

St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Summer 2018
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PARTS AND WHOLES

Good Afternoon and Welcome – New and returning students, families, friends, and tutors – to the 2018 summer term of the Graduate Institute at St. John's College. In particular, welcome to all of you who are today beginning your first term in the Graduate Institute.

One of the questions I encounter most frequently when talking to people about the Graduate Institute has to do with the structure of the program. The question comes in two forms. The first form, which comes from people familiar with the undergraduate program, asks why the Graduate program is divided into what appear to be “subject areas,” when the undergraduate program eschews such designations. The other form of the question, coming from people with a different sort of academic background, asks why there isn't *more* specification in the GI. Why, at the graduate level, would one offer a degree in something as general as the “Liberal Arts?” If one is going to designate areas such as “History,” “Literature,” “Mathematics and Natural Sciences,” etc. at all– why not just allow students to get a degree IN one of those areas? Since I encounter these questions so commonly, it

seemed reasonable to think that questions like them may have occurred to you, as well. I hope that in attempting to respond, I may be able to say something to you about the sort of community of learning you are joining today.

In both forms of the question, the issue seems to be the status of the divisions within the Graduate Program – so I’ll start there. These sections, which might somewhere else have been called “subject areas” or something similar, are here called “segments.” The word “segment” comes from the Latin, “secare” - to cut – and the word was chosen advisedly. The segments are *parts*, and not natural parts in the way that a foot is a part of a body, but - like the line segments we encounter in geometry - parts that come into being as they are cut off from a whole.

The supposition that the segments are meant to be regarded as parts cut off, rather than subject areas naturally arising, is confirmed by a quick look at the history of the Graduate Institute. We know that the program was initially divided into sections not because that was how the founders thought that knowledge presents itself to us, but rather for pragmatic reasons. The Institute was founded for teachers many of whom, like many of *you*, would be attending only in the summers; so to be manageable the program of the Graduate Institute needed to be divided into somewhat discrete chunks. This means that you shouldn’t think of the readings in a particular segment as filling out and defining a subject area that will

be neatly separate from other subject areas, and into which certain books will obviously fall....On the other hand, we don't want to say the placement of books in the segments is arbitrary..... What *do* we want to say, then? To my mind, perhaps the best way to think of the segments is that the arrangement of readings in each seems to highlight a set of questions – questions that conventionally are grouped together under words that we use in the segment titles: Philosophy. Theology. Or for the segments of this summer, Politics. Society. Mathematics. Natural Science.

Based on this observation, I'll make an initial suggestion about how you might approach your studies. Hold the titles of the segments lightly. Don't assume that you know what is *meant* by "Philosophy" or "Natural Science" and that everything you read in a class under that heading will fit self-evidently into that category. It is at least as likely that the texts you read in a given class will throw the category itself into question. Perhaps the category IS a question. What is erotic in the "love of wisdom?" Is there a sort of knowledge called "scientific" that is different from other sorts of knowing? What is "natural?" Questions like these are thrown into relief by our division of the program into segments.

Having spoken of the way in which the segments are parts, I have of course opened myself to a perplexing follow-up: What are they parts OF?

As you've become familiar with St. John's, you've no doubt heard people

refer regularly to the Program – with a capital P. You may also have seen a document called “The Statement of the Program.” If you haven’t read it, I recommend it to you. It’s true that the statement was written with reference to the undergraduate program, but in an important sense there is only one Program; the principles articulated in the statement underlie both the undergraduate and graduate versions of that course of study. So... The beginning of the answer to my question about the whole of which the segments are a part is that they are parts of the Program - as it is presented in the Graduate Institute, adapted to the particular needs of this community. It is the *Program* that is a whole. If you think about it, this conviction that the Program is a whole underlies many of our most distinctive practices. Not only in calling our divisions “segments” - rather than “subjects” – but in requiring you to spend time in at least 4 of them, in requiring our faculty to teach across the curriculum, and in offering a Masters degree in the Liberal Arts rather than in any specialized area of study, we indicate our belief in this wholeness.

But while this is a beginning, it is not a fully satisfying answer. What do I mean when I say the Program is somehow a whole? It’s easier to say what I don’t mean. I don’t mean, for example, that the Program is a fixed set texts, or knowledge about those texts, that can be “covered” in a course of study. And I’m

certainly not saying that all of us here engaged in leading classes that are part of the program agree on the answers to fundamental questions. You need only be here for a short time to be aware of the diversity of opinions that flourish here, and that we constantly test in conversation with one another. So in what sense is a program in which we study Euclid, Shakespeare, Plato, Newton and the Bible a whole? I'm not going to be able to get very far with that question in this brief talk, but I'll at least take us to a place to start. As is often the case, that place is in the *Meno* – perhaps the one text that I can assume almost all of us sitting here have in common.

The moment I want to highlight occurs around 81 d. Meno, who has been searching with Socrates for a definition of virtue and has become frustrated, puts to Socrates the famous “Debaters’ argument.” (All quotes taken from the Grube translation.) “...that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows – since he knows it there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know – for he does not know what to look for..” To counter this argument, Socrates presents an account that he says he has received from women and men with knowledge of the highest things, an account that is often referred to as “the myth of recollection.” The account begins with the assertion that “the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, and there is nothing that it has not learned.”

Then we read: “As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only – a process men call learning – discovering everything else for himself if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are as a whole recollection.” (81 d)

Often, what most immediately commands attention about this account is the claim about the eternality of the soul and the question of whether knowledge can really be characterized as recollection. But there is another element of the account that is just as important. Socrates asserts that *all that has come into being is akin*. The Greek translated as “akin” is “*syn-genous*”, or of a common origin. That is to say, *all that is*, is a whole. There is something about knowledge such that, once we find a foothold somewhere through having learned just one thing, we can begin to make progress in any direction. Our knowledge about the diagonal of a square, for example, might lead us into deeper into an investigation of geometry, perhaps to a consideration of the continuous and the discrete. But it also gives us a foothold in our attempt to understand the nature of teaching and learning, maybe even in thinking about virtue. The claim that the knowable is connected presented in passing, almost as an aside, but the account as an answer to Meno’s challenge depends upon it. It is *because* all that is knowable is akin that Socrates is able to defend the possibility of searching for what we do not know already. *Because* the knowable is syn-genous, a person who is sufficiently brave and industrious,

questioning carefully, having learned only one thing, can follow the argument and discover anything else.

This assertion in what we call the myth of recollection begins to get at what I think of as the wholeness or connectedness of knowledge. The account itself is mysterious, of course – placed in the mouths of holy women and men. Socrates says himself that he would not insist on the accuracy of every detail. But there is at least one thing upon which he will insist, for which he would “contend in all costs both in word and deed” - that is, that “we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know, and that we must not look for it.” This is Socrates’ optimistic response to the cynical challenge of the debaters’ argument – and it seems to me that if the myth is to work AT ALL as a response to that challenge, some version of the idea that knowledge is “syn-genous” must hold.

Coming around to the question with which I began, this optimism about the connectedness of knowledge is embodied in the structure program at St. John’s; as I suggested earlier is evident in some of our most distinctive practices. I’ll go further now and say that in my opinion it is fundamental to our way of teaching and learning – and that it is even more fully and beautifully evident in the give and take of the classroom, that is, in the *living practice* of the program, than it is in the

structure of the program. I think about my class from this past semester. Some were in their first term in the GI, some in their last. Some had just finished college, others were nearing the end of long and distinguished careers; some were military veterans; there were students from Tunisia, Puerto Rico, and Indiana. If it weren't for this optimism that the knowable is akin, what sense would it make for us to sit around a table grappling with difficult texts, seeking together for what we do not know and learning from one another? If knowledge is siloed into discrete "subjects," then we ought simply to listen to the expert in the room. It is *only* if the recollection of one thing, at least for the industrious and brave, can lead - *anywhere*- that it makes sense to teach and learn in this unusual, arduous, and fantastically exciting way. We welcome you now to join us, in searching together for what we do not know.

Please join us for refreshments in the back of the hall before your preceptorials at 2pm. The summer 2018 semester of the Graduate Institute in Annapolis is now in session.

CONVOCATUM EST