

“So What?”

Finding the Existential Purpose to Liberal Education

During the Summer 2018 semester, I had the good fortune of teaching “LS610: The Existential Imagination” in Loyola University Maryland’s Graduate Program in Liberal Studies. I’ve been teaching in this program at Loyola for more than a decade, and although this was to be my first opportunity to lead this particular course, I was no stranger to the course or its material. As a young undergraduate (I won’t say how many years ago), it took only a semester and a half for me to change my major from the very practical English for Secondary Education to the more challenging (if proportionately *less* practical) realm of philosophy. There was no telling what I would do once I’d wrestled with the ‘big questions’ rigorously enough and for long enough to wrench a degree from its learned but demanding clutches (seriously *no* telling, and I tried hard to tell many people what I might do), but what did that matter? What better way to spend the latter portion of one’s formative years than to be guided by the love of wisdom?¹

This same desire would, several years after earning what turned out to be a rather inconsequential piece of paper, lead me to enroll in my very first course in a graduate liberal studies program; it just so happened that this course would be “LS610: The Existential Imagination,” in the Graduate Program in Liberal Studies (then the Master of Modern Studies program) at Loyola

¹ A bit on the nose perhaps, but true nonetheless—*philosophy*, from the Greek *philosophia* (*philo* – loving; *sophia* – knowledge, wisdom), means loving [love of] wisdom.

University of Maryland (then Loyola College). This was a comfortable and familiar way for me to return to the rigors of advanced academia, a limbering and invigorating regimen of mental calisthenics meant to prepare me to wrestle in the higher weight class of graduate work. As it turns out, my hopes for the course were not misguided; it proved to be an enjoyable and rewarding semester-long investigation that not only reminded me why I love philosophy but also affirmed my decision to return to the classroom in earnest. Further, despite my unarticulated and embarrassingly naïve expectation that spending a few months in the very familiar company of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus² would ultimately yield profound enjoyment but no new knowledge, I did manage to learn a few things. As it turns out, the system works: undergraduate education is undergraduate for a reason, just as graduate education is graduate for a reason. I congratulated myself on having the “wisdom” to embark on this new educational adventure and for having the requisite skill and fortitude to overcome my first (if unfairly familiar) opponent. I was on my way.

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Students of graduate liberal studies programs are very often a curious breed. Having been a student in both a master’s- and doctoral-level program, and having also taught in similar programs for more than a decade, I have witnessed this first-hand. In many ways, beyond the very obvious label “graduate student in liberal studies,” these students defy classification. There is no singular call that led them back to the halls of academia, no unifying purpose to their pursuit; there is no common classroom, campus, or community experience like that of many undergraduate or more discipline-specific graduate programs. Whereas for some this educational pursuit is the focal point of their energies and efforts, for others it comes second (or third, or fourth, ...) to the responsibilities and pleasures of a career, a family, or any number of other disparate but important elements comprised by one’s life.

² No, Camus should not properly be called an ‘existentialist,’ and not just because of his own insistence of that fact. Still, discussing Camus in the context of existentialism is not a wholly misguided or fruitless endeavor; I’ll say no more on that score.

Finally, there is no absolute *telos* to orient and inspire the multi-year odyssey that culminates in the master's degree³: whereas some students long for the opportunity to pursue a deeper education for its own sake, others seek more tangible outcomes to be attained through the very specific (and marketable!) skills—writing, speaking, critical thinking—which constitute the wheelhouse of liberal education.

I firmly believe that the existence of a student who falls exclusively into one category or the other is rare; far more often, students find themselves with a foot in each camp, sometimes leaning one way and sometimes the other, sometimes relishing the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, sometimes buoyed by the recognition that all their hard work and effort will culminate in some practical (and quantifiable) improvement of station. In his extensive lectures on aesthetics, Hegel contended that one of the great challenges of contemporary human existence is the need to reconcile the subjectivity of particular, individual human existence with the objective whole (the “world”) within which such individual existence is immersed and undertaken. The individual longs, according to Hegel, for a fundamental harmony (*eintracht*) between oneself and the world, thus allowing one to exist both in one's own subjectivity and in the objectivity of the world. As Hegel concludes, “spiritual culture, the modern intellect, produces this opposition in [the individual] which makes [one] an amphibious animal, because [one] now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another.”⁴ In a similar manner (and, I would argue, no less profoundly), most students of graduate liberal studies are equally amphibious. How fortunate for all of us that this kind of tension, this discomfort, often proves to be the most fertile ground for learning and growth.

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³ This fact proves to be both the blessing and the bane of liberal studies programs everywhere; in no other formal graduate program can students and faculty alike enjoy the unique pleasures and unanticipated challenges and discoveries of true interdisciplinarity; similarly, no other formal graduate program must work so tirelessly to define and defend its purpose, not just to prospective students upon whom they depend for their viability but also to the institutions upon whom they depend for their vitality.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 54.

But what does any of this have to do with the “LS610: The Existential Imagination” and the summer of 2018? A great deal, actually.

First, let me admit that, when I was a student of graduate liberal studies, I tended to lean heavily toward the “deeper education for its own sake” side of things; while this may reflect a fidelity to my educational roots in philosophy, there is a certain short-sighted impracticality inherent to this position as well. Second, let me further admit that the disproportionate nature of my motivation was not wholly corrected during my time as a student and has followed me well into my teaching career. As I prepared to teach my first course in a graduate liberal studies program (in fact, the first course I would ever teach in *any* program), I had a troubling conversation with a long-time friend (with whom, not coincidentally, I had studied philosophy as an undergraduate) that compelled me to question my insistence on prioritizing “deeper education for its own sake.” It seems that the years since we had earned our degrees in philosophy had led us to very different places; whereas mine was still firmly entrenched in a “love of wisdom,” his had tended more toward a disdain for “thought for its own sake” and a complete sloughing off of his philosophical hide. Thus, after I enthusiastically explained to him how I would bring the full depth and breadth of my philosophical knowledge to the subject matter of my course, he replied only with an unimpressed “so what?” Okay, so I had not won over my friend into recognizing the intellectual merit of my proposed course; that was one thing. What was far worse was the attendant realization that I was very likely to encounter the same charge from any (or all!) of my students at any attempt on my part to share my philosophical insights.

“Ultimately, Socrates contended that to fear death over a refusal to continue to question himself and others, toward understanding the Delphic decree that there was no one wiser than Socrates, would be a profound betrayal of his identity and his divine responsibility.”

“Really? So what?”

“For Camus, the designation ‘Absurd’ is not a description of the world or of the individual but rather of the relationship, the tension, that arises in the confrontation between the two—the individual longing for clarity and purpose and the world’s silent refusal to give. What matters more, however, is the manner of individual response, in revolt against the silence of the world and the absurdity of such an existence in the world. This is why ‘one must imagine Sisyphus happy.’”

“Sure, okay. So what?”

And so on it would go. And I had no good answer ready to combat this cold, unimpressed, unmoved foe: “so what?”

Over the years since teaching that first course, I have tried hard to find a good answer to this seldom-asked but perpetually haunting question. Beyond the need to successfully complete a specific course requirement, why *indeed* should this matter to anyone? Why *have* I chosen the readings and lectures that I’ve chosen, why do we discuss this and not that? How do I imagine that anything of what we read, discuss, and think and write about will have a substantive effect on the daily existence of my students? *Why does any of this actually matter?* Sometimes, the answer is quite easy to find, and sometimes it is not. Very often, even when I have found a truly compelling answer, it remains safely stashed away in the ol’ bag of tricks for lack of the question being asked. And yet there are other times, even when not called for, that the answer insists on entering the room and announcing itself with great gusto. Such was the very fortunate case in “LS610: The Existential Imagination” in the summer of 2018.

One day while reading, wholly independently of my preparations to teach existentialism to a group of graduate liberal studies students, I stumbled upon this arresting insight from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: “Is not segregation an existential expression of [the individual’s] tragic separation, [one’s] awful estrangement, [one’s] terrible sinfulness?”⁵ Now we all know that when you spend an inordinate amount of time in contemplation of any specific idea or area of investigation, you tend to see manifestations of that particular idea or area of

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 85.

investigation *everywhere*. But still—was there something meaningful in this statement from Dr. King? Might this be applicable to, perhaps *necessarily* so, my upcoming teaching assignment? A bit of further reading led me to his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” which he had written in response to Harold Fey’s request of various thinkers and public figures to write an essay “reflecting their intellectual and spiritual development over the past ten years.” In his essay, while addressing a myriad of influences on his own intellectual/spiritual trajectory, King explicitly cites existentialism as a significant component of his education which woke him from his Kantian “dogmatic slumber.” King notes: “I became convinced that existentialism...had grasped certain basic truths about [the individual] and [the individual’s] condition that could not be permanently overlooked.”⁶ Further: “Its understanding of the ‘finite freedom’ of [the individual] is one of existentialism’s most lasting contributions, and its perception of the anxiety and conflict produced in [the individual’s] personal and social life as a result of the perilous and ambiguous structure of existence is especially meaningful for our time.”⁷ There it was! There was perhaps the most clear, meaningful, and important answer I’d ever found to a prospective “so what?” If the thought and work of one of the great thinkers, activists, and champions of the cause of human dignity in American history could be at least partially influenced by existentialist thought, then surely we could (and should!), if not be similarly influenced, at least try to identify and explore the grounds for this connection. And thus, my version of “LS610: The Existential Imagination” became not merely a course in the history and themes of existentialist thought, but also an exploration of the manner in which a particular ideology, a *philosophy*, might yield a particular manner of being in the world which entails a commitment to human equality and human dignity, for both oneself and on behalf of others, and not merely in the abstract but also in this immediate time and place, in the second decade of the twenty-first century in a city that is still deeply and troublingly segregated. And thus, my version of “LS610: The Existential Imagination” was poised to deliver on the educational promise to serve the amphibious students who would

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in *Stride toward Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

⁷ *Ibid.*

come seeking both intellectual and meaningful, practical edification.

Isn't this, in the end, precisely what we cherish about a liberal education? The confluence of the abstract and the real, of theory and practice, of respectful regard for the past and concern for the future, which uniquely equips us, students and faculty alike, to fully and earnestly engage, understand, and hope to change the world in which we live, *together*. For my part, just as I could imagine no better way to spend my undergraduate years than as a student of philosophy, so can I not imagine a better way to spend my intellectual and professional life than by continuing to cultivate for myself, and hopefully inspire in others, such a thoughtful engagement with human existence in the world, from its loftiest ideas down to its most mundane and immediate experiences. After all, we cannot fully engage one without simultaneously engaging the other, both individually and collectively.