Democracy and the Examined Life
Commencement Address to Graduate Students at Clark University, May 19, 2019
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President Angel, Provost Baird, faculty, parents and friends, and, above all, graduating graduate students. You have all achieved so much, and you are embarking on so many different life paths. May these be fruitful and richly productive. I am moved and humbled by this award, and by the invitation to address you.

You are graduating from the first university in the United States initially dedicated exclusively to graduate level training and research, one that has promoted rigorous thinking and high-level research, including daring innovation, since Clark’s founding in 1887. I first heard of Clark in connection with the life of Sigmund Freud: it was Clark, with its distinguished Psychology Department, that was bold and insightful enough, in 1909, to make Freud an offer to visit, paying him $750, in those days a princely honorarium, to deliver a series of five lectures -- despite the fact that American puritans had long targeted Freud on account of the sexual content of his theory. In his lectures (which, by the way, were delivered in German!), Freud advocated greater sexual freedom, and the lectures, as you might imagine, were very well received. So Clark was a special place then, as it is now; and I note that none of the famous Ivy League schools had the daring to make him an invitation. On that same visit Freud received an honorary degree from Clark, so now I, who by sheer chance share my May 6 birthday with the great Freud, now share this honor as well, and this association increases my gratitude and sense of honor, though with considerable humility.

Freud did not like America very well, and never returned. He commented in a later letter that Americans channel too much of their libido into money-making. But he had nothing but praise for Clark, and Clark’s courage and foresight are evident from this history.
In my own philosophical way I have devoted much of my career to understanding human emotions, including, recently, the disturbing roles that anger and fear are playing in our society today, so I was at first inclined to make remarks about that topic. But I feel that topic is not inclusive enough for this occasion, where you follow so many different paths of inquiry. However, there is a more general version of Freud’s quest that is fully inclusive of the many life-paths you will all follow: the importance of leading what Socrates called “the examined life.”. This quest for understanding and self-understanding links all of the disciplines represented here, and pertains to all the careers you will follow, whether in the academy or in other walks of life.

Socrates lived in a democracy that, like ours, dishonored reasoned inquiry in many ways. Researchers were charged, as he was, with insulting the gods and traditions of the city; public discourse substituted invective for argument, and public reasoning was often sloppy and disdainful of both fact and logic. Into this world Socrates brought the demand for the examined life: that is for rational inquiry into the key concepts and issues used by politics and used by people in planning their lives. Like Freud, he encountered scorn; a famous comedy of Aristophanes made fun of him. But he greeted scorn and opposition by saying that democracy needs rational inquiry and logical argument. He said he was like a gadfly on the back of the democracy, which he compared to a “noble but sluggish horse”: he was stinging it so that it would wake up and do its business more adequately.

It’s obvious that democracy needs good theoretical and empirical work of many types. We should insist on this and object to the frequent denigration of fact and of science itself in our current political climate. But as a philosopher and teacher I’ve seen a more general phenomenon: that when people analyze an issue pro and con, and marshal all the arguments, they attain a new degree of clarity about what they themselves favor. AND they also attain a new respect for opponents, since they see the opposing position not as a rival sports team to be defeated, but as a structure of
reasons, to be taken apart and criticized in a civil manner. It's also that more general benefit of Socratic reasoning that we so urgently need to foster in our society, increasingly polarized and unwilling to listen. Respectful discourse itself seems at times like a relic of another time. Try to remember and even to enjoy the fact that there may be better arguments and conclusions than your own.

You have all been trained in that rigorous critical activity, and in your different careers you are able to bring it into our society. Indeed, it's crucial that you are in so many different careers, since our society is vast and complex, and it needs Socratic examination in so many places. I can think of no task that is more honorable or more urgently important.

Congratulations. May you live happy and productive lives and enliven our world with your commitment to reason.