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Staying Human in the 21st Century Is Harder Than You Might Think

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Let me start by saying that it's a great honour to address you today.¹ It turns out that nearly forty years ago, I was the 'salutatorian' of the Class of 1979 at Columbia College in New York. That means I was the number two guy in terms of overall grade point average across all subjects. And that guy gives the introductory speech, whereas the number one guy gives the closing speech, the so-called 'valedictory' address, which literally means saying goodbye.

It seems that once again I am the 'warm up act' for a graduation ceremony in that once I finish speaking, you'll actually get your degrees! And that's exactly how it worked in the old days.

I am someone who thinks that if I have anything interesting to say, it will be to those who are more oriented to the future than to the past – or even the present. In any case, this is how I would wish you to interpret me.

There are many challenges to our sense of humanity today. I want to start with a long term challenge that you will increasingly face in the coming years. That has to do with privileging 'humanity' understood as a kind of upright ape who has consolidated its place on Earth by monopolizing control over the planet's resources. This is what geologists are beginning to call the 'Anthropocene', and it probably began with the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century – and it marks the first time a single species has dictated the terms of engagement on Earth.

This has led to considerable metaphysical soul-searching about the human condition. And put bluntly, much of this soul-searching has resulted in self-loathing for humanity as a species. We are to blame for the unprecedented levels of mass extinctions and climate change over the past two or more centuries.

All the while, our species has come to range over the entire planet in a manner that reminds some of these scientifically informed misanthropes of cockroaches. However, the difference between us and cockroaches is that cockroaches don't seem to exhibit the strong sense of inequality among its members that we have historically insisted among ourselves.

So given our evolutionary track record, in what sense are humans are worth promoting, let alone all of us – as Thomas Jefferson said, as 'created equal'? Of course, it's been long recognized that there is an enormous spread in the capacity of human beings. Modern biological science has given this informal observation an empirical basis.

Originally it was presented as a demonstration of natural inequality, and the phrase 'scientific racism' remains a legacy of that line of thought. However, nowadays biologists prefer to speak of the diversity of life-forms, which together constitute ecologies, the Earth itself being the ultimate ecosystem.

¹ What follows is the [commencement address](#) to the Winter 2018 graduating class of [Ashland University](#), Ohio. It was delivered on 15 December.

But against this general current of thought, egalitarianism has been advanced by the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – simply on the grounds that we are all children of the same God in some broadly ‘privileged’ sense.

In the modern era, this fundamental intuition was given focus by the classical idea of republicanism, namely, that a society should be constituted only by those who regard each other as equals. And what makes and keeps people equal are the standards by which they are judged – and this is determined by the people themselves. And that was what was meant by the *res publica* – the ‘public thing’, in Latin.

It’s worth recalling that prior to the US Constitution, republics had been small enclaves of the few who regarded each other as equals. Think about Athens, Rome, Venice and the Netherlands in their republican phases. Basically, they were places for rich migrants.

So What Happens If The Migrants Aren’t Rich?

In law, there are two general ways in which people can become citizens. One is called *jus soli*, and refers to the land in which you yourself were born, and the other is called *jus sanguinis*, and refers to the birth of your parents. If you look at a map of the world today, you’ll see that *jus soli* dominates the Western hemisphere and *jus sanguinis* dominates the Eastern hemisphere. And that’s because the Western hemisphere – this hemisphere of North and South America – has been seen as a natural place for migrants.

However, candidates for citizenship in a republic typically have to demonstrate their fitness to be treated as equal with regard to the *res publica*. And then once accepted, they would be obliged to participate in public life. Providing evidence of wealth was historically crucial because it showed both management skills and a desire to pool one’s resources with an alien society. The duty to vote in elections – in which each vote counts as one -- is simply a remnant of what had been a much stronger civic expectation to engage in society.

Many philosophers have believed that republicanism cannot be scaled up because they thought it was unreasonable to expect that people with quite diverse backgrounds and interests could treat each other as ‘equals’ in some politically sustainable sense. It’s quite clear that even the American Founding Fathers had their doubts, since they counted slaves as only 3/5 of a person for purposes of Congressional representation.

Notice that I haven’t yet mentioned ‘democracy’. That’s because democracy has historically meant ‘majority rule’, on whatever terms it’s established. For example, 51% could license the execution of the remaining 49% in a democracy. Indeed, people may start equal in a democracy but that equality could soon evaporate after the first collective decision is taken. Think *Animal Farm* and *Lord of the Flies*, two classic mid-20th century English novels.

Here one can begin to appreciate the abiding importance of the Abrahamic religions in upholding a metaphysical conception of human equality that cuts against what had been traditionally seen as the eventual descent of democracy into ‘mob rule’.

That metaphysical idea – the fundamental equality of all humans -- was first made incarnate in the practice of debt forgiveness among the Jews on each sabbatical year. To cut a long story short, since I don't want to bore you with religious history, the fundamental equality of people was ritualistically demonstrated by the redistribution of wealth from the 'winners' to the 'losers' in society, which in turn provided an opportunity for everyone to be 'born again': The rich as somewhat poorer and the poor as somewhat richer. Thus, society is periodically remade as a level playing field.

Until the losers are regarded as always the equals of the winners of society, democracy is not an especially egalitarian political movement. This helps to explain why such great defenders of liberalism as John Stuart Mill regarded democracy with considerable suspicion. He believed that given the chance, the great unwashed might permanently silence the enlightened few, who throughout history have often been on the losing side of many of society's great arguments – especially on matters concerning the future.

In What Sense, Then, Are All People 'Created Equal'?

I would like to propose that our equality is ultimately about possessing a wide degree of freedom. And I mean a freedom that gives you the right to be wrong and the right to fail. This is only possible if you're allowed to express yourself in the first place -- and be allowed a second chance. This is to do with the range of opportunities available to you.

It's easy to see that someone with a track record of managing their own wealth successfully would already be in the business of allowing themselves second chances – say, when an investment sours – and so would be fit for republican citizenship. However, the ancient Jewish practice of debt atonement was the original policy to allow everyone to acquire that enviable status. It was always in the back of minds of those who designed the welfare state.

Every human is entitled to be free in how they dispose of their lives, regardless of their likelihood of success. Freedom is the capacity to take risks, and universities are for the development of that capacity. There is nothing natural about how people come to want what they want. It is all a matter of training, and the only question is where and how it happens. And you have come to Ashland for that.

If you graduate from Ashland with a clearer sense of purpose than when you entered, then this university will have done its job and you will be able to go forward as an exemplary human being. I say this as a matter of principle – regardless of what you take your purpose to be, and even if your sense of clarity arises from revolting what you have encountered here.

The bottom line is that if you can't have a sense of purpose unless you have faced serious alternatives – that is to say, 'opportunity costs', as the economists like to put it.

You're not free unless you have had the opportunity to reject alternatives presented to you. And in that respect, the value of your education amounts to increasing your capacity for rejection – you can afford to let go. And that means more than simply saying no because of

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what you have been taught, but rather saying yes because you can identify with a certain way of being in the world.

We live in a time when those of you before me can self-identify in a wider range of ways than ever before. When I was your age, all we had was class and national mobility at our disposal, but now you also have gender and even race mobility added on to it – at both a social and a biological level, in case one is worried by pedigree.

I am by no means suggesting that you need to think about any of these sorts of migrations, but they are there for the asking, and if you have been trained properly here, you will at least have heard of them and have adopted a reasoned response to them.

Whatever else one can say about humanity in the future, it is bound to be a moveable feast. And you will be among the movers and shakers!

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