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Two Neglected Features of Honors Advising

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Recent studies on advising show considerable agreement about the sorts of practices that constitute good advising, whether by a professional staff advisor, an official faculty advisor, or an unofficial faculty mentor. These practices include creating a welcoming atmosphere, building a trusting relationship, and helping the student find resources to envision a flourishing future and make concrete plans to achieve it (Gregory and Edwards; Bloom et al.; Cooperrider et al.). Two important features of advising, though, do not receive the focus they deserve. The first is the advisor's practice of attention, an activity that forms the basis of a trusting relationship and that does justice to the advisee. The second is helping advisees discern their vocation, or life goal, which students need in order to make rational decisions about their academic and post-academic careers. Attention and vocation, topics well established in philosophical literature (Weil; Murdoch; Adams; Frankena), are relevant to and valuable for the practice of good advising.

While attention and focus on vocation should inform all advisors' work, aiding students to identify the coursework and extracurricular activities that will help them flourish, they are especially important features of honors advising. While some honors students come to college without a clear

vision for their future, many are well-prepared for advising, appear certain about what they want to do in life, have well-formulated, multi-year plans for college, and can articulate in detail what they want to pursue after graduation. The thoughtful detail with which they present their plans offers the illusion that honors students do not need the level of guidance other students need, especially if advisors assume that their task is no more than getting students through a coherent college program that will allow them to embark on their chosen career. While honors students may not need the same sort of guidance as other students, they still need an advisor's guidance in subjecting their detailed and concrete plans to the continuing questions and scrutiny they would apply to a thesis under discussion in an honors classroom. Such querying opens the door to a richer advising experience in which students have a better understanding of their career goals and how they fit into the larger scheme of the students' life goals.

A focus on attention and vocation ensures that honors advising will share key features with the honors classroom and curriculum. For instance, a typical honors curriculum has as one of its goals the students' increased intellectual autonomy. Courses are often taught in a seminar style: students can decide what they find important in their readings and projects; study questions, if used at all, do not prejudice the students' learning; and the professor is a senior partner in the collaborative enterprise of learning. Similarly, the practice of attention in advising, with a focus on the students' vocation, enables students to arrive at greater self-knowledge and awareness, encouraging them to see for themselves how to structure their academic and post-academic careers. The pedagogies of honors advising should thus resemble those of the honors classroom.

ATTENTION

Honors programs are quick to point out that they are student-centered, often with a clear philosophy of what this means for classroom and laboratory instruction, e.g., insistence on experiential learning, small class sizes, student-led courses, instructor accessibility, and tutoring. Honors programs are less clear about student-centered honors advising even though, like any sort of academic advising, it is itself a form of instruction and should be governed by a pedagogical philosophy consistent with classroom and laboratory instruction. This failure is surprising since advising sessions, with either official advisors or unofficial mentors, are often a university's best chance to focus on the individual student. Alongside independent research and paper

consultations, advising is one of the few times a student will meet one-on-one with a mentor.

A student-centered advisor does more than simply inform a student about possible degree programs and report the courses needed to fulfill it; that much can be accomplished by a catalogue or interactive software. Student-centered honors advisors know their advisees personally; meet with them regularly; talk about their needs, values, and concerns; and discuss what makes for a flourishing life. Only with such personal understanding can advisors counsel students about how best to formulate and achieve their academic and co-curricular goals. The best way to understand what it means to be student-centered in honors advising is by appeal to the concept of “attention” as defined by such philosophers as Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Raimond Gaita. The practice of attention results in trusting relationships in which the advisor can offer students the most appropriate advice for their academic and post-academic lives.

Some recent literature on advising touches indirectly on the importance of attention but does not treat this issue explicitly. For instance, in the “Appreciative Inquiry” model of advising (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom; Cooperrider et al.), advisors should devote time to such activities as discovering, dreaming, and designing. Advisors discover who their students are by listening to their stories, watching for verbal and physical cues about a student’s passions, and offering appropriate encouragement. They help students dream by helping them conceptualize attractive but accessible career paths and ways of life that they might want to adopt. After students have settled on one or more possible courses of life and career, they have clear goals that they can work to achieve, and advisors can then help them design an appropriate course of study and co-curricular activity. In order to make these discoveries about their advisees, help them formulate achievable dreams, and work with them on a plausible plan, advisors need to cultivate their own capacity for attention; otherwise, they risk failing their advisees at each of the three stages.

Attention is not simply listening to advisees, watching for their non-verbal cues, keeping one’s mind from wandering, or paying appropriate respect, although the practice of attention results in all these outcomes. As much of the literature on advising recognizes, good advisors need an accurate understanding of their advisees’ particular learning needs, of which challenges will be inspiring and which dispiriting, of what their advisees value and care about now, and of what values they are still formulating. In Iris Murdoch’s metaphor, advisors need a “vision” of their students in order to advise them, as the current literature acknowledges (e.g. Bloom et al.; Cooperrider et al.).

Contrary to what we might expect, attention begins not with a focus on the person we are trying to pay attention to but rather with self-understanding and self-criticism (Weil; Murdoch). Genuine attention to another person begins with turning a critical eye on ourselves. Each of us exhibits, consciously or unconsciously, our own preconceptions, preferences, bigotry, pretensions, fantasies, conceit, and simple self-love, and these attitudes interfere with our accurate vision of other people. This inaccurate vision is a sort of injustice since we see others through the lens of our own egos. Murdoch offers a telling example of a mother-in-law who has just such a distorted vision (Murdoch 18–19). She finds her daughter-in-law pert, unceremonious, and juvenile. She dislikes her accent and way of dressing. She thinks her son has married beneath him. However, this mother-in-law then engages in critical self-reflection. As she begins to realize that she herself is snobbish, pretentious, and jealous, her vision of her daughter-in-law begins to change. Her daughter-in-law is now “refreshingly youthful” rather than “tiresomely juvenile.” Of course, the daughter-in-law has not changed at all. Rather, by bringing to light and correcting the pretensions and fantasies that had distorted her vision, the mother-in-law is able to achieve a more just and accurate vision of her daughter-in-law.

Critical self-reflection is crucial to forming an accurate vision of others. In Murdoch’s example, it enables the mother-in-law to see why she had originally developed the prejudices through which she envisioned her daughter-in-law and to jettison these prejudices as products of her own ego. The temptation to form selfish, unjust concepts is powerful and affects even the most reflective of us, as Robert Coles explains in recounting his first meeting with Dorothy Day. Coles had learned from his parents about the Catholic Worker Movement that Day had founded, had heard his mentors Reinhold Niebuhr and David Roberts speak approvingly of her work, and as a medical student had decided to volunteer at Day’s New York soup kitchen. Having arrived at the soup kitchen, he walked into a room where he found Day sitting at a table with a middle-aged woman who was visibly drunk and ranting. Day was intent on this woman’s conversation. Coles, a young man of privilege, kept wondering when this “conversation” would end. Just as the drunken woman seemed ready to stop, Day would ask a question and the intoxicated woman found the wherewithal to revitalize the conversation. Only after a lull in their exchange, when Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption, did she at last approach Coles to ask, “Are you waiting to talk with one of us?” (xviii). Day’s question is striking because most people would have assumed that Coles would have no interest in a ranting, middle-aged drunkard. Nearly

everyone will profess that all human beings are equally worthy of respect and neighborly love, yet Coles's striking example reveals that we do not always manage to see others as equals. Instead, we envision them through the lens of our ego: If I am an accomplished humanitarian, surely an intelligent young man of privilege must be here to see *me* and not a ranting drunk. However, by cultivating the power of attention, we eradicate these unwarranted and unjust assumptions.

In both Murdoch's and Coles's examples, we find lessons important for honors advising. We must put aside our self-importance, the thought that what we work on or care about is more important than what others work on or care about. When we approach our advisees with sufficient self-awareness to mitigate our distorting prejudices, we can see who they are and help them plan their lives. Our prejudices may take many forms. An advisor might be tempted to think of an advisee as "just another pre-med student," just another common sort of case to handle. More commonly, honors advisors who are faculty members may be tempted to re-create themselves in their advisees, to further their own intellectual agenda through their best students whether this course of study is best for the advisee or not. A different sort of advisor, Ignatius of Loyola, tried to forestall this kind of problem in writing his *Spiritual Exercises*: "The one who is giving the exercises should not move the one receiving them . . . to one state or manner of living rather than another"; rather, the advisor should remain "in the center, like the pointer on a scale," to allow unmediated exchange between God and creature (*Exercitia spiritualia*, Annotation 15, 27–29, translation mine). The same principle applies to honors advising: advisors may want to promote their own fields, to see the sort of work they do furthered by the brightest students. Nevertheless, if a student is discerning the best course of study, the advisor should remain "in the center, like the pointer on a scale" to allow the student freedom of discernment. Failure to do so is failure of attention.

When advisors exercise attention, they invite students into the sort of trusting relationship that the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has emphasized in its conceptualization of academic advising: "the relationship between advisors and students is fundamental and is characterized by mutual respect, trust, and ethical behavior." When we trust, we aim at attaining or safeguarding some good by relying on another person. That reliance makes us vulnerable; in trusting, we place ourselves to some extent in another person's power by entering into an implicit or explicit agreement and acting with the confidence that the other person will not betray us. Despite the risk of betrayal, trust is worth striving for because of personal

and communal goods that would otherwise lie outside our reach. Through trust, advisors can help students achieve the significant goals of greater self-knowledge, discernment of their vocations and career goals, and selection of optimal courses and activities.

In a trusting, attentive advising relationship, an advisor can help students understand more accurately who they are, including what they value and what they care about, and thereby discern more effectively what their careers and vocations should be. This discernment requires a joint effort of attention between advisor and students in seeking an accurate narrative of the students' lives, past and present, and of their aspirations for the future. The advisor and student thus work to uncover the right concepts with which to understand their lives and aspirations. By "accurate narrative" and "right concepts," I mean a narrative and concepts that are not distorted by the lens of unreasonable fear or fantasy. The advisor should help students look at their lives from multiple perspectives and find those that are fairest to themselves. Again, in keeping with the best honors pedagogy, the advisor should not tell students how to conceptualize their lives but should instead cultivate their capacity to do it themselves. For instance, students whose self-doubt distorts their accurate assessment of their talents, capacities, and achievements might ignore their advisors' well-intentioned counsel to apply for prestigious fellowships or admission to elite graduate or professional programs. Attentive advisors, aware of the students' fears and anxieties, do not simply insist that their advisees are well-qualified but (as in the honors classroom) enable them to come to this conclusion on their own by sharing information about successful applicants. Once students see no significant difference between successful applicants and themselves, a major obstacle to fair and accurate self-conception is eliminated and advisors can dispense advice that the students will be able to appreciate.

While guarding against the most egregious failures of attention is easy, other failures are more elusive. In the contemporary university, the injustice of unwarranted assumptions based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status is now well-known, and the ubiquity of diversity training and of diverse student populations has raised advisors' awareness and avoidance of such inattention. Nevertheless, as the Coles anecdote about Dorothy Day reminds us, failing to live up to the egalitarianism we sincerely believe in is sometimes shockingly easy. We must be on guard against defects of attention even when—perhaps especially when—we are confident of our capacity to treat students justly.

Advisors more commonly fail to show attention by injecting their prejudices about fields of study into advising. An advisor who cares little for literature might advise a student to major in communications rather than English just as one who loves history might counsel a student to study Latin rather than Spanish. In neither case does the advisor base the suggestion on the student's needs or passions. Rather, the suggestion stems from the advisor's own likes and dislikes.

Most advisors are pressed for time, especially overburdened professional advisors or faculty members who undertake advising as required service in addition to research and teaching. Under these conditions, advisors must guard against lapses in patience in which they jump to conclusions about what would be good for the student. Like honors teaching, honors advising is a time-consuming, labor-intensive activity in which the advisor must patiently explore options with the student until the student can see for herself how to proceed.

Finally, we may simply fail to be "present" to the advisee (Gaita 268ff). Our advisees deserve not just part of our attention but all of it, expressed not just in the advice we dispense but in the manner of our speech and body language. We need to convey the conviction that we are responding to their needs, anxieties, and hopes. If we are only present enough to dispense advice as a catalogue might, we fall short. We must be sufficiently present that students trust us to offer something they can seriously consider and take to heart on the basis of trust. Honors advising is particularly vulnerable to a lack of presence: because honors students are bright and self-motivated, we may assume they will be responsive to dispassionate reasons however they are delivered. Such an assumption leads to lost opportunities for building relationships of trust and attention that can help students understand themselves and discern their vocation in life.

Through their advisors' attentive presence, students become aware that their advisors understand them and will treat them with justice. The advice they receive will therefore not be generic, haphazard, or self-seeking but will be designed for their particular needs and concerns. The intentional practice of attention achieves the goal of the so-called "Disarm Stage" of Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al.), in which advisors seek to build an environment that makes students feel safe. Putting aside computer, cell phone, and other distractions, advisors prepare to be fully present to their advisees, listening carefully to their advisees, attending to their body language, asking questions, offering feedback, and demonstrating that, at that moment, nothing is more

important than the advisee's academic life and post-academic career. The safety that attention breeds includes a relationship of trust and a sense of justice, which serve as a fruitful foundation for advising.

VOCATION

The concept of vocation articulated here, although perfectly at home in secular thought, has roots in the thought of the Protestant Reformers. Opposing a medieval conception in which a vocation is always God's call to the clerical or religious life, Reformers such as Martin Luther maintained instead that God calls people to a wide variety of occupations that express virtue and serve the community. The work is therefore holy and constitutes a person's distinctive role in the world (Luther). People discern this call through prayer and reflection on the conditions in which they find themselves, including their economic situations and constraints, their talents, and their inclinations. By living out their vocations, people have a meaningful life that expresses love of God and neighbor.

Over the last hundred years, many philosophers have drawn on the Reformers' ideas to develop accounts of vocation that can be understood in either a religious or a secular context (Frankena; Rashdall). The account I advance here retains important features of the Reformation concept, holding that a vocation is an occupation expressing virtue and benefitting the community; it departs from the Reformers, however, in its contention that a vocation is constitutive of one's identity and may involve a purely metaphorical call.

By asserting that a vocation is an occupation, I am departing from the frequently held contemporary view that a vocation is a paying job. I am proposing that any long-term engagement in a field or discipline may constitute an occupation and serve as a vocation. For instance, a person's vocation might be volunteering, producing works of fine art, tending the house and garden, or political activism, whether in paid positions or not. However, any occupation that is a candidate for vocation must express virtue and benefit the community. An evil occupation like human trafficking or a useless activity like digging holes for the fun of it cannot qualify as a vocation.

When advisors engage in the common practice of asking their advisees to envision a future life that will make them feel proud, they are asking these students to ponder many of the same considerations that enter into their discernment of their vocation. Students are likely to feel proud when they are pursuing an occupation that expresses virtue and benefits the community. Encouraging students to go further and to think specifically in terms of

a vocation is even more fruitful. People's vocations largely constitute their identity, and discernment of a vocation begins with reflection on their values and on what they care about, which together determine what they find meaningful in life. This kind of reflection enables students to envision a future self that they want to grow into, a self that expresses their cares and values. This future self then serves as a goal that "calls" the student. In some cases, students will understand this metaphorical call as an invitation to a meaningful life while others will see it as an obligation. In either case, the sort of occupation the student must undertake to achieve the future self is his or her vocation. Reflection on vocation thus helps students to articulate their current concerns and values, how they see themselves living out these concerns and values in the future, and the sort of occupations they might find conducive to that future life.

This future self, if the discernment process goes well, is neither an idle daydream nor a prediction of what the future will hold. Envisioning a future self is a crucial exercise for understanding who the student is now. People are temporal, working in the present to become something in the future. The future self that one conceptualizes influences the present self (Adams). This insight helps us give sense to a paradoxical question expressed by both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: How does one become what one is? The answer lies, at least in part, by pursuing one's vocation, by growing into the future self that partly constitutes one's present identity.

This sort of discernment may not come naturally, and good advisors can help students to discern well by getting them to reflect on what they value and care about. One technique for eliciting this sort of reflection is asking students what sort of life they would find worthwhile and fulfilling if they did not have any financial constraints and did not have to appease their parents or peers. Their answers will provide the starting points of a conversation about their vocations by identifying the sorts of activities they value for their own sake and not as instrumental means to some further end. No matter what sorts of answers students offer—janitor, pastry chef, butterfly collector—the advisor now has a place to start and can explore with students what they find appealing and important about these sorts of lives. That exploration will help students identify a future life that, while providing a living wage, allows them to express and grow more fully into themselves.

Once a student has completed her initial discernment of a vocation, she will have a clearer idea of what her distinctive role in the world is, of the path that will express her identity and give her life meaning. However, the process

of discernment by its very nature is ongoing. As a student learns how to live a certain vocation, it shapes the way she sees the world and her role in it (Frankena). Her perspective on the world will be conditioned by her vocation as an engineer, a policy analyst, a historian, and as the perspective changes, she will need to continue to query the meaning of her own life and the role she plays in the larger community. For this reason, advisors should give students sufficient conceptual tools to continue their vocational discernment well after graduation. Those tools include a vocabulary rich enough to sustain periodic reflection on their evolving values and concerns and to construct a sufficiently complex narrative of their lives. Hence, advisors should encourage students to think in terms of flourishing, vocation, identity, values, concerns and passions, commitments, duties, relationships, and love.

By appeal to vocation, advisors ensure that discussion of the student's life goals is not haphazard but focuses on helping the student articulate her identity and grow further into it. However, discernment of the activity or constellation of activities that constitute a student's vocation should follow a distinctive honors pedagogy. Honors education is a collaborative effort involving both professor and student, with honors courses driven by discussion, focused on projects, or otherwise grounded in experiential learning. In honors advising, the vocational discernment process should follow the same pedagogy, with advisors allowing students sufficient scope for discernment by practicing the sort of attention I articulated earlier. As students reflect on their life goals, an advisor could speed up the process by weighting the student's preferences in one direction or another, but, mirroring the honors classroom, honors advising pedagogy dictates that the student make this discernment for herself, looking at the various relevant considerations from multiple perspectives, querying her decision-making process, and revisiting her answer in light of her investigations. Like all honors education, the process is labor-intensive but necessary if the student is to arrive at an authentic answer.

Once a student has a working idea of what her vocation is and how her career or volunteer activities will be related to it, she is able to make more informed decisions about her program of study. She selects majors, minors, and extracurricular activities on the basis of not just a future career but also a vocation. The result is a maximally rational plan of study that provides criteria for selecting the most effective means to her goals.

At the same time, advising with an eye to vocation should not rule out adventure, serendipity, or even whim in the selection of courses or extracurricular activities. If students have a conception of their vocation, they should

use that conception as one important principle of course and activity selection. However, vocation is not the entirety of one's life, and so nothing rules out advising students to sign up for a course that sounds interesting, fun, challenging, or just weird. Taking vocation seriously as a principle of rational decision-making does not mean abandoning whimsy.

CONCLUSION:

VOCATION, ATTENTION, AND HONORS PEDAGOGY

An explicit effort to incorporate both attention and vocation into honors advising promotes a trusting relationship between advisors and students so that students can develop the self-knowledge and intellectual autonomy to make rational decisions about their life goals and curricular commitments. The value of attention follows from the desiderata of honors pedagogy, in which we train students to design experiments with painstaking care in order to confirm or invalidate hypotheses. Bias must be filtered out of an experimental design to ensure the greatest objectivity. Likewise, students must read texts carefully, not jumping to conclusions about what Homer or Chaucer or Austen means but reading carefully and with sensitivity to the work's historical and cultural context. The principles of the discipline dictate how students proceed, learning to avoid preconceptions, prejudices, and unwarranted assumptions in working through the material. These standards of attention that we practice in the honors classroom should extend to our practice of advising as we help students set the trajectory for the rest of their lives.

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