

Response to
Excellence-An Augustinian Tension
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First let me thank Dr Wright for his fascinating and insightful talk on Excellence. As Principal of a distinguished school such as Shore he is well placed to make a comment on this topic. Tim has read very widely on this and other topics relevant to education, and hence I always appreciate his perspectives on education. In his talk today he has sought to turn a few ideas concerning excellence on their head.

He opened his talk with the stirring words of George Herbert from ‘The Elixir’¹ and the challenge “To do it as for Thee”. This of course set one of the central planks of his argument.

There are many ways for a Christian to approach the topic of excellence. Some look to moral virtues or values as the starting point, worldview, the *telos* (end purpose or goal), holiness, humans as God’s image bearers and so on. Dr Wright chose to begin to frame his talk with the latter and began with Genesis. He reminded us that “God created mankind in his own image” (Gen 1:26)

He addressed three key points in the talk:

- That excellence has a grounding in our creation in the image of God
- That problems arise when excellence becomes an end in itself
- That there is a Christian alternative based on Augustinian thinking

I found all three points engaging, and was regularly agreeing with what he had to say. I spent considerable time pondering the nuance of each point he was making, and occasionally thinking, but what about...? Let me share my more specific comments and some of the ‘what about?’.

1. That excellence somehow has grounding in our creation in the image of God

Dr Wright used Herbert’s reference to man as God’s image bearer to point to the attributes that we reflect of Him in our character and makeup. He cited as examples “creativity, relational orientation, and sense of moral order”. To which of course we could add others such as a creature that reasons and makes choices, a creature made for ‘fellowship’ and so on.

He argued that to be made in the image of God means that in some way, we reflect the characteristics of God, and this is reflected in “...a *calling*. That is to say, we represent God as vice-regents in his world.” He reminded us that these things are not mutually exclusive.

I agree with much of what Dr Wright had to say in this first point. I have no doubt that God made us to be creative and to act on our world - to work the soil, care for his creation, and turn our imaginations and endeavours to all things. And all for his glory – “To do it as for thee”

¹ George Herbert, ‘The Elixir’, source The Poetry Foundation, downloaded 14th August 2014.
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173627>

(George Herbert). But I feel a little uncomfortable with the stronger statements of Jamie Smith and others like Paul Griffiths who use words like ‘co-regents’ and ‘co-creators’.

This idea rests on an interesting argument that a number of theologians have championed. But words like ‘partner’, ‘co-regent’ and ‘co-creators’, give me cause to pause. I suspect that the idea in the wrong hands can be misused.

While God gives us a role in his creation, and delights at our creativity, ingenuity and skill, he doesn’t need us to achieve his purposes. Nor do we want believers to begin to think that they are working with God to improve or complete God’s creation work. For while there is much that we can do to mitigate the consequences of living in this fallen and decaying world (Rom 8:18-25), we are to look forward to the future and ultimate glory in a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-22:5).

Scripture of course is littered with examples of God reminding his creatures to remember their place. Job 38 is an excellent (almost scary) example. The Lord answers Job out of a whirlwind, and challenges him to answer. He convinces him of his ignorance and weakness, by reminding him of His mighty works, particularly the creation of the earth.

“Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.
Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone...” (Job 38:2-16)

And of course we have a number of reminders that we are mere clay in God’s hands, including passages such as Isaiah 64 and Jeremiah 18.

However, while this is a quibble with the way James Smith expresses his thoughts on our work in creation, I do agree with the conclusion that Dr Wright reaches:

“The primary act of Grace from God is the giving by his volition, the creation, and placing us as image in it...” This is “...our opportunity to learn and to create in this context (and) is a gift to all humanity from God.”

2. The implications of excellence becomes an end in itself

Dr Wright’s second point mitigated my worries over the idea of ‘co-regents’ as he spoke of the dangers of excellence as an end in itself. I enjoyed his reference to Luther’s diagnosis that humanity devoid of God is one “curved in upon itself” (*incurvatus in se*). I agree with him that we must beware notions of excellence that are focussed simply on self-fulfilment, personal gain and personal power.

Dr Wright helpfully drew on the work of Charles Taylor, James Smith, Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Griffiths in this section of his talk. He used their ideas to challenge implicit and assumed definitions of excellence that end with us measuring performance and capacity as an end in itself.

Our challenge in schools is how we can view excellence, not just in individual achievement, but in understanding that God’s calling is to bring honour and glory to His name. This understanding is, as he points out, founded on a key biblical truth “...all that we have and are come from God

as gifts of grace”. And of course our students in their often unregenerate state give us constant reminders of God’s grace in young lives.

As an aside, let me quote Wayne Grudem who reminds us that God takes pleasure in everything in creation that mirrors his own excellence². Ultimately, only God is truly excellent. Only He can tower above the rest. But any sense of excellence that we witness in others that mirrors the excellence of God, even if only dimly, brings pleasure to God and ultimately glory to Him. God’s creation can in some way demonstrate some of the attributes of God seen as perfect only in Him (e.g. love, mercy, justice, holiness, mercy...). We are to be “imitators of God” (Eph 5:1), but while encouraging our students to seek excellence, they like us, can never attain His excellence. But we seek it to bring glory and honour to the one who is the source of all excellence, not our self-glory.

Dr Wright reminded us to look for excellence in all its forms, and with this I completely agree. In my life as a teacher and head of a Residential College, I have found that it is often seen in the ‘in between’ places. We witness it in the student who volunteers to do more than their share of tasks expected of a particular role. It is seen in the student who shares their ideas on the next assignment because they want the other student to succeed. It is seen in how individuals care for others in their brokenness and despair.

I have witnessed this in startling form within my own university college experience. One example stands out. It occurred over a period of five years. It came when parents arrived with their eighteen year-old son, who needed a place to live as he commenced a degree. He had just lived through two years of trauma. God entrusted this young man to our undergraduate community after he had experienced two strokes as a 17 and 18 year old. Our lives were enriched as God provided numerous opportunities for community members to seek excellence in the oft-ignored places. I saw excellence in the 27 male volunteers who offered to assist with his personal care day by day. I saw it in the way residents helped this young man to show us his great gifts and extraordinary creativity and determination, even when paralysed and unable to communicate with the clarity that he would have wanted. We also saw it when he suffered following a third stroke just prior to graduating with distinction. And finally, I saw it when residents rallied to celebrate his life after death and to care for family members. God took no pleasure in this young man’s suffering, but I’m sure that He did in seeing such excellence demonstrated. God allowed his fallen creatures to mirror, just a little, His excellence. This example, teaches something else about excellence. At the end of the day, excellence is a gift of God’s grace. This young man was God’s gift of grace to a community, and through his life and others who supported him; some faint image of God’s excellence was mirrored.

In His grace, God entrusted him to a community.

In his grace God gave others physical capability that were take away from this young man.

In His grace God showed kindness in and through the community.

In His grace God called us to excel in these areas.

In His grace & kindness God blessed us abundantly in what we received as undeserved favours.

Such grace leaves us with just one place to give credit for excellence – at the feet of God!!

Dr Wright has rightly reminded us that schools like Shore must guard against “...privileging certain activities or standards as bestowing greater intrinsic value” to specific achievements. We

² Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic theology: An introduction to biblical doctrine*. Zondervan, 1994.

should look for the work of God in the way his creation bears his likeness (even if dimly) and the grace that we receive.

3. A Christian alternative based on Augustinian thinking

In Dr Wright's final point he tussled with a Christian alternative to the way schools often view excellence. He helpfully discussed two categories of learning discussed by St Augustine³ - 'curiositas' and 'studiositas'. He cited Paul Griffiths⁴ in discussing how curiositas is driven by a desire to know and to discover the novel almost for its own sake, whereas 'studiositas' requires more participation and sees knowledge gained as a gift. While there isn't time to fully discuss Augustine's categories or Griffiths' thoughts, it does seem to me that the categories need not be seen as mutually exclusive; certainly not when we are discussing excellence. The problem with our use of Augustine's categories is that while studiositas can be translated as studiousness, curiositas doesn't simply translate as curiosity. The goal of the learning is the key here. Is it for self, and a search for knowledge that is the central object of our learning and the seat of our desire? Or is it a desire to learn from and with others for ends that bring glory to God, not self.

I agree heartily with Dr Wright's point that our schools, teachers and learners need to see knowledge (and achievements of all kinds) as a gift to be received, not simply personal achievement. That is, learners "...reciprocally shaped by the learning" not set upon a telos that is centred on personal achievement and fails to acknowledge the grace of God as giver of all things.

God in his grace has given us gifts and abilities to use to serve others and hence fulfil our calling as God's image bearers. And if so, what should the School do about it? Hopefully, if this is to be a school that sees excellence in biblical terms, then it will look for excellence in surprising places, if you like, the 'in between' places that I spoke of earlier in my comments. A Christian school will acknowledge such excellence when observed, praise God for it, and commend others to imitate it. It will be a school that receives, understands and demonstrates grace to the glory of God.

Dr Wright ended with Proverbs 1:7:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This is the basis of our New College motto. Excellence needs as its foundation a right understanding and action, which of course is what we mean by wisdom. In the Bible 'fear' of God means 'bowing' before Him. It is the opposite of being hard-hearted, self-sufficient, over confident in one's ability to control one's world.

To fear God is to be more bothered about God than ourselves. We are to be concerned with what He thinks. It leads to a 'turned out' view of the world (if you will forgive me for misquoting Luther), rather than Luther's *incurvatus in se*, humanity 'curved in upon itself' one. A school where the confidence of students, staff and the school are in God, not self (Prov 14:26).

Might God bless Shore Grammar as a school known for its 'turned out' nature and its desire to honour God and do all good things "as to thee".

³ Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. 'Confessions'. Translated Henry Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 (original work written 397-398 AD)

⁴ Griffiths, P.J. *Intellectual Appetite*, Catholic University of America, 2009.