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# **Classical Home Education: Supporting Modern Education**

The benefits of EHE for children, families, and the nation

[member of the public], November 2020

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## 1.0 SUMMARY

There have always been and always will be challenges in education and our academic institutions; such is the nature of human society. The United Kingdom has provided for multiple avenues of pursuing education, with its allowance for government-funded and independent schools, and home educators. The specific permission of home educators has made it possible for the classical method to be explored by parents (and independent schools) who have the flexibility and incentive and risk tolerance that the governmental institutions, by their very nature, do not have.

Classical education provides a rich, historically grounded education with global reach. It does so by not focusing on specific subject areas but by teaching students *how to learn*: the tools to learn any subject. It encourages students to be curious (by teaching them to ask questions) and it endows them with the confidence that they are equipped to turn their curiosity into knowledge and skill, because they have mastered the tools of learning. It provides a possible answer to the problem currently being discussed in academic circles about the fragmentation of knowledge.

The freedom to home educate has enabled and encouraged classical education to be pursued in the United Kingdom, most recently under the auspices of Classical Conversations UK&I. This represents innovation that is always needed for healthy institutions to continue to flourish. Encouraging the ongoing presence of government schools, independent schools *and home educating* is a robust strategy for investing in the long-term success of the United Kingdom's educational establishment. A strategy that brings benefits for children, families and the nation as a whole.

## 2.0 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Academic disciplines that do not interact

The academic establishment in the West has long recognised how the different disciplines are drifting further and further apart. The higher the level of learning, the more fragmented and isolated the learning becomes. There is no coherent organising principle for knowledge that can provide a map, to show how the disciplines relate and to provide a context in which scholars can interact. Astonishingly, the more advanced the scholarship, the less scholars from different disciplines are able to communicate. Using an anthropological analogy, the sociologist Burton R. Clark joked in the 1960s that

Men of the sociological tribe rarely visit the lands of the physicists and have little idea of what they do over there. If the sociologists were to step into the building occupied by the English department, they would encounter the cold stares if not the slingshots of the hostile natives. (Krishnan, 2009, 22–23)

Owen Barfield classically and brilliantly illustrated these ‘watertight compartments’ in *Worlds Apart: A Dialogue of the 1960’s*. He depicted the problem as a series of book reviews of academic publications, which ought to be a snapshot of scholarly dialogue. The reality was anything but a genuine dialogue.

Behind each review there lay a whole network of unspoken assumptions about the nature of life and the universe which were completely incompatible with the corresponding network behind the review on the next page.

From one academic discipline to the next, the very understanding of life, the university, reality—completely incompatible with the next! In his book, experts from fields as diverse as psychology, physical science, education and theology discuss philosophy, space and history gather for a three-day symposium to discuss the assumptions underlying their separate fields. They discover just how incompatible their beliefs are, and how little they know of their neighbours. Each discipline had become a watertight compartment, entirely sealed off from its neighbouring disciplines.

## **2.2 Attempted solution: Interdisciplinarity**

Academia hoped that it could solve these problems, bridging these worlds, through interdisciplinary studies. Unfortunately, Krishnan's 2009 report on interdisciplinarity reveals that the problem has only worsened:

Although the idea of 'interdisciplinarity' is certainly a very compelling one, it also appears that the term is so loosely and insufficiently defined as to make it almost meaningless.

The appropriate academic response must always be to re-evaluate our assumptions, to be prepared to call into question our philosophies and pedagogies that we have largely taken for granted. We must be willing to acknowledge where strategies have not worked, and we must have the patience and foresight to discover new strategies that will work.

## **2.3 Needed: Willingness to innovate**

We need people with courage to theorise, experiment and innovate. The health of our educational system depends on the ability to identify problems and provide solutions. The current legal framework and governmental regulations permit a symbiosis of all the various approaches: government schools, independent schools, and home educators; all should function together for a healthy educational system in the United Kingdom.

In a nutshell, home educators are often ideally placed to identify difficulties within our educational system and to respond, within their own homes and social networks, as a source of innovation that will benefit all schools. There will always be difficulties and challenges in society, and it is the healthy society that has strategies to regularly identify and handle such difficulties. Enabling and encouraging home education is one key strategy to addressing difficulties within education: for who is more motivated than parents to be willing to try something different, for the best interests of their children? Who has the flexibility to try new things and adapt quickly?

Home educators choose to educate their children at home because, for various reasons, they believe their children will be best served by receiving an education at home. Home educators are problem-solvers. They are a tremendous asset to the educational system, because not only do they solve

challenges within their families, but they can be valuable to the nation for their work in innovation in education.

## 2.4 Classical Education

An irony about innovation is that, often, it is re-discovery of something quite old that once again is valued in society. Such is the case with classical education, which is, as its name suggests, not new. Its roots lie in the end of the Middle Ages but has been revived in the last century, based on this insight:

[We perceive] the distressing fact that a man may be master in one field and show no better judgment than his neighbour anywhere else; he remembers what he has learnt, but *forgets altogether how he learned it*. (Sayers 1947, 6)

There is a distinction to be made between the subject material we learn and the *process of learning* itself. In 1947 Dorothy Sayers wrote a plea for education to concern itself primarily with teaching students *how to learn* as its primary aim, which would thereby equip the students to learn anything, afterward, and indeed to know how to think and converse and process ideas. A person who knows how to learn has developed judgment and discernment, which can extend into any field.

This view proposes what may be a very unexpected organising principle to education, which is best understood with an understanding of the history of scholarship and education, for which we therefore provide a brief overview.<sup>1</sup> Following upon this review we will explain the classical method of education and why it is so beneficial to the United Kingdom and the West at this time.

This is a history well researched by others,<sup>2</sup> on whose work we may build to propose a framework in which to understand what enabled education and knowledge to be viewed as a coherent whole in the past and how this can provide wisdom as we face the future. (The organising principle active in each stage of history has been placed in bold faced type for ease of reference.)

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<sup>1</sup> This material was first researched to write another article, soon to be published in *Journal for Semitics*, to discuss this problem of fragmentation within the world of Semitic and biblical studies. There is consequently much overlap between this essay and that article, but they remain separate pieces of scholarship serving very different purposes.

<sup>2</sup> This is largely a reflection on Krishnan, 2009; Turner, 2014 and Pollock et al., 2015a.

## 3.0 A REVIEW OF INSTITUTIONALISED SCHOLARSHIP

### 3.1 The Ancient World

In the ancient world, education and scholarship revolved around philosophy, whose foundation was laid by such as Plato and Aristotle. Debate was their means of pursuing truth: by conversing, in community, one could test and hone one's argument until convinced it had arrived at truth. Because debate inherently involves language, and that language once recorded becomes literature, language and literature became part of this pursuit: not only wisdom as inherent content, but wisdom as expressed content.

Grammar was developed to systematise this body of knowledge as written down in books. Dionysios Thrax, in the first known grammar, defines it as 'an experimental knowledge of the usages of language as generally current among poets and prose writers' (Thrax, 1874). Grammar was the definition of the ideal language that expressed the ideal thoughts. The purpose was to pursue and express **eternal, immortal truth** by means of those words.

### 3.2 The Middle Ages

Philosophy was displaced by Christian theology in Europe in the Middle Ages. The Bible eclipsed Homer and the classics as the fount of knowledge. The Bible was divine revelation, which enabled elevating philosophy (matters of timeless and eternal wisdom) into theology (knowledge of God).

The ultimate good became defined as the **knowledge of God** that becomes union with God: knowledge was no longer of an object but became a relationship with a person. It is in this sense that theology became the 'queen' of the sciences: if science is the systematic search for knowledge, then when the search has reached its aim, it has arrived at knowledge of God, namely, theology. The dominant method for coming to know God was logic, or dialectic: proceeding from premises to argued conclusions as a means of advancing knowledge.

### 3.3 The Renaissance

An imbalance of attention to logic and the other-worldly caused a shift again, in the Renaissance, when truth and beauty here on earth had been neglected.

“The Christian religion does not rest on proof, but on persuasion, which is superior to proof,” declared the humanist Lorenzo Valla in the fifteenth century (Turner, 2014, 98). In the Middle Ages, proof of truth was the goal, but in the Renaissance, proof was elusive; how could people agree? Before any thought of proof, persuasion was what was needed. Indeed, with the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics found themselves in a cultural war, seeking to control the story of the past that would legitimate one party versus the other. As Aristotle found with politics, so these religionists found that **rhetoric**, persuasion, was an invaluable weapon, highly practical and relevant. The content for this rhetoric was to be found largely in the documents of the early church and, through and alongside them, the classics.

Scholarship in terms of textual study (known as philology, the scholarly study of the written word) was thus born as an occupation in European Renaissance humanism. Through the ancient texts studied came additional discoveries: the ability, through comparative studies, **to recreate lost worlds**. If one could re-create the world of the biblical text, one could also re-create other worlds. With the discovery of new languages, and particularly how the Indian language Sanskrit was actually related to the European languages, was born a brand-new interest in how such relationships are structured, over both space (geography, Europe to India) and time (over seven millennia). Interest shifted from theological universals to what the new comparative method, with its historical developmental stories, could reveal about the human story.

A historical consciousness was reborn, with historical texts the centrepiece. The question became how to approach them: dialectically and logically (looking for universal truths, as in the Middle Ages) or rhetorically and logically (looking to recreate lost worlds, as the Renaissance philologists)? Increasingly the philologist was less interested in the spiritual and more interested in the historical and rhetorical, which paved the way for philology to reach its greatest heights.

### 3.4 Modern Philology

Modern Philology was at its zenith in nineteenth-century Europe, enshrined in the university. Berlin (whose university was founded in 1809) was able to proclaim philology as new queen of the sciences. Philosophy had represented the ultimate goal of wisdom, theology the ultimate goal of knowledge of God,

and now philology as queen represented the ultimate goal of re-creating a lost world which could **explain and structure one's understanding of the present**. This was epitomised in Germany's choice of philology as able to re-establish its own identity after its humiliation under Napoleon. Humboldt describes his plan for the university that would begin this:

the [philological] study of a nation offers all the advantages which history has in general, namely to increase our knowledge of human beings by examples of actions and events, to sharpen our power of judgment, and to improve and raise our character. Yet it does more. In trying not only to unravel the thread of successive events, but rather to explore the condition and the state of the nation altogether, **this kind of study gives us a biography**, as it were. (Pollock et al., 2015b, 269)<sup>3</sup>

Philology's purpose was to re-tell history to make sense of and give sense to the present. Humboldt's comments on the intended role of philology are 'symptomatic of a wider and lasting tendency to establish a developmental, narrative model both for use in scholarly discourse and for articulating the discipline's own self-understanding.' (Pollock et al., 2015b, 269) Historical, empirical research interpreted with the comparative method became the source of knowledge, both of the world as well as of self.

### 3.5 Division into Disciplines

When the comparative methods of philology were applied beyond texts (to Greek temples, medieval cathedrals, and Renaissance paintings), this **inductive, historical-comparative method** became the foundation of the very science of interpretation, of any kind of object.

The division of knowledge was now based on the object of study: natural objects (the sciences) versus man as object (social sciences) versus culture (humanities). The same methods applied to different objects led to a splintering of domains of institutionalised knowledge. A new organising principle was needed.

In the early 20th century, logical positivism emerged, with the goal of re-uniting these fractured disciplines and research agendas. It situated itself within

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<sup>3</sup> This research programme was intended to do nothing less than provide the "only true foundation of national prosperity" (Turnbull, 1923, 184).

philosophy, establishing **empirical observation** as its proper object of research, on which **logical reasoning** would build cumulatively a full body of objective knowledge. The historically observable became transformed through timeless reason to offer genuine knowledge. The scientific method sought the role of queen of knowledge.

### 3.6 How a Scientific Field Develops

Nonetheless, the idea of science as a cumulative process came under heavy fire in Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Instead of a steady evolutionary process, he understood a succession of scientific revolutions to fundamentally reorganise scientific fields and disciplines. From this work we derive the whole idea of a 'paradigm shift', which was meant to convey this concept that disciplines are based on theoretical frameworks, which claim to organise the empirical phenomena in that field. When more data are observed, or when theories are perceived wanting, an entirely new theoretical framework—paradigm—is needed to re-organise the discipline entirely.

The paradigm in place at any given time is deterministic: it both shapes the very questions scientists ask and it pre-defines the available answers. It precludes certain questions and presupposes others. What is needed is not a final, ideal theory, but rather a frank acknowledgement of an ever-continuing succession of theories to organise our world of data. (Krishnan, 2009, 14-15 ) Logical positivism might reign for a time, but self-evidently it could not provide a final, cumulative body of knowledge and truth. No theory could ever do that; **a higher framework** than theories is needed to deal with the concepts of knowledge and truth.

### 3.7 Postmodernism

Postmodernism has not resolved this challenge of how to divide up knowledge of the world. Logical positivism would limit knowledge to that which is based on empirical observations, with everything intangible (metaphysics) rendered meaningless. The ancient queens of theology and philosophy would be declared meaningless by modern science and be replaced by that which was once scorned: time-bound empirical observations, which would then be manipulated by critical reasoning.

Kuhn warned that logical positivism needed to be de-throned, and he redefined the throne of science as a practical matter of historical reality (what fits the facts of the time) rather than philosophical necessity (how to attain truth). But then postmodernists attempted to dethrone even systematic knowledge itself, scorning it as but a social construction designed to reinforce societal power arrangements and therefore itself inherently suspicious. For social constructionists, scientific truth itself becomes historically contingent, referring to nothing other than itself and its own development. As a framework locked within a societal context, unable to access any form of universal truth, an academic discipline can only be a Wittgensteinian 'language game'; progress is illusory because it is in fact impossible.

In the postmodern world academic institutions **do not have a coherent organising principle**. The adoration of the scientific method seeks to turn induction (possibility) into deduction (certainty), which the laws of traditional logic forbid. Can postmodernism dispense with traditional logic? True metaphysical (e.g. spiritual or anything intangible) 'knowledge' becomes meaningless to those bred on the restriction of knowledge to the empirically observable. Philosophy birthed theoretical physics and yet one of its most prominent practitioners, Stephen Hawking, has declared philosophy dead (Hawking 2010). There is no coherent view of knowledge.

### 3.8 Fragmented Knowledge

This provides the backdrop for the challenge of the field of education, within the larger field of academics and knowledge. The problem consists of the following tensions:

- Academic disciplines (and sub-disciplines) have become so **fragmented** and cut off from one another that they are like 'watertight compartments'. They base their work on mutually incompatible presuppositions and dismiss each other's work as irrelevant for their own.<sup>4</sup>
- Each 'queen' of the sciences, which once united all of knowledge, has fallen to the wayside and been rejected by current scholarship.

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<sup>4</sup> Illustrated classically (and brilliantly) by Barfield, 1963.

Functionally, one might ask, what is there already that unites the humanities and sciences? Regarding the goal of knowledge, postmodernism has no ready response. In the ancient world, the goal was to preserve texts and the language of those texts. In the Middle Ages, it was to pursue knowledge of God. During the Renaissance, it was to recreate the lost worlds of history to explain the present and give meaning to the present and one's own existence.

But postmodernism founders on precisely this question of the **purpose of our scholarship and knowledge**. Practically, some say the goal of a discipline is to eventually become a reference discipline, a repository of data and interpretations to be useful to others. Religious groups would assert that, ultimately, knowledge is to lead us to God. Other groups might argue for knowledge of self or of the universe, or perhaps expression of self. If our culture cannot agree on the purpose of knowledge and study, what likelihood is there that we could agree on an organising principle to unite the pursuit of knowledge today?

## 4.0 THE CLASSICAL METHOD

Classical education comes from a very different perspective and does propose answers to these questions. The purpose of education is to become able to identify truth and goodness and to be equipped to desire them, pursue them and persuade others of them. Educators accomplish this, not primarily by teaching individual subjects, nor by teaching the mastery specific skills, but by teaching their students **how to learn**. (The students learn how to learn *by actually learning* many subjects. In the end, the mastery of subjects and skills is the natural result and proof that they have, indeed, learned how to learn.)

The classical method of education, which culminates in a 'classical education', recognises learning as occurring along 'three roads' (Latin, *trivium*):

- grammar (the basic building blocks of the subject), which needs to be *memorised*;
- logic or dialectic, in which the connections between those building blocks are *understood*; and
- rhetoric, in which the building blocks are *applied* to accomplish something.

The fundamental insight of classical education is that true learning encompasses *all three* of these paths: one must be able to identify the basic building blocks (e.g. the ingredients in a recipe), one must be able to understand their connections (e.g. ratios of liquids to solid determine final consistency) and one must be able to apply them (e.g. create new recipes). Educational systems have failed every time they have focused on one at the expense of the other two: rote memorisation that never leads to understanding; understanding that has no base of knowledge on which to build; application that is frustrated by a lack of understanding.<sup>5</sup>

The power of the classical *method* is recognising that these three roads to learning align with the natural developmental stages of children. Young children love to repeat endlessly, with no interest in the meaning of the words. They will repeat adverts, jingles, nonsense rhymes: anything that tickles their fancy! The

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<sup>5</sup> Knowing ingredients that are never combined are not appetising (bicarbonate of soda on its own?). Understanding the concept of ratios without knowing which ingredients matter is not practical. Creating recipes without any understanding of ratios leads to many a kitchen disaster (too much salt does ruin a dish).

classical method capitalises on this with the grammar stage and gives them facts that are just as fun as the jingles but will provide a foundation for their future learning. (My [age] daughter alternates between singing about Roman Britain and Christmas carols when getting herself ready for the day.)

Older children love to ask questions and are not satisfied until they have a sense of understanding from multiple angles. Many a parent has wanted to end a conversation with, “because I said so!”, out of frustration with the endless “but *why?!?*”. The classical method capitalises on this with the logic or dialectic stage and gives the children worthwhile questions, questions that teach the children *how* to understand a matter. They learn to ask about definitions, about comparisons, about circumstances. They learn to discover connections for themselves, which is infinitely more powerful and memorable than connections presented them by another. (My [age] son complained last week about a youth discussion group that “handed you the answer” as boring, after having been taught at home that it is his job to discover the questions to find the answer himself.)

Teenagers want to *do* something, whether it be go on a trip or build a contraption or write a song. They are not satisfied with memorising or simply asking and answering questions; they want to apply their knowledge in some way. This is the capstone of learning, aligning with the rhetoric stage: when the learner is ready to apply, to teach, to persuade. Once having learned the basics and how they work together, the student learns to present the material to the world to accomplish something good. (My [age] old is just entering this phase, and we are excited to see how it plays out.)

This is a radically different paradigm from today’s standard pedagogy, which tends to either focus on grammar (rote memorisation, sometimes never transitioning to understanding) or logic (skills and understanding, though hampered by lack of material to understand) or rhetoric (creativity, though with little base on which to be creative), unwittingly at the expense of the others.

When learning is segregated into discrete subjects, as maths, science, English and history, an additional challenge is raised: precisely that which opened this essay, namely, the fragmentation of knowledge. Yet what alternative is there, when the field of knowledge is so vast? It is impossible to know all there is to know, so surely division by academic field is the only option?

#### 4.1 An Organising Principle

This is precisely the problem of the organisation of academic disciplines. Such an idea presupposes that academic disciplines *are* the appropriate form of organising our educational and research institutions in the first place, which Turner calls severely into question:

Today's humanities disciplines are not ancient, integral modes of knowledge. They are modern, artificial creations—where made-up lines pretend to divide the single sandbox in which we all play into each boy's or girl's own inviolable kingdom. It is a sham. (Turner, 2014, 717 )

His implication is precisely that postmodernism's problem of fragmented disciplines lies *in the very definition* of academic disciplines as carving up their own 'sandboxes' of knowledge.

Prior to modern academic disciplines, the umbrella of philology enabled a 'university' of knowledge. Now, in the modern world, there is ample diversity, but there is no unity to be had.

Classical education does have an organising principle, but it does not lie in divisions based on subject matter (cutting off maths from history), nor does it lie in specific skills (cutting off reasoning from its facts). Classical education is based on the *process of learning*, which equips the students to know *how to learn* and to be able to employ that knowledge to self-teach *anything* the rest of their lives. If they are taught how to learn, they will know how to teach themselves a language, or an occupation, or how to cook.

More importantly for this discussion, students educated within a classical method understand the role of connections and the need to ask questions to uncover further connections. In studying Magna Carta, they will ask questions of relationship: what came before (and caused) Magna Carta, and what came after it, caused by it? They will ask questions of circumstance: what was happening at the same time, but in a different place? By teaching students how to ask questions, their world of knowledge becomes infinitely expandable, *as required for the subject matter at hand*.

When students seek to understand something, they recognise they need to know the basic building blocks, the grammar. As I teach my children to cook, they need to know the difference between mincing and dicing and chopping.

They need to know a clove of garlic from a bulb of garlic. They know they must first memorise what the different terms mean before they can understand the connections and do something useful with them.

And, finally, students who have been classically trained are not deceived that they have learnt something if they can only recite it back (grammar stage) or decode it (logic stage). They know that learning is only fully accomplished when they *do* something with it. Learning that does not bring about change is not genuine learning.

In this way, where *learning itself* is the organising principle, a given subject becomes a starting point for discussion but never a container to isolate that material from other subjects. A given skill is only appreciated in its context, and it is valued when it is seen to be the same skill useful in many contexts.

## 4.2 Implementation

But how does one learn how to learn? Where does one start? Young children start the moment they learn the names of objects and repeat them (endlessly!) with pleasure simply in the naming. Because the classical method can be used with any subject, Classical Conversations UK&I has identified the subject material that forms the foundation of a Western liberal arts education and uses that as the material on which children learn how to learn. They therefore simultaneously learn the counties and physical features of the United Kingdom while learning that *this is how one learns geography*. They learn the kings and queens and prime ministers while learning that *this is how one learns about historical people*. They learn scientific laws and elements of the periodic table while learning *this is how one starts learning science*.

As they grow older, they learn how to ask good questions by asking them of their own language: analytical grammar. They learn to ask good questions about writing: and they learn to write well. As they grow yet older, they learn to enter into the 'classical conversations' of the ages, learning how to research and then discuss (and debate!) history, science, government, with nearly every conversation inevitably bringing them all together, identifying the connections. Discussing the moral question of abortion requires addressing the philosophical idea of personhood as well as sociological realities of poverty and abuse. Discussing Isaac Newton's law of gravity and his refusal to propose *why* gravity

acts as it does, even while being confident that it *does* act as described, requires understanding inductive vs deductive logic. (These are all discussions I have had with thirteen and fourteen-year-olds.)

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

There have always been and always will be challenges in education and our academic institutions; such is the nature of human society. The United Kingdom has had the wisdom to provide for multiple avenues of pursuing education, with its allowance for government-funded and independent schools and home educators. The specific permission for home educating has made it possible for the classical method to be explored by parents (and independent schools) who have the flexibility and incentive and risk tolerance that the governmental institutions, by their very nature, do not have.

Classical Conversations UK&I is an ever-growing group of parents who have embraced a classical education as providing the education they want their children to receive. It provides a rich, historically grounded education with global reach. It encourages students with curiosity and the confidence that they know how to turn their curiosity into knowledge and skill, because they have mastered the tools of learning.

The freedom to home educate has enabled and encouraged innovation, innovation which is always needed for healthy institutions to continue to flourish. Encouraging the ongoing presence of government schools, independent schools *and home educating* is a robust strategy for investing in the long-term success of the United Kingdom's educational establishment.

## 6.0 REFERENCES

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