

Article: “Final Lecture: Political Freedom”
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Final Lecture: Political Freedom

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So here we are; you at the end of the course, me at the end of 34 years of teaching at UCSC and 20 years of teaching Political Freedom. This seems an appropriate enough occasion for us to reflect together on teaching and being taught.

In the past I have ended the course by inviting you to say how *you* would teach Political Freedom. I did so for two reasons. The first is that I learned from the conversations and changed the course because of them. The second has to do with what I have done all term: use our after-lecture discussions as a public forum in which to debate, illustrate, and experience the themes and texts of the course. It was Hannah Arendt who argued that politics rightly understood is a matter of continuously contested opinions rather than the expression of private interests or preferences. While conflicts of interest and preferences lead to bargaining and compromise, the clash of opinions engenders deliberation. We have seen how this works (or doesn't work) in our exchanges with each other. Arendt writes about the courage needed and pleasures of participating in the public realm, what she calls "the space of appearance." Many of you experienced this when you stood up to address your 600 colleagues. Her touchstone for this view of politics was the Greek city-state, several of which had fewer citizens than there are students in this class.

Yet I feel that there would be something artificial about discussing a course I will never offer again. So I have decided to end it by issuing a different invitation: inviting you to think with me about the two questions you and students before you have asked me for 34 years: "What do you think?" beyond the various personas you have assumed, and "What is to be done?" You have asked me these questions in a variety of

venues, some conventional, as in the class, my office, and casual conversations on campus; some less so, such as in Safeway, Classic Cleaners, various restaurants, San Jose airport, Beacon gas stations, and a men's room. But I am afraid my answers to your questions will disappoint you. Indeed, they must disappoint you for Socratic as well as Arendtian reasons. Why do I say that?

Inevitably, after I ask the question, "How would you teach the course?" someone begins by saying something like, "I hated Tocqueville, get rid of him," only to be met by the response, "*Democracy in America* was my favorite text," and so the debate is on. But for either side to make headway rather than simply reiterate their preferences, they had to offer reasons in terms of the themes and purposes of the course which became explicit in the process of conversation, much as the purposes of political and moral life do in Socratic dialogues.

From Socrates' perspective, as that is portrayed in Plato's *Apology*, the real issue is not what I think but that you think; that you stop going through the motions, sleepwalking your way through life, being docile towards those with power and authority or deferential to reigning intellectual fads, political correctness and calls for an uncritical patriotism. In these terms, calls for such patriotism by Ashcroft, Lynne Cheney and various trustees of the City University of New York is shameful, particularly when these same people defer to the philosophical tradition that Socrates helped found.

Not only do you need to see the lenses you normally look through and discern the idea of goodness implicit in your words and deeds, you must recognize the voices in you that you did not know were there and perhaps did not want to know were there. Some of you found yourselves unexpectedly sympathetic to the argument of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor that, given a choice, humans prefer happiness to freedom. You were surprised by your cynicism or, rather, lapsed idealism.

So I should not answer your question, "What do you believe." If Socrates is right that the first obligation of a teacher is to provoke and challenge, cajole, convince and even seduce students who are also one's fellow citizens into living the examined life, the issue is not what I think but that *you* think. To teach is to bring philosophy into the streets literally and figuratively, which means that if you limit the examined life to the classroom you are not living it; you are only going through the motions.

Of course, it matters not only *that* you think, but *what* you think about. We are not talking about which cereal to eat, though we could imagine a circumstance in which thinking about the cereal you eat (who made it, where and for what wages) might become a matter for serious reflection. For Socrates, the issues that mattered were living a just life and providing moral critiques that escaped both a self-righteous moralism and a flippant relativism.

These have been the questions that have framed this course. But my particular incarnation of them has been different, even un-Socratic. For I have tried to give dignity to politics as a vocation and activity, and have argued that political freedom is a redundancy rather than a contradiction in terms. It was in this context that we talked about the presence of the past as it appears in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Morrison's *The Beloved*, the relationship between authority and freedom in Dostoevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, De Tocqueville and Arendt, the relationship between political and economic freedom in Marx and Milton Friedman, and the prospects for participatory politics. You might say that this course has been a reclamation project, recovering ideas of politics and freedom that have lost currency and favor but not their resonance. For these ideas constitute a voice in our political tradition, however muffled that voice may now be.

But one must not forget that Socrates also gave answers. Indeed, his insistence that the unexamined life is not worth living is one, as is his very un-Greek

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insistence that it is better to suffer injustice than commit it. But how is it possible to ask questions and give answers, live an examined life yet say “I know” or “That is true,” when such phrases seem “shut up” terms that make further thinking seem a waste of time? Did Socrates mean to exclude his answers from questioning? Were his “dialogues” simply a matter of him asking questions until his students got the “right” answer? I do not think so. He understood that students and teachers must both be at risk for either to learn. And remember that Socrates died for truths he acknowledged might have been disproven in his next dialogic encounter.

In the end, I do not think it was just the questions Socrates asked or the answers he gave that made him such a compelling figure. It was the drama of his life and death that did, a drama captured by the consummate artistry of Plato. In Plato’s hands that drama included silences and irony that invite us to become interlocutors in the conversation. That is what many of you did with *The Apology* when you resented Socrates’ seeming arrogance, suspected his manipulateness or doubted whether you could emulate his courage and go home when commanded by those in power to arrest an innocent man.

Plato’s Socrates presents himself as a moral exemplar, acting as he wished the world to become in whatever context he found himself. If, for instance, you wish to act locally, then what can be more local than yourself? “And if you wished to produce results *today*,” Jonathan Schell writes in his “Introduction” to Adam Michnik’s *Letters*, “then what area of life was more ready to hand, more thoroughly within your grasp than your own actions? And if, accordingly, you made yourself and your own actions your starting point for the reform of society, then how could you permit those actions to be degraded by brutality, deception or any other disfigurement?”

I will also disappoint you because I will, yet again, change your question, “What is to be done?” into mine: “What shall we do?” I do this not out of perversity, though you have some reason to doubt this. I change it because “What is to be done?” is literally and grammatically the passive voice which whites out the agent doing “it.” What shall *we* do is less abstract. It focuses on who is acting and the need to remain a *we* in order to act in the future. The *we* also implies that political



knowledge, like political power, is collective, arising out of the clash of perspectives on a shared past, present, and future.

For Socrates, the *we* is unusually inclusive because he has such a capacious notion of human wisdom. At one point

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in *The Apology*, Socrates insists that he has only human wisdom. I think he means many things by this: that his opponents presumptively claim godlike knowledge, that mortals cannot have certain knowledge about death, and that he, like everyone else, is an historical therefore partial being whose one-sidedness and incompleteness can only be lessened by dialogue with others. But I also think his idea of human

wisdom is meant to suggest that every human is capable of being wise. That is the democratic promise and challenge Socrates has bequeathed to us.

A further implication, mine more than Socrates’, is that politics is far too important to be left to elites and experts. Perhaps it is time to transform “We the people of the United States . . .” into something more than an anachronism and recognize how often invocations of “the American people” is a self-serving construction by politicians who have contempt for us and look askance at the idea that government of the people and for the people can only be government by the people. Of course, it matters who the people are: recall, for example, how many the Constitution left out of the “*we*.”

Focusing on the “*we*” suggests the degree to which education, like politics, is a collaborative enterprise. I cannot teach you unless you teach me how to do it. Unless I know “where you are coming from,” I do not know how to talk to you, which means I must rely on your honesty, trust and courage to speak your mind. I can assure you that virtually every one of my lectures has been shaped by the questions you have asked in class, by the notes you gave me after class, and by the concerns your teaching assistants conveyed to me

in our weekly seminar. So if this course has mattered to you, you deserve as much of the credit as I do, though I have no intention of sharing my salary with you. I can begin and initiate, but the rest is up to you. Neither teaching nor politics is a matter of blueprints. There is no such thing as absolute sovereignty in politics or in the classroom because both public life and public education involve dealing with others who have wills and intentions of their own.

Since I began the course with Plato's *Apology*, I might as well end with an apology of my own, though the word is the only connection between mine and his. I need to apologize for my rotten jokes, strained puns, snide comments about Californese, tofu, sprouts, New Age religions, and the sybaritic life I am too old to enjoy. You have put up with my provocations and teasing, my rhetorical extravagances, and my senior citizen moments when I announced five points and gave you four or six or eight. (Math was never my forte.) Believe it or not, there has been a point to all or at least most of this. I wanted to show how serious subjects can be argued over with passion and humor; why intellectual work involves risk and pleasure and how changing your mind is changing who you are. I also wanted to prevent ideas from becoming tranquilizers, which is one reason why I concentrated on the way the rhetorical structure of a

work is constitutive of its argument and meaning. Thus, we contrasted the nonviolence of Martin Luther King's prose in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* with the percussiveness of Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and Catherine MacKinnon's *Difference and Dominance*. Finally, I hoped you would come to share my love of language, to respect its integrity, delight in its cadences, observe its distinctions, and appreciate its power. It was Arendt who warned us against living with clichés and language codes that function to muffle reality. Rape is not unsought intercourse and the murder of Jews is not a "medical matter." And it was Morrison's *Beloved* that demonstrated how the beauty of language makes it possible to confront and feel the ugliness and injustice of slavery while redeeming the human spirit in the face of gratuitous cruelty.

As we "saw" with *Oedipus the King*, the ancient Greeks regarded the eyes as the source of knowledge. (Of course, Oedipus had a bad case of farsightedness.) But the eyes are not only the source of knowledge; they are the instrument of tears. For the chorus in *Antigone*, watching the young heroine "going to her bridal chamber of eternal sleep" brings forth the "stream of tears." As Martha Nussbaum argues, a purely intellectual perception of the play's action will not do. If we turn off the flow of tears in the name of academic propriety we may well miss

much of what the texts we have read have to teach us. So leave the tranquilizers at home. Contrary to popular opinion the heart and mind are not separate organs when it comes to learning life's deepest secrets and hardest lessons.

Above all, I have offered you traveling companions, voices to carry with you to participate in the dialogues we have with ourselves about how to live and what to do. If you lose your moral compass, are unsure where justice lies, wish to think outside reigning intellectual fads and fashions, are impatient with political correctness, and want to avoid both self-righteous moralism and a too easily earned relativism; if, God forbid, you should find yourself in a regime of systematic mendacity, where law is immoral, order means ethnic cleansing, and common sense and conscience have been appropriated by evil, they will be there with you: Marx and Dostoevsky, Epictetus and Malcolm X, Sophocles and Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King and Milton Friedman, Catherine MacKinnon and Adam Michnik, Alexis de Tocqueville and Thomas Jefferson, Socrates and Hannah Arendt.

I end the lecture and my 34 years here by saying to you what I would say to the 12,000 or so students I have taught if they were here. You have been a pleasure to teach and I have learned much from you. Be well and go in peace wherever your journey may take you.