

Classical vs. Modern Education: A Vision from C.S. Lewis (Classical Education, Lost Tools of Learning, Liberal Arts, Trivium, Homeschool, Homeschooling, Curriculum, Charlotte Mason)

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I. Waterfalls and the World

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C.S. Lewis summarizes these two ages thusly: For classical man, the fundamental question was: “How do I conform my soul to the world around me and thus be drawn up into divine life?” The answer was through prayer, virtue, and knowledge. However, for modern man, the question is inverted: modern man is not interested in how to conform the soul to reality. Instead, modern man asks, “How do I conform the world to my own desires and ambitions?” The answer involves tapping into those institutions that operate by the mechanisms of power and manipulation, namely, science, technology, and the state.

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Lewis believes that this propensity, this orientation, toward power and manipulation inherent in the modernist experiment is nothing less than a threat to our humanity as we have known it.

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So, ‘paideia’ is both the content of culture and the educational process by which one is initiated into culture; in short, the ‘cultivation of culture’.

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This conception of education became very important for the emerging Christian civilization.

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Ephesians 6:4 where St. Paul exhorts fathers to raise their children in the ‘paideia tou kyriou’, the “paideia of the Lord.” Paul brings in this paideia idea, but this is not a paideia of the Greeks or the Romans; this is a paideia of the Lord. This is a paideia that is not of this world so it is bringing in a culture literally of another world, the world of heaven itself. And so you have Christians developing the Greco-Roman conception of paideia in strikingly new and unprecedented ways.

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Every person born into the world is born into a world of divine obligation, so all people are obligated to orient their lives in a way that realizes the divine purpose for humanity.

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For the Greek, there was a profound sense that one was truly human only to the extent that one was in a harmonious relationship with the cosmos.

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The goal was to bring about a harmony between the three aspects of the soul—the intellectual, moral, and emotional—which was demonstrated in an ethical life of civic virtue, the ideal citizen of the polis; the way Lewis puts it, the goal was to produce “men with chests.” This is what the term “virtue” means: “vir” is the Latin term for “man.”

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Everyone was initiated into a culture that materialized or substantiated a cosmic piety that enabled the student to fulfill his divine purpose and thereby become truly human.

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This vision of education remained normative for 2,200 years, beginning with Plato. It flourished under the Romans and then into Christendom, and all the way up to the mid-nineteenth-century.

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Religion gives a person personal meaning, but it has no public or objective value at all. And if religion cannot be known, then it never leaves the realm of doubt, and thus doubt is the proper orientation toward the church’s claims.

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With the rise of the scientific method as the sole way of knowing, the church is pushed completely from the public square, into the periphery of society, consigned solely to one’s private life.

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By the beginning of the twentieth-century, the public/ private distinction imposed upon Christianity by secularized processes was firmly in place.

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The term culture today is used more in a social scientific sense which can be very misleading; this is because the fundamental assumption to this social scientific sense is that there is no inherent meaning or purpose that is objectively discernable in this world, and so meaning is specific to the human race.

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Culture is composed of common symbols, practices, and arrangements shared among a distinct population by which they impute meaning to a meaningless world.

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That one culture is any more valid than another, since all cultures are by their nature arbitrary; they fabricate meaning systems that are artificial in relation to impersonal nature.

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By definition turn students away from the classical vision of cosmic piety and cut them off from encountering the transcendent and eternal values of the **True, the Good, and the Beautiful.**

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Lewis observes that if students are cut off from encountering the transcendent, then we have cut them off from the very source of civic virtue; we have cut them off from the cosmic values by which they might foster a balanced soul and thus become truly human.

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Saint Augustine argues that virtue involves properly ordering our loves, or what he called 'ordo amoris'.

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And the danger here, which classical civilization recognized, is that without conforming itself to the cosmic values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, the human soul collapses into either an unethical rationalism or an unthinking sensualism.

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We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

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Lewis recognizes that if all values are relegated to the person-relative, if all conceptions of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are collapsed into the subjective as personal preferences, then the only way there can be a moral consensus in society is through the use of coercion.

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The only way we can have any kind of mass ethical conformity is through some institution that has the power to compel such conformity. Thus, Lewis sees manipulation at the heart of this brave new world to which we are embarking.

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The genius of this new modern division of labor is the success it has had in enslaving the masses by convincing them that the extent to which they are dependent on social engineers is the measure of their freedom.

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The vast majority of the population is “nature” and is there to be controlled and manipulated in accordance with the goals and desires of the manipulators.

V. The Education Renaissance

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If we are to see a restoration of civic virtue in our society, we must take seriously the reformation of the institutions that educate the next generations.

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True, the Good, and the Beautiful in this world,