

St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Fall 2011

What Is a Community of Learning?

Welcome, new students, returning students, and tutors, to St. John's College, and to the Graduate Institute. Today each of you is joining, or returning to, a College that describes itself as a community of learning, and that dedicates itself to inquiry: to asking fundamental questions, and to pursuing answers to these questions. As members of such a community, we must from time to time turn the searchlight of inquiry on ourselves. So I mean to take this occasion to ask: what is a community of learning? My suspicion is that the phrase involves a latent but fundamental tension between its component terms, 'community' and 'learning.' To expose this tension, I propose to begin by investigating the meaning of each term in turn, under the guidance of Plato's Socrates.

Let us put learning first, as we ought to do here at St. John's. What, then, is learning? One answer, and I think a true and beautiful answer, is found in the *Meno*, part of which every incoming Graduate Institute student reads in the course of our new student orientation. Responding to Meno's paralyzing claim that it is impossible to seek anything – because either one knows what one is seeking, and so has no need to seek it, or one does not know what one is seeking, and so does not know how to seek it – Socrates raises a third possibility: we know what we are seeking, but we have forgotten it. Learning, therefore, is recollection, remembering what we once knew but have forgotten. The human soul, Socrates explains to the enthralled Meno, is immortal, and death and birth are only apparent changes that do not entail the soul's destruction. Since the immortal soul has therefore seen all things, both on the earth and in the underworld,

there is nothing that it has not learned. And since the whole of nature is akin, it suffices for a human being to recollect one thing, in order for him to be able to recall everything else for himself.

It is not hard to see that Socrates' story does not in fact allege that learning is recollection, as Socrates claims, and Meno concludes it does. If what we call learning is recollection, and we recollect what we once knew but have forgotten, then recollection *presupposes* knowledge. So where did this knowledge come from? The answer, according to Socrates' story, is that it came from seeing: knowing is primarily having seen, and so learning is primarily seeing. And indeed, this is what we see in the subsequent geometry lesson with Meno's slave. All Socrates needs to do, for the slave to learn to find the side of the double square, is to make the slave see that the square drawn on the so-called diagonal is in fact twice as big as the square drawn on the original side. The slave's opinions about the name of the side of the double square – for example, that this name must, in order to be speakable, contain some mention of a numerical ratio with the original side – are reasonable, but they are obstacles to his seeing what Socrates wants him to see, obstacles that Socrates must clear away by refutation if the slave is to see clearly. If the slave were to go through the same lesson repeatedly and in various ways, Socrates concludes, he would end up having knowledge about such things no less precisely than anyone. That is, he would know such things as well as it is possible for a human being to know them.

Now if learning is primarily nothing other than seeing, it seems to me to follow that it is an essentially private activity, one that takes place entirely in the one who sees. This is not to deny that it can be pursued in a community, with friends or colleagues; it is only to deny that it must be pursued in common. The same thing follows, I think, even when the seeing involved is

metaphorical, and the thing seen is seen in the speeches uttered in our common life. Even when the thing learned is common, the learning is not essentially in common. Now it is true that the slave boy needs Socrates to help him to clear away the incorrect opinions he has about the side of the double square. But if these obstacles to seeing are due, not to what the slave has seen, but to what he has heard from his community – as the *Meno* implies, and the *Republic*'s cave story states outright – then it follows nonetheless that learning requires community only as a source of things to see, and not as a means to seeing.

But I have gotten ahead of myself. For what is a community? Once again, a Platonic dialogue is helpful. For human beings to be in a community, they must hold things in common. As Socrates and Glaucon agree in the *Republic*, the greatest good in the organization of a city, the common good at which the legislator aims, is what binds it together and makes it one: the community of pleasure and pain, which leads the citizens to say 'my own' and 'not my own' about the same things, and in the same way. More generally, we can say that any community extends just as far as does this sense of a common good, marked by these opinions about what is and is not its own. But much earlier in their long conversation, Socrates and Glaucon also agree that, at least in the case of the citizens of the city in speech, these opinions about 'my own' and 'not my own,' about who is a citizen and who a stranger, are founded on a lie: namely, a story that all the citizens are brothers, born of and nursed by the land that they inhabit. More generally, we can say that the sense of the common good in every community is marked by correct opinions that are, if not lies, at least not held because they have been seen to be true. Since each community is founded and maintained by the promulgation of such correct opinions, it is absolutely forbidden to call these opinions into question, whether by laughing at them, or by inquiring into their truth. To do so is to call the community itself into question.

By now it should be clear what I have in mind by the latent but fundamental tension that I suspect in the phrase ‘community of learning.’ Learning, according to the *Meno* and the *Republic*, is an essentially private activity that does not require a community for its completion. And every community, according to the *Republic* and the *Meno*, is founded on correct opinions that are resistant to inquiry, and that therefore pose particularly recalcitrant obstacles to community members seeing what is – that is, to their learning. This latent but fundamental tension between community and learning is made vivid by Socrates’ image of the cave in the *Republic*. We are like prisoners confined to a deep cave, Socrates says, whose necks and legs are bound so that what we can see is limited to what is right before us. Above and behind us, where we cannot look, unbound denizens of the cave carry artifacts back and forth in front of a fire, so that shadows are cast by these artifacts on the cave wall that we face. The cave wall also reflects sounds made by some of these puppeteers, so that we take them for sounds made by the shadows. We take the shadows themselves for real beings, and the ones that seem to speak for real human beings.

Socrates makes it clear that the cave is an image of the community by remarking that, while it is an image of our nature in its education and want of education, we find ourselves in it not from birth but from childhood. Our first education must have amounted to an induction into the cave; a second, deeper education is needed for us to escape it. Moreover, the image suggests that while a kind of learning is possible within the cave – some of the prisoners get very good at discerning, naming, and predicting the shadows – this so-called learning is based on a fundamental falsehood: never having seen either the source of the shadows or any other kind of being, the prisoners take the effects for causes, and artifacts for natures. (We should note that

this would be the case even if there were no world beyond the cave.) What is learned in the cave is correct opinion rather than truth, though it bears some intelligible relationship to truth.

It is conventional, in edifying addresses of this kind, that the speaker, having identified some apparently intractable problem, go on to offer a surprising solution. I am sorry to say that I have no such solution to offer with respect to the phrase ‘community of learning.’ To repeat: learning, understood as seeing, does not require a community for its completion; and every community poses barriers, in the form of correct opinions, to learning. Unless learning is something other than literal or metaphorical seeing, or unless there are communities that do not depend on correct opinion for their sense of the common good, it seems that the phrase ‘community of learning’ must involve a contradiction: in the respect that there is learning, there is no community, and in the respect that there is a community, there is no learning. But both the image of the cave in the *Republic* and the scene with the slave in the *Meno* do suggest one way in which the consistency of the phrase might be saved. According to Socrates, while the release and healing of the prisoners in the cave can happen by nature, it helps to have a free human being in the cave, one who can release the prisoners, compel them to stand up, walk, and turn toward the light, and even drag them by force out of the cave. This releasing, compelling, and dragging is the closest one can come to helping to see, and so the one who does this is the closest thing to a teacher. Similarly, while Socrates quite reasonably claims that he is not teaching Meno’s slave when he sets the latter’s opinions against one another – after all, he does not tell the slave the correct opinion – he does help him to see that he does not know the side of the double square. This compulsion, this setting of opinion against opinion, has more in common with the means used by the community than it does with seeing, but it can lead to seeing.

This conclusion points to a more consistent meaning for the phrase ‘community of learning.’ Since we all always already find ourselves in a community, with our necks and legs bound, and our heads pointed in a fixed direction, it would be very helpful to us if we could find and join another community, one whose correct opinions oppose and counteract those that constitute and maintain the broader community in which we find ourselves. Such a ‘remedial community’ would have orthodoxies of its own, of course, and these would necessarily stand as obstacles to learning. But if these orthodoxies were well-chosen, they could also contradict the orthodoxies of the broader community, call them into question, and help us to loosen the bonds that limit our field of view. Such a remedial community, though an obstacle to learning when seen from the highest perspective, when seen from our perspective could help us to learn.

This, I submit, is the best true answer to the question ‘what is a community of learning’; and it is by being such a remedial community that St John’s College earns the right to call itself a community of learning. More particularly, it is by means of this notion that the several practices of the College that seem unnecessary to learning when seen from the highest perspective – practices like our largely-required graduate program, our requirement of attendance and participation in the conversation, our imposition of due dates for essays, and our determination of class lists and teaching assignments – are justified. The notion of a remedial community helps us to see, for example, that it is a lie in the soul to justify turning in a late paper on grounds of learning. It is true that the thought comes when it wants to, and not when we want it to; so it is true that due dates make no sense from the highest perspective. But we have no right to this highest perspective. We are prisoners in a cave. The due date of an essay protects learning by giving it a standing in the world of the cave equal to the standing of the important shadows that

parade before our eyes. It protects learning by opposing compulsion to compulsion, correct opinion to correct opinion.

Similarly, it is a lie in the soul to justify skipping a class, or sitting silently in one, on grounds of learning. It is true that we might learn more reading by ourselves in our rooms, or by coming to class just to listen, than by coming to class and saying what we think; so it is true that the requirements of attendance and participation make no sense from the highest perspective. But we are prisoners in a cave. We have no right to this highest perspective. These requirements protect learning by giving it a standing in the world of the cave equal to that of flat tires and doctor's appointments.

It should not escape our notice that this notion of a community of learning as a remedial community also supplies us with a helpful standard to judge the College. If the orthodoxies of St. John's do not oppose and counteract those of the broader community, if they instead echo and magnify the latter, then the College is a community of learning in name only. St. John's and its Graduate Institute ought to be a shelter from the ever-increasing busyness and prevailing short-term fearfulness that characterize the current mood of the surrounding community. This does not mean that we should expect serenity within these walls; the image of the cave suggests that if we are not kicking and screaming, if we do not feel ourselves to be under compulsion, if we are not temporarily blinded, we are not being prepared for learning. But we should expect that the mood of our studies here will not be the mood of the surrounding community. If it is, we can only struggle by ourselves, or hope for the assistance of a wise, and free, friend.

So come to class, and speak in class, and turn your essays in on time, even if, or especially if, you must struggle to do so. Your struggles are not a sufficient sign of learning, but if it is true that we all find ourselves prisoners in a cave, they are a necessary sign.

I would like to conclude by announcing that there will be a study group this term on Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. Please watch your email for an announcement of the place and time. I would also like to invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to tutorial.

The summer 2011 term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. *Convocatum est.*

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
August 25, 2011