

Comments Delivered upon the Reception of the 2019 Smith Award*

*T.A. Cavanaugh***

THANKS TO PRESIDENT LEMMONS, Vice-President Myers, members of the UFL Board, and fellow members of UFL. My heart is full of gratitude. I'm grateful to see my wife, Bonnie, here in the audience. Among many other roles, Bonnie is a registered nurse. When we were married, we decided that it was the union of philosophy (representing mind) and nursing (representing body). When we were dating, we quickly realized that we had irreconcilable differences: she was a girl and I was a boy. So, we figured: "Why not? Let's split our differences and get married!" That was about twenty-five years ago. Since then she has been the *sine qua non* of my scholarship. Bonnie, thank you!

The fruit of our irreconcilable differences is also in the audience: our son, Thomas. Thomas has eagerly listened to me wax on about double effect and homeopathy, among other topics. He has always been a great interlocutor. Thomas, thanks for your enthusiastic support of my scholarship.

I am deeply honored by this award, particularly as I think about what constitutes honor. Aristotle tells us that honor is a human good; it is part of the good life, of human happiness. What matters about honor, however, is those

* These comments have been modestly revised from those delivered on the evening of 7 June 2019 at the 29th annual conference of University Faculty for Life, held at Our Lady of the Lake University in Mundelein, Illinois.

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who bestow the honor. Are they honorable? Are they admirable?

When I think about the honor due to University Faculty for Life, I am profoundly moved to be honored by you. For you are eminently honorable! Why? Let us reflect on what you do. You do fine, excellent deeds. This makes you admirable. You are university faculty. In the preface to *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman tells us that university faculty teach all branches of knowledge.¹ Moreover, he tells us that they do so in order to share knowledge with those who lack it – students.

Now, intellectual activity is the highest form of activity. For God is intellect. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes that God is “knowing knowing knowing” (*Metaphysics* 12.9.1074b34). Further, Jesus says, “this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (*John* 17:3). So, you are engaged in a great enterprise, an intellectual enterprise. This alone makes you admirable.

Moreover, and more importantly, Augustine tells us that knowledge is a common good. He defines a common good as a good that is not diminished when it is shared. When you teach students, your knowledge does not decrease; thus, it is a common good. Augustine also says that a common good (such as knowledge) is not properly possessed until it is shared.² It borders on tyranny not to share a good what does not diminish when shared. This is a second reason in virtue of which you are admirable. For you share the good of knowledge with your students. Hence, you have the proper attitude towards this great good of knowledge. You are liberal, magnanimous benefactors. You are do-gooders and you do great good.

Finally, you are not only university faculty; you are university faculty for life – *pro vita* – on behalf of life. An exceptional and remarkable good motivates you. You do a great deed and you do it for the best of reasons. Augustine writes that in each of us there is a mirror image of the Holy Trinity. For we live, we know that we live, and we love our lives and our knowledge of our lives.³ Doing this is conducting ourselves like the Father (life), Son

¹ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), p. 3.

² He proposes that “all things that upon being given do not decrease, if they are possessed and not given, are not yet possessed as they ought to be” (*On Christian Doctrine* I.1).

³ Augustine, *On the Trinity* 9.12.18.

(knowledge of life), and the Holy Spirit (love of both life and knowledge of life). As university faculty for life, you live, you know life, and you share your love of both knowledge and life with your students and in your scholarship. In this respect, you imitate the Divine, the highest being. So, I am profoundly honored because you yourselves are eminently honorable.

Now, briefly, let us reflect on university faculty more generally *vis-à-vis* life. A famous bioethicist has a book entitled *Should the Baby Live?* He asks this question of a disabled infant. Sadly, he answers in the negative. “No,” to paraphrase the bioethicist, “the disabled down syndrome infant should not live.” The French have a phrase for books entitled in this way. It is *un question mal posée* – a poorly posed question. Indeed, a question that should not even be asked. It is upside down, inside out, and backwards. It is perfectly wrong, exactly incorrect. Babies live. That is what they do: live. Butterflies fly. Grasshoppers hop. And babies live. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins writes:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*⁴

Babies come to live; hence, that is what they do. The bioethicist, however, tells us that the baby about whom he writes his book is disabled. According to this individual, this makes all the difference. Supposedly, the severely disabled baby ought not to live. What of this? What of severe disability? What difference ought it to make? Well, what is disability? A *Google* search quickly reveals that “disability” differs from “inability.” A disability is a lack of a proper, fitting, appropriate capacity. This contrasts with an inability, which simply means not having a power. A man is blind; that is bad because men are meant to see. The blind man is disabled. A tree is unable to see but not blind; unable but not disabled. That is a curious difference that escapes the notice of our bioethicist. Let us examine disability more closely.

What does “dis” mean? “Dis” is of Latin origin. It is intimately related to the word for two (*duo*). It means “torn asunder.” It refers to two things meant

⁴Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame” in *Poems and Prose* (London UK: Penguin, 1985), p. 51.

to be together that are, unfortunately, separate. So, the bioethicist is right to remark upon the baby's disability. His response, however, is further to tear asunder things meant to be together. Because the baby lacks a due power, we are also to take away its life. We are to add injustice to injury. This is in keeping with the spirit of our age. For, as the insightful René Girard tells us, the spirit of our age is one of separation, one of casting apart – in Greek, *diaballein* (from which we get “diabolic”). Our times favor further casting apart, separating, dividing. So, predictably, we have the suggestion that we cast apart what has already been torn asunder. That is the governing sentiment and the answer that so many in the contemporary university offer us. The philosophers, however, should know better.

For if we have recourse to Socrates (whose student Plato founded the Academy), we find a very different answer. What does Socrates have to say about the proper response to one who lacks what he ought to have? What does Socrates say about disability?

If we look in two Socratic dialogues written by Plato to vindicate his teacher, the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology* (or, more accurately, *Defense*), we will find our answer. As you know, Socrates was accused, convicted, and put to death by an Athenian jury for impiety. Plato wrote these two dialogues in part to argue that Socrates actually was pious, indeed, magnificently pious. Plato does so by focusing on Socrates's practice of philosophy as a therapeutic service. Plato has Socrates speak of philosophy as a service (*hypēresian*) or therapy. *Therapeia* is a Greek word meaning “to take care of” or “perform a service to.” Horsemen are therapists to horses; shepherds to sheep, and more generally, the superior to the inferior. Or, more precisely, those who have something needed by and appropriate to another in need take care of those in need. One can perform a service to the gods; however, in *Euthyphro* Socrates notes that when one does so, one does not make the gods better off. Rather, one takes care of something on behalf of the gods (*Euthyphro* 13d).

In the *Defense* Plato suggests that Socrates is pious because Socrates shares knowledge with the ignorant who, needless to say, lack knowledge. This is the service to the gods that Socrates practices by philosophizing (*Defense* 30a). For a human to lack knowledge is a grave disability. Recall the prisoners in the cave found at the beginning of book VII of Plato's *Republic*:

[Socrates:] “Next, then,” I said, “make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human

beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets.”

“I see,” he [Glaucou, Plato’s brother] said.

[Socrates:] “Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent.”

[Glaucou:] “It’s a strange image,” he said, “and strange prisoners you’re telling of.”

[Socrates:] “They’re like us,” I said.⁵

We are the gravely ignorant pathetic prisoners. Plato’s allegory of the cave illustrates our human nature in its neediness for knowledge, its proper possession. Needless to say, the prisoners are disabled. They lack a due good. Things that belong together are torn asunder.

What is the proper response? If we follow the bioethicist’s logic, we should get rid of the prisoners, seal the cave. Of course, that is a gross error, as gross an error as killing the disabled baby. As Socrates tells us, the proper response is to remedy the lack, to educate the ignorant, to lead them out of the cave. That is what Socrates does.

Now, to speak in a decidedly monotheistic fashion, God loves the ignorant. When Socrates educates them, he is pious. For he performs this therapeutic service to those beloved by God on behalf of God. According to Plato, piety is to take care of those loved by the divine who lack a due good. In other words, piety is to care for the disabled loved by God on behalf of God. Clearly, the founder of the Academy suggests a much different answer to our question concerning the disabled than that which we find in the modern university.

Allow me to conclude with a familiar, optimistic story:

⁵Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, 514a-515a, translated by Alan Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York NY: Basic Books, 1991), p. 193.

Once upon a time, a mystic asked God to see Heaven and Hell. God sent a Saint to show the mystic. The Saint pointed towards two doors. Inside the first, in the middle of the room, was an enormous round table with a large pot of stew. It smelled delicious, the mystic's mouth watered, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly, famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles. Each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. They repeatedly cursed and bemoaned their condition. The mystic shuddered at the sight of their misery. The Saint said: "You have seen Hell." Behind the second door, the room was identical. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful stew that made the mystic's mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. Their joy was electric. The mystic turned to the Saint and said: "I do not understand." The Saint smiled, told the mystic to open his mouth, and placed a spoonful of the perfectly delicious stew on his tongue. She said: "Its simple: In Heaven, we feed each other."

Thank you!