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Lecture 4: A Few Opinions

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THE FOURTH LAST LECTURE

DR. M. JUDD HARMON

"A FEW OPINIONS"

March 9, 1979
8:00 pm
business auditorium
THE LAST LECTURE
"A FEW OPINIONS"

As I understand it, the "Last Lecture" is supposed to be a kind of distillation of the wisdom the lecturer has laid up in his mind over the years, rather than a report of facts accumulated through research. This being the case, it is unfortunate that I was not asked to perform twenty-five years ago or so when I had a great many more answers than I now have. In those days I had few doubts on almost any subject. Everything seemed so much clearer. I could tell my students in political philosophy, with great assurance, that Plato was bad and Aristotle was good, that Locke was good and Hobbes bad, that Machiavelli was evil, Burke reactionary, Jefferson saintly, Hamilton venal, and so on.

I was pretty sure that I understood the causes of most of mankind's problems and also could prescribe the cures. Criminality, for instance, grew out of poverty. Eliminate poverty and we could disband the police force and probably the armed forces as well. The nature of man, I thought, was innately good; he has only been corrupted by evil institutions. If we reform or eliminate those institutions the natural altruism of human nature will flower and utopia will be realized. And convention, it seemed to me, stood in the way of human progress, so we should get busy and change things.

I regret to report that I have lost most of my certitude. I now sometimes guiltily wonder if there might not be something to say for Plato's proposed rule by an intellectual elite. I do not even feel guilty about concluding that Hobbes' premise that self-interest is the mainspring of human action is closer to the mark than Locke's view of the matter. I have concluded that if Machiavelli was evil we are all pretty much tarred with
the same brush. I find Burke's respect for convention, for custom and tradition, increasingly attractive in a time when those values are challenged. And despite my admiration for the humanitarianism of Jefferson I wonder if there was not a considerable measure of softheadedness in it and if the coldly efficient Hamilton did not provide a much greater service for the American people.

Mainly, I have come to distrust absolutes, everlasting truths. I cannot claim that God whispers them in my ear, a fact that I find disconcerting since apparently he speaks to a great many others—a situation undoubtedly a consequence of my own errant life. At any rate I cannot be counted on to supply the canons for an infallible gospel of life. It is obvious that I have become wishy-washy. I travel, however, in fair company. It was Justice Holmes himself, for example, who said: "Every year, if not every day, we have to wager our salvation upon some prophecy based upon imperfect knowledge."

If I cannot furnish you with truths I can only give opinions. Please bear the distinction in mind as I proceed. You are under no obligation to accept them, or even to take them seriously. In another ten years I will probably change my own mind. As I think about it, it seems conceited to deal with the whole matter as if it were a problem. I suppose that one who heard Pericles' Funeral Oration or Lincoln's Gettysburg Address might have remembered what was said in them. The chances of my saying anything memorable, on the other hand, are, as Dizzy Dean used to put it, "slim and none."

With those apologies and explanations I would like to give you some of my opinions and impressions on a few subjects, as they have developed over a longer period of years than I care to contemplate. Parenthetically,
my contemporaries will appreciate my sentiments when I say that it seems only yesterday that, as a newcomer to campus, I was one of the campus radicals, in trouble for suggesting that I would like to teach a course on Soviet Government and in receipt of a letter from the chairman of the Board of Trustees warning me that my job was in jeopardy for having signed a newspaper advertisement supporting Adlai Stevenson for President of the United States. These incidents are examples of what I term the Cache Valley syndrome, which sees the Republican Party as the fount of all good and the Democratic Party as the source of all evil. I had not previously understood that God was a Republican, but I was left in no further doubt. The Cache Valley syndrome has diminished in intensity over the years but has by no means disappeared. I don't wish to press the point however. In my senility I have come to love almost everyone and hold no grudges. 

I trust that you will not be consternated to learn that I am not one of those who regards teaching as a calling. For the most part I have enjoyed teaching and during my early years I recall saying, often and with somewhat exaggerated enthusiasm, that if I had to I would do it for nothing. As a matter of fact, now that I think of it, that is about what I was doing. In more recent times, after it was too late to do anything about it, I thought of a number of other vocations that I thought appealing. I believe, for example, that I would have enjoyed being a stockbroker, or almost anything else that would have made me wealthy. I am not going to try to invent still another aphorism to illustrate the point, but it is my sincere opinion that it is pleasant to have money. I'm sure that there are limits beyond which that principle does not apply, but since I have not reached them I cannot speak authoritatively on the matter. I do not hesitate,
therefore, to say to the students present who wish to save the world that unless they have a most unusual tolerance for wolves at the door they should learn how to save themselves as well. I have found it instructive to note, in this regard, how many of my students from the years of protest of the sixties have trimmed their hair, put on shoes, and now sign petitions endorsing Proposition 13.

I hasten to add, however, that I do not think that money is the sole requisite for a good life. For that a little learning is indispensable. The advantage of an education, aside from the preparation for a career which it provides, is that it expands the possibilities of enjoyment. What, for example, is the good of being able to afford a trip to Europe if you know nothing of the history, the art, the culture of the places you visit. I suspect that, if the truth were known, a substantial majority of those hundreds of thousands of American tourists who dutifully trudge through the art galleries, museums, and monuments of Spain, Italy, France, and England, wish they were back in Buffalo or Albuquerque going to a movie. So along with learning how to make a living one should learn how to live. This is hard work, but well worth the trouble--something to bear in mind as you labor to make your "B" in Western Civilization or Art Appreciation.

If learning enhances the enjoyment of life, a realistic view of life is necessary to understanding it, to the avoidance of frustration, even, perhaps, to the preservation of sanity. What I mean by a realistic view is recognition of the force of self-interest in society. One should never underestimate that force in trying to comprehend the conduct of his fellow human beings. I would not go as far as Hobbes, who contended that self-interest was the sole motivator of human conduct. I think that there is
such a thing as altruism, and I believe that the force of self-interest operates unevenly among different people, but I also believe that it is, nonetheless, a constant. Great amounts of time and energy have been wasted by philosophers and social reformers in speculating about reasons for the human proclivity to pursue self-interest. A variety of answers have been given, but they usually boil down to the same thing. Man is by nature good, but he has been corrupted by evil institutions. If we destroy those institutions mankind will once more stand as innocent as Adam before the Fall.

Those who hold this view never seem to ask how is it that good and innocent humans created corrupting institutions in the first place? Christianity, of course, has an answer--the Devil did it, which considering the naivete of the original assumption, is probably as good an answer as any. It is not, however, very helpful since it does nothing to rectify the situation.

Most of the time, self-interest is expressed in terms of the general interest; that is, a person will pursue his own interest by arguing that what he wants is good for everyone. A classic example appears in the resignation statement of Richard Nixon, who said: "If some of my judgments were wrong... they were made in what I believed at the time to be in the best interests of the nation." I leave you to reach your own conclusions on that.

The capacity of the individual to rationalize a self-interest is infinite. Thus the members of the OPEC cartel lecture us to the effect that tripling the price of crude oil will help conserve a valuable resource and be in our own long term interest. American cattlemen insist that a protective tariff to limit the import of cheaper beef is necessary to national security and prosperity. For labor unions higher paychecks are never in-
flationary but only serve to stimulate the economy. Everyone is in favor of protecting the environment so long as it does not inhibit anything else they want to do, which invariably would be good for society. I do not suggest that these positions are untenable; I am, however, cynical enough to think that it is an individual rather than a general interest which is the primary motivating force in all of them.

No one stated the case better than Lord Halifax in England in the 17th Century. The loud proclamation of principles, he said, is generally designed to camouflage the pursuit of self-interest. What men call "principles," he added, is a nail everybody would use to fix that which is good for them; for all men would have that principle to be immovable that serves their use at the time.

Fundamental is a word used by the laity, as the word sacred is by the clergy, to fix everything to themselves they have a mind to keep, that nobody else may touch it.

Nor should anyone assume that this principle is not operative in the realm of higher education. University presidents compete with one another for legislative appropriations. Deans contend before the administration for college funds. Department heads battle for their own with each other. And individual staff members vie for money available for salary increases—all this, of course, in the name of justice and the general interest.

I do not intend all this either to contribute to your own disillusionment or to express my own. If I understand the Christian ethic it proposes that we should give priority to the welfare of our fellow beings. If that is correct, it seems to be that the best that can be said is that we have not overdone it. It is perhaps more comforting to dismiss Christian ethics and remember, instead, that the principle of self-interest achieves respectability from the fact that it has been woven into the constitutional and
economic fabrics of our nation. It seems hardly necessary to remind you that the economic system of free enterprise rests upon the Smithian principle that the general interest is best served when each person is left free (from governmental control) to pursue his self-interest. And, contrary to widely held but ill-formed belief, the framers of the Constitution of the United States did not seek to establish democracy in this country, but rather, what Alpheus T. Mason has called "free government," a system in which an array of limitations are imposed upon the power of a majority to pursue its own interest and to restrict the pursuit of self-interest by individuals. The principle of self-interest is one in which there is free-

The consequences of the operation of this principle are often appalling, particularly, of course, for those who, for one reason or another, are unable to compete effectively. But I believe also that life would be dull without it. I read somewhere recently that a prime motivator of human activity is the desire to escape boredom; the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became of the correctness of that view. Communist societies repudiate the idea that the pursuit of individual interest is a proper basis for social organization, and they, accordingly, create institutions which severely repress that pursuit. It seems to me that in those societies the oppressiveness of authority would be less hard to bear than the sheer dreariness of an existence in which individual freedom is so restrained. In recent months the new regime of the People's Republic of China has tempered slightly (and perhaps only temporarily) the repressiveness of its controls. The results should dismay those who believe that the human taste for individuality is an acquired one which can be altered by long exposure to an anti-individualist environment, for it is the young, those whose lives have been lived entirely in such an environment, who clamor most loudly for an
expansion of individual liberty. And the current rulers of China, who lifted the lid of this Pandora's box, must be wondering if they can prevent all the contents from escaping.

I have been discussing this issue as if self-interest were synonymous with selfishness, and in fact as an operative principle in society, I suspect that is generally the case. I also believe that the consequences of that principle in operation are often salutary for society, as, for example, when competition means better quality and lower prices for consumer goods. And, as I have tried to make clear, a society which functions on the basis of the principle of self-interest is one in which there is freedom--no mean value in itself. This does not mean, however, that any and every pursuit of self-interest can be countenanced. A thief pursues what he conceives to be his interest, but we draw the line at sanctioning his acts. Thus, as is generally the case, self-interest is not a principle having absolute validity.

There is another side, though, to the problem of self-interest. Plato distinguished between a real and an apparent self-interest. Often, he said, we take some action which we believe will serve our own interest when in fact we are only injuring that interest. It may seem to a child that the sting of the vaccination is not in his best interest. It may seem to an adult that his interest requires that he keep his money rather than pay taxes with it. But if the child contracts a disease which could have been prevented by vaccination, and if the adult's money is stolen for want of police protection which could have been provided with taxes it seems obvious that those actions did not achieve the true interest of either. Plato believed that the pursuit of self-interest was inevitable and that if the interest achieved were a real self-interest it would always be in the general interest
as well. In other words, he thought there was never a conflict between the general interest and a real self-interest. He also was convinced, however, that only a small minority of human beings were capable of understanding this, of being able, in other words, to distinguish between a real and an apparent self-interest. This led him to conclude that a good society is possible only when it is governed by those who possess true knowledge, the capacity to understand that there is no difference between the individual and the public interest. Plato's great work the Republic is his plan for creating a state based on this principle. In the Republic an educational system is devised to select and educate those who, possessing true knowledge, will direct the lives of others who lack this capacity.

As is the case with most great ideas, there is something to be said for this one. I find the notion of dictatorship of any kind repulsive, and that of Plato's seems little more tolerable than any other. Plato, as is the case with most seminal thinkers, was carried away by enthusiasm for his thesis. Because it explained some things he thought that it explained all things, and he ended up with an absolutist state, thereby making the same mistake that many other political philosophers have made when they have embraced a single criterion for rulership, whether that be intelligence (as for Plato), property, strength, religion, or whatever.

But Plato was perceptive and, I think, correct in assuming that most human beings cannot see beyond their noses when it comes to recognizing what their real interests are. Plato is also correct, I believe, in relating intelligence and knowledge to this ability. This is evidenced, interestingly, in public opinion polls which distinguish among responses on the basis of levels of educational achievement. This is not, under present conditions, a very accurate gauge of knowledge. Anyone who could not make
it through the modern university surely must have had difficulty finding his way back and forth from home to campus. Also, so many who do make it through are so vocationally oriented that they have seldom had to ponder such weighty and esoteric matters as the conflict between individual and general interest.

Nonetheless educational level does provide a rough measure of the differences of opinion which we are considering. In this regard it has been my observation that the higher the educational level the more likely a respondent is to take what I would call an "enlightened position," which I arbitrarily define as one which sees an identity, or at least a close approximation, of the individual and general interest. The more knowledgeable are also less likely to be swayed by emotion, more apt to recognize the enormous complexity of social problems, and less likely to succumb to the blandishments of rabblerousers. For what it is worth, I noted in a recent opinion poll that college graduates were the only group to give majority approval to the recognition of Red China and the termination of diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

If a university education can accomplish this, can teach us to be more farsighted in the pursuance of our interests, it is worthwhile, irrespective of its failures, which admittedly are many. What it tells me is that there is a practical advantage in complying with the biblical injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves. If it also helps smooth the path to heaven, who can afford to shrug it off.

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For the balance of my time I turn to another subject, one which I might advantageously leave alone but cannot because, it seems to me, the nature of this lecture will not permit my doing so. The criteria for
selection of the lecturer imply that he has enjoyed some measure of success as a teacher. If that is the case he should be able to discuss the reasons for it for the benefit of those who may wish to emulate his methods. I doubt, for a number of reasons, that I can do this satisfactorily, but I feel an obligation at least to deal with the subject.

One of the problems involved here is that it is hard if not impossible to measure effectiveness in teaching. Surely the most popular teacher is not necessarily the best teacher. And do we mean by "best" the most interesting, the most informative, the most stimulating, or what? In my own experience it was not always the best classroom performer that I considered best but a few who inspired me, made me think, or in some other manner touched my life, affected it in such a way that things were never to be the same again. Very few teachers can do that, and success in that regard does not depend upon any particular teaching technique.

I have never considered my own teaching to be inspirational. I said at the beginning of this venture that I have not regarded teaching as a calling, to be approached with missionary zeal. I hasten to add that that does not mean I haven't worked at it. Over the years I noted that the most often used adjective used by students in evaluations of my teaching performance was "professional." The statement, "He is a professional," appeared rather consistently on those evaluations. I believe (at least I hope) that it was meant as a compliment, and at any rate I took it as one. I was not generally described as inspirational, and, I'm sure, for very good reason. No one said precisely what he or she meant by professionalism, although a great deal could be inferred from other remarks which appeared in the evaluations. Consequently, because I have always taken student evaluations seriously, I began to try to structure my thinking about professionalism
(What does it mean to be a professional in university teaching?) and consciously try to act professionally. I do not pretend to have succeeded, but I believe I was better for having tried. What follows is simply my views on the meaning of professionalism in teaching. I'm sure I will leave out a great deal, and I again concede the possibility of error, but it represents some pretty strong conviction on my part.

I will not attempt to rank what I see as attributes of professionalism in order of importance, but it seems obvious to me that one of the most important is simply being on the job. Missing an occasional class is unavoidable, but some teachers take the matter far too lightly.

Professionalism also means being prepared, knowing what one intends to do during a class period and being ready to do it. It is my recollection that those of my teachers who strolled in, sat on the table, and said, "What shall we talk about today?" rarely said anything worthwhile. I'm sure some can do it. I cannot. Teaching is hard work, at least for me. It may be attributable to mental deficiency, but after teaching the same courses for more than a quarter of a century I find that it still takes several hours a day to prepare for a lecture.

Professionalism requires studiousness. I know teachers who have not read a half dozen scholarly books in their fields in twenty years after taking their degrees. In recent years, since the gaining of tenure has become something more than routine, this situation has changed considerably and certainly for the better. But it is also the case that not every teacher who receives tenure continues the scholarly effort that professionalism demands. And if there is no scholarship, there is little to give the students.

Professionalism demands objectivity in presentation. The educational process assumes that all truth has not been discovered. The professional,
therefore, ought to concede the possibility of being wrong and should be
tolerant of the expression of opinions which differ from his own. Object-
tivity has another application--in the treatment of students. It may be
difficult to give a favorite student a "B" or a "C" and one who is anything
but a favorite an "A", but professionalism requires it.

Professionalism also requires that the teacher be demanding. Students
should have to work hard enough to learn something. It is my experience,
and I have looked at the situation from the viewpoint of a teacher, a de-
partment head, and a dean, that although students may fill the classes of
the undemanding teacher they seldom rate such a teacher a good one. And
if the teacher is demanding of students he should also welcome demands made
upon him by students. To be available to students for a large part of the
day outside the classroom is a duty.

The kind of relationship that exists between a teacher and his students
often depends upon the personality of the teacher. For some a degree of
informality is possible that would repel others. In any circumstance there
ought to be mutual respect, and that cannot exist if the teacher does not
comport himself or herself in such a manner as to warrant respect. The same
injunction applies to students. The student who attends irregularly, who
is consistently late, who is never prepared, and whose eyes are glazed with
boredom (if they are open at all) should neither demand nor expect respect
from a teacher. Turnabout is fair play.

It seems to me, too, that professionalism in teaching requires giving
the taxpayers their money's worth. This is an obligation too seldom acknowled-
ged by teachers. Like it or not we feed from the public trough--not,
perhaps, as well as we would prefer, but that is a choice we make when we
become teachers. I do not suggest that we should not press for additional
nourishment, but we are obligated to satisfy those who provide what we get. Our sovereigns are entitled to demand the kind of performance that derives from hard work. They are not, generally, I should add, entitled to interfere with our freedom to impart information. Even this, however, is not an absolute freedom. Teachers should be very cautious about utilizing time on the job to express their opinions concerning matters outside their areas of expertise. A teacher, as any other citizen, has a moral and legal right to express an opinion on any subject, so long as doing so does not interfere with what he or she is paid to do. This is often a problem during times of social unrest when campuses become hotbeds of controversy, and teachers from a great variety of disciplines feel a moral urge, even a moral duty, to let their views be known and cite academic freedom in support of their right to do so. I do not believe, though, that academic freedom guarantees the right of a mathematician to devote his time in class to a discussion of the recognition of Red China. And that, I assure you, is not a farfetched example.

Another aspect of this matter concerns the relationships between members of the academic community and those outside it. How to establish a rapport between town and gown is a problem that has plagued university leaders and leaders of the business and professional community for a very long time. During the recent congressional elections in Utah one candidate attempted (unsuccessfully, I was glad to note) to dispose of his primary opponent by constantly referring to him as "professor." This was designed, of course, to evoke an image of the kind of muddlehead who absentmindedly wears his hat in the bathtub, a different colored shoe for each foot, and is oblivious to the realities of the world about him.

This, of course, is a grossly unfair portrayal, as inaccurate as one which sees every businessman as a Babbitt. But there are sufficient grounds
in particular cases to warrant concern, at least in my judgment. In this affluent society (certainly affluent as compared, let's say, to forty or fifty years ago) many college teachers have not truly been outside an educational environment from the time they began kindergarten to the time they stand before a lectern and deliver their first lecture. I have to say that I regard this as unfortunate. I do not argue that such a person does not live in the real world, as some critics claim, but he or she has only lived in a very small part of it.

There is no absolute security behind the ivy-covered walls of a university, but by and large those who live behind them have a rather sheltered life. If one has had no experience with the competitive existence beyond the walls I should think it would be difficult to teach effectively, especially in those disciplines which purport to deal with the realities of social existence--political science, for example, or economics, or sociology, or philosophy, or history, or, for that matter, literature, theater, and music. I disavow any claim to expertise on the subject, and it may be that my own aesthetic tastes are inadequately developed, but it seems to me that the great works of literature are characterized by an awareness of the many-sidedness of life. This awareness is reflected in the ability of the writer to depict the terrible problems of mankind and the dilemmas that stem from them, to portray our iniquity as well as our nobility, our venality as well as our generosity. It is this quality which explains to me the greatness of a Tolstoy, a Dostoevski, a Dickens, a Sandberg, and a Hobbes. They were realists, not mere dilettantes.

It may be argued that all this has nothing to do with professionalism, but I believe it has. One of the definitions of professional is "suitable for a profession." This makes it a matter of opinion as to what constitutes
suitability, and I stated in the beginning that I was only going to give opinions.

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Students have an obligation to press for professionalism on the part of their teachers. They cannot demand inspirational teaching; too few of us are capable of that, and it is sheer good fortune for the student to experience it. But they can demand professionalism. Students are too prone to tolerate perfunctory performance. They may fear retribution if they complain or merely be apathetic, or both. When students have an opportunity, through formal evaluations, to protest poor teaching not as many as should take the time to do a proper job. They should. They should also register their objections with department heads, with deans, and, if necessary with the president of the university. They should, in fact, scream their heads off if necessary.

And by the same token they should show their appreciation of good teaching. Some of that is done, of course, but not enough. A professional will do his job without plaudits, but because he is also a human being he will probably do it better with them. There are many ways to express appreciation, and I suggest that students give some thought to the matter. For myself, I can say that few things are as rewarding as to receive a letter from a student of ten or twenty or more years ago saying "thanks for what you did for me." And being a fallible human, infinitely capable of self-deception, the fact that I probably did little or nothing for that student bothers me not at all.

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It only remains to try to turn off this flow of wisdom with some degree of grace, and I think it might be appropriate to do so by saying thanks to
the many students, past and present, who have made my professional life as rewarding as it has been. That does not include all of them. Will Rogers once said that he had never met a man he didn't like. In a similar vein I have heard teachers say that they loved all of their students. Both Will Rogers and the teachers were either lying or guilty of remarkably poor judgment. But I can honestly say that I have liked most of my students, and not only the very good ones either. I have been fortunate in getting more than my share of good students, and a great many more have at least been interested. A teacher can hardly ask for more. If those students believe I have given them something, they owe me nothing in return. They have given me at least as much as I have given them, and, in addition, I made all that money.