To many of those within the classical education movement in America, David Hicks’ *Norms and Nobility*, first published in 1981, is considered a foundational document, on par with significant texts such as C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*, Dorothy Sayers’ frequently-referenced essay “The Lost Tools of Learning,” and Mortimer Adler’s *The Paideia Proposal*. In the prologue to his book, Hicks asserts that it is his intention “to ponder the difference between the man who was educated to believe himself to be a little lower than the angels and the man whose education permits him to ignore both angels and God, to avoid knowledge not of the five senses, and to presume mastery over nature but not over himself” (11). He couples an incisive critique of modern education with his description of how Christian classical education, properly pursued, is the fulfillment of pagan antiquity’s attempts to seek, find, and live the truth. His book remains relevant to anyone seriously pondering education today, whether it be those charged with education of the young or the adult wondering how best to remediate their own formational lacunae.

Beginning in the early years of the 20th century, reforms of the American education system rode the wave of the rationalistic, materialistic trends that were sown in the Enlightenment and came to fruition in the Industrial Revolution. Utilitarian teaching became the rule, focused on maximizing productivity, profit, and pleasure for both the student and society as a whole. While this education reform had the beneficial effect of universalizing and democratizing education to a much greater extent, in its wake came a loss of any vision of man’s purposes beyond that which was useful, and a discarding of all discussions of transcendence or meaning. While modern schools often claim to be unbiased with regard to any particular truth claim, Hicks
notes that any attempt to teach is in fact an exercise in selection. What one selects to teach suggests what one considers to be important, even if one explicitly claims to be “empty” of any predilection towards one particular set of values. This stands in stark contrast to Hicks’ ideal for classical education, which he suggests must offer not only knowledge, but also a “normative” vision of what one must do or become in order to become “noble.”

Hicks strongly criticizes the deterministic thrust of scientific materialism, focused so heavily on the manipulation of externals that man’s growth becomes not a question of conversion, or formation of virtue, but of changing man’s material conditions. He notes that classrooms which restrict knowledge to only that which is quantitatively verifiable exclude a vast array of human experience, reasonable experience that, while not expressed in weights or measures, still furthers man’s understanding of the world. Yet a lingering question remains as to how classical education can properly acknowledge the precision introduced by careful application of the scientific method within the appropriate realms. This method at least has the potential to lead to a deeper (perhaps even wonder-filled) appreciation of the created world, as well as to an increase in health and human flourishing (although to what extent would need to be carefully qualified). Hicks himself admits, ten years after the book’s initial publication, that there remain “difficult and urgent” (vii) questions such as “How can science and mathematics remain at the core of the modern curriculum and contribute to man’s search for objective truth and self-understanding without imposing a narrow empiricist agenda on the rest of the school?” Another question is: “How can we teach science in a way that serves the technological needs of our society and the spiritual needs of our students?” There are dual issues at stake here, both regarding the methodology of teaching as well as the necessity to formulate adequate norms which guide the power wielded by modern technology. Neither of them are fully answered by Hicks in *Norms and Nobility*.

As a foil for the disarray in modern education, Hicks turns to the aims and educational methods of Grecian antiquity. To Hicks, classical education is not any particular set of books or languages to be acquired; rather, it is an emulation of the ancients’ spirit of inquiry and curiosity, and the fruitful interplay between the proposal of hypotheses and the testing of these via reason, logic, observation, and literature. Two tendencies flowed through classical education: that of the philosophers, who saw man’s perfection as being sought via logic and reason; and that of the rhetoricians, who believed that presenting students with a variety of “Ideal Types”—heroic individuals portrayed via myth—would eventually bring their students’ action into conformity with their virtuous behavior. Pagan education had its own sand-traps, however. The ancients tended to see man as the supreme value, the measure of all things, and the pinnacle of history; this tended to emphasize rather than downplay man’s tendency towards problematic, elitist egocentricity. Despite the attempts of reason and myth to aim classical man towards self-sacrifice and self-transcendence, pagan humanists recognized a tragic tendency for man to fail in his attempts to act virtuously, in accordance with his knowledge of the true and the good.

Now we come to classical education as practiced in the wake of Christianity. The creative tension between pagan humanism and Christianity results in a more hopeful resolution of the egocentric tendencies of man. Knowledge of, and faith in, Christ, who is both the embodiment of logic (as the *Logos*) as well as the Ideal Type *par excellence*, allows man to know both himself and God more deeply. The new Christian element of faith, Hicks says, is both the predecessor of and the fruit of right action: the saints embody in their holiness the perfect unity of knowledge...
and action. A further fruit of Christianity is the dignity of the individual, which provides, against elitist tendencies, the impetus for classical education to be made available to all people. In this sense, a widely-available classical education, enabling persons to attain the knowledge and virtue necessary to live a life adequate to their humanity, redeemed in Christ, becomes a truly democratic education in its best form.

In the second half of the book, Hicks makes a practical proposal for both a curriculum and a structure for a classically-oriented school. He admits that his suggestions are a “personal” answer to what a modern classical school might look like, and invites his readers to engage with their own “dialectical” response to his program, should they find it lacking. His proposal expands beyond a book list for grades 7‒12. He includes practical and theoretical questions teachers and administrators might ask themselves and one another, from the general (“What are your school’s priorities?”) to the more personal (“How often do you ask your students questions to which you do not presume to have ready answers?” “Do your students have time to pursue ideas in informal conversation with you?”). In this book, Hicks’ vision of a classical education is confined to traditional brick-and-mortar schools; however it need not be. When *Norms and Nobility* was first published in 1981, the upswing in the homeschooling movement—including some of its more recent manifestations in hybrid, co-op, or university-model schools—was only just beginning. While Hicks does not address any of these as specific alternatives to secular, utilitarian education, his vision of classical education is broad enough to be relevant in all these arenas.

In the Preface to the 1990 edition of his book, Hicks notes that over the years what he most came to appreciate in the effort to implement classical education was that “the teacher, not the curriculum, needs to be the focus of [educational] reform” (viii). Personal change can tend to be more challenging, at its root, than structural, administrative, or curricular changes. If Christian evangelization at its most basic level could be considered a call to educate others, Hicks’ statement is a widely applicable exhortation. Thus education—from the Latin verb *ducere*, to lead, and the prefix, *ex*, meaning out—becomes a duty for all. In all times and places, sharing the Gospel is a way of extending a hand to help *lead others out* of the morass of sin and self-absorption and to point them on a path towards bounty. This is often most effective if the Gospel words are not only spoken but incarnated in a life “risked” (41) for the sake of their truth. If all are evangelizers, then all are educators. *Norms and Nobility*, then, is not simply a book to be relegated to the shelves of teachers seeking professional development, or schools seeking institutional improvement. The compelling evangelical/educational method of Christ and the saints consists in lives that “illuminate [their] teaching” (41). It is certainly the case that a Christian soul exposed to the meager soil of a utilitarian education may still grow towards a life of virtue by God’s grace, nourished by Scripture and the Sacraments. However, it may also be the case that there is something to be found within classical education, in its literary, historical, philosophical, mathematical, scientific, musical and theological wholeness, which provides an enriched, nutrient-dense soil for many Christian souls. These souls, grounding themselves thoroughly in the life of the Church, are enabled by their contemplation of the world and its multifaceted wonders, to grow more deeply in love with their Creator.

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