Memoirs of a Careerist

Political philosophy saved my life. It is with this lofty and dramatic statement that I simultaneously initiate the enterprise of recounting my story and condemn it to suffer from expectations beyond its due if we do not immediately rush to clarify both the content we intend the concepts "political philosophy" and "life" to carry and the fact that whatever narrative element can be found in this memoir only exists to establish what is eventually intended to be a philosophical point. The difficulty lies in the fact that the first line, if given literal treatment, would be of the sort whose lack of immediate intelligibility might justify an initially puzzled or skeptical reception. Hence it is my aim, in the telling of the subsequent story, to provide a firm basis upon which such a statement can securely and coherently be made, and the reading of which will hopefully produce the impression that my original claim, if improper, is only so because it does not go far enough; and if it is defective, it is only because political philosophy was not responsible for saving my life but for making it in the first place.

As will become clear, it is the study of the tradition of political philosophical thought that fashioned, from what had before consisted largely of a collection of unexamined impulses and unrefined desires, a whole human being properly conceived. Indeed, up until this point, my life was arranged around a set of priorities which had at their locus a narrow and worldly ambition and which manifested chiefly in career pursuits—indeed an existence which, as it appears to me in hindsight, contained no serious notion of life or living. It was only by way of a fortuitous initial encounter with a remarkable tradition of formation and

education, followed later by a long and sustained engagement with it, that I had come to inhabit a perspective so far removed from (perhaps, if I may, so far above) that of the past, that I have begun to lose connection altogether with this former inner world. Thus it is my hope not only to illustrate my journey and relay what lessons it may contain but also to put down in writing such a wayward chapter of my life before it slips from the already loose grasp of memory. It is also my hope through the recourse to be found in ink and paper that these elusive thoughts may be bound to form where they will be subjected to slow and careful scrutiny, the carrying out of which covers the subsequent pages.

During the effort to investigate that which comprised my thinking and identity, it was impossible not to recognize in the circumstances responsible for them the unmistakable imprint of our particular political-philosophical moment. At this point it did occur to me that these reflections might contain broader appeal: perhaps to the great many students who had been formed under similar conditions and who thus may derive some kind of personal and intellectual profit from its reading. It is not difficult, as we will see, to make the connections between my moral disposition and the political conditions of what many thinkers have filed under "democracy", but what we now denote more loosely with the interrelated concepts of modernity, liberalism, capitalism, even meritocracy. Liberal education is discussed at great length throughout and especially towards the end, and appropriately so, given its vital role in the elevation of perspective which if nothing else equipped me with both the means and impetus to undertake this reflection.

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We must begin in my teenage years with my time in high school, where despite my access to a rather broad and substantial education, I remained more or less a *tabula rasa*. That is to say, I possessed few passions of the highest order, ones I truly lived *for.* Certainly, there were subjects of interest I had indicated on my college application and pursued to an extent sufficient to have secured me

admission, but such interests, though real, never rose to the level of genuine vocational commitment, and I have no compunctions in admitting that they were selected as much for their ability to facilitate a favorable application narrative as they were for their original intellectual enticement. My pick of the poison ended up being 'biomedical engineering', a subject whose interdisciplinary framing appealed to me as much as it would, I hoped, to admissions officers. It would of course be improper to say that I had no genuine curiosity whatsoever in the subject, yet it cannot be denied that any consideration of interest was always supplemented with, possibly supplanted with, a consideration of practical necessity. In hindsight, I might perhaps consider myself lucky to have not been among those precocious children who, by birth and fortune, set themselves on the pursuit of a largely inexplicable passion, to which they are able to commit the totality of their being—because for them, it was left to Providence whether such interests aligned with what was expedient for college admissions. To illustrate this point I might bring up the example of a friend of mine who, despite a genuine passion for math, understood that to apply to college as an "Asian male in math" meant none too different an action than applying directly for the rejection pile; he therefore ended up carving out his niche in Geology (pun not intended) and of course gained acceptance into Harvard—but at what cost? If indeed his passion for math ran true, then by one plausible estimation he has made the greatest possible sacrifice. I happened to be spared such a fate, as there was no single subject that could command my absolute attention; this matter I now recognize as no great misfortune given the circumstances. Like most, I possessed a broad generalist curiosity accompanied by an instinct to survey my options before committing to any particular one. Nature had seemingly ordained me with no intrinsic direction; instead I wished to roam and wander, to examine different options and try them on for size, to have a diverse and fulfilling life. I understood a time would come for specialization, yet remained optimistic that through breadth, I'd encounter depth, and that further exploration could unearth a subject under whose gravity I'd happily fall and in whose orbit I'd happily remain. High school, then, would, as far as such an effort was concerned, consist entirely of unfettered curiosity and intellectual adventuring.

Such idealism soon learned to bend the knee to the brutal reign of necessity (and in that way, it charted a trajectory not unlike that of political thought after Machiavelli). It was in my sophomore year that I gravely learned I needed to undergo vigorous specialization, mandated by that great bogeyman of post-adolescence that was college admissions. By then, the internet had democratized the knowledge that universities, especially elite ones, sought candidates who could assemble distinctive and coherent narratives. That "Yale looks for a well-rounded class, not well-rounded students" became conventional wisdom, with the understanding that Yale curates the former by rejecting the latter: to be a jack of all trades was decidedly inferior to being a master of one. Moreover, every college applications season would mint fresh corpses out of the well-rounded applicants, producing constant reminders of the great sin of being the generalist. It was clear the dominant strategy in the admissions meta revolved around the idea of the "spiked applicant": one who had a single demonstrable area of deep expertise, narrow and specialized, and ideally exotic; it did not escape anyone's notice that the most substantive spikes, the kinds you saw showcased on college application forums, were the product of meticulous planning and early effort. I quickly came to understand the magnitude of the task that lay ahead of me. The game, structured as it was, demanded an effort I considered a necessary evil, as to opt out was no legitimate possibility: it had been firmly ingrained in me that any step taken to maximize my odds in the college admissions lottery was a step towards the securing of my future. And so, though born for broad curiosity, I found myself condemned in high school to a life of early and artificial specialization.

Of course, two paths were available: I could make an intense effort in self-discovery conceivably resulting in the organic development of an effective "spike", which was time-consuming and subject to substantial chance, or I could engage in tactical spike-manufacturing, which only required the strategic oversight obtainable from any admissions consultant or even thorough independent research. In keeping with the spirit of rational calculation, it was the second that I took. I only cropped together a coherent file in my senior year – alarmingly late by most standards – and my application, held together by

post-deadline addenda, hadn't assumed an acceptable form until the eleventh hour. Though as fortune would have it, I managed to slip through.

In principle, after I entered university, I could finally partake in the sort of holistic learning I should have pursued from the outset. I was free to explore different subject areas and engage in the questing towards which I had turned my back in high school. Yet, in practice, nothing of the sort happened. For one, it is impossible to emerge unscathed from playing the college admissions game, especially if it was played obsessively and to the degree that I did: by this point I was among those whose souls had been formed – or perhaps deformed – by the incentives that guided my early years; those whose minds, while liberated from the ultimate objective, were still enslaved to the values acquired along the way. These mental habits would not suddenly vanish the moment I departed for college, nor would they abate with the wear of time. College admissions was, after all, the specter that dominated three years of my life and haunted all the others; its tacit values of prestige, achievement, status, having been instilled "from the youth up", would remain remarkably stubborn in my mind. The best chance of persuading its easing was to participate in the kind of liberalizing activity that could be found in true education, one which was oriented not towards knowledge acquisition or career preparation, but cultivation of certain moral and intellectual faculties. Certainly, it was by way of such an education that I could have learned to discern worthier ends in life and subsequently free myself from the vise grip of compulsions under whose domination I had been toiling. But it would be foolish to think that I, who as things stood had been thoroughly habituated to the pursuit of worldly goals, was in any position to select that kind of education for myself. I admit it would have been firmly to my long-term benefit had I been denied a choice altogether and instead subjected to a source of higher authority and wisdom. Of course, I would have likely wanted to resist, but so too does a child make resistance if denied sugar and screen time; any adult who accedes ought to be regarded as no crusader of liberty but rather an irresponsible parent. As it turned out, under the wildly negligent parentage that is the current order of things in higher education, I was permitted unchecked choice; with it formulated a plan entirely hostile to the liberal arts and entirely predictable for the credentialist striver-maximizer. Of course, at the time, I

considered a stroke of mild genius the plan to complete my major and distribution requirements as quickly as possible so that I could dedicate every remaining course credit to cross-enrollment at the business school, thus spending my undergraduate years assembling the equivalent of an MBA and bypassing the pesky humanities courses forced upon me through "distributional requirements". Under such a plan I could circumvent the utter wastefulness of the modern liberal arts curriculum and put my tuition dollars to *real* use. We cannot exactly be shocked that a creature of firm bourgeois instinct, when given freedom, will use it only to set itself further upon bourgeois ends. Worse, since it was usually not education but career that absorbed my thoughts, such an effort already comprised one of the infrequent occasions where I thought about education, and unfortunately, these were the sorts of silly contrivances I put forth.

But there is one omission I must not make, for I believe that such a worldly ambition was not the result of educational conditions alone. The other great pillar supporting this crude and uncritical phase of my life has its foundations in a deeper cultural ferment. It is a sentiment that is worth examining in detail to account adequately for the psychological intensity of the situation as I experienced it, and is in fact so widespread in the undergraduate experience as to be considered cliche, especially during the earlier years where one is likely to encounter it in both discussion and firsthand experience. I am referring here, of course, to none other than imposter syndrome, which at a place like Yale is nearly universal given the sheer ambient merit of the undergraduate population.
I myself, it is safe to say, was not spared from imposter syndrome to any mild degree. My perceived deficit of worldly accomplishment was processed as an inadequacy at the most basic level: to acquire prestigious credentialing was also to prove my worth as a human; until then I could not regard myself seriously as a person, much less expect others to regard me any differently. Such was the psychology that could be found in the deepest part of my consciousness, subtly directing all of my priorities. When presented with a problem like this, how could anything else solicit my attention? Is not an immediate and primal instinct to amend this most fundamental deficiency, in the presence of which nothing else matters? All lucid thinking dissipates, all rational ordering of one's priorities

breaks down; one is left only in a desperate fervor to regain his sense of value as a human being. My reflective voice within was supplanted by a screaming call to action—yes, action, not contemplation; in service of ambition, not wisdom; and aimed at demonstrable success, not virtue. The resulting drive to repair such a deficiency naturally steers one towards frenzied activity in the marketplace, as opposed to, say, calm liberal learning or philosophical cultivation. Hence, the more absorbed I became in matters of the world, the less attuned I was to those of the mind; to attend to one was, almost by necessity, to neglect the other. Of course, in theory this tension between mind and world, which for me has always represented a most crucial junction, needn't be either/or, but I've come to see that in practice, there are a multiplicity of reasons why modern humans, aim as they may for both, end up only truly living one.

This is not to deny that, at the level of individual experience, the matter admitted of considerable variation. I certainly recall taking notice of those few who navigated this uneasy psychological terrain with facility, perhaps familiarity; there were those who seemed to possess from the very start a measure of maturity and wisdom with which they could ignore the status games and see directly through to the more important things in life. It is unbeknownst to me how students of so young an age could manage to remain steady in the face of the powerful cross-current of social pressure and public opinion; perhaps it was by nature, or perhaps they were beneficiaries of a morally formative early education which set the soul upon firm foundations and ingrained certain first principles from which equanimity and fortitude could be derived. At any rate, these types were rather rare, and I certainly couldn't count myself among such an exemplary and rarefied group.

That imposter syndrome is apparently as ubiquitous as it is tells me that I was not alone in my distinct inflection of character, and therefore likely not alone in my formative experiences; to me, this was the first indicator that inquiry into broader narratives could very well be productive. In light of the fact that much can be said about this issue, I will limit myself to the observation that it is the bourgeois mindset which prepares the ground for imposter syndrome to take root. The feeling of comparative insufficiency with regard to self-worth derives

from a view in which worldly accomplishment constitutes the primary basis of human worth. To see the affinity in another light, we could consider that, were we to banish this mental yardstick by which comparisons can be made, the notion of imposter syndrome as we understand it becomes unintelligible. This particular form of psychological disquiet seizes hold precisely when one associates their innate value as a human with their value in the marketplace to such an extent that a perceived lack of the latter prompts one to lose sight of their original entitlement to the former. I have come to recognize imposter syndrome as reflective of the essentially pernicious nature of bourgeois value-economies, in which even our basic moral dignities become subordinate to the primacy of merit. It is yet another way in which liberal capitalism struggles to maintain coherence as a single concept—a point at which serious antagonism between its two components threatens their generally peaceable alignment. For despite the ideological entanglement between and historical adjacency of liberalism and capitalism – the former providing moral augmentation for the latter – the two ultimately imply different accounts of human ends: one who subscribes to a capitalist system of values whereby merit or achievement are installed as the measure of all things, including self-worth, has reduced the value of the human to a level that liberalism would never consider acceptable. By all means, it is up to the reader whether they believe that a critique of meritocracy implies a critique of capitalism, or whether one wishes to implicate liberalism too by extending its domain so far as to include meritocracy. For now, I intend to leave the minutiae to those possessed of greater intellectual equipment than I and instead train my crosshairs back onto the various other factors which, in the course of this reflection, occur to me to be equally as consequential in their facilitation of my descent into careerism.

As far as anxiety of inadequacy was concerned, it didn't help that my value was to be explicitly appraised by student organizations whose interview processes were unduly competitive but necessary if I wanted to involve myself in just about anything at Yale. This was true of both extracurricular and pre-professional clubs, though the latter was of far greater import to my career prospects. Hence, mere months after I had sent out the last of my college applications and rejoiced in the fact that I'd see reprieve from this special kind of misery for a fair while, I

once again found myself forced to partake in the drafting of statements exaggerating my passions for some subject for which I could only truly claim an incipient curiosity. This first club-applications season amounted to more or less a remarkably pitiful showing, I having failed to get into practically every pre-professional club I applied for. To be sure, when confronted with this outcome there was no small part of me that wanted to imagine, as some do, that I had merely a terrible roll of the die. Yet I had made a habit of confronting truths rather than evading them, and in this situation I knew well and clear that behind each rejected application, a reader had examined it and determined it wanting. It was therefore required by my fanatical commitment to internal agency, which made me travel further than was demanded by reason, that I took each rejection as an indictment of personal value. In hindsight, there was almost a trace of self-deceit at play, guided by a subconscious recognition of its instrumental utility towards ends I had taken as absolute and for which I was willing to undergo any means: I, having been steeped in the bourgeois ethic, understood that the dogmatic upholding of one's own agency was often necessary for the attainment of success in the commercial sphere and therefore allowed myself to be guided by an aphilosophical ethic which bluntly regarded all forms of excuse-making, even those cast in reasonable argument, as weakness. Sufficient was my commitment to it that I was willing to engage in subtle self-trickery. For these reasons, it became this ordeal, trivial as it may appear to us in the present moment, that gathered enough psychological force to supply the final push which toppled me into the careerist abyss; it was all that a mind, already tensioned to its breaking point by the aforementioned imposter syndrome, required in order to snap.

One who was enough concerned with validation to commit wholly in its direction, as I was, soon realizes that there exists among all vocational choices one particularly enticing path. Impressions of this sort are initially formed when one inevitably encounters soon upon their arrival to campus certain industry names whose invocation appears to carry with them great weight and respect. Indeed, regarding the names of those firms found at the pinnacle of that domain which in public perception occupies the nexus of prestige, wealth, and achievement, to utter them too loudly would feel like an intrusion upon public

sensibilities. However—that it was never considered good form to display outwards obsession did not deny the fact that many students lavished these firms, along with any upperclassmen who could claim association by way of internship or job offer, with an admiration that was subtly discernible to most but flagrantly obvious to me. Thus I understood almost immediately that this was to be my path, for in treating a disease of my kind there was no better remedy than the prestige I saw it to bring. After all, it could have well been said that mine was not an infirmity of the mind nor an infirmity of the body, but an infirmity of the resume: hence the ideal first-line therapy would be aimed at strengthening not mind, nor body, but resume. Indeed these virulent bourgeois insecurities that had managed to infect my entire spirit would only see attenuation through the successful engagement in production and worldly accomplishment, the foremost path towards which seemed to me to reside in the finance industry.

Having now established my intention to work in finance, I must now mention one last important detail, which, in keeping with previous themes, consists of an exposition of certain situational factors that have as a psychological consequence the encouragement of careerism, and generally at the expense of serious educational pursuits. However, in departure from the factors thus mentioned, the one I am to describe follows from the work of an active set of perpetrators as opposed to being the passive manifestation of a particular cultural or philosophical (dis)order.

When a student initially sets out on the finance career path, he or she is likely soon to be made additionally aware of a crucial addendum. This realization consists in the fact that recruiting for finance occurs not in one's senior year as it normally does in other domains, but rather without delay. Indeed, the most dangerous mistake one hoping to enter the field could make is the quite reasonable assumption that one should first explore their options and consider each thoroughly; in reality, the timeline allows for no such luxuries. From the moment one steps foot on campus, they must begin to make important preparations which, as they are correctly told, will make or break their chances of securing any desirable job in the industry. That recruiting timelines are so compressed is the cumulative result of a series of facts. First, it is to be noted that

the vast majority of full-time hires are conversions from the summer internship pipeline; it is almost necessary to complete a junior summer internship if one wishes to join post-graduation. Second, for these junior-summer internships, interviews are held starting in the winter of one's sophomore year, with the majority of offers arriving in hand by March. Third, preparation for these sophomore-year interviews must take place still earlier – in one's freshman year – because banking recruiting requires a monthslong networking effort prior to the official interview process. One additionally must attain fluency in the introductory finance and accounting theory that is rarely taught at liberal arts institutions but comprises the better part of the technical screen; it is no small task and usually requires months of serious effort, to be undertaken in a largely self-directed capacity.

As an aside: Despite the betraying tone with which I have approached the subject, I do not intend to deny the fact that these beliefs can be useful insofar as career utility is concerned. I can attest to my obstinate determination being primarily responsible for mine having come out of this major setback not in defeat but with renewed determination. My spirit was galvanized, my will reinforced. Hence, if speaking strictly within the narrow limits of worldly ends, it was a "good" development. But in endeavoring to broaden our perspective with regard to the manifold worthy ends of life and understand their relative rank-ordering in sharper resolution, we would have to consider a perspective from which these habits appear not so "good". For while it is true that the pressure of the situation spurred on a kind of personal evolution through which I encountered professional success, it was also a kind of evolution that – similar to how a feral wolf resorts to its meanest instincts when cornered – brought me closer to the human animal at the expense of the human being, and hence more properly a devolution. The coarse instincts I adopted were suitable of the brute concerned with securing its existence, not the rational creature capable of any higher kind of activity. Certainly there are conditions in which such characteristics prove beneficial, but I cannot be sure if modern Western society resembles these conditions to any appreciable degree. Rather, I tend to view bourgeois society as facilitating habits that lie in sharp disconnect with those required for meaningful living in today's world. A fixation on resource acquisition, for instance, could be useful to the extent that it promotes survival, but for the great many students who are comfortably beyond subsistence, it merely presents a distraction.

It is a great irony of the free market that while material poverty has improved dramatically, and in certain places eliminated altogether, people's behavior reflects as if the opposite has occurred. Even in an era of technology and material abundance we act as if in great scarcity. I believe it is because the market generates a simulated fight for survival, provoking a struggle that bears the psychological markers of real danger despite possessing none of its actual consequences. Though the true stakes are rarely as severe as true survival, this fact does not seem to reach us; it is obscured by our natural inclination towards relative comparison as opposed to absolute measurement. Compounding this tendency is the fact that capitalistic social mobility has the effect of dynamically refreshing the cohort against whom we compete: when one succeeds among their peers, they find themselves elevated to a higher peer set more capable and more accomplished than the last, and with whom keeping up requires even greater exertion. Perhaps the reason why the wealthy still behave as if they were poor is because they indeed are if compared against their even richer friends.

I had a firsthand taste of this harsh irony when I first arrived at Yale. Though I had accomplished all I had set out to do in high school and exceeded all my expectations in healthy measure, I could not pause to enjoy any of its sweetness. For new standards quickly usurped the position of the old ones; they had their basis, as all standards tend to do, in the level of expectation common to my new environment. Indeed, with everyone around me possessing a sense of ambition that dwarfed my own, I could not help but pull my own standards upwards. At the time I understood this as an unambiguously good thing: by surrounding myself with relentless strivers, I am constantly encouraged to become the best version of myself. Now I am not so lenient as to permit such a remark to be advanced without qualification. I would clarify that competitive pressure only brought me closer to my "best version" insofar as "best" is construed in the simplest of senses, the bourgeois sense, where a term such as "best" has no meaning beyond "most successful" or "most accomplished". Yet if we are to include any consideration of the higher potentialities available to man, we easily see that such a situation hardly put me anywhere close to becoming the "best" kind of human being. It was only because I had failed to understand that there could exist alternative interpretations of life that I initially took delight in what I recognized to be the salutary effects of bourgeois competition.

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The forward-shifting of recruiting timelines has long been characteristic of the finance industry, but only in the last decade has it reached a level bordering on the absurd, and its reasons are twofold. First, the technology industry has emerged as a credible threat. To ambitious students who care less for the kind of work they do than for a respected title and generous salary, Big Tech, bearing higher wages at lower weekly working hours, offers a superior value proposition. Accelerated recruiting is therefore simply a strategy, borne of desperation, by the banking industry to ensnare students before they can explore the highly competitive alternatives available to them. Secondly, banks have been engaged among themselves in a vicious recruiting war in which the acceleration of recruiting timelines has served as the primary weapon. The conflict is thought to have been initiated by the firms which, acknowledging their perception as second-rate firms, made a bid to secure first-rate talent by pushing forward their interviewing cycles and issuing "exploding offers" to ensure immediate commitment. Risk-averse candidates in such a position would often opt to accept such an offer rather than chance a run at the top shops. Of course, the other firms soon caught wind of the mischief and accelerated in turn. But the escalatory loop had no logical end: every ensuing year, one firm would get the crafty idea to place their process just before the other (already-accelerated) cycles, requiring others to advance in lockstep. The game-theoretical state of equilibrium is one in which every bank initiates their recruiting process as early as is possible, restricted only by the practical limit of how far recruiting can advance without sacrificing the quality of the candidate pool. Applications in the 2025 cycle opened as early as the fall of sophomore year; that it has not advanced further should by no means be taken as an indication of moderation on behalf of the investment banks. So preposterous indeed is the situation that one would be justified in thinking it hyperbolic; yet one would, upon a brief consultation with any current underclassman who knows a thing or two about finance recruiting, understand that what I have related from firsthand experience is likely representative of a broader state of affairs.

Perhaps it is helpful to illustrate what is now a common experience among Yale students:

> You arrive on campus as a first year. Before you are even able to gather your bearings and survey the options available to you, you learn that there exists an industry called Investment Banking. Soon thereafter you realize that recruiting in this field has most bizarrely already begun; in fact, some of your friends, those enterprising individuals among you who always seem to be on top of everything, have already networked with bankers, attended information sessions, and joined the right clubs: all of this contributes to a sense of immediate urgency, a sense that the train is soon to leave (in which case you would be entirely correct). For most, there is no time to think, only time to do—yet even those who do take the time to briefly weigh the decision end up concluding: banking *is* the way. For one, there is plenty of time later on to engage in academic and intellectual exploration if that is what you so desire; conversely banking recruiting is happening now and thus deserves your immediate attention. Then you realize that, because investment banks focus their recruiting efforts on top universities, you ought to take advantage of this privilege if you happen to attend one such university; you get the sense that to ignore this opportunity is a serious waste of a privilege. Slowly, you pick up on many additional pieces of conventional wisdom: that investment banking is a safe way to "keep the most doors open", which is just what your indecisive mind needs. Plus, the better part of your first-year class – and especially all the most driven students – are already stampeding in this direction. The resulting calculus is clear. Perhaps you are eager to prove yourself to others. Perhaps you trust the wisdom of the crowd. Perhaps you have little sense of where your passions lay and want to preserve optionality. Either way, all roads lead to Rome: finance is prestigious, high-signal, optionality-maximizing. It is decided then that you will try your hand at recruiting. What follows is a protracted scramble to network and prepare for technical interviews, all of which contribute to two years of severe psychological strain and constant anxiety; by the time all is said and done, fortune permitting, you may have an internship offer in hand.

Such is the story of how recruiting has lost its fixed place in the ordinary progression of college life as that beast which only rears its ugly head towards the end. In a rather dramatic reversal, its presence now intrudes at the beginning. One can of course choose to ignore such an unwanted intrusion – and indeed, many do successfully – yet in considering whether one desires any involvement in so nonsensical an ordeal, it is easy to fall prey, as I did, to those pieces of widely-circulated but misguided logic.

It has become obvious to me that students are forced to turn an eye toward career concerns far before they have the time to explore either themselves or the education that has been offered to them. The recruiting escalation war waged by the finance industry has manufactured a needless and wholly artificial sense of urgency, leaving collateral damage in its wake; among its victims is liberal education, or for that matter, education at large. I find illustrative a common piece of advice that now diffuses through the undergraduate finance clubs at Yale. It urges freshmen and sophomores to follow a course enrollment strategy whereby easy credits are prioritized over intellectual challenge and which should result in the accrual of two benefits. First, it ensures that minimal time is "wasted" on coursework so as to make way for the formidable and time-intensive effort that is finance recruiting. Second, it helps to secure a robust GPA meant to betray nothing of the fact that scarce attention had actually been allocated to academics. Of course, campus discourse is known to teem with both good and bad ideas, but never have I encountered a piece of advice that carries within it a spirit more contrary to the ideals of the university (or at least what it once stood for in theory, even if it no longer upholds them in practice). It is entirely representative of the vocationalist spirit and as such lies at odds with not just the moral and humanistic education but with all forms of education: in that sense, it is the very antithesis of education. It is also indeed the advice I ended up following myself, a fact which my transcript stands to prove.

It is the hope of those educators who possess a serious conception of education that the college years comprise, initially if not in whole, of intellectual adventure, personal questing, and the surrender to wonder, all with the eventual aim of the broader cultivation of mind and character. It is the hope that through

engagement with a rich and varied curriculum centered around not just technical learning but also substantive inquiry, one can find purchase in a stronger vision of what life could consist in. The advocacy by a small but committed group for the continued study of particular philosophical traditions is sustained with a view to this lofty understanding of the true ends of learning, as opposed to the instrumental and technocratic paradigm that increasingly engulfs the university today. Yet the kind of education I received couldn't have been further estranged from these ideals. That is if I could be said to have been pursuing an education at all; truth be told, I was pursuing a career, not education, and education was only pursued insofar as it advanced a career.

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Thus concludes the account of my descent into the deepest throes of pre-professional ambition. How I eventually came to a stop is a matter of happenstance, which I will soon address. But I should not be satisfied to lay the subject to rest without giving some account of the positives that came out of it, of which there are various, and without which my narrative remains incomplete. Indeed, as much as what I have described alludes to a regretful perspective which recognizes this phase of life as a period of nothing more than plain disorientation, I intend now to raise the suggestion that it was facilitative, if not crucially so, of my eventual rebound. Upon taking a broader view, I have come to regard my successive stages of development with an optimistic poise, my stint in careerism as a necessary step along a grand progression towards finer ends. This intermediary phase should not so much be regarded a detour or diversion as to be understood more properly in Hegelian terms a catalyst of, and transition into, the next phase.

Specifically, my immersion in vocational activity was necessary to produce that characteristic bourgeois discontent, which upon its sufficient accumulation provided the impetus towards its eventual resolution. Though some are able to sustain a worldly way of life so long as they suppress or do not experience the

gnawing inquietude, I proved unable; hence it was only a matter of time before I would attach myself firmly upon some means of mitigation. Indeed I had emerged from the trance of careerism with a soul so already taut with frustration as to require only the right outlet to release all its accumulated restless energy. In my case, it was a fortuitous encounter with liberal education that happened to supply that initial catalyst, that initial nudge which eventually undoes the entire psychological edifice.

Allow me introduce a few rather ordinary analogies whose parallels to my situation will very quickly make my point clear. Just as how wealth is most intensely savored in the hands of those most deprived of it, or how blistering post-workout dehydration gives water an overwhelming sweetness, or how a terrible storm might make the safety of shelter feel ever the more cozy, it is because I had undergone the full extent of bourgeois commitment and felt its associated dissatisfaction that I came to truly appreciate those which revealed to me the alternatives. We might even recall the philosophical argument that the notion of good only acquires meaning given the existence of evil: whatever its theoretical merits, it is at least phenomenologically plausible in that the knowledge of evil sharpens (even if it does not altogether render intelligible) the experience of good. The principle that we as humans have a greater tendency to regard the presence of a thing to the extent that we have felt the absence of that thing, when mapped on to my case, meant that my passage through careerism did more than merely prepare me for the turn that followed; it rather furnished, I like to think, a further and more enduring advantage.

There were, for instance, students who had pursued Directed Studies (the Great Books program for first-years) since the beginning, but, having been passive recipients of that kind of learning as opposed to an active seeker of it, absorbed its concepts but not its animating lessons. For many of them, liberal education became just another intellectual interest, attractive at an academic level and important to one's learning but perhaps not to one's life. Often it was merely a subject of curiosity which they happened to pick up in high school and so naturally continued in college, in which case the nature of their interest in humanities was not unlike that of the chemistry student who finds the topic of

molecular bonding to be a matter of genuine curiosity, but a detached and analytical one at that. An important difference is that this kind of intellectual interest does not make the ascent upwards to higher levels of conviction, which in most cases requires an understanding of the subject's importance beyond its appeal as a body of concepts. One might for instance detect, in speaking to such students, that there is still some distance that remains between knowing the tenets of a subject and caring enough to take them up into one's life. Crucially, only at the point of the latter can the purpose of liberal or political education be said to be truly *understood* by its student; short of that, such understanding is often revealed to be little more than memorization, or at best, derive from sources intellectual rather than existential. For liberal education is not meant merely to be a body of ideas to be learned and regurgitated but a lived discipline whose ultimate test lies in action. On this point, it has been my observation that there is always some portion of every Directed Studies cohort that seems to have absorbed humanistic learnings in theory but failed to uphold their key principles in practice: this becomes most evident when some number of them are eventually discovered poking around at recruiting events or making rounds at corporate information sessions. To be sure, a great many of these students will remain exemplars of liberal learning whose selected paths bear some indication of a serious effort in their humanistic studies. But it was nevertheless not uncommon that I would speak to a student whose background I admired, even envied, for the fact that they received from the beginning an education which I only encountered by the sheerest stroke of luck towards the end, and think to myself, "How I wish to have traded places with them!"—only to later learn that they possessed the very same thought. To think that they, the fortunate recipients of the greatest kind of education Western civilization has to offer, would look at me, who at the time had little more to my character than that part which was ceaselessly occupied in the pursuit of worldly success, and wish they could have my place on the treadmill of ambition! Was it not the point of such an education to learn to desire wisely, to free oneself from the oppression of these vulgar appetites and to pursue a more ennobling existence: to be everything I wasn't? Much time would pass before I understood that their susceptibility to persuasions of various sorts did not necessarily indicate a failure, perhaps, on the pedagogical level, or even that the great project was flawed to its core, but rather,

that the circumstances under which the lessons were received had not produced real conviction. Indeed, such an education was acquired so easily and frictionlessly as to be taken for granted, and, in this paltry state, could not provide the countervailing force that was needed to balance out the potent and growing influence of commercial culture.

Ironically, I had found myself in a much different position by the time I had entered into a serious education: my stint on the other side, despite having consumed much of my energetic early college years, produced the benefit of insulating me from the perils of an overactive curiosity. Never afterwards did I wonder, as many do, if the "grass might be greener" on the other side, for I had seen its barrenness firsthand. Perhaps an analog to my situation can be seen in the case of how the most vocal atheists tend to become the sturdiest Christians. To be sure, many atheists never find their way (as is also the case with most careerists), but when they do, the resulting conviction is of a different kind, cast not of whimsy or circumstance but of hard-fought principle. Theirs is an understanding that was received not as passive doctrine and held tenuously as such, but forged in rigorous discourse and contemplation; what emerges is nothing short of a steeled assurance. One seeking to shake them from their belief will find a mind impervious to the temptations to which casual sophistry so easily lends itself. Regardless of what counterarguments are attempted, one is unlikely to make a discovery that was not at least already known: whatever points are raised in argument against their position are likely to have already been examined deeply, and they may even have, once upon a time, issued such arguments themselves. It is therefore they alone who are acquainted in firsthand manner with all possible sides of the subject. And if such a religious convert were to engage in argument with an opponent, it would be little more than a reprisal of the contest he or she once waged against his or her own former position and, by necessity, won. I understood what it meant to be a creature of ambition as well as any, and knew it in all its forms, all its highs and lows; its seductive appeals were evident as were its vital shortcomings; hence my foundations were laid on dense groundwork with the effect that I was not to be easily swayed by the winds of speculation and temptation. I would observe, without developing the urge to conform, as those around me took up the default values supplied by our

civilization and frantically gave themselves towards their pursuit, for I had been equipped with such an awareness of both myself and the higher human alternatives as to withstand these dominant cultural tendencies and now looked with suspicion upon the retinue of modern mental habits, those which prescient philosophers from the very beginning had foreseen to be endemic to the democratic polity, in spite of, or rather in light of, the fact that I once had lived entirely under their influence.

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Regarding the reorientation in values that occurred towards the end of my undergraduate years, I would now like to offer a more detailed account concerning its educational origins. Though I have frequently alluded to the role of the humanities, I have not yet made any important distinctions among its various sub-disciplines, distinctions that are of the utmost importance in any discussion of philosophy as a subject concerned with the cultivation of the individual. In my case, the form of humanities education best suited towards these ends did not arrive until the end. I do not regret the time I spent shopping among various departments before I eventually located the kind of serious pedagogy I desired, though this optimistic assessment is tempered only by the fact that some of these classes, by the nature of their curricula, potentially obscured the possibility that anything greater than mere intellectual curiosity could be found in a humanities education. I am indeed speaking specifically of the kind of activity that largely dominates Anglo-American philosophy departments today, whose priority evidently is to clarify narrow queries within well-defined boundaries as opposed to teaching with a view to the enduring questions, even though it tends to be the latter which students can immediately detect to have bearing on their everyday choices and lives, and hence which motivates their earnest and continued study even as these students move beyond their college years. Whereas, in the case of the former, unless the explicit connection is made by the teacher on behalf of the student, it usually remains unclear how certain technical and specialized issues are derivative of, and once

asked in service of, the more permanent issues. These courses struggle to make the case (if any attempt is ever made to begin with) for why students ought to enroll in them, an effort that is increasingly indispensable in our "commodified" state of higher education where students browse and shop courses as they please. All too many students now pass over the humanities in favor of those subjects which either make the effort to defend its utility on instrumental grounds or were already by nature suited towards commercial ends. In a world in which the pursuit of any kind of philosophy, never mind the distinctions between them, is broadly on the decline, it may perhaps be advantageous to comprehend the manner in which students tend to be exposed to philosophy nowadays and what they subsequently come to think of it as attempting to do.

My experience with the courses in the philosophy department was fairly typical in that the satiation of intellectual curiosity was the only purpose for which I enrolled in them and the only takeaway which I obtained from them. I could not have detected that there were, deep within these ideas, serious stakes to be realized if one were to trace the genealogy of thought back to its origins in ancient Greece. In truth, the questions that contemporary philosophy departments dealt with were much too narrow to draw any clear connection to the permanent questions that animate daily life. To render patent the everyday importance of philosophy is not only no longer within the pedagogical mandate but actively outside of it: the spirit of the analytical project, as it became clear to me, is one which locates the true end of philosophy to be itself and not the pragmatic goal of human formation. It would for instance now be considered unusual, and perhaps inappropriate, for a course on analytic metaphysics to speak of wisdom and guidance; it has put so much distance between itself and the interrogation of human life that the fact that it once had its origins in a project that sought to examine the best political regime (with a view to the best kind of life) is all but unrecognizable. The questions with which it concerns itself today are many layers removed from those which deal with the essence and importance of the cultured man, or active citizen, or fulfilled human. Philosophy as such felt like an intellectual hobby, one that would exist alongside and remain subordinate to a primary career to which the majority of your attention was directed, as opposed to the enterprise that was to comprise the chief recipient of

your energy and which gave all other pursuits their meaning. I imagine I cannot be alone in my assessment that comprehending the ontological distinction between transcendental idealism and empirical realism has little to no bearing on the way in which I approached the task of *living*, and was certainly not the kind of question that struck me as being crucial to life; further, it was the sort of inquiry that might perhaps tickle the mind but could never satiate the soul. Hence, insofar as the discipline has deviated so far down its own narrow fields of inquiry that it is altogether detached from more central questions, it lacked any appeal for me beyond a mere cerebral curiosity. Of course, it would be incorrect to assert that philosophy in its analytic form lacks a sense of stake altogether – for some argument can always be formulated, some case made, and perhaps something manages to come into view as long as one stretches their neck long enough – but it is not apparent to me that these stakes are ever meant to comprise the primary motive for its pursuit. Hence I thought of this kind of philosophy as being of the "fun" variety: one you could entertain as an interest *after* you had your life in order, as opposed to the activity you pursued to *get* your life in order. I still enjoyed it, but only as a hobby or an accessory to life, as opposed to its sturdy foundation or animating center.

The political science courses I took were plagued by a different set of problems, though they produced similar outcomes. I, having been an Economics major, was well-acquainted with various empirical methodologies and therefore well-cognizant of their limits. I had ventured towards political science hoping to encounter a taste of the qualitative instruction that I had once naively expected from the economics department. Yet there was to be no escape from the spectre of scientism: political science, I found, was but another instance of the "elephantiasis of the spirit of rationalism" from which I sought reprieve during my time in that extended exercise in mathematics which we call economics. Of course, only later in the study of intellectual history did I understand why such courses always practiced a fearful aversion to anything which was value-laden and instead stuck to that which was safely empirical. Perhaps the only class I found to offer something in the way of an introduction to the history of ideas was introductory political philosophy, but the nature of the survey course was that the curriculum consisted in so wide a berth of ideas that the relations between

them as well as their greater import were lost. I received a bit of Hobbes, a bit of Locke; some Machiavelli here, some Marx there. When we studied Foucault we learned about his idea of the Panopticon, and when it came to Mill, his harm principle. Upon the completion of the course it felt as though I had merely collected a menagerie of fun facts whose first conceivable application was intellectual grandstanding at a dinner party; such tidbits of knowledge made for convenient conversational fodder, useful for instilling a sense of urbane learnedness whose ultimately superficial nature was obscured as long as the discussion remained light; but for substantive discourse, or far more importantly, purposes beyond conversation altogether, such knowledge fell short. Indeed, by internalizing what was essentially an aggregation of fragments of knowledge without any understanding as to how they formed an essential whole, I had missed the very purpose of the humanities education.

But the root of my objection lies not in the breadth of the curriculum, which would certainly be an unfair complaint to lodge against a course meant to be introductory by nature. My concern here is rather that, as a survey course, it ought to include some discussion of the motivators for why we learn what we learn, as opposed to rushing directly into the material. Put simply, it ought to make a case for itself. This is not just a helpful suggestion but a matter of practical necessity in the age of democratized higher education, where curricular planning is no longer legislated from above but left to student choice. Such choice, unrefined as it is, rarely possesses a discerning eye for that which is valuable pursuing; and more broadly, a marketplace of electives, left to sheer supply and demand, is ill-suited to surface what is best and highest in the curriculum. This is because student-customers tend to 'purchase' on the basis of rudimentary appetite; any elevation beyond these inclinations would require the very liberal education that has not yet been chosen. Raw choice, then, must be aided by the sales efforts of our faculty; courses therefore must make a serious attempt to advertise themselves. Luckily, when it comes to political philosophy, making the case is not fundamentally difficult: its splendor lies thinly concealed, awaiting only a capable hand to tear away the veil. Such an effort requires only an account of the permanent questions and unified themes to which each of these historical figures addressed themselves (intentionally or not)—themes that bear

decisively on how we live. That way, one would not, as I did, move through such an education while missing the entire point of it, and finish the course only to find out later that there was an entirely different layer of meaning that was evidently accessible but ultimately went unaccessed. Certainly, that courses must stoop so low as to participate in the undignified activity of commercial advertisement is by no means an ideal state of affairs; yet, if anything, political philosophy itself shows us that there are times in which considerations of the ideal must yield to considerations of necessity. I have faith that, if such advertising is done well – expressed in the right words, and with genuine ardor, as should be no matter of difficulty for a subject of such latent grandeur – students may still detect that something important is being said and, in the face of all modern distraction, commit to what may well be the worthiest pursuit of their lives.

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It was only by my junior year that I got my first proper glimpse of liberal education. I cannot precisely recall how I found my way to the organization by the name of the Elm Institute—to memory, it was mentioned to me at some point in passing (by whom or in what context I can no longer remember) that lunch talks were held there every Friday. I hadn't thought much of it at the time: I was still in the habit of judging uses of time by their overt utility, by which standards Elm did not necessarily rise to the top of my list of priorities. Thus I cannot imagine what sort of impetus it might have taken to compel me, on one Friday afternoon, to pay them my first visit. I would like to think it was a mysterious bout of divine inspiration or perhaps something written in and mandated by the course of fate, though a reasonable account has it that I was just particularly bored and tempted by free food. Either way, I found myself at a discussion, one which I recall little of aside from the fact that I comprehended almost none of it. Despite this rather severe constraint, I was able to get the sense that there was truly something serious taking place here, something of a sort of which I had no prior experience in my time at Yale. During this first encounter I felt an

inexplicable pull, an allure that I, despite lacking any means for its articulation, was able to process at an intuitive level. For it was here that I brushed up against a rich tradition of thought, one which had the effect of, among many others, engendering a certain nobleness in the minds and characters of its initiates; while I ultimately had no understanding of the former, I could perceive glimpses of the latter. Moreover, there was something about this tradition that seemed to speak to pressing inner issues that were then starting to reach their first ferment in my soul. Of the early seminars I attended, there were only a meager few that I could claim to understand, but when such understanding did register, it did so with real weight. Those talks that dealt with more directly apprehensible topics such as the university, education, and professionalism, either illuminated concerns I harbored but lacked the conceptual equipment to surface or spoke to stirrings I myself did not even know had been there. It occurred to me at one point that if even those simple discussions amenable to my understanding left me in such a state of wonder, then all those that went well over my head – concerning more recondite matters in philosophy, history, and culture – must have contained something worth learning about. This I understood not so much by a process of explicit reasoning as by faint intuition. The truth of the matter is that I simply felt drawn in a way that few other things have ever drawn me before—hence it might be more appropriate to say that my constant returning was a condition that I had somewhat found myself in as opposed to one that I chose.

We must remember that up until this point it had been corporate financial statements and investment memos that had comprised my "literary" education. Looking back, I would emerge from each of my first few visits to the Elm in a daze. Every session became, in effect, a marathon of cognitive exertion where I – by intellectual standards a couch potato – scrambled to match the cerebral pace of elite athletes whose lives had been spent in training. It is only a miracle that I remained on my feet. I would recall being the only one taking notes, my brain having reached its point of saturation some minutes in, on my computer, notes which were to be digested over the course of the following week despite being written over the course of an hour. These first few months made evident the fact that my tenure as a student of the natural sciences in high school, then as a finance careerist in college, had left me functionally illiterate—not to mention

utterly blind to matters of philosophy or culture, fundamentally inexperienced with the higher sentimentalities, and altogether uncultivated as a human being. On occasion, when I found a topic both to my liking and comprehension – the latter of which usually constituted the chief bottleneck – I would summon the wherewithal to advance an idea of my own. It must have taken a certain largeness of spirit, I imagine, for such men of erudition to receive my primitive babblings with an attitude of openness and seriousness. Philosophy at certain moments has a way of appearing deceptively amenable to the understanding; one can feel as if they have gotten the grasp of an idea but in reality miss the heart of the point entirely. This tends to lead to situations where you feel as though you may understand all that is being said, so much so that you decide to open your mouth to release your ignorance from the space in the mind where it ought to remain confined and out into the room to provide its inhabitants with much opportunity for the exercise of the virtues of patience and tolerance. It did not help that I possessed no real expertise in anything except perhaps finance recruiting, a domain which decidedly had little bearing upon the somewhat more important questions Elm was in the business of addressing. I would hope that it was probably not too often that one so thoroughly marinated in commercial philistinism as myself would grace their floors at least made for some measure of entertainment. When it came to any remotely philosophical subject I was soundly out of my depth; and even beyond matters of philosophy, my intellectual range would be dwarfed by the variety of topics that these men could seemingly navigate with ease. Indeed, they were of such a learned sort that you could bring to them almost any subject of discussion and get some illuminating comments in return; they were those to whom you could mention just about *anything*, and in return they'd be able to offer *something*. I can only be glad that they were magnanimous enough to entertain the arrangement whereby they did most of the offering, and I most of the receiving.

If such aspects as I have just recounted do not sufficiently illustrate the allure of the kind of learning that took place at the Elm Institute, let me offer one analysis more. Ultimately, it was to my intuition even if it were beyond my articulation, that the elevation in speech and thought I had encountered initially at Elm and later within a few select spaces on campus bore a hint of some rich source from

which it was derived: that behind such an excellence of the mind was not to be found mere chance, or the work of nature, but rather a project of intentional, directed cultivation. Of course, that I had been confronted with a humanistic tradition the details and nature of which were utterly unfamiliar to me certainly lent to an impression of grandeur heightened past the point of moderated reason. It is, after all, worth bearing in mind that of the ambitious and worldly types who had previously commanded my admiration, few had possessed truly broad formation, especially in the subtler matters of culture and refinement. Hence upon an encounter with a model of learning of a sort that I had not yet had the pleasure of knowing elsewhere, every bit of appreciation was reinforced by novelty—not at all to detract, though, from the fact that I found that the virtues of the cultivated man truly did more to set him apart from, or perhaps above, the rest, than did raw industriousness and pragmatic elegance for the bourgeois man. Perhaps, as I began to discover, I was among those endowed at birth with an intuition which valued well-bred thoughtfulness over sheer strength of the will. At any rate, at the point at which it was no longer only the latter which I could count among my most immediate influences, I could feel that an expansion of horizons was in order: here was a direction of development which, as was distinct from all other pursuits I had entertained thus far in life, I could earnestly embrace. This fact was firmly understood when I came to the realization that there were previously few kinds of people in my life for whom I could confidently attest to the following: that something worthy of admiration was to be found in so various a number of respects that I could hardly hope to detail them all, and further that common descriptors were left but sorely wanting in their ability to capture such an impression. Regardless, I will now make the attempt.

It is a nobleness of bearing that I speak of: a broad attunement of the spirit which gives the impression of serious formation, if it is not at first and perhaps crudely perceived as an aristocratic presence or a simple learnedness. I do not even mean to refer to the detectible intellectual register behind every act of speech or the generally clean and sharp mode of thought which carries with it that pleasing aesthetic dimension which is hardly found in practical life. Instead, I gesture at a high seriousness, reflected in not just words but deed and character, and which

consists in the ability to respond adequately to reality; the latter largely appears to me to consist in an element of calibration of one's moral, emotional, and aesthetic sensibilities, with the cumulative effect that one becomes capable of admiring what is genuinely admirable, and of expressing sound judgment in the most important matters. Such a person comfortably inhabits a stable structure of values which, having been constructed under the auspices of the great intellects of history and tempered and hardened by practice in life, has been rendered insusceptible to the whimsied gusts of such aberrant influences as public opinion or common appetite, normally sufficient to sweep up and carry away minds of lesser reinforcement. Those who attain this can be said to be truly sophisticated of soul, and can often be found securely and happily leading an altogether different way of life from those which otherwise are dominant in the milieu of modern existence.

Certainly, I was young and impressionable, and hadn't previously encountered much in the way of a model of true excellence; yet neither of these facts ought to detract from the enthusiasm with which I recall these early days. The fact of the matter is that I admired the Elm as a standard of distinction in not just intellectual but everyday affairs, and it came in my life at a time when I perceived few other worthy models upon which my aspiration could fasten. Though I had not the means to explain it at the time, it was this I understood at heart and expressed in action by returning every week to the floors of the Elm Institute.

Fortunately, by way of an acquaintance with such figures, I was for the first time granted a scale against which the smallness of my own soul became readily apparent. Among the most humbling admissions one can make is that their method of approach to life is lacking in some way; even more painful then is the knowledge that such a lack might be of the most serious kind, one whose classic symptoms are an impoverished interior life and an unreflective mind that knows not what it lives for. Years spent in obsession with the narrow matters of the world had left me with little time to make even a light acquaintance with culture, to say nothing of the sustained contact with the high zeniths of human experience necessary to produce the man of truly large human amplitude—of whom I was now aware and against whom I could now compare myself. In the

absence of experience with real greatness it does not readily occur to one that there can be gradations in such a sense; one is aware of neither the thing to strive towards nor the standard which makes clear their own shortcomings; but after the realization is made, one can no longer rid themselves of sense that, perhaps, they had not actually been properly initiated into the project of living.

That anything of this sort was lacking was only apparent to me in the broadest of strokes, but it was nonetheless sufficient to rouse a particularly stubborn curiosity: to now simply put these realizations behind me and return to the provincial affairs of my previous life was beyond consideration. Yes—once my soul, roused sharply not from the slumber of dogma but from the slumber of ignorance, had indicated this initial stirring, the course towards consciousness was decisively charted; this soul now had claim to certain yearnings, yearnings which like a petulant child will not go away until one gives audience to its demands. Hence I regarded as no longer just a fitting but a necessary enterprise the reading and pondering of serious books. I had seen and heard enough of life to gather that this might have been my last chance to know and understand real beauty; that afterwards, especially in the scramble of things, life had a way of catching up with you, outrunning you and leaving you with little intention or means to engage in any such luxury pursuits as commerce with the highest questions. And indeed was it a luxury to be a man of consideration and culture—the kinder sentiments and tender sensitivities make for poor companions to one who, exposed to the cruelties of life, needs the opposing sentiments of strength and callousness in order to weather the daily tedium of earning an honest living. Especially in an age where the affordability of the most basic things is thought to be in regress, one is justified in heeding first the coarse instinct of self-preservation—it is true that a beautiful mind is of no use to a starving body. Nonetheless, inasmuch as it was a luxury I could afford, I had the privilege of obeying a different instinct, one which told me, practically screamed at me, that it was not appropriate to move forward into the agitation of worldly life without having first caught a glimpse of beauty, of philosophy. The following of this course, given its delayed timing, compelled me to dedicate my last two months of college, along with the subsequent year, to my studies, and despite the fact that it entailed a certain nontrivial career sacrifice, I understood that there

was no worthier way to spend my time. During this period I engaged in little else, having drawn resolve from a deadly focus derived from a sentiment not unlike that which I experienced at the beginning of my college days under the fever of ambition and imposter syndrome, when a deficiency of a similar intensity but different origin was first perceived. It is only funny, if not poetically fitting, that of the two, the first had propelled my descent into careerism whereas the second accompanied my rise out of it.

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Having now recounted both the origins and nature of my transformation, I will return, at last, to the line with which I began, to make clear the role of political philosophy if it is not already evident.

A most serious misconception about political philosophy, common to outside perspectives, is that it consists in inquiry of "politics" understood in the pragmatic sense of the term; that is, in reference to whatever sundry goings-on in the nation's capital. The pursuit of politics as such is of minor (though admittedly growing) interest to me. But a different understanding of the subject has it at the animating core around which emerged a brilliant canon of thought concerning the issue of governance, with respect to not just polities but selves, for politics is merely ethics writ large. As regards the original insight into the resonance between city and soul we are profoundly indebted to our Platonic inheritance and to the subsequent Western tradition for elaborating its implications across centuries of political experience. A few figures distinguish themselves in my mind, chief among them Tocqueville, who offered what was certainly not the first but perhaps the firmest treatment of the subject in *Democracy in America*, where he demonstrates with extraordinary foresight how arrangements at the political level will profoundly shape at the individual level, and that philosophy, when used to build the system by which we rule, rarely remains contained within that system; rather it diffuses into our inner lives and ultimately narrows our possibilities. One therefore needs only to understand the

dominant temper of a civilization, a clue to which can be found in its political structure, in order to understand something essential about all those formed by it; this too is among the deepest Platonic insights: that we inevitably become products of our time and place.

It is therefore political education that becomes the best form of liberal education. It brings to the fore the original, central questions, in the process of whose thorough consideration we might recognize a few things: that our particular civilization but provides *one* viable set of answers; that rival arrangements of which we were once unaware do indeed exist, if not in history at least in concept; and that the political tradeoffs which become apparent when we hold each alternative up to our current standard of liberal democracy display so startling an isomorphism with our personal tradeoffs as to leave only the conclusion that the study of serious political alternatives must illuminate the serious human alternatives. Indeed, we find that, if such a study is undertaken seriously, one may discover access to a new repertoire of inner tools with which to better navigate the delicate decisions that present themselves in course of living life. I speak here from firsthand experience. It was by way of political education as liberal education, the study of the manifold conceptions of proper governance of city and soul in all their respective appeals as well as their particular defects, that I acquired a higher perspective from which I could observe the ways in which I, an unwitting prisoner to historically-contingent conditions, had possessed by default certain habits of thought and action.

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