St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Summer 2012

What Is Liberal Education? Part I

Welcome, new students, returning students, and tutors, to St. John's College, and to the Graduate Institute. Today each of you is joining, or returning to, a College that describes itself as a community of learning, and that dedicates itself to inquiry: to asking fundamental questions, and to pursuing answers to these questions. As members of such a community, we must from time to time shine the light of inquiry on ourselves. Today I mean to do so by asking 'what is liberal education?'

Now let me reassure you that I don't mean to try to answer this question in the next fifteen minutes. My somewhat more modest goal is to divide the question into two parts, and today to ask only 'what is liberal?' I mean to save the second part of the question, 'what is education?,' for my next convocation address, in the fall 2012 term. Still, this modesty doesn't get me entirely out of difficulty. For now I find myself asking a 'what is?' question about an adjective, 'liberal' – as if a quality of beings could itself be a being. Perhaps there is a noun that gives meaning to this adjective? It turns out there could be as many as three.

There is a tradition here at St. John's about this word, 'liberal,' that is a helpful place to begin. It dates from the foundation of the New Program in 1937, when Scott Buchanan, the new dean of the College, outlined its Program in a document titled "In Search of a Liberal College." To introduce his reader to the liberal arts, Buchanan begins with the etymology of 'liberal,' which he traces to three different Latin nouns: *liber*, or book; *liberi*, or free human beings;[1] and *liberi*, or children. Add a fourth Latin noun – *libra*, or balance – and a dash of alliterative

whimsy, and you get the College's motto: *facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque*, "I fashion free human beings out of children by means of books and a balance." Let's leave aside *libra*, the balance, which stands for laboratory science and which does not have a prominent place in the graduate Program here at the College, and inquire instead into the meaning of 'liberal' through the other three words.

First: *liber*, or book. If 'liberal' means 'bookish,' then the education we pursue here is indeed liberal education, for perhaps even more than those who pursue the undergraduate version of the Program – as I claimed in my convocation address last summer – we in the Graduate Institute learn together chiefly by reading great books and discussing the questions that arise from our reading. Before we congratulate ourselves on our bookish education, though, we should acknowledge that the term 'bookish' is pejorative to some. You may have heard the disapproving phrase 'book smart,' which is sometimes contrasted to a more approving phrase, like 'street smart.' The thought behind these phrases and this contrast is that a bookish education is concerned with things that are unreal, because abstract, or theoretical, or fictional. 'Street smarts,' on the other hand, come from lived experience with things that are real, because concrete or practical. The people who use these phrases and make this contrast are probably thinking that only the 'school of hard knocks' can equip us for a life well-lived; a liberal, bookish education only equips us for a life well-read. If 'liberal' means 'bookish,' then, we are compelled by their disapproval to wonder whether a liberal education is what we want.

It is fitting to grant in reply that the content of the books we read is abstract, or theoretical, or fictional. We might even be tempted to sharpen the criticism: since we read the *great* books, what we read about is most abstract, most theoretical, the greatest of fictions. But we should also ask these critics what they mean by 'real.' The concrete or practical content of

the real experiences they advocate are deeds, rather than thoughts; 'put down your books and *live* a little' could be their motto. But deeds are accompanied by thoughts, guided by thoughts, and even magnified by thoughts. When we act we often begin by thinking; when we are kept from acting we often argue; and when we are asked why we act, we often give reasons. When we want to act with the assistance of others, we give them reasons. Moreover, every deed aims at a state that is not yet achieved, which is to say, at a fiction. It turns out that the real, if it is characterized by deeds, is shot through both with thought and with fiction. All 'street smart' human beings, we might say with a twinkle in our eyes, stretch out toward 'book smarts.' Their stretching out is an inadvertent desire for liberal, bookish education.

Now we may have convinced our critics that deeds are embroiled with thoughts, and reality with fiction. But isn't it still the case that a bookish education is somehow more pallid than real life experience? Don't people read to escape the real world, to evade their responsibilities? We can find a kind of reply to these questions near the end of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Having just invented a myth claiming that written speeches are good only as reminders to those who already know – which is to say, that learning cannot come from books – Socrates imagines a different kind of speech, one that is "written with knowledge in the soul of him who understands, with power to defend itself, and knowing how to speak and to keep silent toward those it ought" [276a-b]. He envisions, in other words, a writing that behaves like a living being, a writing the reading of which is like interacting with a living being. The great books that are also our teachers *are* such writings. Because they are written with knowledge, each time we turn to them they speak to us in a way commensurate with our capacities. If conversation with a living being is a real life experience – as our critics of bookish education would claim – then so too is reading such a writing. Indeed, since they are purged of the mute, the everyday, and the accidental,

reading the great books is more vivid than much of real life experience. Far from being an evasion of the real world and its responsibilities, our liberal, bookish education confronts this world directly and courageously.

Let's turn to the second noun behind the adjective 'liberal': *liberi*, or free human beings. It points to the meaning of liberal education that is perhaps most congenial to us, as participants in a modern liberal democracy: liberal education as education of the free, as education to freedom, as the education that most supports our political regime. But there are complications to this meaning of 'liberal' that demand our attention; and it is a principle of education to be most suspicious of what is congenial. First, is liberal education an education of the free, or an education of the unfree to freedom? The great documents of our democracy tell us the former: that we are endowed by our creator with an unalienable right to liberty, which government must secure for us. But our motto tells us the latter: that the College, not the government, makes free human beings – presumably out of those who are not free, despite being citizens of this great republic. The government tells us that we are free to do what we want; but the College tells us that we are not free until we know what we *should* want. Now St. John's is supported in this bold claim by one of the greatest of the great books that we read: the *Republic* of Plato. In that dialogue Plato has his Socrates depict "our nature in its education and want of education" through the image of a cave in which human beings are imprisoned "from childhood" [514a-b]. Human beings may be born free, Socrates' image tells us, but most or perhaps all of us become unfree as children, and we then need education if we are to become free again. If Socrates' depiction is right, then a liberal education begins with the realization that we are not free; and the belief that we are free is an obstacle to such an education.

But this complication goes further. In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, as we all know, Socrates spends a lot of time trying to get a recalcitrant Meno to offer a satisfying definition of virtue. At one point near the middle of the dialogue, after Meno has evaded Socrates' demand in a variety of ways, Socrates says that he will let himself be ruled by Meno, "since you don't even attempt to rule yourself – so that you can be free, I suppose" [86d-e]. By the end of the dialogue, the freedom-loving Meno has learned nothing; the one who has learned the most from Socrates is Meno's obedient, nameless slave. If Socrates' diagnosis is right, then liberal education not only requires that we grant that we are not free; it also requires that we give up our desire for freedom. We must become slaves of the speeches, following wherever they lead.

Can this be right, though? According to still another meaning of 'liberal,' liberal education is education for *free* human beings, as distinguished from slaves, because it begins by requiring that we have the leisure, the freedom from necessity, to pursue it. This freedom makes liberal education an end in itself; to the extent that education is not an end in itself, to the extent that it is not free from necessity, it is not liberal. This sense of 'liberal' reminds us that we diminish liberal education when we talk only about the skills that accompany it, or the careers for which it prepares us. But Socrates' warning from the *Meno* about the desire to be free, and about the need for us to rule ourselves, also reminds us that even activities for their own sake are subject to rules, and not simply free from necessity. So how can it be that liberal education, the education that is fitting for free human beings because it alone is for its own sake, nonetheless requires that we acknowledge and accept that we are not free?

This brings me to the last of our Latin nouns: *liberi*, or children. According to our motto, children are the raw material on which the College works, out of which to fashion free human beings. This claim makes some sense for the undergraduate Program, but not for the Graduate

Institute: since we require our students to have earned bachelor's degrees, we cannot say that they begin with us as children. But there is another respect in which the word *liberi*, or children, could be applied to graduate students – and perhaps more so than to undergraduates. There is an ancient accusation leveled against inquiry into fundamental questions, one that is at least as old as Plato's *Gorgias*: that such inquiry is childish. In that dialogue a young Athenian named Callicles, angered by the claims Socrates makes about justice and punishment, bursts into the conversation with a long speech, during which he tells Socrates that he feels about philosophy the same way he feels about mumbling and playing around childishly:

> For seeing philosophy in a young lad, I admire it, and it seems to me fitting, and I consider this human being to be a free man, whereas the one who does not philosophize I consider illiberal, someone who will never deem himself worthy of any fine and noble affair. But whenever I see an older man still philosophizing and not released from it, this man, Socrates, surely seems to me to need a beating [485c-d].

We find an echo of the same view in Paul, who writes in his first *Letter to the Corinthians*, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" [I Cor. 13:11]. Knowledge or faith about fundamental matters is fitting for an adult; inquiry into fundamental matters is childish. So what are we doing, inquiring at our age?

The best response to this accusation of childishness comes from a book by Friedrich Nietzsche, titled *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It tells of a man named Zarathustra who wants to give his happiness meaning by giving humankind a gift, and so descends from his mountain to the valley and the town below. There he speaks to the townspeople, but he fails to convince them of the value of his gift; so he begins to travel in search of companions, and while travelling he makes a series of speeches. The first of these, spoken during his stay in a town called 'The Motley Cow,' is titled "On the Three Metamorphoses." In it Zarathustra describes three changes

of shape in what he calls "the spirit": "how the spirit becomes a camel, and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child" [ASZ, 137]. The first metamorphosis, into a camel, occurs when the spirit first wants to bear the most difficult burdens; the second, into a lion, occurs when these burdens force the camel into the loneliest desert, and it must oppose the command 'thou shalt' with the demand 'I will.' If its opposition is successful, the lion wins freedom for itself, and it can undergo the third metamorphosis, into a child. About this final form of the spirit Zarathustra says: "The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'" [ASZ, 139].

With Nietzsche's help, then, we can correct those who accuse liberal education of being childish, by saying that in its highest form it is instead child*like*. Continuing inquiry into fundamental questions is innocent, because it asks 'what is?' without regard for the practical consequences, and because it is deaf to the adult demand that its questions be settled for the sake of action. It is forgetting because it sets aside the authoritative answers to its questions. It is a new beginning because it seeks to ask about what is first for human beings, what is given. And perhaps most importantly, childlike education is a game in the highest sense. It combines the freedom from necessity that distinguishes play from work with the willing subjection to necessity that distinguishes play from rest. It combines the camel's readiness to shoulder the greatest burdens with the lion's fierce demand that the burdens be of his own choosing. The result is a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes': something that is for its own sake, but that can be yoked to other things, and so give rise to a world.

Let this be the conclusion, for now, of this inquiry into 'what is liberal?' Liberal education is bookish education, freeing education, childlike education. As education through conversation with the great books, it is the consummation of practice and a courageous

confrontation with what is most real. It is the education of the free who know they are not free into a freedom they do not desire. It is an education that forgets and begins again, that plays at the most serious things, and that thereby gives us a world in which to live. This is liberal; so what, then, is education?

I would like to conclude by announcing that there will be a study group this term on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, which will meet on Tuesday afternoons, from 3:00 to 4:30, in the Hartle Room, beginning on June 26th. We will read and discuss one act at each meeting. Also, tomorrow at 2:00 there will be a writing workshop, also in the Hartle Room. Lastly, I would like to invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to preceptorial.

The summer 2012 term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. *Convocatum est.*

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
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Notes

[1] Actually, Buchanan wrote *liberus*, free human being; but I can find no evidence of this substantive form of the adjective *liber*, or free.