has no charge . . .

**Fifth Grade:** Electrons move around the nucleus in paths called shells (or energy levels); the Periodic Table: organizes elements with common properties

**Sixth Grade:** Energy is conserved in a system; Energy transfer: matter changes phase by adding or removing energy.<sup>17</sup>

Here we can see, among numerous violations of hierarchy, children being given a “basic concept” of atoms in the first grade, “learning” about the charge of protons and electrons in fourth grade, and being introduced to the periodic table in fifth grade. But consider the sequence in which these items of knowledge actually came to be known. The proof of the existence of atoms came in the late 19th century and depended on centuries of scientific knowledge, including Faraday’s work with electricity, Avogadro’s discoveries about molecules, and Dalton’s experiments in chemistry, whose work in turn depended on the many scientists before them. Students are properly taught about atoms only *after* they have learned the long history of physics that made possible the discovery of atoms, at which time they are able to thoroughly grasp the arguments for their existence.

Hirsch’s apparent insistence on facts, content, and subject matter comes in pleasant contrast to his progressive predecessors, but his position is destroyed by the fact that his program treats all facts as if they were created equal. For him, a fact, at any level of abstraction, is merely a fact. But all facts are *not* of equal importance in the education of a child. Some facts are essential to a child’s education; others are nonessential; and still others are irrelevant. Further, there is no uniform body of “facts” that need merely be handed down to the next generation. For a child to really grasp something as fact, he must understand it—which means he must possess the prerequisite information that makes it intelligible and be able to integrate it with the rest of his knowledge. Anything else is the mindless mouthing of dogmatic commandments from an educational authority.

Because the Core Knowledge sequence is not founded on an understanding of the hierarchical structure of concepts, it is not really a sequence at all. Topics are arbitrarily assigned to different grade levels, and facts are taught without the prerequisite knowledge that would allow a child to genuinely grasp them.

Hirsch says explicitly that a proper theory of education “deems it neither wrong nor unnatural to teach young children adult information before they fully understand it,” because of the fact “that a human group must have effective communications to function effectively, that effective communications require shared culture, and that shared culture requires transmission of specific information to children.”<sup>18</sup> (How people are to communicate “effectively” using concepts they do not “fully understand” is a question Hirsch does not answer. Our present state of cultural debate, however, offers us innumerable examples of how individuals communicate *ineffectively* using concepts they do not understand and do not feel the need to understand.)

The students at VanDamme Academy would never tolerate Hirsch’s approach. Several years ago, Tom VanDamme was teaching geology to his class of fifth- and sixth-grade students. He took a historical approach, teaching students step-by-step the advancements made in the history of geology, from the first geological mapping in the 18th century to plate tectonics. He began the course with a discussion of prescientific geological theories, which were deduced from the Biblical story of the Great Flood. Much later in the course, he taught the students about Hutton’s estimate of the age of the Earth. In contrast to his usual, hierarchical method, he made the mistake of presenting Hutton’s conclusion first, and then offered evidence to support it. This did not get past the students. When Mr. VanDamme began the class with Hutton’s answer, Casey, an astute ten-year-old girl, immediately raised her hand and asked, “Isn’t that just like the guys who made their theory from the Great Flood, because it isn’t based on evidence?” The students had come to expect—as they should—a step-by-step process of integrating evidence to arrive at a conclusion, and their minds rebelled at a conclusion that came as a bolt from the blue.

Filling a child’s head with such bolts from the blue is not education, but indoctrination. So, although Hirsch’s focus on Western civilization is refreshing, it is thoroughly undermined by his pedagogical method.

Another example of this wrong approach is offered by Hirsch-admirer William Bennett in *The Educated Child*. A good school, says Bennett, must from the beginning teach every child to love his country. He praises the words of Noah Webster, who said that as soon as a child “opens his lips, he should rehearse the history of his own country; he should lisp the praise of liberty, and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen who have wrought a revolution in her favor.”<sup>19</sup> One who loves this country and the principle of rational individualism on which it was founded would find no inspiration in a child’s mindless lisp of praise for liberty (a concept that most adults today, including Bennett, woefully misunderstand).

Let us turn now to Adler’s prescribed teaching methodology, which has problems similar to Hirsch’s.

Adler’s Paideia Proposal includes explicit modes of teaching that apply to every subject within the

core curriculum. The first mode of teaching is what Adler calls “didactic instruction” or “teaching by telling.” Didactic instruction can come in the form of a lecture from the teacher or in the form of written material; what makes it *didactic* in nature is that the student is being told what he should know. Didactic instruction is, in essence, the conveyance of established facts to students, who must simply accept and retain the ready-made truths provided to them.

The second mode of teaching is what Adler calls “coaching sessions.” “Coaching” consists of one-on-one conversation between the teacher and student. The teacher probes, questions, and guides the student through the doing or revising of his own work.

The final mode of teaching is what he calls “seminars.”

Seminars can be likened to the Socratic method in that they involve neither teaching didactically nor coaching, but rather consist in questioning and encouraging a student in the independent use of his mind. The subject of a seminar, says Adler, should not be a textbook or other simple, straightforwardly factual work. As mere catalogues of facts and information, he says, such works are “undiscussable.” The subjects of seminars instead should be the Great Books, whose subjects are ideas, fundamental issues, broad abstractions.

“Didactic instruction,” “coaching sessions,” and “seminars” are not regarded by Adler as equally important; he regards seminars as supremely important—the essence of liberal education, including early education.

The problem with this approach is that it is inordinately focused on questions involving higher-level abstractions that young students are not capable of understanding and on a method of learning (seminars) that is hierarchically inappropriate for children and young teenagers.

Let us take first the issue of the intense focus on the moral-philosophical questions raised by the Great Books.

As I wrote in “Teaching Values in the Classroom”:

Thinking about and understanding moral issues on [a highly] abstract level requires a multitude of life experiences, a high degree of psychological maturity, and a basic grasp of both human nature and history. To ask [for example] a 10-year-old to give other people advice about conscience is a brazen violation of the hierarchy of knowledge—the order in which content must be taught if it is to be grasped by the student. [It is wrong to expect students] to understand highly abstract, philosophical concepts and conclusions before they have the necessary range of experiences to give meaning to those concepts and conclusions. . . .

Rather, discussion of values can and should arise naturally out of the curriculum, because moral principles are generalizations about the requirements of man’s life on earth drawn from

experience by means of reason. A proper curriculum presents the relevant facts of a given subject in a way that students can grasp those facts in relation to the requirements of life. . . .

[E]xtensive knowledge of the world; of the history of man and the consequences of his ideas and actions; of the great discoveries of science, how they were made, and what they made possible; of the classics of literature and the characters and situations they describe; these are the raw material from which rational moral principles—such as honesty, purpose, justice, liberty—are drawn.<sup>20</sup>

By attempting to teach excessively high-level abstractions to young children, Adler’s prescription necessarily comes at the expense of the content needed to deal effectively with these issues—and encourages the practice of “discussing” and “thinking about” them before one is actually capable of doing so. This last is the effect of the seminars that Adler regards as essential to education.

In my view, every class in elementary and junior high school should be conducted in a *lecture* format. The teacher must be an authority on the subject, he must grasp its basic purpose, he must carefully define the knowledge to be conveyed by reference to that purpose, and he must present that knowledge in a hierarchical, integrated, and engaging form.

When I teach a literature class, for example, I go into each class armed with an understanding of the value of studying literature and the knowledge that this value is derived primarily from an appreciation of the novel’s plot, an understanding of the basic nature of the characters, and a clear grasp of the novel’s theme. These broad goals then guide me in defining the goal of any particular class. If I am teaching Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Arrowsmith*, for example, I might give one class about the idealistic characters and in what way they are doomed to suffering in the world, another about those who abandon their ideals and achieve practical “success,” another about the basic moral-practical dichotomy this implies, and another contrasting this view with that of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*. In each class, I would set out to convey a definite point about the novel and to methodically lead the students to a clear understanding of the issue through the events of the novel. I would not conduct the class as a question-and-answer, back-and-forth bull session.

It is certainly appropriate to ask students abstract questions that draw upon their prior knowledge and that they therefore have the context to answer; I do this all the time. But questioning of the students should be secondary to the teacher’s directed, purposeful, positive presentation of a clearly defined body of knowledge. For every class, the teacher should seek to convey definite knowledge, presenting the essential facts and integrating those facts into abstract conclusions, thereby leading the students to a clear understanding while also modeling rational thought. (This does not entail passivity on the part of the students. On the contrary, they will be engaged in answering questions when appropriate, asking questions that occur to them, making connections with other relevant items of their knowledge, and *following* the logical progression laid out by the teacher—which itself is an active-minded process.)

Adler’s seminars, because they come far too early in a child’s education, will inevitably turn into the ignorant, “student-driven” bull sessions commonly associated with progressive education.

For the Great Books and Paideia Programs, reasoning is not the exercise of a conceptual faculty firmly grounded in reality and developed inductively from perceptual evidence; rather, it is the systematic baseless assertion of broad abstractions. It is for this reason that the Great Books, with their deep, timeless, and fundamental issues, become the focus of an educational program, with little attention given to the knowledge and preparation one needs to think properly about such questions. It is also for this reason that the Paideia Proposal gives emphasis to the mode of teaching that Adler calls “seminars.” It is in these seminars that the child grapples with big issues he is incapable of dealing with, rather than learning rudimentary facts or developing low-level skills.

One gets the impression, upon reading Adler, that he regards the process of gaining knowledge as less important than the process of discussing philosophical questions (as if there is a separation between the two). In fact, he and Hutchins state this more or less explicitly. In Hutchins’s *Great Books: the Foundation of a Liberal Education*, he writes: “Childhood and youth are no time to get an education. They are the time to get ready to get an education.”<sup>21</sup> Adler echoes this view in *The Paideia Proposal*, saying, “Youth is an insuperable obstacle to being an educated person.”<sup>22</sup>

On this view, youth is a sort of waiting period in which children do warm-up exercises for the mind, while also filling their minds indiscriminately with “facts,” until they reach adulthood and consequently gain license to enter the world of real thought full-time.

In fact, childhood education is essentially the same as adult education—just less abstract. It is in childhood that one begins building the complex, interrelated structure of concepts that leads ultimately to the broad issues that Adler and Hutchins identify as the essence of education. But by giving these issues a superiority and emphasis over hierarchically prior knowledge, Adler and Hutchins write a prescription for pseudo-knowledge and pseudo-thought.

Let us turn to the methodology of *The Well Trained Mind*, with its philosophy of the trivium and quadrivium.

Here is an outline of the trivium and quadrivium. In the medieval period, the educated man first studied the trivium, which consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and then the quadrivium, which consisted of astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, and music. The trivium was to provide him with the power of words: the ability to understand, decipher, analyze, and eloquently use language. The quadrivium was to introduce him to the natural world. In the trivium, “grammar” included an intensive study of Latin, as preparation to study the writings of the Church. “Logic” was training in the art of reasoning through dialogue or debate to arrive at new truths, primarily in the realm of

theology. (This is where, for example, a student would engage in debate over questions of the “how many angels can fit on the head of a pin?” type.) “Rhetoric” was guidance in the skill of writing a compelling speech, with attention to such things as arrangement and style. After mastering the trivium, the medieval student was to become versed in the subject matter of the quadrivium. From the trivium, he would gain transferable intellectual skills; from the quadrivium, he would gain a corpus of knowledge.

Observe that, in this sequence, thought, concepts, and logic *precede* and are regarded as prerequisites to knowledge of reality. First, you are to dive into the world of abstractions, learning how to grasp, manipulate, and logically interrelate concepts to arrive at deductive truths. Then, once you have gained a command of language and logic in a contentless void, you are to apply these skills to the outside world.

In the trivium’s sharp division between thinking skills and content, with thinking skills coming *before* content, we can see in consistent form the same methodological and philosophic error that underlies Adler, Hirsch, and other secular classic educational theorists. This is the error known as *rationalism*.

The term “rationalism,” in this context, does not mean observing reality and going by reason; rather, it means attempting to use reason *apart from* reality; it is the fallacy of forming or using abstractions without regard to the concrete facts (if any) that underlie and give rise to those abstractions. Rationalism is an erroneous method of thinking because, although abstractions are tools for grasping reality, they are valid only if and to the extent that they are based on reality, consistent with reality, and used to understand and succeed in reality.

In all cases so far of classical education, we see the advocacy of “learning” and “reasoning” with abstractions that are detached from reality. From the principles of electron movement “taught” to young children under Hirsch’s curriculum, to the Great Books seminar dominated by a thirteen-year-old under Adler’s Proposal, to the “logic” studied in a vacuum under the trivium—in each case, students are being taught to “think” with what Ayn Rand called “floating abstractions,” that is, abstractions disconnected from, and thus inapplicable to, reality.

To be fair to *The Well-Trained Mind*, its authors interpret the trivium in such a loose and charitable manner that the method appears almost plausible. But even as presented in *The Well-Trained Mind*, the trivium is an essentially rationalistic theory, and it should not be confused with a proper, hierarchical approach to education.

*The Well-Trained Mind* adopts the theory of the trivium, with its division into grammar, logic, and rhetoric; however, rather than severing these skills from the study of subject matter, it presents them as developmental stages through which a child progresses in his study of subjects such as math, science, and history. They do not precede content, but rather model the way in which a child masters

content at various stages of intellectual maturity.

The grammar stage, which roughly corresponds to grades one through four, is described as the stage at which the child learns facts. Children at this stage are said to love simply to consume information, and even delight in the process of memorization. It is therefore the educator’s responsibility to fill their minds with stories, rules, and information that will serve as the building blocks for the study of each subject.

The logic stage, which is said to correspond to grades five through eight, is allegedly the time when a student begins to look for cause and effect and to interrelate the knowledge he has gained in various subjects. He is no longer content with mere facts, but seeks explanations and connections.

The rhetoric stage, which approximately corresponds to grades nine through twelve, is the stage at which the child learns “to write and speak with force and originality.” This is the time when he takes the knowledge and skills he has gained in the prior stages and uses them to make and persuasively express his own independent conclusions.

If this theory is interpreted in a rough, commonsense way, it sounds plausible. Young children amass facts: from the sounds of the letters, to the multiplication tables, to the names of a universe of entities. Notice, however, what the authors of *The Well-Trained Mind* mean by the “facts” acquired at the grammar stage. They say that the grammar stage (grades one through four, remember) is “the first time your child will encounter Egyptian embalming rites or the atmosphere of Venus; this is the first time he will understand what light is made of or why Americans rebelled against the British.”<sup>23</sup> Everything—from religious rituals, to analysis of major political events, to the most abstract discoveries in science—is placed under the heading of “facts.” *The Well-Trained Mind* regards it as the educator’s job to stockpile a young mind with such facts.

Like Hirsch’s Core Knowledge catalogue, *The Well-Trained Mind* fails to differentiate facts at various levels of abstraction. Facts are simply the automatically given raw material from which logical conclusions are drawn and impassioned arguments made. In the first years of schooling, the child is supplied with all the facts known to man—no matter how these facts actually came to be known, and thus regardless of how these facts can be truly understood firsthand. In the logic stage, he learns how to relate and interconnect the facts to form arguments. In the rhetoric stage, he learns to use his catalogue of facts and skill at argument to create new ideas and present them in a compelling manner. How is he to know that the said facts are facts? The answer is that he simply does not know; he is to accept them as facts because an authority says so.

In addition to constituting an appeal to authority, *The Well-Trained Mind*, because it is not grounded in a proper understanding of abstractions, is filled with recommendations that are wildly inappropriate

to the student’s level of intellectual maturity. Although it offers a few recommendations of good, developmentally appropriate children’s novels, it also suggests that six- to nine-year-olds be introduced to Dickens, Jonathan Swift, Wordsworth, and Tennyson; that ten- to thirteen-year-olds read about and debate such issues as the atomic bomb, the Cold War, and the New Deal; that high school students read Aristotle’s *Physics*, Einstein’s *Relativity*, and Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. If knowledge is just a grab bag of facts that can be presented to any child at any stage of development, nothing bars a second grader from British social commentary; the fifth grader from complex, controversial political debate; and the high school freshman from abstract discussion of the nature of space and time.

It is clearly a mistake to treat all knowledge as first-level knowledge or to teach floating abstractions under the heading of “facts.” But it is equally a mistake to divide the learning process into the artificial stages of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Beyond the immediate, perceptual level of knowledge, the acquisition of *all* knowledge at *every* stage requires grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Consider what it would be like to try to conduct a discussion of a children’s novel, such as *Pippi Longstocking*, with a “grammar-stage” child while adhering strictly to the idea that this is the stage at which he merely consumes facts. The student would be restricted to reciting the plot of the story, or repeating abstractions force-fed to him by the teacher. In contrast to this approach, when Cornelia Lockitch taught this novel at my school, the students were asked, for example, to identify things Pippi had done that would make it difficult for her to fit in at school; to explain what about Pippi’s manner of serving and eating cake was impolite; and to suggest how she could have done it differently. At the conclusion of the novel, they were asked to write their own Pippi adventure, drawing from their understanding of the character and the kinds of mischief she is famous for. In these exercises, they do not just recount facts but logically piece together information to draw conclusions and use their knowledge to generate new, independent ideas, however simple those ideas might be.

There is no stage in a child’s development during which it is proper to teach him facts apart from their relationships to one another, because beyond the perceptual level, no fact is self-contained, or intelligible on its own, independent of connections to and differentiations from the rest of his knowledge. While teaching a young child the meaning of the word “renowned,” you would not properly ask him to memorize the definition and part of speech. You might offer examples of historical figures who could be called renowned and ask the students to think of examples of their own; you might compare “renowned” to “famous” or “infamous,” identifying the common element of their meanings and making clear the distinctions among them; you might ask the students to think of an antonym for renowned; you might ask them to write a fictional paragraph that describes someone who goes from obscurity to renown. Such exercises, which require connections, differentiations, applications, and creativity from the child, are essential to his coming to thoroughly grasp the meaning of the word.

If the theory underlying *The Well-Trained Mind* is taken seriously, and its practical advice accepted wholesale, it is a recipe for a rationalistic curriculum.

All of the movements I have discussed, the Great Books program, the Paideia Proposal, the Core Knowledge program, and the program offered in *The Well-Trained Mind*, share a stated respect for the intellect and for abstract thought, in contrast to the past century of schools dominated by the “progressive” movement. However, their respect for abstractions becomes almost meaningless because they do not understand the real nature of abstractions. The Pragmatist “progressives” fall into what is called the empiricist philosophic tradition; they are mired in concretes, emotions, and disintegrated, subjective “experiences”—logic and abstractions be damned. The classical educationists instead advocate a method that is fundamentally rationalistic; they promote abstract thought, logic, integration, and universal truths, but it is a world of abstractions that is disconnected from the concrete, perceptual world around us.

The negative consequences of a secular classical education are legion. Fundamentally, such an education fails to deliver on its promise to give students the knowledge and thinking methods they need for adult life. It fails to provide a true understanding of the crucial facts that students need to know, and it trains them in a method of dealing with abstractions that leaves them incapable of knowing what they are talking about—while simultaneously assuring them that they do know. For endless examples of this phenomenon, see the public debate over crucial cultural and political issues. See the discussions of “the universal desire for freedom” (in total ignorance of the actual attitude toward freedom of most peoples throughout history); see the confident pronouncements of catastrophic global warming by everyone from actors to seven-year-olds, without a hint of the requisite knowledge to make such claims; see the discussions of the latest foreign policy crisis, without a knowledge of the past sixty years of American history, let alone Greek or Roman military history.

The rationalism that unites the various forms of secular classical education leaves them ill-equipped to provide a proper alternative to “progressive” education. Instead, it paves the way for an insidious educational movement that explicitly and passionately defends rationalism in education: Christian classical education. This disturbingly prominent movement is led by authors such as Dorothy Sayers and Douglas Wilson. These authors offer a far more consistent and far more ominous expression of the same philosophic principles underlying the secular programs.

## **Christian Classical Education**

Christian classical education enjoys phenomenal popularity among today’s homeschoolers, some 75 percent of whom are evangelical Christians. Evangelical homeschoolers are disillusioned with what they view as overly secular public schools, and even overly secular “religious schools.”

Exponents of Christian classical education are even more anti-progressive education than their secular counterparts—and, perhaps surprisingly, they promise phenomenal educational benefits that would appeal to any secular parent. For example, the website of Foundations Academy, a Christian classical school in Idaho, says:

There is no greater task for education than to teach students how to learn. The influence of “progressive” teaching methods and the oversimplification of textbooks make it difficult for students to acquire the mental discipline that traditional instruction methods once cultivated. The classical method develops independent learning skills on the foundation of language, logic, and tangible fact. The classical difference is clear when students are taken beyond conventionally taught subjects and asked to apply their knowledge through logic and clear expression. . . . Is classical Christian education still relevant? Yes, more now than ever. Our world is accelerating as technological, cultural, and geo-political forces reshape our daily lives. The subject matter and skills required in the market are evolving and changing rapidly. However, thinking, articulate people are always in demand. Those who are able to acquire new skills rapidly and independently are sought after regardless of the field. Classical Christian education has a proven track record of turning out these types of students. . . .

Classical education teaches students facts, provides them with logical tools to use those facts, and perfects the student’s ability to relate those facts to others. This fundamental skill-set is more valuable today than it has ever been. . . . Classical education helps students draw original, creative, and accurate conclusions from facts and then formulate those conclusions into logical and persuasive arguments. . . .

In short, we help ordinary children and deliver extraordinary results by employing proven methods tested for centuries.<sup>24</sup>

This is an exceptional sales pitch, and many other Christian classical schools promise benefits that are just as universally compelling. But real thinking ability and real knowledge are the exact opposite of what they achieve.

As I indicated earlier, today’s Christian classical educators take seriously the trivium. They are heavily influenced by Dorothy Sayers, whom you may know as a British mystery writer. In 1947, Sayers delivered a speech at Oxford called “The Lost Tools of Learning.” This speech, republished as an essay, was responsible for reviving interest in the medieval trivium, particularly within the homeschooling movement—and it is cited frequently in *The Well-Trained Mind*. The version of the trivium endorsed by Dorothy Sayers is much more insidiously rationalistic than the watered-down version presented in *The Well-Trained Mind*.

Sayers titled her essay “The Lost Tools of Learning” because she believes it is the *tools of thought* that have been lost from education; she laments the modern man’s inability to define his terms precisely, to distinguish scholarly from unscholarly arguments, to identify what is or is not relevant to an argument, or to present his own ideas in a logical and persuasive form. She believes the solution to this problem is to reinstate the study of the trivium before the study of the traditional subjects. Before

you can learn subjects, she says, you must learn *methods of dealing with subjects*.

Here, in summary, is Sayers’s explanation of the three stages of the trivium. In the grammar stage, she says, “anything and everything which can be usefully committed to memory should be memorized . . . whether it is immediately intelligible or not.” At the logic stage, the student is to engage in analysis, argument, and debate. That he has little knowledge from which to draw the material of his argument is of no concern to Sayers. Why? First, because “every syllogism whose major premise is in the form ‘All A is B’ can be recast in hypothetical form” and “the practical utility of Formal Logic today lies not so much in the establishment of positive conclusions as in the prompt detection and exposure of invalid inference.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the practical value of teaching students formal logic lies not so much in the fact that it will aid them in the discovery of truths as in the fact that it will aid them in analyzing self-contained arguments apart from their correspondence to reality. Second, she notes that the subjects of medieval argument were usually drawn from theology, and says that suitable material can be drawn either from theology or from a child’s daily life. She gives the following as a model of the “natural and proper thirst of the awakening reason” at the logic stage:

[A] small number of boys enjoyed themselves for days arguing about an extraordinary shower of rain which had fallen in their town—a shower so localized that it left one half of the main street wet and the other dry. Could one, they argued, properly say that it had rained that day on or over the town or only in the town? How many drops of water were required to constitute rain?<sup>26</sup>

At this point in his education, the student has memorized facts he does not understand, then proceeded to engage in pointless, semantic debates with no concern about the truth or falsity of his premises. He is now ready for the rhetoric stage, in which he uses his non-knowledge and pseudo-reason to persuade others of what he does not really know and cannot really prove.

A well-meaning parent, hearing of Christian classical education’s emphasis on the trivium, and hearing it described as a method of teaching practical thinking skills, might conclude that it would make a good foundation for his child’s education. Even a non-religious parent might be tempted to send a child to an openly Christian classical school or to use Christian classical resources, hoping that the religious element is peripheral and more than compensated for by an outstanding education. After all, Christian classical resources are cited and recommended throughout the secularly-popular *Well-Trained Mind*.

But exponents of Christian classical education are clear on the role of Christianity in Christian classical education: A proper education, with the depth of knowledge and thinking abilities they promise, can be achieved only through a thoroughly Christian education. And the method used in Christian classical education invariably entails Christian content.

Here is Foundations Academy in the same document in which it promises universally appealing

educational benefits, writing to assuage the fears of Christian parents who worry that their school will not have a Bible class:

Some parents fear that the classical method will overshadow the importance of Christianity in their child’s education. Classical and Christian schools understand that a Bible class is not enough. Yes, most classical and Christian schools have Bible classes. However, the real power is in teaching ALL subjects from the perspective of the Christian worldview.<sup>27</sup>

Why must a proper education be rooted in Christianity? They offer two arguments for this. The first can be called “the argument from non-neutrality.” The second can be called “the argument from the necessity of integration.”

The argument from non-neutrality holds that it is impossible for education to be philosophically or religiously neutral; any given curriculum must, at least implicitly, take a stance on many issues of religion and philosophy. The mission statement of Logos School, an institution founded by leading Christian classical theorist Douglas Wilson, says: “Every school must teach on the foundation of some kind of worldview. That worldview may be boldly stated, or it may be implicit—but, it is always present.”

This much is true.

Take the ongoing debate concerning creationism versus evolution in the schools. A naturalistic worldview, in which everything has a this-worldly explanation, is perfectly compatible with an explanation of the evolution of human beings by natural selection. But if one takes the literal story of creation as true, that is incompatible with the teaching of evolution.

Of course, the impossibility of neutrality leaves open the question of what should take precedence in schools—Christian dogma or truths discovered by observation and reason. But on this, the Christian classical educators are clear: The Bible is the revealed truth of God, period—and that Truth must be recognized, and never contradicted, throughout the entire curriculum.

Says Douglas Wilson, perhaps the most revered and influential Christian classical theorist today, “The facts of each subject are not ‘neutral’ facts. God knows where they go, and how they fit in.”<sup>28</sup> (How he knows “God,” let alone how he “knows” that his interpretation of what “God knows,” one of thousands of different ones, is right, is a question he cannot rationally answer.)

In Wilson’s book, *The Case for Christian Classical Education*, he approvingly cites the following quote from the influential early 20th-century theologian John Gresham Machen:

[T]he field of Christianity is the world. The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian, therefore,

cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into *some* relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup>

Lest you suppose this is an isolated case, here is the position of Foundations Academy, the same school that claimed to be ideal for the modern scientific and technological world, on this issue:

Conventional education operates on the philosophy that education is neutral—that it merely conveys fact and that facts do not require a spiritual context. We believe that facts, whether scientific, mathematical, historical, or otherwise, can only represent truth if they are taught in the context of a Christian worldview. There is no neutrality. For this reason, we found our classical curriculum on biblical truth to provide an education that is pervasively Christian. The classical method’s Christian worldview is more than a Bible class. It shows the natural world and its history through the lens of God’s sovereign will and decree.

And:

Classically educated students will not distinguish between “God’s creation” and “science”; between “God’s order” and “mathematics”; or between “Church history” and “world history.” Throughout the curriculum, an inseparable association exists between “subject-matter” and “spiritual matters.”<sup>30</sup>

The second argument Christian classical educators give for the imperative of a Christian education is the argument from integration—an argument that poses a legitimate challenge, though absolutely not a legitimate solution, to secular classical educators.

Recall that the secular classical educators stressed the necessity of *integrating* the knowledge within and between subjects. The Christian classical educators, citing this idea, declare that a proper education must be *completely* integrated, with a “final synthesis” that gives everything else meaning and purpose.

Wilson writes: “When a student is taught to think, he will relate what he learns in one class to the information offered in another. But he can only do this when he has an integrating principle—something that will tie all the subjects together.”<sup>31</sup>

And of course, Christian classical educators “know” that Christianity is the necessary doctrine to give meaning, purpose, and coherence to all the rest of knowledge one acquires.

Dorothy Sayers, in “The Lost Tools of Learning,” writes of *theology* as the necessary culmination of a proper curriculum: “[T]heology is the mistress-science without which the whole educational structure will necessarily lack its final synthesis. Those who disagree about this will remain content to leave their pupil’s education still full of loose ends.”<sup>32</sup>

On the rationalist premise of classical education, this has a certain appeal. Rationalist thinkers throughout the ages have tried to construct theoretical systems that connect all knowledge into one fundamental abstract truth—for example, Plato’s Form of the Good. What the Christians are arguing is that no secular philosophy or philosopher can provide this desired integration—only God can.

All of this reflects a fundamental misunderstanding—indeed, a bastardization—of the nature and value of integration in knowledge. It is worth refuting, not just to understand the destructiveness of Christian classical education, but to indicate the positive, proper role of integration in education.

The basic truth ignored by the classical, especially Christian classical, advocacy of integration is this: Integrating abstractions is valid and valuable only if done in a form based on perceptual reality.

Let us observe this with two forms of integration: integrating from less abstract knowledge to more abstract knowledge, and integrating knowledge across different fields.

When we integrate from less abstract to more abstract, we unite two or more items of knowledge into a whole based on some real underlying similarity between them. To take a simple example, we integrate the concept of “man” and the concept of “cat” into the concept of “animal,” based on the numerous, important things they share in common (life, locomotion, perception, etc.) despite their many differences (claws, tail, volition, etc.). To take a much more complex example, Darwin integrated numerous observations about various species of animals, noticed certain denominators, and was able to grasp a causal mechanism (evolution by natural selection).

Integration based on real similarities enables us to discover fundamental principles that apply to wide categories of things.

Another form of integration is that of integrating new items of knowledge with existing ones, making knowledge into a unified, ever-growing, and ever-more-detailed whole. For instance, when the theory of evolution was first discovered, biologists connected it with their preexisting knowledge, which illuminated previous biological discoveries, and those discoveries helped clarify and illuminate the theory of evolution. Further discoveries in evolution, such as principles observed in laboratory experiments, followed the same pattern. Such integration, which we can call horizontal integration, also serves as a crucial *check* on previous knowledge; since we know that contradictions cannot exist in reality, if we discover a contradiction between a new idea and an old one, we know that at least one of them is not true.

In both these forms of integration, and with all others, there is tremendous cognitive value to be gained—but only if the items being connected are real knowledge, and only if the connection is based on real similarities. If not, “integration” is a formula for cognitive disaster.

Take the Christian approach to the theory of evolution, which fundamentalist Christians “check” with regard to Scripture and thus find utterly contradictory. This should be no surprise, as the theory of evolution is based on observation of reality, and the “truth” of Scripture is a matter of dogma. But the fundamentalist Christian response to the new knowledge is to throw it out, because it contradicts their old “knowledge”—“knowledge” not based on reality: non-knowledge. (And, of course, the attempt to make Christianity the ultimate integrating principle of all knowledge is exponentially more destructive.)

“Ultimate integrating principles” are valid only if they are based on perceptual reality. Historically, the issue of proper ultimate principles has rightly been the province of philosophy, specifically of *epistemology*—which seeks to discover principles of *method* that underlie the discovery of all knowledge—and of *ethics*—which seeks to discover principles of ends and means that underlie all proper action. But a philosophy is valid and valuable only if it is true—that is, based on the evidence of the senses. Christianity is not.

To make a fundamental integrator out of dogma is to turn integration from a tool for illuminating reality into a tool for ignoring reality. Here is Logos School’s summary of this sort of “integration”:

At Logos School, our foundational worldview is the unchangeable Word of God—the Bible. Because God created the world and everything in it, all creation is subject to Him. Because God revealed Himself in His creation, in the Bible, and in His Son Jesus Christ, we may confidently teach all subjects in the light of His Lordship.<sup>33</sup>

What Christian classical education provides for students is a fundamental, comprehensive source of ignorance. Its educators take Christian dogma—patently absurd fantasies—as the standard to which everything must be reconciled or thrown out.

Here is a summary of the section of “Modern World History Through the 20th Century” in a classical Christian curriculum:

[A] young man raised on a hatred of Christianity would take a trip on the Beagle and write a scientific work, even though he was not trained as a scientist, which offended science, but which, through propaganda and the help of the clergy, gradually became the standard by which all science was judged. His name was Charles Darwin. . . . Europe still convulsed with war, as it has done unceasingly, it seems, since the old Roman Empire: as Germany fought against Europe; the Russian Revolution traded the oppression of the czars for the oppression of the state; and the greatest war yet, World War II, taught us the results of Darwin’s philosophy lived out.<sup>34</sup>

(It is safe to assume that this “history” course will not tell students about Hitler’s ties with Christianity—or about the incredible explanatory power of the theory of evolution and the wondrous scientific advances it made possible.)

In every subject, the classical Christian educator recognizes that he must choose between literal Christian dogma and the actual facts—and he faithfully chooses dogma.

That such “educators” do this while claiming to be developing children’s *reasoning* ability is perverse, to put it mildly.

Nothing is more destructive to a child’s (or an adult’s) ability to reason than to be fed dogma and to swallow it. Reason functions by logically integrating observable facts of reality into a non-contradictory whole. In regard to every idea, a reasoning mind must ask: Is this supported by the facts of reality? And: How does this integrate with my other factual knowledge of reality? When a rational person spots a contradiction, he knows that at least one of his premises is wrong.

But what is he to do with the Bible—which, if taken literally, provides him with an endless stream of absurd falsehoods and unscientific assertions? Can a bush talk, as is claimed in the Old Testament? Can a man walk on water or turn it to wine, as Jesus is purported to have done? Was everything created *ex nihilo* in six days? Was man created in his current form? Have Christians not caused major atrocities throughout history—and are these atrocities not sanctioned by the Bible?

An education that places primacy on the observable, provable facts of reality can teach a child how to think and integrate; one that does not, short-circuits his mind by telling him to accept that which makes no sense and contradicts that which he knows.

The purpose of Christian classical education is neither to teach a student to think nor to teach him facts. To teach a student to think is to teach him to think *independently*—but independent thinking is incompatible with the acceptance of dogma and the tenets of Christianity.

Although Christian classical educators ignore or evade the contradiction between their curriculum and the cognitive requirements of a child’s mind, they openly boast about what they *do* wish to turn him into: a more effective “witness” for Jesus.

In response to a question of how to measure success in Christian classical education, Douglas Wilson writes: “You measure success by faithfulness to God. Does the next generation want to carry on in a covenantal faithfulness?”<sup>35</sup> He explains how Christian classical education is a means to become a more effective witness, saying:

It will help them [become more effective “witnesses”] because it will help them understand the world around them. How can they know what to *say* to someone when they have nothing to say. We do not just “witness” to an experience with God. We have to live faithfully in the world, and Christian education is the process of teaching us to do this.

Wilson says that a homeschool parent’s first and most sacred responsibility is to teach his children an

“all-encompassing love for God, including an intellectual love for God, all the time.”<sup>36</sup>

Everything in the curriculum is subordinate to the goal of breeding more effective “witnesses.” Take the issue of teaching logic, which Christian classical educators brag about. Logic, in their view, is not a means of identifying facts or rooting out contradictions or throwing out evidence-free claims. On the contrary, it is a means of linguistic manipulation, a means of connecting claims in the Bible to defend tenets of the Bible, a means of fending off irreligious arguments to defend the Gospel.

Wilson, like Sayers, advocates the trivium; like Sayers, he views the grammar stage as the time to amass facts, the logic stage as the time to learn the rules of argumentation, and the rhetoric stage as the time in which all prior knowledge is brought together and given transcendent significance through religion. He says, “In the rhetorical stage, they learn to take what they have learned and present a thoughtful presentation and apology for the Christian faith.”<sup>37</sup>

To summarize this perspective: Education is a means of making Christian dogma the centerpiece of life and training Christian “witnesses” to defend and spread the faith.

Disturbingly, the imperative to defend and spread the faith is often made with violent language about being at “war.” Douglas Wilson writes:

To be a Christian is to be in constant, total war. We have no say in the matter, and no one is exempt from serving. This war is not just some sideline feature of the Christian life. It is the Christian life. Every step toward seeing “every knee bow” before the Lord of glory is an act of war, whether in faithfulness or hatred. Until that point, the war is ruthless and relentless. The horrific enemy onslaught never ceases. . . .

Christians ought to be the most skeptical and imaginative people on the face of the earth. We ought, by God’s Spirit, to discipline ourselves and our children in the Fruit of the Spirit, the testimony of faithful warfare. And, most assuredly, we ought to live in the unhesitating confidence that Christ has conquered the enemy, “having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15).<sup>38</sup>

The kind of child Wilson wants to train is the opposite of an independent thinker; he is a slavish “witness”—someone willing to give up his mind, and if need be his life, for the Christian cause.

The non-“true believer” may find it hard to accept that such a movement is taken seriously in the modern era by untold millions of American homeschoolers. But it is. And it is dangerous in large part because it poses as the only possible contrast to the horrors of “progressive” education, leaving many with the impression that they must choose between a Christian “education” and a “progressive” non-education.

To grasp the breadth of Christian classical education’s anti-educational views, consider this: The

author of an extremely popular curriculum describes an “overall plan for education, laying out an entire curriculum for the home educator. This overall plan for education must have a theological center which encompasses every single subject.” Is this the curriculum of Foundations Academy or Logos School? No—it is a description of *The Well-Trained Mind* by its author, Susan Wise Bauer—not in the book (which mentions but downplays the authors’ religiosity) but in an essay on the Internet explaining the value of the book to Christians.

Bauer defends her and her mother’s impeccable Christian credentials, and defends the seeming secularity of the book by saying that *true* Christianity demands that textbook authors not provide “this theological center.”

Should my mother and I lay it all out for you, so that you can give your child a godly education? . . . We can provide you with a good plan for teaching grammar and math, but I do not believe that we should usurp the job of your believing community by explaining the ways of God in history to your children. The Christian narrative that gives shape to education must, in the final analysis, be provided by parents who are guided by faithful pastors.<sup>39</sup>

And:

The church of Christ, not textbook writers, should be responsible for providing the central Christian story that must inform all true education. . . . a Christian education can only be provided by a Christian community—parents, in obedience to and in faithful relationship with their local church.<sup>40</sup>

Having indicated that Christianity in its modern form is too individualistic, because it gives words too much weight over community authority, Bauer makes this view explicit by approvingly quoting Robert Godfrey of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals:

Many people do not like the idea of a disciplined church. They believe they should be able to do whatever is right in their own eyes. Such an attitude reflects the militant individualism of our society. But it does not reflect Christ’s teaching about the life of his church. Proper discipline by the officers of the church is necessary for the well-being of individual Christians as well as for the church as a whole. Such discipline can take place only in the context of membership in a local church.<sup>41</sup>

This is the ultimate consequence of Christian classical education: not excited, eager, independent minds, but “disciplined,” slavish young followers of dictatorial Christian communities.

If you want to see concretely the kind of children these indoctrinators aim to produce and are in fact producing, watch the recent documentary “Jesus Camp,” which follows a summer camp called Kids on Fire run by evangelical Children’s Pastor Becky Fischer, which trains members of “God’s Army.” In one scene early in the documentary, Fischer speaks admiringly of the methods used to “disciple” children throughout the Muslim world.

It's no wonder with that kind of intense discipling and training, that those kids are willing to kill themselves for the cause of Islam.

I want to see young people who are as committed to the cause of Jesus Christ as the young people are to the cause of Islam. I want to see them as radically laying down their lives for the gospel as they are over in Pakistan and in Israel and in Palestine, because we have, excuse me, but we have the truth!<sup>42</sup>

I do not know how widespread such camps are, but I do know that the ranks of Christian classical educators are many and growing—and they are training the next generation for a full-fledged war against reason—or, as the Academy of Classical Christian Schools calls the enemy, “the soul-destroying Enlightenment.”

## Conclusion

Among the more sophisticated commentators on modern education, it is a commonplace yet valuable observation that education needs reform more radical than a bigger education budget, a stronger teacher's union, smaller class sizes, or more rigorous testing procedures. After examining the nature of classical education, it should be clear that education also needs reform more radical than harking back to a more traditional approach that mouths respect for facts, logic, and abstract thought. Education must be radically reformed in accordance with a proper understanding of abstractions that gives new meaning to the very notion of facts, logic, and abstract thought. It must treat concepts not as automatically-given abstractions to be memorized, toyed with, and shoehorned to fit with religious faith, but as items of real knowledge, grasped rationally, based in perceptual reality, and developed inductively, with the indispensable, practical power to identify reality and therefore give guidance to a man in every decision he faces over the course of his life.

As I argued in my essay “The Hierarchy of Knowledge,” the basis of this educational reform is Ayn Rand's revolutionary understanding of the relationship between concepts and reality, including the crucial principle of conceptual hierarchy.

With Rand's understanding of concepts, education becomes a process of building conceptual knowledge that begins in perception and proceeds to higher and higher levels of abstraction. The student possessing such an education has the profoundly practical power to gain true, firsthand knowledge of reality, allowing him to make good judgments in every realm of his life, from the most mundane to the most significant.

The proper goal of education is to foster the conceptual development of the child—to instill in him the knowledge and cognitive powers needed for mature life. It involves taking the whole of human knowledge, selecting that which is essential to the child's conceptual development, presenting it in a way that allows the student to clearly grasp both the material itself and its value to his life, and

thereby supplying him with both crucial knowledge and the rational thinking skills that will enable him to acquire real knowledge ever after. This is a truly *progressive* education—and parents and students should settle for nothing less.

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- Return to Summer 2007 contents

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## Endnotes

Acknowledgment: I want to thank Alex Epstein for his considerable contribution to all of the articles I have published in this journal and to this article in particular. In each case, Mr. Epstein helped me to improve the logical structure of my arguments, flesh out points that needed further explanation, and refine the formulations of important philosophic ideas. For this article, he also did extensive research and substantially clarified the relationship between the secular and Christian forms of classical education. I am indebted to Mr. Epstein for his contribution both to the writing of these articles and to my own understanding of the issues they address.

<sup>1</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 6–7.

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, “Student writing samples show lack of skill,” April 25, 2003. <http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/04/25/writing.samples.ap/>.

<sup>3</sup> Charles J. Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, or Add* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 5–7.

<sup>4</sup> *The Emile of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, translated by William Boyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> For a refutation of Kant's central argument, see “Consciousness and Identity,” chapter 8 of Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.

<sup>6</sup> G. Stanley Hall, “The Ideal School as Based on Child Study,” *National Education Association Journal of Addresses and Proceedings*, 1901 (Washington, DC, 1901), pp. 475–82.

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, *School of Tomorrow* (New York: Dutton, 1915), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> <http://wwwFOUNDATIONSacademy.org/about.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> <http://wwwFOUNDATIONSacademy.org/about.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. xiii.

<sup>15</sup> William J. Bennett, *The Educated Child: A Parent's Guide From Preschool Through Eighth Grade* (New York: Free Press, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa VanDamme, “The Hierarchy of Knowledge: The Most Neglected Issue in Education,” *The Objective Standard*, Spring 2006, p. 59.

- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/about/index.htm>.
- <sup>18</sup> Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, p. xvii.
- <sup>19</sup> William J. Bennett, *The Educated Child: A Parent's Guide From Preschool Through Eighth Grade* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2000), p. 191.
- <sup>20</sup> Lisa VanDamme, “Teaching Values in the Classroom,” *The Objective Standard*, Summer 2006, pp. 63, 74–75.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Hutchins, *Great Books: The Foundation of a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 17.
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- <sup>23</sup> Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, *The Well-Trained Mind, Revised Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 23.
- <sup>24</sup> <http://wwwFOUNDATIONSACADEMY.org/about.htm>.
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- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> <http://wwwFOUNDATIONSACADEMY.org/about.htm>.
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- <sup>34</sup> <http://www.classical-homeschooling.org/curriculum/history-grammar.html>.
- <sup>35</sup> <http://www.cbn.com/CBNnews/usnews/060309a.aspx>.
- <sup>36</sup> Douglas Wilson, Wes Callihan, and Douglas Jones, “Classical Education and the Homeschool,” pamphlet, p. 40.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> <http://www.welltrainedmind.com/neutral.php>.
- <sup>40</sup> <http://www.welltrainedmind.com/neutral.php>.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert Godfrey, “The TV Church,” [http://www.evangelical-library.org.uk/articles/the\\_tv\\_church.doc](http://www.evangelical-library.org.uk/articles/the_tv_church.doc).
- <sup>42</sup> *Jesus Camp* (86 min.), directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady (Magnolia Pictures, 2006).

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