A Republic of Letters: A Conversation Begins

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This work is born out of a number of familiar and not so familiar frustrations with the academy. The familiar frustration concerns the fact that an undergraduate at a private, expensive, elite college is more likely to be in an environment that is conducive to understanding political philosophy than an undergraduate in a public institution, even a top notch public institution. This is not to deny that great teaching can happen anywhere or to assume that all is well at the elites, but favorable circumstances for teaching political philosophy do make a difference: Smart teachers with secure employment, smaller classes, students with sufficient financial resources, and administrative structure dedicated to the liberal arts are bound to have some effect on the kind of teaching that is likely to happen. Less expensive institutions with larger lectures may be broken down into discussion sections, but the educational experiences offered by graduate students serving as teaching assistants is liable to be uneven and the lecture format is not particularly conducive to teaching students how to read or write or, more generally, how to think. At other affordable places, political philosophy is ignored altogether or the teaching load of the instructors is so heavy or split that they hardly have time to make financial or intellectual ends meets. Perhaps in the other subdisciplines of political science or in other disciplines in the academy more generally there is a better sense of what an undergraduate education is all about, but at least in my own small universe, it is no longer so clear.

A second, and perhaps unrelated frustration concerns the governance of our educational institutions. My colleagues may talk the talk of the importance of shared governance and of democracy, but most lack either the time or the interest to engage in such activity. Moreover, those who are most interested in democracy in the abstract seem the least willing to accept the opinions, advice and counsel of their colleagues. The cause of democracy may receive a full-throated “yes” in every political discussion, but amongst academics it consistently runs headlong into a predilection (a vanity, really) to believe that they have the right answer and hence others must be wrong – a most undemocratic disposition.

A third frustration grows out of the transactional, instrumental, careerist mentality that pervades a commercial society (some may say neoliberal or capitalist if these terms have any meaning). We should not be surprised that on the lovely campuses with their lovely buildings and their latest athletic and shopping facilities the commons will be a mall. The piper must be paid, and the payment appears to entail understanding a liberal arts education not in terms of the formation of a character that has the intellectual achievements of humanity at her disposal but in terms of expected income over the course of a lifetime. Yes, of course, one must make a living, but the piper now expects “a living” to be a life and a life to encompass only what can be bought and sold.

These frustrations were somewhere in the back of my mind when I had the opportunity to teach an undergraduate honors seminar on republicanism. I have tried my best to replicate the conversation over the course of a term, but it should not be understood as a transcript of what transpired. Consequently, however hokey it may appear, it is best to see it as lying in the land of imagination and hence I have changed the names of the participants.

What emerged from their imaginings was a college organized along republican (small “r”) principles, in which the students (along with faculty and staff) actually governed the place. The imaginary construction of the college became a way to understand the meaning, challenges and significance of self-government. In our discussions, it quickly became clear that a College of Government and Politics would itself both express and house the very principles and ideals upon which self-government depends. In a way, the institution itself could a laboratory for learning self-government while trying to understand its meaning and importance.

As will be seen in later papers, the discussion of a College of Government and Politics raised questions of the different languages of understanding our political life: philosophy, social science, history, arts and literature, and practice. Such a college would be dedicated to a broad conception of political studies that incorporated approaches traditionally part of a liberal arts education, but excluded from or marginalized by the conventional discipline of political science. In the pursuit of the public thing, the students wrestled with the authority of faculty, the justification of coercion, the distinction between public and private, the capacity of students to govern, the role of equality, the meaning of freedom, and the significance of participation. But even this was not enough. Eventually, the students (always being interested in the practical payoff) got into the details of what such a college would look like: the number of students and faculty, whether it could be virtual, the role of tenure, salary, and relationship of tuition and equality and freedom, the importance of autonomy, and the place of individuality.

In this paper, however, the seminar begins by wrestling with the idea of the “public thing” and why a discussion of a college may be a useful model for understanding that phrase. Along the way, questions arise of why participation is importance and what should and should not be subject to the decision of the participants. From one perspective a college would seem to be place where knowledge and expertise rules and not the students, faculty and staff. Perhaps it is a difficult case for making the claim of self-governance. Perhaps the differences between a college and an actual government are so great that using the idea of a college to think about a republic leads to further confusion. The suggestion, however, is that those differences can also enable further thinking about the character of self-government.

Sophie Fortuna

Professor of Government

I.

After weeks of discussion, the seminar repeatedly and, perhaps, inevitably foundered on the meaning of a republic. What was this *public thing* that made up the Latin words *res* and *publica*? The idea seemed too mysterious (what was the *public?*) or too abstract (what *thing* are we talking about?) to guide the construction or direction of a government. Some argued that the composite terms were so subjective that they could easily justify any form of government. Was it merely a cover for the self-interested pursuit of resources, or another way to make patriarchy acceptable? Was the republic simply a reflection of class interest or could it be reduced to a composition of procedures and rights? Maybe the public thing was just a vague ideal that celebrated community and dampened individuality?

“Why not say, as Montesquieu says, that whatever a republic is, it isn’t a monarchy and it isn’t a despotic government?” said Ivan.

“Fine,” replied Monica, “but that doesn’t tell us what the public thing is.”

“Well,” said Ross. “maybe it’s what Rousseau thought -- connected to the general will.”

“And what’s *that*?” asked Vesna.

“It is when the people come together to decide something and they are not motivated by self-interest. Rather, they are motivated by what they think will serve the common good,” answered Ross.

“Okay. But what are the people looking for in trying to decide what will serve the common good?” asked Sophie.

The room was silent.

“It is what is not in anyone’s private interest!” Amanda asserted.

“It is an exercise in revolution,” muttered Matt. “Around and around we go.” The room was silent again.

“Well,” Sophie asked, “WWPD?”

“What?” responded Amanda.

“What would Plato do” answered Brian. “Whenever Professor S. wants to address something difficult, she makes it more difficult by asking what Plato would do to try to answer or address the difficulty.”

Sophie smiled. “What does Plato do in *The Republic* when he finds himself at a dead-end in trying to figure out the meaning of justice?” Everyone looked down at the table. The clocked ticked.

“In the *Republic,*” Joel began slowly, “he says that in order to see what justice means for a person, we should ‘blow it up.’ I mean, he says that we should try to imagine what it looks like if we were to see it in larger scale. So, he says, to see what the just person is like, we could first see what the just state is like.”

“Exactly,” replied Sophie.

“I’m not sure I understand,” said Kathleen. “We’re already trying to see what the public thing is at the level of the state. Are you asking us to look first at a global notion of the public good? That’s seems even more complicated.”

“Why?” asked Sophie.

“Wow! I mean, think of the diversity of cultures and ways of life. It seems to me that you merely multiply the difficulties by going global.”

“Okay,” said Sophie. “Remember, in Plato’s case, the metaphor of increasing the scale of something was meant to allow us to see it better -- much like a magnifying glass enlarges objects to make them appear more clearly. So, using the idea of enlarging is merely a means to an end. The point is not that enlarging something always makes it clearer.”

“So, you’re saying that maybe in the case of a republic we need to shrink things to see them more clearly?” asked Dan.

“Maybe,” replied Sophie. “Maybe the state is too big to come to grips with what the republic entails. Perhaps it’s like not being able to see something clearly because it is of too grand a scale.”

“So, we need to look at the public thing in the individual?” asked Dan.

“Or, maybe we need to look at the public thing is in a city?” added Jason.

“What do the rest of you think?” asked Sophie.

The seminar was silent again, except for the clock. Matt looked up from his laptop and said, “It would be strange to imagine what the public thing is by looking at the individual.”

“Why?” asked Sophie.

“Because,” he continued, “it’s public! The word itself suggests that there is more than one person involved.”

“But what if the person herself is divided up?” asked Kathleen. “What if individuals are composed of multiple personalities?”

“What?” asked Christian. “Like someone who has a multiple personality disorder?”

“No,” replied Kathleen. “I mean like we all have different personas depending on the situation that we face. We’re students here in Prof. S’s class. Outside of class, we’re daughters and sons. Outside the family we’re probably employees of some business.”

“Do these internal individuals meet? Do they speak to one another? Do they assemble” asked Christian.

“Well, yes, they can. There are times when you find your ‘family self’ in conflict with your ‘employee self’ or with your ‘citizen self.’ There was that case of a set of parents who were being called up to active duty and they had children. I’m sure their parental selves were talking to their soldier selves. Hannah Arendt has this notion that all thinking requires a ‘two-in-one.’ In order for us to think we need to be in dialogue with ourselves.” Kathleen looked at Christian, expecting his agreement.

“The idea that Kathleen is suggesting is that perhaps there is a notion of ‘public’ that is built into a conversation that an individual could hold with herself,” interjected Sophie.

“I think Kathleen’s argument can even be stronger,” said Vesna. “There are notions of language which suggest that meaning must itself be public. The very words that we use to make sense of and understand ourselves and the world are already public.”

“And who makes that kind of argument,” asked Sophie.

“Wittgenstein,” replied Vesna.

“Yes. Good,” replied Sophie nodding her head. “So we are like these miniature republics. We carry whole cities around inside ourselves.”

“Maybe not whole cities,” Kathleen says. “Maybe two or three personas clash at any given time.”

Christian turned to Kathleen. “But there is just one body.”

“So what?” Kathleen said. “There is just one city. There is just one state.”

“Yes. I know, I know. The point is that there could be more than one city and more than one state. I mean if things really get bad, the city could be divided into two or one part of the state could secede. In the case of the person, you can’t grow another head and another set of arms, however, bad things get inside you. You still have only one body.” Christian answered with a fair amount of satisfaction in his voice.

“A one-body problem,” said Sophie. “So, you’re suggesting that because we have only one body, the metaphor of the individual as a republic may mislead us. States can do what individuals cannot -- sub-divide?”

“Yes,” answered Christian.

“Okay,” said Kathleen. “I’ll concede that point, but I still think that looking at the individual in order to understand something about the state or government would still be useful.”

“What about looking at a city?” asked Thomas. “That doesn’t seem to be much of a reach at all. Weren’t republics in Italy little more than city-states?

“That’s correct,” said Sophie.

“Yes, but that’s precisely the reason why it isn’t an analogy!” noted Amanda. “We’re looking for something that is smaller than a republic, but larger than an individual. The city is or always could be a republic. Where’s the analogy? It’s like having a map of the United States that is the size of the United States.”

“To quote Steven Wright,” replied Thomas.

“What if we looked closer at home? What would it mean for a college to be a republic? Maybe if we see a school in those terms, we would come to a better sense of what the *public thing* means,” interjected Sophia.

“Well, I know what it means to see a college as a monarchy,” replied Brian.

“What does that look like?” asked Sophie.

“Pretty much like what most colleges already look like,” he answered.

“And businesses and just about any organization that has any power in this country,” asserted Kathleen.

“I don’t think that’s really fair to most colleges,” answered Ross. “After all, most have a board of directors that oversees the general health of the college as well as some sort of faculty senate that deals with curriculum and sometimes reacts to the things that the administration does. In addition, students usually have an assembly that allows them to voice their opinions and petition the faculty and the administration. I would say that most colleges are already mixed regimes: the President is the executive, the faculty senate is the senate and the students have their assembly. Given the mixture, they are already republics.”

“I disagree,” Thomas replied. “I think that at our school, real power is found in the President and the Board of Directors. The students certainly don’t have much of a say over anything. Who knows what the faculty does?”

“Careful,” Sophie said wryly.

“Ross may be right in thinking that the form is one of power sharing, but the reality is closer to being a monarchy or maybe even an oligarchy. Really, the Board of Directors is just a bunch of rich alums rubber stamping whatever the President wants,” Amanda argued.

“The question,” Sophie asked, “is why that arrangement, assuming your description is correct, is so bad. What’s so bad with living under a monarchy or a benevolent aristocracy?”

“This is where the analogy goes off the rails,” asserted Jason. “Ordinarily, we would say that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The problem with a monarchy or an oligarchy is that they concentrate power and with concentrated power comes abuse.”

“And by abuse you mean?” asked Pia.

“By abuse I mean abuse! I mean people being thrown in jail for no good reason; people’s property being confiscated without fair compensation; rights to religion or free speech being violated,” replied Jason. “The thing about a college in this country is that those sorts of violations are prohibited by the larger government within which college government exists. Life under this oligarchy isn’t so bad because there are higher authorities that would presumably step-in if the college violated our rights. Our oligarchy is more or less benevolent. We may complain about this or that policy or our current President, but it would be difficult for the present monarch to become a tyrant. And if she did, there would always be the recourse of appealing to the Board or the courts run by the government. Or, one could simply leave the college.”

“I think that’s right,” replied Sophie. “But in a way it helps focus the question in a more positive light. Suppose we have a benevolent monarchy or aristocracy, putting to the side why they are benevolent, what’s wrong with these kinds of regimes? Benevolent is benevolent.”

The students shifted in their seats. Some flipped through their copies of Montesquieu and others stared at their notes. Thomas looked up and said, “I’m not sure if I understand the question. Are you asking why it’s a good thing to have a say in the government?”

“Yes,” Sophie said. “I think that may be a clearer way to put the question.”

“Wait a minute,” said Monica, “I have no problem with a benevolent monarch. The reason why you have popular participation is because power corrupts. It’s not that monarchy is itself a problem. It’s that *unaccountable* monarchy is a problem. We should have the opportunity to participate only as a defense against abuse. So, because our college is situated in a larger political context that prevents it from abusing its power and can hold it accountable, then I say benevolent is benevolent. Long live the King or Queen or Chancellor or whoever the benevolent ruler happens to be!”

“Are you saying that the only justification for participation in the governance of a college is to prevent abuse?” asked Sophie.

“Yes,” replied Monica.

“And what do the rest of you think?” asked Sophie.

Thomas replied, “There are different sorts of answers that people have given to that question that go beyond Monica’s argument. Some, like Aristotle, argue that we are naturally political animals and so we need to participate in order to flourish as human beings.”

“Aristotle also suggests that the outcomes could be better if people participated,” added Amanda.

“Why?” asked Sophie.

“Because those who are under the law or are the objects of public policy know better where the shoe pinches. Their collective judgment can help improve the law or help it obtain whatever purpose it is seeking to obtain.”

“Good,” said Sophie. Any other reasons why one should participate? Any reasons that go beyond Monica and Aristotle?”

“There is some principle about having those who are affected by the law have some say in its creation. I think it’s a Roman thing” said Cynthia.

“Yes,” replied Sophie. “It is a Roman thing. . . something from the *Justinian Code*. The Latin is: *quod omnes similiter tangit, ad omnibus comprobetur*.” She got up and wrote it on the white board. “The translation is: ‘what touches all should be approved by all.’”

“Yes, that’s it,” noted Cynthia. “But that’s not really enough, is it? It doesn’t tell us why what touches all should be approved by all. It merely says that it should. But why should it? Isn’t that the question you are asking?”

“Okay, I’m asking *that* now!” replied Sophie. “It’s a principle. What lies behind or supports the principle? We could go back to Aristotle’s argument and say that the principle is supported by a notion of humans as political animals or by his idea of improving the quality of decisions. Or, we could go to Monica’s defensive argument. You see those reasons reappearing throughout the history of political thought. Are there any other reasons?”

“How about, because it just seems to be fair,” stated Kathleen.

“Yes?” asked Sophie.

Kathleen continued, “Isn’t it just a matter of fairness to have some say in the laws that you are going to apply to you? The thing about rules, codes and laws is that there is always something coercive about them. If you don’t follow the rules and take the right classes, you aren’t going to graduate, right? So, if you are going to be pushed around by these things it seems only fair to have some say in the creation of the rules.”

“Or else have some say in who can make the rules, so that you can hold the rule makers accountable,” added Christian. “At least allow us to elect the rule makers and then vote them out of office if you really don’t like what they’ve done.”

“In either case,” Nick grumbled, “we don’t have a direct or indirect say in who makes the rules in the College. We don’t make the rules and we can’t vote the President of the university out of office.”

“Kathleen’s suggestion is that there is something unfair about being coerced without having some say in the creation of rules that will do the coercion,” noted Sophie.

Brian shook his head. “Why accept coercion at all? Who cares if you have a say in it. It’s still coercion and it still stinks. There is nothing good about having someone else push you around.”

“Unless you’re an infant in a baby carriage!” said Christian.

Some snickered. “Okay, there is nothing good about having someone else push you around if you’re an adult!” Brian added.

“Anarchism,” said Sophie. “But your response suggests something even more than that. You are suggesting, what is could be called, antinomianism.” She got up again and wrote it on the white board and everyone typed into their laptop. “You are opposed to any rules whose violation has the hint of licensing coercion or external compulsion.”

“Yes,” answered Brian.

“But doesn’t it make a difference,” asked Joel, “that no one is being forced to go to college?”

“You haven’t talked to my parents,” responded Ross. “Plus, there are all sorts of pressures to go to college. If you don’t go, then you diminish your earning potential. If you don’t go, then your peers look down on you. . . .”

“Okay, aside from Ross’s parents and his friends compelling Ross, no one is forced to go to college,” continued Joel. “People voluntarily go to college knowing that it is an institution with rules and requirements. They already accept the idea that if they don’t abide by the rules and don’t do well, they can be kicked out of school. Or, if they don’t like the rules, they can always leave. . . and, just to preempt Brian, leaving college is not like emigrating from a country. The cost of leaving college is so much lower than emigrating that we truly are free or not free to do this – assuming we have the money to go in the first place!”

“I agree that it’s not as bad as having to emigrate,” said Brian. “Moreover, I agree that at the beginning, you might make the argument that voluntarily accepting the rules and being able to leave make the rules less onerous. If you really can just walk away, then you can certainly avoid or evade the coercion. But it’s another thing once you become a junior or a senior. At that point, it becomes pretty costly to leave. After all, you have taken all of these classes and invested a fair amount of time and effort into your education. Leaving is not so easy to do if you’re still interested in getting out of college with some sort of degree. And if you want to transfer to another institution you’ll be subject to another set of rules that will be coercive because you want a degree. Once that happens, then I think it’s more difficult to find the coercion acceptable. At that point, the rules really are coercive and really are objectionable.”

“If I am hearing you correctly,” stated Sophie, “you seem to be accepting the idea that abiding by coercive rules is okay if you still have the freedom to exit and avoid the coercion. The problem is that when the costs of exiting go up, then you are no longer free to leave and so the coercive weight of the rules becomes more disturbing. Coercion is okay as long as you can avoid it?”

“Yes,” replied Brian. “I’ll accept that.”

“But aren’t you just choosing whether to accept the coercion?” asked Amanda. “If you have a choice in whether to accept the coercion, doesn’t that make it something less than coercion?”

“Because there are rules being enforced, so there is still coercion,” replied Brian. “I mean, I want to go to school. I want to get the degree and I want to take classes, and so if I leave I will lose all of that. But after a while, I may find that the administration sucks or that not all of the professors are as good as Prof. S., or that I hate living in California. I’ll accept the rules, but only if we diminish the costs of leaving.”

“So, to respond to Brian, how could we handle the costs of leaving? He is suggesting that if the costs of exit are less significant early on perhaps the coerciveness of the rules is diminished,” suggested Sophie. “How could this play out institutionally?”

Joel answered, “Well, you go into college voluntarily and so it may make little difference whether you need to have an initial say in the construction of the rules of the place because you can leave.”

“But as time goes on . . . ,” added Sophie,

“But as time goes on,” responded Joel, “the costs of exit go up and so the coercive character of the rules increases.”

“And if the coercive character of the rules increases?” asked Sophie.

“And if the coercive character of the rules increases, then the case is stronger for greater participation in the creation of the rules which govern one’s stay at the school,” answered Joel.

“Assuming that the reason for participation is a matter of fairness and our idea of fairness is somehow connected to the notion of having a say in the rules that touch us,” added Sophie.

Brian raised his hand.

“Yes?” asked Sophie.

“The more I think about it, the amount of money that is needed to go to school seems to make this whole discussion senseless,” Brian responded.

“Why?” asked Sophie.

“Even at the beginning, no one is free to leave if it costs $40,000 per year to go to school,” said Brian.

“I have heard that some colleges are going to charge $50,000 per year just for tuition,” added Jason.

“Then don’t go to those schools,” answered Cynthia.

“But all colleges cost something,” answered Brian. “You can’t go to school without paying for your living expenses and even most state schools charge something. If you don’t have the money, you’re going to get into debt no matter what.”

“Then let us suppose that at least initially, say for the first two years, there is no tuition. That would seem to increase the voluntary character of entering and exiting, make the existing structure of rules less coercive, and possibly support the idea that first-year students could justifiably have less of a say in what is going on in the college,” added Sophie.

“You mean free college for the first couple of years, not because acquiring debt is itself a bad thing, but because freedom and fairness are such good things?” asked Ross.

“Yes,” responded Sophie. “I’m not saying that acquiring debt in the first couple of years of one’s education is good or bad. Rather, I’m suggesting that there are additional, perhaps even more important considerations regarding the question of debt, if we want to see what it would be like to understand a college as a kind of republic. Those questions bracket the problems of one’s ability to pay, at least temporally.”

Pia interjected, “It does make things awfully easy. Now you really are creating a college in the clouds. Who’s going to pay the expenses for such an operation? How could it possibly function without any income?”

“Let’s postpone that discussion,” suggested Sophie. “We haven’t really explored fully the role of rules and requirements in our little college in the clouds. For example, we have yet to answer Brian’s initial, more radical complaint about coercion. Can we justify coercion at all? Should there exist enforceable rules regarding things like course or degree requirements? Should college rulers have the right to establish requirements over citizen-students such that a failure to meet those requirements could call forth certain consequences like being denied one’s degree or being kicked out or maintaining a certain gpa or requiring certain classes? asked Sophie.

Joel answered, “If going to college and receiving a degree is to mean anything, then it would seem that rules and requirements are necessary and therefore some level of coercion is necessary.”

“How so?” asked Sophie.

“They are necessary because, um, well, because in the absence of the rules or requirements one wouldn’t know what receiving a degree meant.”

“Could you fill that out a little?” prodded Sophie.

“Suppose there were no requirements and one could take whatever one wanted and receive failing grades and still receive a degree. In that case, if you graduated from college, it’s not clear what ‘graduated’ meant. I mean, if there really were absolutely no rules or requirements then it’s not clear how someone who went to college would be any different from someone who didn’t go to college,” answered Joel.

Vesna interjected, “In a way, the rules themselves constitute the degree. You can only be said to have a degree because you have accomplished something. It’s got to be different than twiddling your thumbs. Without rules, one couldn’t have the thing that colleges issue – namely degrees.”

“Great,” responded Sophie. “And so these rules need to be coercive because?”

“Because,” replied Vesna, “without being able to distinguish between who has followed and who has not followed the rules, that is, without being able to draw a line that has some at least implicit coercive backing, say in terms of denying one a degree, the degree would not mean anything.”

“I still think coercion is objectionable,” replied Kathleen. “I think Brian gave up his criticism of rules too early.”

“I agree with Kathleen,” noted Jason.

“It is objectionable,” responded Monica, “but it may be necessary in order to have things called degrees and courses. I suppose we could have a college in which people simply wandered in and out and listened to lectures and wrote papers. The judgment of such papers wouldn’t add up to anything other than what the individual happened to learn.”

“Yes,” responded Jason. “let’s call it an open university! Just throw the doors open. Let people take what they want for free. Come and go as they please. What’s wrong with that? It would be a college in which people were motivated to learn because they wanted to learn and *not because* they wanted to get some piece of paper! They would be internally driven. And if they wanted to show employers or anyone else for that matter that they were competent in physics or medieval theology or economics they could simply show them a transcript that they had taken a particular course and received a particular grade.”

“I don’t think anything is wrong with that,” answered Monica.

“On the other hand,” Joel noted, “I don’t think you’ve gotten out of the problem of coercion. I mean professors at an open university will still have requirements for their classes. And if you are not doing the work or not doing the work in a competent manner, then presumably they could kick you out or give you a low mark.”

“Okay,” Brian responded, “then let’s take away any course specific rules and the whole notion of grades. I don’t like the idea of having to peddle my labor based on what I happened to write in a course on Medieval theology. What’s wrong with *that*?”

“Again, I don’t think there is anything wrong with that,” responded Monica. “But you can do that right now. It’s called reading a book or going on-line and listening to a set of lectures. You could probably pay someone to read your papers, if you thought that was important. But that’s not a college. You’ve described life-long learning!”

“Why isn’t it a college?” asked Sophie. “What’s missing in Brian’s idea of a college?”

“The beer!” answered Nick.

“Aside from the beer,” responded Sophie, “what’s missing?”

Joel answered, “I don’t think it’s the degree per se. I think it’s connected to the notion that in a college there is some kind of public judgment that we have arrived at an understanding of something. It isn’t merely that we’ve listened to lectures and read a lot books and had bullshit sessions late at night–excuse me—but that we understand those lectures and books.”

“So, we come back to a notion of the public,” noted Sophie. “Let’s push Joel’s comments a little farther. What do we have to presume in order to make the judgment that something is understood?”

“I don’t understand,” laughed Joel.

“Okay,” responded Sophie, “When you just said that in the context of this conversation, what are you presuming about my question?”

“I suppose that you understand what it is that you are saying,” answered Cynthia.

“And, maybe, that you already understand what constitutes the answer,” added Robin.

“The presumption is certainly that I must have some understanding of my question. That is true. But do I also need to already understand the answer when I ask a question? Is that always presumed in a question?” asked Sophie.

“No, that doesn’t make sense. If it were true, it would mean that no one could ask questions unless they already understood or had an understanding of the answer. It would make asking questions a very odd sort of activity,” responded Vesna.

“Nevertheless, in case of being able to judge whether another individual does understand something the presumption is that the one who is judging does have enough of an understanding. In other words, the assessor or the teacher or the professor has to be qualified in some way. The teachers or the faculty understand enough about what they are teaching such that they can assess whether the students understand,” said Sophie. “So a college and schools more generally are places in which these kinds of judgments are being made on a daily basis. The grades and the degrees certify that you now understand something that you didn’t understand before.”

“And,” added Vesna, “in order for the degree to be recognized by the rest of the world it must be the case that there is a public acknowledgement that these teachers and professors know enough such that their judgment counts for something. So, they have degrees which are based on the judgments of others.”

“And on back into the primordial mist of time,” noted Nick.

“Yes,” responded Sophie, “it constitutes a kind of tradition of judgment and certification of judgment that is very old. In the west, it goes back to late antiquity. Of course, it’s a tradition that is no longer confined to academia. Sometimes one’s credentials or experiences from the ‘outside world’ are treated as a qualification for judging others. There is something about being professional that implies the capacity to understand. But I want to put that line of argument to the side, however, and pursue two aspects of this faculty of judgment. We need to go back to the idea of coercion and we need to talk a bit about equality. If the rules and requirements are predicated on the idea that there is an assessment of student understanding by those who already have some understanding, does that make a difference to the coercive quality of the rules? If I am a certified, licensed expert in political philosophy, why shouldn’t I be able to make what I think are the best rules and requirements I can to try to discern whether you understand? Even though those rules have a coercive character to them, aren’t they justified by a basic inequality that I know something that you don’t know?”

“This is beginning to look like Plato’s philosopher-kings,” said Christian.

“Precisely,” answered Sophie, “why shouldn’t Plato’s best regime be seen as the model for college governance? It is true that we translate his work as *The Republic*, but that is a bit misleading. In Plato’s best regime, giving philosophers the right to rule over others is based on the claim that they know something that the others do not. It is their expertise in understanding the form or idea of justice and how best to rule that justifies their authority. In that case, coercion seems to drop out of the picture because the inequality of power is for the good of everyone! So, in the case of every professor being a philosopher-queen of her classroom, the rules and requirements of the course are *not coercive* because they really serve the true interests of the students, namely trying to get them to understand something that they want to understand. Just as Plato notes, it makes no sense to have those who do not understand—in this case, you, the students–have a hand in running things because, well, what do you know? Similarly, it makes no sense to have the people rule in a democracy. What do they know about ruling a country?”

The students shifted in their seats. Sophie continued, “We, however, are uncomfortable with his argument against democracy. We democrats find it an objectionable argument. Maybe what looks objectionable in the case of a country, looks like a pretty good argument in the case of classroom and maybe looks really good in the case of a college! So, if I am an authority in my field of study and I judge that your work is not good enough to pass the course and you don’t graduate it would not seem to be coercive, particularly because you came to college to submit yourself to my judgment of your work. Or, to put this in a way that goes back to a Kathleen’s earlier formulation about fairness, there is nothing inherently unfair about undemocratically exercising my authority/expertise, is there?” asked Sophie.

“I think that’s right,” answered Monica.

“I’m still uneasy with that conclusion,” countered Ivan. “Brian, Kathleen, and Jason all nodded in agreement.

“Why?” asked Sophie.

“I don’t know,” responded Ivan. “Maybe it makes sense when students don’t know *anything* and when the answers to the questions are clear and certain. When, however, students begin to arrive at some understanding, it would seem that they too acquire a bit of expertise and, it seems that, at least in the field of political philosophy, reasonable people disagree about a lot of things, so there may not necessarily be one right answer to every question. I’ll concede that certified professors do understand more than their students, but I’m not convinced that their understanding is absolute or always correct. Maybe what I am saying is that even professors can be wrong on occasion.”

“Go on,” said Sophie.

“But there is something else that’s wrong. The argument seems to imply that learning is somehow like having the top of your head opened up and the information shoveled in. Or, even better, like downloading an app.”

“What’s wrong with that model?” asked Cynthia.

“There is nothing interactive about it,” responded Ivan. “In all the times that I have learned something, I mean, really learned something, I was not and could not be a passive receptacle. I need to take it in. Chew on it. Turn it around in my own mind. It wasn’t like surrendering my will.”

“Good,” noted Sophie. “Did you surrender your judgment in the process of learning? Could you have surrendered your judgment and still learned something?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Ivan. “If anything, learning seemed to be about exercising or practicing my judgment.”

“How so?” asked Sophie.

“At the very least, I needed to make some kind of judgment that this or that person could teach what he or she said she could teach. Colleges always boast about the credentials and expertise of their faculty. Beyond looking at their publicly sanctioned credentials, I tried to assess whether this or that instructor was a good instructor. If not, then I would try to drop the class -- if the drop date had not passed. When I did encounter a better teacher, I found that what they said was compelling not because they said it, but because it was compelling.”

“No kidding,” noted Kathleen. “I cannot tell you how many times I’ve encountered teachers who want us to believe whatever they are saying just because they are saying it. It reminds me of my parents. I’d say, ‘Why can’t I do this?’ ‘Because I’m the parent and you’re the child, that’s why!’”

“What you are saying is that even in instances in which the purported expert is standing before you, the authority of that expert does not rule out the exercise of your judgment. Is that right?” asked Sophie. The students nodded their heads, some of them reluctantly. “From this perspective, the kind of an unassailable authority that is suggested by Plato doesn’t seem to make sense even in a college. So the philosopher-queen’s authority within the classroom is not based on the idea that what she says should be believed simply because she said it.”

“No,” responded Ivan. “It should be believed because it is true.”

“Ahh,” responded Sophie.

“And if what the Professor says is true and then she uses that truth to judge the quality of a student’s—which leads to being kicked out of school, then that’s not coercive?” asked Brian.

“I don’t think it is coercive,” replied Ivan. “How could the truth be coercive?”

“Well,” replied Jason, “It depends on whose truth it happens to be.”

“Okay,” said Ivan, “If you think that the truth is completely relative and one statement about the world is as good as the next, then what do you think learning is all about? Why come to college?” He paused for a moment. “Let me start again. If learning is trying to understand something that you don’t understand, and you come to school trying to learn about the world, don’t you assume that it is possible to misunderstand something? How could understanding itself be understood as coercive? Isn’t misunderstanding a kind of coercion?”

“Why can’t I say the imposition of the truth is coercive?” asked Jason. “It certainly feels coercive when someone is correcting my work.”

“But is it *really* coercion?” asked Ivan. “If a coach is trying to get you to accomplish something that you want to accomplish by having you endlessly run up and down the field, that’s not coercion because you’ve accepted it. Besides, in order for learning to happen, you must still exercise your judgment.”

“Does this mean that professors shouldn’t be handing out grades?” asked Joel. “If learning requires that students continue to exercise their judgment and students happen to judge that the professor is mistaken, then why should the professor win the argument and assign a grade? Doesn’t the exercise of judgment mean that the professor and students are equal? And, if they are equal, why should the teachers have any authority?”

“What do the rest of you think about Joel’s argument? Has Joel put me out of the business of evaluating and grading your work?” asked Sophie.

Nick began, “I think that Joel’s point would be unavoidable if it were the case that students got correct answers as often as teachers. But I guess if that was the case, then the students would have nothing to learn from their professors. There would be nothing to teach. They are not equal as long as it’s the case that the teacher is more likely to get things right that the students.”

“I think it’s important to remember,” noted Ivan, “that it isn’t because Prof. S says that it’s a bad argument that it’s a bad argument. Rather, an argument is not very good, because it’s not meeting some kind of standard. The major difference between professors and the rest of us is that they have developed their judgment more fully or have a greater facility with the material.”

“But that difference is a difference of degree and it’s a difference that should shrink if the teacher has been successful. The goal of teaching is to put oneself out of the business of teaching. Fortunately, for the faculty, there is always another generation that comes along to keep us employed!” said Sophie.

“And it means that professors can be wrong. On those occasions in which a student believes that the grade is incorrect or unfair then she (the student) will feel coerced. And she’ll feel coerced until she’s convinced that the grade is justified,” added Ivan.

“So perhaps a case could be made for having some sort of say in appealing a grade,” noted Sophie. “If professors are fallible, then it might make sense to have some kind of procedure that would settle such a dispute.”

“Okay,” said Monica. “But the settlement of the dispute is probably not going to come from someone who just flips a coin. That would be, if anything, more arbitrary than the original grade. I would think the process would have to entail appealing to another expert.”

“Perhaps,” said Matt. “On the other hand, maybe the problem isn’t the substance of the paper. Maybe the student got sick or her grandparents died or there was some reason why the paper wasn’t handed in on time and the professor simply refused to accept it. In those kinds of cases, you don’t need an expert you need someone who has a basic sense of fairness to determine whether the professor was simply being too harsh or unbending.”

“Okay,” said Sophie, “Let’s try to get a sense of where we stand. If there is something unfair about being subjected to coercive rules without having some say in their formation, either directly or indirectly, and if the activity of judging, grading and granting degrees is coercive, then there is some prima facie argument for participating in the formulation of those rules and requirements. However, what seems to go on in seminars and classrooms are judgments by experts or authorities in their field of study. But even in those judgments, the activity of learning and the acceptance of their authority cannot entail the surrender of the student’s judgments. In order to learn, students have to participate in their learning. Even in the classroom, the idea of philosopher-queens shoveling the truth into her subjects does not make sense. If I understand Nick and Ivan correctly, that doesn’t mean that professors should lack the authority to assess the work of students. It doesn’t mean that everyone is equal in the classroom. On the other hand, it does mean that the experts’ judgments could go off the rails. The authority of the faculty should not be seen as absolute, however much we want to be philosopher-queens. And, to remedy the unfairness, students have to have a voice?” asked Sophie.

“Yes and no,” responded Matt. “Because I think that Prof. S. has unfairly graded my paper or not given me enough time on the final exam, does not mean that all students need to weigh-in on my particular case. It doesn’t seem like the possible injury to me needs to go to a vote. It may be enough if there is a process in which I can present my side of the case or tell my story. That, I think is important. But that process itself need not be democratic.”

“That’s true,” added Christian. “But that process is itself coercive and so why shouldn’t the rest of us have at least the potential to say something about what that process should look like. It seems that the students could and should have some voice or say in establishing the rules for appealing grades or making complaints about professors.”

“So the judgments involved in setting the grade itself are not a public thing, but the processes that may establish how we appeal grades may be a public thing. Should your individual grades be a public thing? Should others know how well you did in my class?” asked Sophie.

“I hope they aren’t public!” said Dan.

“Why not?” asked Sophie.

“How well I do in my courses is nobody’s business but my own! I don’t want other people being able to snoop around in my records,” Dan replied.

“We need to be a little clearer here. There are least two different ways that the public could be connected to your grades. One way is that the public gets a say in how you are graded. The other way is that the public has access to your records,” said Sophie.

“Given what we said about professors having some expertise in what they are teaching, it doesn’t make much sense to have one’s fellow students determine one’s grades. That would seem to undermine the credibility of the assessment,” argued Dan.

“And what about public access to the grades that you’ve received. Are grades public things in the sense that the world should know how you’ve performed?” asked Sophie.

“If we denied public access, do you mean that the public could never see them? That doesn’t seem right. If someone wants to publish their own transcripts on social media, who cares?” asked Jason.

“Okay,” replied Sophie. “So the question is whether grades are public in the sense that the individual has no say in whether they can be released to a wider audience. If they are private things, why are they private? If they are public things, why are they public?”

“I’ll take a stab at it,” said Jason. “If the assessment of every student is not dependent on the specific performance of any other student then my grade has nothing to do with your grade. The quality of my work should be judged based on what I have done and not on what Jason or Cynthia or Monica has done. So grades are private things because they are tailored to what an individual has accomplished and not what others have done. Grades are private because my grade shouldn’t affect Ivan’s grade. If what is public is what affects all, then my grades don’t affect anyone other than me.”

“Good,” replied Sophie. “And if I assign a group project and give a grade to performance of the group?”

“In that case,” said Jason, “I suppose that the grade will be known by all the members of the group. And so it is more public in a way. But it isn’t public in the sense that anyone has access to them. Using the logic of what I just said. The performance of one group is not affected by the performance of another group. From that perspective, even a group grade would not be ‘public’, unless they want to tell everyone else what they got!

“Good,” said Sophie. “What do the rest of you think? Are you okay with Jason’s argument.”

“Hmm,” started Stuart, “What if one grade is depended on another grade?”

“How so?” asked Jason.

“What if Professor S. is going to hand out only two As and five Bs and 10 Cs? What happens if there is a curve and for someone to receive an A means that the likelihood of someone else receiving that grade is diminished? In a world of scarce As, doesn’t everyone’s grade affect everyone else’s in some statistical sense?” replied Stuart.

“But even in that case,” asked Jason, “why should my grade not be private? Couldn’t Prof. S simply announce that that there were two As and five Bs and so on after the exams were handed back? What is the reason for making it public that *Jason* received an A and *Stuar*t received a C?”

“Prof. S. could do that,” answered Stuart. “The question, however, is whether the grades are independent of each other. If they are not independent, then that reason for keeping them private would disappear. How Prof. S. handled the situation, would be up to her.”

“I don’t understand,” added Kathleen. “What reason would she have for announcing them? Shouldn’t the fallback position be one of privacy?”

“I would like to jump in here,” said Monica, “and fully endorse what Kathleen just said. I think we should presume that everything is private unless a case can be made that there some public interest in the activity. Without the case that there is a public thing, there isn’t a public thing.”

“Let’s hold off on Monica’s point,” said Sophie, “and address Kathleen’s question about why I could have a reason for announcing who got what in an assignment.”

“Okay,” responded Stuart. “Let’s suppose that Prof. S.’s reason is that she wants to reward and encourage the A students and shame the other students into performing better.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very good reason,” answered Kathleen.

“Yes, but it would be a reason, wouldn’t it?” asked Sophie. “Even if the shaming argument is a bad pedagogical reason, let us suppose that honoring the good students is either a good or at least an acceptable pedagogical reason. Is there something in being graded or assessed inherently private or inherently public?”

“I would think that it depends on the reasons that are given,” answered Kathleen. “It may be the case that honoring some is not such a good thing for those who are honored. But I guess the answer to your question is that there is nothing inherent in grading that is private or public.”

“Back in the dark ages,” Sophie adds, “the faculty used to post final grades with the names of their students outside their doors. The practice was seen as advantageous to the students because, prior to the existence of personal computers and email, they could receive their grades much faster than through snail mail. Now grades are pretty much available once the faculty upload them to the registrar. The disadvantages associated with having to wait, no longer play a role in the discussion and so other reasons, presumably, take great weight. Perhaps whether to make grades public should itself be decided by those who will be affected. If so, it would seem that, once again, the voice of the students could have some role here.”

“Unless,” noted Matt, “the question is already settled by the laws of the state within which the college resides. Perhaps the state has decided that certain information is simply privileged, for example, grades. In that case, it makes no difference what the students, professors or administrators think.”

“Given the logic of the argument, there would be an interest in students and faculty having a voice in formulating those state regulations. At least in this regard, if there are rules governing how the college will govern itself then that larger context should be open to all those who are affected by the rules,” said Sophie. “In the context of our little republic, we seem to have concluded that the authority of the faculty should not and, maybe, cannot be absolute. Students must not only participate in their own education, but at a more public level they should have a say in the rules that will govern the conduct of the members of the college. Instead of a beacon to which we are drawn, the public thing appears to be something that requires our considered judgment and the weighing of alternatives. Can we go farther? Should the students also have a voice in the curriculum? Should they have a say in what is or is not taught at the college?”

End of Chapter One