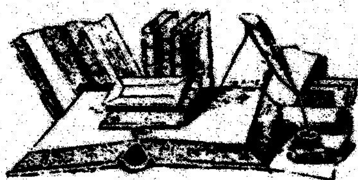

Morality, Aristotle, and Liberal Education

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Dean's Lecture
St. John's College, Santa Fe
August 27, 1993

Note: By tradition

the first Friday night lecture of the academic year

is given by the dean on the topic of liberal education.

Its purpose is to help students and tutors alike think again

about some important aspect of their work at this college.

It is often an occasion for the dean to address one or more

of the central books of the program. This lecture was given on

Friday, August 27, 1993, in the great hall of

St. John's College in Santa Fe. It was followed, as is the

case with all formal lectures at St. John's, by a discussion

period in which the issues it raises and others related

to them can be pursued in conversation.

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Morality, Aristotle, and Liberal Education

The *Charter* of St. John's College, written in 1784, justifies colleges like ours by saying, "Institutions for the liberal education of youth in the principles of virtue, knowledge and useful literature are of the highest benefit to society, in order to train up and perpetuate a succession of able and honest men for discharging various offices and duties in life."[1] Besides modernizing our sense of the phrase "able and honest men" to include able and honest women, we must also be concerned about the question of how the two objectives of our charge, liberal education and the training up of citizens, that seem so naturally connected in the *Charter*, have gotten in our time to seem far from each other, and perhaps even incompatible.

While we are confident about our grasp of the idea of liberal education, its relation to moral training is less clear. The question touches not only how one might "train up" that succession of useful citizens, but extends to serious wonder about whether moral training can be compatible at all with liberal education, understanding liberal education, as we do, to be radical inquiry.

I would like to take an editorial step back here to note that this problem is both genuine and serious. I come to it with possibilities in mind and with my own convictions, but without a completely comfortable or satisfying answer. It is, therefore, a proper example of the kind of question or issue we work on constantly at St. John's. It would be useful to wonder for a moment about where questions like this might lead—that is to say, what you might expect from me here tonight.

Different sorts of conclusions are appropriate to different sorts of questions: To some, a simply statable unequivocal answer is appropriate, and we should settle for nothing less. Perhaps the largest number of questions we take up are of this kind: They include solutions to mathematical equations, identifying words and grammatical forms, or correctly

[1]*St. John's College: Charter and Polity of the College* (Santa Fe, New Mexico, amended and restated as of April 1993), 2.

restating points made in arguments presented by the authors. Other questions admit of greater latitude: What is the best translation of a Greek passage? What is the most elegant proof for a mathematical theorem? Finally, there are those questions, surely the most important, that when pursued, take us back into ourselves and make us wonder what we must be thinking or believing to ask a question of that kind. The pursuit of these questions leads often not to answers, but to successive reformulations of the question.

The phrase "the question has become . . ." is something of a local cliche. People here also are fond of saying we have no answers, only more questions. Properly understood, both of these ways of talking are on the mark; in their popular sense, however, they are worrisome, as they suggest a conviction that there are no answers, no hope of truth, and that mere talking is to be counted a virtue in its own right.

In rethinking the larger questions we often discover that we are working from convictions that we have never seriously examined or challenged. The point is not so much that we should give these convictions up, but that we should wonder about them, see if they do in fact rest on principles that are certain, and at least be self-conscious about the part they play in our thought. As one question leads to another, we find also that they leap quite easily over subject-matter boundaries and that it is very difficult to get far with any of the larger issues without addressing the underlying philosophic problems. And so it is that all serious inquiry makes its way, sooner or later, to questions of reality, the meaning of our existence, and the possibility of knowledge.

Getting back to the main track of my inquiry, the next section will describe some of the basic points of ethics and moral training, as I fear that even the vocabulary of ethics may be a lost language these days to most. It may be helpful to distinguish training in ethics, practices by which one becomes moral, from moral philosophy or learning about ethics. Moral philosophy is surely a proper subject for our curriculum. The question arises about becoming good according to a particular understanding and what relation that might bear to liberal education.

It is also useful to distinguish between the ethics that serve the individual and those by which one serves the state. The authors of our *Charter* in mandating the civic virtues seem to presume the virtues of the

individual. This issue will be taken up further on.

There is no better company for exploring the basic concepts of ethics than that of Aristotle. By beginning with Aristotle, we will get the added benefit of seeing an account in which there is harmony between moral training and the kind of education appropriate to a free human being. At the risk of seeming always to take a step backward, I will set out some of Aristotle's most basic assumptions before tackling the specific issue of ethics. While it is surely appropriate to hold these assumptions as principles, that is to say unproved beginning points, it is also useful to think of them, taken together, as Aristotle's way of opening up a question. They are the ways of looking and asking that characterize his mind. I will resist the urge to go into all the elements one would need for a full grasp of his views, contenting myself with those most necessary for the question at hand.

First, he distinguishes activities that are for the sake of something else from those that are, as he says, "pursued and loved for themselves." (*Ethics* I 6, 1096 b 11)[2]

Second, he claims, "All knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good." (*Ethics* I 4, 1095 a 13) These "goods" can be ordered from the lowest to the highest. An activity that is for the sake of something else always ranks lower than one that is an end in itself.

Third, Aristotle says that things and beings in the world have natures, which he defines as their "principle of motion or rest." (*Physics* II 1, 192 b 15) For simple things, like rocks, the fulfillment of their nature means something simple like being in the place where rocks belong, or tending to move to such a place, i.e., the ground. Human beings have more complicated natures, the fulfillment of which requires more explanation. The various parts or dimensions of human nature are fulfilled in various ways; many of these we share with the animals. What is specific to humans, what we do not share with other animate forms, according to Aristotle, is that the function of man is "an activity of

[2]References to Aristotle are given in the standard pagination of the edition by I. Bekker (Berlin 1831). I have used W.D. Ross's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Benjamin Jowett's translation of the *Politics*, both available in many editions.

soul which follows or implies a rational principle." (*Ethics* I 7, 1098 a 8) The fulfillment of this nature, or, if you like, the target, mark, or end at which human nature aims to complete itself, according to Aristotle, is happiness. Happiness, he says, cannot be possession or even a state of character, such as being virtuous; it must be an activity. Working out an understanding of happiness and its relationship to the virtues is Aristotle's principal task in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

More must be said about the virtues. Aristotle's use of this term is technical and goes far beyond our casual, present-day use of this word. To each of the parts of the animating principle or soul, there pertains a specific excellence or "virtue." The virtues are of two kinds, moral and intellectual. We will first consider the moral virtues.

The principal moral virtues are courage, temperance, and justice; Aristotle is also interested in such lesser moral virtues as liberality, pride (understood differently from the Christian sense of pride as a sin), good temper, and the virtues of social intercourse: friendliness, truthfulness, and ready wit. He defines them according to a rough mathematical metaphor, as mean terms between vices at the extremities. Courage, for example, lies in a "mean position" between cowardice and rashness; temperance lies between self-indulgence and insensibility.

The image of the mean is quite helpful in providing a way of talking about these virtues, but it surely does not constitute a simple or complete explanation. Courage is not to be found halfway between cowardice and rashness, even if we could make sense of what "halfway" might mean in that sentence. The mean is relative to us as individuals with differing capacities; the actions it governs must be considered in light of contingent circumstances.

The image of the mean seems more appropriate to some moral virtues than others. It fits, for example, better with courage than temperance. For courage, the vices at the extremes, cowardice and rashness, are actual states we see people in. It seems to work less well, for example, with temperance. Temperance is concerned with those bodily pleasures that are liable to excess, such as eating, drinking and sex. (*Ethics* III 10, 1118 a 32) The extremes, according to Aristotle, are self-indulgence and insensibility. Self-indulgence is a vice clearly visible in others, whereas even Aristotle says that insensibility is not a direction in which one is likely to err:

> And if there is any one who finds nothing pleasant and nothing more attractive than anything else, he must be something quite different from a man; this sort of person has not received a name because he hardly occurs. (*Ethics* III 11, 1119 a 8 ff.)

The image of the mean, nevertheless, seems quite useful as a way of beginning to talk about these matters even in those cases where it fits less well, as it helps us to see the differences among the moral virtues.

Aristotle's general disclaimer may also be of use here. He says,

> It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. (*Ethics* I 3, 1094 b 24 ff.)

This may sound like an easy way for Aristotle to dodge inconvenient criticism. Actually, it seems to me that it is quite a truthful acknowledgment of how we often find ourselves with important questions. It helps us to understand Aristotle's account as suggestive and provocative, rather than rigid or dogmatic. He uses the language of mathematics, but he uses it poetically, metaphorically, not as though a subject like ethics could be bound strictly to a mathematical model. Consider, by way of contrast, the modern social sciences like psychology and sociology, or foundations of education, that adopt the language of mathematics, taking the connection between mathematics and their subjects literally, and assuming that the clarity of their mathematical conclusions endow their subjects with the same clarity and authority as mathematical physics. To go the other direction, to avoid subjects that cannot be made perfectly clear would leave very important areas of thought and action inaccessible to us and would leave us ill equipped to function in the world.

It may help to turn now from considering what the virtues are, and to think for a moment about how, according to Aristotle, they are acquired. He at first speaks of the moral virtues as states of character to be developed by habituation in childhood: Good character is associated with being well brought up. The Greek word that gets translated as character actually has a simpler sense of "habit." Through habituation

the moral virtues become "states of character." The moral virtues, says Aristotle, do not come to us by nature, nor are they contrary to nature, but "we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit." (*Ethics* II 1, 1103 a 24) Thus one's character is not the same as natural endowment. Natural endowment underlies character as a material. A person's natural endowment is shaped into character during childhood.

Pleasure and pain in their strict sense refer only to bodily sensations. By extension they can refer to the realm of moral sensibility as well. Children who are praised for doing what their parents want and blamed for doing otherwise eventually develop an inner sense of what is praiseworthy or deserving of blame if their parents and teachers are at all consistent about what they praise and blame. This process of inculcating habits is often spoken of as conditioning the young to love good things and good deeds. At one place Aristotle says, "Virtue consists in rejoicing and loving and hating aright." (*Politics* VIII 5, 1340 a 16)

These claims grate a bit on the modern ear, as they go so forcefully against the modern view that there are no better or worse ways to live, but only an array of equal alternatives. This is one of the places where one must fall back on experience for confirmation. Aristotle points out that much in the study of ethics will make no sense to those who themselves are not well brought up or to those who lack experience, who are too young. He acknowledges that differing states, religions, and families will diverge in their views of what is best and most worth loving. Though these are largely matters of convention, they are not simply arbitrary. They must be of a piece with one's understanding of how they serve the aim of human happiness, and some ways of construing human happiness are superior to others.

The experience of being a parent may be helpful here. Bringing up children, even if done badly or carelessly, will necessarily have an effect on the shape of a child's character, on what a child comes to feel is worthy of praise or blame. Children grow up sympathetic to the convictions of their parents. As Aristotle says, "Children start with a natural affection and disposition to obey." (*Ethics* X 9, 1180 b 6) And, at least for a good many years, they take quite seriously what their parents deem worthy of praise or blame.

Having good habits, or being well brought up, is an important starting point both for acquiring moral virtue and even for being able to understand just what the study of ethics is. Aristotle says,

> Presumably, then, we must begin with things known to us. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is the starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting points. (*Ethics* X 9, 1095 b 3 ff.)

As his account proceeds, it emerges that the habituation that occurs in childhood, though necessary for moral virtue, is somehow insufficient since, as he says, an action cannot be virtuous unless done deliberately, as a matter of choice. Doing something deliberately necessarily involves the exercise of practical reason which is governed by "prudence," an intellectual virtue that serves the end of human action.

Aristotle, a little further in the treatise, offers this definition of moral virtue:

> Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (*Ethics* II 6, 1106 b 36 ff.)

We seem to be thrown back into the awkward position of being told, if you have practical wisdom, then you will know what I mean, which is nearly the same as saying, if you know what I mean, then you know what I mean. This seems not very helpful, and yet when I think for a moment about situations in which some action must be taken, the elements Aristotle describes are the very ones I consider. A failure of courage is surely some combination of two elements: first, misjudgment of the spectrum between cowardice and rashness, and second, weakness of character, a failure of the instinctive part to feel pleasure or praiseworthiness in noble action, or perhaps a failure of one's sense of right to win out over fears of criticism or blame.

Aristotle distinguishes two main virtues of the intellect, practical wisdom and philosophic wisdom. Practical wisdom or prudence is concerned with actions in the world. Aristotle calls it a "reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods." (*Ethics* VI 5, 1140 b 20) It applies both to the goods of the personal and political realms. It is the part of the soul that "forms opinions" and opinions specifically about actions. These are matters of deliberation. We must be careful to distinguish practical reason from mere cleverness or "smartness." Aristotle says,

> There is a faculty which is called cleverness; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it. Now if the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness. (*Ethics* VI 12, 1144 a 25 ff.)

Philosophic wisdom is, on the other hand, according to Aristotle, "scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature." (*Ethics* VI 7, 1141 b 3) The activity that characterizes philosophic wisdom is contemplation since its objects are things like the motions of the heavenly spheres and theology that are not subject to change and cannot be otherwise than as they are.

When he returns to the issue of happiness in the final book of the *Ethics*, he says, "Happiness is activity in accordance with virtue." (*Ethics* X 7, 1177 a 11) Activities in accordance with practical wisdom, and therefore in accord with moral virtue, he says, "befit our human estate." (*Ethics* X 8, 1178 a 10) But it is only the highest intellectual activity, contemplation of the highest and best things, done for its own sake, that brings with it happiness understood in the most complete sense. It is important to note that happiness is not mere physical pleasure, amusement, rest, or fun, but rather it entails intense activity, albeit activity of the mind. By Aristotle's account it is in contemplating the invariable truths that we both fulfill what is best in our nature and at the same time approach the divine:

> If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can,

> make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything . . . . that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest. (*Ethics* X 7, 1177 b 30 ff.)

In the *Ethics* Aristotle does not go much farther into the issue of philosophic wisdom and its constituent parts, intuitive reason and scientific knowledge. A thoroughgoing consideration, however, would require a very close look at these. It would also require serious attention to ascertaining the extent to which the rest of Aristotle's account of ethics depends on his understanding of philosophical activity.

As Aristotle's account unfolds, it becomes clear that to be a good human being in the highest sense requires full development of our capacities from top to bottom. Though good habits are the beginning of moral virtue, they are only virtuous in a meaningful way when they are governed by practical wisdom. Development of the practical reason, in the absence of philosophic wisdom, may never get beyond mere cleverness since its domain is the realm of means, not ends.

Perhaps the clearest case for the insufficiency of isolated virtues is Aristotle's account of the large-souled or "proud" man or perhaps the man with a large sense of himself. The great-souled man carries himself with awareness of his excellence. He disdains the things commonly held in honor; Aristotle says, "A slow step, a deep voice and a level utterance" characterize his manner. (*Ethics* IV 3, 1125 a 12) While the qualities of the "great-souled man" surely befit the consummately good man, they are ludicrous in those who lack the full complement of virtues. Pride or the "great-souled" virtue in isolation is simply a monstrosity.

It is a curious feature of the *Ethics* that Aristotle does not end the treatise with his account of contemplation and happiness. He concludes the treatise by turning his attention from contemplation and focusing again on the realm of practical reason, but now seeing the consideration of ethics as a necessary prerequisite to the study of politics. This fresh beginning near the end may be explained as follows: Contemplation is

the highest activity, but one can only engage in it when leisure is provided. Leisure here does not mean anything like time to be entertained or distracted. It means rather freedom from practical concerns, a freedom of the sort necessary for liberal education. Mind is only a part of our composite being, although it is the best part, and can only be exercised fully when practical matters are in order. Moreover, the composite nature of our being extends beyond ourselves: As individuals we are not sufficient unto ourselves but necessarily live in communities. Practical matters can be in order in a larger sense only to the extent that we live in a good state. The interdependence between individual and state is much stronger here than we may be used to thinking. Thus arises Aristotle's famous dictum in the *Politics* that man by nature is suited to living in a *polis* or city state. This sentence is often translated "man is by nature a political animal." (*Politics* I 2, 1253 a 2) With our present-day low regard for politicians, it sounds a little too close to "party animal"—which I'm sure Aristotle did not intend. Good states require good statesmen and legislators who will produce good laws; and on the other side, individuals must grow up under good laws to develop good character.

The question of how education might be helpful in producing moral virtue can now be taken up. By Aristotle's account it seems that the work of education with respect to morality is to re-found good habits, the makings of moral virtue, on the principles of reason, to hone the skills of deliberation and develop an understanding of the proper inter-relation of all the virtues, both moral and intellectual. By this way of thinking, teachers need to be concerned that their students do more than acquire value-neutral skills; students must actually develop practical wisdom with knowledge about the ends they should serve. Aristotle goes further in the eighth book of *Politics* when he says, "It is evident, then, that there is a sort of education in which parents should train their sons, not as being useful or necessary, but because it is liberal or noble." (*Politics* VIII 3, 1338 a 30 ff.) This passage suggests that an education befitting a free human being must take students beyond the practical and initiate them in contemplating the beautiful and the good.

For those who do not manage to get good habits as children, Aristotle leaves open the possibility of later acquisition: "For all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue may win it by a certain kind of study and care." (*Ethics* I 9, 1099 b 19) Indeed, Aristotle goes

farther than this when he claims that his treatise on ethics, "does not aim at theoretical knowledge . . . we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use." (*Ethics* II 2, 1103 b 26)

These passages throw a new light on all that has been said to this point. The first suggests that education might provide a catch-up version of moral training; the second, that the very activity of studying ethics might help us become moral. Consider Aristotle's exhortation:

> Surely, as the saying goes, where there are things to be done the end is not to survey and recognize the various things, but rather to do them; with regard to virtue, then, it is not enough to know, but we must try to have and use it, or try any other way there may be of becoming good. (*Ethics* X 9, 1179 a 35 ff.)

And for those who approach ethics without the good habits that form the predisposition of moral virtue, study may go far toward making up the difference. Building up the habits later in life on the basis of understanding, however, may be something like beginning to play the piano in midlife: It can be done, but not with the same grace that comes from habituation at an early age.

Aristotle suggests that someone who knows what virtue is will be virtuous. But he is careful about this; in some cases knowledge of virtue seems to be a sufficient spur to good action, but not always. In our experience, and I suspect in Aristotle's too, providing knowledge of what is good is not a reliable way of getting the thing to happen, of making people good. And yet knowledge is at least necessary: For someone to be good without knowing what that means would make no sense. We have all seen people who are good though not learned, or learned without being good. Perhaps the most education can do is to lay open the possibilities, providing access to some of the best thinking on these questions, with the hope that students will realize, whether they agree completely with any of these writers, that this is not a mere intellectual diversion, and that their convictions about these matters will have profound effects on the quality of their lives.

Aristotle loves to make fresh beginnings. After working through an account that is of the sort one would expect from him in the *Ethics*,

starting with things as they seem to us and leading back to principles, but before reaching his conclusions regarding happiness, he takes up the question of ethics from a new direction altogether in his discussion of friendship.

He outlines various kinds of friendship from those based on utility or the lower pleasures, in which there is disproportion of virtue, to friendships between those who are alike with respect to virtue, and finally those he calls perfect in which the virtues are of the highest order. Friendship itself he says is a virtue since it is a state of character and not a feeling or a passion. Moreover, friendship requires reciprocity; merely having good will toward someone is not the same as friendship. In his words:

> Now it looks as though love were a feeling, friendship a state of character, for love may be felt just as much towards lifeless things, but mutual love involves choice and choice springs from a state of character; and men wish well to those whom they love, for their sake, not as a result of feeling but as a result of a state of character. And in loving a friend men love what is good for themselves; for the good man in becoming a friend becomes a good to his friend. Each, then, both loves what is good for himself, and makes an equal return in goodwill and in pleasantness; for friendship is said to be equality, and both of these are found most in the friendship of the good. (*Ethics* VIII 5, 1157 b 29 ff.)

Aristotle's account of friendship of the highest sort, between those alike in virtue, adds three dimensionality to his view of ethics. The earlier parts of the treatise are concerned primarily with the self. The treatment of friendship strikes a powerful chord as it shifts our viewpoint from what we can affirm about what we see of morals and virtues in ourselves to what we observe, love, and hope for in our friends. It shows the ethics of an individual in a new light and adds power to the claim that it is human nature to live together. Thus in the same way that the highest activity, contemplation, takes place for the individual in the context of the lesser supporting activities, perfect friendship occurs between people in a society in the context of lower forms of friendship and lesser relationships in the *polis* that are necessary for its existence. Contemplation itself can be seen in a heightened sense when shared insight about the greatest and most beautiful things is the basis of

friendship and characterizes the conversations of friends.

It might be good to stand back from Aristotle's account at this point to consider what relation it bears to our work of liberal education. We are never obliged to pay blind homage even to the greatest of writers; their reputation should, however, gain them a good hearing. The principle of radical inquiry obliges us to read both sympathetically and critically. It would be a mistake to ignore either of these dimensions of our work of liberal education. Reading sympathetically means asking ourselves what would be required of us to see the world as Aristotle sees it. This means reading with openness and good will, being prepared to reach deeper appreciation through deeper understanding. It means being patient and not dismissive.

The second dimension of radical inquiry is only appropriate after the first. It binds us not to gloss over difficult and far-reaching assumptions, but to challenge them to ask the questions that may in fact uproot a writer's account. There are many places in my sketch of Aristotle's exploration of ethics that deserve serious questioning; there are even more such places in his full account. All of Aristotle's beginning places deserve critical attention. Why should we think that humans have natures, or if they do, has Aristotle gotten it right? Do these natures really strive for some end? Is it really true that some activities are higher and better than others? Are there really activities that are ends in themselves and not in the service of something else? What are the consequences of adopting Aristotle's positions? What are the consequences of the alternatives to them? Does human activity really aim at happiness, and if so, is Aristotle's account, that happiness is activity in accordance with the highest virtue, an adequate one? Should we be looking for starting places utterly different from Aristotle's?

The philosophic tradition we follow is itself an extended exercise in radical inquiry, of challenge and contradiction, but also of synthesis and rediscovery. As Plato finds fault with the positions of thinkers who came before him, so also Aristotle argues against positions taken by his friend and teacher, Plato. St. Thomas describes a world that fuses Aristotle's views with the spirituality of Christian scripture. The tradition pursues its relentless questions to the point that, especially in the last three and a half centuries, it has come seriously to doubt itself and has given up, at least for now, efforts at comprehensive and systematic explanation.

Much that was taken for granted by the drafters of our college *Charter* must now be either abandoned or rediscovered and rethought. The question remains, how are we to understand our charge "to train up and perpetuate a succession of able and honest men for discharging the various offices and duties in life?"

Clearly, it is not our business to habituate students to particular opinions and convictions: The closest we may come to this is in nurturing their love of inquiry and encouraging disciplined study. Furthermore, it remains a wonderful mystery how anyone can get to be convinced of the rightness of a view so strongly that it becomes the basis of action. Perhaps the best a liberal education can do is to help free students from the bonds both of ignorance and prejudice and provide an introduction to those authors, like Aristotle, who present well conceived explanations of us and the world that differ from the received opinions of our day.

Moreover, if it is right not to demand closure with respect to the largest philosophical questions, we must, nevertheless, behave according to a code at least roughly of the sort Aristotle would approve simply to pursue the demanding course of radical inquiry. At least this much is clear, our work of liberal education depends on good habits, on the moral virtues, in fact, on the very set of moral virtues Aristotle delineates. This is not a matter that can be put off until we are more certain, until students leave the college and enter the larger world. Demands are made on our moral virtue and practical reason every day, and our experiences here shape who we are and who we will be in the future.

If we really mean to train people up for useful service in our liberal democracy, we run a great risk at the college by studying writers like Nietzsche whose questions tear at the roots not only of liberal democracy but even of the standing of knowledge itself. This risk we willingly take, as it would constitute a failure of courage and be intellectually dishonest to skirt or banish these thinkers. What we do not have time for in our program, and I wish we did, is to do it all again, to reconsider Plato and Aristotle and St. Thomas in the light of more recent thought, for it is not necessarily true that more recent writers are more likely to be correct than the ancients.

Each year at least some of our graduates leave the college convinced that the point really was that all this reading and talk lead to nothing,

that the moral and intellectual virtues have no basis, that truth, beauty and goodness are merely arbitrary, and worse, that a continuing search for these things is bound to end in a muddle, and finally, that the only matters of any human importance are appetite or will. On the other hand, it is true that the majority of our alumni enter the larger world, their natures if not perfected, at least improved by the work here, tempered and purified by the crucible of the program to undertake responsibly and with distinction the tasks both civic and private that face them when they leave our halls.

I close this talk by recounting the tale of Theseus and the labyrinth, in a version borrowed from Plutarch. Theseus, the legendary hero of Athens, renowned for his good sense, soundness of character, and devotion to his *polis,* travelled from his birthplace in Troezen, and after a series of Herculean adventures arrived in Athens where he learned of the terms of tribute that bound Athens to Crete: Every nine years the Athenians were required to send seven youths and seven maidens to be given over to the Minotaur in his labyrinth. Plutarch cites Euripides description of the Minotaur:

> A mingled form where two strange shapes combined,
> And different natures, bull and man were joined. (*Lives* 9)[3]

By some accounts the labyrinth, presumably an intricate maze, was devised by Daedalus, the legendary craftsman and artist, for King Minos. The best end that the youths and maidens might hope for was to starve to death in one of the remote passages. As Plutarch puts it: "Wandering in the labyrinth, and finding no possible means of getting out, they miserably ended their lives there."(9) More likely, they would be destroyed by the Minotaur.

As legend has it, if anyone could kill the Minotaur, the tribute would cease. The first two times the tribute was made the ship was sent out with a black sail, a sign that there was no hope of a safe return. The third time Theseus managed to have himself designated as one of the seven youths. (There are conflicting accounts according to which Minos insisted that Theseus be included.) He insisted that a white sail be sent

[3]Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (New York: Modern Library).

along, to be used only if he were successful in defeating the Minotaur. Curiously, the oracle at Delphi advised that Theseus sacrifice to Aphrodite and make her his guide.

When he arrived at Crete, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, fell in love with him and provided him with "a clue of thread," presumably, a ball of thread that he trailed behind him as he made his way through the labyrinth. After dispatching the Minotaur he was able to find his way out of the labyrinth, putting an end to the tribute and saving the other young Athenians.

By a leap of fancy, it seems to me that we too in our program at this college, boldly send our students, like Theseus into the labyrinths of post Nietzschean thought, with the hope that somehow they will manage to face the intellectual challenges of the last hundred and fifty years that do constitute our tradition. We hope, moreover, that you will not perish spiritually in the caverns of nothingness and despair, but that, with the help of Aphrodite, you will re-emerge—your boat flying the white sail—holding the thread that leads us back through the two millennia and more of our tradition, linking us with the Athens of Plato and Aristotle.