

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



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April 8-9

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Young Philosophers

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“Life has never been normal,” wrote C. S. Lewis in an address to students at the outset of World War II. If we are waiting for a better time to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty, we may never get started. In the Young Philosophers series, Gutenberg College opens its (virtual) doors to high-school-age participants for thoughtful online discussion of important ideas. Join the conversation!

March 3: What Is Freedom?

May 12: What Is Language?



Learning as an Act of Will

Eliot Grasso

This article is adapted from a paper presented at Gutenberg’s Education Conference, The Art of Learning, on September 11, 2021.

Eliot Grasso is the vice president and a tutor at Gutenberg College. He holds an M.A. in ethnomusicology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Oregon.

In the predominant view of education, the student’s primary job is to consume and store information, much like a computer. But such a view misses the true nature of learning. Learning is a dynamic process in which a student, like an apprentice, slowly builds skills and knowledge, constantly self-correcting toward mastery and a sound worldview. A key component of the process—frequently overlooked in modern education—is a student’s moral orientation toward truth. The mainstream view that determines the goals and methods of learning is somehow insufficient. Something about this approach to learning is not quite right.

Assumptions of the Predominant View

All approaches to anything have underlying assumptions, that is, ideas about what is true and what should be done in light of that truth. Different views are often defined and distinguished by their assumptions. The assumptions underlying the predominant view of education can differ from the assumptions underlying the biblical view. When those of us who hold a biblical worldview observe that the predominant view of education frequently overlooks a student’s moral orientation toward truth, we may ask, “Why on earth would an educational system overlook one’s moral orientation toward truth?” Three assumptions contribute to an answer: The first relates to the nature of human beings, the second to the nature of knowing, and the third to what can be known.

Assumption 1: Man Is Morally Neutral

The predominant view of education holds that human beings are morally neutral, like a computer. The predominant view overlooks man’s moral orientation because from this perspective, man *has no moral orientation*. Man is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. At birth, man is a blank drive whose moral program is coded into him through the assembly-line process of education.

Underlying this framework is the belief that man’s goodness or badness is ultimately caused by whatever takes place in his environment. This view of man’s moral neutrality has been around a long time. If you asked Aristotle 2,400 years ago, “How does one acquire moral virtue?” he would likely give an answer similar to the one he gave in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. David Ross, *Oxford World’s Classics*, 23): “...legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark...” The idea here is this: if you want a good society, you need good citizens. You can make citizens good by prescription. If you give citizens a particular education, they will become good at being citizens. After all, how could they become anything else? If you were to ask Aristotle why people do bad things, he would say that people do bad things only because they are ignorant. In this view, when you replace ignorance with knowledge, you can transform badness into goodness—a belief shared by the predominant view of education.

If it is true that people do bad things only because they are ignorant, then education is the key to goodness. When we replace ignorance with knowledge, we will become

more virtuous people. Without education, we are doomed to do bad while mistakenly believing that we are doing good. This line of thinking assumes that human beings are morally neutral.

Assumption 2: Knowing Is a Passive Activity

The second assumption of the predominant view of education relates to the nature of knowing. The study of what and how people know—*epistemology*—has a long and interesting history. As you might expect, not everyone agrees about what we can know or how it is that we can know it. I will not attempt to give an overview of this long and lively discussion. Rather, I will focus on one view of knowledge—*empiricism*—that is still dominant today, especially in fields of study like the biological sciences. If you are an empiricist, then you think that the only way humans can know anything is through the senses. An investigation of empiricism will uncover the second critical assumption held in the predominant view of education: knowing is a passive activity.

Perhaps one of the most influential advocates of empiricism was the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume who thought that the only way we can know things is through sense experience. This was quite a break from earlier approaches to knowing. For example, in the Middle Ages, people believed that your mind could know things that had nothing to do with your senses—for example, you came to know God not by exploring the natural world but by prayerful contemplation. By contrast, for Hume, you need to see, smell, taste, touch, or hear something yourself to know it. For Hume, the mind is not active in knowing—rather, it is passive.

So how did this empiricism work in Hume’s philosophy? Imagine that your mind is a big lump of red clay. You are outside for a walk on a cool autumn day. You see a bird sitting on a branch. If you asked Hume how your mind knows the bird is there, he would likely say that the impact of the visual image of that bird on your mind is like taking your thumb and pressing it deep into that big, red lump of clay. After you press your thumb into the clay, the clay doesn’t do anything with the thumbprint—it just sits there. For Hume, the clay is your mind. Seeing the bird is your thumb pressing into it. This is what it means to know something as an empiricist: sense experience alone causes you to know things. As such, your mind does not filter or interpret any of your sense experience. All the knowledge you have enters your mind as pure, raw-data—like impressions on a lump of clay.

Hume’s idea of passive knowing might sound implausible. How could someone possibly think that our experiences of the world would be so lifeless in a living mind? But if you’ve ever heard of an “objective fact,” then you’ve encountered Hume’s view alive and well. The word “fact” comes from the Latin verb *factito* meaning “to make” or “to do.” Facts are bits of information that are “done to you,” like a thumb making a mark on a lump of clay. When it comes to something like a fact, the empiricist assumes that no interpretation is involved. Facts are raw data, uninterpreted and unfiltered. When you know a fact, you know something clear, distinct, and certain—a piece of information that is totally independent of human interpretation and judgment. A fact is a piece of human knowledge with the humanity stripped away.

Now, some of you may be wondering: Where is he going with this? Is he saying there isn’t objective reality? Is he saying that my moral bearing will prevent me from knowing the truth? No, I am not implying any of those things, and the rest of my talk should allay those fears. But let me just say here that I think an independent, truly knowable reality exists beyond myself; that God designed us to know what is true; and if God wants to make Himself known to us, we can know Him.

I think we can rely on our senses to help us accurately know the world around us—I just think there is a lot more to knowing than sense perception. My point here is that the predominant view of education assumes passive knowing (described in Hume) and moral neutrality.

Why might someone accept these assumptions? They might because of the implicit potential for human progress. If “knowing” simply amounts to passive data collection, and the material world is finite, then we move increasingly and inexorably toward total knowledge of the material world. Once we have total knowledge of the material world,

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Alumni Spotlight: Erik & Kelly Beck Class of 2006

by Kelly Beck

Kelly Beck was a member of Gutenberg’s board of governors from 2016 to 2020. She and her husband, Erik, have two children, Sophia (7) and Lincoln (3).

My husband, Erik, and I graduated from Gutenberg College in 2006. We were in the same class and married during spring break of our senior year. The years since then have been shaped by many ups and downs but have carried with them the indelible influence of the time we spent living, studying, and stressing in that big brick house at 1883 University Street. That community, which coupled mutual support with open-minded inquiry, was a watershed for both Erik and me. In all our endeavors since, we’ve sought to create the same ethos we experienced there and translate it into our own context.

We’ve experienced Gutenberg’s influence most profoundly in our marriage. We encountered several unexpected hardships early on that served to illuminate how young, inexperienced, and lost we were just starting out in our lives together. Those days were difficult, and we ultimately found ourselves landing in different places regarding our thoughts on God and the practice of our faith. As we walked through these confusing times, trying to sort out all the things we thought we’d figured out, we discovered several ways Gutenberg’s influence was coming to bear. After four years of school, the space and honor shown of another’s process—modeled by the tu-

tors and expected of us in the classroom day in and day out—felt second nature to us. As Erik and I hashed through the difficult questions in life, we were already practiced in trying to hear one another’s meaning and believed that working it out together—even when it meant a lot of time and tension—would be better in the long run than going it alone. Even



if we ultimately drew different conclusions from one another, we had a belief in the dignity and complexity of the other, which meant that unity and commitment could mean something deeper than agreement. At Gutenberg, we had learned the skill of asking deep questions of life-altering importance and living with the tension of not having immediate answers. Out of the classroom, when hardship hit and the stakes were high, believing there are solutions to problems was a life-saving notion—even when the journey to apprehend them is a difficult, sometimes complicated one. Living as a young married couple through the seemingly irreconcilable tensions of life, we found this idea sustaining.

Since those days, we have moved to Southern California and have also seen Gutenberg’s influence vocationally. I began a career in education, both in

teaching and in the nonprofit world. After attending law school, Erik began a career as an attorney in Orange County. However, we both eventually found ourselves pulled to the classroom when, through a series of amazing events, we were offered positions as teachers to help build a new Classical Humanities program into an existing charter school in San Diego, where we are currently working and living. The executive director of our organization, though proud of the school’s prestigious reputation, grew concerned about the humanity and wisdom of the students graduating from our schools. To address this, he sought to develop a Gutenberg-style Great Books program within the school. Given the tall order of helping to change a culture, this work has been difficult but also deeply rewarding. All the way along, our experience of community at Gutenberg College and the skills we learned there have been a help in guiding our work.

Erik is teaching Humanities to high schoolers while writing a new integrated humanities curriculum for grades six through twelve. In addition to teaching Humanities to 7th and 8th graders, I am putting my hand to teacher training and parent education. As we engage in this important work, we have benefited from our experience at Gutenberg, in which true humanity is sought out and elevated.

Gutenberg College—in size, experience, and approach to education—is unique in today’s education world. I remember the most growth happening outside of the classroom—hashing through important and difficult ideas over coffee with a tutor or dinner with friends. I am now integrating this unique educational experience in my current context in the same way—over coffee with my colleagues, over lunch with students, and by invit-



ing parents into my classroom to watch 7th graders hash through important and difficult ideas. These things bring out the humanity of the process and implicitly communicate that eating, drinking, talking, dwelling, and learning together are all inextricably linked.

Wading through the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated this. The pandemic—with its lengthy school closures, Zoom classes, and relative chaos—had a negative effect on our students. Never before in the classroom had we experienced the enormity of disconnectedness, sense of loss, emotional stagnation, and crisis-level mental health issues in our students. In March 2020, when the pandemic first hit and we suddenly had to shut down our school for what ended up being eighteen months, teachers were required to refigure everything at the last minute to attempt to educate students online. We had to write three versions of our lesson plans—one for school, one for a hybrid remote option, and one for a completely remote option—simply because we had no idea what new information or mandates the next day would bring. Our teachers, students, and families were frightened, and tensions were high. My training gave me an ability to problem solve, to think critically, and to adapt to what human needs were required. Students were needing quite



a bit more than academics. They were needing to feel connected to something bigger than themselves. I am eternally grateful to the people at Gutenberg for giving me the experience that I am now attempting to translate into the context of this generation. I find the values to

be just as timeless—and perhaps more needed than ever before.



Learning as an Act of Will

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then we can predict and ultimately control all of nature. Once we have total control, we will have everything we need to enjoy life.

In line with this, to be morally neutral is to have great potential, which makes the project of education tremendously significant. If the role of education is to train someone into a morally good condition, then one becomes good by having the right education. If everyone gets the right education, then everyone will become good—man shall only *will* what he is taught to *will*. If everyone wills good, then society, too, shall become good. This assumption, then, makes education such an important piece on the sociological chessboard. Education is the primary tool used to shape people into the sort of people who will be good for society and, thus, make society good.

Assumption 3: The Material World Is All There Is to Know

The first two assumptions of the prominent view of education work particularly well together if we add a third: the only thing there is to know about is the material world. If all of reality is only matter in motion, if chemistry and physics can fully account for the totality of what is real, then man's neutrality and man's passive knowing fit comfortably with this third assumption. If these assumptions are the right ones, then quite a hopeful long-term picture begins to emerge for the naturalist, the materialist, and the humanist. As we will see, however, the Bible presents quite a different picture of man's moral standing and of man's ability to know.

Assumptions of a Biblical Worldview

As I stated earlier, all ideas have underlying assumptions. We have looked at three that underlie the predominant view of education. Now, let's contrast those assumptions with those that undergird the biblical worldview. Let us think together about the biblical connection between knowing and willing, since knowing and willing are essential aspects of learning. Considering this connection can help us better understand the responsibilities of both students and teachers.

Assumption 1: Man Is Not Morally Neutral

The biblical worldview holds different assumptions about man's nature than the predominant view of education. Unlike Aristotle, the Bible claims that human beings are *not* morally neutral. Rather, we are morally skewed—we are all sinners. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. To be a sinner is not to be morally neutral. To be a sinner is to be morally skewed: to be capable of—and even inclined to—sin. To be inclined to sin is to want to do things that are opposed to the things that God would have us do. Furthermore, human beings are not made sinners by bad education or corrupt culture. Sinning, unfortunately, is something that all of us do because all of us are sinners—we are rebellious at heart.

Now, some of you may be thinking that education plays an important role in our moral lives. I agree that education *does* play a formative role in what we practice and how we practice. However, I would propose that it might take a lot more than education to morally straighten a corrupt person, especially one who does not want to be straightened out. More than education makes up one's moral framework, despite the crucial role that education plays in our decisions.

Assumption 2: Knowing and Learning Are Acts of Will

The biblical view of how man knows is also different from the predominant view. The Bible makes it clear that to know God requires a profound act of the human will—something active, not passive. God is holy and good, but to know this requires us to admit that we are not. God is merciful, but to know this requires us to see our need for forgiveness. God's promised kingdom alone satisfies, but to know this requires us to recognize the false promises of this world. To be disciples of Jesus, we must admit that we are ignorant and that we need to learn.

What is supremely true of learning about God is true for education in general. Just as knowing is an act of will, learning, too, is an act of will, and every student must make the choice to learn.

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Learning as an Act of Will Continued from page 5

We are already familiar with the idea that the Bible diagnoses man as a sinner. Let us consider what role the will plays in man's knowing and learning from a biblical perspective.

If you are anything like me, there are times in your relationships when you find yourself caught in spots where you do not know stuff that you are supposed to know. For example, my wife will lovingly tell me when the doctor's appointment is, where the kids are, or how to tuck in the bedspread. I agree that these are things that I should know, but as it often turns out, I do not, in fact, know them. She is trying to teach me about appointments, kids, and bedspreads, but I am a poor student. Despite her attempts to teach me, I am a poor learner and do not know these things.

Why is that? Why is it that her repeated attempts to try to cause me to know something—something important—do not succeed? Why do I fail to know the things that I agree that I am supposed to know? We could point at forgetfulness or misunderstanding or even my bad hearing. I have used all three to excuse my profound ignorance of essential tasks of daily life—to little avail. I suspect something fundamental underlies my ignorance in these situations and that this fundamental something is the *will*. I do not end up knowing things that I do not really want to know. I *should* want to know about appointments, bedspreads, and the rest, but the truth is that sometimes I do not want to know—at least, I do not want to know until it is too late.

I would love to be able to claim this miserable condition as distinctly and idiosyncratically mine and to give it some colorful, medical-sounding name that resembles my own: *Eliotamnesia* or *Hypomentalgrassoplosion*. But I am afraid that if I did so, I would be infringing on territory trod, claimed, and rightly due to many, many other humans.

Let's take a few examples from the Bible to illustrate the connection between knowing and willing, examples where knowing is directly grounded on man's will and his moral orientation toward truth.

In Genesis 2, God creates Adam and Eve and tells them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They disregard His commands and eat the fruit anyway. And the consequences follow.

In Paul's letter to the Romans (1:18-35), Paul speaks of people that by their unrighteousness suppress the truth about God, exchanging it for a lie. Because of this, God's wrath will come because they denied what has been evident since the creation of the world: who God is and what He has made. And the consequences follow.

The biblical view of how a person acquires moral virtue is quite different from the sort of view that Aristotle had in mind. God teaches Adam and Eve what fruit not to eat. He even tells them why. They do it anyway. Paul points out that God teaches man about Himself through the world He has made. And yet, even when God teaches things about Himself through His creation, people still suppress the truth. Is ignorance *really* the problem here? Are they just missing key facts and sound instruction? Is it simply a matter of people not knowing what's right and then haplessly doing wrong as Aristotle would suggest?

Knowledge is not the problem here. People have lots of knowledge. Adam and Eve had knowledge from God's direct instruction, and Paul says that mankind has knowledge of God from the creation and so we are without excuse. If Aristotle and Hume are correct—that we are passive knowers who are morally neutral—then the kind of knowledge people have about God would have to cause them to do good. To *know* good is to *do* good, right? But this seems not to be the case in either Genesis or in Romans—or even today. People know things about God, but it doesn't make them do godly things. In fact, people do just the opposite. Knowledge, then, is not the key to goodness.

If knowledge is not enough to make us good, what else could there be? I would point to the grace of God, which facilitates any truly good thing that we end up doing—regardless of our educational

background. God is putting his law in the minds and writing it on the hearts of his people (Jeremiah 31:33). This work of God is miraculous and fundamental in shaping our will in the right way—a way oriented toward caring about the truth. Such shaping can cause us to *care* about what is good and true; it can cause us to *inquire* about what is good and true. We can even come to *learn* what is good and true. The will, from a biblical view, is not an inert lump of red clay. The will is a significant aspect of man's moral framework. It is with his will that man chooses.

Let us consider an example from the Gospel of Matthew to illustrate the relationship between knowing and willing. Jesus has several run-ins with the Jewish chief priests and Pharisees. To them, Jesus teaches with authority, has gained a following, and is a threat to their power and social status. Furthermore, Jesus is accusing them in public of hypocrisy and ignorance. The chief priests are getting fed up with Jesus, and they are trying to take him down. Matthew 21:23-27 recounts one such incident:

And when he [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (ESV)

The chief priests *seem* like they are trying to learn something—that is, by what authority Jesus is doing what he does. But the chief priests do not end up *learning* the answer to their question. Why is this?

The incident happens in the temple where a crowd is gathered. The chief

priests refuse to say that John's baptism came from heaven for fear of looking like irreverent hypocrites. And they refuse to say that John's baptism came from man for fear of being unpopular with the crowd and risking social danger or physical harm. It seems to me, however, that the chief priests do not learn the answer to their question because *they do not ultimately want to know the answer*; they are not interested in the truth. They only want to hear Jesus *say* by what authority he does what he does so that they can accuse him and condemn him. I am convinced that even if Jesus had answered them—that he does what he does by the authority of God—the chief priests still would not want to believe the truth. As a result, the chief priests receive no answer and learn nothing because they are not morally oriented toward the truth. The corrupt and crooked state of their *will* prevents them from coming to know the truth.

Implications of a Biblical Worldview for the Art of Learning

We have seen, then, that our moral bearing plays a significant role in what we know and how we know. To know actively is for our minds to make judgments and decisions when we have experiences. Sense experiences activate other mental faculties, but our minds situate our experiences into pre-existing categories and into a moral framework. When we see the bank robbery, we judge it as wrong. When we see the child hug the grandparent, our hearts melt. These meanings are actively applied to sense experience by our active mind. Thus, knowing and learning are no more passive activities than humans are morally neutral beings. Learning and knowing engage man's full array of assumptions, dispositions, notions, concepts, ideas, thoughts, desires, and will. Knowing, far from being mechanical fact-processing, is much more of an art that requires deep reflection and skillful judgment that pulls together pieces that may exist beyond what my senses perceive.

So, what does all this mean for the art of learning? As a learner—a student—I would be wise to recognize that I will not learn what I do not want to learn. If I think I am the smartest person in the room, chances are slim that I will be able

to learn anything from others around me. My pride can rob me of the benefits of learning from all sorts of people. Furthermore, it behooves me to ask myself what I am about. When I step into a scenario, am I ultimately interested in learning anything, or am I more interested in something else? If I am interested in learning something, am I ultimately interested in what is true, and am I interested in being Christ-like as I pursue that truth? Will I yield, forgive, humble myself, and put others first; or will I be a bull in a china shop?

As a teacher—one who has students—the adage “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink” might be a good one to keep near at hand. Students can learn what they are willing to learn, and no teacher can do a student's learning for him. Teachers can remind, encourage, invite, discuss, respond—but a teacher cannot cause students to know something they do not want to know. When students struggle to know, then these can be great opportunities to remind them that they are ultimately in charge of what it is that they will know or not know. A teacher can ask students

what they are about and why. A teacher can humanize and dignify students struggling with their will to learn. Ultimately, a teacher is responsible for loving his or her students enough to engage them in dialogue about such things.

While the predominant view of education is defined by its assumptions about man's moral neutrality and passive knowing, the biblical view presents quite a different and—I think—more realistic view of how human learning takes place. The Bible presents an admittedly grimmer view of what we are like as sinners—an analysis that the predominant view of education rejects—but it also offers great hope in that the ultimate sovereignty over my moral redemption rests in the hands of a God who is both good and loving.

It takes an act of will for me to want to know what is true, and if God is at work in me, then I can trust that He can bring me to the truth. While I am many times a poor student, my great hope and prayer is that the Lord will not give up on teaching me and will continue to guide me toward what is true. 

Congratulations, Juniors!

At the Junior Tea each fall, Gutenberg honors the students who successfully complete all their two-year exams at the end of their sophomore year and awards them a Greek New Testament. Congratulations to these students: (front row) Connor Clark, Andrew Dewberry, Isaiah Hall, Ariana Jones, Zoë Watts, and Ryanna Eyre; (back row) Donovan Snider, Dane Miller, Abigail Margrave, and Will Dowdy.



COLLOQUY WINTER 2022



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ADMISSION for Fall 2022 (Regular Decision)
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RESIDENCE PROGRAM for Fall Housing
gutenberg.edu/student-life/residence-program

Join the Conversation!

Summer Institute 2022 July 28-30: **Stories of Conversion**

Since its beginning, a prominent aspect of Christianity has been the conversion narrative. Sometimes dramatic, sometimes mundane, these accounts tell the stories of how particular individuals committed their lives to Christ. For the 2022 Summer Institute, we will read several of these accounts from throughout history, and we will think about how these stories of particular people living in contexts that differ from our own might nevertheless impact our thinking now. Join us for discussions, talks, and food, as we contemplate together these stories of conversion.

gutenberg.edu/si

The Art of Learning Conference September 8-10: **Learning for Life**

Fundamentally, educating is the passing on of knowledge and values from one generation to the next to promote living wisely and well. As with all communication, however, the “how” of what we say impacts the “what.” A good educator is at root a good learner who models patient listening and skilled questioning. This year we will explore the “how” by focusing on the art of discussion, where teachers become fellow learners and, together with students, cultivate a life-long passion for truth and a life well lived.

gutenberg.edu/edcon

Robert Bortins Joins National Advisory Board



Gutenberg is pleased to welcome Robert Bortins, CEO of Classical Conversations, to its National Advisory Board. He brings a wealth of knowledge and experience in the domains of strategic planning and business-model analysis to the board. He joins other leaders in Christian education who share with Gutenberg a vision for encouraging one another toward faith and biblical wisdom and who stand as advocates for and partners with the college at a national level.

Gutenberg Student Art Show March 8 at 7:00 PM

This annual event highlights the art and performance of Gutenberg students and others in the community.

