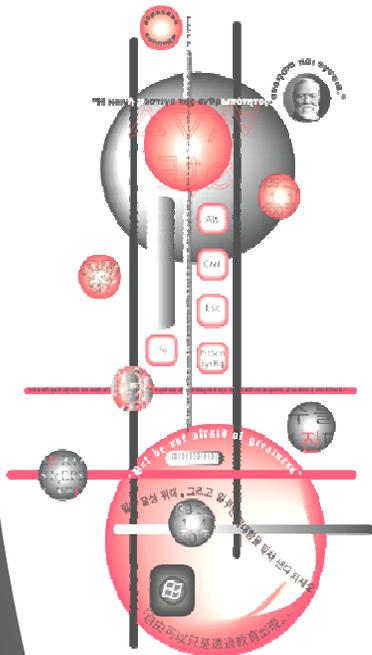




CONVERSATION AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND

Keynote Address at the York
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I wish to thank the committee of my peers for nominating me as a candidate for Convocation Professor and President Keizs and Provost Griffith for selecting me. I would also like to pay my respects to Professor Ruttenberg, whose role I now assume.

Two of my intellectual heroes are Plato and Sigmund Freud. What have they in common, genius aside? Well, they both imagined a tripartite psyche: for Freud the Id, the Ego, and the Super-Ego; for Plato the Appetitive part, the Rational part, and, in Greek, the *Thumos*, too often rendered in English as “spiritedness”—too easily confused by students with “spiritual,” quite a different thing altogether. The political philosopher Harvey Mansfield suggests, instead of “spiritedness,” *Manliness*, thereby offending half of humankind. In any case, while Plato’s and Freud’s conceptions of a three-part soul have a degree of overlap, they are hardly the same system. But I digress. What they really have in common—for my purposes—is that both Plato and Freud practiced and encouraged the art of conversation. By the way, Freud’s so-called “talking cure” was never considered a cure by Freud himself: he said somewhere that his intention was to bring his patient’s condition down to the level of merely ordinary human misery. Nonetheless, Freud made a medical science out of the practice of conversation; Plato’s teacher and spokesman Socrates, one could say, conversed himself right into a death sentence. Do I

seem to be merely chatting? I know I do. But there is logic to my madness. For another name for “chatting” is “conversation.” And the exercise of the conversational is my theme today—or one of them. The other theme: my hesitation to retire although I am by age eligible.

What precisely do I mean by “conversation”? One of my favorite uses of the word follows: the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott calls the liberal arts and sciences “The Great Conversation,” and argues that a college education is or should be “the invitation to disentangle oneself, for a while, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves.” I would like to repeat that especially for students: “the invitation to disentangle oneself, for a while, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves.” (For too many people the undergraduate years are the last chance to do that.) So the Great Conversation is the history and experience of human thought and creation, and the invitation to undergraduates to join the conversation amounts to the curriculum. I do not intend to talk about curriculum, however, for I doubt that many would put up with my view that a proper general-education curriculum would be an intense and comprehensive four-year affair. Nor do I intend to talk about teaching, although the conversational mode often called the “Socratic method” is what many of us aspire to.

No, the kind of “conversation”

I wish to talk about is nothing so grand and world-historical as Oakeshott’s Great Conversation, and nothing so goal-oriented as the Socratic method or the Freudian psychoanalytic enterprise. Socrates or the Socratic teacher is trying to make a point; the psychoanalyst is prodding his talkative patient to make a psychologically helpful discovery. But ordinary conversation, everyday chatting, does not have to be and usually isn’t oriented toward some goal or discovery; it’s a self-justifying verbal activity—or, to strike a more conversational tone, it’s something we do just for the hell of it. Now conversation as a method of discovery, as an educational technique, would seem to be the more appropriate subject for consideration in a university environment. By the same logic, conversation for its own sake, the rather desultory or even aimless kind of conversation-chatting would seem inappropriate for that same environment. But I profoundly disagree. In fact I think we need much more of it!

The recognized academic duties of a college professor are—like the Platonic and the Freudian psyches—tripartite: teaching, scholarship and/or creativity, and service. For the fulfillment of these duties one is rewarded. I would add a third, although I do not expect it to be rewarded and cannot imagine how it could be: conversation. I mean—outside the classroom, not as question-and-answer after a scholarly presentation, not shop-talk at a committee or department meeting—conversation between faculty

members (broadly conceived) over lunch or coffee or (were it allowed) cocktails, conversation preferably not exclusively and excludingly hyper-specialized chatter between scholars within a narrowly conceived academic field, but conversation between smart people curious as to what other smart people from this field or that are thinking about. What is to be gained from such “extracurricular” (so to speak) conversation? Wrong question. What is happening is that the life of the mind is being lived. If I hear one more time someone say after a spirited exchange in the cafeteria, “This has been very nice, but I have to get back to real work,” I shall become violent. I take seriously the idea of a scholarly community: in a community communicants communicate. Cafeterias are not just for eating.

Of course I realize that indeed something may be gained from this desultory and casual sort of encounter. We may pick up something that can be used, used say in a classroom. I teach in two departments. In English I teach literature; in History and Philosophy I teach the “Western Civilization” survey and philosophy. I have no formal training in science, but I have picked up in the faculty cafeteria enough layman’s grasp of quantum mechanics to use the notion of a quantum leap as a metaphor to elucidate some apparent disconnect in a difficult poetic or metaphysical passage. But I insist that possible gain is not why we have this kind of encounter. We do it because when we do it we are

being who we are—reward or no reward—just as truly as we are being who we are while giving instruction in a classroom.

There is yet another reason to encourage this kind of conversational exercise of the mind: we do not wish to be what Thorstein Veblen called a “learned ignoramus,” that is, learned in one’s own field but in all others the mental equivalent of a box of hair. I once knew a historian who knew everything there was to know about medieval municipal charters and, as far as I could tell, nothing else. My old friend the late Sam Hartenberg, the first teacher hired at York by the way, told me a story of when he was teaching philosophy at San Francisco State. He threw a party and invited a colleague, an ichthyologist whom I will call Algernon, and sensing Algernon’s hesitation because he’d have no one to talk to promised he would invite another fish specialist from across the Bay. The day after the party Sam asked Algernon if he’d had a good time, and Algernon confessed he hadn’t really because while he was fresh-water the other guy was salt-water. This conveniently leads me to my final reason, which I must introduce by an analogy.

The linguist John McWhorter in *The Power of Babel* reproduces a sequence of five sentences in each the Swabian and the Swiss dialects of German. The least familiarity with the way German looks will assure you that the sentences are indeed German, but unless you are proficient in both dialects—not very likely—there is no way

you would know that the two sequences are identical in meaning. This is not like the differences between American regional dialects: a New Yorker and a North Carolinian understand one another if the former says “Would you give me a lift to the city?” and the latter “Would you carry me down town?” But the Swabian speaking his dialect and the Swiss speaking his could only look at one another with the faintest glimmer of comprehension and say “Hunh?”—or however you say “Hunh” in German. Of course they would ultimately communicate by dropping the dialects and speaking to one another in *Hochdeutsch* (High German), the common language of cultivated discourse in German. How does this analogy work? Well, there are several academic “dialects” which are in danger of ceasing to be dialects in the American-regional sense and becoming dialects in the German sense. A philosopher may not readily grasp what a literary scholar means by referring to the “Eliotic dissociation of sensibility,” and the literary type may have no idea what the philosopher is saying when the latter wonders aloud in befuddlement it he’s just heard a “Husserlian phenomenological reduction.” What they both need is more practice in High German—no, I don’t mean that; I mean more practice in the language of conversational discourse, which can best be gained in—you guessed it—conversation. Now I know that one response to what I’ve just said is that various disciplinary academic dialects are necessary

given the immense proliferation of knowledge as the years pass—to which I have a response that follows.

I can hardly think of a discipline more demanding of rigor and precision than physics. When quantum theory was being developed, physicists discovered that the laws of classical physics, and consequently its terminology, were really inadequate to describe the goings-on in the sub-atomic universe, that the predictability of events in the macro-world had to yield in the micro-world to a probabilistic calculus; mathematical formulae were more precise in this probabilistic universe than were the classical concepts. Yet according to the great Niels Bohr, as the equally great Werner Heisenberg recalled a conversation, we must retain as much as possible the classical vocabulary simply because it is the extension of ordinary discourse into scientific realms, the verbal representation of the thinking that leads us to physical experiment in the first place, and “it is one of the basic presuppositions of science that we speak of measurements in a language that has basically the same structure as the one in

which we speak of everyday experience.” If this means an imperfect description of sub-atomic events, that is the paradox we pay, for “Science is the observation of phenomena *and the communication of results to others.*” If this is true of the natural sciences, then it is more so of the humanities and social sciences.

There is an honored Spanish tradition called the *tertulia*. Friends meet on a regular basis in a bar, café, wherever, for conversation. There are literary *tertulias*, political *tertulias*, and so on. I have been a member the last few years of a kind of general *tertulia*, here at York College. Every Wednesday at 5 pm we meet for pre-class dinner at an academic conference room—and talk. The topic is always different—but never shop-talk. No one may ask “What happened at your department meeting last week?” Sitting around the table are, besides me, the regulars: a rhetorician and literary scholar, a philosopher, a musicologist, another rhetorician who used to be a social worker, a geologist, a nurse, a historian, a sexologist; and, schedules permitting in any given semester, the occasionals

and semi-regulars: a painter, two more geologists, a physicist, another rhetorician, another historian, another philosopher, an actor, a singer, another literary scholar, a musician, and, when he is on leave, a recent York graduate who is making a career in U.S. Air Force special operations, and my apologies to whoever may have slipped my memory. Anyone who thinks the life of the mind is not both exciting and convivial—and necessary—is out of his mind.

I have not forgotten my second theme; let me give it a formal cognomen: retirement-hesitation. Consider again the tripartite responsibilities of faculty—teaching: I would miss it, but “all good things. . .” as they say; service: I would find it easy to do without committee meetings; scholarship: in retirement I would have more time for more essays. So, not a single one of the three really accounts for my hesitation. But just how important to me is cross-disciplinary conversation? Were my Wednesday *tertulia* to cease to be, my retirement-hesitation would be retired.

Thank you for your attention.

Samuel Hux was brought up in Greenville, N.C., and attended East Carolina University, for a year, before doing a stint in the U.S. Army, after which he went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he majored in English and minored in philosophy. He entered the doctoral program in English at UNC, completed his graduate course requirements there, but then transferred to the more liberal program at the University of Connecticut.

Professor Hux got his first full-time appointment at Queens College, where he taught until he moved over to York when it opened in 1967. While Professor of English, he actually splits his time between the English department and the department of History and Philosophy. In journals as diverse as *The Antioch Review*, *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *Dissent*, *The Humanist*, *Midstream*, *Modern Age*, *New Oxford Review*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, and others, Professor Hux has published roughly seventy essays and reviews.

He lives in rural Connecticut with the poet Evelyn Hooven—“my smarter, better half,” says Professor Hux—a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and Yale University, early-retired from teaching creative writing at Lehman College.

