

Leon Kass of the University of Chicago was awarded a 2025 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Dr. Kass about how classic texts are both the source of and the greatest critics of our wisdom traditions, why the word “question” comes from the same root as the word “quest,” and what has surprised him about both growing old and growing young as an educator.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello everybody. I’m Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters. Here with me today is Leon Kass, emeritus of the University of Chicago and currently teaching at Shalem College. Leon was one of the winners of the Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement in 2025. Leon, thank you so much for being with us.

Leon Kass, University of Chicago

Pleasure to be with you, Greg.

Forster

My first question is, what are some underappreciated ways in which the study of classic texts contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Kass

The classic texts, the so-called Great Books, are important both for their timelessness and the timeliness of their content and their power to change lives. They illuminate the great and enduring questions of human existence. That’s their timelessness. But they also speak to our contemporary concerns as both the originators, but also the most exacting critics of our current opinions. In these texts, literary, philosophical, religious, historical, even scientific, the greatest minds, the greatest teachers examine most deeply, whether by story or argument or prophecy, the fundamental questions that most thoughtful human beings have to encounter sooner or later in their lives. Questions like Socrates’s questions, What is justice? What is man? What is God? Kant’s questions, What can I know? What ought I do? What may I hope?

Of course, we don’t read these books as authorities because they disagree with one another. But we read them as friends who can present us with, at the very highest level, the most important alternatives for reflecting on who we are, what to make of our existence, how we should live individually and communally. To make the most of them, we can’t read them like animals in the zoo to learn about them from the outside. We have to approach them charitably, as if they might be showing us one of the most important things we have to learn, and we might not learn it unless we inhabit them, learn to live with them, allow them to work on us, in mind but also in heart and in terms of sensibilities.

Forster

You put me in mind of Xenophon’s Socrates who said that to discuss ideas with friends is the greatest pleasure that life affords, and that has always stuck with me. I especially appreciate your highlighting that the Great Books disagree, because on the one hand, people who want to tear down the study of classic texts will often portray them as uniform, monolithic, we need free thought so we can’t have this

body of classic texts. But, at the same time, among some of the fans of classic texts, sometimes there seems to be a certain idolatry. If only we would simply have people read the classic texts they would never disagree again, because they would know all the answers. There'd be solidarity and a monolithic integrity. But the experience of reading these texts actually leads to disagreement.

Kass

Absolutely. There's a difference between approaching these texts as part of a great tradition with more or less one voice, some small interfamilial squabbles between the Platonists and the Aristotelians. But if you read them not as the history of ideas, but as still-living alternatives from which we still can learn something, to listen to the disagreements and the competing alternatives is a way to cure one's simple-mindedness and to learn to see the complexity of the world through the opinions of people who have thought things through much more deeply than we have. I've taught books that I disagree with, but I teach them as their advocate in the sense that I want the students not to read them for ammunition if they like them, nor to read them to criticize them, but to try to understand the books as the authors understood them themselves and as the books want to be read. In that way, we can engage in dialogue with them, shedding light on our opinions, arguing with them, once we've done the hard work of understanding them.

Forster

We need to have the humility to recognize that we are dependent on wisdom traditions that have been handed down for the thought structures, even that we use to criticize the wisdom traditions. Yet, at the same time, we have to boldly embrace the invitation to disagreement and the responsibility of thinking for ourselves.

I'm going to toss my second question out there and see if it isn't just what we've already been talking about. How would you describe our vocation as educators, and why is that important?

Kass

This is a question very dear to me. Although I was trained in medicine and then in biochemistry, I've been a devotee of liberal education all my working life. I got the bug in the College at the University of Chicago, which was education using great texts, but it was mostly big questions and conversation. It was there that I got the idea that what you really mean by the vocation of being a teacher and being an educator is you're engaged in the formation of thoughtful, open-minded, yet truth-seeking young men and women. You're engaged in something more than transmitting accumulated knowledge. You're not just engaged in professional training. It's not just exposure to the widest variety of human endeavor, or even the very important thing of refinement and cultivation.

It goes beyond acquiring the very important liberating skills of careful reading, listening (a forgotten virtue), careful writing, arguing and so on. It has to do with acquiring, cultivating, encouraging the habits of mind and of heart to seek what's true and to make it your own. As a teacher, you've got to, first of all, wake up, encourage and render habitual this habit of thoughtfulness, of reflection about the weighty human matters in quest of what's simply true and good. It means that you're not just teaching subjects, you're teaching students. It means that, yes, there's room for great lectures. It's wonderful sometimes to witness and participate in a great mind at work and to follow the thought well articulated.

But if the goal is to make people thoughtful rather than to ingest the digested thoughts of their teachers, the heart of the activity is questioning. “Questioning” related to the old Sanskrit root from which we also get the word “quest.” A quest was originally the hunting dog’s search for its prey. To be in quest in mind is to hunger for an answer to the things that concern us. To ask a question and to respond to a question isn’t a way to search within yourself for what you think, to offer it, to subject it to examination, to criticism. My wife had a great response to a first response – “another sentence please” – flattering the students to think they had more to say that they didn’t know they had to say. The activity produced that confidence to try out your opinions; you will learn by venturing. It’s to produce people who really are willing to think for themselves and carefully examine the thoughts of their colleagues that we’re going to produce the kind of thoughtful men and women that we desperately need to deal with the complexities of our collective lives, never mind also our private lives as citizens in a bewildering world.

Forster

I tell my students I never ask a question that has only one right answer because I want them to think and I want us to have a conversation. One of the most common things I’ll say is, “tell me more about that,” because they’ll give a short one-sentence answer and I’ve got to draw them out. I’ve got to get them hunting. I love the connection you’re drawing between questions and questing. The pedagogical model we’ve inherited is really focused on information transfer. I’ve talked to a lot of people about this, and I’ve never talked to anyone who’s satisfied with that pedagogical model. Nobody says, oh yes, my job as an educator is to transfer information to the cognition of other minds. Yet, although it’s not satisfactory, it does continue to shape the institutional systems that we teach within and the assumptions we make about what’s going on in the classroom.

Kass

It’s an old Germanic model. The professor comes in and he speaks and the students write it down and they give it back to him. You can learn things, you can get information, but you do not acquire the habit of thinking for yourself and it’s not rewarded. Thoughtfulness is in short supply in this world of distraction and low attention spans, and yet the problems are more complicated than ever. We need people who say, I’m not sure about that, or what do you think? And, let’s look at it in a different way.

Forster

Now more than ever, as the information environment becomes overwhelming, we’ve never needed more information less, but we’ve never needed thoughtfulness more.

Speaking of the changing environment, I want to ask my last question, which is, what has pleasantly surprised you in the last five years?

Kass

You mentioned at the top that I’m at Shalem College in Jerusalem. It’s Israel’s only liberal arts college, and I’ve been here for five years. I came out of retirement. I was on the search committee for the new president, and I told him that if he’d go (he’s an American as well), I’d go with him. I became the dean of the faculty. Most of my work is administrative, but since this was a place where the faculty were educated by Germanic professors and all they did was front a lecture, my job here was to recruit and, as much as possible, transform the mode of pedagogy and to change some of the courses from lecturing,

looking at, say, Greek philosophy from 35,000 feet to actually having the course read Platonic dialogue and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the first year.

Part of the excitement is to bring a lifetime of experience of this kind of teaching and learning to a community that is very welcoming of this, I'm happy to say. Most important is to bring this kind of transformative education into the lives of some of the most magnificent, inspiring and absolutely admirable young people that I've ever met to help them become the best versions of themselves, but also to fulfill their dream of making a positive difference each in his or her own way in Israeli society.

What's been exciting to me in old age is two things. The students are older, they all do their national service in the army before they come. The average age at starting is about 24. Some have had large careers outside. They have a moral gravity that 18-year-olds in America rarely have. They are absolutely civil in their discourse, and the community is a mixture of left and right, religious and secular. During all of the political controversies of which we have all of the opinions in the building, there was no yelling. It's the culture of conversation, of inquiry, with a hunger for learning, an ambition to do good, and there's absolutely nothing silly, frivolous or self-indulgent about these young people. It's astounding to me, and I've just been revitalized.

The classes are all in Hebrew, so I don't do much public teaching, but I've had some private tutorials, one of them now in its fifth year. I started with this young man when he was a first-year student. I'm three times his age, but he has an old soul, and we studied books for which I've been his student and he's been mine. American documents, speeches of Lincoln, a discourse of Rousseau, two years on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the books of Samuel, the *Tempest*, Plato's *Euthyphro*, *Crito* (just finished yesterday), the American and the Israeli Declarations of Independence, on which he's writing a book. Another guy I've had only for 18 months, 13 of them spent reading the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis, on which I've written the book in a full commentary, and thanks to this fellow's painstaking work with the Hebrew, we've made just tremendous discoveries practically every week.

So, I'm a student again in the way in which I was most effectively a student by being engaged in honest and serious conversations, not delivering the goods, but working on texts from which we can learn with people whom it's a privilege to be with. Who knew that there was an epilogue after act 5 was finished and put to bed? You're looking at a guy who's still very young in spirit, and it's thanks to this opportunity and mostly the contact with these splendid young people.

Forster

I was just going to comment, Plato's *Republic* begins with Socrates asking Cephalus, is it better to be old or young? It sounds like the answer is, it's better to be both, but to be both, you have to be old first, but you need to get some young folks around you to help you rediscover it.

Kass

The remarkable thing, Greg, is these are people young in years, but old in understanding. This one guy I was with this morning, he's conceived a project called the Ethics of the Fathers, named after a famous book in the Jewish tradition, in which he and my other student and their friends are going around interviewing the elderly in the State of Israel in all walks of life, trying to record their wisdom and understanding about what was, what they've learned, what they understand. It is an attitude toward

history, toward their elders, toward what's come before, that you just don't find in present-day America. This appreciation of the wisdom of experience, the wisdom of books, the wisdom of the ages – they've got old souls, and they're ready to receive, and they're ready to go forward. It's just thrilling for me. I've loved my teaching my entire life. I've been blessed with good students at St. John's, a wonderful 34 years at the University of Chicago, also teaching with my dear wife of blessed memory. But that there would be this final opportunity before the curtain comes down, an unbelievable blessing.

Forster

Nothing's more life-giving than good students. May we continue to have them. Leon, thank you so much. It's a delight and an honor to have you with us.

Kass

Greg, wonderful to be with you. All blessings on your important work.