

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Spring 2023

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Editor Robby Julian

Colloquy team Eliot Grasso, Brian Julian, Chris Swanson

Cover Art Arminas Novakas (Class of 2017)

Other Photography Will Dowdy (Class of 2023), Ryan Ewert, Erin Greco (Class of 2010), Robby Julian, Donovan Snider (Class of 2023)

Layout Robby Julian

Proofreaders Bob Blanchard, Karen Peters (Class of 2012)

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President Chris Swanson, Ph.D.

Vice President Eliot Grasso, Ph.D.

Academic Dean Thomas (Charley) Dewberry, Ph.D.

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The Inadequacy of Virtue

By Brian Julian

Of all the Great Books, Plato's *Republic* is surely one of the greatest. This is not because it gets everything right. Rather, its greatness comes from its scope: it discusses politics, ethics, education, reality, theory of knowledge, and more—and every discussion is thought-provoking.

One of these discussions critiques a strikingly contemporary attitude. Towards the end of the *Republic*, Plato examines the life devoted to freedom—to doing what I want—and he decides that this life is second-to-worst when ranking the possible options. The low rank comes partially from the way the life devoted to freedom so easily slips into the worst life, a life of slavery to desires.

The upstanding advocate of freedom is not trying to become a slave, and he recognizes that some desires should not be acted upon. There are things a person might want to do, but nevertheless he should not do them: murder, steal, harm another, and so on. Plato calls these “unlawful desires,” since they are the sorts of activities that a society prevents via laws, and he sees them as the Achilles’ heel of the lover of freedom. This is because however much a person might try to forbid these actions, if someone bases his life on freedom, he has no real basis for forbidding them. The rule he is trying to maintain is “Do everything you want to, except for those few things that have been deemed unacceptable.” However, since his life is based on freedom, nothing is left to reply when asked, “But if you want to do those things, why not do them?” The lover of freedom has based his life around doing what he wants, so why would he deny that in a few cases? Plato points out that freedom of desires leads logically to tyranny of desires, to the point where one’s desires dictate his actions and there is nothing he will not do. And this life of slavery is the worst sort possible.

Plato offers a way to avoid this outcome. We must base our lives not in freedom but in virtue. Only virtue is strong enough to counteract the inevitable pull of desire. A virtue is a good state of character that has been ingrained into someone. He has been shaped into a good person. If his life is centered around virtue rather than freedom, then if he has a desire to do something wrong, it is enough to remind him that the act is not virtuous. More importantly, his character will have been so trained that it is unlikely he will have such desires in the first place.

Plato’s account of the problem and its solution are quite attractive, especially to a Christian. Contemporary American culture is largely based upon fulfilling one’s desires,

and this can lead to people doing things that are manifestly wrong according to the Bible. It seems wonderful if, instead of this, we could have more virtue—more courage, justice, self-control. *These* qualities are praised by the Bible. Should we, then, join with Plato and advocate for virtue?

I'm asking this because, on the one hand, I would like to know how I should think about ethics as a Christian. Reading the Bible is central to this project, but, in addition, I am helped by comparing other significant positions. (This is why I love teaching the Great Books!) Reading others helps me to recognize new questions I hadn't thought of before, questions that can be brought to bear on how I was previously thinking or on what I had thought the Bible was saying. In this case, virtue has always seemed unproblematic to me, but Plato's enthusiastic endorsement has me reconsidering its merits.

On the other hand, I am asking about the centrality of virtue because I, along with many other Christians, am attracted by much that the Greeks have to offer. The ancient, classical authors avoid many of the pitfalls in the thinking of us moderns, and at times they even offer helpful bridges to cross them. But at the same time, if prioritizing virtue is a Christian way of thinking about ethics—about how to live—then this is saying the classical authors are basically Christian. Given that they lived before Christ and had no idea of Him, it seems problematic to say so.

So, I want to ask whether a Christian should prioritize virtue the way Plato does. But let me refine my question further because Plato says a number of things about virtue, and there are multiple ways that he could be understood to be advocating for it. As I said above, virtue is a state of character. It is a positive trait so etched into my soul that it appears natural—it is a second nature. Given what virtue is, Plato points out two benefits of having such a thing.

First, virtue is a useful glue to make a society cohere and flourish. Virtuous people make good citizens. Plato emphasizes in the *Republic* how, when a city is filled with citizens who are virtuous, the city will not need many laws or lawyers. The people will watch their own behavior to make sure it is what it should be. Second, virtue is useful to each individual because it will make their lives go more smoothly. As explained above, Plato sees virtue as the bulwark that will keep one's desires in check, and a life of succumbing to every desire is not a good one.

Because of these two benefits, Plato sees virtue as the goal in life we are to pursue. Since it makes society better and an individual life smoother—since it leads to flourishing—it is the key to a good life. The *Republic* ends with an exhortation to pursue the central virtue: justice.

If we are persuaded by me, ... we shall always ... practice justice with prudence in every way so that we shall be friends to ourselves and the gods, both while we remain here and when we reap the rewards for it like the victors who go about gathering in the prizes. And so here and in [the afterlife] we shall fare well.¹

Virtue makes a life good, so it is the goal of life.

It is this last piece that I want to question. I would like to propose that despite the benefits of virtue, it is not the goal of the Christian life. Now, I don't mean by this that virtue is bad. I just want to say that virtue is not the central goal that Plato makes it. I am not suggesting that vice is better, as some thinkers have proposed. Nor am I saying that we should never change who we are and instead make our goal unadulterated authenticity, as many students respond when confronted with the idea of virtue. It makes a lot of sense to say that virtue makes my life and my society better. I am simply arguing that a Christian should not emphasize virtue the way Plato did, making it the key to a good life.

In order to see why, it is helpful to look at how Plato thinks we acquire virtue. He begins to educate children by censoring the music they hear. (By "music," he has in mind a broader category than is captured by the English word. Plato's music encompasses all

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¹ *Republic* 621c-d. All Plato quotations are from Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, second ed., Basic Books, 1991.



PENGUIN CLASSICS

G. K. CHESTERTON

The Man Who Was Thursday

Great-Book Review by Tutor Naomi Rinehold

There's a conspiracy afoot! Sunday and his council of anarchists are well on their way to creating havoc in Europe with assassinations, bombings, and other such mischief! But never fear, poet-turned-police-detective Gabriel Syme has infiltrated the council and swears to thwart their nefarious schemes!

Chesterton reveled in a lifelong romance with fairytale and paradox, and his exuberant attitude pervades all of his many works. In 1908, he penned *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, which was hugely popular at the time of its publication and exerted significant influence on subsequent literature. We read this book at Gutenberg partly because of its influence, partly for its exceptional style, and entirely to confront a bewildering duality: a good God with evil in His world.

The novel takes on the problem of evil by relating the fantastical adventures of Gabriel Syme and his pursuit of the mysterious Sunday. Chesterton makes no arguments and arrives at no conclusions. He carefully avoids all the traditional solutions. Instead he paints a darkly terrifying world, full of inexplicable events, rushing unstoppable toward apocalypse. Into this scene, he catapults a man of gargantuan proportions—huge in body but also too huge for his body. When confronted with human suffering, he only replies, "I suffer too!" and we are left to conclude what we will.



Alumni Spotlight: Toby Swanson Class of 2015 by Tutor Eliot Grasso

“What can you do with a B.A. in Liberal Arts?” is a common question I hear from families considering Gutenberg College. The answer, as it turns out, is “many things.” Behind the question is the suspicion that the liberal arts are too general to help a graduate succeed in the marketplace. This (wrong) assumption is often accompanied by its sibling belief that the specialization a student gets through one’s undergraduate major is the best way to ensure job security.

In this instance, the conventional wisdom of our culture has oversimplified things. The question isn’t “Is specialization helpful for a career?” The question is “*At what point in one’s education is specialization helpful for a career?*” Though our culture says, “Specialization earlier and earlier is better and better,” rationality might suggest otherwise. Think about it: if you owned a business, would you want to pay top dollar for a twenty-one-year-old “specialist” right out of school with no work experience? Probably not. Specialization is better far later than the culture suggests. A general education at the undergraduate level followed by post-grad schooling can lay an excellent foundation for career-specific specialization later.

I had the opportunity to witness the gifts of delayed specialization when I began to have lower back problems and sought a chiropractor. When it comes to high quality medical care, patients are well-served by medical staff who know how to ask good questions, see the broader picture, and can explain things with clarity and precision. Naturally, I sought a doctor with a background in the liberal arts who would possess these essential skills. And I found one in Toby Swanson, Doctor of Chiropractic.

After Toby graduated from Gutenberg College in 2015, he pursued more science courses at Bushnell University in Eugene and was then accepted into a Doctor of Chiropractic program at the University of Western States in Portland, from which he graduated in 2022. When I asked him what drew him to chiropractic work, Toby responded, “I had several trusted friends and family members whose pain had been significantly improved by chiropractic care, and I was also drawn to the interpersonal nature of one-on-one patient interaction and treatment. One of the biggest draws, though, was the idea of the sheer mastery of human anatomy that was required. That sounded fascinating to me.”

When asked what sorts of skills are involved in chiropractic work, Toby said, “Quickly and efficiently gathering information and analytical decision-making based on your findings are key to the differential diagnosis process of determining what is wrong with any given patient and whether chiropractic care is the most appropriate treatment. Key skills are definitely attentive, intelligent listening and clear communication—skills that Gutenberg taught me in spades.”

Toby was a student of mine in courses on the philosophy of art. Some students might say that studying art is a waste of time if you’re going into the sciences. Most people see science and art as diametrically opposed: the sciences giving

ironclad certainties arrived at through the use of the scientific method, and the arts rendering squishy, subjective, debatable propositions mired in the imperfections of human judgment.

But as it turns out, true science is an art because true art is methodically rigorous. Excellent medical care is an art that requires practitioners to make high-level value judgments about complex situations involving a huge number of variables. Toby did an incredible job assessing my situation because he understands how to think about history and causality. Based on the patient *history* I gave, he was able to figure out a good course of care that would *cause* me to improve.

Toby wouldn’t be a chiropractor without the knowledge and skills he acquired at chiropractic school. But what in part makes him a great chiropractor (one who saved my back!) are his diagnostic and communications skills sharpened and refined by his efforts in the liberal arts.



Toby married Gutenberg classmate Larissa Weisse in 2015, and the Swansons welcomed their daughter, Aleithea Juniper Swanson, to their family on November 1, 2022.

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the stories, poems, and songs inspired by the muses.) No stories may be told that depict good people in a bad light or the gods in a way that is less than divine. Nor may the children hear stories encouraging them to imitate the bad. The goal of this censorship is to shape the kids to be the right sort of people.

Isn't this why the rearing in music is most sovereign? Because rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them; and they make a man graceful if he is correctly reared, if not, the opposite. . . . And, due to his having the right kinds of dislikes, he would praise the fine things; and, taking pleasure in them and receiving them into his soul, he would be reared on them and become a gentleman. (401d-e)

The correctly shaped person is the one who displays the virtues and recognizes them in other things.

We'll never be musical... before we recognize the forms of moderation, courage, liberality, magnificence, and all their kin... (402b-c)

The person who has had his soul shaped throughout his childhood will have the virtues etched deeply into him, and this will allow him to live a good life. As Plato goes on, however, he clarifies that virtue acquired in this way—via training or habituation—while good, is not the best sort of virtue. That distinction is reserved for virtue arrived at through reason and knowledge—through philosophy. The childhood training is not enough to bring a person to this better virtue, for it is only “participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy” (619c), a situation that Plato criticizes. A large section of the *Republic* is dedicated to the discussion of philosophy, and I cannot examine that discussion here. Suffice it to say that when a person has grasped knowledge via philosophy, when he has grasped with his mind what virtue is and why it is good, then this instills virtue in his soul in a manner even more secure than habit can achieve. He understands for himself why the virtuous life

is the best one, so he will never depart from it.

For Plato, then, virtue is the goal of life and it is acquired by habit or by knowledge. And this picture sounds pretty good. It is hard to criticize the person who says, “I am devoting my life to virtue!” However, when it comes to evaluating Plato’s view, it is worth noting that two key concepts are missing from the account, concepts that are central to Christianity. Plato’s account involves neither sin nor God.

Regarding the first, his account of virtue has no place for sin. If virtue is acquired by habit or through knowledge, then it can be taught. We can make people more virtuous through education. This point is important because if virtue is the goal of life, then being a virtuous person means we have reached the goal. We are what a person should be. We are a good person. And when virtue is the goal, this means that goodness can be taught. But, if goodness is teachable, then sin is either irrelevant or tangential to the discussion. The central idea of Christianity proclaims that something in us is not right—sin—and that the only way for us to be fixed is through Jesus and the cross. But if we can become good people through education, then what we need is schools, not churches.

This is not to say that Plato thinks everyone will end up virtuous. Some people will start learning too late, when bad habits already run deep. Others will simply not be up to the task of the lessons. (Plato is especially insistent that few people have what it takes to be a philosopher.) These impediments, however, are different from Christianity’s view of sin. The cross is not simply for poor students who couldn’t complete their lessons. The Bible says that “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”² So, Plato does not have a grasp of sin if he thinks that *anyone* can reach the goal of life through education.

Secondly, Plato does not require an account of virtue to feature God. A quote

from Plato above mentioned the virtuous person being a friend to the gods, but that concerned the benefits of virtue in the afterlife, not the importance of the gods when it comes to the goal of life. For Christianity, however, God is central. Some of the best evidence for this idea comes from the book of the Bible that can most look like it endorses virtue as the key to a good life: Proverbs. This book is filled with advice for having a more successful life and a thriving community. And I don’t want to downplay this—it is good advice! But the central idea of the book is not to extol industriousness, chastity, or any other virtue. Instead, it repeats over and over that we should *fear the Lord*.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death. (Proverbs 14:27)

The fear of the Lord leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm. (Proverbs 19:23)

The key attribute is not a virtue but a relationship. Proverbs’ vision of the good life depends upon having a heart that properly relates to God. Jesus emphasized the same thing when he gave the greatest commandment.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)

If the goal of life is properly relating to God, then this makes sense of the Christian message regarding sin. None of us relate to God properly on our own, not even if we have instilled into us all of Plato’s virtues. We do not relate properly because we are all by nature hostile to Him. We are all sinners at heart. This is

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² Romans 3:23, emphasis added. Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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a problem we cannot solve on our own and need God to fix. And—amazingly—this is what He does. Through the cross He fixes the relationship, and He works in our hearts to enable us to love and fear Him.

This does not mean that acting well is irrelevant to the Bible. Far from it. The Bible says we should be generous, patient, self-controlled, and so on. But this behavior is not due merely to a love of virtue. We do it because we love God, and since we love God, we will want to live out His character in our own lives. We change our behavior as a result of our changed relationship with God. This makes virtue a secondary thing, however, rather than the goal of life. It flows out of our relationship to God rather than being our ultimate aim.

Virtue is not the goal of a Christian life. The goal is properly relating to God in love, fear, and faith. Because of this,

there are two consequences to keep in mind, two ways that a Christian must remember that Plato is incomplete.

First, Plato places great emphasis on education, but it is not possible to educate someone into the good life. Such a life consists in a relationship between the person and God, not a habit to instill or knowledge to impart. This doesn't mean that education is unimportant! We can train students to avoid practical problems—to not be enslaved to desires—and this will make their lives smoother and their communities richer. Simply having these things does not mean the student has reached the goal of the good life, but it is nonetheless a blessing to provide students with them. Further, even when it comes to the good life, though we cannot bring someone else there ourselves, as teachers we can support, admonish, and provide guidance to students as they decide whether

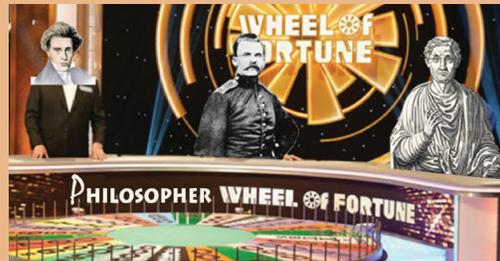
to embark on their own relationship with God.

Second, and most importantly, we need to remember that pursuing virtue as the goal of life, as Plato and many other classical authors do, is not a Christian view. Virtue is not the solution to your deepest problems. Plato was a brilliant thinker, and I highly recommend reading the *Republic*, but as I said at the beginning, he doesn't get everything right. So don't center your life around a love of virtue. Instead, seek the truly good life and love God. 

Brian Julian is a tutor at Gutenberg College, as well as an alumnus. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston University. He writes (and cartoons) at thinkinginthelight.com, where he aims to make philosophical ideas accessible to a general audience.

Life at Gutenberg: The President's Dinner

The annual President's Dinner lightens the mood during the dark winter months. In March, the entire school enjoyed a meal together, and the students presented humorous skits around the theme of Game Shows.



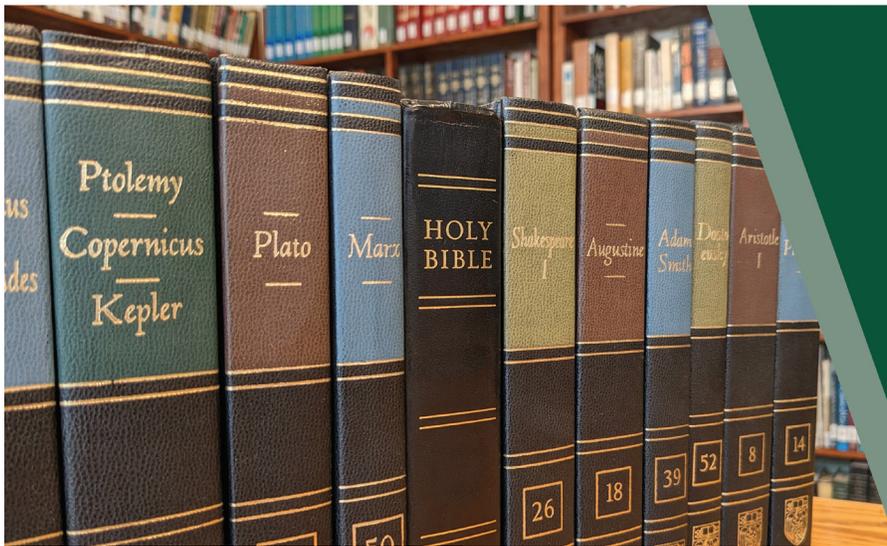
The philosophers above: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Boethius



The Gutenberg Podcast brings the complex world of ideas to a broader audience. Every other week, Gutenberg alumnus and host Gil Greco and a Gutenberg-tutor “guest” explore the Great Books from a Christian perspective, recognizing their complexity in the light of competing views.

You can find this free podcast on these streaming services: Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, Audible, Google Podcasts, Radio Republic, Spotify, and Stitcher.





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Faith and Learning

EDUCATION CONFERENCE 2023
AUGUST 11 & 12
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In the last few centuries, the intellectual world has slowly but steadily abandoned Christianity, offering alternate secular perspectives to life's most important questions. As a result, Christian educators have become suspicious of "academia" and often seek to protect children from secular learning. In this conference, we will explore the dual goals of pursuing learning and promoting faith. How do we foster faith, encourage an interest in truth, model confidence and humility, and avoid rebellion—all while embedded in a hostile world? Because truth is faith's greatest ally, we can embrace open and honest inquiry, trusting God to turn hearts to Him.

In addition to plenary talks, there will be a selection of workshops and two small-group breakout discussions that will focus on readings about the pursuit of knowledge and living a life of faith.

WHEN:

Friday, August 11 (all day)
Banquet: 5:30 PM (ticket required)
Saturday, August 12 (all day)

WHERE:

University Fellowship Church
1855 Cal Young Road
Eugene, OR 97401

REGISTER BY JULY 15 to receive price discounts.

INFORMATION & REGISTRATION:
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Susan Wise Bauer
Well-Trained Mind Academy
"Safe Education and Dangerous Ideas"



Wes Callihan
Author & Teacher
"The Early Church on Classical Education"



Jennifer Courtney
Classical Conversations
"In the Beginning Was the Word:
Building Faith through Latin Grammar"



Andrea Lipinski
CiRCE Institute
"Mythos and Eros: Practices that Support Academic Studies and Faith"



Eliot Grasso
Gutenberg College
"Love and Fear in Faithful Learning"



Chris Swanson
Gutenberg College
"What We Want for Our Kids"

COLLOQUY SPRING 2023



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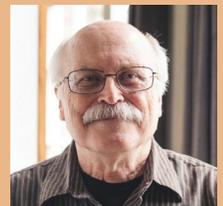
GUTENBERG COLLEGE May 11




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God Is Alive

SUMMER INSTITUTE 2023
JULY 20-22
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Charley Dewberry



Eliot Grasso



Brian Julian



Nancy Scott

Over a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared that God is dead. He observed that Western culture no longer accepted the idea of God, and he noted that its values and practices would eventually reflect this. We now live in a world that conforms in many ways to his prediction.

But as Christians we know—even if the culture doesn't reflect it—that God is very much alive. What difference, then, should this make in the way we think and act? At Gutenberg's 2023 Summer Institute, we will examine several aspects of our world and our lives—science, ethics, psychology, community—and we will consider the ways a belief in God should impact our thinking about them. Why are some differences we see between Christians and non-Christians so pronounced? In what ways might we be absorbing views that implicitly reject God? How can we be encouraged by recognizing God's relevance to every area of our lives? Join us July 20-22 for book discussions, talks from Gutenberg tutors, good food, and great conversations.

