

Editorial: Philosophy and the Classics

A great deal is made by commentators of educational decline in the modern world, and a similar amount of effort is expended by those running the educational system to show that there has really been no decline. It is not our intention to take up a position on either side of this dispute, but rather to draw attention to one fact which is incontrovertible. It is the decline of classical learning in our schools.

In Britain, there are around 675,000 pupils taking national exams at the age of 16. These 675,000 pupils take around 5.7 million papers in a whole range of subjects. But of these papers taken annually, less than 10,000 are in Latin, barely 1,000 in Greek and only a further 4,500 or so in what is called 'Classical Civilisation', a paper on Greek and Roman topics, which requires no knowledge of the original languages.

Does any of this matter? Does it matter to philosophy and philosophers? In Booknotes (April 2006) we have recently drawn attention to Bernard Williams' dictum that 'the legacy of Greece to Western Philosophy is Western philosophy'. And, without exaggeration, similar things could be said about the epics of Homer and Virgil, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the architecture and sculpture of classical Greece, the poetry of Horace and Ovid, the Roman legal system and much else besides. Western civilisation and Christianity too are simply incomprehensible outside of these works and their meaning. They are the soil out of which what we are and what we know to-day have grown.

It is also noteworthy that revivals of classical learning have taken place in every century from the fourteenth to the nineteenth and even in the twentieth not all was lost; and also that a sensitivity to the civilisations of Greece and Rome has been taken to be the distinguishing mark of humanism since the time of Erasmus and John Colet – until, of course, the present. It is amazing that such a seismic shift in educational values should occasion so little comment, except when, as happened recently in Britain some governmental bigwig in an off the cuff remark implies that it really does not matter.

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At the very least, if Bernard Williams is even half right, philosophers should help to start some sort of public debate on the matter, and take some interest in what is going on in schools. Critical thinking, on which there is great interest in the philosophical community, is all very well; but we should also be concerned about the roots of our thinking, and about transmitting to our successors some grasp of those roots.