

Dusting Off the Moral Compass

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It's customary and fitting to begin the Faculty Lecture with acknowledgements of gratitude. After all, there are few things that we actually do totally on our own, and virtually nothing of value that doesn't depend on the contributions of others. Even my simple ritual of a cup of coffee each morning is made possible by the labor of scores of people whom I've never even met. Imagine, then, my deep indebtedness and gratitude to those who have helped make this day possible. Formal acknowledgements of appreciation are in the brochure that you received and which I invite you to please read if you have not already done so. To all of you here today, thank you for the honor of your presence. I'm aware how busy all of you are, and how precious time is. Your being here to share this occasion with me is the highlight of my career.

I'd like to acknowledge the comforting presence of my wife, Victoria, our son, Gabriel, and my daughter Kim. I am moved, as well, to acknowledge the felt absence of departed colleagues in my division, who were once part of my daily life on the third floor of the IDC building: Peter Angeles, Henry Bagish, David Lawyer, Darryl Morrison, and Bruce Trotter. I value the moments we shared and want to honor that by dedicating this lecture to them.

The 26 lecturers who have preceded me have run the presentation gamut from tightly crafted scholarship worthy of publication, to skillful, sometimes playful, presentations with graphics, props, and displays managing to both instruct and delight. Each has been a unique expression of the style and personality of the lecturer and each has brought credit to our college.

As with previous Faculty Lecturers, I am here to represent my colleagues and to celebrate with you the noble enterprise of education. We participate in a grand venture, where the daily routine of our efforts is uplifted and derives its noble character from what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called, in his book so titled, "The Aims of Education." These aims are directed at our ultimate concern here, the students of Santa Barbara City College.

The particular subject through which I relate to my students is philosophy, the source and origin of the intellectual disciplines, the disciplines that inquire. Philosophy is the activity of questioning, of inquiring into our most basic assumptions, beliefs, and ideas about ourselves and the world. The master of the

art of questioning is Socrates. In the Western tradition, Socrates is credited with having turned philosophical attention inward, from questions about the nature of the physical world, to questions about human nature, about how one ought to live and how one ought to relate to others. In effect, he applied critical thinking to the moral life, and gave birth to Moral Philosophy, also known as Ethics, the study of morality.

Socrates described himself as on a mission, a divine calling to prod the citizens of Athens to take morality seriously and tend to their souls. He grew up in the most powerful and wealthy society of his day, and lived through its most trying period of civil discord and unrest. His society was a democracy, but, much like our own, threatened by political corruption, religious hypocrisy, and increasing decadence.

Like the skeptic Diogenes, who walked the streets of Athens in the daytime with a lantern, searching for an honest man, Socrates could find neither wisdom nor virtue in its leading citizens, and, among the rest, saw widespread ignorance about truth, goodness, and beauty. At his trial, Socrates admonishes his fellow citizens with words that have retained their force throughout the centuries and are fresh, even here and now:

“You are a citizen of a great and powerful nation. Are you not ashamed that you give so much time to the pursuit of wealth and reputation and honors, and care so little for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your soul?”

(Plato, *The Apology*)

When asked why he devoted his entire life to this one mission, Socrates responded, “The most important question is: ‘How should I live my life?’” He was constantly urging others to ask this question, to engage in self-examination, convinced that the truth about the right and the good could be discovered, that it was inherent in our very natures, concealed by the dust and distortions of ignorance, false beliefs, and social conventions. Although the mariner’s compass was centuries away from being invented, Socrates had envisioned within each of us a moral compass, a guide to how we ought to live our lives.

The title of my lecture, “Dusting Off the Moral Compass,” was inspired by the remarks of Isabel Dalhousie, the protagonist in Alexander McCall Smith’s delightful novel, *The Sunday Philosophy Club*. One morning, while having breakfast and reading of yet another scandal at the highest level of public office, in her beloved Scotland, Isabel says to her companion and housekeeper, Grace:

“Shocking...I can’t remember when exactly it was that it

became all right to lie in public life. Can you remember?" Grace could. "President Nixon started it. He lied and lied. And then it came across the Atlantic and our people started to lie too. That's how it started. Now it's standard practice." Isabel had to agree. People had lost their moral compass, it seemed, and this was just a further example.

This, of course, is just a metaphor, but the idea of a "moral compass" struck a chord in me. A compass allows a mariner at the helm to stay on course, even in troubled waters, shifting winds, and starless sky. It gives direction, but we have to learn to read it, to trust it, and even then the hard work of steering straight is up to us. Now, whether we're as morally adrift as Isabel fears, is open to challenge, and my suspicion that we are may be evidence that I'm getting old and looking back through the distorting lenses of nostalgia. But it does seem to me that, the older I get, the more our culture appears to be deteriorating. In particular, human civility, respect for the rule of law, concern for the welfare and rights of others, appreciation for the environment that sustains us, keeping one's word, carrying one's weight, — all of this, without which civilization cannot long last, much less thrive, all seems at risk.

Our moral condition no doubt results from many factors, but I venture to say that it's the prevailing ideas and values of a culture, more than anything else, that shape the development and destiny of that culture, as surely as the fundamental beliefs and values of an individual determine the shape and destiny of that person's life. Beliefs have consequences, and not all beliefs are true.

As I see it, our culture is suffering from a great divide, a clash of ideas concerning human nature and the nature and role of moral values in human life, particularly in the public domain. These ideas, I contend, are seriously flawed.

On one side is the view that morality is relative, lacking an objective base and universal application. This comes largely from the secular tradition, associated generally with political liberalism, humanism, and confidence in reason and science. On the other side, the view that morality requires belief in God, coming from the religious tradition, associated generally with political conservatism, belief in the supernatural, and moral absolutism.

In my view, our present moral condition stems largely from these two competing perspectives: secular relativism, and religious absolutism, each with profound social and political implications. These beliefs have created much of the dust on our moral compass. Submitting them to critical review should clear the dust. Let's begin with relativism.

Relativism is the general term for a variety of views about truth which basically come down to the idea that truth is a matter of mere opinion, either the opinion of an individual, called subjectivism, or the opinion of a culture or group, called cultural relativism. And so, the fairly common expressions, “true *for me*” and “true *for them*.” These expressions typically serve as conversation stoppers. In other words, “true for me” is supposed to be as beyond challenge as “my favorite color is green.” On this view, there is no such thing as objective truth, truth independent of what a particular individual or group believes.

Relativism seems to have enjoyed a surge of popularity in recent decades, but it’s hardly a new phenomenon. Plato’s philosophy got its jumpstart from his annoyance with the relativists of his day. In Plato’s dialogues we see his teacher Socrates on a number of occasions mind-wrestling with a relativist or two.

Now, as widespread as this view seems to be, it is doubtful that many people hold it without some qualification. You’re not likely to hear a relativist say, “Well, officer, the speed limit may be 65 *for you*, but not *for me*.” As a general theory of truth, relativism is literally indefensible because any attempt to support it or to convince someone of its truth presupposes the objectivity of truth. In other words, the relativist’s claim that truth is relative is self-defeating.

Put another way, if the claim “truth is relative” were **objectively** true, it would contradict itself. On the other hand, if the claim is only **relatively** true, that is, true **for** the relativist, then it’s not a claim about truth, but rather, a report about the relativist, namely, that he’s a relativist, which tells us nothing about truth at all. So, one can easily enough *say* that truth is relative, but it would be odd to *insist* that it is when challenged.

Given that wholesale relativism is untenable, the relativist thesis usually gets narrowed down considerably, in particular, to the moral domain, where it creates quite a cloud of dust.

In ethics, cultural relativism is the view that what is right and wrong for an individual is whatever that individual’s culture or group holds to be right and wrong. This has been a theme among many social scientists for the better part of the twentieth century, resting largely on observations of the great diversity in moral practices among different cultures throughout the world.

According to relativism, cross-cultural criticism reflects one’s ignorance of the nature of morality, namely, that moral standards are grounded in and arise from particular cultural contexts. What is right in one culture may be wrong in another. In short, there are no culture-neutral standards that apply universally, to all persons. It follows that there can be no culture-neutral evaluations; all

evaluations are on equal footing. No particular culture's standards, then, are better than any other's. The relativist explains that the endless and widespread disagreement in ethics is due to the fact that there is no objective moral truth to be found.

So, rather than criticizing others, we are advised by the relativist to be tolerant of different practices. And, instead of engaging in cultural prejudice, we should seek understanding, recognizing and appreciating the diversity in cultural practices, beliefs, and values throughout the world.

Now, it is certainly true that moral practices vary widely, as do beliefs about what is right and wrong. It is also true that moral condemnation, especially of alien customs, often rests on ignorance. Anthropologists and sociologists have done an exceptional job of observing, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting the practices, customs, attitudes, and beliefs of the many varied and diverse human cultures.

But, it does not follow from the fact that cultures differ in their practices and moral beliefs either that there are no objective moral truths, or, that the differing practices necessarily imply differing moral values. In other words, from the premise that there is cultural diversity, one cannot infer the conclusion that there are no objective moral truths. One cannot go from observations about what people believe to a conclusion about the truth or falsity of those beliefs. Put bluntly, the cultural differences argument, a major support of relativism, is simply invalid.

Moreover, radically differing practices may conceal strikingly similar moral values and principles. The philosopher James Rachels offers an example of relativism given by the Greek historian Herodotus, who recounts a tale in which the Greek custom of cremating the dead, is compared with a custom of a group called the Callatians, who ceremoniously ate from the dead. Each abhorred the others' practice as barbaric and immoral. But, as Rachels correctly observes, despite the difference in practices, there was a shared underlying value and meaning: respect for the dead.

This example does not prove that respect for the dead is objective and universal; that is not its point. What it does show, however, is that there is likely much less diversity in moral values and principles than the diversity in practices suggests.

Additionally, some differences in practices arise from differences in beliefs, some of which may be shown to be false, in which case the practice based on that belief would be open to rational challenge. For instance, suppose that a group sincerely believed that earthquakes could be prevented by the sacrificial burning of, say, a

liberal secularist or a religious conservative. Either thousands of innocents would die from an earthquake, or be saved by the sacrifice of one. Such a practice would be open to challenge, since it requires the unnecessary taking of human life based on a false belief. The general guiding principle here would be: no practice that requires unnecessary human suffering is justified.

Armed with the lesson of this simple example, we very likely could, objectively, non-ethnocentrically examine and find wanting at least some practices of various cultures, including some of our own. Indeed, have we not, in our society, made some moral progress, for example, in recognizing the rights of women and members of various minorities and other disadvantaged groups?

For the relativist, there can be no moral **progress**, only change, for progress presupposes a standard independent of cultural norms. But, we **have** progressed **away** from what were once the prevailing cultural norms; and, since these **were** the prevailing norms, we had to have been following a different standard, one independent of the culture, a standard toward which we are still striving.

Relativism gets much of its moral force from its non-judgmental stance and, ironically, its appeal to tolerance. This “anthropological perspective” is built into social scientific method, and rightly so, for the purposes of research and knowledge. But, one cannot coherently hold that values are relative, that value judgments have no objective basis, and, at the same time, make the value judgment that we, everyone, ought not make value judgments, urging us to be tolerant and respectful.

To be sure, in general tolerance is called for, not because moral values are relative, but because we are finite and fallible: we may be ignorant and may need to know more. That each of us is subject to misunderstanding and to being misunderstood should always give us pause. By its very nature, relativism closes the door to the critical examination and evaluation of moral practices, resulting in the view that different moral perspectives are on equal footing, are equally valid, which amounts to saying that “anything goes,” so long as some culture values it.

Though widely embraced, this view of the nature of morality does not survive philosophical challenge. It also collides head-on with relativism’s most vocal critics, the religious absolutists, those who hold that morality is grounded in the absolute commands of God such that, not only are there rules that apply to everyone, but that these rules have no exceptions.

From the perspective of the religious absolutist, relativism has undermined morality and put our culture on the road to decadence and decline. In other

words, without God, there can be no morality. Atheism and agnosticism, then, have no moral ground, and open the door to moral chaos. This view is captured succinctly by one of Tolstoy's characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, with the disturbing and prophetic claim, "If God is dead, then everything is permissible."

On this view, the challenge that science and secular humanism pose to religion is, in essence, a threat to morality. And so, according to the religious absolutist, only a return to morality based on faith in God can set us back on course. Throughout history, this has very likely been the most widely held view about the nature and source of morality, of right and wrong: God has voiced commands that we must obey—absolutely, without exception, without questioning. Here is an example from the Bible, Genesis, 22:

And it came to pass...that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him..."Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

And Abraham rose up early in the morning...and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto the men, Abide ye here...and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

And Isaac spake unto Abraham...and said, My father...Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham...Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything

unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son...from me.

Fortunately for Isaac, God provided a surrogate, a wild ram, which Abraham lost no time in slaying and roasting, no doubt more eagerly than had it been Isaac. So, all's well that ends well. Except, of course, for the poor ram.

Upon orders from God, Abraham set out to slay his son Isaac. Resolute, with eyes ablaze and knife in midair, Abraham would surely have killed Isaac, had an angel not restrained him. In philosophy, this view, that the right and the good are whatever God commands *because* God says so, is called Divine Command Theory. Given this view, we can only know right from wrong, good from bad, by God's telling us...that is, by revelation, either directly from God to an individual, or through God's word revealed in a sacred text.

Now, to an inquiring, impartial observer, this raises some troubling questions, for there are numerous revelations, numerous sacred texts which, at various crucial points, conflict, and cannot all be the true revelation. Virtually all believers of the various texts recognize this, and regard *their* text as genuine, and the others as not. Muslims do not accept the New Testament; Christians do not accept the Koran; and Mormons do not accept the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and so on. One could even imagine violence and war arising from their disagreements.

And so, the question: how is one to tell which, if any, of the claims to divine revelation is true? But, let's assume that this can be settled, and assume, as well, that we can solve the problem of which of the possible interpretations of the true revelation is the correct interpretation. We still face the question raised by Socrates over two thousand years ago, a question now famous in philosophy, "Are God's commands good because God commands them, or does God command them because they are good?"

As we have seen, Abraham believes that God's commands are good because God commands them. But this answer has the unfortunate consequence of making God's commands arbitrary. That is, if God's simply saying so makes it so, then God has no reasons for issuing the commands that He issues. God could just as well issue the opposite of the commands, say, the opposite of the Ten Commandments, and then *those* would be right and good, by His simply saying so. Nor will it do to say that God *wouldn't* do this, since one couldn't offer a reason why not, for reasons have been ruled out. The right and the good are solely a function of God's will, God's power. In other words, Divine Command theory reduces to Might makes Right. In this case, Absolute might makes Absolute right.

In Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*, Socrates takes a different approach. He simply asks questions, similar to the following: "Is an apple nourishing because we eat it, or do we eat it because it is nourishing?" "Is an object heavy because it is hard to lift, or is it hard to lift because it is heavy?"

The answers are clear, for there is a logic to the concept of "because": we do not make the apple nourishing by eating it, we eat it because it is nourishing; we do not make the object heavy by finding it hard to lift, it is hard to lift because it is heavy. God does not make a command good by commanding it. He commands it because it is good. It is thus good for *some other reason*.

If so, it follows on this reading that we can act rightly, do good, for *that* reason, rather than because God commanded it. Even atheists and agnostics, then, can be moral, for there is goodness, rightness, justice, truth, whether or not God issues commands; indeed, whether or not there is even a God.

Let's compare the patriarch Abraham, with another familiar figure from literature, though admittedly not sacred literature, Huckleberry Finn. There's a particularly dramatic scene in Twain's novel, when Huck struggles over his having helped Jim, a runaway slave, escape from his owner, Miss Watson.

The morality of Huck's culture, Southern colonial America, as well as the only law Huck knew, demanded the return of fugitive slaves. Huck is troubled by his having broken the law. He decides that maybe praying over the problem might help.

And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide from Him. Nor from *me*, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because I was playing double. I was letting *on* to give up sins but away inside me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and the clean thing and go and write to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie – and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie – I found that Out. So I was full of trouble, full as I could be, and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and says, I'll go and write the letter – and *then* see if I can pray...

Miss Watson your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give Him up for the reward if you send.

Huck Finn

I felt good and all washed clean of sin and for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing.

But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and I see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such like times...and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

...I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell" – and tore it up. It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming...as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

What a study in contrast, this truant, country boy, and a legendary, biblical giant, each at a crucial point of no return. On the one hand, Abraham, larger than life, steadfast, obedient, unquestioning, following the command without the slightest hesitation, or even a moment of deliberation, ready to kill his son; on the other, Huck, a boy on the verge of manhood, struggling between the demands of culture and of the religion that he had been taught, and something yet unformed prompting him from within, decides to suffer damnation rather than betray a loving friend.

One would think that Huck had reason enough to turn Jim in. After all, the rules of his society and the religion he'd learned directed him to do so. But he needed more than that, something concrete, a reason that he could feel, as though it were his own, not a law or rule or command forced upon him, whether by a culture, or even by a God.

Someone else's saying so doesn't make it so, any more than you can pray a lie. "I was trembling, because I'd got to decide forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it." Huck is totally present to the gravity of the moment, fully aware that everything awaits his choice. In a moving act of self-determination, he

accepts the full burden of responsibility. "All right, then, I'll go to hell." The irony is poignant. I needn't spell it out.

Ask yourself this question: which of these two, Abraham or Huck, strikes you as the better example of someone morally serious, morally engaged, morally motivated? This is not a mere rhetorical question. It's an invitation to a genuine philosophical inquiry.

Well, what have I done thus far? First, I've offered some philosophical criticisms of moral relativism that show the view to be seriously flawed, perhaps untenable. I have *not* criticized cultural diversity, nor have I encouraged cultural criticism, much less the immoral practice of moral imperialism, of forcing one's values on others. Second, I've offered philosophical criticisms of the view that morality requires God, showing that thesis to be questionable. I have *not* criticized or questioned belief in God, the goodness of God's commands, or the yearning for transcendence that is embodied in religious expression.

I should make clear that the observations I've offered about relativism and religious absolutism barely scratch the surface and come nowhere near doing justice to the breadth and depth of the discussion of these topics in the literature of my discipline. I should also at least mention the dramatic historical context within which morality fell victim to both religious absolutism and relativism.

It can plausibly be argued that morality has lost considerable intellectual respectability over the past few centuries. For nearly 1500 years, the unchallenged intellectual authority was the church, which, by association, gave morality supreme status. Within a hundred years of its birth in the 17th century, modern science assumed the role of intellectual authority, replacing faith with reason, ritual with method, doctrine with the laws of nature, and values with facts.

Morality was swept up in the wake of the Church's decline as an intellectual force. The emergence of relativism, a by-product of the social sciences in the 20th century, further weakened the case for morality. I chose to focus on relativism and religious absolutism because they not only represent radically opposing and widely held views about the nature of morality, but, they pose major obstacles to moral clarity as well. I hope that what I've sketched out is enough to provoke serious reflection on this matter, for there is much to be considered.

In the time that remains I'd like to shift a bit from the formal to the personal. What I've said thus far could just as easily have been presented by any other instructor in philosophy. I don't mean by this that I'm not committed to what I've said, only that it came more from the head than from the heart. Philosophy

should touch both; it is, after all, the Love of wisdom, when the heart and mind are one.

As you can no doubt see, my yesterdays are much greater than my tomorrows. Many more years are behind me than ahead. I'm quite comfortable with that. In reflecting on my life, what stands out to me so clearly is how very fortunate I've been, how free from suffering, great loss, bitter disappointment, physical and emotional pain, and mental impairment.

But more than that, how fortunate in my relationships, both casual and intimate; fortunate in having work that brings me joy; fortunate in the stunning beauty of where I live; fortunate that I understand enough to be moved to tears by great poetry, art, and music, and understand enough to be humbled by the genius of great minds and inspired by the example of great souls. I've traveled enough of the world to get a first-hand sense of human beings, enough to see a shared humanity beneath the differences. I'm quite aware of the human capacity for good and evil and the conditions that can give rise to both.

So, what have I learned that's worth passing on, that I can offer with conviction? Something that applies universally, to every human being, something true, regardless of time and place, true objectively? Something that can guide us, like a compass, through every stage of life, no matter our circumstances?

This really amounts to what Socrates felt was the most important question of all: "How ought I live my life?" Now, this question can be understood as asking for a rule of action or a decision procedure that will tell us what to do whenever we have to make a choice. Moral philosophy in the modern era has favored this approach, this identification of morality with rules and law. This may be due, in large part, to the influence of the Enlightenment in the 18th century and its emphasis on reason, science, and scientific laws.

But, this certainly is not what Socrates had in mind, and my life experience counsels me to side with him. I shake my head whenever, as happens all too frequently, a scandal in public office is followed by politicians posturing about the need for more rules of ethics, for laws to prevent abuse and corruption, for laws requiring the teaching of ethics in schools of business, medicine, and law, for stricter enforcement, stiffer penalties, as though we don't have enough laws already, as though the answer lies there. There's wisdom in the old saying: "You can't legislate morality." To which I would add, it's dangerous to attempt to do so.

As I see it, being moral, living morally, doing as one ought, has more to do with the kind of person one is, with the quality of one's character, than with making

the correct decisions in accordance with a rule. Machines can be programmed to follow rules. I prefer to approach the question “How ought I live my life?” from the perspective of someone responsible for raising a child, for preparing the child to manage the challenges of life and make the most of whatever his or her circumstances might be.

The question then becomes, “What kind of person ought I help that child become?” which is the same question that faces each of us: “What kind of person ought I be?” The answer lies in the cultivation of the virtues: I ought to BE, honest, courageous, compassionate, generous, prudent, and just; I ought to live so, as well.

Now, we can argue about what counts as generous, courageous, compassionate and the like, or argue about whether and which, of the virtues, if any, has priority status, or argue about how virtuous characters are best formed, or the relationship between the virtues and culture, and so on. But, what I think is beyond dispute, and what all of human wisdom throughout the ages points to is this: the best life for any human being, the life well lived and the living of which is intrinsically worthy and rewarding, is the life of virtue.

The central, recurring theme in the great literature, drama, and art of the world, in our sacred texts and rituals, folk tales, fables, and mythology, is character in conflict and the triumph of virtue. It is the *moral* of the story that counts most, and the stories preserved in the oral, literary, and dramatic traditions of human cultures throughout time are testaments to the universality of the virtues underlying the rich diversity of their expression.

Human beings are characters in conflict because it ‘s not always easy to be honest, courageous, generous, and the like. I speak from experience, from my own failings, and from the moral example of others in my life who, unbeknownst to them, keep lighting the way for me. It’s a work in progress, getting oneself right, and it necessarily includes others: I am my best when I am generous, compassionate, and just. And so are you. Who is not?

In his treatise on Ethics, Aristotle describes the virtuous person as one who is skilled at doing the right thing, at the right time, to the right degree, in the right spirit, and for the right reason. It’s not easy to hit that mark dead center, but there is virtue even in the trying.

I’ve wondered about why it is that moral excellence is so widely thought to be challenging. The philosopher Spinoza, himself a morally gifted person, put it thus: “All things noble are as difficult as they are rare.” Why is that? Surely, the difficulty lies in us, in our human nature. The other animals are spared the ordeal

of moral challenges. We are more than merely animals. And therein lies our greatest possibilities and our greatest challenge. We have to make ourselves. Our lives do not unfold all on their own: we have to fashion out a life, like an artist working with a stubborn medium.

We are beings who can reason; we are also beings who can feel: we have emotions, needs, desires. The wisdom tradition of sacred literature is rich with dramatic explorations of the struggle between our two natures, and our yearning to be whole, complete. In our best moments we hearken to a higher light, calling it God, perhaps, but surely something ultimate in our hierarchy of concerns, something to be treated as though sacred. If anything is sacred, it's the yearning to be worthy, if only in one's own eyes, that condition called "respect."

This is as basic a need as food and drink, and more profound, for it adds the dimension of dignity that lifts us above our animal selves, and makes a moral life possible. Respect defines the proper objects of moral concern and can direct us in our relationships with one another, and in our search for meaning in life.

Respect attaches to our personhood, our characters, which are shaped largely by parenting, education, and culture, though each of us must accept a fair measure of responsibility for the kind of persons that we are. No system of rules, however complete and consistent, however just in the abstract, however strictly enforced, will yield a moral community if its citizens lack virtue.

Like a compass, the virtues always direct us toward the good; the good for ourselves, and the good for others. In the end these are inseparable, for we are social creatures for whom a community is the condition of individual fulfillment. There is no meaning without belonging, and no belonging without relationships, without community. In its broadest sense, education is the preparation of an individual for seeking fulfillment in community with others. This is essentially a moral goal, requiring that we pay due regard to our common human needs and respect each person's right to self-determination. This is what we find when we dust off the moral compass

At the outset of this lecture I mentioned Alfred North Whitehead's book "The Aims of Education." Whitehead observed that the fundamental overarching aims of a university curriculum were: first, to assist the student in becoming an independent thinker: intellectual autonomy; and second, to see to the student's increased sensitivity to the human condition: moral awareness. To realize these aims we offer the physical, natural, and social /behavioral sciences, mathematics, literature, drama, the arts, music, and, dare I say, best of all, philosophy.

Whitehead adds a warning: Either aim, without the other, intelligence, without sensitivity, is dangerous and unfitting to be called education. As Immanuel Kant would have put it, "Intelligence without sensitivity is empty; sensitivity without intelligence is blind."

In his wisdom, Whitehead concludes with the observation that intellectual autonomy and moral sensitivity must be fully integrated into the practical disciplines that comprise commerce, industry, and technology, the engines of modern life. Such is the portrait of an education.

This speaks well, I think, for what all of us do at this college. We have accepted the challenge and responsibility of helping our students become whole human beings, independent in their thinking, sensitive to the human condition, and equipped to conduct themselves competently and honorably in the market place and as citizens of a free society. I thank all of you for having joined me to celebrate this noble venture.

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