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

What Is a Segment?

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 turn the searchlight of inquiry on ourselves. Today I mean to do so by looking at the graduate program, and asking 'what is a segment?'

It is easy to be at a loss in the face of such a 'what is?' question, since it is not clear that a segment is one of the beings. Rather, 'segment' is the conventional name we give to the parts of the graduate program here at St. John's, of which there are five: Philosophy & Theology, Politics & Society, Mathematics & Natural Science, Literature, and History. These segments can be taken in almost any order, though the History segment cannot be taken first; and completing four of five segments entitles the student to a Master's of Arts in Liberal Arts. Given that the name 'segment' is a convention, we might at first think that the question 'what is a segment?' is an empty one: couldn't these things just as well have been called parts of the graduate program? But once we recognize that the undergraduate expression of the St. John's Program does not *have* segments – its parts are either the four years, freshman to senior, or the four classes, seminar, tutorial, preceptorial, and laboratory – we see that the name 'segment' marks something distinctive about the graduate expression of the Program.

So the question ‘what is a segment?’ becomes something like ‘what were they thinking when they called the parts of the graduate program – parts in some sense other than the sense in which the different classes are parts – segments?’ And now we are not without resources, for we can ask more generally, ‘what do people mean when they use the word segment?’ The word means ‘part,’ certainly; but more strictly it means a part which has been, or can be, cut from a whole. A segment, in other words, is not a natural part, the way a finger is part of a hand, or a hand part of a human body. Rather, a segment is a part by violence: something that, were it not for the cutting, we might not see as a part at all.

The particularly geometrical meaning of the term makes the need for cutting more clear. In definition six of Book Three of his *Elements*, Euclid tells us that “a segment [τμῆμα: the word means a part cut off] of a circle is the figure contained by a straight line and a circumference of a circle.” From this we get our more modern geometrical uses of the term, such as in the phrase ‘line segment,’ which means a part cut off by two points from an infinite, or at least endless, straight line. These particularly geometrical uses of the word ‘segment’ have two features in common. First, the part is a segment because it must be cut off from the whole to be distinguished as a part; and this is so because the whole is a homogeneous magnitude: a finite area in the case of the circle, and an infinite length in the case of the straight line. The homogeneity of the magnitude means that it has no natural parts, and that any part of it can be distinguished as a part by cutting. Second, the segment so distinguished, because of the homogeneity of its whole, can suffice as an indication of the whole. Given a straight line segment, we can produce it in both directions, or remove its endpoints, to find the whole modern straight line. And given any segment of a circle, no matter how small, we can find the whole circle too.

Could these two intimations of the geometrical meaning of 'segment' hold true for the term as we use it in the graduate program? In calling its parts 'segments,' that is, could the intention have been to intimate that the graduate program is a homogeneous whole, cut arbitrarily into parts, each of which points back to the whole?

I think the answer to these questions is 'yes.' Despite appearances, the graduate program here at St. John's is a homogeneous whole – as is the undergraduate program, incidentally – and its segments represent arbitrary divisions of that whole into parts. To be convinced of this view, we need to look into, and try to see through, several other conventional terms that stand in our way. Chief among these are the names we give to the segments and to our classes. The names of our classes are easier to overcome, so let's begin with them.

I hope it will surprise no one here to learn that our seminars are not restricted to seminarians, nor are they literally seed-plots; nor do we bring in preceptors – that is, commanders or instructors – to teach our preceptorials; nor are we called tutors – that is, watchers or guardians – because our charges have not yet reached the age of legal majority. Despite their evocative names, our classes differ mainly in size, in the number of tutors and students in each. The activity of each, the pursuit through conversation of answers to fundamental questions, is the same; and even though in some tutorials the demonstration of mathematical propositions or the analysis of poetry is the chief technique, nothing in principle prevents a preceptorial or even a seminar from reading a text closely, or attending to a demonstration at the board. Even the composition of each segment out of a seminar, a tutorial, and a preceptorial is not a matter of necessity – though it is, I hasten to add, a matter of strict policy. While there are practical reasons to entrust a smaller class with the tasks of demonstration in the Mathematics & Natural Science tutorial, and analysis in the Literature

tutorial, it is not as clear that the readings of the Politics & Society, Philosophy & Theology, or History tutorials could not be assigned to a seminar, nor that the seminar readings from these segments would be ill-suited to a tutorial. There is nothing about Plato's *Republic*, for example, that suits it to be discussed by twenty people, nor about Hobbes's *Leviathan* that suits it to sixteen. We can even make much the same claim about preceptorials: that all of our seminar and tutorial books are worthy of the intense scrutiny of a preceptorial, and that only practical considerations should bar us from including our preceptorial books in the seminar and tutorial reading lists.

The reason why our segments *do* in fact consist of a seminar, a tutorial, and a preceptorial seems mostly to have to do with our judgment that each segment should consist of a required and an elective component: the elective component is the preceptorial, while the required component is shared between the seminar and the tutorial, in various ways, depending on the segment. Sometimes the ampersand marks the division of labor: in the Philosophy & Theology segment we have a largely-philosophy tutorial and a largely-theology seminar; in the Mathematics & Natural Science segment it is the tutorial that takes mathematics, and the seminar natural science. But sometimes this is not the case. If there really is such a thing as society, it is not clear whether the Politics & Society seminar or tutorial treats it more fully. Where there is no ampersand in the segment title, by contrast, the division of labor between the seminar and tutorial is that the seminar in some fashion takes the ancients and the tutorial the moderns. The Literature seminar is unapologetically Hellenic, while the tutorial handles the rest of literature. The History seminar reaches as late as Gibbon among its authors, but as late as the fall of the Roman Empire among its subjects; the tutorial picks up with Augustine and the rise of Christianity.

I hope this is enough to convince you that the different names we give to our classes – seminar, tutorial, and preceptorial – are no barrier to understanding the graduate program as homogeneous. The names we give to our segments, on the other hand, present more of a challenge. Everywhere we look in higher education today, we see these names and similar ones written above the majors and departments: Philosophy, Theology, Political Science, Sociology, Mathematics, Physics, Literature, and History. But we should not infer from our adoption of such titles for our segments that we agree with the thinking that leads to majors and departments. Elsewhere, the title of a major often amounts to a compressed, predetermined answer to a series of predetermined questions. It tells students what they will be studying, and sometimes even what kind of profession they will have when they are done. It asserts the existence of the kinds of beings that the discipline studies, that they are somehow knowable, and that they are worth knowing. Perhaps most importantly, it reassures students about what they will be doing when they study: physics majors can evade essays, and philosophy majors escape problem sets.

For us, by contrast, the titles of our segments should stand as compressed questions in need of answers, and as opportunities for wonder that is the opposite of reassuring. Is there such a thing as a life lived under the sole guidance of reason, or under the authority of revelation – and ought we to think that one or the other of these lives can make us happy? Is there a distinct realm of politics, or does it always reduce to philosophy or to theology? Are there beings that are characteristically knowable, and if so, what sort of beings are they? Are the natural beings among these beings, and so knowable as well? Is there a place for poetry or music in a happy life, and do they provide something that reason and revelation cannot? Is there such a thing as history, does it involve novelty or progress, and will it end? We must not take these titles that we use merely to name the segments – numbering them would also have been confusing – as

grounds for thinking that we know in advance what sort of questions and answers can be asked and given in our classes, and hence that we know in advance the limits of what we might learn.

Now to say that each of our segment titles points to a fundamental question is not yet to show that the graduate program is homogeneous, nor that it is a whole. Could there not be a series of fundamental questions, perhaps even an infinite series, each of which has nothing to do with the other, and so each of which indicates and demarcates its own field of inquiry? I can almost imagine such a series; but as soon as I require that these questions have nothing to do with one another, they cease to be meaningful to me as questions. Our experience in preceptorial, the experience that some of you will soon have for the first time, gives good guidance here. Most of the preceptorials offered this term count toward all three of the term's segments: Philosophy & Theology, Politics & Society, and History. And yet very few of the fundamental and interesting questions asked in these preceptorials will present themselves exclusively as philosophical, theological, political, or historical questions. It will occur neither to students nor to tutors, while pursuing these questions, that there are certain directions the conversation cannot take because a disciplinary boundary would be crossed. And it will not be evident which segment each student is taking, from the tendency of his or her remarks to reside in one discipline or another. To the contrary: while the interesting and fundamental questions we pursue in our classes can originate in the concerns of many, perhaps infinitely many, disciplines, as interesting they all indicate a relation between the thing asked about and us, the questioners and answerers; and as fundamental they all point to the central questions of what we are as questioning and answering beings, and how we should live. So it is precisely the interesting character of the questions indicated by our segment titles, and pursued in our classes, that indicates the wholeness of the Program in both its undergraduate and graduate expressions – and

in doing so, indicates the problematic and aspirational wholeness of the human being. And similarly it is precisely the fundamental character of these questions that indicates the problem that we are, the human problem that constitutes the Program's homogeneity.

What, then, is a segment? For us, here in the Graduate Institute, a segment is three classes in which we read great books, gathered under a title which is meant to provoke interesting and fundamental questions, all of which point back to the first and characteristic question for a human being: 'how should I live?' I do not mean by this conclusion to deny that certain questions are more likely to be pursued in the classes of one segment than in those of another; in the Mathematics and Natural Science tutorial, for example, we would be remiss if we did not discuss Euclid's definition of a straight line, whereas this definition is not a frequent topic of conversation in the Literature seminar. But I do mean to insist that our segment titles, and the segments themselves, ought not to be taken as signs of deep differences, natural kinds, among the books that we read and the questions that we ask. The St. John's program is a whole, not a heap.

But why this insistence? Why ask 'what is a segment?' Just as graduate students have a special practical need for a segmented program, since the pace and order of their studies are not as regular as those of undergraduates, they also run special risks once the segments have names, as ours do. For some of you may already have studied, may have degrees in, may even have *advanced* degrees in disciplines that share the names of our segments. I insist on the questionableness of these names in part to point out that no matter your previous education, you haven't done this before. Our task in our classes is to make the most familiar books and authors unfamiliar and newly challenging. I also insist on the questionableness of our segments' names to discourage the practice of worrying about which segments to take, and in which order. While

it is respectable to have reasons to want to read particular books by particular authors, we should keep in mind that what we find in the pages of every great book is human being, and human being more wonderful, and less reassuring, than we can imagine.

I would like to conclude by announcing that there will be a study group this term on Shakespeare's Roman plays: *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. We will read *Titus Andronicus* during the summer term. This term, the group will meet on Thursday afternoons, from 3:30 to 5:30, in the Hartle Room, beginning on January 19th. Watch your email accounts for a schedule of readings. I would also like to invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to tutorial.

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

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
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