

Book Review: *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education*

by Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain

Reviewed by Matthew Bianco

The writing of book reviews warrants a hesitancy that is often ignored, at least if social media and the blogosphere are accurate indicators. With any book, the reviewer is often unqualified to review the author in question. Who, truth be told, would feel qualified to review the work of a Nobel prize-winning economist, for example? That is exactly the case with the book being reviewed herein. Who among us would be qualified to write a review for a book on classical education by Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain? Few have done the amount of research and preparation that these two committed to, along with the experience in teaching and education that they brought to the writing of their most recent publication, *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education*.

This book, published in 2013 by Classical Academic Press, has received the praise of Christian classical schoolteachers and headmasters, homeschool curriculum developers, university professors, and research institute presidents. This is high praise for a paperback book weighing in at less than 170 pages. Clark and Jain, moreover, hold nothing back in setting forth this clear, concise thesis for their work: “The seven liberal arts were never meant to stand on their own as the entire curriculum, for they are designed particularly for cultivating intellectual virtue” (Clark and Jain 2).

The Liberal Arts Tradition, with that thesis in view, embarks on a journey for the sake of the Western Tradition. Walking the reader along the various points on the educational path, Clark and Jain remind him of the earliest phases in education: piety, then gymnastics and music. Piety, “the proper love and fear of God and man” (13), is a necessary but often overlooked aspect of a child’s education if for no other reason than it is assumed that it has already been instilled or will be instilled by the education and discipline that will follow. Piety cultivates love for God and love for neighbor; it cultivates a healthy respect and honor for father and mother—best understood in the fullness of those terms to include all of those who have gone before us, those who have participated in the passing on of culture

from one generation to the next. The teaching of piety, then, is accomplished, in part, by the passing on and reception of the very tradition we are striving to keep alive, because “without a respect for this Western Christian heritage and a desire to emulate the great leaders and thinkers of the past, Christian classical education surely unravels” (17).

Gymnastics and music, moreover, are just as necessary and just as overlooked as piety has been. Christian classical education creates monsters if it succeeds only at growing the mind to the neglect of the body and soul. “Musical and gymnastic education point to a profound truth about the nature of human beings: the body and soul are united in such a way that failure to cultivate the capacities inherent in either is a failure to cultivate the whole person” (20-21).

Clark and Jain continue to take the reader through the more familiar Trivium, often the only landmark attended to on this journey, then through the Quadrivium, which has only recently gotten any attention. Finally, they introduce the reader to two other landmarks along the path: Philosophy and Theology. Philosophy, not reduced only to the intellectual foray into well-known names such as Freud and Hume, but seen also to include a more robust study of what was once called natural philosophy, now known primarily by its synonym, natural science, as well as the study of moral philosophy and metaphysics. All of these conclude with the study of Theology, the queen of the sciences.

Clark and Jain set out as their thesis that Christian classical education was never meant to be reduced to the seven liberal arts, far less so to just the Trivium. Each step along the educational journey builds upon and needs the preceding steps to be fully grasped and understood and thus to lead us to wisdom. All of this matters, they argue, because “education is more than the transference of knowledge; it is the transmission of values, culture, and the proper ordering of loves” (ix). To properly engage in education, as defined here, students need more than just the arts of the Trivium and Quadrivium; they need instruction

in piety, music, and gymnastics. They need instruction in philosophy and theology. They need an education of the whole human person.

Most readers will have already grasped the importance of the Trivium, yet Clark and Jain show how it connects to the previous concepts of piety, music, and gymnastics too often ignored. For example, “dialectic is the art of reasoning through the voluminous material encountered in a thorough musical and grammatical education” (41) and an education in piety, one might add. Dialectic is not the art of reasoning through what a student has just encountered, but through this and all of the previous information encountered throughout his life. Add to this the case for the Quadrivium: “the study of mathematics leads the mind toward pure reason and cultivates the love of wisdom.... The mind learns to transcend the level of changing opinions to identify objective truth” (50). The latter serves as a great aid applied

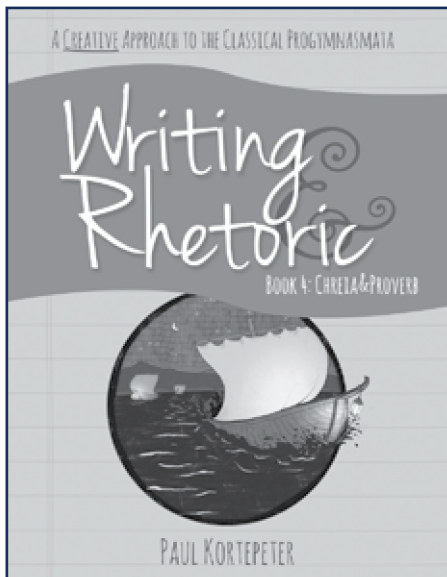
to previous studies through the Trivium, and the former is a great aid that will lead students through the study of philosophy (for that is what the phrase ‘love of wisdom’ means) as well as theology.

Piety, which inculcates love for God, neighbor, and our cultural inheritance, is precisely what is lacking in modern education: “This rejection of the past, our neighbor, and nature, may in fact be the hallmark of modernity” (11). Gymnastics, moreover, is necessary, Clark and Jain rightly conclude, precisely because “education is not merely an intellectual affair, no matter how intellect-centered it must be, because human beings are not merely minds.... A full curriculum must cultivate the good of the whole person, soul and body” (23). And, musical education, they show, “considers some of the same ‘subjects’ as the liberal arts, [although] it does so from the perspective of forming the heart, the sense of wonder, and the affections. It contains in seed form the liberal arts and the philosophies. What is

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sown by music and gymnastic training will be cultivated later in the liberal arts portion of the curriculum..." (29). As stated above, these ideas encountered earlier in education prepare the student for later education in the liberal arts and, ultimately, in philosophy and theology.

With regard to philosophy, Clark and Jain remind the reader that it is an inclusive study, inclusive of natural philosophy (science), moral philosophy (ethics), and metaphysics (the True, the Good, and the Beautiful). "Most ancients and medievals believed that man both constituted the community and the community in turn made him into a true man" (114). Natural philosophy gives knowledge of the community's environment, moral philosophy of man's and the community's ethical obligations, and metaphysics of their coherence, of reality itself. Philosophy, then, helps man to rightly constitute a community and to rightly be made into a true man by it, and philosophy is "studied with all the tools of the liberal arts, both linguistic and mathematical" (113). Thus, it both necessitates their previous study and becomes part of the purpose for their study.

It is important to note that Theology is the final end to which we devote all of our studies. Thus, Theology as "God's revelation is a source of knowledge in addition to that studied by the classical curriculum, [requiring] a science devoted particularly to its study" (129). Theology is the goal of education because, among other things, "it furnishes the concepts of creation, universe, intelligence, telos, and so on, which are essential to our understanding of the natural world" (131). Everything we are teaching, including the seven liberal arts, point us toward this end, but it is this end which will also and finally fill out and unify all that we have studied.

This is the thesis of Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain in *The Liberal Arts Tradition*. It is a call to Christian classical educators, be they school teachers, administrators, or

homeschoolers, to no longer forget the broader tradition incorporating more than just the Trivium and to intentionally seek out, use, and apprehend the whole of the tradition, preserving our Western Christian tradition as we do so. While Clark and Jain do a compelling job at presenting their thesis, there is more to say. If there is a complaint, and there isn't, it would be that the book is too short. It is filled with footnotes that might have been worked into the text itself, but the book was meant to be the beginning to a larger conversation and that demanded the format it has.

A book review written by the unqualified is limited in what it can say and do. All that has been written here has been written in light of the author's limited experience and knowledge of Christian classical education and the Western Christian tradition. Any interaction with this book will be greatly expanded by the experience and knowledge the reader himself brings to the text. Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain have begun a conversation and you are being invited to join that conversation. Don't ignore this invitation; purchase a copy of *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education*, grab your favorite highlighters and pen, and join the conversation. It is a conversation worth having, and they and you will be bettered by having participated in it.

Matt Bianco is the Education Director for Classical Conversations, a national homeschooling curriculum and network of communities. He has tutored eleventh and twelfth graders in his local homeschooling community, in all subjects, including algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and physics. He lives in North Carolina with his altogether lovely high school sweetheart, Patty, and their three children, Alec, Andrew, and Ada. There, he most enjoys reading and conversations, generally accompanied by tasty beverages and his pipe.