



Common Core or Christian Core?

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The Common Core State Standards are an initiative to adopt a uniform set of kindergarten through 12th-grade mathematics and English educational standards throughout the United States. Many Christian schools are also voluntarily adopting Common Core standards. This article examines whether such a practice is truly in the best interest of students and parents by considering the compatibility of Common Core with a classical Christian philosophy of education. This article begins with an analysis of Common Core standards to identify the foundational philosophy of education inherent in Common Core. This philosophy of education is then contrasted with the classical Christian philosophy of education to discern whether Common Core is compatible with the Christian core that should be at the heart of every Christian school.

The Common Core State Standards are an initiative to adopt a uniform set of kindergarten through 12th-grade mathematics and English educational standards throughout the United States. Along with a number of states, many Christian schools have likewise adopted these standards. This naturally leads to the question: Are the Common Core standards compatible with a classical-Christian philosophy of education? To discern an answer this article examines several factors. First, it describes the Common Core standards, paying particular attention to their development. This analysis reveals the fundamental philosophy of education behind the Common Core standards. Having established the intent and purpose of the Common Core standards, this article then considers classical-Christian education and articulates the classical-Christian philosophy of education. Having established the foundational understanding of the purpose of education for each position, this article concludes by analyzing the compatibility or incompatibility of these two philosophies of education.

Please note that the intent of this article is not to claim that Christian schools should completely ignore all state standards. Certainly, Christian schools must look to state standards, yet do so with an eye towards discerning the good from the bad. It is in this light that the present article considers not only whether Common Core is compatible with a Christian philosophy of education, but also seeks to discern whether the Common Core standards are fundamentally sound standards in their own right.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS INITIATIVE

Let us first turn to a description of Common Core itself. According to the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council for Chief State School Officers Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2010) webpage, “What Parents Should Know,” Common Core is a multistate partnership to create uniform education standards with this purpose: “To ensure all students are ready for success after high school, the Common Core State Standards establish clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th grade.” Currently, forty-three states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core standards (CCSSI, 2010).

To fully understand the intent behind Common Core requires a clear understanding of how its authors define “success.” The Common Core State Standards Initiative tagline of “preparing America’s students for college & career” provides some immediate insight into Common Core’s definition of “success” and thereby its philosophy of education (CCSSI, 2010). Going deeper, the “What Parents Should Know” page also says, “The standards were drafted by experts and teachers from across the country and are designed to ensure students are prepared for today’s entry-level careers, freshman-level college courses, and workforce training programs” (CCSSI, 2010). Thus, for Common Core, “success” is purely pragmatic in nature: Entry into college and the workforce. Its underlying philosophy holds that the sole purpose of education is to prepare students to enter the workforce, either directly after high school or following college graduation. Nowhere does Common Core see a higher purpose to education than *career preparation*. Thus, we might say its philosophy of education is very horizontal: to ensure that a student “performs well” in school so that the student may obtain a “good” job and thereby become an economically productive member of society.

Before moving on, some background on the development of the Common Core standards proves helpful. In 2009, three private organizations based in Washington, DC (the National Governors Association, the Council for Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc.) developed the Common Core standards in a closed-door process through funding provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Stotsky 2013). Further, despite claims that teachers were involved in the development of the Common Core standards, in reality, as Wurman (2014) countered:

No records are available to show why members of the various CCSSI committees were chosen or what their relevant credentials were.

The Standards Development Work Group was composed chiefly of staff members of or consultants to Achieve, Inc., National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), and the two major college testing companies (College Board and American College Testing, or ACT). (p. 2)

In other words, the Common Core standards were not developed by working classroom teachers, but instead were primarily developed by the private entities that write and sell the standardized exams which schools must purchase for testing in accordance with Common Core standards. Further, as Wurman (2014) revealed, of the twenty-nine-member Validation Committee, only one member held a doctorate in mathematics, and none held doctorates in English language or literature, while only three members actually possessed experience in writing education standards (p. 2). Ultimately five members refused to sign off on the standards, including those with the most relevant standards-development experience and the group's one mathematics doctorate, citing the Common Core standards' "low level and incompatibility with those of high-achieving nations" (Wurman 2014, p. 4). With this background on Common Core, the next step involves an analysis of the classical-Christian worldview on education.

CLASSICAL-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

As opposed to the pragmatic, horizontal focus of Common Core's educational philosophy, the Christian philosophy of education, with its focus on God as the source and summit of Truth, is far more vertical in orientation. The classical-Christian philosophy of education sees "getting a good job" as a secondary by-product of a "good" education rather than as the primary focus of education. Pazmiño (2008) said of the Christian educational worldview, "Christian faith identifies specific ultimate foundations to guide life and education in its various forms. . . . The content in this case includes the mind, the heart, the body, and life lived personally and in relationship" (p. 90). In its document *The Catholic School*, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) made explicit the classical-Christian philosophy of education:

Its task is fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life: the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second, in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian. (para. 37)

Instead of a narrow pragmatic focus, Christian education looks to the formation of the entire human person—body and soul; precisely as Pope Paul VI (1965) explained:

For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share. (para. 1)

The Christian worldview sees education as transformational and transcendent; it seeks to form the individual in light of Divine truth.

This orientation towards truth and formation in truth is absolutely key to understanding the Christian philosophy of education. In *Lay Catholics in School: Witnesses to Faith*, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) expounded on this commitment to truth:

For the Catholic educator, whatever is true is a participation in Him who is the Truth; the communication of truth, therefore, as a professional activity, is thus fundamentally transformed into a unique participation in the prophetic mission of Christ, carried on through one's teaching. (para. 16)

Thus, on a fundamental level, the Christian philosophy of education seeks to orient students towards truth; it seeks to equip them to properly discern and then hold to truth. The foundation of the classical-Christian philosophy of education as a quest for truth comes to us at least in part as a gift from the Greeks.

FROM ATHENS TO JERUSALEM: CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN EDUCATION

Western civilization in general—and classical-Christian education in particular—traces its lineage back to the ancient Greeks. Freeman Butts observed: “We think the way we do in large part because the Greeks thought the way they did. Thus, to understand our own ways of thinking we need to know how the Greeks thought” (as cited in Pazmiño 2008, p. 138). From the Greeks Western civilization developed the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music as the basis of education. For the Greeks, the liberal arts constituted the cornerstone of education, with its purpose being the acquisition of wisdom and the cultivation of virtue; as West (2010) explained, “Thus Aristotle in his *Politics* defines ‘the liberal sciences’ as the proper subjects of instruction for free men who aspire not after what is immediately practical or useful, but after intellectual and moral excellence in general” (para. 1). The Greeks saw a fundamentally moral purpose to education. For the Greeks, education was not limited to the merely pragmatic purpose of “helping” Greek children find “good jobs,” but instead saw as its purpose the transcendent goal of making someone a better person. Clark and Jain (2013) summed up this

critical point, saying, “The ancients believed that these seven ‘arts’ were not merely subjects to be mastered, but sure and certain ways of forming in the soul the intellectual virtue necessary for acquiring true wisdom” (p. 1).

Along with the formation of the individual, the Greeks also saw a communal aspect to education, the concept of *paideia*. This concept “represents a culture’s consensus about what constitutes human excellence” (Pazmiño 2008, p. 139). As Pazmiño went on to note, while disagreement existed among the Greek city-states and also among the great Greek philosophers regarding exactly what should constitute this consensus, they nevertheless all agreed that an important function of education is to transmit a society’s culture, traditions, and beliefs. Pazmiño (2008) further observed that in its biblical usage, “*paideia* refers to nurturing, chastening, and character formation, implying that persons are genuinely committed and vitally related to one another in community” (pp. 139–40). The classical-Christian philosophy of education firmly embraces this concept of *paideia*. Not only are we individual human persons, but we are also human persons *in community*. Thus, the classical-Christian philosophy of education also holds to the promotion of the common good as another important aspect of education. Since the ultimate common good of mankind is found in the Beatific Vision (the state of the souls in Heaven sharing fully in the life of God), Christian education seeks “to promote efficaciously the good of the earthly city . . . [while also serving] in the spread of the Kingdom of God” (Paul VI 1965, para. 8). With this background, the foundation is now set for a comparison of Common Core with the classical-Christian philosophy of education.

COMMON CORE: A CRITIQUE

Before diving into deeper philosophical differences between Common Core and the classical-Christian philosophy of education, some immediate practical concerns with the Common Core State Standards Initiative itself are worth noting. In particular, two points already mentioned above stand out for further consideration. Since the standards were developed and written largely by employees and consultants of the testing companies which stand to make a great deal of money by providing all the standardized-testing services and other materials required for full implementation of the Common Core Standards, this seems at the very least a concerning conflict of interest. Another point is the lack of standards-writing expertise and subject-matter expertise among members of the validation committee. Very troubling here is the fact that five members of the committee, including the only mathematics doctorate on the committee, refused to sign off on the standards.

Additionally, while teachers’ unions generally supported the initial development of the Common Core standards, as states begin to reach full im-

plementation of the standards, many teachers have begun voicing serious concerns. In July 2014 the American Federation of Teachers announced \$20,000 to \$30,000 of grant money for “state and local affiliates to critique the Common Core State Standards” (Russo 2015, 37). Although the leadership of the national teachers’ unions continue to voice support for Common Core, clearly many of the rank-and-file members believe otherwise. Russo (2015) cites a 2014 *Education Next* poll revealing that teacher support for Common Core dropped from 76 percent to 46 percent over the course of just one year (p. 42); along with this, the Chicago Teachers’ Union unanimously passed a resolution in May 2014 opposing the Common Core standards in their entirety. That so many teachers actually charged with implementing the Common Core standards in the classroom are opposing the standards after becoming familiar with them is cause for concern.

Of even greater concern are problems that have been noted in the standards themselves. In its English standards, Common Core radically downplays the importance of reading great works of literature, instead devoting 50 percent of reading instructional time to “informational or nonfiction reading” (Stotsky 2012). The developers of the Common Core standards do not explain the rationale for this change, although it suggests they believe it promotes “college readiness” since most college students read more informational texts than literature. However, as Stotsky (2012) points out, absolutely no empirical research supports the assumption that having high-school students read a greater amount of “informational or nonfiction” texts instead of classical works of literature increases their ability to read and understand the informational textbooks they will encounter in the college classroom; instead it appears the opposite is actually the case: The decline in the reading ability of college students appears tied to an increasingly less demanding high school literature curriculum since the 1960s. Instead of implementing stronger literature standards in high school to address the issue of college students’ declining reading ability created by a decline in high school literature standards, the Common Core standards exacerbate the problem with a further decline in the high school literature curriculum.

This near-disregard for the importance of literature is an especially troubling aspect of the Common Core standards. This article already examined the concept of *paideia* and its importance in transmitting a society’s shared understanding of excellence. Great literature is intimately tied with *paideia*. Through these great works students come to know deep and lasting truths of the human condition; as Robert Spencer (1998) stated: “A high school student need not know anything about Thomistic metaphysics or the politics of medieval Italy to be able to appreciate Dante’s *Divine Comedy*” (p. 19). In other words, while knowledge of Thomistic metaphysics and the

politics of medieval Italy add to one's appreciation of the *Divine Comedy*, nevertheless, great literature possesses an ability to stand on its own to deeply touch the human heart with fundamental truths about human nature and existence, even if one is not intimately familiar with all the background details. The mark of great literature is its ability to take students into the very heart of the human story. The fact that the Common Core standards fail to recognize this transcendent aspect of literature gets to a serious problem of Common Core. Replacing great works of literature with "informational or nonfiction reading" is a step backwards, not forwards.

Ultimately, the fundamental problem with the Common Core standards is not the fact that they come from the state—government is most certainly capable of acting for the common good and in fact has an obligation to do so.¹ Instead, the fundamental problem with the Common Core standards is that they are poor standards, period. University of Notre Dame Professor Gerald Bradley (2013) observed:

In my judgment (and in the opinion of a growing number of teachers, administrators and parents), Common Core is a wholesale education revision that shortchanges the central goals of all sound education, which are: to grow in the intellectual virtues; to mature into a responsible, flourishing adult; and to contribute as a citizen to the process of responsible democratic self-government. . . . It is instead a recipe for standardized workforce preparation. Common Core adopts a bottom-line, pragmatic approach to education. At or near the heart of its philosophy is the judgment that it is a waste of resources to "over-educate" people. . . . Truck-drivers do not need to know *Huck Finn*. Physicians have no use for the humanities. Only those destined to major in literature need to worry about *Ulysses*. (paras. 7, 8)

Along these lines, Bradley and Professor Robert George of Princeton University organized over 130 Catholic scholars to pen a letter to the U.S. Catholic bishops urging them not to adopt Common Core standards in Catholic schools (Strauss 2013). The letter noted that prominent educational experts such as James Milgram of Stanford University and Sandra Stotsky of the University of Arkansas believe the Common Core standards are a step backwards in educational practice. Stotsky denounced the Common Core standards as promoting "empty skill sets . . . [that] weaken the basis of literary and cultural knowledge needed for authentic college coursework" (as cited in Strauss 2013, para. 22). The Common Core standards are bad standards for Christian schools because the Common Core standards are in themselves bad standards. Further, the Common Core standards are bad standards because they are based on a flawed philosophy of education which fails to capture an authentic understanding of the human person.

COMMON CORE OR CHRISTIAN CORE: A CLASH OF WORLDVIEWS

Ultimately, the philosophy of education espoused by the Common Core standards and the classical-Christian philosophy of education stand as near polar opposites. At its root, Common Core reflects the philosophy of postmodernism. Such a philosophy “rejects notions of absolute truth and binding rationality as well as the notion that language can unambiguously communicate matters of ultimate meaning” (Groothuis 2004, p. 239). With its rejection of absolute truth, the philosophy of education behind Common Core remains fixed in the horizontal and can never rise up to the transcendent. Lacking any sort of vertical component, Common Core’s philosophy of education can never see beyond the pragmatic purpose of education as “career preparation;” yet even here it falls terribly short, as for example Common Core’s continued lowering of the already poor literary standards which have been documented to negatively impact reading ability—certainly an important “career preparation” skill.

Even David Coleman, hailed as the chief architect of Common Core, noted the difference between Common Core standards and traditional Catholic education. Coleman called upon Catholic schools not to abandon the unique aspects of traditional Catholic education in favor of Common Core. Speaking about classical-Catholic liberal arts schools, Coleman emphasized, “I say, share what you do that is beautiful and distinctive. Don’t just defend your right to exist. Be proud of what you have to offer, which is different” (as cited in Cassandra 2015, para. 23). Coleman recognizes that the classical-Christian philosophy of education is different from that espoused by the Common Core standards and does not believe that Christian schools should abandon the classical-Christian philosophy of education in favor of the Common Core standards.

In contrast with Common Core’s pragmatic philosophy of education, the classical-Christian philosophy of education embraces the transcendent by seeking to cultivate virtue and community so as to move the human person towards his ultimate end of beatitude² with God. Thus, as Pope Pius XI (1929) concluded:

In fact, since education consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end for which he was created, it is clear that there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man’s last end, and that in the present order of Providence, since God has revealed Himself to us in the Person of His Only Begotten Son, who alone is “the way, the truth and the life,” there can be no ideally perfect education which is not Christian education. (para. 7)

The classical-Christian philosophy of education goes well beyond the limited scope of Common Core. Dr. Dan Guernsey of the Cardinal Newman Society perfectly sums up the difference, “We don’t open Catholic schools to get kids into college. We open Catholic schools to get them into heaven” (as cited in Cassandra 2015, para. 23). The Common Core standards are designed to produce good and productive workers. The classical-Christian philosophy of education seeks to produce great and holy saints. Christian schools must never lose sight of this fundamental difference in the aim of education. Given this fact, Christian schools should not succumb to the temptation of wholesale adoption of Common Core standards. Instead, Christian schools should continue to hold students to the far higher standards of a true Christian core.

Notes

1. There is also an issue of subsidiarity regarding at what level (local, state, federal) the government should be involved in dictating education standards. However, this is a separate issue from the main point of this article. I mention the issue of government involvement in education standards in order to make explicit that I do not reject the idea that at an appropriate level, the government has a responsibility to promote the common good through development of sound education standards. The primary problem, as I explain, is that the standards of Common Core are not sound regardless of the level of government through which they are implemented.

2. “This state is taken by Catholic tradition to be found in its completeness only in the life to come—when human persons, elevated by grace, share fully in the life of the Triune God” (Carlson 2012, p. 44).

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