St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Spring 2015

What Is a Tutor?

(Or, On the Future of Our Educational Institution)

Welcome, new students, returning students, and tutors, to St. John's College, and to the Graduate Institute. Today each of you is beginning, or resuming, your membership in a community of learning, at a College that dedicates itself to inquiry: to asking fundamental questions, and to pursuing answers to these questions. For the past eleven terms, in just as many convocation addresses, I have tried to shed light on various aspects of the graduate program here at St. John's. But in this, my twelfth and final address as Associate Dean for the Graduate Program, I mean to shine the light of inquiry closer to home – at the risk of doing what Coriolanus refused to do, and displaying my wounds. I mean to ask: what is a tutor?

This question may seem perverse. How can someone who professes himself a tutor ask, in public no less, what a tutor is? To this I reply: there is no guarantee that the names we use all the time are the correct ones. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato's Socrates claims that "those who spend their lives in philosophy" are *almost* ignorant of whether their neighbors are human beings. This should remind us that we too run the risk of using the wrong words for the things we encounter in the world. Consider the word 'tutor.' While nowadays it takes some digging in the College's website to verify the fact, here at St. John's, faculty members are indeed called 'tutors,' in order to distinguish them from professors. On the Annapolis page for prospective faculty, we find this claim: "We use the title 'tutor' to highlight that learning is an ongoing, cooperative enterprise in which some are at different stages [from] others." Professors, we are led to infer, downplay or even deny – by their reliance on lectures – the ongoing, cooperative, and individual character of learning.

We could be forgiven for further inferring that, by calling themselves 'tutors,' the faculty at St. John's means to indicate not just their difference from professors, but their superiority to them.

Any such pretensions are quickly punctured, however, by none other than the Oxford English Dictionary. As it archly informs us, the particularly American meaning of 'tutor' is "a teacher *subordinate* to a professor" [my emphasis]. But it also gives us the etymology of the word, which gets us off to a helpful start. 'Tutor' comes from the Latin verb *tueri*, which means 'to watch' – and so, derivatively, 'to take care of,' 'guard,' or 'protect.' A tutor in the original sense protected a child and his estate in the absence of his father. But this purely defensive sense of the word has become obsolete. In its modern meaning, the prophylactic sense is combined with a pedagogical sense. Nowadays, a tutor is "one employed in the supervision *and instruction* of a youth in a private household."

Why this pedagogical addition to the work of a tutor? It must have come from the sense that for the young, protection and supervision are not enough. No lesser a defender of the sufficiency of human nature – or in his formula, "the natural goodness of man" – than Jean-Jacques Rousseau is compelled to acknowledge, in his educational treatise *Emile*, that nature can at most be entrusted with one-half, or perhaps only one-third, of the education of a human being who is meant to live in society. Since even the best-guarded young can turn out badly, no one should employ a supervisor who is not also an instructor, who in addition to protecting the young from malign external influences, takes care to expose them to benign ones. To be employed, then, a tutor must also be an instructor, which is to say, a teacher. Until so-called competency-based education rules the land, no student will receive a college degree for having been left to herself for four years, provided only that she has been adequately supervised and protected. Professing via lectures is not required, nor perhaps even recommended, but teaching and learning are necessary. So to be a tutor in this modern sense, one must teach.

Here, then, is a first answer to our guiding question: a tutor is a teacher. How satisfying is this answer? To test it, let's turn to one of the books we read in the Philosophy & Theology tutorial: *Beyond Good and Evil*, by Friedrich Nietzsche. In the first section of the fourth part of that book, a part titled "Epigrams and Interludes," we find this warning: "Whoever is a teacher from the ground up, takes all things in earnest only in relation to his students – even his own self." To want to teach is to want another human being to learn, which, absent an omnipotent speech, is to want to accommodate oneself to the conditions of another human being's learning. To want to accommodate oneself wholly in this way, even in one's own ground – to be willing to say *anything*, so long as it produces a change in the listener – is to take one's own self seriously only in relation to one's students. It is, in other words, to place a higher value on the one who does not know than on the one who knows: to judge that the student's unknown genius has a higher value than the teacher's known teaching. The limit of this willingness to bend oneself into whatever shape the student needs, this faith that each student has an unknown, and perhaps unknowable genius, is an education that stresses form rather than content, and that judges, not *what* a student has learned, but only *that* she has learned – which is to say, changed. What is worse, this subordination involves the thoroughgoing teacher in a contradiction, since one has a right to teach only if knowing is more valuable than not knowing.

So Nietzsche hints that we cannot be wholly satisfied with the thought that a tutor is simply a teacher. But he has much more to say on the question. While this playful epigram is his first mention of teachers [*Lehrer*] in *Beyond Good and Evil*, and his only substantial one, he devotes the whole of Part Six of the book to those who, literally, have been taught: "We Scholars [*Wir Gelehrten*]." Though as a former philologist Nietzsche identifies himself as a scholar, experience has given him access to a higher ideal than the scholarly, and to a ground from which to criticize scholars, those who are wholly what they have been taught. Objectivity is the scholarly ideal,

Nietzsche writes, and to the extent that a scholar achieves this ideal he becomes a precious instrument, like a mirror:

> he lives to submit before everything that wants to be known, without any other desire than for that which knowing, "mirroring," gives, – he waits, until something comes, and then spreads himself delicately out, so that even light footsteps and the slipping over of ghostly beings not be lost on his surface and skin.

In the light of his ideal the scholar squints at the subjective aspects of his person; he has time for the objects of his study, but none for himself, and he demands of others the same submission. He is industrious and patient, measured and even in his capacities and needs, dependent on the approval of others, familiar, egalitarian, mediocre, and envious. As a thoroughgoing learner, he is the ideal match for the thoroughgoing teacher. Like a mirror, his face remains empty until something like a book – any book – is put in front of it.

Nietzsche grants that scholars have very serious reasons for pursuing this objective ideal. The extent of human knowledge is vast and growing, all the more so now than in Nietzsche's day. To want to learn everything is to risk exhaustion; to want to learn only some things, before one knows everything, is to risk either dilettantism or an arbitrary, ignorant choice. None of us wants to be deceived in the things that are most important to us to know; and this intellectual conscience demands that if we learn anything, we should learn it well. So we succumb to specialization, for the sake of our self-respect, and the respect of others. The ideal of objectivity recasts this necessity as a virtue, by dignifying our careful submission before anything that wants to be known, our careful cultivation of our scholarly patch of grass. But the price of the objective ideal is high, for we scholars become skeptical and envious of everything that is not objective: of everything that can judge with a clear conscience for personal, subjective reasons. Indeed, we must be skeptical of philosophy in particular, wherever we detect that it is not objective – that is, not scholarly. So through a combination of intellectual conscience and exhaustion, we scholars end by putting ourselves in the place of philosophers. Those who are skeptical about the possibility of judgment

displace those responsible for making the most comprehensive judgments. This, in Nietzsche's account in Part Six of *Beyond Good and Evil*, is the consequence for students of learning from those who are teachers from the ground up. Wholly selfless teachers produce students wholly lacking in selves.

It's time for a brief summary: a step backward for the sake of a leap forward. A tutor cannot simply be a guardian, since this presumes that the young need nothing but protection to turn out well. But a tutor cannot simply be a teacher, either, since wholehearted teachers educate young who are nothing for themselves. What meaning of 'tutor' remains, on which we can wholeheartedly pride ourselves? I once overheard a colleague of mine say something on this score that I find helpful: "a tutor is someone who deserves a sabbatical." Lest I be suspected of just now having taken my leap too far into the subjective and personal, let me explain what I take this colleague to mean.

When times are good, and circumstances ordinary, each faculty member at St. John's College receives a sabbatical every seventh year of her tenure. We say that this respite from teaching is for the sake of study, rest, and renewal of spirit, in anticipation of future teaching. But we require from tutors neither a plan for a proposed sabbatical, detailing the studies to be pursued and the rest to be taken, nor a report on a completed sabbatical. We do not test the spirits of our returning tutors, to see whether they truly have been renewed. All that we require of a tutor returning from sabbatical is that she resume teaching, for at least two more years. Now a practice designed and described in this way, as a matter of instruction and not of compensation, rests on two presuppositions. First, it presupposes that a tutor's teaching will be benefited by study that is not dictated by teaching. It acknowledges that, however much we may learn while we teach, the learning that is incidental to teaching is not enough – even from the perspective of the demands of teaching. Second, and more importantly in my view, by requiring neither a plan nor a report for a

sabbatical, our practice acknowledges that the tutor, and not the College, is the best judge of what counts as study, rest, and renewal of spirit – and that allowing tutors to exercise this judgment will benefit their teaching. Our practice acknowledges that tutors are *not* teachers from the ground up; we could say, with a wink at our modern arithmomania, that they are six parts teachers, and one part something else. But this one part is the important part, for it is the ground of the rest. And here is where the aptness of my colleague's dictum becomes clear. A tutor is someone who deserves a sabbatical, because a tutor, in the precise sense, is someone who can be trusted to make independent judgments about the ground of her teaching. A tutor is someone whose own work *is* the work of the College, not because she pursues it always with an eye to the needs of the College, but because she knows that the activity of her own intellect and imagination is the source of the life in her teaching. The College depends on such tutors to constitute its community of learning – to make it more than a community of teaching. No array of scholarly specialists, however wisely selected, can take their place.

To add some detail to this vision of what a tutor is, we can turn back to Part Six of *Beyond Good and Evil*, to the ideal that Nietzsche opposes to the scholarly. "In the face of a world of 'modern ideas,' which would banish everybody into a nook and 'specialty,'" Nietzsche writes – and we should interject here that this is our world, to an even greater degree than it was Nietzsche's –

> a philosopher – supposing that today there could be philosophers – would be compelled to place the greatness of the human being, the concept of 'greatness,' precisely in his comprehensiveness and multiplicity, in his wholeness in manifoldness. He would even determine worth and rank from this, how much and how many things one could bear and take upon oneself, how far one could stretch his responsibility.

Let's heed Nietzsche's warning that what a philosopher is cannot be taught [*nicht zu lehren*], and give the anti-scholarly ideal a more modest name, one more suited to saying what a tutor is. Let's call this the comprehensive ideal. Far from being scholarly mirrors who submit themselves before every thought that comes along, who wish to do nothing more than understand each author as

he understood himself, who are Platonists because it is Monday afternoon, and monotheists because it is Monday night, devotees of the comprehensive ideal seek to place everything they comprehend into an ordered whole in which they can live. They are skeptics, not in the sense that they try to bend every exclamation point into a question mark, but in the sense that they test every thought to see whether it is solid and shapely enough to be of use. They are courageous, deft, and methodical critics, not in order to anatomize every idea they touch, but in order to be able, when called on, to stand alone and give an account of themselves, and of the world they are trying to be. Seen in the light of the comprehensive ideal, it is clear why a tutor is someone who deserves a sabbatical. A sabbatical is the appropriate conclusion to the creation of a world.

But what can a tutor striving for the comprehensive ideal be for her students? At the root of the German word for teacher, *Lehrer*, is the word *Lehre*, or 'instruction' – a word closely related to *Lehr*, or 'model.' We see something similar in the etymology of 'to teach,' which can be traced back to the Greek word δείκνυμι, meaning 'to show.' We are accustomed to say here at the College that tutors are model learners, but we should remember that they are also models of having learned, of living with learning. Tutors who aspire to the comprehensive ideal model this ideal for their students, and show them that it *can* be lived. They show them that their learning is neither for its own sake, in that morally humble but metaphysically proud phrase, nor for the sake of some job, family, institution, or community to which they must subordinate themselves, or into which they must fit. Rather, their learning is for the sake of the wholeness in manifoldness of the being that longs to comprehend a world – the wholeness in manifoldness that is the true end of liberal education. It is by protecting this possibility, in tutors, staff, and students alike, that our remedial community earns the right to be called a community of learning. It is through this wholeness in manifoldness of the human being, in the highest sense of the term, that our two programs of instruction, the graduate and the undergraduate, win the right to consider themselves wholes. And it

is in pursuit of this wholeness in manifoldness that liberal education, our bookish, freeing, childlike education, becomes what it is:

> the consummation of practice and a courageous confrontation with what is most real… the education of the free who know they are not free into a freedom that they do not desire… 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.

There will be five Graduate Institute-hosted study groups this term: one on Homer's *Odyssey*, one on Euclid's *Elements*, one on Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, one on Shakespeare's Henry plays, and one on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Schedules and meeting places for these groups will be circulated by email soon. By way of conclusion, let me invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to class.

The spring 2015 term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. *Convocatum est.*

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
5 January 2015

Note

In my beginning, I have Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in mind, but also the beginning of section 204, in Part Six of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Socrates' remark can be found at *Theaetetus*, 174B. For "the natural goodness of man," see Rousseau's note for philosophers in the *Final Reply*; the passage of *Emile* to which I refer is on page 38 of Bloom's edition. Nietzsche's epigram about the teacher from the ground up is section 63 of *Beyond Good and Evil*; the translation is my own. Part Six of that book had a strong influence on the whole argument of this address: I quote from sections 207 and 212, making my own translations there too; but the aspects of Nietzsche's argument that I do not mention are more interesting. The final quotation is from my Summer 2012 convocation address, "What Is Liberal Education? Part I."