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Irrigating Deserts



by Walker Reid Cosgrove

When I traveled with my family on Christmas Break, we passed through a good-sized Midwestern city. As we were maneuvering through traffic, a billboard advertising a local university caught my eye because it proclaimed, “Prepare to Prosper,” followed by a boasted 97% placement rate within six months of graduation. The next day my daughter and her cousins played board games, including *The Game of Life* with the self-proclaimed objective “The player with the most money at the end of the game wins!”—an objective my daughter pursued with vigor and singularity of vision. I meditated on these two encounters the rest of the break, as I wondered about what it is exactly that I do as a professor. It seems clearer now than ever to me that much of higher education exists in a solar system revolving around the sun of career preparation, specifically aiming for the highest salary, best benefit package, and most prestige—alas, the message being

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sent to students is that their worth as humans is connected to these things. Unfortunately, this message means that from the lowest to the highest levels, most education focuses on pragmatic use of information in order to get As, in order to graduate and get into a prestigious college, in order to land that prominent job, in order to have all of the things social media tells us provide meaning. In short, this approach views education as information transfer, as a pragmatic means to a desired end.

As I reflect on this situation, I’m reminded of a memorable line from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice finds herself lost at a fork in the road and asks the Cheshire Cat in which direction she should head. The Cheshire Cat responds, “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.” Alice tells him she does not really care, to which he then says it does not matter what direction she heads because as long as she keeps walking she will get somewhere. Similarly, a recent book aimed at undergraduates states, “because the meaning you give to your life is what propels your actions, before asking *what to do*, ask yourself *who you are*.”¹ It seems to me that a major issue facing education today is that either the end is not considered at all, or the sirens of pragmatism point to the singular end of career, prestige, and money. Either way, generally we do not ask students (at any level) to consider who they are, as the primary and most important question of their entire educational journey, if not their lives.

The past couple of years I have spent a lot of time with Plato, and I am more convinced than ever that the *Republic* is concerned less with politics and more with education. Regardless of whatever else one thinks about Plato or his

philosophy, he was correct in his underlying assumptions about education, that the most important question anyone can ask before beginning the educational process (either as a teacher or a student) is this: Who am I as a person, or what does it mean to be a human being? Everything else follows from this question, which is no doubt why Socrates pursued single-mindedly his famous dictum, “know thyself.” In this advice, as educational theories and methods come and go, Plato is timeless and always relevant. Of course, Plato does not have the last word, but he begins a conversation that is picked up and developed within the Christian tradition by figures like St. Augustine and John Calvin, who reframe knowing oneself in the context of knowing God.²

I recognize I am not suggesting anything new, as all of life, not just education, flows from these questions. A sustained reading within the Abrahamic faiths as well as ancient philosophy reveals that the first step toward faithfulness in any ancient religious or philosophical tradition is wrestling with, even if not totally answering, the questions of what it means to be human and the human place in the cosmos. This is what it means for a religion or a philosophy to be a way of life, not simply an addendum to life.³ Education naturally flows from these questions because education ultimately shapes us as humans, whether we are intentional about it or not. Because many colleges and universities are given over to pragmatism, they do not think of education as shaping particular human persons but, instead, simply as a gnostic transfer of course material or information into their students’ brains. Instead of aiming for something more, this utilitarianism sees humans simply as cogs in the industrial-capitalistic machine, and the job of the educator as preparing students to be dutiful producers and purchasers within the great American (or Global) economy. This is short sighted and a very narrow view of our horizon as humans, and it is ultimately, I think, destructive to persons and communities.

Connected to questions about meaning and purpose are questions about what it means to know. There are competing visions about this, but currently education, and culture more broadly, is dominated by an implicit pragmatism,

which answers the question about how we know by focusing on knowledge-as-information. As a result, what are valued as most important are things that are measurable. An earlier tradition running from the ancient and medieval worlds suggests knowledge-as-formation, or becoming more fully human, as core to true education.⁴ In this view, the unmeasurable is most important because the truly valuable things in life—love, friendship, family, the transcendent, the other—are all unmeasurable.

Do not misunderstand me: I am not a Renaissance Humanist who lionizes the past. Nor am I, in some nostalgic vein, suggesting that a naïve return to the past will solve all of our problems. But I also disagree vehemently with the Modern notion that the future is always better and that the past ought to be left in the past. Rather than worship or forget the past, I follow C.S. Lewis, who suggests that despite earlier thinkers getting it wrong in so many ways, there is something important about learning from them because they easily reveal where we are wrong.⁵ Thus, there is something in the vision promoted by ancients and medievals that has the potential to radically change the trajectory of students’ lives today, breaking them out of the tunnel vision encouraged by social media. G.K. Chesterton warns against becoming unmoored from the past and encourages us to draw from the past “as from a root” so that it will continually shape us as we grow, develop, and move into the future.⁶

As a reader of Plato, I do not agree with the common interpretation of Plato as a hater of art and poetry. Rather, the real reason he was wary of poetry was his recognition of its great power and influence over human society, and in his own historical context he understood as dangerous the vision and horizon that Greek epic and tragic poetry provided his fellow Athenians for what it meant to be human and humanity’s place in the cosmos. Thus, Plato attempted not to actually ban poetry from the polis but to create a new, philosophical poetry that offered an alternative vision for answering the questions of human meaning and purpose. Plato is not the only individual to attempt such a radical upheaval of the

standard vision for the world: as much the same could be said for the cosmic rebellion preached by Jesus Christ, in that early Christianity offered a completely different way to look at the world and the cosmos, putting love at the center of all things and offering dignity to all humans, rather than following the standard Roman vision of the day that promoted power, wealth, influence, and strength above all.

In my wrestling with contemporary education and my role within it as a professor, I recently came across three recent books with counter-cultural visions for education and its deepest purpose: Jack R. Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro, *Wendell Berry and Higher Education: Cultivating Virtues of Place*; Father Francis Bethel, *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism*; and Ryan C. McIlhenny, *Reforming the Liberal Arts*.⁷ These books are similar to each other in many ways as they seek to combat an educational culture given over to pragmatism and an impoverished vision for human beings that encourages a primary objective of upward mobility to achieve the American Dream through career/job preparation and high-earning potential. In its place, these authors emphasize the centrality of the great questions of human meaning and purpose and seek to ignite students' imaginations with a different vision for what it means to be human, namely to embrace their humanity and seek to serve the broader human community instead of simply themselves (Baker and Bilbro 1, 4, 8, 38-39; Bethel 123-124; McIlhenny 96-102, 117-118).

All three of these books seek to encourage a more intentional, proactive cultivation of certain virtues and habits, based on an understanding of human nature that is more complicated and complex than simply economic (McIlhenny 33, 38; Bethel 259-260, 273; Baker and Bilbro, 91). In all of this, they recognize, as Plato did, the seriousness of poetry, or the importance of the imagination in casting this vision of the human person and the place of education in shaping that

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person (McIlhenny 94-96; Baker and Bilbro 4, 39-42, 54-55, 59; Bethel 5-6, 121). They all build their ideas about education upon a classical and medieval foundation; and in so doing, they recognize that in true education the questions are always more important than the answers, and that we as humans need these questions even as we need air and food and water to survive. After all, Jesus did tell his disciples that one does not live by bread alone. This is what the Cheshire Cat tried to share with Alice, even as Socrates tried to share it with 5th-century Athens and what really good professors ought to share with their students today. But, sadly, much like the Cheshire Cat, I fear that the professor who dwells on such meaningful questions and allows them to shape the contours of her interactions with students is at best disappearing, or, like Socrates and Jesus, forcibly removed from the situation.

To counter the insidious pragmatic vision in American culture today, these authors seek to position the individual within the community. As each suggests in his own way, truly no human person is an autonomous entity who can control, manipulate, or master her own reality (Baker and Bilbro 13, 34; McIlhenny 96-102). Instead, each encourages allowing the ancient and medieval perspective to shape us today, and each believes that to find meaning or purpose as a human person means living in community with others and "conforming [ourselves] to reality [through] knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue" (Baker and Bilbro 9). They insist that humans have responsibilities that extend beyond the self and earning capabilities, to include responsibility to place, to tradition, to the created order, as well as to other human persons (Baker and Bilbro 91; McIlhenny 16, 19-20). As I said above, these ancient and medieval texts are not without their problems, but they are important because they can shine the light so clearly on our own failings. This communal vision can be cast by the traditional arts and sciences and in par-

ticular, as the authors under review suggest, great texts from the past. It is possible that reading and discussing great texts will open students' minds and hearts to "true, good, and beautiful realities which give meaning to life" (Bethel, 1), realities that surpass the latest fashions, computer games, or reality stars. Great texts can pull students out of the immediacy of the here-and-now and the self and lead to the good, the true, and the beautiful. The point of the traditional arts and sciences was not about information or job preparation specifically, but about shaping the intellect, the will, and emotions in the (institution's) hopes of more fully shaping the human person for the good of society (Bethel xvi, 121, 150, 291-301; McIlhenny 14, 16, 25, 33, 38, 111).

It is an understatement that our contemporary society is an information age, often leading to information overload, as seen in the proliferation of devices, the reach of the internet, and the power of social media (McIlhenny, 33, 38, Baker and Bilbro 105-106). Eric Schmidt, former Google CEO, went as far to say (in 2010), that "Every two days now we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003,"⁸ a point which he meant positively and was well received across news outlets. It is no wonder that so often we feel overwhelmed, as we are continuously bombarded with information. This bombardment plagues the educational realm as well, as education has become simply the transfer of relevant information or material—relevancy dictated by marketability of skills or job possibilities. Information slowly replaces true knowledge or wisdom as the foundation for education, and this replacement has dangerous implications for our students (McIlhenny 25). Nearly 80 years ago T.S. Eliot prophetically wrote about the loss of wisdom: "Where is the life we have lost in living? / Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"⁹ Baker and Bilbro reflect on Eliot's words: "As these words attest, wisdom is not something we can manufacture, access, or possess. Rather, wisdom exists only when it is embodied in persons with rich, well-ordered memories" (Baker and Bilbro 106). Eliot is correct: as information becomes easier

and easier to obtain, true knowledge and wisdom become more and more elusive, to our detriment as humans and as society.

Instead of encouraging students to think about human meaning and purpose, and guiding them to seek truth and true knowledge and wisdom, most educational institutions move quickly past deep, sustained thought, pushing students to "heroic" or "celebrity" vocations of leadership, or, to put it differently, pushing "upward mobility," which does great harm to local communities and places (Baker and Bilbro, 8ff). According to this vision, to "settle" for an average job among average people in an average place is ultimately to fail. Instead, the only acceptable path is the hubristic pursuit of changing or saving the world. I am certainly not suggesting that causes such as ending world hunger or global warming are bad causes, simply that while the vision cast by colleges and universities often sounds altruistic, self-sacrificing, and virtuous, it equally looks like virtual signaling to the appropriate constituents, alumni, donors, or prospective students, and while the cause of the poor and less fortunate is important, so too is expanding the name and influence of the particular educational institution.

It seems that today we serve others not by serving others but by proclaiming that service in alumni magazines, institutional blogs, and social media. To the credit of the ancient Greeks, at least Attic tragedy warned its audience that nemesis followed hubris and brought epic downfall. Unfortunately, in the wake of the Enlightenment we tend to think of ourselves as limitless and relegate Nemesis to a deserted island with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. As this is the case, Baker and Bilbro are correct to find a model of this hubristic vision—not in Oedipus or Agamemnon but in Milton's Satan (Baker and Bilbro 130-131). The cure to this hubris is fidelity to a vision focused on particular persons and places in which we already find ourselves, and not bombastic plans to change the world, announced globally via social media. It is, instead, following Wendell Berry's example, a fidelity to humble places, humble vocations, and humble neighbors and community (Baker and Bilbro 130-131; Bethel 107-108, McIlhenny 14,

16). As McIlhenny states, building on this idea that true education leads to wisdom, “A wise individual exhibits a proactive morality—a morality that takes joy in cultivating the well-being of others.... In short, wisdom fosters love for others” (McIlhenny 102) instead of the selfishness our own educational and cultural situation encourages: that we seek our own wealth, success, power, influence, or even celebrity, even in taking on great and difficult public causes.

These authors all come from certain religious orientations, and one has to wonder if these sorts of changes are going to be made if the impetus needs to come from a religious community. Bethel and Bilbro have clear faith commitments, as they both teach at a faith-based, Evangelical institution; are clearly shaped by religious thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and James K.A. Smith; and ultimately base their argument upon the thought of Wendell Berry, who is a Christian. That said, they do not presuppose that one has to share their faith commitments to benefit from either the thought of Wendell Berry or their appropriation of his thought to higher education.

The particular faith communities to which Father Bethel (and John Senior) and McIlhenny belong are much more central in shaping the lines of their thoughts on education than those of Baker and Bilbro. A traditional Catholic understanding of Jesus Christ as creator and sustainer of all reality is foundational to John Senior’s thought, as unpacked by Bethel, and the vision pursued by the great texts was completed and fulfilled by Jesus Christ, or, to put it differently, the pagan great texts were merely *praeparatio fidei* (Bethel 5, 53, 70-71, 351). Senior was shaped by such Christian thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, Cardinal Newman, and Chesterton (Bethel 130-131); and traditional Catholic practices played an important role in all of these thinkers (Bethel 259-260, 273).

Similarly, McIlhenny clearly writes from a

specific religious tradition, that of Reformed Christianity, which, following John Calvin, suggests that the deepest knowledge of the self only comes when one first knows God.¹⁰ Consequently, McIlhenny explains that the only way to discover the underlying coherence to the created order is to know the sovereign God who created and sustains it (McIlhenny, 21). Both Senior and McIlhenny ultimately suggest that change can only come through Jesus Christ because he created and sustains all reality.¹¹

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Even though these three books are similar in their arguments, they do differ enough in terms of specific focus or ideas to merit individual attention by those interested in thinking differently about education. I appreciate the verve with which all three refuse to accept the reigning educational paradigm and, in so doing, refuse to

bow to the idols of the age: efficiency, practicality, measurability, and marketability. While they have my gratitude, I lack their confidence in the likelihood of change on the institutional scale beyond the individual in her classroom. One hurdle is that colleges and universities have become big businesses. Many college and university administrators have become a separate caste, largely no longer taken directly from the institution’s faculty. These men and women attend the same administrator and leadership conferences, they read the same leadership books and journals, and they share the same hopes, fears, and dreams as administrators across America. It seems that a new poetry is needed to provide an alternative vision for both administrators and students.

While it is easy for faculty to blame administrators for the problems within the university, professors also bear blame for these problems. Within the last twenty or thirty years, faculty members, particularly at small, liberal arts institutions traditionally focused on teaching, have chased the disconnected, individualistic agenda of the larger, more prestigious research institu-

tions. This chase often leads one to silo into a particular division, department, and ultimately one's own office, classroom, or lab with very little cross-discipline/division interaction, either in person-to-person conversation or even in shared common texts or ideas. This move is encouraged by administrations that seek to raise their institutions' profile in boasting top-ranked faculty who continually publish, which then only pushes faculty members to be more concerned with CV-building and territorial control than traditional education connected to shaping students as human persons—unless, of course, disciples can be made from the student population.

Given that administrations have generally capitulated to cultural trends in education and faculty members are consumed with individualistic research, it is little wonder that there is no one left to sing a new poetry that could provide a different vision for the possibilities in education to constituencies, donors, and prospective students/parents. Across much of academy, many institutions are incapable of truly selling an alternative vision for what education could and should be because as a whole, they themselves lack a vision for something different, unique, and truly educational and are usually deeply embedded in the absolutizing of economic and profit motivations for education.

While I generally tend toward melancholy in life, as I have meditated on the ideas within these books I have been given new hope for my place in academia. I find myself less negative about education today, though perhaps still unsure about the future of educational institutions. As I think about it, true education happens all of the time, though never with great popularity. This should not surprise me, as C.S. Lewis describes the teacher's task as irrigating deserts.¹² And while there is a certain sparseness of the desert in bloom, the desert, unlike a jungle, still has a beauty that captivates. I have seen the desert bloom. Every semester I encounter a few students who open up to great texts and poetry and are willing to wrestle with great questions of meaning and purpose. I find students who rise to the challenge of not expecting easy, pat answers but instead who force themselves to wrestle with dif-

ficult texts and attempt to develop their own answers in conversations with the generations that have gone before. At least once every semester, a particular student surprises me in the middle of a class discussion, and I find myself with the class exploring a text from a perspective I have never considered before. Occasionally a former student contacts me to continue earlier conversations about meaning and purpose from the time she was a student. Somewhat regularly, I join colleagues at my own institution and beyond to wrestle with great texts and ideas. These experiences bring me great joy whenever they occur.

Which leads me back to Plato and his *Republic*. Plato ends Book 9 of his *Republic* with the idea that it is actually impossible to found the perfect polis, something he and his interlocutors have discussed the previous 300 pages. Rather, the discussion of the perfect polis has provided a pattern or image, a new philosophical poetry, for the individual who desires something more, something deeper in life. He ends the *Republic* in Book 10 with the hope that those who use this pattern within their soul might “always keep to the upper road and practice justice with prudence in every way...”¹³ Perhaps finding an educational institution that aligns with the vision promoted by Baker and Bilbro, Bethel/Senior, and McIlhenny (not to mention the dozens of other texts I could have mentioned) is impossible. But, at the very least, these books provide a pattern, a new poetry, for those of us who want to wrestle with the great questions of meaning and purpose within ourselves and within the classroom, and ultimately to irrigate deserts in encouraging such a life and pilgrimage to the students who daily cross our paths—that flowers might bloom in a dry and weary land.

Endnotes

1. Ingrid Rossellini. *Know Thyself: Western Identity from Classical Greece to the Renaissance*. (New York: Doubleday, 2018), xv.
2. See, for example, Augustine, *Confessions*, Sarah Ruden trans. (New York: Modern Library, 2018) 1.2.2, 4.4.9, 5.3.5, 10.5.7, 10.17.26, 10.23.34-35, 10.35.55 (really the whole of Book 10); and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,

- 2 vols., Henry Beveridge trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), i.1-3 and II.i.1.
3. For Plato, obviously the *Republic*, Allan Bloom trans. (New York: Basic Books, 2016) as mentioned above; but equally important texts are *Apology* and the *Phaedo*, *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*, C.D.C. Reeve ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012). Augustine's *Confessions* reveal the Christian journey to answer that question. For a guide in thinking about ancient philosophy in this way, see Pierre Hadot. *What is Ancient Philosophy*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2002). Dante's *Commedia* provides an excellent example this type of world-and-life vision for medieval Catholicism, and more recently Herman Dooyeweerd. *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*. (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2012) for a Reformational approach. In Islam the Sufis put great emphasis on knowing the self as the first step to knowing God, see Omid Safi, ed. and trans. *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*. (New Haven: Yale, 2018) and William C. Chittick. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path of God* (New Haven: Yale, 2013).
 4. For development on these competing epistemologies within the context of education see the brilliant book, Esther Lightcap Meek. *A Little Manual For Knowing* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
 5. C.S. Lewis, "Introduction to St. Athanasius," *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1946), 11.
 6. G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1913), 12.
 7. Jack R. Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro, *Wendell Berry and Higher Education: Cultivating Virtues of Place* (University Press of Kentucky, 2017); Father Francis Bethel, *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism* (Thomas More College Press; 1st edition, 2017); and Ryan C. McIlhenny, *Reforming the Liberal Arts* (Falls City Press, 2017).
 8. Apparently, Schmidt's data was off, which doesn't detract from the power of the quote itself or the media's infatuation with it. For more information see, <https://blog.rjmetrics.com/2011/02/07/eric-schmidts-5-exabytes-quote-is-a-load-of-crap/>
 9. See, T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from The Rock," in *T.S. Eliot Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, Centenary Edition (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 145-173.
 10. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.i.1-3 and II.i.1.
 11. For scriptural background, see Hebrews 13.1-3; Colossians 1.17.
 12. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 14.
 13. See Plato, *Republic* 9.592b and 10.621c. Translation is Allan Bloom's.