

Why Study Classics in a Global Age?⁺

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Two arguments are often advanced to defend the study of classics in college education:

- (A) Classics teach us HOW to read, write, and think, and
- (B) Classics teach us WHAT is important to do or think.

The first argument A suggests that, regardless of social/political relevance, studying Classics helps us become more rational, or more cultured, or more ethical, using better language. (I love the classics too, but the above argument may not persuade those who do not.)

Classics do not teach reasoning, ethics, or language better than well-designed games.

Brain science demonstrates that we learn reasoning less from reading than from doing math, and that we acquire ethical behaviors less from

reading about them than from practicing them.

We can learn discrimination of nuance by critical reading of law or theatre as well as of classics.

And to argue that classics students get better exam scores in law and medicine plays into the hands of those proposing that better scores in law and medicine should be our ultimate goals. (If those be our ultimate goals and we find better ways to improve scores, farewell classics!)

Argument B, that Classics teach us WHAT is important to do and think, implies that Classics are important when they are relevant or applicable today. This also two contains two views:

1. "Universalist":

Classics' content is important regardless of context because they are somehow "universal."

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2. "Particularist":

Classics must be understood within their socio-historical contexts.

These alternatives are not contradictory.

1. Abstract questions of value—what are genuinely good, happy, desirable—remain "Universal." From a historical perspective, for millions of years, humans struggled to get food, shelter, reproduction, and long life. So do rats and cockroaches. Now humans have enough food, shelter, reproduction, and long life (though not equally shared). But our old "universal" problems remain; contemplating the meaning and value of human life (beyond that of rats and roaches) requires us to think how to distribute resources, to reward effort without exalting individuals to the detriment of society or the world. Classics contemplate such universal, ongoing issues as love, justice, war, nobility, humaneness—which remain central to our lives and civilizations. Studying classics is a good approach to "universal" issues, because it makes sense to see how great minds already thought through tough questions common to humanity.

2. The classics also contemplate issues grounded in specific languages and cultural contexts, like proper diet, marital relations, the origin of the world, and the nature of matter. "Particularist" questions of what to eat when, how often to reproduce, how to treat our wives and children, or how to understand the physical universe, derive from specific linguistic/cultural contexts, no longer absolute today. However, Classics did not contemplate problems grounded in the languages and context of modernity, like genetic engineering, information explosion, global warming, or transnational monopolies. Unlike past millennia of prehistory and history, problems particular to today include how to stop our pursuit of goods from destroying our environment, how to

limit our reproduction to sustainable levels, how to limit our aging lives to humanly meaningful ones.

Putting it differently, classics both raise questions (1) and propose answers (2). Many questions they raise continue to be important. The answers they provide include texts from which we can both (a) infer the assumptions underlying their particular cultural approaches to those questions, and also (b) abstract principles or axioms which may be important for future civilization.

We may abstract values of sustainability or justice from the particular approaches of classical thinkers in their respective cultural settings, but need neither believe in nor apply their answers literally to the very different world we face today. When I study the classics, I treat them not as sacred bodies of permanent truth, but as reservoirs of insights; insights not about science or society, but about human values and ideals. I have written books praising classical Buddhism and Confucianism, despite their anachronistic views on diet or sexual roles, for the insights that they provide in contributing to sustainability, fairness, sensitivity, compassion, wisdom, nobility of character, and humane judgment.

The classics of China and India offer essential antitheses to the Great Books of the Western World. Taoist classics pose a relativist antithesis to the search for absolutes in Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian thought. Confucian classics focus on social and interpersonal issues far more than even Aristotle, while most of the Western classics center on individual issues. Buddhist classics locate the causes of suffering not in an inscrutable absolute creator and judge, but in our own cravings for things to be other than the way they are.

These are of course gross generalizations, while analogues do exist within the Western classics. But these three standpoints are

increasingly important, not merely as texts to study, but as lifeways in the face of threats to the future of the world. In the face of black-white with-us or against-us fundamentalism that leads monotheists to the brink of nuclear war, Taoism proffers at once both a tolerance and a search to live by an ever-evolving Way. In the face of competitive self-aggrandizement, Confucian classics remind us that cultivation of character and human relations are more valuable and more satisfying than wealth and fame. In the face of transnational corporate pursuit of profit regardless of its human and environmental costs, Buddhism exposes the emptiness and futility of pursuing temporary satisfactions. All these "Eastern Classics" suggest a median between fundamentalist absolutism and "anything-goes relativism": it is not the case that all values are equally subjective, much less groundless, but their grounding is in society and contexts, rather than in commandments of a divine judge.

These gross generalizations betray my classical training in critical exegesis of original texts. But at my age—in this day and age—I have come to believe that the ultimate values of classical study are not primarily in critical exegesis nor even in enriching our vocabularies, however valuable all that may be. Rather the greatest values of studying classics are first, that they relocate us in traditions of seeking and questioning meanings (relativizing them without throwing out the search as premodern or meaningless), and second, that they suggest alternative values to those of global capitalism, values prerequisite to the future equity and sustainability of societies if not of the entire ecosystem.¹

1 Cf. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

