

St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Summer 2013

On the Philosophy & Theology 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 shine the light of inquiry on ourselves. Today I mean to do so by examining the readings of the Philosophy & Theology segment.

The subject of this convocation address – which I mean to be the first of five, each treating one of the segments of the Graduate Institute – follows from a claim that I made in an earlier address, delivered in Spring 2012, titled “What is a Segment?” I said then that the program of the Graduate Institute is a homogeneous whole, and that its segments represent arbitrary divisions of that whole into parts. Accordingly, I claimed that the titles of these segments should be taken as compressed questions in need of answers, and as opportunities for wonder, rather than as names for the distinct subject matter treated by the readings in each. Now I hope to make good on these claims in detail. So what, then, are the wonderful questions raised by the segment title “Philosophy & Theology”? And before I proceed to answer my own question, I should caution that the threads that I mean to follow for the next few minutes – threads that run through the tutorial and seminar readings of the segment, and that are connected to threads that run through other segments – are by no means the *only* ones worth following. I

only insist that these threads are present in the segment readings, and truly worth following. So again, what are the wonderful questions raised by “Philosophy & Theology”?

Let’s begin with the ampersand. It suggests that there is something dual about the segment, and prompts us to wonder what this duality is. The things joined together by the ampersand, of course, are philosophy, which any good dictionary will tell you comes from the Greek for ‘love of wisdom,’ and theology, which comes from the Greek for ‘an account about the god.’ In what way, then, are the ‘love of wisdom’ and ‘an account about the god’ two?

It’s tempting to answer this question summarily, by noting that three of our segment titles have ampersands in them, and that each segment has two classes whose readings are required: the seminar and the tutorial. Could it be, then, that the dual segment titles reflect the duality of the seminar and tutorial readings? Not every segment title has an ampersand, admittedly, whereas every segment has a seminar and a tutorial. But we could attribute the exceptions, the one-word segment titles, to exhausted imaginations on the part of the graduate Program’s architects. We could then correct the title of the Literature segment, calling it the Greek & English Literature segment. The History segment would become the Ancient & Modern History segment, and our work would be done.

At first glance, there seems to be something to this somewhat tongue-in-cheek ‘division of labor’ theory. For if we survey the readings of the tutorial and the seminar, we see that the former is full of great books ordinarily taken to be works of philosophy – Plato’s *Meno*, Aristotle’s *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *On the Soul*, Descartes’ *Meditations*, Hume’s *Enquiry*, Kant’s *Prolegomena*, and Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* – whereas the latter is full of great books ordinarily taken to be works of theology: the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures, and Augustine’s *Confessions*. The presence of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* on the seminar reading

list could be taken as conclusive evidence in favor of the division of labor between seminar and tutorial, were it not for the disappointing fact that Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* is also among the readings of the so-called 'theology seminar' – not to mention that, with the *Prolegomena* in tutorial and the *Groundwork* in seminar, Kant seems to be playing for both teams.

Indeed, the more one thinks about this division of labor theory, the more problems appear. Take the very first reading from the so-called 'philosophy tutorial': Plato's *Meno*. It begins, as we all know, with Meno challenging Socrates to say whether virtue comes to be in human beings by teaching, by practice, by learning, by nature, or in some other way [70a]; and it ends, as most of us know, with Socrates claiming that virtue comes to be by "divine allotment" [100b]. In between, we find an account (*logos*) about divine matters (*ta theia*), one that claims that "what we call learning is recollection" [81a-81e]. Is the *Meno* not in some way, then, a theological dialogue? If we are tempted to dismiss this thought, on the ground that Socrates is being playful when he speaks about the gods, what should we say about Aristotle's account of the unmoved mover, or about Descartes' proof of the existence of God, or about Hume's discussion of miracles, or Kant's theological Idea, or Nietzsche's reintroduction of Dionysus? Are these really not accounts about the god? What is worse, if we consult Aristotle's discussion of wisdom (*sophia*), found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – which we read, alarmingly, in the Politics & Society tutorial – we find that it is "the science of the things that are valued most highly" [1141a20-21]. How could the love of such a science not include an account about the god? How could philosophy not include theology? From the perspective of the so-called 'philosophy tutorial,' then, it seems that the ampersand in the Philosophy & Theology segment title only marks and apparent duality, a hendiadys, a two that is really one.

Problems arise from the perspective of a so-called ‘theology seminar’ too; but they are more grave, and more interesting. Should we seek a definition of theology, we can find one, but unfortunately, it is also in Aristotle. In two passages in the *Metaphysics* that we don’t read for tutorial, Aristotle calls theology the kind of contemplative philosophy that concerns things that are eternal, separate, and motionless [1026a10-20; 1064a30-b5] – should such things exist. By contrast, the term is not found in the Hebrew or Christian scriptures. It first appears among the seminar authors in Augustine’s *City of God* – parts of which we read in the History tutorial – and then among the seminar readings, most obviously in the title of Aquinas’ *magnum opus*. So the Greek term ‘theology’ seems applicable to at best half of the so-called ‘theology seminar’ readings, in the sense that the authors of roughly half of these readings were aware of, or made use of the term. Since the authors of the other half of these readings had a different name for, or a different understanding of, what they were doing, it seems like the so-called ‘theology seminar’ is in fact composed of theology, understood as a branch of philosophy, and something else. What, then, is this something else?

Another look at the first readings for tutorial and seminar will be helpful here. In one of the most memorable passages in the *Meno*, Socrates says that while he will not insist very much on the other parts of his argument, he would do battle, if he could, for the view that it is better, more courageous, and less lazy to inquire into the things we don’t know, rather than supposing that it is impossible to discover them, or that we ought not to inquire into them [86b-c]. (By the way, I take Socrates’ conditional here not to imply that he *can’t* battle for this view, but to provide an opening for Meno, who is very interested in what Socrates can and can’t do, to *ask* him to battle for this view. It’s an opening Meno fails to exploit.) Socrates does not outright say

that we *can* know all the things we don't know; but he does imply that he has reason to think that we should try – that the attempt will be neither fruitless nor dangerous.

Now contrast this beginning with the beginning in the first Genesis reading from the Philosophy & Theology seminar, where we learn that God created heaven and earth, and what he created was “very good” [1:30]; but Adam and Eve nonetheless ate of the prohibited tree of good and evil knowledge, and were punished for it [3:1-24]. Leaving aside the more sophisticated – we might say, more theological – interpretations of these events, which try to interpret this punishment in accordance with the presumed characteristics of God, the serpent, Eve, and Adam, the naïve message is clear: we ought not to inquire into at least some of the things we don't know, namely the prohibited things, as the attempt to do so could be both fruitless *and* dangerous.

The first readings of the Philosophy & Theology tutorial and seminar thus make opposite claims. And we should not let our prejudices in favor of one or the other of these claims muddy the wonderful, terrifying question that wants to rise to the surface through this opposition. There are things that we don't know. It is good to try to know them? Is knowledge possible, and is it good? With these questions we have at last gripped two threads that run, in my view at least, throughout the segment's tutorial and seminar readings. In the tutorial, the *Meno* is followed by Aristotle, who in the *Metaphysics* practices theology as the science of the intrinsically most knowable and best things; by Descartes and Hume, whose reasoning about God is calculated to protect the possibility of knowledge; and by Kant, whose reasoning about knowledge is calculated to protect the possibility of God. This tutorial thread terminates, after its brief Kantian crossing into the seminar, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, with Nietzsche's alarming claims that knowledge in the Aristotelian theological sense is neither simply possible, nor simply good.

The seminar thread, by contrast, runs through the Hebrew scriptures, with the examples of Abraham's exemplary fear [Genesis 22:12], which makes him a worthy father of multitudes and a blessing for nations [22:17-18]; the Israelites' exemplary law, obedience to which is wisdom and understanding in the eyes of peoples [Deuteronomy 4:6]; and Job's exemplary ignorance, which in the end confesses that knowledge of God is impossible, and so speaks rightly [Job 42:2-8]. It is found also in the Christian scriptures, for example in Jesus' claim that the most needful knowledge depends solely on revelation – “no one knows the son except the father,” he says; “and no one knows the father except the son, and anyone to whom the son wishes to reveal it” [Matthew 11:27]. But with the rise of theology, starting with the writings of Paul, this thread becomes tangled. Paul, who confesses himself a debtor just as much to the Greeks as to the barbarians, to the wise as to the unwise [Romans 1:14], is willing to claim that “the invisible things of [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” [2:20]. And Augustine and Aquinas both find themselves in the same boat, using the philosophical arguments of theology as paths to belief in the Christian God, all the while denying the sufficiency and even doubting the necessity of these paths. In Book Ten of his *Confessions*, for example, Augustine laments the soul's “vain and inquisitive greed” for experience, which “cloaks itself in the name of ‘research’ and ‘knowledge’” [10.35.54]; but soon thereafter he qualifies his lament, saying that he has been able to curb his “curiosity for *superfluous* knowledge” [10.37.60; emphasis added]. For his part, Aquinas begins the *Summa* by insisting that sacred doctrine is a science in the Aristotelian sense, even though it is beyond human knowledge and may not be sought by human reason [q.1 a.1]. This seminar thread finally becomes untangled, and then terminates, with Kierkegaard, who asserts in the *Philosophical Fragments* that thought wants to discover something that thought

cannot think [IV.204]: namely, the, eternal historical moment of god become man [IV.227], the faith that is different in kind from, and infinitely more needful than, any knowledge.

Having traced these threads in this way, what can we say about the meaning of the ampersand, and the duality of the Philosophy & Theology readings? The apparent duality of the love of wisdom and an account about the god is only apparent: every lover of wisdom, every lover of the science of the most valuable things, will seek an account about the god. But behind this apparent duality is a real duality, between the love of knowledge – with all the sometimes irrational attachment that the word ‘love’ can connote – and doubt about knowledge. The drama of this duality comes from the encounter between these two views. Since doubt about knowledge nonetheless wants to insist that its doubt is grounded in knowledge, it is easily seduced by the appeal of love of knowledge, tries to incorporate it, and is corrupted by it. Once this corruption is understood, attempts are made to recover the original insight, the original tension between love of knowledge and doubt about knowledge. *Beyond Good and Evil*, with its consideration of “The Religious Being,” its assertion of the necessity of religion to a flourishing society [61-62], and its Dionysian conclusion, and the *Philosophical Fragments*, with its radical rethinking of the meaning of Christian faith, are two attempts to restate the original questions – is knowledge possible? Is knowledge good? – in their originally wonderful and terrifying force.

I hasten to repeat that the story I have told here about the readings of the Philosophy & Theology tutorial is not a history, and certainly not a Hegelian one. There’s no necessity, to my mind, that Kant follow Hume, nor that Jesus follow Moses; there’s no necessity that the threads I’ve tried to grasp begin and end untangled. (Indeed, they seem quite tangled to me in our contemporary, everyday world.) But there is a necessity that the authors of the great books that we read confront, in more or less clearsighted ways, what it means to be the kinds of beings that

we are: beings that both stretch out, and stretch out toward knowing. It is this durable necessity that ensures the connection of these threads to the threads that run through the readings of the other Graduate Institute segments. The scope and character of political and social life depend, for example, on our answers to the questions of whether knowledge is possible and good, as do the scope and character of mathematics and natural science. And the durable basis of this durable necessity is human nature itself, that homogeneous though multiple subject matter that is the true content and concern of the graduate Program here at St. John's. Without some account of the whole that lies behind the graduate Program, without some attempt to follow the threads that run through and between its segments, the education we are all pursuing in the Graduate Institute will not acquire its full value.

I would like to conclude by announcing that there will be two Graduate Institute-hosted study groups this term. One group will meet on Tuesdays, from 3:00 to 4:30, beginning on June 25, to read Xenophon's *Memorabilia* – his recollections of Socrates. The other will hold an organizational meeting in the Hartle Room this Tuesday, June 18, from 2:00 to 3:00. The purpose of the group is to study techniques useful for the math section of the GRE. Schedules for these groups will be circulated by email. Lastly, I would like to invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to preceptorial.

The summer 2013 term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. *Convocatum est.*

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
13 June 2013
Delivered 17 June 2013

Note

The numbers cited in the text refer in each case to the standard divisions of the work in question, never to page numbers.