



At The Symposium

Number 1, September 19th

www.atthesymposium.org/whitepapers

The Links between Physics and a Classical Education

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Keywords: Greco-Roman, Polymath

Encountering subjects such as Latin, literature, and logic may seem to fit right into a classical curriculum, but how does an advanced science such as Physics fit into the picture?

When thinking of the classics, there are certain figures that may come to mind. People like *William Shakespeare* in literature, *Leonardo da Vinci* in art, *Plato* in philosophy, and *Voltaire* in politics. But who do we think of when discussing a science like Physics, and what correlation, if any, do they have to the figures above? When discussing science, we typically note certain persons for their revolutionary achievements. When someone speaks of Copernicus, heliocentrism comes to mind, or when Albert Einstein is mentioned, the theory of relativity sticks out to us. What may not seem obvious on the surface, however, is that these great scientists share a very similar background to that of the great poets and play writes. That is, they all often share a deep education following the classical method. And beyond being a method of education, the classical method, like the classical figures, is not narrowly concerned with one discipline but with the likes of humanity at large.

As Dr. Christopher Perrin points out in *An Introduction to Classical Education*, the roots of a classical education stem from the *Greco-Roman* tradition. A particular feature of this tradition is to study a broad range of critical subjects. For the Greeks and Romans, this meant studying two categories of subject matter, *logic* and *rhetoric*. Such studies would place emphasis on math, reading, grammar, and argument. As time went on and as disciplines developed, the Greco-Roman or classical tradition evolved into what we today call the liberal arts or humanities. But for those living from the 4th century to about the 18th, a classical education was all that was good and proper. In contrast to a more career-centered education like that of modernity, the classical method and classical figures were more concerned with developing the skills to think critically and the ability to articulate ideas. There is a very good reason for this: because they had to.

We must recall that the classical education existed before many areas of study were created or developed. Because of this, it was much more common for a scholar to study everything from science to literature, to politics, to philosophy, and even religion. This was in part because some of humanity's greatest questions had yet to have been answered or even to have been asked. In such a case, individuals and scholars would cultivate themselves in many areas of study in order to find out which subject areas had the best answers. Remember, the classics lived in a time before much of the knowledge they would soon discover was found, so they sought of themselves to explore life's most profound questions from all angles. In this regard, there was much less prejudice against certain subjects.

Where today, one may find historians that gloss over the philosophers or scientists that think little of religious studies; in the classical era, it was more often the case that scholars would have training and interest in all of these areas. As we think of an advanced science like Physics, there is often a stigma of it being driven by math-heavy abstractions. But in the classical era, the scientist, the physicists, the philosophers, and the theologians were all asking the same questions but in different ways. In fact, many of the physicists, philosophers, mathematicians, and theologians were all the same person. *Isaac Newton*, *Gottfried Leibnitz*, and *Blaise Pascal* were all of those things.

They were polymaths: people that had a high degree of knowledge and expertise in many areas. This was, and still is, the ideal outcome of a classical education. While these three figures all had interdisciplinary expertise, they each became well known for different things. Newton is most recognized for Newtonian Mechanics, Gottfried Leibnitz for his work in the philosophy of ethics, and Blaise Pascal for *Pascal's Wager* and spawning the field of pragmatism in philosophy. The link between them and many other classical figures is not just that they were subsumed in a similar educational approach but that they all took part in developing and answering some of humanity's most profound questions. For that, the classical method knows no bounds between science, religion, ethics, politics, philosophy, or literature, as each area is pursuant of developing the questions that will inevitably lead to a better understanding of humanity.

References

Perrin, C. A. (2004). *An introduction to classical education: A guide for parents*. Classical Academic Press.