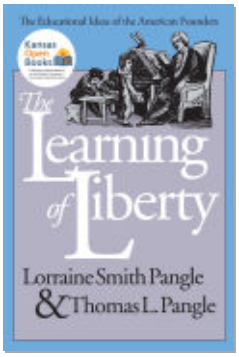
2 Classical Republican Educational Ideals



Published by

Pangle, Thomas L. and Lorraine Smith Pangle.
The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders.
University Press of Kansas, 2023.
Project MUSE. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.84016.

2 • Classical Republican Educational Ideals

To find models of educational systems whose direct and unambiguous goal was the fostering of republican citizenship, many Americans in the Founding era turned back to the republics of antiquity and to the educational writings of the classical republican theorists. No one was more conspicuous in this respect than Benjamin Rush, and no one spoke as emphatically as Rush did about the need for Americans to use the lever of classical republican educational thought to break the chains of colonial ways of thinking about education. In 1786 Rush published a proposal outlining a new, republican system of education for his state of Pennsylvania, and appended his general reflections on education in America, framed as a message to his fellow citizens in all thirteen states.

After calling upon Americans to undertake a self-critical uprooting of their previous habits in education, Rush proceeds boldly to declare that, as regards the great task of instilling a distinctively republican patriotism in the youth, "the policy of the Lacedamonians is well worthy of our imitation." More specifically, Rush suggests:

> Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it.
>
> He must watch for the state as if its liberties depended upon his vigilance alone. . . . These are practicable lessons, and the history of the commonwealths of Greece and Rome show that human nature, without the aids of Christianity, has attained these degrees of perfection.[1]

The example of the Spartan institution is to apply in physical education as well:

> To assist in rendering religious, moral, and political instruction more effectual upon the minds of our youth, it will be necessary to subject their bodies to physical discipline. To obviate the inconveniences of their studious and sedentary mode of life, they should live upon a temperate diet, consisting chiefly of broths, milk, and vegetables. The black broth of Sparta and the barley broth of Scotland have been alike celebrated for their beneficial effects upon the minds of young people. They should avoid tasting spiritous liquors. They should also be accustomed occasionally to work with their hands in the intervals of study and in the busy seasons of the year in the country. Moderate sleep, silence, occasional solitude, and cleanliness should be inculcated upon them, and the utmost advantage should be taken of a proper direction of those great principles of human conduct—sensibility, habit, imitation, and association.

Regarding the demeanor of teachers, Rush goes beyond even Spartan discipline.

> In the education of youth, let the authority of our masters be as *absolute* as possible. The government of schools like the government of private families should be *arbitrary*, that it may not be *severe*. By this mode of education, we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic. I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age, and I have often thought that society owes a great deal of its order and happiness to the deficiencies of parental government being supplied by those habits of obedience and subordination which are contracted at schools.

Naturally, military training will be emphasized in any such republican educational program: "In a state where every citizen is liable to be a soldier and a legislator, it will be necessary to have some regular instruction given upon the ART OF WAR and upon PRACTICAL LEGISLATION. These branches of knowledge are of too much importance in a republic to be trusted to solitary study or to a fortuitous acquaintance with books."[2]

Yet this extraordinary celebration of Spartan self-sacrifice is far from being Rush's last word on the nature of the education required in the American states. Insofar as he does give way here to an almost febrile enthusiasm for classical educational principles, Rush goes well beyond most or all of the other Founders who voiced their views on education.[3] Indeed, when examined more closely, not only in comparison with other pronouncements of the time but even with an eye to internal consistency, Rush's essay begins to appear somewhat bizarre. For the essay's invocation of Spartan discipline and sacrifice appears hand in hand

with a call for education in precisely those sorts of habits, preoccupations, and studies which the Spartan and other similar classical systems regarded as virulent germs of corruption: commercialism, consumerism, the accumulation of private wealth, and progressive scientific investigation leading to theological criticism as well as to technological innovation in the machines of war and peace.

Immediately after invoking the Spartan model, Rush adds that the youth he has in mind "must be taught to amass wealth"—although "it must be only to increase his power of contributing to the wants and demands of the state." The student, Rush continues, "must be indulged occasionally in amusements, but he must be taught that study and business should be his principal pursuits in life." "Above all," Rush proclaims in his curious fashion, the student must learn to "love life and endeavor to acquire as many of its conveniences as possible by industry and economy"—always with the proviso that the student is to be "taught that this life 'is not his own' when the safety of his country requires it." "In a state which boasts of the first commercial city in America," Rush declares, "I wish to see [knowledge of our language] cultivated by young men who are intended for the counting house, for many such, I hope, will be educated in our colleges. The time is past when an academical education was thought to be unnecessary to qualify a young man for merchandise." "I wish likewise," he adds,

> to see the numerous facts that relate to the origin and present state of COMMERCE, together with the nature and principles of MONEY, reduced to such a system as to be intelligible and agreeable to a young man. If we consider the commerce of our metropolis only as the avenue of the wealth of the state, the study of it merits a place in a young man's education, but, I consider commerce in a much higher light when I recommend the study of it in republican seminaries.[4]

The more closely it is considered, the more Rush's essay will be found to exhibit an all-too-common syncretistic turn of mind: a hopefulness that deeply discordant but attractive principles and ways of life can somehow be combined in a synthetic mixture that will preserve all their appealing features while washing out the unappealing.

Other prominent Americans sometimes evinced milder versions of this rather incoherent embrace of antiquity. Rush's essay is reminiscent of the vision adumbrated by Samuel Adams in his famous if puzzling aspiration to a "Christian Sparta" as the hoped-for future destiny of Boston after the Revolution.[5] But by and large the more thoughtful commentators in the 1780s and 1790s were impressed by the gulf that separated America from Sparta or republican Rome. Their admiration for the civic virtues of antiquity was therefore controlled by a

keener sense than Rush seemed to possess of the distance between their situation and that of the classical lawgivers. Even while expressing deep regard for the Stoic virtues, the Founders were more likely to exhibit great classical learning than severe manners and morals. They could more easily imagine themselves at home with Plutarch than with Lycurgus or the Spartan hoplites honored by Plutarch. The Founders sympathized most with those classical authors—the prosaic more often than the poetic, the historians and orators more often than the philosophers—who looked back with admiration to the glories of an austere republican life but who themselves lived in "soft," more "civilized" societies. The Founders accordingly sought in practice a much-relaxed version of classical civic virtue. Few Americans were as self-conscious or frank as Samuel Knox, but he formulates the more general attitude toward the classics with an ingenuous clarity.

> So circumscribed was the state of literature in those times and such the circumstances of those commonwealths that their plans of education were rather military schools preparing them for the camp, either for self-defense or for butchering the human species, than seminaries suited to literary acquisition, the conduct of life, or the improvement of the human mind.
>
> This observation, however, extends no farther than as it applies to institutions of national education and is by no means considered as applicable to the schools of the philosophers or of many celebrated orators, grammarians, and rhetoricians of the ancient world.[6]

But Knox is too complacent. The difficulty in an attitude such as his is this: how can one genuinely follow or respect the political judgment and moral taste of the classical educators like Isocrates, yet shrink from their explicit and emphatic political and moral preferences—for Sparta over Athens (or for old, taciturn Athens over new, talky Athens), for selfless austerity and piety over sophisticated enlightenment? It is one great merit of Benjamin Rush's essay that it compels us to confront this problem. As we read and reflect on Rush, we are forced to recognize that the Americans' admiration for classical republicanism was not merely ornamental. Rush's essay may be bizarre, but in its moral and political seriousness—in the earnestness with which it looks to the classics, through searching if not always welcoming eyes—Rush's discussion brings to the fore the most important dimension of the Founders' concern with classical texts and authors. The Founding generation's posture toward the classical republican tradition mingles real respect and some serious attachment with criticism so severe as to suggest a sense of alienation. The most reflective of the Founders take the classics too seriously, and struggle with them too intensely, to have regarded them simply from an "aesthetic" point of view.

Our first task must be to clarify the precise character of this complex, uneasy blend of kinship and antagonism between the principles of American and classical republicanism. To do so, we need to examine briefly the relationship between the theory of classical republicanism and the new, competing republican theory that arose in the centuries immediately preceding the American Founding—the theory that captivated and "corrupted" the originally Puritan spirit of New England. Then, on the basis of this contrast, we will try to attain a more vivid understanding of the educational implications of these two antagonistic conceptions of republicanism.

Modern in Contrast to Classical Republicanism

At first sight, the disagreements between the American and the classical republicans appear to be over means rather than ends, for the goals of all republican government seem obvious and indisputable. All republics seek freedom from foreign domination and from internal oppression. Now it suffices to read a few pages of Thucydides or Aristotle to note that the massive threat to freedom and security in the classical republic was the prevalence of selfish, violent, factional conflict, especially between rich and poor. "The friend of popular governments," Madison writes at the start of the tenth *Federalist Paper*, "never finds himself so alarmed for their character and fate as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice." Are not the discoveries in political science that Madison and Hamilton extol in the *Federalist Papers* new cures for the old republican diseases of factionalism and consequent instability? Let the republic be so large and so diverse, let factions become so numerous, Madison and Hamilton argue, that no faction will be widespread and thus powerful enough to oppress the others. Let tyranny, of the mighty ruler or of the entrenched governmental faction, be prevented through the separation of powers and a system of checks and balances, so that "ambition [may] be made to counteract ambition." Let the people's views be filtered and moderated by representatives elected from diverse constituencies at diverse times, to prevent the passionate excesses of the populace from coalescing in direct, mob democracy goaded on by demagogues.[7]

There is considerable and by no means shallow truth to this assimilation of the ends of the American Founders to the ends of the classical republics. Nevertheless, a closer and more searching analysis reveals how incomplete the truth is that this picture captures. The new "means" the Founders adopt and employ in order to secure good government entail in fact a profound shift—more precisely, a profound constriction—in the very meaning of "good government," growing out of a new conception of the proper ends of civil society.

The philosophers of classical republicanism (Thucydides, Socrates, Plato,

Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, etc.) begin not from theories about republics or about human nature but instead from direct observation of republics and of men living as republican citizens. This firsthand experience prompts them to start by trying to conceive human beings as naturally at home, and naturally seeking their fulfillment, not as independent individuals but as participants in and dutiful contributors to the civic community: a community that, to be healthy or fulfilling, must be a small, homogeneous, and fraternal city. Republics, so conceived, necessarily put great demands on all of their citizens, for they require remarkable courage and discipline in their citizen armies, and justice, good judgment, and self-restraint in their councils and assemblies. But, the classics insist, to say that republics strive to foster these virtues as means, in order to survive or even to remain free, is to characterize republicanism too narrowly. Serious republican citizens recognize virtue as one of the chief aims, perhaps *the* chief aim, of civic life. Although they indeed see in virtue a bulwark of safety and freedom, these citizens also see security and liberty as gaining their full dignity in providing the opportunity for the exercise of virtue.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this understanding of republican virtue was deeply and decisively challenged in the name of a revolutionary and radically unclassical conception of politics first put forth by Machiavelli and subsequently modified in diverse and competing ways by Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, and Hume. It was the teachings of these modern political philosophers that issued in the "liberal" republican or democratic outlook of the American Founders.[8] The new republicans argue that the virtues and the virtuous community extolled by the classical republicans are unreasonable, because such virtues and such community demand a self-transcendence, a sacrifice of material and individual interests, a subordination of commerce and acquisitiveness, that is simply contrary to human nature. Classical civic virtue was inspired and in fact only made tolerable by the ceaselessly belligerent condition of the ancient cities in which that virtue flourished. "Ancient policy was violent, and contrary to the more natural and usual course of things," David Hume argues.

> The Roman and other ancient republics were free states; they were small ones; and the age being martial, all their neighbors were continually in arms. Freedom naturally begets public spirit, especially in small states; and this public spirit, this *amor patriae*, must encrease, when the public is almost in continual alarm, and men are obliged, every moment, to expose themselves to the greatest dangers for its defence. A continual succession of wars makes every citizen a soldier. . . . This service is indeed equivalent to a heavy tax. . . . Now, according to the most natural course of things, industry and arts and trade encrease the power of the sovereign as well as the

> happiness of the subjects; and that policy is violent, which aggrandizes the public by the poverty of individuals.
>
> . . . Could we convert a city into a kind of fortified camp, and infuse into each breast so martial a genius, and such a passion for public good, as to make every one willing to undergo the greatest hardships for the sake of the public; these affections might now, as in ancient times, prove alone a sufficient spur to industry, and support the community. It would then be advantageous, as in camps, to banish all arts and luxury; and by restrictions on equipage and tables, make the provisions and forage last longer than if the army were loaded with a number of superfluous retainers. But as these principles are too disinterested and too difficult to support, it is requisite to govern men by other passions, and animate them with a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury. . . . The harmony of the whole is still supported; and the natural bent of the mind being more complied with, individuals, as well as the public, find their account in the observance of those maxims.[9]

It was John Locke who articulated most fully the principles of justice and morality underlying this new theory of human nature and of legitimate republican government. Locke's political teaching was transmitted to the Americans in large part directly, through their reading and study of his works, but it also made an impact by way of two of his most eloquent followers—John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, whose famous journalism, published under the name of *Cato's Letters*, provided a blunt, simplified, and somewhat coarsened version of the key Lockean teachings.[10] The new political doctrine, elaborated most fully in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, takes as its foundation the idea of the "State of Nature," or the proposition that human beings are all essentially free and independent beings, equally possessed of inalienable personal freedoms, claims, or "rights" that, it is argued, are implicit in the natural independence of every individual. All obligations, and in particular all civic obligations, are understood to flow from the rational contractual consent of the free and by nature independent individuals seeking to protect and augment their personal interests.

Government (as opposed to individuals and their rights) is therefore held to be artificial, the product of human contrivance. Government finds its only legitimate basis in the consent of the governed and contracting individuals, and it finds its overriding legitimate purpose in securing their rights. The individual rights whose protection thus defines the common good include notably the right to life, or secure self-preservation, as most basic; the right to lawful liberty, or liberty of speech and deed limited only by restrictions necessary to insure the congruent liberties of all; and the right to what Locke taught Americans to call "the pursuit of happiness,"[11] i.e., the liberty of every individual to decide for

oneself, within the confines of legitimate law, the ends of life and the good for one's own soul, including especially one's religious vocation or otherworldly destiny and duty. The most reasonable and, within a reasonable society, the most naturally prevalent expression of the pursuit of happiness is the exercise of the right to acquire, produce, and increase property or material possessions without any restraint except law enacted by consent. In the service of all these ends, public policy ought to allow and encourage science and free inquiry—less as ends in themselves than as means to the ever-increasing prosperity, comfort, health, liberty, and safety of society.

With this skeleton of Lockean liberalism in view, we are better able to appreciate the distance that separates the new from the classical republican conception. For Locke, government or politics has no legitimate authority to promote the health or excellence or salvation of men's souls: "The care of the soul belongs to each individual, and it is to be left to each." Or as he said in a rather bold and early (unpublished) work, "Give me leave to say, however strange it may seem, that the law-giver hath nothing to do with moral virtues and vices."[12]

According to classical republicanism, however, "politics" is defined as "the art whose business it is to care for souls."[13] As a result, classical republicanism places far less emphasis on toleration, property rights, commercial growth, and provision for material and technological progress. Yet this is not to say that classical republican theorists are unalive to the charms of such "progressive" hopes, for that would posit a too-simplistic contrast between classical republican theory and the new republican theory that chiefly inspired the Founders. The best antidote to such oversimplification is a perusal of the educational writings of Xenophon, the most obviously radical, or most willing to experiment, of the classical republican educational theorists.

Xenophon presents his sustained reflections on civic education in a work of fiction entitled *The Education of Cyrus*. The novel depicts a conceivable best regime founded on a dynamic leader's liberation of an oppressed poor population. His efforts are directed to the steady elimination of ethnic, religious, class, and even to some extent sexual discrimination, to the creation of a far-reaching equality of opportunity, to the unleashing of unlimited military and economic growth, and finally to the attainment of universal peace and security through large-scale bureaucratic planning, commercialism, and elaborate economic interdependence in a vast and ethnically heterogeneous nation or empire.

Yet while painting, often in glowing colors, the wonderful benefits such a society would bring, especially to the underprivileged and impoverished masses, Xenophon portrays in no less dramatic hues the severe costs, especially to those from all classes who care passionately about human dignity and an education in dignity. In other words, Xenophon never abandons what may be said to be the great positive theme of classical republicanism: the theme of virtue or excellence

and its cultivation. Cyrus, the "hero" of Xenophon's novel and the genius who creates the new and liberated society, builds his project on the corruption of the small, austere, inegalitarian republic in which he was born and educated. That republic was dedicated to civic or moral virtue as an end; Cyrus corrupts it in the name of a society that conceives of virtue as a means and that attempts to make prosperity, freedom, and glory its ends. It is the doubt as to the viability, in the long run, of such a ranking of priorities—it is the insistence that a sound political society must base itself on an explicit, shared dedication to nonutilitarian nobility—that is the leitmotif of authentically classical republicanism.

But if we are to understand more precisely the ramifications of the classical dedication to "virtue," if we are thereby to begin to understand the alternative, but still dialectically derivative, notion of civic life that guides the educational thought of the American Founders, we need to penetrate a bit deeper into the theory of classical republicanism. We need above all to try to understand the grounds for the *aristocratic* bent of the classical republican tradition. The preference for aristocracy over democracy, at least in principle, follows from the classical preoccupation with virtue understood as the noble end of political life. For if the healthy republic exists chiefly to foster and give opportunities for the exercise of virtue, then such a republic will seek to give fullest recognition and scope to the activity of those who prove themselves most virtuous. One may go so far as to say that "popular sovereignty," or government understood as deriving its just authority solely from the consent of the governed, is never a doctrine of classical republicanism. Classical republicanism stubbornly insists that there are two necessary but competing sources of legitimacy: consent, and wisdom or virtue. And the latter is the more authoritative of the two.[14]

Still, one cannot leave it at this. For the classical theorists are fully aware of the difficulties involved in trying to identify the few who are truly virtuous or wise and therefore truly deserving of the highest offices and honors. As a result, they readily concede that republican life is compelled in almost all practical situations to settle for rulers who at best exemplify some kind of bastardization of genuine virtue or wisdom. On the other hand, they observe that consent, since it is consent of the less than wise, is almost always colored by deception and self-deception. The complex task of constitution making and of ruling, in the classical understanding, is therefore the weaving together of two necessarily mutilated strands of political authority, through the arbitration and regulation of the rule of law. But this means to say that, in the classical view, there is something radically imperfect, even questionable, about all actual political authority.

It would therefore be leaving a rather false impression of classical republicanism, and of its contrast with American or modern, liberal republicanism, if we were not to add that the classical political philosophers insist on presenting civic virtue, and political legitimacy rooted in virtue, *as a problem*. This dimension of

classical republican political and educational theory has been very severely neglected and misunderstood in almost all the present-day scholarly accounts of the history of educational thought. The drama of *The Education of Cyrus* lies in Xenophon's fascinating portrayal of how a virtuous citizenry is corrupted by a gifted, enchanting, and supremely talented leader; and it is precisely the ease with which Cyrus is shown to corrupt his virtuous fellow citizens that illuminates the fragility of civic virtue.

It is only when we recognize this fragile or problematic character of republican virtue, as it is treated by classical educational and political thought, that we begin to discern the deepest—and usually ignored—contrast between classical and American republicanism. For it seems likely that in the final analysis the classical writers would have rebuked the American Founders—and their great teachers, even Machiavelli—not for having been too skeptical about virtue but for having failed to question or probe virtue sufficiently. The classics teach that the profound questioning—and hence the true *understanding*—of morality and of moral education have as their essential prerequisite a powerful but also thoughtful attachment to conventional virtue, an attachment that is capable of becoming deeply troubled by the question of whether the virtue society teaches is according to nature. The classics might well have criticized the Founders for too quickly and easily assimilating the moral to the expedient in their thinking; the Founders thereby failed to recognize the depth of the attachment that they still felt for nonutilitarian virtue and failed to ponder sufficiently the powerful hold that morality has on the human heart altogether. They thus never fully understood the problematic character of that attachment, and the consequent tendency of man's moral feelings, when not cultivated by a careful education, to be alternately weak and dangerously explosive. The ancient philosophers might thus censure the Founders for having taken virtue a bit too much for granted, for having assumed that, at least in an attenuated form, it could always somehow be counted upon as a kind of necessary concomitant of political freedom.

The classical philosophers' more quizzical posture towards virtue goes hand in hand with the very elevated place the theme of law (and the kindred theme of piety) occupies in their educational thinking. Civic virtue, the classics will not let us forget, is emphatically dependent on law and law-enforced communal habituation and education. The classics have in mind here not merely the indirect encouragement of virtue through the institutional checking and channeling of passions; they mean the use of legally supervised artistic talent, law-enforced mores, and legally sanctioned religion to form souls, to mold character. As Aristotle stresses in the conclusion to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, moral as well as civic virtue and education has to be legislated and backed up by official praise and blame, as well as lawful reward and penalty, or it will wither, despite the naturally inspiring quality of nobility. This linkage between virtue and lawful fear or

coercion sharply distinguishes classical republicanism from all Kantian and neo- or post-Kantian conceptions or virtue and education in virtue, for the outlooks inspired by Kant hold that virtue ceases to be virtue if it is not rooted in the free choice or "commitment" of the "autonomous" individual.

Conversely, no feature of classical republicanism is so close to the biblical political and educational tradition. In the Bible, the love of God, and the commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor for the sake of God, are inseparable from the fear of God as the punisher as well as the redeemer. In the words of Mary's Magnificat, "His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). Christ speaks chilling words in Luke 12:5: "I will warn you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into Hell; yes, I say unto you, fear Him!" His admonition receives a mighty echo in early American educational thought in Cotton Mather's leading pronouncement on the subject: "*Come, ye Children, Hearken to me, I will teach you*, what you ought to do. You ought, *First*, To be *Willing* to be *Taught the Fear of the Lord*. . . . *Children*, 'Tis your *Dawning* Time. It may be your *Dying Time*. . . . Go unto the *Burying-place*; There you will see many a *Grave* shorter than your selves. . . . And what needs any more be said, for your Awakening, to Learn the *Holy Scriptures*!"[15] A later and milder insistence on the importance of fear in the Christian education of very young children is John Witherspoon's influential *Letters on Education* of 1765 (printed in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1775 and reprinted five times in the United States before 1822):

> I despise the foolish refinement of those, who, through fear of making children mercenary, are for being very sparing of the mention of heaven or hell. . . . I know no circumstance from which your opinion of the necessity of religion will appear with the greater clearness, or carry it in greater force, than your behavior towards and treatment of your children in time of dangerous sickness. Certainly there is no time in their whole lives when the necessity appears more urgent, or the opportunity more favorable, for impressing their minds with a sense of the things that belong to their peace. What shall we say then of those parents, who, through fear of alarming their minds, and augmenting their disorder, will not suffer any mention to be made to them of the approach of death, or the importance of eternity?[16]

For the classical philosophers, however, the observation that virtue and education in virtue, depend on law—and hence, in crucial respects, on coercion and fear—casts a long shadow over virtue. How can that which hinges essentially on conventional habit, shame, coercion, and fear be fully natural? How can a republic that has at its heart the rule of law ever be the true response to the deepest spiritual needs of human nature? In short, the "rule of law" is in the classical

analysis fraught with grave questions, which culminate in one crucial query: Are the virtues as they are known in political life, even at its highest, the fulfillment or perfection of human life, or are they not in fact pale reflections of a kind of excellence and a way of life that is, as Aristotle has it, "divine," "set apart," truly noble, and therefore "blessed?"[17] With these words Aristotle refers to the philosophic or contemplative or theoretical life, which is always in one way or another brought to the fore in classical republicanism as a challenge and an alternative that transcends whatever can be achieved in political existence.

Now since, in the classical understanding, the philosophic or political-philosophic life is inevitably attended by a questioning and probing of civic virtue, of civic education, and of the law, the relations between the philosophic and the civic realms are of the utmost danger and delicacy to both parties. The gingerly but sustained exploration of this tension-filled relationship between philosophy and law may be said to be the very highest theme of classical republicanism and classical political philosophy.

That theme is pursued above all through the depiction and exploration of Socrates and his way of life—the way of life of a man who was *the* citizen-philosopher and *the* educator par excellence. Socrates and the philosophers who followed him became famous for constantly raising and pursuing, in dialogues or conversations with the young, questions about morality and happiness: What is virtue? Can it be taught? How? What is a statesman? What is a friend? Who or what is worthy of passionate love? In other words, the moral and political prudence that the classical political philosophers distilled and offered to statesmen and citizens was a wisdom always infused with new and ever deeper sources of wonder and thought. It is the downplaying or even the absence of this theme—the Socratic life, the friendly tension between the life of action and the life of philosophic inquiry, the uneasy but mutually fruitful relation between theory and practice—that marks the widest departure of the Americans from classical republicanism.

Classical Education Theory and Its Modern Disciple Milton

John Milton's short tract "Of Education" (1644), especially when read in the light of his famous *Areopagitica*, published in the same year, represents the best brief introduction to the modern tradition that attempted to carry on classical republican educational theory in the English-speaking world. Moreover, Milton's political thought as a whole stands as a high point in the endeavor to combine classical republicanism with the Puritan faith. His work therefore helps illuminate both the affinities and the tensions between the classical and the Protestant Christian outlook, at its most astute, while also preparing us to ap-

preciate the sharp break Locke managed to effect with both classical and Puritan educational ideas. Milton's educational writings were well known and influential in America.[18]

But to understand Milton, and the Americans he influenced, we need to share with him and them, in some small degree at least, the experience of reading the most vivid classical accounts of education as found above all in Xenophon as well as Plato. Xenophon figures large in Milton's various recommended curricula, and Xenophon's influence as well as his reputation were infinitely higher in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than they are today. If we wish to see classical republican educational theory from the eighteenth century perspective, we do well to start by looking at Xenophon.[19]

Xenophon presents his famous account of the best sort of republican public education through his depiction, in the second chapter of *The Education of Cyrus*, of the Old Persian civic order that the "hero" Cyrus corrupted and transformed. The leitmotif is struck at the outset, when Xenophon draws a contrast between the Old Persian *polis* and most Greek cities (except Sparta):

> Most cities permit everyone to train his own children just as he will, and the o[illegible] people themselves to live as they please; and then they command them not to steal and not to rob, not to break into homes, not to strike one they have no right to strike, not to commit adultery, not to disobey a magistrate, and so forth. And if someone transgresses in any of these respects, they levy punishment. The Persian laws, however, anticipating, take care that from the first their citizens shall not be of such a character as ever to be inclined toward a wicked or shameful deed.
>
> At the center of the city, Xenophon goes on to explain, is located what is called "the Square of Liberty." There are found the government buildings, where public affairs are handled, and there is where education takes place. All commerce is prohibited from this square, and no one who engages in business or merchandising can be a citizen or participate in government. The need for trade, bartering, and so forth is kept to a minimum by severe sumptuary laws forbidding all luxury or conspicuous consumption and by legislation placing strict ceilings on the amount of property individuals may own. All the male citizens and the boys who are being educated to be future citizens must leave their farms (which are worked by tenants) and appear at the Square of Liberty every morning at dawn, to spend the entire day in public fellowship and the performance of political or educational duties.[20]
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> The youngest boys, Xenophon says, "go to school and spend their time learning justice; and they say that they go there for this purpose, just as among us they say boys go to school to learn to read and write." The boys are constantly

engaged in prosecuting and defending one another in miniature trials, learning the laws and the meaning of investigation, law enforcement, prosecutorial and defense rhetoric, and civic responsibility. There are no lawyers or distinct police force or prosecutor's office in such a republic. At the same time, the boys are habituated, through constant trials and tests, to strict obedience to lawful rulers and to stoic self-control regarding food and drink, physical endurance, and the mastery of anger. Their food in particular is of the utmost austerity and equality.

> They bring from home bread for their nourishment, watercress for a relish, and, for drink, when they need it, a cup for drawing water from the river. . . . and if you think their meals are not enjoyable, when all they get is bread with watercress, or that their drinking is not enjoyable, when they drink just water, think back to how sweet barley bread and wheat bread taste when you are famished, and how sweet it is to drink water when you are parched.[22]

As they get older, the boys are introduced to weapons and begin to learn the military skills so necessary for the collective defense of a tiny country whose survival depends on a reputation for hornetlike resistance to foreign domination, and which scorns reliance on a hired or professional army. For ten years, the adolescents spend not only all their days but all their nights camping around the public square with their weapons. They have the responsibility (under adult supervision) for guarding as well as policing the country, night and day. Every week or so, half the population of adolescents and mature citizens under fifty go out on great public hunts led by the king. These hunts are in fact the equivalent of military maneuvers and are meant to test and develop physical courage, stamina, and shrewdness. In the stress of action against ferocious beasts, the youths as well as their elders are honed in cooperation, leadership, discipline, and rapid, tricky thinking. They thus prepare for the day when, at the age of twenty-five, the young men assume their places among the little band of brothers that takes responsibility for administering and defending the city through constant committee and platoon work.

Milton's design for the public schools he would have established in every city in England proposes a mitigated version of the military discipline of Xenophon. For an hour and a half each day the boys are to be at "exercises," beginning with swordsmanship. In addition to promoting health, strength, endurance, and agility, this will

> inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage, which being tempered with seasonable lectures and precepts to them of true fortitude and patience, will turn into a native and heroic valor, and make them hate the

> cowardice of doing wrong. They must be also practiced in all the locks and grips of wrestling, wherein Englishmen were wont to excel, as need may often be in fight to tug, to grapple, and to close.

At unpredictable occasions in the evening, the students are

> by a sudden alarum or watchword, to be called out to their military motions, under sky or covert, according to the season, as was the Roman wont; first on foot, then, as their age permits, on horseback, to all the art of cavalry; that having in sport, but with much exactness and daily muster, served out the rudiments of their soldiership in all the skill of embattling, marching, encamping, fortifying, besieging, and battering, with all the helps of ancient and modern stratagems, tactics, and warlike maxims, they may as it were out of a long war come forth renowned and perfect commanders in the service of their country.[23]

Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* in no way diminish Xenophon's emphasis on the need for training in law, self-control, gymnastics, and military skill; if anything, Plato lays greater stress on wrestling and the rough-and-tumble arts of manly self-defense. But Plato adds also a complementary accent on music education. "Music" means here all those arts presided over by the goddesses called the Muses: poetry, choral performance, dance, and the study of literature and history. With the pleasing adornment of rhythm, harmony, poetic metaphor, and dramatic vivacity, the models of virtuous men and virtuous behavior become more compelling and more attractive. The arts induce a grace, delicacy, and sensitivity that soften the otherwise overly harsh tendencies of the stern gymnastic and military civic education. In the words of Milton, religious, martial, and political songs, "if wise men and prophets be not extremely out, have a great power over dispositions and manners, to smooth and make them gentle from rustic harshness and distempered passions."[24]

Moreover, as the young people mature, thought-provoking problems can be cautiously introduced by way of poems and plays and histories that depict virtuous men struggling against evil or confronted by perplexing moral and political choices; thus practical wisdom, together with pleasure and grace, may insensibly come to adorn, deepen, and elevate the habitual attachment to the civic virtues. Milton has his students' course of studies commence with "some easy and delightful book of education," of which "the Greeks have store, as Cebes, Plutarch, and other Socratic discourses." But his curriculum culminates (after the students have learned to read ancient Greek) in the "Attic tragedies of stateliest and most regal argument, with all the famous political orations," which, "if they were not only read but some of them got by memory and solemnly pronounced

with right accent and grace, as might be taught, would endue them even with the spirit and vigor of Demosthenes or Cicero, Euripides or Sophocles." Then, "lastly, will be the time to read with them" what the ancient philosophers have written about the science of language, to the point where "Logic" will

> open her contracted palm into a graceful and ornate rhetoric taught out of the rule of Plato, Aristotle, Phalerus, Cicero, Hermogenes, Longinus. To which poetry would be made subsequent, or indeed rather precedent, as being less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous, and passionate. I mean not here the prosody of a verse, . . . but that sublime art which in Aristotle's poetics, in Horace, . . . teaches what the laws of a true epic poem, what of a dramatic, what of a lyric. . . . This would make them soon perceive what despicable creatures our common rhymers and play-writers be, and show them what religious, what glorious and magnificent use might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things. From hence, and not till now, will be the right season of forming them to be able writers and composers in every excellent matter, when they shall be thus fraught with an universal insight into things.[25]

At the heart of the music Plato and Milton have in mind is the civic piety that inspired the poets and now inspires their readers. In Plato's best city, frequent festivals of the gods become the occasion for constant communal artistic endeavors, and the gods themselves become, in some measure, models for as well as stern enforcers of the virtuous life. Moreover, "theology," or the encouragement of some discussion of the nature of the gods, may be the guise in which philosophy and the philosophic virtues can to some extent safely insinuate themselves into the otherwise rather closed public life of a virtuous city such as Plato envisages. For according to Plato the virtuous city is necessarily a closed rather than an open society. Plato argues that all theological discussion and all work of the artists must be subject to very strict censorship on the part of the communal authorities. The enormous educational responsibility assigned to the poets and artists, and the very grave consequences of their work in a society where the moral qualities of the future citizens depend on the passionate tastes shaped by the communal dedication to the arts, make it necessary that the poets work hand in hand with, and under the watchful eye of, the elected older supervisors of education and morals.

Yet to say that Platonic educational philosophy endorses censorship is to say too little and at the same time too much. It is more accurate to observe that Plato's discussion of the central educative role of poetry, of literature, and of the fine arts generally is inseparable from his famous condemnation of the greatest actual poets for their failure to live up to their educative responsibilities. This denunci-

ation, culminating in the banishment of the poets from the best regime, is justly shocking to the sensibilities of every serious first-time reader of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Yet upon further reflection, one cannot help but become aware of the extraordinarily paradoxical and hence thought-provoking character of Plato's condemnation of the poets. Certainly Milton, at any rate, insists that precisely Plato's discussions of censorship reveal clearly that Plato never seriously intended either the *Republic* or the *Laws* to be prescriptions for actual cities. According to Milton, Plato was depicting in those works the absurd lengths to which one would have to go to create a society so morally pure as to entail the censorship of writings through licensing, or prior restraint on publication. Plato was after all himself a poet, who as composer of "wanton dialogues" transgressed simultaneously the laws of poetry he had the characters in those dialogues propose.

> That Plato meant this law peculiarly to that commonwealth which he had imagined, and to no other, is evident. Why was he not else a lawgiver to himself, but a transgressor, and to be expelled by his own magistrates, both for the wanton epigrams and dialogues which he made, and his perpetual reading of Sophron Mimus and Aristophanes . . . he knew this licensing of poems had reference and dependence to many other provisoes there set down in his fancied republic, which in this world could have no place; and so neither he himself, nor any magistrate or city, ever imitated that course.[26]

Milton's *Areopagitica*, the work in which this remarkable suggestion as to how to read Plato appears, is the most famous plea for freedom of the press ever written, but it is a kind of appeal profoundly unfamiliar to us nowadays. For it is a classical republican plea, an oration (in imitation of Isocrates) written by a very great poet deeply indebted to Plato and Aristotle, as well as to the Bible, for his understanding of poetry and of education through poetry. Milton does not rest his case on an appeal to natural rights, and he certainly does not advocate artistic "self-expression" or even "freedom of speech." The argument is rooted in a keen awareness of the poet's civic duties and educative responsibilities and of the consequent need for limits on what a poet or any writer can or ought to say. The question for Milton is how to set and police those limits in the republican community: "I deny not but that it is of greatest concernment in the church and commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how books demean themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors: for books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are."[27]

In the rare worst cases—of libel, blasphemy, and obscenity—books may be

banned and their authors punished, but only after publication and hence scrutiny by the public. For this is the core of a truly civic censorship, as taught by Plato when his books are read with the proper care.

> Those unwritten or at least unconstraining laws of virtuous education, religious and civil nurture, which Plato there mentions as the bonds and ligaments of the commonwealth, the pillars and sustainers of every written statute; these they be which will bear chief sway in such matters as these, when all licensing will be easily eluded. Impunity and remissness, for certain, are the bane of a commonwealth; but here the great art lies, to discern in what the law is to bid restraint and punishment, and in what things persuasion only is to work.[28]

Persuasion, counterargument, honor, and dishonor are the proper communal rewards and punishments for all works that appear to advocate falsehood or to challenge on insufficient grounds the accepted principles of politics and religion: so long as they contain no libel, blasphemy, or outright wickedness, the books should be free to enter the lists in the struggle to find and express the truth.

Milton does indeed criticize Plato for having published, in the guise of an account of the "best city," his fantastic vision of what would be required to create a totally—and hence impossibly—pure society. These speculations "they who otherwise admire him wish had been rather buried and excused in the genial cups of an Academic night sitting," for they are written in such a way as too much tempts the reader to take them seriously, as Plato's actual proposals or wishes. In Milton's judgment, Plato was not statesmanlike enough in his self-censorship.[29]

But even if we grant Milton's remarkable interpretation, with its claim that Plato in his *Republic* sought to delineate the limits of politics rather than to lay down its proper goals, we may still wonder whether Plato meant to offer exactly the teaching on censorship and education through books, that Milton here offers. Milton differs from Plato not only in his concern to publish only what serves a constructive civic purpose but also in the confidence with which he trusts that truth will ultimately grow stronger and emerge more clearly in the public contest of words and books; for Milton writes in the light of what he believes is the dawn of a magnificent English "reformation of the reformation," under God's providence. At least in the context in which he publishes his oration (England in 1644), Milton's faith may allow him greater confidence than Plato could afford that the religious and moral truth discerned by the philosopher is on the road to triumph in the world, and neither threatens the foundations of existing society nor needs to be protected and nurtured as something fragile.

When one looks a bit more closely at Plato's works, provoked and guided by Milton's startling interpretative suggestions, one observes that the poet Plato has his chief characters condemn the poets on two different and rather contradictory grounds. In the second book of the *Laws*, the "Athenian Stranger" criticizes the poets for being insufficiently moralistic or civic-spirited—for speaking too frankly and thus failing to write poetry whose "noble lies" or myths strengthen the attachment of citizens, and especially young citizens, to the laws and ethos of the political community. In book 2 of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates reiterate this verdict—although Socrates adds the reflection that the immoral stories about the gods are perhaps necessarily false, given the premise that the gods must be wholly good. But in the last book of the *Republic*, Socrates bans the poets because of their lack of concern for education in the truth, or nature, especially the nature of the human soul, as opposed to convention and lawful or conventional beliefs about the soul. The poets' failure as educators is now said to be most evident in their excessive docility before what is respectable according to the traditional laws or conventions. For the poets to make good on their claim to be educators, they would have to succeed in revolutionizing society with new laws more in accord with nature; or, failing to achieve political reform, they would have to found independent sects of followers whose way of life was more in tune with nature and therefore departed strikingly from what is conventionally respectable in any civil society. In the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger eventually presents a criticism of the narrowness and rigidity of civic or legal language and thought—in the name of the superior flexibility of poetic speech. Poetic speech, the Athenian Stranger observes, can truly educate because in the same speech the poet can say contradictory things, thus addressing different messages adapted to the radically different types of people in his audience.[30]

The paradoxical character of the Platonic criticism of the poets may indicate that Plato's preeminent objective is to teach the enormous difficulty (perhaps the impossibility, in the strict sense) of civic education. Civic education at its intellectual peak is education in thinking, guided by books—above all, the books of great poets (and, following Milton, of great historians and orators). Those books have a threefold and tension-ridden educational goal. They seek in the first place to edify and inspire loyal, self-sacrificing, and reliable citizens. Next, they attempt to instill prudence, or shrewd and versatile practical wisdom, in leaders who emerge out of the decent and reliable citizens. To this end, good books compel the reader to witness and share vicariously some of the burden of agonizing deliberations over fundamental questions of public policy. Finally, and as a sort of sequel to the preceding, good books try to awaken in some individuals, including at least some of the leadership, a more or less profound awareness of the essential limitations on what may be expected from all political life or

action. Among the most important effects of such an awareness of limitations is the dissolving or at any rate diminution of false hopes and fears that may otherwise distort a clear-eyed view of the potentialities and pitfalls of political existence. The roots of these limitations are to be found in the seemingly insuperable conflicts or contradictions that define human existence—for example, the tension between private erotic or familial love and public civic duty; or the tension between the happiness of the individual and the good of the community, to which the individual is duty-bound on occasion to sacrifice his or her happiness; or the tension between societies like Sparta that stress the communal nature of humanity and societies like Athens that give much greater scope or encouragement to the competitive ambitions of individuals.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which Americans were alive to the complexities, tensions, and paradoxes of the authentic classical republican educational legacy. As has been noted, the Americans praised most often the grace and style of classical literature. They also lauded the moral edification conveyed by the heroic examples contained in the classical histories; and they spoke, with more qualified praise, of the practical wisdom or political science the historians could offer—especially through their stirring portrayals of the evils of despotism and the attractions of liberty. Very rarely, however, does one find an American putting stress on students' vicarious participation in classical political debate, or the moderation of political hopes and dreams that is inculcated through a study of the most thoughtful—and most austere (one is tempted to say most tragic)—of the classical historians. Milton has his educational curriculum culminate in a thorough study and assimilation of the "Attic tragedies of stateliest and most regal argument"; in the educational writings of the American Framers, there will be found little reference to ancient tragedy.[31]

The Leading Eighteenth-Century Academic Representative of Ancient Education

To get a better sense of how the Founding generation may have viewed, or been taught to view, the challenge posed by classical educational thought, it is useful to cast a glance at the most authoritative contemporary academic interpreter of the classical educational texts—the famous Sorbonne professor of ancient history, Charles Rollin, who completed his influential treatise on education in 1731.[32] Rollin's treatise was immediately translated into English, went through numerous English editions, and was referred to frequently by the colonists. Benjamin Franklin, in particular, cites "the much admired Mons. Rollin" in his 1749 *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania.*[33]

As a faithful Roman Catholic, a loyal subject of the French monarchy, and a favorite of Jacobites, Rollin could hardly champion the rebirth of classical republicanism; but he could insist on the supreme value of the academic study of the classics, and, with an eye to his favorite author, Xenophon, he could assert the continuing relevance of classical political and educational theory even under monarchic systems of government. In this respect, Rollin may be said to have carried on the scholastic tradition, though under the shadow of, and to some extent in opposition to, the increasingly dominant current of the Enlightenment.

In making the case for classical education, Rollin takes his cue from the preamble to the educational legislation of Henry IV. Following that great king, he says not a word about enlightenment or the rights of man but instead stresses the education of the young in "their inviolable duties to God, their parents, and their country, with the respect and obedience which they owe to Kings and Magistrates." But lest obedience be confused with slavery, Rollin turns immediately to what he calls "the first object of instruction": "forming the mind." The exemplar of a well-formed mind is that possessed by Roman statesmen like Aemilius and his son Scipio, who relied on Xenophon for their wisdom in the ways of the world. For the education of men of practical affairs, there is a unique value in the study of historians like

> Caesar, Polybius, Xenophon, and Thucydides, who by their lively descriptions carry the reader into the field of battle. . . . The same may be said of negotiations, magistracies, offices of civil jurisdiction, commissions, in a word, of all the employments which oblige us either to speak in publick or in private, to write, or give an account of our administration, to manage others, gain them over, or persuade them. And what employment is there, where almost all these things are not necessary?

Even more important than the forming of the mind for Rollin is the forming of the character that underlies the mind. Here Rollin commends the classical authors for avoiding preaching, precepts, or moralizing and instead employing vivid example accompanied by laconic or even allusive lessons, sometimes communicated by pregnant silences.

> Nothing is more apt to inspire sentiments of virtue, and to divert from vice, than the conversation of men of worth, as it makes an impression by degrees, and sinks deep into the heart. The seeing and hearing them often will serve instead of precepts, and their very presence, tho' they say nothing, speaks and instructs. And this advantage is chiefly to be drawn from the reading of authors. It forms a kind of relation between us and the great-

> est men of antiquity. We converse with them; we travel with them; we live with them; we hear them discourse, and are witnesses of their actions; we enter insensibly into their principles and opinions. . . . When I talk thus, it is not that I think moral reflections should be largely insisted on. If we would make an impression, our precepts should be short and lively, and pointed as a needle. . . . 'Tis with these reflections, says Seneca, as with seed, which is small in itself, but if cast into a well-prepared soil, unfolds by degrees, till at last it insensibly grows to a prodigious increase. Thus the precepts we speak of are oft but a word, or a short reflection, but this word and reflection, which in a moment shall seem lost and gone, will produce their effect in due time.[34]

Though Rollin speaks with force and some penetration about the peculiarly thought-provoking manner in which the classical texts convey their lessons in statecraft, his comprehension of the substance of the classical teaching (and especially of the higher, more problematic, reaches of classical educational thought) is limited. Rollin tends to assume that the advent of the Catholic faith has resolved whatever fundamental difficulties may be found in the classical accounts concerning the relation between philosophy and piety or between poetry and morality, and that what is best in classical philosophy, poetry, and education anticipates and is completed by that faith. Yet despite this easygoingness, Rollin does afford his readers at least an echo, however faint and tremulous, of certain key debates or questions raised in the original classical texts on education.

Rollin, we have said, is a partisan of the ancients, understood to be subordinate to the revealed truths of the Roman Catholic tradition. Even so, Rollin cannot help but acknowledge that the educational treatise of John Locke has offered to all humanity an unprecedented fund of wisdom regarding the methods (though not the ultimate goals) of education. Rollin concedes that no one before Locke so closely observed and so accurately described the peculiar nature of the young. Rollin therefore does not hesitate to transcribe long sections of Locke's treatise, even while voicing unmistakably his reservations as to the intention that guides Locke, as well as his reservations about Locke's attitude toward study of the classics.[35] All the more impressive, given these reservations, is Rollin's bow to Locke, a bow which testifies to the overwhelming influence, the striking innovation, and the deep penetration of Locke's treatise on education. For it is indeed the case that when we turn from the classics celebrated by Rollin to the educational reflections of John Locke, we find ourselves, as it were, in a different world.