



“Why Latin (and Greek)?”
Or, “Why answering (most) questions is a waste of time.”
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At a recent Latin seminar for parents, I was asked the question I’ve been asked for 15 years: “Why Latin?” For the first time I saw the two false assumptions underlying that simple question: my own and the questioners.

In the past I’ve tried to answer the question. I would run through a list of “positives” for the student. This included things like the benefit of reading the wisdom of the past in its original language, how Latin trains the mind, how Latin helps us learn grammar, the helpfulness of Latin for building vocabulary (legal, medical, and otherwise), higher ACT/SAT scores, etc. I still think all of these things are true and are good for the student. But I have learned something about the human soul over the years.

What I realized for the first time that day is that my answers are worthless. *My* answers, whatever they are, are based on *my* convictions about what really matters in life and how Latin helps you to live into that “good life.” I believe that learning to hear from the dead is essential to living well. Therefore, I emphasize how Latin helps us grow in wisdom by listening carefully to others. I believe learning to think and reflect is important, so I emphasize how Latin helps us clarify our thinking. However, that may not be my audience’s conviction at all, especially if that audience is a 15 year-old boy. He might only have a care for Netflix, sports, video games, and whatever else he *desires* to do. His desires rule him, not his mind. He wants his classes to head north to New York, while I aim west for Texas; we will never agree on a path to travel together. We must agree upon our destination if we are to agree upon our route. Because we cannot agree on a destination, I captain our ship and he rides along, surprised to be discovering for the first time the beauty of the ages on the voyage, because he does not have the vision for the end destination in mind. He will have to taste and see to believe the good of Latin, not know beforehand and then experience.

The second assumption belongs to those who ask the question. When questioners ask, “Why Latin?” they assume they know the purpose of the other things taught at school. What a parent may know is that they “took” math, history, science, music, art, Spanish, and literature classes growing up. They did not “take” Latin, so it is out of place and needs an explanation. I believe the truth is that we don’t know why any of these things should or should not be taught. We do not know that we do not know what school is for. We do not know what it means to learn something contrasted by what it means to take a class. And a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, especially when it pertains to the most important of things.

So perhaps the greatest blessing of Latin is that it might allow us to see that we don’t know why we’re doing anything at school or why we go to school at all or what a school is or what it is for. We need to spend time dialoguing about what is worth living towards and how “school” and maybe how Latin helps us move towards that end. What we should say to the questioner is this: “What do you think matters most?” Then we may enter into a dialogue about the nature of what is most important and by what means we can pursue those greatest things in life. We may find ourselves in the midst of the book of Ecclesiastes, gazing upon the vanity of the things under the sun. We may discover that what matters most is wisdom and virtue, and that the study of the word in Latin and Greek is able to powerfully shape the soul away from passing and trivial things and towards those things that will last forever. But we will only gain this summit of knowledge as we walk the path of wisdom, and Latin is an amazingly powerful tool for helping us toward living for eternal things.