



CLASSICAL HUMANISM HAS *EVERYTHING* TO DO WITH JUSTICE¹

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We are not born for ourselves alone, to use Plato's splendid words... people are born for the sake of people, so that they may be able to assist one another. ~ Cicero, *On Duties*, I.22

In justice is all virtue combined. ~ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.1

Strangers and beggars come from Zeus. ~ Homer, *Odyssey* XIV

The age-old demand for justice seems to have come into greater prominence over the course of the last several decades, from the protests of the 1960's to today. During this same period, classical studies have become ever more marginal in the Academy. But the divergence between these two patterns seems far from inevitable: the themes of justice and the practices of classical humanism are so linked that one should have expected a parallel rather than an inverse-reciprocal relationship. Four motivations have led me to make this case at this time.

¹ This article is based on the Edmund F. Miller, S.J., Lecture given at John Carroll University, March 28, 2007.

First, the call for justice demands careful reflection, particularly because we are so easily led into antinomies. The pro-Lifers and the pro-Choicers, for example, could both *claim* to be working for justice; and they could both *claim* that the other side is being unjust. In such a situation, “promoting justice” sounds like a slogan that simply begs other questions about what is just; it begs for further investigation, further reflection, further deliberation, — things that might seem like detours that undermine a prompt response. But how *can* we in good conscience do without them? We might so easily end up “doing good to achieve evil,” so to speak, that is, making well-intentioned efforts that look and feel so very virtuous but that actually cause greater harm in the long run. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote: “A too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice.”² Long ago, Cicero cited a proverb, “The more Justice, the more injustice.”³ So we must be very careful about this call to justice, and we must bring the best resources we have to bear on it. Classical humanism, I am convinced, is one of those resources.

A second motivation is the long-standing relationship that Western culture and education have had with classical humanism. Our major religious tradition is also tightly intertwined with this tradition: Saint Paul’s letters show Stoic influences; Biblical interpretation follows in the wake of Greek literary criticism at Alexandria; Augustine carries with him Cicero and Plato; and Aquinas, Aristotle. All the more reason to wonder about the attenuation of classical elements in our education. We need to ask: “By shedding the old classical elements, are we being reborn into a new form, or are we just diminishing ourselves in a self-destructive way? How do we evaluate the tradition of classical humanism today?” I have pursued this topic partly in the hope of contributing to these questions.

Such a line of thinking suggests the third motivation, namely, our current educational moment. Criticism of higher education became almost a genre in itself after 1988, with Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*.⁴ This type of critical

² *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), Chapter 7, Section 2, p. 138.

³ “*Summum ius, summa iniuria.*” *On Duties (De Officiis)* I.33. Cicero, *On Duties*, edited by M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 14.

⁴ New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

reflection flourishes because there is some sense of a need for it. Recently there have appeared, within a very short time, four compelling calls to rethink liberal arts education; the authors were the Notre Dame philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre; the former dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis; the former president of Harvard, Derek Bok, and the political scientist, Peter Berkowitz.⁵ These are significant critiques that deserve our attention sooner rather than later, but in fact, we should always be reviewing the effectiveness of our liberal arts practices. I suspect that classical humanism has much to offer this discussion.

My fourth motivation is the greatest: our students and their needs. For me, the very first and most radical justice-question for all college programs is that of whether are not the students are getting in their studies what they most need – not necessarily what they or their teachers or their parents or the market might most *want* students to be getting, but what they really most *need to get* in order to live their lives most fully, most productively, and with the most integrity, according to their own callings and gifts. As Michael Buckley says:

Any justification of the promotion of justice as a commitment of the contemporary university must be grounded on the basic conviction that the university exists for the humane growth of its students.⁶

So, are we doing adequate justice to the students? What best supports their humane growth? I believe that classical humanism might make a notable, even a necessary, contribution in this area.

⁵ See Alasdair MacIntyre's article, "The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University," in *Commonweal* CXXXIII: 18 (October 20, 2006), pp. 10-14; Harry R. Lewis's book about Harvard, *Excellence without Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*; Derek Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton University Press, 2006); and Peter Berkowitz's essay in *Policy Review* (No. 140, December 2006 – January 2007), "Liberal Education, Then and Now," pp. 47-67.

⁶ Michael J. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Georgetown University Press, 1999), pp. 113-114.

Defining Terms

How, then, to define our basic terms? For justice, let us simply take the conventional shorthand: giving people their due. That meaning seems to be implicit in most uses of the word. I would add, however, that it implies giving people their due with some idea of what is going on in that act, some consciousness of what is due, and some sense of moral responsibility or rightness in the achievement of that justice. If you give people their due without this larger reflective awareness, the act is then really more of an accident than an act of justice.

Classical humanism is essentially the cultural and educational use of the classical heritage for contemporary purposes. The term *Humanism* was first used by a German educationist in 1808 to refer to a course of study based on Latin and Greek authors, a curriculum that had been established by Italian Renaissance humanists.⁷ Their curriculum covered moral philosophy, history, literature, rhetoric, and grammar; it has expanded over time to include other subjects as well. Eventually, the word *humanism* came to indicate a certain perspective, an approach, a mentality, a vision stressing the importance of human experiences, capacities, initiatives, and achievements. The phrase *classical humanism* combines both of these meanings: it is the cultivation of a certain *mentality, sensibility, and vision* through the educational use of classical contents and through the *traditions, practices, and values* that that use has established.⁸ It starts with an engagement with the classical past that leads us to dialogue with it, to critique it, to emulate its greatest virtues, and to transcend it in a way that is appropriate for our time and place.

⁷ Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und des Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungs-Unterrichts unsrer Zeit*, Jena 1808.

⁸ *Classical humanism* refers, then, to a type of *education* and a type of *consciousness, interest, and orientation* that rest on a judicious engagement with the heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, and with all that significantly derives from or interacts with that classical tradition (for example, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Petrarch, Montaigne, Shakespeare), and it also refers to the *practice* of engaging the larger cultural heritage through such figures. That practice can be extended to contents that originally have little to do with Europe, for example, the Hebrew scriptures.

The Argument

I propose that classical humanism and justice are closely connected because of the contents of the heritage, the nature of the heritage, and the actual history of the heritage. The contents, because it talks significantly about justice in significant works; the nature, because its characteristic practices and vision support justice; the actual history, because the classical humanist tradition has in fact led to justice-related changes in the “real-world.”

Contents of the Heritage: Justice-Themes

Let me start off with the most striking, concrete examples that I can find to show that the leading works of the heritage are centrally concerned with justice.

Homer foregrounds the justice of Zeus in striking ways in the *Iliad*, where justice is seen under the aspect of honor: when people do not get the honor that they deserve, a situation of injustice results, bringing suffering and disaster in its wake. Seeking his own honor, Agamemnon dishonors the priest Chryses; when forced to relent, he dishonors Achilles, who breaks forth into a self-destructive rage. Honoring persons appropriately touches the heart of questions about justice.

When we turn to the *Odyssey*, we see Odysseus’s house being exploited by his wife’s arrogant suitors while he is away at war. It is this situation of injustice that Homer highlights for the first four of his twenty-four books; he introduces his main character only in Book 5. Odysseus returns as a homeless person, an outcast, a beggar, to re-establish a just order in his home community. The epic actually begins with a pointed reference to another justice question: the opening scene focuses on Zeus contemplating the death of Aigisthos, who helped Klytemnestra to kill her husband. Zeus is saying: “Look at these mortals blaming us Gods when *they* are the ones at fault. We told the man, stay away from Agamemnon’s wife, but he did not listen, so now he has paid the price for his foolishness.” At the end of the *Odyssey*, when the Ithakans want to overwhelm Odysseus because he punished the suitors, Halitherses says:

Men of Ithaca, it is all your own fault that things have turned out as they have; you would not listen to me, nor yet to Mentor, when we warned you to check the folly of your sons who were

doing much wrong in the wantonness of their hearts — wasting the substance and dishonouring the wife of a chieftain who they thought would not return.⁹

These most popular of all Greek epics suggest that human beings should learn something about their own responsibilities in keeping the peace by being just. The result of injustice is disaster.

Another high point of Greek culture was the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, a dramatic trilogy that deals with Agamemnon's murder at the hands of his wife. When his son Orestes avenges him, by killing his own mother, he is chased by the Furies, who are an embodiment of the old primeval justice of Nature. The dramatic trilogy ends with the establishment of a court to hear the case, and with jurors under the guidance of Athena voting to determine the outcome. There is move to a new kind of justice that does not dishonor primitive justice but that does relativize it in a new juridical dispensation.

The *Antigone* of Sophocles goes yet further to portray the demands of a transcendent divine justice that exceeds the legal justice of King Creon, who had ordered that the body of Antigone's brother, as a traitor, not be buried. So neither political justice nor primitive justice rooted in revenge are completely adequate: the transcendental perspective on justice is required.

Plato highlights justice in his synthesis, the *Republic*, the most famous philosophy book of all antiquity. In fact it has carried for a long time the subtitle "On the Just" because the central question for discussion is "What is justice?"

One of Aristotle's most influential texts was the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the center of the work, a structurally significant place in Greek composition, Aristotle turns to the question of justice. He speaks of it in the most exalted terms:

Justice...is complete virtue... For this reason, it is often held that justice is the greatest of the virues, and that 'neither evening star nor morning star is such a wonder.' We express this in the proverb, 'In justice is all virtue combined.' And it is complete

⁹ Adapted from *The Iliad of Homer and The Odyssey*, translated by Samuel Butler, Volume 4 in *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971, c1952), p. 321.

virtue in the fullest sense, because it is the exercise of complete virtue.¹⁰

These are prominent moments in some of the most important monuments of classical literature. In themselves, they are a great cultural accomplishment. But they also point beyond themselves to a larger achievement, to a long-standing involvement in justice issues that we might say helps to constitute the very character of the classical humanist heritage.

The Nature of the Heritage

It is clear why justice was a major category for ancient Greek thought and literature, and why it deeply marked the classical humanist tradition: justice was a major part of the society's consciousness. It was an ongoing project. It had to be. The Greeks had many city-states in competition with each other; by trial and error they made efforts to establish socially and politically viable constitutional arrangements. They learned from one another's mistakes and successes. The spread of literacy helped to make that reflection something that could be shared from citizen to citizen, recorded, reflected upon, and refined. The *polis*, or city-state, loomed so large for the Greeks that it shaped their very self-understanding of what it means to be human: Aristotle famously said that a human being can be defined as an animal that nature has designed to live in a *polis*. Think about this a moment: this ultimately suggests that we are not meant to live by and for ourselves. Centuries later, Cicero quoted Plato to his son:

We are not born for ourselves alone, to use Plato's splendid words, but our country claims for itself one part of our birth, and our friends another. Moreover, as the Stoics believe, everything produced on earth is created for the use of humanity, and people are born for the sake of people, so that they may be able to assist one another.¹¹

¹⁰ Nic. Eth. 1129b. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 83.

¹¹ Cicero, *On Duties (De Officiis)*, I.22, pp. 9-10. Slightly adapted here.

The Romans constantly looked back to the Greek tradition; they learned from previous experience and did not let it die. They too developed a dislike for and many hedges against absolute monarchy or tyranny, even if they fell back into the Strong-Man approach to politics that is still a universally powerful dynamic. Anyone who takes up Roman history will have to encounter the difficulties that the patricians and the plebeians had with one another through the centuries. The rights of the people, even the commonest of people, finally had to be taken into account and had to be given formal representation at the highest levels of the government. The Romans had to develop a *politics of inclusion* to survive and grow. Inclusion meant not only taking care of the commoners at Rome, but extending the franchise of citizenship widely across the empire. Even as the West was collapsing, the Romans produced in Justinian's *Institutes* the fruit of a millenium of practical efforts to provide for justice in society.

But long before Justinian's reign, Cicero's influence had already been supremely influential, and he was to go on influencing Western political and social thinking right down to the founding of the United States and beyond. I would just like to quote one passage to give you an idea of the scope of the vision that he attained:

Those who say, however, that we have to have consideration for citizens and not for foreigners destroy the common fellowship of humanity; when that has been removed, kindness, generosity, goodness and justice are removed. The ones who remove them must be condemned even as rebels against the immortal gods. For they are overturning the fellowship established by the gods among human beings: its strongest bond is thinking that it is more against nature to diminish another person for the sake of one's advantage than to endure all inconveniences of property or body ... or even quite personal inconveniences that themselves lack justice. For this virtue alone is mistress of all of them. It is the queen of virtues.¹²

Here is Cicero, one of the heroes of classical humanism, rising in his last work beyond the limits of his own individuality, his own country, his own national pride, to the themes of the pre-eminence of justice and universal rights. It is a major moment that should be celebrated as much

¹² Cicero, *ibid.*, III.28. Translation mine.

as any declaration of independence. It is a declaration of human fellowship.

But perhaps we owe it also to the Stoics that influenced Cicero. Stoicism was a leader in popularizing this idea, which has also been expressed as human solidarity. “The notion of an active and practical community of all mankind is Stoic doctrine.”¹³ A related idea is found in Plato’s *Republic*, where society is treated as an organic whole: “We are not looking to make any one group in it outstandingly happy, but to make the whole city so far as possible.”¹⁴

Homer also suggests some idea of solidarity in the *Iliad* when Priam, the King of Troy, and his enemy Achilles are together in a tent, weeping over their losses. Achilles, looking on Priam, imagines his own father, and his previously unstoppable anger finally relents. It becomes painfully clear: we are, across any political divide, fellows in the human condition. We are subject to the same pains and losses. In Homer, this is not a theory, not a moral or legal code, but the image of an experience whose truth we can feel and affirm.

Something similar is carried by Vergil’s famous line: *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*.¹⁵ “Tears do fall for the life we live, and the miseries of mortals do make us mindful.” When this line is spoken, the hero Aeneas has arrived in Carthage, and he is looking at an artistic rendition of his own people’s story, the story of the fall of his once-great civilization. The Carthaginians, whose own civilization is at that time on the rise, have taken thought to portray the Trojan war on the panels of a temple. Aeneas is deeply touched that these foreigners on a remote northern coast of Africa should take any thought for the sufferings of his people. He sees the profound human capacity to extend one’s awareness, to look beyond one’s own interests to those of others. And in seeing that, just as he realizes that his own suffering is somehow worth remembrance, worth sympathy, his vision is enlarged. He is better able to begin to transcend his own particular interests to look to larger corporate and historical ones. There is both a special poignancy and a special irony

¹³ Richard Hoeningwald, “On Humanism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9:1 (September, 1948), pp. 41-50. [Review of Walter Rüegg, *Cicero und der Humanismus: Formale Untersuchungen ueber Petrarca und Erasmus* (Zürich, Rhein. Verlag, 1946).] Page 48.

¹⁴ *Republic* IV, 420b. Plato, *Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett, 2004).

¹⁵ Vergil, *Aeneid*, Book I, line 462.

here, because Queen Dido's Carthage was to become the sworn enemy of Rome, and Rome was to annihilate Carthage after the Third Punic War. Yet Vergil is pointing to the possibility of sympathy even with one's deadliest enemy, by virtue of our common humanity.

I dwell on this issue of solidarity because it is a high point of the classical heritage, and solidarity obviously has everything to do with justice. And it also suggests the arch-theme of Renaissance humanism. One scholar has claimed that "Renaissance humanism was neither a creed nor a philosophical system: it represented no interest group and made no attempt to organize itself as a movement."¹⁶ Another scholar, Craig Kallendorf, went on to say that "It did, however, present a central theme: *humanitas*, the cultivation to the fullest possible extent of human creativity, modeled on the achievements of ancient Greece and Rome."¹⁷

This central theme of the humanists, *humanitas*, is in fact something that includes but goes beyond creativity to sensibility, particularly the sensibility that appreciates what is common to all humanity. The classical humanist tradition may very well be one of the best devices we have for making us mindful of our common ground in a non-partisan, non-sectarian way. And by *elevating* that humanity in the way that it does, the vision of classical humanism helps to promote a large and consistent concern for justice and the human fulfillment that accompanies it.

How it does this can be seen in one theme in particular: that of the "dignity of the human person." Charles Trinkaus claims that this idea "attained its greatest prominence and was given its characteristic meaning in the Italian Renaissance."¹⁸ The dignity of the human person was identified with *humanitas* itself, which Trinkaus defines as "the quality of being most truly human which was to be acquired through the study of the liberal arts."¹⁹ Even in antiquity, Cicero's influential portrayal of the dignity of the human person was blended with a tradition stemming from Genesis 1:26, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our

¹⁶ Craig Kallendorf, "Humanism," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 71, quoting Allen Bullock, *The Humanist Tradition in the West* (New York and London: W.W.Norton, 1985), p. 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Charles Trinkaus, "The Renaissance Idea of the Dignity of Man," pp. 343-363, in *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1983), p. 343.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

likeness...” and Gen 1:28: “Be fruitful... and have dominion (over all the earth).” This theme comes to its high point in Pico della Mirandola’s famous 1486 oration on “The Dignity of the Human Person.” That text, by the way, makes it very clear that it is not just the dignity of the *European* person. It begins, in fact, with a good example of the cross-cultural respect carried by the humanistic tradition, invoking a Muslim Arabian and an occultist pagan from Egypt as authorities. Pico begins his speech by saying,

I have read in the records of the Arabians, worshipful Fathers, that Abdala the Saracen, when questioned as to what on this stage of the world, as it were, should be considered most worthy of wonder, replied: “There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than [humanity],” with which opinion the saying of Hermes Trismegistus agrees: “A great miracle, Asclepius, is [humanity].”²⁰

A tradition with such a vision shows itself to have radical and universal relevance. It goes *pari passu* with the attempt to give students a sense of their own dignity, their own importance, their own callings as human person in a large community whose members have an innate worth. Long before we were talking about self-esteem, classical humanism was communicating a serious appreciation for human dignity, that is, self-esteem writ large, even while it was running counter to the natural narcissism in each of our subjectivities.

It is no wonder that this tradition, in embracing and elevating the human, had to look across cultural boundaries. In so doing, it had to give respectful attention to **variety and diversity** from the very beginning. Even the inner world of a single person’s subjectivity has its incredible variety and diversity, as Montaigne witnessed in his abundant introspective reflections. Much moreso do these features appear in the outward expressions of our humanity. So the humanist canon was not just Homer, but Homer and Hesiod, that is, epic and didactic verse. And then it added the lyric poets and playwrights and philosophers and scientists, even those that disagreed with one another. The humanist canon is the tradition of “AND.” There are Zeus *and* Hera, the *Iliad and* the *Odyssey*,

²⁰ *Of the Dignity of Man: Oration of Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, Count of Concordia*, translated by Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 3, No. 3. (Jun., 1942), pp. 347-354. Page 347.

Odysseus *and* Penelope, the Greeks *and* the Romans, the Stoics *and* the Epicureans, comedy *and* tragedy, the pagans *and* the Christians, the arts *and* the sciences, the moderns *and* the ancients, the Greco-Romans *and* the Judaeo-Christians.

The very nature of the tradition is one of a plurality of voices. People might try to flatten it out and say that it is merely one voice, essentially one perspective – the “dead white male voices of Old Europe.” But to say such a thing is to do it *no justice at all*. That would be a “cultural profiling” of the most simplistic kind. On the contrary, the classical humanist tradition is the many voices of humanity coming to be heard the best way they could. It could include the voices of peasants, slaves, and the marginalized as well as those of the nobility; the voices of women as well as men; poets as well as generals; non-Greeks as well as Greeks.²¹ Whatever the imbalance according to 21st century standards, the direction has generally been towards a greater and greater *inclusivity* and towards the crossing of cultural divides.

The classical world was never “merely European” (which itself would represent a vast variety), but always richly *Mediterranean*. It involved three continents. In fact, we can be fairly sure that the “Greek miracle” would never have occurred without the achievements of Asia and Egypt. What would Greek literature have become without the Phoenician alphabet and the writing technologies developed in Egypt? What would a Greek temple have looked like without the Egyptian architectural practices that the Greeks adopted and modified? How far would the wisdom of the Greeks gone without the sapiential traditions of the Near East? Most of the wonders of the ancient world celebrated since the ancient Greeks were in fact physically outside of what we call Europe.²² And what we consider the heart of Europe (France and Germany) did not really begin to be opened up to the Mediterranean culture until the days of Julius Caesar.

But the larger point is simply that the hearing of many voices is essential for justice, whether those voices are found on different continents, or on different levels of society, or in different personalities within one community. Classical humanism devised one of the greatest

²¹ Aesop and Terence and Epictetus were slaves; the Delphic oracle and Sappho and a host of vivid personalities in the literature, women.

²² The Pyramids, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Lighthouse at Alexandria, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus.

ways that we know to hear those many voices and to give them importance.

Actual History: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Real World

I think that there is a direct connection between such a hearing of many voices and the versatile polyphony of human personalities that we hear in a poet like Shakespeare, who represents a high point of that tradition. But there is also a connection with the enactment of justice in human society. For it was the ability to hear many kinds of voices that helped to lead humanists to adopt a tolerant stance in an increasingly pluralistic situation, and their stance led to real-world results. In 1996, the scholar Gary Remer published a study of how in the midst of the violent dogmatic battles of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Renaissance humanist tradition stood out as representative of what he calls the “rhetoric of toleration.”²³ That is, this group, from Erasmus on, tended to oppose any use of force to impose religious unity even while the members of the group remained quite religious people rather than rationalists of the Enlightenment. The humanists promoted persuasive speech rather than coercion; they distinguished between the common fundamentals of faith and the non-essentials over which there could be disagreement; and they considered ethics more important than doctrinal purity.²⁴ Why? Why were *they* the ones to be leaders of toleration in an overly polemical age?

For Remer the essential thing is the humanist concern for rhetoric. Rhetoric is all about persuasion, listening carefully to opponents and being able to argue both sides of a question, commitment to decorum (that is, what is appropriate in both speech and action), and the search for a measure by which to gauge probability and consensus. Furthermore, classical rhetoric relies on attaining deep insight into people’s characters and mentalities. It directly promotes, therefore, the understanding of those who are different from yourself. Remer concludes that “[C]lassical rhetoric is both the primary influence on and the common denominator to the different humanist justifications for greater religious freedom.”²⁵ He goes on to state that “[T]he humanists’ arguments from religion have been

²³ Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

transformed into the secular theory of free speech known as the marketplace of ideas...”, and he argues that “humanism’s legacy is a belief in the state’s affirmative responsibility to foster the discovery of truth. Against the libertarian position that opposes any regulation of speech, the humanist stance is to fashion an environment conducive to rational discussion.”²⁶ Most people would agree that tolerant religious dialogue and the establishment of conditions that are most conducive to a productive use of the freedom of speech are fundamental elements in our notion of justice today. Both of these have been well supported by the classical humanist tradition. Even the ancient Greeks valued *parrhesia*, or freedom of speech: it was proposed as an ideal that marked the truly mature philosopher.

But how did the rhetorical tradition understand itself? Luckily, the rhetoricians left us some of their words on the subject. I would like to cite what two of them thought of their art and its connection with justice and a very comprehensive ethical vision. Isocrates says, in his *Antidosis*:

I consider that the kind of art which can implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not now exist, and that people who profess that power will grow weary and cease from their vain pretensions before such an education is ever found. But I do hold that people can become better and worthier if they conceive an ambition to speak well, if they become possessed of the desire to be able to persuade their hearers, and, finally, if they set their hearts on seizing their advantage – I do not mean "advantage" in the sense given to that word by the empty-minded, but advantage in the true meaning of that term; and that this is so I think I shall presently make clear. For, in the first place, when anyone elects to speak or write discourses which are worthy of praise and honor, it is not conceivable that he will support causes which are unjust or petty or devoted to private quarrels, and not rather those which are great and honorable, devoted to the welfare of [humanity] and our common good; for if he fails to find causes of this character, he will accomplish nothing to the purpose.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁷ This and all quotations from Isocrates are cited from a text available at the Perseus Project at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>. *Isocrates*, George Norlin

Quintilian, five hundred years later, agrees. He also sees rhetorical study as radically connected with virtue and with justice. He claims that the only true rhetoric “will be a virtue,” and that “no person can be an orator unless he is a good person.”²⁸ In fact, “oratory is in the main concerned with the treatment of what is just and honourable.”²⁹

The orator must above all things devote his attention to the formation of moral character and must acquire a complete knowledge of all that is just and honourable. For without this knowledge no one can be either a good [person] or skilled in speaking... [Some say morality owes nothing to instruction.] But can the [person] who does not know what abstinence is, claim to be truly abstinent? or brave, if he has never purged his soul of the fears of pain, death, and superstition? or just, if he has never, in language approaching that of philosophy, discussed the nature of virtue and justice, or of the laws that have been given to [humanity] by nature or established among individual peoples and nations? What a contempt it argues for such themes to regard them as being so easy of comprehension!³⁰

These two ancient rhetoricians reveal how in fact, the liberal arts tradition, which is at the heart of the classical humanist tradition, is centered on virtue and on the formation of the human soul as virtuous. Remember that Isocrates claimed that no art can implant honesty and justice in a depraved nature. But if the nature of the person is somewhat healthy it could profit from an enterprise that motivates ethical development. The point of studying history and the poets and moral philosophy is to lead forward those who have an ear for the music of virtue to some kind of ethical maturity. It did not do this merely by reason, but by examples to be imitated or avoided. Thus Isocrates went on to say that the student of rhetoric:

(Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1980).

²⁸ *Institutio Oratoria* II.20; XII.1. All quotations from Quintilian are cited from the translation of the Loeb edition, done by H. E. Butler, *Quintilian* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1920-1922).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, XII.1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, XII.2-3.

...will select from all the actions of [people] which bear upon his subject those examples which are the most illustrious and the most edifying; and, habituating himself to contemplate and appraise such examples, he will feel their influence not only in the preparation of a given discourse but in all the actions of his life. It follows, then, that the power to speak well and think right will reward the [person] who approaches the art of discourse with love of wisdom and love of honor.³¹

The examples that are studied will have a spiritual impact, then, that is expressed in a person's life. Isocrates continues, "the stronger a [person's] desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honorable and to have the esteem of his fellow-citizens."³² So, ultimately, only by actually living a virtuous life will any person really be convincing.

Such an ethical vision deeply marked the orientation of classical culture. So when we come to the Renaissance, we find the ethical interest is made explicit, along with the interest in antiquity. Petrarch wants studies that make him better as a person. Vergerio says that "we call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free [person]; those studies by which we attain and practise virtue and wisdom."³³ The classical liberal arts are focused on making students *humanissimi*, most deeply human, cultivating the highest *virtus* (virtue or excellence) that is in them as human beings. That highest virtue is *logos*, reason and speech, which must be spoken by someone who is good in favor of things that are great and good. Vives says, "The arts of humanity...[are] those branches of learning [*disciplinae*], by means of which we separate ourselves from the way of life and customs of animals and are restored to humanity and raised toward God Himself."³⁴

³¹ Ibid., XII.3.

³² Ibid., XII.3.

³³ Quoted in Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1986), p. 79. Taken from Petrus Paulus Vergerius, "De Ingeniis Moribus," in *Vittorino da Feltre and other Humanist Educators: Essays and Versions*, William H. Woodward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), p. 102.

³⁴ Quoted in Buckley, *The Catholic University*, p. 92.

Further Real-World Consequences

I know that such quotations can seem all too theoretical and wildly idealistic. Some scholars have claimed that these ideals remained only propaganda. Where are the “real-world results”?

Certainly the changing of someone’s consciousness is, in fact, a real-world result, and it is absolutely essential to the quest for justice. On this basis alone, the use of the classical humanist tradition can be fully vindicated. Granted, to grow in consciousness is not necessarily to achieve conversion; still, some growth in consciousness of ethical values seems to me to be a precondition for any substantial moral conversion. The founder of Christianity himself was far more of a *soul-reformer* than he was a *social reformer*: he believed in the changing of hearts more than he believed in the detailing of blueprints for a just society. The Renaissance left us this famous notion: “The education of the youth is the renovation of the world.” There is a vocation and a faith that teachers accept and live, and their work is precisely the renovation of the world.

But faith leads to works, so the Bible says. We therefore justifiably ask for the results of the transformed consciousness of which we are speaking. Certainly classical humanism looked toward the social and political world: the civic dimensions of Renaissance humanism are well known.³⁵ That movement not only joined literary education and moral-religious formation but it also “embodied a new orientation towards social action and efficacy”³⁶ I have already connected classical humanism with religious toleration and freedom of speech; I would like to add a few more items that tend to prove its engagement with justice issues.

Most notable is the first tract ever written about society’s responsibility to take care of its poor. It was published in 1526 by Juan Luis Vives, a Renaissance humanist who met and probably influenced that vastly influential educationist Ignatius Loyola. That tract was called

³⁵ See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*. (Princeton University Press, 1955). Ronald G. Witt proposes that Petrarch was actually a “third-generation humanist” who diverted humanism “from a secular-civic orientation consistent with the secularism of lay culture in medieval Italy.” *In the Footsteps of the Ancients”: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), p. 497.

³⁶ Buckley, *The Catholic University*, p. 92.

De Subventionem Pauperum, sive De Humanis Necessitatibus (On Relief of the Poor, or On Human Needs). There he makes good use of classical as well as Christian background. His work impacted the social structures that were established in the Low Countries.³⁷

Secondly, there is John Stuart Mill, who was even as a child deeply steeped in classical culture, which he later used to inform his well-known contributions to thinking on issues of justice, including his 1869 tract on *The Subjection of Women* (which, of course, he is against). Long ago, Plato, one of Mill's greatest heroes, imagined an ideal state in which men and women were equals: he has Socrates arguing at length that "women can share by nature in every pursuit."³⁸

Thirdly, the three great sociological thinkers of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, were all classical inspired in a very comprehensive way, as George E. McCarthy details in his book, *Classical Horizons: The Origins of Sociology in Ancient Greece*.³⁹ Those who analyze social justice issues today are deeply indebted to the traditions established by these thinkers and their heirs.

Fourthly, there is the American Revolution. Bernard Bailyn, in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*,⁴⁰ mentions how the classics were the common possession of the generation that debated liberty in the American colonies. But there is another line of influence from classical humanism that is often not noticed. Bailyn shows how the civil war in the mid-seventeenth century England brought with it an abundance of political thought that tended to limit monarchical powers and move in the direction of checks and balances. Some have supposed that England's civil war changed everything by bringing about the collapse of older inhibitive categories that was necessary for more modern

³⁷ Ignatius visited Flanders in 1535 and later had his own Basque home town structure the collection and distribution of alms in a way that paralleled what Vives had proposed See J.L. Vives, *De Subventionem Pauperum, sive De Humanis Necessitatibus*, eds. C. Matheusen and C. Fantazzi (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002), p. xxv.

³⁸ *Republic*, V, 455d.

³⁹ Albany: SUNY Press, 2003.

⁴⁰ Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967.

modes of republican thinking.⁴¹ In fact, however, it has been shown that humanist influences were a persistent factor from the end of the Renaissance up to the years before the civil war. The tradition carried themes of opposition to tyranny, the value of maintaining a republic, civil offices, and citizens' responsibilities.⁴²

Some may, of course, argue that classical culture was involved in injustice as well. "Wasn't Aristotle used as an authority in order to support the institution of slavery?" someone may ask. Of course, no cultural heritage is free of blame, and any major tradition can be used in all kinds of good and bad ways. Slavery as a universal practice seemed to call for some kind of justification in Aristotle's day, but it was nevertheless also classical antiquity, notably the Stoics, along with the Hebrew tradition, that first recognized the rights of slaves as persons and looked beyond that institution to the principle of the solidarity of all humanity and the importance of freedom as an essential condition of a humane existence. It is the *leap forward*, beyond slavery and discrimination, that deserves special remembrance and honor; the very act of remembering and the honoring of the leap confirm it; and the remembering and the honoring change our souls in the process. Most importantly, the tradition developed the tools, as it were, the principles and practices, by which it could critique and transcend itself.

Summary and Conclusion: Our Obligations

What then are our obligations with regard to this heritage? Several considerations suggest to me that classical humanism is a tradition that we are obliged to cultivate as a matter of justice.

1. The classical humanist tradition is much larger than justice-questions alone, but it is steeped in them. It can contribute substantially to the reflective thought about those questions; through its literature, it can allow for our imaginative and affective orientation towards justice; in its pluralism and essential orientation, it can lead us toward tolerance, toward

⁴¹ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

⁴² Markku Peltonen's *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) studies the continuity in the humanist culture during those years.

acceptance of others, toward expansive dialogue and horizons, toward an ethical vision, toward the realization of the importance of political and social thought and action, toward broad and inclusive cultural understandings, and toward the actual realization of justice in the world. Classical humanism therefore supports the development of just individuals that will help create a more just society. It offers common ground that can unite us by giving us an environment of shared history, understandings, and discourse. It can be used in a non-partisan, non-sectarian way to develop in students an attitude of judicious toleration, and an historically-informed concern for human rights, diversity, equality, and a humane existence.

So on the basis of prudence alone, we should support the tradition of classical humanism. But is it a *question of justice* that we do this? If classical humanism is in our judgment one of the best ways we have to cultivate justice, then it seems to me that we have some kind of an obligation not to ignore it, just as we have an obligation not to withhold the most nutritious food from our families if we have access to it.

2. Secondly, classical humanism provides access to essential cultural information. Is it at all fair to raise a person today in our society and not teach that person the alphabet, or reading, or counting? No, the person needs these things for a chance at a functional, involved existence in our society. Classical humanism is not the entire alphabet the next generation needs to know, but it holds some of the most important letters of that alphabet, so to speak. The next generation can be stronger with it than they will likely be without it.

3. Thirdly, we easily lose what we do not cultivate. It is a matter of justice to the world that we corporately support and maintain what undergirds the greatest spiritual and social advances. You might want to try to create a wondrous utopian society without the wheel, or fire, or soap, but though these inventions are quite old, they have a lasting and universal value. So does classical humanism.

4. Fourthly, classical humanism is also a valuable way for us as individuals to personally appropriate the advances of our cultural tradition. It constitutes a standard, major framework for organizing the story of which we are all already a part. It is, in an important way, our very memory. This tradition therefore provides access to and even enables the constitution of our larger identities. It is an important device for overcoming narcissism and inserting us into the family of humanity. Is it fair to raise a person and not tell the person who he or she is, not let the person know anything about his or her own family? No, having an

identity usually entails having and coming to know a family; it entails the act of remembering and integrating memories. It is simply not fair to obscure our students' heritage or to keep from them the valuable patrimony that can help them to live well and to become who they are. It is their *right*. It is our *obligation*.

5. Fifthly, students need not just essential tools and the facts about their own identities. All of that is useless if they do not have a sense of the *significance* of their own lives and of their own educations. It is also for that sense of significance that we have to let our students know the larger story of which they are a part. Words get their meanings from their contexts. Students need to know their own contexts to make sense of what they are doing. They need the larger context of what the best of their cultural heritage is about. They need to have some idea of the import of what society is asking them to do in college and of what is at stake in their academic efforts. The classical humanist tradition at its best is oriented precisely to giving students this sense, both of their own individual spiritual importance *and* of the importance of what they are doing as students. Classical humanism is famous for taking individuals, humanity, and education seriously.

I therefore conclude: an adequate promotion of justice requires the practices of classical humanism. Classical humanism, in fact, has *everything* to do with justice.

Appendix: Some Syllogisms on Justice and Classical Humanism

Syllogism 1

1. Classical humanism is at its core the classical liberal arts.
2. The classical liberal arts aim at the development of the cardinal virtues, which include justice.
3. Therefore, classical humanism essentially includes an intention to develop justice.

Syllogism 2

1. Substantial advances in justice require personal and corporate self-knowledge.
2. Classical humanism provides essential support for personal and corporate self-knowledge.
3. Therefore, substantial advances in justice require classical humanism.

Syllogism 3

1. All justice questions in our society will one day be managed by the next generation largely on the basis of the education they are receiving today.
2. The education of the next generation can be significantly improved through the judicious practice of classical humanism.
3. Therefore, the handling of justice questions in the near future can profit greatly from the judicious practice of classical humanism.

Syllogism 4

1. Justice demands a distribution and sharing of goods that can and should be common.
2. The classical heritage is one of the greatest common goods we have.
3. Therefore, justice demands that we share the classical heritage.

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