

Scholar: Schools Are Creating 'Learned Barbarians'

There are two main competing views about [human nature](#) in Western civilization.

The first and most ancient is the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian view. Mutatis mutandis, it holds that men and women are born with a proclivity toward ignorance, are subject to many harmful passions (e.g. anger, envy, etc.), and need much training and work to come to appreciate what's true and good.

The second and more recent is [the Rousseauian view](#). Its classic source is the thought of [Jean-Jacques Rousseau \(1712-1778\)](#), and it holds that men and women are born [originally good and innocent](#), and are only corrupted through society and ill-designed institutions.

As some maintain, the Rousseauian view of human nature has come to prevail in the modern West. Among its manifestations are the cult of youth and the enormous amount of time and energy spent on tinkering with systems and institutions. And as scholar Robert Royal argues, it has had some detrimental consequences for education.

In his essay ["Who Put the West in Western Civilization?"](#) he writes:

*"Aristotle claims some of us are slaves by nature; but in a sense we are all slaves by nature—slaves to our ignorance, passions, and untutored capacities. Elsewhere in Aristotle we see the need constantly to pursue education and self-discipline to overcome our natural slavery. And it is no accident that as our attachment to that view of civilization weakened, our view of education shifted. **An errant pedagogy has arisen that makes the ignorant passions of the student the measure of what should and should not be learned. As a***

result, even when people spend long years under instruction they usually wind up in a kind of learned barbarism."

I think that teachers these days are in a difficult spot when it comes to educating children, for the children themselves have been made the measure of what's significant and what's not. Teachers are increasingly expected to be not only educators but entertainers, virtues of maturity are not promoted, and traditional methods and works are continually discarded in favor of what's "most relevant" to the students. According to Royal's reasoning, this means that many schools are producing young men and women who have been heavily "schooled," but have not been "educated" in the sense of being "trained" or "molded"—which is what *educare* means in Latin. In other words, schools are producing "learned barbarians".

If this is the case, then according to education historian Henri Marrou the ancient Greeks would be laughing at us now:

"One cannot feel confident that if the Greeks could have known the endeavours that psychology and education have been making ever since Emile [Rousseau's treatise on education] was written to adapt themselves to the child and the special characteristics of his mind they would have responded with anything but amused surprise. What is the point, they seem to say, of concentrating on the child as though he were an end in himself? Apart from the few unlucky children who are condemned to a premature death, the only point of childhood is that it leads to manhood, and the proper object of education is therefore not any slobbering child or awkward adolescent or even an up-and-coming young man, but Man, and Man alone; and the only point of education is to teach the child to transcend himself."