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Feature Articles

Book Reviews

Classically Educated

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Review: David Hein, *Teaching the Virtues* (Mecosta, MI: Mecosta House, 2025). 205 pp. Kindle, $9.99; Softcover, $16.95.

David Hein's *Teaching the Virtues* is the first imprint from the Russell Kirk Center's new publishing house in Mecosta, Michigan. The ancestral home of one of modern conservatism's intellectual founders, Mecosta has long been a pilgrimage site for conservative thinkers and friends from around the world. Hein is one such pilgrim and now serves as a Distinguished Teaching Fellow at the Russell Kirk Center. Many Ciceronian Society members have also found refuge and inspiration in Mecosta and its venerable "sage." Hein's book is affordable, brief, well-written, and memorable—ideal for Mecosta House's maiden voyage. Its audience is educators at "traditional church schools, in classical Christian schools, and in homeschooling settings," and beyond that, "school leaders, parents, and perhaps even a few students" (2). It is not a book *about* virtues or teaching, but rather "a primer on teaching the virtues," all to their end of "realizing one's best self" (2, 4). Seeking more than agreement from his readers, Hein wants engagement. He challenges teachers to either "rewrite this book" or to "produc[e] another book" that will carry the tradition (1).

Part one, "Schools," focuses on the institutions and methods of education, as opposed to perfunctory "schooling"—"strategic plans, assessment devices, external reviews, competitive rankings, diversity definitions..." (9). Schools should acknowledge the importance of virtue in education. Parents looking for a church-affiliated school, Hein reminds, want to know if it will educate the right kind of character for their son or daughter.

In the first chapter, "Politics and Ball Bearings," Hein lays the book's foundations with two analogies. The first is a political teaching of a "conservative-liberal politics" that promotes "ordered liberty," the moral foundations of freedom. "Our experiences teach us that liberty flourishes when joined with forbearance" (11). Politics must be rooted in tradition, an accretion of practical wisdom, yet open to prudent reform. This outlook includes both "a liberal understanding of fundamental human rights" and "equality before the law and equality

before our Creator. It embraces equal opportunity and basic fairness" (11). But rather than abstractions like natural rights or "a theoretical social contract," liberal values are understood as "commitments and practices rooted in the rich cultural soil of Athens and Rome, of Jerusalem and London." Hein adds two Philadelphias: the northern center of American Revolution and Philadelphia, Mississippi, a southern center of civil rights tragedy and protest. Authors in this tradition include Burke, Tocqueville, Oakeshott, Aron, Kirk, and Scruton.

Hein's conservative liberalism is both political *and* educational. "The most salubrious option for the polity at large, conservative liberalism is also the most fitting and helpful, the most workable and inspiring, stance for schools today" (12). It provides the conditions for the moral imagination enlivened by questions of virtue. Students should be encouraged to question everything: gay marriage, hate speech, trangenderism, and systemic racism (13–14). This questioning opposes ideology and conformity and extends to the school's own principles. Hein discourages religious litmus tests in admissions: "in no school is militant woke fundamentalism or militant Christian fundamentalism desirable as either policy or practice" (13). Church schools should embrace "receptive ecumenicism," an openness to new practices that "dovetail with our convictions but flesh out our principles" in unexpected ways (18–19). Thus, he seeks a balance: schools should deemphasize unfriendly dogma, but "each school should make it clear what it holds to be true belief and right conduct" (14).

Using a second analogy of ball bearings, Hein discusses this relation between the school's fixed principles of "institutional identity" and its "diurnal activity" (20). Ball bearings reduce the friction of rotation around an axle—in this case the student, around which everything revolves. The bearings' liberal inner ring consists of institutional life: "classes and chapel, games and the arts, extracurriculars and outings, rules and punishments, papers and labs and exams, together with correction and encouragement" (15, 17). The outer conservative ring is the "school's most profound commitments and character—its ethos as an orthodox Christian institution, its participation in the sacraments, its trust in and loyalty to Christ, not idols" (17). The ball bearings are the "habits of moral and spiritual excellence" (20) and their integration into every area of school life, not just a single class or chapel. "The ancient virtues mediat[e] between students' freedom and the institution's faith" (20). Schools should reintroduce the word *virtue*—"good habits conducing to good ends" (21)—and teach the theological and moral virtues absent in popular culture. Dialectic alone is insufficient for education. Teachers must

use rhetoric to awaken students' moral imaginations, enabling them to picture a future in which the virtues enhance human happiness. This education should facilitate deep roots, or habits, for a sound character. It will "enable survival, propagation, and the realization of our distinctive ends," namely, "living in society, loving others, being reliable contributors" (24).

Hein's example of the teaching method of the outer conservative ring is nineteenth-century educator Henry A. Coit, whose strengths included systematic knowledge, intense preparation, and high standards to prepare students for the ministry. But Coit needed ball bearings. "He bore down too hard on students' natures, pronouncing apodictically on what he would have been better off discussing invitingly" (32). Classical education advocates often forget that its older variant was not Socratic Method but a slog of Greek and Latin recitations. Coit's education was hindered by a confident absolutism, autocratic methods, and a refusal to engage with the outside world. Thus, Hein adds to Coit's methods "a dash of [John] Dewey," who viewed "students as active, not passive" (33). A teacher can meet students' passions by integrating the virtues into common subjects—history, science, mathematics, athletics, and "deep reading" (38). Hein gives special place to "writing as a moral act" (41). As a vigorous, demanding exercise, it begins not with prescription but description, followed by "intellectually alert and stylistically engaging commentary" on the assigned reading (43). Well-written essays do not consist in "isolated, undefended opinion" but in "rational analysis and informed judgment" that draw imagined respondents into a conversation (43).

Part one concludes with a project of building "university life and the community of honor" (76). Where *honor* properly includes "sturdy habits of self-discipline, moral courage, practical judgment, and commitment to fair play," today it is often equated with esteem, an unbending code, or female chastity (58). Moreover, it is seen as "expired" and even "morally flawed" (63). Hein critiques the ancient view of honor from the vantages of modern universal human rights and Christian ethics that uphold the dignity of every person. He advises an "updated version of honor" to "restore the mores of past cultures but also incorporate the modern commitment to human dignity and to freely chosen institutional roles" (65). Hein roots this reconstruction in concrete traditions, such as the University of Virginia's 1916 Senff Gate inscription. While honor means "living by right principles," an individual's excellent character is best drawn out in "a community that has a good purpose," one "with its own

distinctive places and time-honored rituals" (69). Thus the desire for honor is channeled into "appropriate self-esteem" according to duty rather than shallow interest or desire (70–71).

Part two focuses on the virtues themselves. Beginning with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, Hein exhorts teachers not to omit discussions of faith but to introduce it in neutral terms. Faith is accessed through our experiences of trust and our flaws of infidelity. The student is made aware that "communism, Nazism, and wokeism have all been identified as religions, with their own creedal statements, holy texts, moral codes, and sacred rituals" (76). Theology, by engaging with this center of "social faith," introduces the student to "radical monotheism" (78). One seeks eternal truths about the God beyond the many gods that he, consciously or not, already believes have worth. Faith provides not absolute certainty but meaning and consistent value. By this questioning, "Christians confront in the redemptive events of Cross and Resurrection the intersection of absolute love and absolute power," which reveals the possibility of restoring "friendship between God and humanity" (79). Students no longer view faith as a private affair "having little to do with the public realm," and God becomes a center of meaning that informs their discussions of the virtues (79). Hein provides examplars of the theological and the cardinal virtues (for example, he points to Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt as models of prudence). He advises how to teach the virtues of justice, courage, and temperance, as well as gratitude, stability, and patience. One effective way to entice students into conversations about the virtues is translating them into modern English: temperance means "self-mastery"; justice is "fair play."

Hein's method shines in Chapters six and seven. He paints portraits of human excellence in George Washington's "patient power," Hannah More's "moral imagination," and Booker T. Washington's "prudent reform." He then shows how "exploring literature and film with students offers good opportunities to shape the moral imagination" (133). "Good films can incite interest, provoke questions, and create memories, which viewers might then employ as touchstones for future cognition" (143). Instead of recounting a film's events or their personal opinions, students should examine the characters' traits and impact. Hein illustrates this method in his own engaging interpretations of two books (*All the King's Men* and *Darkness at Noon*) and two films (*Ride the High Country* and *The Hanging Tree*).

Hein concludes with the virtue of piety. "The meaning of the virtues for members of the school community begins and ends in the chapel"—they are "embedded in the complete

narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and sanctification," lest they dissolve in a fragmented culture or serve the wrong ends (163). Piety is higher than justice—one's debts to God can never be repaid. It is the center of value that enacts the other virtues. Christian piety reorients virtue's ultimate end to "the alignment of our selfish and often misguided wills with the sovereign, holy will of God, conclusively revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ" (167). The virtues must then "leave that sacred space and enter daily existence" (167). Hein's exemplar of piety is George C. Marshall, "soldier and statesman of character" (168), who lived by the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. His life was one of "*pietas*: reverence toward God, country, and kinsmen" (175). As a "conservative internationalist," he initiated the "program for western European recovery that ... was wholly consonant with both his grand strategy as an American statesman and his practice as a faithful churchman" (170–71).

...

Hein's book is both enjoyable and useful, though not for everyone. Unless conservatives are willing to fight for public religious charter schools, church schools are reserved for concerned religious or wealthy parents in what is often an educational wasteland. But this is not Hein's fault. The beautiful St. James School pictured on the book's cover ranks among America's top twenty boarding schools (boarding tuition is $60,000 per year), with students from thirty different countries. Though an Episcopal school, it advertises, "From many backgrounds, faiths, and points of view, our students are broadly educated and deeply principled." In a nation often hostile to Christianity, Hein exhorts Christian educators to respond to criticisms of faith by way of experience. Don't circle the wagons; show Christianity's relevance. Christian students should debate their theology, or learn what it means to have one.

Hein's two grounding analogies do prompt questions. Without an outer ring of fixed principles there are just ball bearings. The axle spins endlessly without traction. Classical education is often sold as teaching students *how* and not *what* to think. Aside from facilitating classroom discussion and declaring a mission statement, Hein was a bit unclear as to whether schools should secure fixed principles with religious tests for teachers or require them to take a stand on some issues. Professionalization measured by credentials, research, and neutrality in the classroom requires no conservative orientation. We all have colleagues who brag about their 'objectivity'—that half their students think they're too liberal and the other half think they're too conservative. While a teacher might lead a seminar on gay marriage, it is difficult

and even job-threatening to take a public position. Conservative schools that tout openness and objectivity by hiring the spectrum of ideologies become beachheads for liberal takeover—over 90 percent of professors, in open partisan affiliation, are Democrats. There are teachers in almost every Christian high school or college who would bend their programs to become more like state-run institutions. Azusa Pacific University, Calvin University, and Wheaton College each knelt to wokism; only stalwart resolution saved Grove City College.[1]

Considering the progressive outer ring that has formed at many traditional institutions, it is worth considering to what degree classical education is itself easily coopted by liberalism. Modern gnostic religions, Hein points out, inculcate their own pieties. Without particular application, the virtues become abstract talking points. Considering Hein's now-common criticisms of wokeness, did classically-trained teachers and professors lead this fight? Did the recent shift in popular culture come from "conservative liberalism" or from a more radical conservatism? How did classical teachers and professors fare during the COVID-19 pandemic? Did their education help them to question the lies? Did they look to experience, with intelligence and courage, in assessing the dangers of the virus? These questions do not have simple answers, but I think they help us to assess the health of classical education.

Hein leans on "conservative liberalism" to educate a moderate attitude by resisting abstractions such as social contract theory (173). But it still seems somewhat disconnected from concrete issues. That regimes must both conserve and adapt is a truism, yet ironically the appeal to tradition easily becomes both a defense of any status quo and itself an abstraction divorced from real-world politics. For one hundred years, progressives, liberals, and radicals—including critical race and queer theorists—rejected social contract theory. The conservative appeal to tradition often means keeping one's head down—finding a safe target (like John Locke, 'abstraction,' or 'modernity') to attack; it becomes a safehouse for conservative teachers and academics to remain *above* the culture wars, tolerate progressive views, and punch to the right to virtue signal to their liberal colleagues. Moreover, Hein's traditionalism—conserving a people's way of life—now confronts Western traditions of a massive entitlement state, feminism, and gay rights that go back one hundred years. Conservatives must now explain why one tradition over another, or why tradition at all.

[1] See Josh Abbotoy, "Wide Awoke at Grove City College?" *American Reformer*, November 29, 2021.

The root of virtue is *vir*. Disaffected young men find more spiritedness (both mental and physical) in Joe Rogan's podcast than in American classrooms, which fail to appeal to both superiority and service to something higher. Yet Hein's book tends to soften the difference between male and female virtues. He gives a poignant description of courage, "A soldier may be loyal to her country—until the enemy pressures her to confess to made-up crimes or to spill military secrets" (92). To be clear, he does include male exemplars, and his use of the female pronoun is part of our scholarly tradition. But the hesitancy to appeal to manly noble sacrifice is what today's young men find derisive about Christian and academic education. I also think Hein could have better distinguished between justice for citizens and noncitizens, as well as a Christianity that, aside from Tocqueville's universalism, is compatible with human distinctions in excellence—the medieval knights and crusaders were Christians too.

Finally, and to his credit, Hein recognizes the importance of "intermediate institutions and traditional associations": "The modern administrative state and political realm bear all the hallmarks of ethical weakness that commentators on bureaucracy and the managerial revolution have identified" (90, 72). Yet some of his exemplars, such as FDR, introduced this administrative ooze. Hein cites George C. Marshall as an example of "conservative internationalism," but the addition of the word *conservative* does not make it so. Marshall's internationalism arguably failed to conserve American noninterventionist foreign policy. In the words of Russell Kirk, the United States is a republic, not an empire.

None of these thoughts are meant to detract from what is a thoughtful, well-written book. If you are a teacher, go buy it, and, as Hein suggests, rewrite it for your own students.

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