

Fortin Award Speech – 2021

E. Paul Colella

Dear Friends, I am both flattered and humbled on this occasion, to receive an award that honors Roger Fortin and to join the company of previous awardees. I thank those who nominated me, and the committee who saw fit to select me. Special thanks to those of you, colleagues and former students who spoke earlier. Recognition by one's own peers always carries a special savor, almost as delightful as looking on as former students become a gift to their communities. Thank you, Liz.

Once upon a time, when I could still be classed as “new faculty”, I heard Roger share his view that while teaching was a most serious business, he always made sure that he and his students would laugh at least once, during each class. He probably does not recall the time or the place when he said that, as mentorship often treads silently; but I can say that that piece of advice has served me well over the years. I also recall being part of a group attempting to fashion what would become the future *Philosophy, Politics and the Public* honors program. It was Roger's inspired suggestion to emphasize the concept of “the public” in the title for the openness and possibility that it would arouse. His suggestion proved a turning point in our planning, as it stirred us on to imagine a wider range of possibility for what this unprecedented program could be ... and in time did become.

And now, twenty years later, in the persistent era of Covid-19 with its multiple challenges to the familiar landscape of higher education, we are once again charged with the task of imagining a future different from the past we knew. Technologically mediated education, already a part of

the university experience, has expanded dramatically. The reality of two and a half semesters away from the live classroom has a way of provoking reflection, if not speculation about what the next semesters and coming years might hold for us. That is the future we are now challenged to fashion.

Recently, I was invited to design and teach a special section of Philosophical Perspectives to the Smith Scholars in the Williams College of Business. I thank Professors Steven Frankel and Staff Johnson for giving me the opportunity to grow in ways I could not have foreseen. Those familiar with my department's contribution to the core know that each section of Philosophical Perspectives includes an examination of Rene Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. In it, Descartes outlines the fundamentals of modern scientific culture. Our students' world. He envisions new conceptions of mind, knowledge and our relation to nature. The ultimate aim is new as well. It is nothing short of the scientific mastery of the natural world that releases humanity from its bondage to the powerful forces of that world. His vision sketches the configuration of our technological culture.

Given the fact that I had a cohort of beginning business students in that class, I thought that it might be interesting to also examine the emergence of the disciplines that form the center of what they will study in their business honors program. So, after reading Descartes, we explored the rise of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. We turned to Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism, who outlines a model of intellectual development over historical time. In it, he relegates theological and metaphysical modes of consciousness – in short, the humanistic studies - to the immature past. Both are destined to be eclipsed by the application of the assumptions, the methods and the aims of positive science to the human social world, in a new

discipline he named “social physics”; our social sciences. In Comte’s approach, external phenomena are taken just as they appear, with no need to excavate beneath them in order to find truth in an ultimate, abstract reality. The aim is purely instrumental. In a manner analogous to Descartes, Comte sees the purpose of knowledge to lie in the controlled manipulation of the human world, bending it toward desired ends. Those ends claim no transcendental anchorage; they are for us to choose and pursue ... and for us to endure the consequences of that choice.

The cultural dominance of Positivism in the late nineteenth century proved a powerful propellant for introducing the social sciences into American universities, including university-level business education. We read an address delivered to an audience of bankers in New York during 1890. The speaker was Dr. Edmund James, who was then on the faculty of the newly created Wharton School of Finance and Economy of the University of Pennsylvania. His address to the bankers on that evening focused on the current state of university education, marked by the intersection of traditional classical studies and the emergent need for greater specialization. Edmund James asserts that “Our literary colleges ... [seem] incapable of answering this demand for the higher education and training of the business man. The average curriculum of the American college” composed of classical languages, literature and history sharpens one’s intellectual faculties and expands one’s intellectual horizon. But he continues ...

... as things go now, and as they probably will go for all time to come, [such education] tends to draw away the youth who has enjoyed it from a business life; tends to fix his mind, tastes, thoughts upon a very different class of things from those which must make up a large part of his future as a business man and citizen.

Yet his is no call to dismantle the classical studies that were then the sum of higher education in this country. Rather while acknowledging the continued role of the humanities, he imagines a more synthetic approach to higher learning, one that preserves the humanistic tradition while integrating it with focused specialization and scientific rigor. Commenting on the perennial value of classical studies, James states that we should be more than our vocational calling ...

We should be human beings before we are bankers, or manufacturers or lawyers or physicians, and our educational system should aim to develop all our power and tastes and possibilities—should increase our capacities for enjoyment in every direction.

And indeed, when my class consulted the business curriculum in place during those early years at Wharton, they were astonished to find that it required no fewer than seven courses in history, five in politics, and two in philosophy, including the history of ethical theory.

We then went on to read another Professor James, this time it was William James, famous for his contributions to transforming psychology into a natural science in America. Trained as a physician, his long career at Harvard travelled a winding path that took him from teaching Anatomy & Physiology in the Medical School, to establishing the first laboratory for the study of psychology in America, and coming to rest in philosophy as one of his country's most visible public intellectuals.

William James never allowed his training in medicine, physiology and scientific psychology to obscure his view of the vital place that the humanities in general, and philosophy in particular, occupied in peoples' lives. What these latter disciplines seem to lack in immediate practicality, they more than compensate for in terms of their vision of possibility ... real possibility. As he was about to begin work on his landmark *Principles of Psychology*, James would write that philosophy that was "the most important of all college studies." This is so because it nurtures

“a wider openness of mind and a more flexible way of thinking than special technical training can generate.” He goes on to add that ...

Philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind. In a word, it means the possession of mental perspective. ... What doctrines students take from their teachers are of little consequence provided they catch from them the living, philosophic attitude of mind ... [1876]

My purpose in sharing all of this with you is really quite simple. The cultivation of this “living, philosophic attitude of mind”, seems to me to be the only real SLO I can hope to instill in the young people who assist me my daily vocation in the classroom. While it may not be readily demonstrable or measurable, there can be no other outcome about which I would be as fully satisfied at the end of the daily hour.

But most important of all, there is “the habit of always seeking an alternative” just as Roger encouraged us to do as PPP was struggling to come into clear focus for us 20 years ago. Should that not be the first, and perhaps the most enduring of “learning outcomes” by means of which our success is measured? Is that not just what we need at this moment of collective uncertainty, both in the university classroom and beyond its walls?

During his tenure as Provost and Chief Academic Officer, Roger was in the habit of always emphasizing the central role that the core curriculum, and the humanities in particular, occupied as the students’ “first major”. The term “core” is wonderfully evocative as the name for this most essential part of our students’ studies. It suggests something central, something deep residing at the heart of things. Like the core of an apple, it is the part that often goes unappreciated. It is too easy to feel frustration at many of today’s students who are inclined to

put practical considerations ahead of these core studies, treating their narrow concentrations in a manner that suggests that they, and they alone provide the flavor and nourishment while the “core” is something at best indigestible, and at worst more appropriately left uneaten.

At such times, it is vital for us to remind both they as well as ourselves that it is the core of the fruit that houses the seeds, and those seeds harbor the promise of present potential becoming fully actual, not over the few weeks of a semester, or in four years of college, but only in its own measured time. As Roger focused his teaching and scholarship on the American experience, I believe it fitting to close by quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the moments when we judge soundly, Emerson writes, we discover that “the most abstract truth is the most practical.”

I believe him.

Thank you.