

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

## What Is Graduate Liberal Education?

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 graduate liberal education? Now as citizens of, or visitors in, a democracy dedicated not to the achievement of happiness but to its pursuit, everything around us commands us to preoccupy ourselves with means, with procedures, and with methods. We feel a need to apologize for any way in which we might depart from the common run in how we live our lives. Our danger is that an excessive self-concern will place obstacles in our path – obstacles like seminars on seminar, conversations about conversation, questions that ask ‘what is a question?’ – and hide from us the things themselves that ought to be the subject of our studies. *My* apology, then, is that I mean my remarks this afternoon to be a temporary inoculation against this danger: a short bout of the disease that will leave us, perhaps after some discomfort, with a clear conscience, and in energetic good health.

So what is graduate liberal education? It suits this occasion for me to begin with the word ‘graduate.’ This word stands for what binds together all of us here today. Students come to the Graduate Institute at different times in their lives, from different backgrounds, and with different goals. Some mean simply to continue their education, others mean to become better

teachers, and still others mean eventually to pursue more advanced degrees elsewhere. But all come having completed some form of undergraduate education. (The same is true, incidentally, of the tutors, not just in the Graduate Institute, but at St. John's as a whole.) And yet, notwithstanding this publicly-acknowledged completion, each student and each tutor is brought to the Graduate Institute of St. John's College by an opposite feeling, one of incompleteness: a feeling of need, for example, or a sense that one's education is not finished, or an anticipation of pleasure at the thought of learning more. To give this feeling of incompleteness its due, think of this: while in many quarters it has become a matter of routine expectation that young people will complete an undergraduate degree, this expectation has not yet been extended to the graduate level. The feeling that brings each graduate student to St. John's, like the sense that brings each tutor here, is not bolstered by routine. To the contrary: many of us pursue our educations here just when the demands of career and family are at their height, and so very much *against* common expectation.

This feeling of incompleteness, whatever its form, has from time to time been taken, or rather, mistaken, for a sign that the undergraduate education that precedes it has been a failure. This false inference has in turn even led to the allegation that the program of the Graduate Institute is really a 'second chance' at the St. John's undergraduate program – *the Program*, as we sometimes call it – and that, in view of its relative brevity, the graduate program is 'St. John's lite.' But this allegation is unjust. It makes just as much sense to claim that, if a St. John's undergraduate were to say on graduation day that she wished that she could have had a preceptorial on Plato's *Republic*, or another chance to work through Euclid's *Elements*, then her undergraduate education was a failure. Indeed, it makes just as much sense to claim that, if a St. John's tutor were to be eager to reread Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for his *Politics* and

Society tutorial, because he hoped to learn something from his reading, then both his undergraduate *and* his graduate educations were failures – to say nothing about the time he spent as a tutor at the College. So in the question ‘what is graduate liberal education,’ the word ‘graduate’ does not mean ‘failed undergraduate.’ It means something more affirmative.

The best way to get at this more affirmative meaning is to infer what we at St. John’s think ‘graduate’ means from a comparison of the graduate and undergraduate programs. The first differences that come to sight in such a comparison are quantitative. Undergraduates attend four classes a semester for eight semesters; graduates attend three classes a term for four terms. The undergraduate classes are seminars, tutorials, laboratories, and preceptorials; the graduate classes are seminars, tutorials, and preceptorials. Undergraduates have two tutorials a semester, language and mathematics; graduates have one a term, and its content depends on the segment. So with respect to quantity, it does appear that the graduate program is to the undergraduate as shorter is to longer or less to more.

But here at St. John’s we know that quantitative measures are laconic, if not wholly mute, unless they are informed by qualitative judgments. And it is the qualitative differences between the graduate and undergraduate programs that begin to shed light on the affirmative meaning of the word ‘graduate.’ Notice that while each of the undergraduate classes, and above all seminar, proceeds roughly chronologically through its readings, over all four years of the program, each of the graduate classes is roughly chronological only within its segment, and more strictly so only within each class. Since the chronological order is the default order in the undergraduate program, adopted when no other ordering theory is at work, the curtailed chronological order of the graduate program is a sign that some other consideration intrudes. That consideration, clearly, is choice. Within certain limits – not every segment is offered every term, and the

History segment must not be taken first – graduate students are allowed to choose the order of their studies. Perhaps more importantly, since the master’s degree is granted after four segments have been completed, graduate students are allowed to choose which segment to omit from their studies. The same consideration informs the place of the preceptorial in the undergraduate and graduate programs. While students in both programs choose their preceptorials from a list of offerings, undergraduates can choose two, and the choice is a privilege reserved for juniors and seniors, whereas graduates can choose four, one for each segment. This qualitative difference, that the graduate program affords more scope for choice, indicates that by ‘graduate’ the College means, in part, someone who can be entrusted with more choices in her education.

But why can graduates be entrusted with more choices? And more importantly, to what end is their greater scope for choice? Another qualitative difference between our two programs is helpful here. Notice that, in the place of the undergraduates’ four mathematics tutorials and three labs, the graduates have a mathematics and natural science segment, with a seminar, tutorial, and preceptorial. Only in the tutorial is the liberal art of mathematics cultivated through regular demonstration; the preceptorials for this segment only occasionally involve demonstration or practica. Instead, our graduate students study mathematics and natural science chiefly by reading and discussing great books. Harvey, Newton, and Darwin are read in the undergraduate tutorial or laboratory, but in the graduate seminar. Likewise, in the place of the undergraduates’ four language tutorials and one music tutorial, the graduates have a literature segment, with a seminar, tutorial, and preceptorial. Only in the tutorial, again, are the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic cultivated through the study of poetry and prose. Instead, our graduate students study literature chiefly by reading and discussing great books. More tellingly, in the place of translation, which is the central activity of many semesters of the four language

tutorials of the undergraduate program, our graduate students can choose to take a Greek preceptorial that is ancillary to reading a great book in its original language.

More so than in the undergraduate program, in the graduate program most of the classes are centered on the reading and discussion of great books, as distinguished from the cultivation of the liberal arts. The tutorial schedules in each of the five segments show that only in the literature tutorial is there latitude for variations in scheduling and content – variations associated with the cultivation of the liberal arts in the undergraduate tutorials. The strict schedules and settled content of the other four graduate tutorials make them resemble seminars and preceptorials in the graduate, and undergraduate, programs. Indeed, only one of the five segment titles even names a liberal art; the others name fields of study, such as are often used to order books in a bookstore. (I will say something about the dangerousness of our segment titles in a subsequent convocation address.)

This comparison of the two programs that express *the* Program, each of which combines in its own way the study of the great books with the cultivation of the liberal arts, makes the qualitative meaning of their quantitative differences clear. Graduate students at St. John's College cultivate the liberal arts less than do their undergraduate colleagues, but they can thereby devote proportionately more of their time to a more focused study of the great books of the western tradition. By 'graduate' the College means someone who can be entrusted with more choices in his education, because he can be presumed to have cultivated the liberal arts enough in his life to study at the graduate level, and to make good choices of subjects for his study. This, then, is the end of the greater scope of choice afforded to graduate students by the Program: to permit them to focus on a few great books of a few kinds, so as to study them in greater depth, with greater intensity. It is no accident that, while the seminar, as the class in which the liberal

arts are exercised on the great books, is the heart of the undergraduate program, the heart of the graduate program is the preceptorial, as the class in which one or a few great books are read with the greatest focus.

So the conclusion, for the moment, of my inquiry – the answer I suggest to my question ‘what is graduate liberal education?’ – is the following: graduate liberal education is not so much the continued cultivation of the liberal arts, as the more focused study of the great books of the western tradition. Of course, like so many other answers to ‘what is?’ questions, this answer is itself a riddle that poses another question: ‘what does it mean to study a great book?’ Common sense tells us, after all, that we study not the books themselves but the things that the books are about, human being and the world. Perhaps it would be better if we could get the books out of our way, and go straight to the things themselves. As an epilogue to my inquiry today, I would like to suggest a solution to this riddle – one that takes seriously the thought that the great books *are* the things themselves.

When we at St. John’s College say that we study books, we mean that we study what is essential about them, rather than what is accidental. In part, this means that we are not primarily concerned with accidents of translation, or edition, or substantiation. The ways in which two translations of the *Republic* or two editions of the *Federalist Papers* might differ are only interesting to us insofar as they illuminate what is essential about these books. And it makes no difference to us whether the books are written on parchment, printed on paper, or displayed on an iPad, provided that what is essential shines through. But we *are* concerned to spend our limited time on certain books, those whose essential content is great. What, then, do we mean by ‘great,’ with respect to books?

At first it might seem that by ‘great’ we mean ‘the cause of great effects.’ This is not a bad way to begin. For how else would we first suspect that a book is great, if not by hearing, among everyone or among all those whom we admire, the opinion ‘this book is great’? And to produce such an opinion among so many or such admirable people is surely to cause a great effect. But it doesn’t take much reflection to see the problem with this view. How do we know that the book in question is really the cause of, that is, really responsible for, this great effect? The difference between the accidental and the essential is helpful here too. We are not interested in books that have great effects by accident – for example, by being misunderstood. Such things are in the territory of the intellectual historian. Rather, we are interested in books that essentially cause great effects. For the same reason, we are not interested in books that *fail* to have great effects by accident – again, for example, by being misunderstood. Rather, we are interested in books that essentially intend to cause great effects.

The objection that books do not strictly speaking have intentions should not confute us. Like every product of human art, a book has an intention only to the extent that the human being who authored it had an intention: the rest is accident. (If your thoughts have just strayed to numberless monkeys and the works of Shakespeare, I encourage you to try the experiment.) If we are interested in books that essentially intend great effects, we are necessarily interested in books whose authors also intended such effects. What we encounter in these great books is their authors preserved and perfected, made young and beautiful.

But what is the greatest effect an author can intend? For surely there are effects greater than merely spreading the opinion ‘this book is great.’ Here we are at the heart of the matter. To foster and educate human beings, to help a human type become actual from among those potentials that compose human nature; and, concomitantly, to take what is given to us in some

disorder and illuminate a world, ordered in terms of first and last, foreground and background – this is the greatest effect an author can intend. This, too, is what it means for the great books to be the things themselves: that in the light of the human types they foster and the worlds they illuminate, the things themselves also emerge. The traditional subjects of the liberal arts – the words that are the fundamental beings in grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the magnitudes and multitudes that are the fundamental beings in arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy – are first illuminated by the more comprehensive relation of human being and world articulated in a great book. Such books furnish the minds of whole epochs of humankind. Such books, regardless of the genre in which history has shelved them, are all products of their author’s love of wisdom. And so they are worthy of our focused study, here in the Graduate Institute at St. John’s College.

I would like to conclude this epilogue by announcing that there will be a study group this term on Machiavelli’s *Prince*, held on Tuesday afternoons at 2:30 in the Hartle Room, beginning on July 5<sup>th</sup>. 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 class.

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

Jeff Black  
Annapolis, Maryland  
June 20, 2011