

## Hegel: On Classical Studies

Written: 1809;

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The speech here translated was delivered by Hegel as rector of the Gymnasium (i.e., a high school as distinct from a technical school) at Nüremberg on September 29, 1809, at the end of the school year. The opening and closing paragraphs, which dealt with matters of school organization and progress, have here been omitted. The translation has been made from the text in the collected edition of Hegel's works published after his death, Vol. XVI, pp. 133 ff. Reference has also been made to the text published by J. Hoffmeister in *Hegel's Nürenberger Schriften* (Leipzig, 1938), pp. 303 ff. The partial translation by Millicent Mackenzie in her *Hegel's Educational Theory and Practice* (London, 1909) has been helpful in certain passages.

The spirit and purpose of our foundation is preparation for learned study, a preparation grounded on Greece and Rome. For more than a thousand years this has been the soil on which all civilization has stood, from which it has sprung, and with which it has been in continuous connection. Just as the natural organisms, plants and animals, struggle to free themselves from gravitation without being able to renounce this element of their own nature, so the fine arts and the sciences have grown up on that soil, and, while they have attained a self-subsistence of their own, they have not yet emancipated themselves from the recollection of that older culture. As Antaeus renewed his energies by touching his mother-earth, so every new impetus and invigoration of science and learning has emerged into the daylight from a return to antiquity.

But, however important the preservation of this soil is, the modification of the relation between antiquity and modern times is no less essential. When once the insufficiency and the disadvantage of old principles and institutions is recognized together with the insufficiency of all former erudition and instruction based upon those principles, our mind first superficially reacts by demanding their complete rejection and abolition. But the wisdom of our government [in

reorganizing education] has risen superior to such an easy-going method, and it has fulfilled the requirements of the time in the truest way by modifying the relation of the old principles to the new world; thus it preserves their essential features no less than it alters and rejuvenates them.

I need only remain you in a few words of the well-known position which the learning of the Latin language formerly had. It was not regarded simply as one element in education but was rather its most essential part and the only means of higher education offered to a pupil who refused to be satisfied with the general rudimentary instruction. There were hardly any educational arrangements expressly for acquiring knowledge useful to practical life or worth in itself. The pupil was given the opportunity of learning Latin, and on the whole it depended on his use of that opportunity whether he picked up any knowledge of a practical kind, and, if so, how much. This other knowledge was thought of as acquired by a special art, not as a general means of education, and for the most part it was hidden in the shell of Latin instruction.

A unanimous objection was raised against that learning of Latin which had become obsolete. In particular, the feeling was produced that a nation cannot be deemed civilized if it cannot express all the treasures of science in its own language, if it cannot move freely in that language whatever the topic discussed. The intimacy which characterizes the possession of our own language is lacking in the knowledge which we possess in a foreign language only. Such a knowledge is separated from us by a barrier which prevents it from genuinely coming home to our minds.

This new outlook, together with deficient methods which often degenerated into a merely mechanical procedure, and the failure to acquire much important knowledge and many important intellectual accomplishments, has step by step destroyed the claim of Latin learning to be the citadel of all sciences. This learning has lost the dignity so long claimed for it, the dignity of being the universal and almost the sole foundation of education. It has ceased to be considered as an end in itself; and this mental discipline has been compelled to see triumphing over it things not fitted for the purposes of education, among them mere matters of fact and everyday experience. Without entering into a discussion of this contrast and its consequences, its exaggerations or obvious

incoherences, I may confine myself to expression our joy at the wisdom of our government in handling this problem.

First of all, it has enlarged the general system of civil education by improving the German elementary schools. In this way it has been made possible for everyone to learn what is essential for every human being and what is useful for every social position. To those who up to now missed a better education, this is not granted, while those who were compelled to learn Latin, in order to obtain something better than the inadequate elementary instruction, are now enabled to acquire abilities and knowledge better adapted to their special purposes, and Latin is not so indispensable for them. This city looks forward to the completion here of the beneficial organization which has already been achieved in the great part of the kingdom [of Bavaria]. The important consequences of this benefit for the whole country are almost incalculable.

Secondly, the study of the sciences and the acquisition of higher intellectual and practical abilities independently of the ancient literatures is now made fully possible in a sister-institute dedicated to this purpose alone.

Thirdly, the study of the ancient languages is preserved. For one thing, it is open as before to everyone as a means of higher education; for another it is not consolidated as the fundamental basis of scholarly learning. Thus it has lost its exclusive character, because it now takes its place alongside those other modes of education and methods of attaining science, and in this way it may have extinguished the hatred aroused by its former arrogance. Thus as one separate discipline alongside others, it has all the more right to demand that it shall be given free scope and that henceforward it shall remain less troubled by alien and disturbing intrusions.

By this segregation and restriction it has obtained its true position and the opportunity of a freer and fuller development. The genuine mark of the freedom and strength of an organization consists in the opportunity granted to its various branches to develop their own peculiar existence and thus make themselves self-dependent systems. In such a way they can work side by side and look at each other's work without envy or fear, while at the same time they are integrated as no more than parts of one great system. It is only when a thing is segregated and when it carries out its own principle to completeness in segregation that it is able to become a consistent whole, i.e., "something"; it gains depth and the vigorous

potentiality of many-sidedness. Solicitude and anxiety about one-sidedness too frequently betray a weakness which generates nothing but a many-sided and inconsistent superficiality.

Now, if the study of the ancient languages remains as before the basis of learned knowledge, it fulfills many claims even when it is restricted in the way just described. It seems to be a just demand that the civilization, art, and science of a nation should manage to stand on its own feet. Are we not entitled to assume that the achievements of modern times, our illumination and the progress of all arts and sciences, have worn out the Greek and Roman garments of their childhood and outgrown their leading-strings, so that they can now advance their own territory without hindrance? The works of the ancients might on this view always possess an educational value of their own, highly rated by some, less highly by others, but they would have to be ranked with memories and superfluous learning antiquities, with things of merely historical import. Such things might be accepted or rejected within our higher education, but they should not, on this view, function any longer as its foundation and basis.

However, if we agree that excellence should be our starting-point, then the foundation of higher study must be and remain Greek literature in the first place, Roman in the second. The perfection and glory of those masterpieces must be the spiritual bath, the secular baptism that first and indelibly attunes and tinctures the soul in respect of taste and knowledge. For this initiation a general, perfunctory acquaintance with ancients is not sufficient; we must take up our lodging with them so that we can breathe their air, absorb their ideas, their manners, one might even say their errors and prejudices, and become at home in this world – the fairest that ever has been. While the first paradise was that of human *nature*, this is the second, the higher paradise of the human *spirit*, the paradise where the human spirit emerges like a bride from her chamber, endowed with a fairer naturalness, with freedom, depth, and serenity. The first wild glory of its dawn in the east is restrained by the grandeur of form and tamed into beauty. The human spirit manifests its profundity here no longer in confusion, gloom, or arrogance, but in perfect clarity. Its serenity is not like the play of children; it is rather a veil spread over the melancholy which is familiar with the cruelty of fate but is not thereby driven to lose its freedom and moderation. I do not believe I claim too much when I say that he who has never known the works of the ancients has lived without knowing what beauty is.

If we make ourselves at home in such an element, all the powers of the soul are stimulated, developed, and exercised; and, further, this element is a unique material through which we enrich ourselves and improve the very substance of our being.

It has been said that activity of mind can be trained on any material, but best of all by external, useful, and visible objects which are supposed to be most appropriate to the age of youth or childhood, since they pertain to the compass and manner of mental development peculiar to this age.

One may doubt whether or not form and matter – training it itself and the objective circle of things on which we are trained – can be separated as if they had nothing to do with each other; but, even so, training as such is not the only thing that matters. As the plant not only trains its reproductive energies by enjoying light and air, but also absorbs its nourishment by this process, so likewise that subject matter which the intellect and our other physical faculties use in developing and training themselves must at the same time be their nourishment. This subject matter is not the sort of material which is called “useful,” i.e., the sensuous material which is the object of immediate sense perception to the child; on the contrary, it is only the content of mind, a content of intrinsic value and interest, which strengthens the soul. This content alone provides the independence and firmness, the essential inwardness which is the mother of self-control and self-possession, of presence and vigilance of mind; it generates in the soul thus prepared and educated a kernel of self-dependent value, of absolute ends, which alone is the precondition of all usefulness in life and which it is important to plant in all citizens of all walks of life. Have we not seen in our own times that even states become unsteady, expose themselves to dangers and collapse, despite plenty of valuable resources, just because they had neglected and disdained to preserve such an inner citadel in the soul of their citizens, and because they were interested in profit alone and directed their citizens to treat things spiritual as mere means?

The works of the ancients contain the most noble food in the most noble form: golden apples in silver bowls. They are incomparably richer than all the works of any other nation and of any other time. The greatness of their sentiments, their statuesque virtue free from moral ambiguity, their patriotism, the grand manner of their deeds and characters, the multiplicity of their destinies, of their morals

and constitutions – to recall these is enough to vindicate the assertion that in the compass of no other civilization was there ever united so much that was splendid, admirable, original, many-sided, and instructive.

These riches, however, are intimately connected with the language, and only through and in it do we obtain them in all their special significance. Their content can be approximately given to us by translations, but not their form, not their ethereal soul. Translations are like artificial roses which may resemble natural ones in shape, color, and perhaps even scent, but which cannot attain their loveliness, delicacy, and softness of life. Whatever daintiness and refinement the copy has belongs to the copy alone, and in the copy the contrast between the content and the form that has not grown up with the content makes itself felt unmistakably. The language is the musical element, the element of intimacy that fades away in the translation; it is the fine fragrance which makes possible the reader's sympathetic enjoyment of the ancient work and without which that work tastes like Rhine wine that has lost its flavor.

This fact lays on us what may seem the hard necessity of studying the ancient languages thoroughly and making them familiar to us as a prelude to enjoying their works to the greatest possible extent in all their aspects and excellences. To complain about the trouble we have to undergo in learning the languages, and to regret or to fear that we have thus to neglect the learning of other things and the training of other abilities means to find fault with fate because it has not given us this collection of classical works in our own language. Only if we possessed them in our own tongue would we possess a substitute for antiquity and be spared the laborious journey thither.

After having spoken about the content of education, I wish to add some words about the form which its nature entails.

The progress of culture must not be regarded as the quiet continuation of a chain in which the new links, though attached to the older ones without incongruity, are made of fresh material, and the work of forging them is not directed by what has been done before. On the contrary, culture must have earlier material on which it works and which it changes and modifies. It is necessary that we appropriate the world of antiquity not only to possess it, but even more to digest and transform it.

But the substance of Nature and Spirit must have confronted us, must have taken the shape of something alien to us, before it can become our *object*. Unhappy he whose immediate world of feelings has been alienated from him – for this means nothing less than the snapping of those bonds of faith, love, and trust which unite heart and head with life in a holy friendship. The alienation which is the condition of theoretical erudition does not require this moral pain, or the sufferings of the heart, but only the easier pain and strain of the imagination which is occupied with something not given in immediate experience, something foreign, something pertaining to recollection, to memory and the thinking mind.

The demand for this separation, however, is so necessary that everyone knows it as a familiar and common impulse. What is strange, and far away, attracts our interest and lures us to activity and effort: it seems to be the more desirable the more remote it is and the less we have in common with it. The youth enjoys the prospect of leaving his native country and living like Robinson Crusoe on a distance island. It is a necessary illusion to begin by mistaking distance for profundity; in fact, the depth and strength to which we attain can be measured only by the distance between the point to which we were fleeing and the center in which we were engrossed at first and to which we shall finally return again.

This centrifugal force of the soul explains why the soul must always be provided with the means of estranging itself from its natural condition and essence, and why in particular the young mind must be led into a remote and foreign world. Now, the screen best suited to perform this task of estrangement for the sake of education is the world and language of the ancients. This world separates us from ourselves, but at the same time it grants us the cardinal means of returning to ourselves: we reconcile ourselves with it and thereby find ourselves again in it, but the self which we then find is the one which accords with the tone and universal essence of mind.

If we apply to school education the general principle of this necessary process, which entails learning the ideas of the ancients as well as their language, it becomes evident that the mechanical side of this learning is not just a necessary evil. For it is the mechanical that is foreign to the mind, and it is this which awakens the mind's desire to digest the indigestible food forced upon it, to make intelligible what is at first without life and meaning, and to assimilate it.

Besides, with the mechanical elements in linguistic study there is closely connected the grammatical study whose value cannot be too highly assessed, for it constitutes the beginning of logical training. I mention this aspect last because it seems to be almost sunk in oblivion. Grammar, I mean, has for its content the categories, the special products and concepts of the understanding: in learning grammar, therefore, the understanding itself first becomes learned. These intellectual essentials, with which grammar first makes us acquainted, are something very easy for youth to grasp; in fact, nothing in the world of mind can be grasped more easily. While youth does not yet possess the power of comprehending the manifold sides of intellectual riches, those abstractions are quite simple. They are as it were the single letters, or rather the vowels, of the intellectual realm; we have to begin with them in order first to spell and later to read the language of mind.

Furthermore, grammar expounds the categories of the understanding in a fashion adapted to youth, because it teaches them by distinguishing them with the help of external marks mostly granted by the language itself. Knowledge of the categories thus accomplished is somewhat better than the knowledge of colors like red or blue which everyone can distinguish without being able to define them according to Newton's hypothesis or some other theory. It is of the utmost importance to have paid attention to these logical distinctions. Since the categories of the understanding are present in us because we are intellectual beings, and since we therefore understand them immediately, the first step in erudition consists in our really possessing them, i.e., in having made them the objects of our consciousness and having become capable of distinguishing them by means of characteristic marks.

Grammatical terminology teaches us how to move in the realm of abstractions. This study consequently can be looked on as a preliminary instruction in philosophy. This is the reason why it is essentially regarded not only as a means, but also as an end, in the Latin as much as in the German language classes. The general superficiality and frivolity which only the tremendous gravity and impact of the political revolutions in our days was able to overcome had perverted the relation between means and ends in the field of linguistic studies as much as in all other fields: the material knowledge of a language was highest esteemed than its rational aspect.



Grammatical learning of an *ancient* language affords the advantage of necessarily implying a continuous and sustained activity of reason. In speaking our mother-tongue, unreflective habit leads us to speak grammatically; but with an ancient language it is otherwise and we have to keep in view the significance with the intellect has given to the parts of speech and call to our aid the rules of their combination. Therefore a perpetual operation of subsuming the particular under the general and of specifying the general has to take place, and it is just in this that the activity of reason consists. Strict grammatical study is accordingly one of the most universal and noble forms of intellectual education.

Study of the ancients in their own language and grammatical instruction together constitutes the fundamental principle characteristic of our institution. This important benefit though rich enough in itself does not comprise the whole range of knowledge to which our preparatory institute is an introduction. The classical authors to be read are so selected that the content of their writings is itself instructive, but, apart from this, the school offers lessons about other subjects which have a value in themselves or are particularly useful or beautiful. I only need to mention these subjects here; their compass, their treatment, their order and gradation, and their relation to other subjects can be learned from the schedule that will be published and distributed. These subjects are, in general: religion, German (including our classics), arithmetic, followed by algebra, geometry, geography, history, physiography (comprising cosmology, natural history, and physics), elements of philosophy, French, Hebrew for future theologians, drawing and calligraphy. How little these subjects are neglected can be seen from a simple calculation: if we omit the last four subjects, the time given to the lessons in those first mentioned is exactly as long as that given to the ancient languages, but if we add those four subjects, then the classical studies comprise not even one-half, but one two-fifths of the whole curriculum.