



My Philosophy of Education and How it Might Relate to Classical Subjects

by Richard Pring

The following speech was given at the annual Summer School of the Association for Latin Teaching, held at Haberdashers' Monmouth School for Girls in July 2015.

Introduction

The title I was given to speak to today invites me to bring together two different interests – that of thinking about the purpose of education and that of my familiarity with, and love of, Rome, where for three years, at the Gregorian University, I had to communicate in Latin, and indeed was examined orally in it. I still remember vividly having to defend in my Latin *viva* the difference between the two Greek philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides. When I mentioned this in the Rose and Crown to a teacher of Latin at Magdalen College School in Oxford, he replied rather haughtily, 'dead easy' – which it is, of course, in English. But not quite so in Latin.

Purpose of education

First, then, with reference to the purpose of education. When I led the Nuffield Review of Education and Training for 14 to 19 year-olds (the last such review being that of the Crowther Report in 1959), we received (over the six years of the Review) many contributions from teachers,

employers, universities, and others, each providing research evidence, argument and experience to help us with our deliberations. How could we make sense of so much material?

What enabled us to make sense of it all and to put it into a single perspective was to ask the question: 'What counts as an educated 19 year-old in this day and age?'

That is the kind of question so rarely asked by those who shape our educational system. Would there be the absurd high-stakes testing system (backed up by the science of 'deliverology', invented by Sir Michael Barber when he had the post of 'chief deliverer' under Prime Minister Blair) if that question had been seriously asked? Would the arts and drama have been excluded from the new EBacc if that question had been asked? Would the classical subjects be having such a lowly place in the schools' curriculum, had that question been asked? Would it have been possible for the Labour Party's White Paper *21st Century Schools: your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system* – if that question had been asked – to announce its 'deep cultural change' and its 'changing boundaries' of professional behaviour by thinking in a completely different way in terms of 'performance' and 'performing' mentioned 121 times, 'outcomes' 55 times, 'delivery' 57 times and with only one mention of books – and that in the section on Information Technology?

To get those in charge of the educational system to think seriously about the purpose of education and the idea of an educated person seems to be nigh impossible. The answer for many would seem to be simple, namely, the attainment of high academic standards, the obtaining of a degree in a 'good university'.

But such a view is challenged by the Principal of a High School I visited in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her letter to her new teachers started off:

Dear Teacher,

I am the victim of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education.

Had she not got good reason to be suspicious of education as that is too often understood? The people who built the gas chambers, poisoned the children, killed the infants, and shot and burned the women and babies were those most successful in their schooling – the 'educated ones', as that is defined by academic success. And so she continued:

My request is: help your students become human. Your efforts must

never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

If then we are to educate our children, then we must think hard about what it means to be 'more human', to develop those distinctively human qualities – indeed, to grow as persons. What does it mean to be a person, and to become so more abundantly? That philosophical question we pursued in the Nuffield Review.

First, to be a person and to grow as a person requires the development of those different capacities: to understand, to reason, to enter into the different forms of knowledge – or, as the philosopher Michael Oakeshott put it, to enter into the conversation between the generations of mankind in which one comes to appreciate the voice of poetry, the voice of history, the voice of science, the voice of philosophy, the voice of religion. And we need to ask: what are the distinctive qualities and lessons from the classical cultures of Greece and Rome which might well be drawn upon in that 'conversation'?

Second, however, such intellectual understanding without the appropriate virtues – that is, the intellectual virtues or dispositions to seek the truth and to base judgement on evidence, and the moral virtues so well argued for by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and indeed exemplified by Cicero in his advocacy of civic virtue and duty. It is interesting to note that, despite so many philosophical accounts of morality, it is to the wisdom of the Greeks that we seem to be returning, through (for example) the work of Alasdair MacIntyre or Charles Taylor.

Third, to be a person is to live and grow within a community – to recognise the mutual interdependence in the growth of social competence and social understanding in its different forms, to appreciate the importance of solidarity and of civic duty, so well exemplified in the rights and obligations of those who had earned Roman citizenship. The individual is not an island, but rather one enriched by social customs and traditions, and able, if encouraged, to participate in the social environment – to protect and to enhance it.

Ignore any one of those characteristics – creating, say, the

well-disposed but ignorant person, or the academic achiever but vicious person, and then there is failure in the educational process – the isolation of one element from the other essential elements in the fully developed or educated person. The educated person is the product of what has been achieved in the past, not only in appreciating (in Matthew Arnold's words) 'the best that has been thought and said', but also of the social traditions, established in communities, which enables the growing person to preserve, protect and enhance those traditions.

Contribution of classical subjects to 'making our children more human'

What, then, might the classical subjects contribute to such a view of the educated person?

The defence of the classics over the decades has taken different forms. I suppose it was resurrected by Arnold of Rugby as the staple diet of education, developing in future leaders the intellectual ability to tackle whatever problems they had to face. It was the formation of what the philosopher Coleridge referred to as 'the clerisy' – not unlike Plato's 'guardian class' but educated through the classics and the playing fields rather than through mathematics and gymnastics. But those classical foundations would provide not only the intellectual skills of translation but also the exposure to the speeches of the law-givers, the significance of religion, the fight for freedom in a democracy, the universal significance, and delineation, of human tragedy. Indeed, the ancient world has never been so popular. There have recently been films about Pompeii, Hercules and the fifth-century Persian War. There will be plays by Sophocles at the Old Vic and at the Barbican. The British Museum broke records with its exhibition of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The belief in the superiority of education in and through the classics was reflected in the contribution of Herbert Warren, President of Magdalen College Oxford, to the discussion of the 1895 Bryce Commission on the training of teachers for secondary education. It had been proposed that the University of

Oxford might take on that responsibility. But Warren argued that the student who has read Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* and *Ethics* has whatever theory is necessary for the practice of teaching. In addition it would be helpful

'[...] that a young man who has passed through an English public school, more particularly if he has been ... a prefect ... has had experience in keeping order and maintaining discipline ... Thus the average Oxford man, more especially the classical student, ought not to require so long an additional training, either in theory or practice, as is sometimes necessary for students from elsewhere.'

Such a view of the *unique* quality and contribution of classical studies to intellectual formation could not be sustained with the onset of science. Rather there are other ways in which such intellectual formation can be developed. Therefore, we need to take seriously the American Principal's request 'to help your students become more human'. What part has the classical subjects to play in helping young people to become human? Or, in what way should classical studies be part of Oakeshott's 'conversations' through which young people come to understand what it means to be human, what it means (in being human) to be a citizen, what are the virtues to be valued and to be acquired?

John Sharwood Smith, a former colleague of mine, in his excellent book *On Teaching Classics*, quoted (whom he refers to as 'the powerful authority') Ulrich von Wilamovitz-Moellendorf, for whom

'[...] this [Graeco-Roman] culture is a unity, even if sharp boundaries cannot be given to its beginning or its end. The purpose [of classical studies] is to make that past life to live again: the song of the poet, the thought of the philosopher and the lawgiver, the holiness of the temple and the sentiments of believer and unbeliever, the multiple and varied activity of the market-place and port, land and sea, and men at work and at their play ... because the life we strive to know is a unity ...'

Classical subjects, therefore, require this absorption into a culture which is defined, not simply by the sequence of events as learnt through history, but through its distinctive customs, its social arrangements, its governance, its exploration of love, war and tragedy through its literature and drama – and, may I add, through its feats of engineering as witnessed by the aqueducts and buildings of Rome. It is to enter a different form of life by which one gains insights into the drama of being human through the contrasts and insights made available. Can one seriously read *Oedipus at Colonus* without realising, through its very drama, the meaning of human tragedy and its prevalence in so many human lives – and to come to understand the victim of hubris, or whatever, with some sympathy?

May I modestly suggest some of the achievements of the Roman classical world which would prompt admiration and also comparisons with the society of the young learners:

- the idea of the ‘citizen’ – the much cherished right to participate in public debates, indeed to reach the political heights of consul or praetor;
- the struggle to achieve and preserve the rule of law against possible tyrants;
- the engineering wonders of the aqueducts, of the sewers of *cloaca maxima*, of the building of the Pantheon, of the Terme of Caracalla which could cope with well over 1000 bathers;
- the military achievements of the expanding empire;
- the use of slaves who, none the less, could eventually attain the status of citizen;
- the multicultural nature of Rome as the centre of empire;
- the poetry of Horace, epic literature of Virgil, the oratory of Cicero;
- the distinctive virtues of the Roman citizen – those of civic duty, of courage in the face of the enemy, of respect for the deities;
- the role of religion and the beginning of Christianity arising from the ancient practices;

- the public entertainments – ‘bread and circuses’ – put on to keep the people contented, and the kind of violence which such contentment demanded.

One sees in Roman civilisation humanity at its best, and, dare I say, at its most decadent. There are obvious parallels with the struggles, the achievements, the failures of the society into which the young are about to enter. As Peter Jones, advisor to *Classics for All*, said:

‘Even a brief encounter with the ancient world not only fires the imagination of the young but also sheds a dazzling light on why we in the West are as we are, with all our massive strengths and disastrous failings.’

One can see how Virgil, Livy, Ovid and countless other dramatists, poets, philosophers and historians of the ancient world had such an impact on writers such as Chaucer, Milton or Shakespeare, on medieval and modern philosophy, on the religious thinking of Christians, Muslims and Jews.

But where are the teachers?

But such an introduction to this ‘conversation between the generations of mankind’ requires teachers who are part of that conversation between the generations – who not only are clearly acquainted with the cultures, but who so love them that they wish to communicate them, and who are so in command of them that they can relate them to the interests, the imagination and the concerns of the pupil – who can enlighten them, for example, on the origins, obligations and rights of citizenship in ancient Rome, and on the struggles to maintain the rule of law against the threats of tyrants. Under such a teacher, the pupils will discover the enchantment of the classical subjects.

Such teachers are not (to use the words of the White Paper already referred to) a ‘workforce who can deliver our ambition of improved outcomes’. Nor are they trainers of those who have to hit targets. Such teachers cannot be what Peter Abbs so well describes in the high-stakes testing system that has been

created, ‘the critical guardians of a long culture; nor the midwives of the creative potentialities of living children’. Rather are teachers forced into becoming what Abbs refers to as the mere ‘technicians of subjects’.

By comparison, though exaggerated this may sound, are not the teachers we want, in the words of the American philosopher, John Dewey, more like ‘the high priests and the usherer in of the Kingdom of God’, as they help the young learners to understand through the classical subjects what it means to be human (its potentialities and its weaknesses, the virtues worth pursuing and the vices to be avoided, the need for civic involvement and the dangers of taking such citizenship for granted)?

Indeed, it is difficult to see how classical studies, so described, can become part of the state system of schools where learning is reduced to hitting targets along the lines dictated by the examination boards under the instructions of the Secretary of State, and where the EBacc dictates what subjects are to count in the accountability of the school – not including the classical subjects.

There are however some noble efforts to overcome these difficulties. Cheney School in Oxford is establishing a classics hub so that the city’s children have better access to GCSE and A Level Latin courses. It has been awarded a grant of £10,000 from the national charity *Classics for All* to run the courses from its East Oxford Community Classics Centre. The money will also be used, at a primary school level, to introduce the classics – Latin, Ancient Greek and classical civilisations. In speaking of this, Oxford University Greek lecturer, Professor Christopher Pelling of Christ Church, who had studied classics at a state school, emphasised the importance of classics for everyone, saying:

‘It’s terrific when we can do something to make Latin available to so many children as want to take it ... [Classics] offers a particular good opportunity to look at a civilisation as a whole, and the differences help the students to realise what’s distinctive about our own culture, thinking critically about ourselves and realising what’s good as well as bad about the world today.’

But where will the teachers come from? Fewer pupils take Latin at school (only 12,000 took Latin GCSE this year, compared to the 40,000 who took O Level in 1970) and therefore fewer will continue with it into A Level and thence the university. No longer does an applicant for Greats at Oxford need either Latin or Greek to be accepted, though successful applicants are expected to reach A Level standard by the end of their first year. Furthermore, only two universities offer the PGCE in Latin.

The Cambridge Schools Classics Project has, over the 45 years of its life, worked hard and successfully to keep the classics subjects alive in schools, providing opportunities for teachers as well as students to have access to the classical literature and languages through electronic material and distance learning. But questions need to be asked, and are being asked, about the need for the teaching of Latin in the way it has traditionally been taught. Let us consider this briefly – and I defer to your better judgement.

Is Latin necessary?

How far does one need to learn the Greek and Latin languages in order to enter into that understanding of the ancient civilisations?

Of course, ‘understanding’ is always a ‘more-or-less affair’. And for many that might be as much as they can aspire to. To learn a language to a level at which the literature can be understood with comparative ease is not an easy task. And, one might say, there is no reason why classical subjects cannot be studied fruitfully through translations.

But integral to any civilisation is the distinctive language, especially in the grasp and enjoyment of poetry, drama and literature. The opportunity must surely be there for those (by no means all) who wish to take that interest in classical cultures further and for that purpose to have a grasp of the language, even if such a grasp may need the help of a ‘crib’. I struggled with Virgil when at school, a little less so with Livy, but could manage Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* quite easily – but I was not allowed to read Catullus’ love poems.

How accurately does one need to have learnt the intricacies of grammar

and syntax in order to appreciate more intimately the classical civilisation into which one is being introduced? Certainly, on the personal level, I loved the connection between my introduction to Latin and the teaching of Roman history by my excellent teacher – a love which has never left me.

This is a question that has been pursued in *The Journal of Classics Teachers*, not least in connection with the changes to the GCSE syllabuses to commence from 2016. My understanding is that there is some dispute over the requirement for extensive translation from English into Latin, an intellectual exercise with mastery of the complex set of rules in syntax and grammar, rather than seeing Latin as a ‘living language’ within the wider study of Roman history and civilisation. This would require a choice of texts which are reflected that Roman world and yet which are short and easier to comprehend, and to be understood within their contexts – Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico*, some of Catullus’ short poems to Lesbia, relevant extracts from Livy’s great history of Rome, *De Urbe Condita*, and examples of Martial’s epigrams.

The point is that if the classical subjects are, in their educational task of developing an understanding of what it means to be human (relevant to all learners), in which some acquaintance with Latin literature plays a significant part, then, first, that learning of Latin must not be seen as nothing other than a challenging intellectual exercise, and, second, it must be pitched at various levels of difficulty so that it becomes accessible to all. Unfortunately, in the Government’s policy ‘to raise standards’ and to make grades ‘tougher’ to attain, the broader educational purposes of teaching the classical subjects are lost.

A personal touch

May I finish with a more personal touch?

I mentioned earlier how my own interest in Roman civilisation was acquired from my excellent teacher of Latin, which was closely associated with his teaching of Roman history. From school I went at the age of 17 to study philosophy in Rome at the Gregorian University where all the lectures and oral examinations were in Latin. Latin was not

there a ‘dead language’, but the *lingua franca* of an international community of students. Such was my enthusiasm that I began to write my daily diary in Latin; witness the extract from New Year’s Day, 1958.

‘ut augeam capacitatem meam ad linguam latinam loquendam, intendo scribere hunc libellum in hac antiqua lingua. Ratio est sequens: passus sum magnum et gravum perturbationem cum, in universitate gregoriana, conatus sum questionem rogare, propter impossibilitatem quam studententes alteri experti sunt ad mea verba cognoscenda.’

The entry for that day ironically concludes:

‘nocte ineunte, spectaculum factum est in collegio; titulum vocabitur ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’.’

Not quite, I admit, the beautiful prose of Livy.

But Rome constantly draws me back for that very enchantment of which I have spoken. There I shall be again in October revealing that enchantment to three more grandchildren. We shall sit at my favourite restaurant *Ristorante dar Pallaro*, just off the *Campo dei Fiori*, and gaze at the *Teatro di Pompeo*, where Caesar was stabbed to death by Brutus. Or, if you have more money than I have, you may choose to dine in the basement of *Da Pancrazio* in the very room where the stabbing is reputed to have taken place – though the food is not nearly as interesting as that in the much cheaper *Der Pallaro*. We shall visit the *Terme di Caracalla*, if only to imagine the vast feat of engineering (and use of a thousand slaves) to heat the waters of the *tepidarium* and the *caldarium*, and to imagine also the many activities – athletic and cultural – put on to keep the thousands of visitors amused. Was it of these baths of Caracalla that Horace wrote that poets were wont to recite their verses, and where Shelley wrote in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that ‘this poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla’? We shall wander over the Palatine (where the remains of the very early Etruscan inhabitants are now exposed to view), by the ruins of once luxurious palaces of the emperors, and

onto the Via Sacra. There we shall march with the victorious armies from the Arch of Titus via the Senate House or Curia to be greeted at the Capitol. Towering eastwards they will see the massive amphitheatre of the first century A.D. Colosseum, where crowds of up to 70,000 were entertained by gladiatorial contests and bestial fights, and where the early Christians suffered dreadful deaths for their faith – evoking the subsequent song of later pilgrims:

*Quamdiu stet Colysaeus, stet et Roma
Quando cadet Colysaeus, cadet et Roma
Quando cadet Roma, cadet et Mundus.*

(For as long as the Colosseum stand, so does Rome. When falls the Colosseum, then falls Rome; when Rome falls, so does the world)

Never should this tour omit the Pantheon, built by Agrippa (friend of the Emperor Augustus), the dome of which was the largest ever for 1,500 years and whose structure remained a mystery until Brunelleschi was given permission to open it up and found the secret which

enabled him to construct the beautiful dome of the Duomo in Florence.

The grandchildren will, I hope, begin to see the significance of the Roman civilisation, reflecting both the glorious achievements of ‘being human’ which have had such a profound influence on the culture of the West, and also the deep depravity and evil to which humanity can sink in the pursuit of power and amusements. There we see ‘being human’ in all its glory and in all its potential wickedness.

But the enchantment and power of ancient Rome would not be so magnificent if we were to ignore that which arose from it. To journey up the *Via Appia Antica* on the way to the catacombs, one might see the home of Lucina where Pliny, on his way into the city, heard the sweet voices of the children singing,

*Introibo ad altare Dei: ad Deum qui
laetificat juventutem meam*

which became the opening prayer of the Christian liturgy, that has survived to this day. Here in the catacombs, especially of S. Calixto and S. Sebastiano, we see the

early flourishing of Christianity. Not only did they secretly bury their dead in the many miles of underground tunnels, but they gathered for protection, community and prayer.

To conclude

Education, properly speaking, is (through the different forms of knowledge and realms of meaning) an introduction to what it means to be human and how that humanity at its best can be pursued. The classical subjects are surely best fitted to do that so long as they are taught by teachers who see their importance, know their subject and are able to make the connections between them and the curiosity and interests of the young learners.

**Professor Richard Pring retired after 14 years as Director of the Department of Educational Studies at Oxford University in May 2003. Since 2003, he was Lead Director of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training.
richard.pring@education.ox.ac.uk**