The Real College Scandal

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In 2019, fifty or so parents were found to have bribed administrators and coaches to have their children accepted to colleges around the country. This college-admissions scandal—"Operation Varsity Blues," as it was known—got drawn out over several news cycles. That a bunch of people broke the law was not, in fact, the *real scandal*, as several pundits made sure to stress. Their crimes were only the tip of the iceberg; the real, true scandal was so enigmatic, so elusive, so deeply buried, that even after weeks in the press, commentators still felt called upon to dig some more.

So what was the real scandal? It was the problem of legal donations, and the fact that they are tax-exempt. SAT prep classes. The fact that universities perpetuate a governing elite. The fact that universities fail to perpetuate a governing elite. Grade inflation. College sports. Rich parents spoiling their children. Celebrity parents using universities to "launder" economic status into social status. The corporatization of the university. The creeping credentialization of U.S. society. The racism our universities fail to fight. The economic inequality our universities fail to fight. The fact that universities are not meritocratic. The fact that universities *are* meritocratic. There was more, but I think you get the idea: no one was going to be satisfied until the analysis of the scandal showed that universities were responsible for every one of contemporary society's ills.

This whole thing really upset me, and I had the strong desire to fix it the only way I knew how: with words. So I wrote. I wrote up optimistic plans for improvement. I wrote impassioned, defensive rants that vented my anger and sought revenge; I veered between indignation and optimism.

I cried. I lost sleep. I was, in fact, too upset to write anything worth reading. The press on the college-admissions scandal broke my heart, because I love the American university. I owe my life to it. Not my existence—that I owe to my parents—but my life, the way I live it, the things in it, the things I care about. I was heartbroken over the attack on the university, and heartbroken over my own inability to stand up for what I believed in.

Let me not beat around the bush anymore; let me tell you now what I didn't have the presence of mind to say then. I'll start with what universities are not for. First, they are not for perpetuating the ruling or elite class. Second, they are not for achieving social justice. Doubtless they do perpetuate the ruling class; many institutions do this. And probably they could do more to bring about social justice. But those things are not what they are for.

Third, universities are not for making money—though they do call for careful financial stewardship. Fourth, they are not for producing better citizens. Fifth, they are not for producing happier human beings. If I had to measure the worth of my classes in my students' subsequent civic virtue or life satisfaction, I couldn't afford to lose touch with most of them after graduation. I am sometimes saddened when I lose touch with them, but it never causes me to wonder whether their education was worthwhile.

Those five points cover basically all the criticisms levied against the university, which means all the critics who said it was not doing its job had *failed to identify what*

its job was in the first place. But that is step one of the criticism process. You can't be failing at what you're not in the business of doing.

Now I grant that the university is easy to misinterpret, because its innermost parts are hidden from view. What's visible is who gets in and who is excluded; the fates of its graduates; clashes between townies and gownies; five-year completion rates; public-relations catastrophes; IRS 990 forms. If you go on a campus visit, you see the buildings, but not what happens inside them.

If you tried to understand museums by sitting outside and studying the demographics of who enters and exits, you might conclude that they existed to perpetuate the elite, and that they should work to achieve more social justice. Perhaps they do in fact do too much of the first thing, and should do more of the second. Nonetheless your research would be missing something very important about what museums are for, something that requires entering the museum, and looking at the art.

That doesn't really get the pundits off the hook, because they tend to be college-educated. The real scandal, if I may, is the fact that so many people who attended one seem to have no idea what it's for. So let me come out and tell you what a university is for: a university is a place where people help each other access the highest intellectual goods. A university is a place of *heterodidacticism*.

An autodidact is someone who learns best on their own, by teaching themselves things. "Heterodidact" is a word I made up to describe the rest of us, for whom learning and knowing is a social activity.

While the college-admissions scandal was happening, I was teaching a class on Aristotle's scientific system. What a crazy thing to teach or study, you might think. Hasn't it all been surpassed by modern science? No. But even if it had been, it is truly amazing to witness the birth of scientific thought. Aristotle was the first to conceive that the changing, sensible, empirical world around us could be rationally systematized, and he did this in opposition to a tradition—beginning with Parmenides and culminating in Plato—that insisted such a project was in principle incoherent. Aristotle proved that science was possible. His works—*Physics*, *Parts of Animals*, *On the Soul*, *On Generation and Corruption*, etc.—taken together, constitute the most ambitious intellectual project a human being has ever undertaken. And he succeeded to an astonishing degree—his most radical moves against his contemporary interlocutors are the ones we've most tenaciously internalized.

I'm going to make a confession about that class: I did not know the material I was teaching very well. Aristotle's natural philosophy is not my specialization, and I intentionally chose readings I was least comfortable with. Minutes before I walked into the classroom each Tuesday or Thursday afternoon, I had been buried in commentaries and confusion. There was so much I did not understand about Aristotle's arguments against atomism! But time was up, and I had to get in there and say something. If you were in that class, you probably thought what I said sounded pretty good, pretty coherent. Actually, it was. But that wasn't all me. I was looking at the students' faces, noticing how they paid attention when I was making sense, noticing when they didn't

follow. Their interest drew me out. I listened to their questions and reframed the argument on the spot; sometimes an objection was so devastating I had to reorganize a whole lecture on the fly. Sometimes, when I just plain didn't know the answer, I asked the question back at the class.

Teaching involves a sleight of hand in which the part of the student is erased, and the teacher ends up getting all the credit. Actually that's a point from Book 3 of Aristotle's *Physics*: he says the teacher isn't teaching if the student isn't learning, because teaching and learning are one activity.

Now don't go thinking this was some kind of subpar, slapdash course. This was one of the best classes I've ever taught. Good courses have all the messiness of human cooperation baked into them. That's what I wish I could've communicated to those embroiled in the admissions-scandal brouhaha; I wanted to break down the walls around my classroom, throw a spotlight on it, and tell everyone to stop talking, look and listen: "It is happening right here—*this* is what universities are for: reading Aristotle together." All the arguments about elitism and corporatization and donations were as irrelevant as the ivy growing on the walls.

I could give you a hundred more examples, but I'll restrict myself to one. The previous quarter, I taught a class on courage, and we read Homer's *Iliad*. I think the *Iliad* is one of the greatest things ever made by human beings, but I hadn't read it in at least seven years. Why not? What was stopping me from picking it up? For that matter, why am I not reading it right now? The answer is that it's hard to read the *Iliad*. Have you ever tried? It takes so much energy. All those epithets. So many tendons being unstrung by spearpoints. I am not some special kind of human who just sits around reading the *Iliad* for fun. I'm not that different from the students I teach. They get their energy from me, I get my energy from them. That's how a university works.

And it's totally amazing that human beings can do this, that we can form intellectual communities. If we didn't actually see it happening, human beings collaborating with nothing to bind them to one another but a shared intellectual interest, we would doubt such a thing was possible. These communities are far from perfect, a fact they inherit from the creatures who compose them. But they are wonderful.

Most wonderful is the manner in which the interest is shared—how the whole of energy and enthusiasm becomes more than the sum of its parts, eventually growing strong enough to vanquish a foe as formidable as the tedious, confusing intricacies of Aristotle's argument against atomism in *On Generation and Corruption*.

A university is a world inside the world, a haven, a bubble, and those who reacted to the college-admissions scandal tried to pop that bubble. My initial impulse was to see this as an act of aggression and hostility: they are trying to blame us for everything! But with hindsight, I have begun to entertain the possibility of a different interpretation. Maybe the sentiment driving the scandalmongering was marked as much by envy as indignation. After all, one reason you might try to pop a bubble is because you want in.

As I mentioned, the journalists and pundits spearheading the attack did not lack for experience of the academic world. They had all been to colleges, good colleges most of them. One of them—the *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens—went to college with me. We were in classes together. I remember one class in particular, with Leon Kass, on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. It was one of the best intellectual experiences of my life. At first I thought, indignantly, people like Bret Stephens should know better. But then I realized: people like Bret Stephens do know better. Maybe that's the whole problem. Maybe they know what they are missing. Under the pretext of channeling others' feelings of exclusion, they could actually be venting their own.

In his brilliant essay "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Leo Strauss ascribes the following view to ancient authors, Plato in particular:

They believed that the gulf separating "the wise" and "the vulgar" was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of "the few." They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men.

Strauss observes that an author who holds such a view can address his intended reader—the person who is innately wise and philosophical—by way of a practice he calls "writing between the lines." This practice involves saying things whose explicit content might not be true:

He would defeat his purpose if he indicated clearly which of his statements expressed a noble lie, and which the still more noble truth. For philosophic readers he would do almost more than enough by drawing their attention to the fact that he did not object to telling lies which were noble, or tales which were merely similar to truth.

The phrase "noble lie" is taken from Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates constructs an ideal city, lays out the details of an educational program for its rulers—who will later be known as "philosopher-kings"—and proposes that its citizens be told a lie. The lie is that the education that the rulers received was a dream, and that these rulers are equipped to rule because they have gold mixed into their souls. (The other, lesser citizens have silver or bronze mixed into their souls.)

Notice two things about Plato's noble lie: first, the reader is explicitly told that it is not the truth. Plato does not hide this information "between the lines." Second, its political function is to naturalize culture, which is to say, to make it appear as though differences caused by education were inscribed in people from the outset in the form of innate capacities whose existence underlies outer differences in social class.

I believe that Plato's phrase "noble lie" is an attempt to describe something we might nowadays call "the ideology of the elite"—the story that elite people tell themselves, and one another, in order to justify their elevated social position. In Plato's case, the privileges that get justified in this way are not wealth (the rulers in his city are kept

poor, and even prevented from owning property) nor ruling (which Plato sees as a burden and a chore), but the gift of education itself, and that of the philosophical life that, we will later learn, the rulers will get to spend most of their lives living. When Strauss ascribes to Plato the view that there is some "basic fact of human nature" that excludes many from and entitles few to the highest kind of life, this seems to be the content of the account that Plato presented in the *Republic* as a *lie*.

If Plato did not subscribe to the idea that only a select few have a talent for philosophy, does it follow that he thought everyone had it? Far from it. For one thing, he sets up elaborate contests and competitions to see whether the recipients of his educational program have in fact learned what they were taught. This suggests an acknowledgment of noneducational factors in the outcome. What Plato denies (or rather, what he uses the myth to deceptively assert) is that these factors play the role of *talents* or *innate human potential*.

Strauss is right to want to distance Plato from the conceit that each of us has, within us, an equally powerful wellspring of intellectual potential, just waiting to be released or unshackled. The core idea of the liberal Enlightenment is that human beings are, by nature, equal. Plato would have dismissed this as a myth. And yet Strauss goes wrong in ascribing to Plato the idea that human beings are, by nature, unequal. Plato thought that was a myth too.

How can someone believe that both natural equality and natural inequality are myths? By allotting most of the explanatory work to chance.

Consider: if the only cuneiform class is at 7 a.m., someone who is a "morning person" will be more likely to learn cuneiform. If we assume being a morning person is a biologically innate property, it would follow that in this scenario people are not naturally equal in respect of where they will end up, cuneiform-wise. But that doesn't mean that being a morning person constitutes a talent for cuneiform or an innate potential to excel at cuneiform. Now imagine that most intellectual differences interface with the accidents of environment in just this brute, contingent way. No one would "deserve" their intellectual opportunities, any more than being a morning person entitles you to learning cuneiform.

The fact that the education program laid out in the *Republic* eventually turns out to involve over fifty years of trials and tests is an acknowledgement of how little knowledge Plato thought we could presume, *even in a utopia*, as to how to "make someone a philosopher." In the real world, Plato's view seemed to be that philosophers arise because occasionally a human being—for no reason, following no plan, and certainly not because he was secretly marked out as One of the Special Ones from birth—manages by sheer luck to find his way to the lone worthwhile life. Thus Socrates's shortcomings with respect to the intellectual "talents" most valued in his era—memory and rhetorical cleverness—are often thematized by Plato.

Plato's explanation for why most people don't get access to the best things is unsatisfying to those who are expecting either a tale of justice, such as the noble lie of the triumph of the talented, or a tale of injustice, such as the liberal account of how

the equal potential in all of us is squandered when the powerful oppress the weak. But you don't need to oppress people in order to withhold intellectual treasures from them if there is simply no reason they would find them in the first place. The intellectual goods lie hidden in plain view.

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The things people long for are: safety and security; fancy vacations and luxury goods; honor, power and acclaim; the warmth of family life and human connection. They want these things even when they don't have them—often, the less they have them, the more they want them. People don't long for intellectual goods. You know the joys of intellectual engagement by experiencing them, and as you step away from them they fade from view. There are strange people who somehow, through a series of accidents, get and stay keyed onto intellectual goods on their own—the autodidacts I mentioned earlier—but the rest of us need constant help reorienting, because just about every worldly temptation pulls us in the opposite direction.

This, in the end, is the explanation of why the innermost parts of the university are hidden from view—and not only to outsiders. I rely on my students and colleagues—including my dead colleagues, such as Aristotle and Plato and Leo Strauss—to redirect me when I lose my way. If I had left the university after college, I believe the intellectual life I occasionally glimpsed as an undergraduate would have faded into a nostalgic memory.

There's nothing in your DNA that makes you a philosopher, nor is there some regimen you can run through to transform yourself into one. The closest we have come to devising a system for attuning a person to the intellectual life is to surround her with others aiming at the same thing for as long as the relevant parties can continue to afford it, and hope for the best.

The idea that one has to be physically located inside a university in order to engage in deep thought is, one would think, too absurd to dignify rebuttal—were it not for the vehemence and regularity with which it gets rebutted. One is not prevented from coming to the intellectual life on one's own, nor is there some obstacle blocking intellectual communities from arising in any place and time. But that does not mean that there is any reason that the former will actually happen, or that the latter, when they do, will have any stability to them.

Universities, especially elite universities, stand as our symbols of the idea of stable intellectual community. For this reason, they also symbolize the problem of the legitimate distribution of intellectual goods—through the course of our lives as well as over a society—and its intractability. Our society has many questions and uncertainties about the just and correct manner of distributing wealth, or health care, or honor, or political power; but these difficulties seem insignificant in comparison to the gaping chasm of total cluelessness we have when it comes to the problem of distributing the very highest goods of all—the intellectual ones.

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This essay is part of our new issue 25 symposium, "What is college for?" Click here to see the rest of the symposium.

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