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# How to be a good person: the importance of learning from the classics

How can you be a good person and a good citizen?

These are important questions that human beings have been asking for centuries - which is why it makes good sense to study what was written long ago if you are looking for some answers.

But for too long the classics have been obscured and monopolised by an academic elite when they belong to everyone, according to **Edith Hall, Professor at the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College, London, and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Leadership Fellow** (</skills/leadershipfellows/>).

"I have no time - none at all - for an academy that won't talk to the public," she says.

Professor Hall is a firm believer in the continuing relevance and necessity of classical philosophy for us all, and has just published a self-help guide based on the work of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle.

"He was read very, very widely in the ancient world by all sorts of," she says. "His was by far the most widely practised school of philosophy by ordinary people, because it's simply about being a good person and providing basic moral guidance, which are things we all need and why I wrote the book."

In *Aristotle's Way: How Ancient wisdom Can Change Your Life* Professor Hall translates some of the philosopher's more complex work into everyday language, for everyone.

"Aristotle wrote numerous popular books but they've all been lost, which is very sad," she says "And all that we've got left is the equivalent of his lectures to his advanced PhD students; we don't have the simple expressions of his ideas. So, I decided to change that!"

The book is arranged over ten chapters, each one applying Aristotle's teachings to aspects of modern life - from friends and relationships, to work, study and death.

At the heart of her ambition is the desire to demystify what can be seen as complex or esoteric ideas and open up the classics, something she sees as her moral duty.

"Like Aristotle, I believe you should use whatever power you have for good," says Professor Hall. "If you



Professor Edith Hall

don't, you are as bad as the person actively doing bad."

Professor Hall is also leading Advocating Classics Education, an AHRC-funded project to extend classical-subject qualifications across the secondary sector.

"If I don't go out to schools and try and get them to provide classics, who will? It's so important," she says.

"The classics were a huge part of working class education in the past. Huge numbers of people read Plutarch and Aesop. They were very popular.

"My advocacy for classics, classical civilisations and ancient history in state schools is all because I believe that everybody should have access to this core piece of learning

"Classics has got itself in a cul de sac, partly because people on the left, who want much greater equality in education, have tended to deny that the ancient Greeks were exceptional.

"But I refuse to accept this! I think that that the achievement of people who spoke Greek over about 2000 years from around 1600 BC is genuinely remarkable. It was one of the great intellectual revolutions in human history and everyone deserves the right to read this work."

**“ We would never accept someone leaving school with no knowledge of the industrial revolution - so why do we accept that someone would leave without knowing about the classical revolution?”**

According to Professor Hall there have been six revolutions in human history. The first was cognitive; we stood up and talked to each other. The second was agrarian. The third was classical civilisation - the moment when we embraced reason. Then the fourth was the printing press; the fifth the industrial revolution and the sixth the digital revolution.

"This is the boundary post, where we moved from superstition into a world of reason and science", she says.

"Aristotle believed that everybody and everything was born with the potential to be something, and he believed that the secret to happiness was working out what that was and going for it.

"If you are a parent, one of the most important things you can do is apply a very brutal critique of yourself and ask whether or not you are trying to force something on your children. They should never give up on their dreams. They may have to modify them. But they should still pursue them.

"Intelligence is distributed very widely across society, and we are not going to get the best brains engaged with the problems of our age unless we go out and look for them - and help them read some of the best writing of all time."

For more information about Edith Hall visit her website at: [www.edithhall.co.uk](http://www.edithhall.co.uk)  (Opens in a new window).

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