Commencement Talk

Greetings! Let me begin with a very warm welcome to all of you. For those of you who are graduating, and for your families and friends, this is a time of celebration, so let me start by saying that I think that there is much to celebrate today. Most obviously, you are graduating, and you have thereby achieved a goal for which you have undoubtedly worked very hard. But in addition, I think that you and your family and friends should also take pride in the fact that you have successfully completed what I believe is in some ways one of the most difficult of majors.

At this point I suspect that some of you who are listening will think, "What kind of claim is that? Isn't philosophy a bit of an airy-fairy discipline? And even if it isn't, surely philosophy is a walk in the park compared with majoring in disciplines such as physics, or biology, or engineering?"

How, then, can I make the claim I have just made about the difficulty of philosophy? The answer is that my claim is based in part upon my own experience as a student. As an undergraduate, I attended a university where one had to choose one's major upon entering, and my choice was mathematics, physics, and chemistry. By my third year at university, however, I had encountered, and fallen in love with, philosophy, and so I switched majors at that point. What I found was that it was mathematics and physics that had been a walk in the park in comparison with philosophy.

What is it that makes philosophy difficult? Part of it is that although some of philosophical questions have been around for over 2000 years, if you asked a philosopher which philosophical problems have been definitely solved, then – aside from the area of logic, where questions are generally as amenable to being definitively answered as is so in the case of mathematics – the list that most philosophers would provide of major philosophical questions that have been answered will tend to be embarrassingly short.

But it is not just that very few major philosophical problems – if any! – have been solved; it is also that it is not clear what one's starting points are. Contrast mathematics and science. In mathematics, there are axioms, and the challenge is to use sound methods of reasoning to get from those axioms to interesting theorems. Are there philosophical axioms? Perhaps, though not all philosophers would agree, and even among those who would agree, if you ask them what the axioms are, I think that you would find very little agreement.

Or consider science, where everything depends upon the outcome of observations and experiments. Could philosophy have a similar foundation? Some philosophers today think so, and they champion what is known as experimental philosophy. But this is very much a minority view, and one which, I would hold, is clearly unsound.

In short, a central difficulty in the study of philosophy is knowing what one's basic starting points are. It is not just a matter of somehow getting from agreed upon starting points to answers to the questions that one is interested in: it is also a matter of knowing what methods can be used to arrive at philosophical conclusions.

Well, clearly, this situation is not an especially welcome one, and it makes philosophy a very challenging discipline. But this unhappy and difficult situation also generates some of the strengths that those who major in philosophy typically develop. For given, for example, that very few philosophical questions have been decisively answered, one really needs to develop the habit of surveying that different answers that have been put forward, and of considering, very closely

and critically, the arguments that have been advanced for and against those different answers. In doing this, one quickly learns that, although, presumably, there are true answers to the questions that one is considering, it is most unlikely that those answers are easy ones. Moreover, if there is some answer that one finds very attractive, in making out a case in support of that answer, it is crucial to address objections that others have advanced against that answer. Responding instead by criticizing the opposing view of one's objector is of no avail, since to show that that person's view is problematic does not itself provide an answer to the objection that that person has directed against your own, favored answer.

The result is that majoring in philosophy naturally leads to one's acquiring skills that are both very valuable in today's world, and also not at all common. Look at popular discussions, on the Internet, or on television shows, and what do you see? Generally speaking – although there are occasional exceptions – one sees people who are unwilling to admit that the views that they are passionately advancing might be wrong, and who are thus unwilling to consider, seriously and dispassionately, the views of others. If objections are raised to their views, how do they respond? Not, in general, in the way that philosophically trained people would do – that is, by carefully considering the objection, and then attempting to rebut the objection if it seems unsound. Often, the person will instead simply repeat the argument that has just been challenged, or else they will counterattack, completely ignoring the objection, and instead advance an objection to the view of the person who raised the objection. It is not surprising, then, if one has a panel of such people, that the result is a discussion in which people constantly interrupt, and try to talk over, the others on the panel. One is inclined to ask, "Is this the way you were raised by your mum and dad?"

Societies, not least of all our own society, face a number of issues that are very important, and about many of which there is quite deep disagreement. There are, for example, questions concerning matters such as immigration, and questions concerning the appropriate legal status of things such as abortion, or physician assisted suicide, or the use of recreational drugs such as marijuana. There are questions about what should be done about the disappearance of jobs, not only in mining and industry, but also, and especially, in the retail sales industry, or about what should be done concerning the high costs of health care, and what should or should not be done about those who cannot afford health care at all. Should such people simply be ignored, as many politicians today would say – or would say if they had the courage to do so – and thus be allowed to suffer and die from illnesses that could be cured?

Progress on such questions is very difficult if one approaches them with fixed ideas, with an unwillingness to admit that one's own present views might be wrong. So society very much needs people who are philosophically trained, who realize that some questions cannot be easily and quickly answered, who realize that their own views might turn out to be mistaken, and that it is therefore crucial to consider all of the alternatives, to ask what can be said for and against each of those answers, and especially to take very seriously objections that can be directed against each answer. Those of you who are parents should therefore take pride in the fact that your daughter or son has not merely graduated, and done so in a very difficult major, but also that he or she has also acquired skills and habits of thought that are very valuable, and that may well enable them to make very worthwhile contributions to society.

I mentioned above a number of issues that society at large faces. There are also, however, crucial issues that concern universities. Indeed, in my pessimistic moments, which are becoming more frequent, I fear that universities, as traditionally understood, may not survive.

What are some of the problems? One is that, as described by Benjamin Ginsberg in his book *The Fall of Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University, and Why It Matters*, the number of administrators in universities has doubled since 1975, while the ratio of faculty to students has remained unchanged, as a result of which, first, the cost of a university education has gone up dramatically, and second, control of the university has shifted from faculty to administrators who generally have no serious scholarly credentials at all, and no conception of what lies at the heart of a liberal education.

Second, a large part of the recent growth in administrators is connected with Title IX, and the recent development of a completely out of control sexual harassment industry. This growth goes back a long way, as is detailed by Daphne Patai in her excellent book, *Heterophobia*, but the harm that it is now causing is due in large part to an infamous "Dear Colleague" letter that was issued by the Office of Civil Rights in 2011 under Barack Obama's presidency – a letter that resulted in universities adopting investigative procedures that, as argued in a document signed by 28 professors of the Harvard Law School in 2014, in effect trample upon the rights of the accused, so that what one now has are in effect "kangaroo" courts.

Even more ominous, however, is the fact that freedom of expression in universities is under very serious attack. First of all, there is what has been called the "coddling of the American mind", which has resulted in some students objecting to ideas that they find offensive, calling for "trigger warnings" and "safe zones", staging protests to get invitations of speakers with whom they disagree withdrawn, and, when those attempts fail, disrupting talks by those speakers. Secondly, Title IX administrators are curtailing freedom of expression, both in classrooms, and even in scholarly publications, by investigating professors who put forward ideas that some students find offensive. A famous case involves Laura Kipnis of Northwestern University, who was subjected to an investigation lasting more than two months when some students objected to an essay, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

How have university faculty reacted to such developments? The answer, I fear, is that faculty, even including philosophers – who should be the first to speak out clearly and unequivocally on these matters – have offered something approaching what one writer described as "the silence of the lambs." Happily, there have been a few exceptions, one of the most recent being Laura Kipnis's book *Unwanted Advances – Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. Then there are excellent books by people who are not at universities, one of the best of which is *Unlearning Liberty – Campus Censorship and the End of the American Debate*, by Greg Lukianoff.

Returning now to the topic of things to celebrate, there is one final thing that I think very much deserves to be celebrated, but where I realize that not everyone will share my view on this matter. To see what it is, let us go back to the origin of philosophy in ancient Greece. There the towering figures were Socrates, with whom it started, and then Plato, who was Socrates' student, followed in turn by Aristotle, who was Plato's student.

Socrates' philosophical interests were much narrower than those of his successors, Plato and Aristotle, as Socrates was primarily interested in the nature of the good life, whereas Plato and Aristotle were also very interested in questions falling in such areas of philosophy as the theory of knowledge, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and logic. I want to focus, however, on Socrates, since he is the one who is relevant to what I believe is a final cause for celebration.

It involves one of the sayings for which Socrates is famous, namely, this: "The unexamined life is not worth living!"

What is one to say about this? Is it true that the unexamined life is not worth living?

Well, that seems like a bit of an overstatement. Imagine someone who went through life without a critical thought about anything – as I might have done, if I had never discovered philosophy – but who had a satisfying job, a happy marriage with children who had good lives, and who spent his or her spare time shooting pool and playing golf. Would such an unexamined life really be a life that is not worth living?!

One can, however, put Socrates' basic claim more modestly, namely, that it is very important not to take any of one's beliefs for granted. Rather, one should ask whether one has good reasons for thinking those beliefs are true. One should consider important alternatives to those beliefs, and one should ask oneself what arguments can be offered both for and against one's own beliefs, and for and against the alternatives. Having done that, one should abandon any belief where some alternative appears more likely to be true in the light of the total evidence and relevant arguments.

In short, the Socratic challenge is this: One should subject even one's most important beliefs – indeed, especially one's most important beliefs – to very close critical scrutiny, and one should then follow the arguments wherever they lead.

So understood, how many people today would agree with Socrates' view? How many people would think that one should take seriously the Socratic challenge to examine closely and critically one's most important beliefs and values?

I think that many people would reject Socrates' idea that one should critically examine one's basic beliefs and values. Certainly, that was the case in Socrates' day, since Socrates was in the end accused of certain crimes, was tried, and was found guilty – in particular, he was found guilty both of corrupting the minds of the young, and of impiety – of not believing in the gods. He was thus sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing the poison hemlock.

Now let me add very quickly, that not all philosophers have the orientation that Socrates had, since philosophy involves a number of areas that have nothing to do with the Socratic injunction not to take for granted even one's most basic beliefs and values. This is true, for example, of most of metaphysics and the theory of knowledge, and it is certainly true of logic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language. It is thus possible to focus entirely on what one might call technical problems in philosophy that have nothing to do with life, and many philosophers pursue philosophy in that way, thereby posing no danger to the young.

Nevertheless, philosophy by its very nature is a subversive discipline, not in the exciting sense that it aims at overthrowing governments, but in the sense that, because it takes nothing for granted, because no belief is sacrosanct, thinking philosophically may lead to undermining beliefs that many feel ought not be questioned.

Philosophy, of course, is not alone in being subversive in this way, in questioning beliefs that many feel should not be questioned. According to a National Center for Science Education poll[1] about 18% of our fellow Americans believe that the earth is less than 10,000 years old, while another 13% are uncertain whether this is so or not, whereas students who take geology learn that, on the contrary, the earth is about 4.5 billion years old. So for the nearly 2 in 10 American who believe that the earth is less than 10,000 years old, geology is a subversive discipline, and the

[1] https://ncse.com/library-resource/americans-scientific-knowledge-beliefs-human-evolution-year

same will be true of physics, since although there are other reasons for holding that the earth is more than 10,000 years old, the most impressive type of evidence involves determination of the age of rocks using knowledge of the radioactive decay of elements.

Similarly, about 40% of American believe that dinosaurs lived at the same time as human beings. Paleontology, however, provides excellent evidence that this is not the case, so for 4 in 10 Americans, paleontology is a subversive discipline. Most subversive of all the sciences, of course, is biology, since only about 1 American in 7 accepts the biological view that humans and other species have evolved over millions of years from less advanced forms of life via a purely naturalistic process in which no supernatural being played any part.

If one is among the 1 in 7 Americans who accept the theory of evolution, one need not worry if one has a daughter or son who decides to major in sciences such as physics, geology, paleontology, or biology. But, that's not so if you have a son or daughter who chooses philosophy as a major, since when it comes to questioning beliefs, philosophy is an equal opportunity enterprise: any belief is open to philosophical scrutiny; no issue is off the table.

Philosophical reflection on many topics might initially seem harmless enough, and perhaps even welcome. But one can never be sure where such reflection will lead. Consider, for example, questions concerning the cost of health care for Americans. Some questions that philosophers would raise in this area are clearly controversial, such as "Does anyone have a right to healthcare? Adults? Children? Babies? Some politicians would answer no to all of these questions – or at least they would do so if they were both honest and consistent. But set aside such clearly controversial questions, and consider the following, apparently non-controversial question: Could one reduce the cost of healthcare, not by providing it to fewer people, but by reducing the cost of a given piece of healthcare? Politicians seem not to be asking that question, but once it is asked, there are obvious points to be made. One is this. There are drugs that are much more expensive in the United States than they would be if they were imported from other countries. Thus, to cite two examples from a recent newspaper piece, the anti-parasitic drug, Daraprim, whose price was raised to nearly $750 per pill, sells for just over $2 overseas. The cancer drug Cosmegen is priced at $1,400 or more per injection here, as opposed to about $20 to $30 overseas. Why aren't these drugs imported into the United States, so that they would be available at much lower prices?

Here's another dramatic case. You decided to take niacin, since there is evidence that it can lower cholesterol. What you didn't know was that if you have low blood pressure, niacin can cause a potentially dangerous drop in blood pressure. As a result, you pass out. Your spouse calls 911, but although you quickly regain consciousness, the emergency service people suggest that it might be good to check into an emergency room at the local hospital. You do that, spending about five hours there, and have one ultrasound examination. How will this affect your bank balance if you don't have health insurance? Or if you do have health insurance, how much will your health insurance company be billed? Any guesses?

The answer is that you, or your health insurance company, may be charged $15,000 for that brief sojourn in hospital. Perhaps, rather than going to that emergency room, you and your spouse should have taken a trip around the world instead!

Could it be that someone is getting overpaid? How could that be? Well, consider radiology. To be trained to become a good radiologist, one wouldn't need to undergo years of medical training. One could easily train a person to be an expert at interpreting X-rays in a few months. So how much should such a person be paid? It turns out that the average salary for male

radiologists is $390,000 a year, and about $309,000 for female radiologists. Nice work if you can get it.

Or compare anesthesiologists, where one could train a person to be an expert anesthesiologist in less than a month, and where the average salary is around $269,000 a year.

But of course if you or I created a business that trained people to be expert radiologists or expert anesthesiologists in at most a few months, those people could never get a job. Why not? Well, because there is a very powerful union that runs a completely closed shop – it's called the American Medical Association – and while some of our politicians enjoy bashing unions, they are only interested in targeting unions for the working classes – it is unions for elementary and high school teachers, and factory workers, for example, that they have in mind: they have no interest in criticizing unions for elite professionals who, after all, can contribute mightily to their election and re-election campaigns.

In short, even if one starts with a seemingly innocuous question, once critical thinking is in gear, it may lead to conclusions that some people find rather unwelcome.

The real crunch comes, however, when philosophers turn to questions that, from the very get-go, most people would prefer not to see subjected to critical reflection. So let me now issue a "trigger warning" at this point, lest I be hauled on the carpet and interrogated by the University of Colorado's dangerous army of Title IX administrators: I am now moving into full-blown Socratic gadfly mode: I am, as New Agers might describe it, going to be attempting to "channel" Socrates.

Consider, for example, the question of what happens to us humans when we die. For most of us, the idea that bodily death is the final and total end of our existence is not especially appetizing. Most of us, I think, would much prefer living forever. (I once had a colleague who thought that that would be terrible. He thought that perhaps about 500 years would be okay, but anything beyond that would, he thought, simply be very boring.)

So how could bodily death not be the final end of one's existence? One idea that is very widely accepted is that we humans are not made up simply of the stuff of physics: we are not constituted simply by protons, neutrons, and electrons. Instead, we involve something non-physical. On one view, defended by the French philosopher René Descartes, we have an immaterial mind that is causally connected to our physical bodies, but that, because it is immaterial, survives the death of one's body, and thus enables one to live forever. Or, according to a slightly different view, defended by the famous Catholic philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, we humans have immaterial souls that are not only the basis of consciousness, and of our intellectual capacities, but that also guide the physical development of a human organism from the moment of conception.

How does the idea that we humans involve an immaterial mind or an immaterial soul fare when subjected to critical reflection? Suppose that you were a halfback playing football and you had a head on collision with a linebacker, and wound up, as we say, unconscious. Such a collision could certainly cause temporary damage to the brain, but why would it harm an immaterial mind or soul? For while one might think that damage to the brain might very well temporarily block any communication between the brain and one's immaterial mind (or soul), so that after the collision, information would no longer flow from one's brain to one's mind, with the result that one would be temporarily without perceptual experiences. Similarly, one might think that one's mind might no longer be able to act upon the brain, with the result that one could not move parts of one's

body. But surely there would be no reason to think that one would also temporarily lose, for example, one's ability to think. For why should physical changes to the brain affect an immaterial mind or soul? Similarly, while it is not surprising that if one consumes too much alcohol, one's speech may become slurred, and one may be unable to walk a straight line, why should a chemical in one's brain have any effect upon an immaterial mind, reducing one's ability to think clearly? Or consider Alzheimer's disease: Why should something that damages one's brain affect one's ability to access memories that are stored in an immaterial mind or soul? Or why should it be the case that when a person has a stroke, or is shot in the head, that the type of mental impairment that one undergoes depends on what specific parts of the brain are damaged?

In short, there is a wealth of facts that make no sense at all if we humans have immaterial Cartesian minds or Thomistic souls, but that fall completely into place if the mind just is the brain.

Not everyone, however, who believes that humans survive bodily death thinks that humans have an immaterial mind or soul. Many believe, instead, that what happens is that at some point after death, a very powerful and benevolent deity collects together all of the fundamental particles that constituted one's body at the moment of bodily death, and reassembles them, so that we humans will be resurrected.

One objection to this is what is sometimes called the "cannibal" objection". But let's leave Hannibal Lecter and his ilk out of it, and imagine instead that some human has the misfortune to be killed and eaten by a grizzly bear. The grizzly bear is later shot, and a number of humans have a subsequent feast. Then it may be that most of the fundamental particles that were part of the body of the first individual at the moment that he was killed are also part of the bodies of the other individuals when they die. But how, then, could even an all-powerful being succeed in collecting together the relevant fundamental particles that were present in the various bodies when the humans in question died, and reassembling all of those humans, given the shared parts?

There is also a deeper objection, however, to the idea that we humans survive death via "reassembly," and one that involves an exercise in critical thinking, that is even more threatening for many people. It involves the question, "Is there good reason for believing that there is a very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very benevolent deity? Is there, in short, good reason to believe that God exists?"

This is a question, moreover, that often comes up even in introductory courses in philosophy, where students may very well be exposed to arguments both for and against the existence of God. The arguments on both sides are many and varied, and thus not such as I can explore here, except to remark that one of the most impressive, for most philosophers, is some version of the argument from evil. This type of argument appeals to the existence of very bad things in the world – such as the fact that around 3 million children die each year as a result of undernutrition[2] – and it is then argued that, given such facts, it is very unlikely that there is even a mildly benevolent deity, let alone a perfectly good one.

My basic point, however, is that once a question – such as that of the existence of God – is on the table, and the relevant arguments on both sides are set out, to be dispassionately considered, all bets are off: there are no grounds for being confident about what the answer will be until the examination of those arguments has actually been carried out.

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[2] "Maternal and Child Nutrition", *The Lancet*, June 6, 2013, http://www.thelancet.com/series/maternal-and-child-nutrition

Here, then, is a disturbing thought; here then is what I think many people would view as a troubling side of philosophy. If one embraces the Socratic challenge, if one accepts the idea that one should take nothing for granted, and that, instead, one should subject even one's most important beliefs to totally dispassionate, critical scrutiny, in some cases, things may not turn out as one had hoped that they would. So suppose that, if people reflected philosophically on the question of whether we humans survive death, many people would conclude that this was unlikely. Or suppose that, if people reflected philosophically on the question of whether the world was created by a supernatural being who was not only very powerful and very knowledgeable, but also very benevolent, many people would arrive at the unhappy conclusion that this was not at all likely. In the light of such possibilities, how should one view the Socratic challenge? Should one still embrace it, or should one instead say that there are some beliefs that it is better not to subject to critical scrutiny?

Many people, I think, would opt for the latter view, and therefore think that one should reject Socrates' injunction that one should take nothing for granted, that one should subject even one's most important beliefs to dispassionate, critical scrutiny. My own view, however, as you may very well have guessed, is that Socrates was right, that the "examined life" is the route that one should take.

To sum up. I started off by saying that there is much for people to take pride in, and to celebrate, today. First of all, we have women and men, daughters and sons, who have generally dedicated four years to completing successfully a very important step in their lives. But secondly, they have done this by undertaking what I believe is one of the most challenging and demanding courses of study in the university. Thirdly, they have not merely mastered a certain body of knowledge: they have also acquired intellectual skills that will enable them, throughout their lives, to approach any question in a critical and dispassionate manner – skills that I believe make for a better life. Fourthly, the skills in questions are also ones that are very much needed in society, especially today, in times of rapid change, so I believe that those of you who are graduating today are well-positioned, whatever careers you ultimately pursue, to make important contributions to society. Finally, while some of you who are graduating today may have focused on what I have called technical problems in philosophy – and those problems are both fascinating and challenging indeed, and well worth focusing upon – others may, as I did when I first encountered philosophy, have focused on the Socratic side of philosophy, upon questions that bear upon how one should live one's life, and you may have also concluded, along with Socrates, that the best life is one that is based upon beliefs that do withstand critical scrutiny. For all of you here today who share Socrates' view, this too, then, is something very much to be celebrated.

To conclude, then, my very heartiest congratulations to all of you who are graduating today, and my very best wishes to parents, siblings and other family members, and friends, who are here to join you in this celebration.

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