

# Boston University Philosophy Department Commencement

## Alumni Address, May 2014

Greetings, parents, friends, and family. Greetings to my teachers and mentors. And greetings and congratulations to you, soon-to-be fellow alumni of Boston University. It's great to be back home.

I'm going to tell you two stories from Plato's Republic about pleasure, one that has helped me to understand what college is for—what we're actually doing here—and another that gives me hope about what comes next.\*

Toward the end of the Republic, Socrates makes this claim that the pleasures of philosophy are 729 times greater than other pleasures. He proves this by means of a rather strange mathematical demonstration, that I'll talk us through step by step. (I'll bet you didn't expect to be doing ancient mathematics today, but here we go!)

There are three kinds of pleasures in life, says Socrates: first, the pleasures that satisfy our bodies, second, the pleasures that satisfy our egos, and finally, third, there are these other pleasures, he calls them "philosophical pleasures," and they are really, really great, but really, really hard to explain and hard to keep hold of, so he uses a mathematical image to help us to compare the three.

I'll give some examples, so you know the kind of thing he's talking about: The first kind includes the pleasure of eating a steak: a nice nine-inch New York strip steak. That sounds pretty great. Or how about the pleasure of selling your nascent social media company and looking at a nine-figure bank account? That's really, really great. Or again, how about nine hours of passion with an exquisite partner? That'd be great, too.

All these kinds of pleasures, Socrates compares to a line, nine units long. About yea big. Now these are clearly pleasures of a certain magnitude and very appealing, very vivid, and the longing for each of these pleasures is intense. Anybody who arrived at this ceremony ravenously hungry knows exactly what I'm talking about. On the other hand, Socrates' image suggests that all these kinds of pleasures are also a little thin. Socrates calls them "ghostly," or sketchy. In the same way that a line has length, but no width or depth, these undeniably great pleasures aren't quite as satisfying or as great as we want them to be. Think of the pleasure of eating that steak. The first few bites are going to be great, then you get a little full, then a couple of hours go by and you need another steak. The pleasures symbolized by the nine-unit line don't last; they don't fill us up. Socrates, at a rather grim moment in another dialogue, called the Gorgias, says that such pleasures trickle out of us even while we try to gulp them down. The person who lives for steak is always losing the

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\* Republic 587b-588a and 611b-612a.

pleasure he chases. I'll leave it to you to think about the possibilities of disappointment for the person who lives for sex or lives for money.

Well, let's say that we see what Socrates is driving at and agree that these nine-unit line pleasures can be little sketchy, a little lacking in substance. Well, Socrates says, multiply that nine-unit line by another nine-unit line, and now you've got a nine-by-nine, 81-unit square plane, with height and width: a two-dimensional picture of a more substantial kind of pleasure, the second tier of pleasures, the ones I'm calling "the pleasures of ego." These are pleasures with a certain dignity. One immediate example would be the pleasure of winning the College Prize. Or of stepping into that restaurant for your steak and being stopped by nine professors who just want you to know what a pleasure it's been to teach you all these years.... Or how about nine offers to top-tier graduate programs? These are the grand pleasures of being recognized in an elevator. (This actually happened to me once. I had won a certain prize at a conference, and I'm standing in the elevator, and someone says, "Are you Hannah Hintze, the prize-winning Hannah Hintze?") I'm not going to lie. That was very pleasant.

But these pleasures, too, have a downside. Like any plane surface, they are superficial. What if you don't respect the people who honor you? That might spoil all your pleasure in being recognized. Or what if you had to lose a friendship to gain the honorable position you now hold? The pleasures of the 81-unit plane can lead to fights and anger and envy. In fact, only one person will win the College prize today, and somebody else who expects to win it will be disappointed. Does that make you a little mad? What if you lived for those pleasures? What if you lived for being right about the Critique of Pure Reason when everyone else gets it wrong! Or for winning the contest of words with your colleagues? Or for beating up third-rate scholars in your footnotes? Such pleasures are greater than the passing pleasures of food, sex, and money but they come at a price, and they stir up longings that can disfigure the soul.

So, Socrates says, take that  $9 \times 9$  superficial plane and multiply it by 9 again! Now you have a cube— $9 \times 9 \times 9$ —height and width and depth, a 729-unit cube, a three-dimensional, solid, real object in the world. This is Socrates' image of philosophical pleasure, a kind of pleasure that makes all the others look so sketchy and superficial by comparison.

We've all had at least a taste of these solid pleasures, whether we studied philosophy in college or not. I was trying to think of a good example to illustrate this and happened to find one, last week, as I was reading Huckleberry Finn. You remember that scene where Huck and Jim lie back on the raft, staring up at the stars, and they wonder how the stars came to be, who or what made them, what could be their eternal cause. They're looking at things that outlast them and they're

having lasting thoughts. They have this real, solid pleasurable, leisurely conversation, without any of the rivalry and envy of superficial dispute.

And all such concerns, such contemplation with a good friend or by oneself, of the whole cosmos and our place in it, or about what it means that we will die, or about how to live, or how to be happy, or about justice, or about the nature of God—all these are matters that are really solid. When we think about these—even the sublime ones like death and finitude—we enjoy a kind of pleasure that is hard to explain, except to others who have had a taste of it, too. The 17th-century thinker Pascal suggests that just a drop, just a taste of these really real things is worth all the steaks in the world. Indeed, that's all we've gotten in these four years of college—many intense tastes of three-dimensional pleasures.

Perhaps you encountered those 3D pleasures when you were writing a paper or an email, and after fussing with it for a long time, suddenly, you figure out exactly what you want to say and find exactly the right words to use. That's exactly what I meant! That's very, very pleasant and no one else had to be defeated for you to triumph in that way.

Or maybe you encountered one of these three-dimensional pleasures while you were reading. I remember once, when I was a sophomore, I think, I took John Locke up to Copp's Hill cemetery to the terrace that overlooks Charlestown. And it was a warm spring evening, and the lights were just starting to light on the other side of the river, and I was thinking about primary and secondary qualities!

And the pleasures of that moment were fully 3D, the warm spring wind for the body, the grand sophomore vista of the Copp's Hill terrace, overlooking the world, and the pleasure of thinking about my place in it, through Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

Or maybe you were with friends. I remember a bunch of us seniors were preparing for a Greek exam on Plato's Symposium and we decided that we'd all get together at 8 o'clock in the morning and together translate the entire dialogue, for hours and hours—and we did, for hours and hours and hours, deep into the evening (I will confess that we skipped some of Pausanius's speech). And we helped each other with vocabulary, we took turns running through the grammatical forms, we remembered funny things that had happened in class; I remember crying-laughing at one point. And all of this was wonderful, difficult, totally over-the-top and so unnecessary for passing an exam. The exam was just the pretext: rather, we talked philosophy for hours and hours because it was so very, very pleasant.

One close analogy to this kind of pleasure is perhaps the pleasure of parenting itself. Here you parents are at this graduation today. Nobody paid you to be here (I assume). You won't get famous by attending this event. So why are you here? I suspect that it's simply very, very pleasant to see your children flourish, do well, and be happy. I've heard people

say just this sort of thing, that the pleasures of having kids are just indescribable: they're a hundred times better than life before.

It's perhaps because you know about these real, solid pleasures that you sacrificed so much so that your children could have this time, these four years at college. And you students who sacrificed and worked your way through, with or without any help from family—it must have been these solid pleasures that kept you going. These short four years gave you a little space for intense moments of philosophical pleasure, so that you could be shaped by them. And how lucky we BU students have been to have this time to be formed, before the rest of life, before what comes next. All this matters because of what comes next.

Here's the second story from the Republic. This is what Socrates has to say about life after college. There once was a man named Glaucus, and he became a statue—for reasons that we don't need to go into now—and he was cast deep down into the sea. And the waves rolled over him, and over time, the old parts of his body begin to break off, and his shape was ground down, and barnacles started to grow on him and seaweed and rocks, and he became so disfigured, so unrecognizable, that you could hardly tell what he used to be.

And so with the rest of us who must enter this sea. The solid formation of the college years, the taste of the 3D, real pleasures of philosophy—all this will undergo the pounding of the waves. What comes next is the repayment of college debts—a noble thing—and the necessity of making a name for oneself, and the trials and pleasures of marriage and family, and eating and drink and sex and honor and ego and all the rest. After being in this sea for a while, you might become disfigured by life. What will you be ten years from now? Socrates asks. Will we be able to recognize you? Will you be able to recognize yourself?

Socrates' young friend, Glaucon (whose name sounds a lot like this strange old statue of a man), starts to worry, too: How are we going to recognize that original man? And Socrates gives us some hope: underneath the barnacles and the seaweed, is philosophy—the love of wisdom and all the solid desires and pleasures that underlie the changing surface of a human being. Underneath the changes is a longing to think about and be with the most lasting things and to taste the pleasures that are deepest and most formative. And if Glaucus, or Glaucon, or we were to wake up ten years from now and were brought by this inner desire for the real pleasures of life, up out of the deep ocean... dripping... and if somebody with a hammer were to hammer off the barnacles and scrape off the sea-film, we just might be able to recollect ourselves and return again to pleasures that are 729 times better than anything else.

So here's some practical advice from a fellow alum. Stay in shape! If you go to the gym for your body, you'll need to tend to your soul, too. If you can, seek work that includes these moments of recollection. And as you face what is next for you, look for friends with a winch and a pulley and hammers, good friends who will help you to remember what you aim to be. Thank you. And congratulations.

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