

# Rejoicing in God's World and Delighting in Humankind: Proverbs 8.1–11, 22–23, 30–35: Address to the Opening Convocation of the 2023–24 Academic Year at Yale Divinity School

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## Abstract

Yale Divinity School begins the academic year with an 'Opening Convocation', a service of thanksgiving and dedication which includes a short speech, drawing on a bible reading, normally given by a member of the faculty.

## Keywords

wisdom, education, inspiration, rhetoric, goodness

I would like to share three stories with you: about the best education I ever had, the most fun I ever had teaching, and the most unexpected lesson I ever learned.

The best education I ever had was in Germany, at the Köln Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, with the great violinist, Igor Ozim. Ozim was a perfectionist. He was notorious for taking elite students and making them play nothing but open strings for months, rebuilding their technique from the bottom up. Imagine being an elite athlete and going to a coach who makes you relearn how to walk—it was as radical as that. Mercifully, I escaped this treatment, but for the first few weeks I practised one dotted rhythm in a Brahms sonata for three hours a

day, until my arms moved with the precision of a Swiss watch.

Every lesson with Ozim was a masterclass. He taught in a great high studio overlooking the city, with tables around the walls and a grand piano in the middle. The class accompanist was a terrifying blonde, who could play the entire violin repertoire and swept out at the end of each day in a huge fur coat. Students would

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drop in and out of the class all day, stay for an hour, mark up music, criticize each other, and translate the jokes.

Our aim was to develop the highest technical perfection in the service of the deepest interpretation of the music, focalized through the unique personality of the performer—because a musician, like any artist, plays the person she is as well as the instrument and the music. To do that, however, Ozim was also teaching us to hold ourselves open to that mysterious inspiration which comes from beyond the music or the performer, but which sometimes strikes the performance and ignites the air between performer and audience. When that happens, we are put in touch with something we cannot reach out and capture if we try, but which can capture us.

It was extraordinarily hard work, but it was also a joyous dance of craft and creativity, muscle and brain and soul. It was also essentially the same exercise as we perform as academics, when when we hone our skills to interpret the world around us, but also hold ourselves open to revealing, sometimes, something beyond what we can reach for ourselves, but which reveals itself through us. For some reason, I think we are less good, or maybe just less brave, than musicians and other artists in expressing what we are trying to do in academic work. I wish we dared to articulate it, to aspire openly to it and teach it more.

Well: that was learning. The most fun I ever had teaching was in a very different space.

For many years, when I taught at Oxford University, my favourite teaching engagement of the year was the day I spent teaching MBA students at the Saïd Business School the elements of ancient Greek rhetoric. As in all business schools, these students were paying a lot of money for a course which they hoped would enable them to earn a lot more, so they were paying close attention. My course centred on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which is still the best book ever written in the west on how to use language to get people to do what you want. Everything he says—about choosing your words, constructing a sentence, a point, and a speech; how

to use rhythm and imagery; how to pitch and pace your voice—still works as well today as it did in the fourth century BCE. The most interesting sections, however, are where Aristotle talks about the mechanics of argument. Not coincidentally, these are also the sections which highlight the tricky ethics of persuasion.

Aristotle shows how to make a formally logical argument which, if your premises are defensible (your facts are right, and so on), will lead to a sound conclusion. But he also knows that the most persuasive arguments are rarely about facts or logic. Much more often they are about probabilities and the assumptions of the audience. For example: you might start a speech by saying a few things we all know (or think we know) about human nature and the world we live in. Then, applying those assumptions to your topic, you make a claim about what is true, or speculate about what is likely to be true, or likely to be the best thing to do.

Aristotle called this type of argument an enthymeme.<sup>1</sup> We call it probabilistic, and it is familiar because it is the stuff of much contemporary public discourse, not to mention computer algorithms, data analytics, and AI. It is attractive not least because it appeals to the accumulation of our lived experience: the mosaic of observation and impression, inference and report, which we build up over our lifetimes. We rely on this all the time, and often it works quite well. It works less well when the facts we are dealing with are novel or atypical, or when we are going to have to respond in a way that is new or unusual, because enthymemes don't encourage us to look at the specific, the actual, or the new. But we—like Aristotle—live in a fast-changing world, where it sometimes feels as if the facts, and our good or realistic options, are changing all the time. Then enthymemes become risky, and that, I think, is one of the major challenges public discourse faces today.

<sup>1</sup> *Rhet.* 1.1.3, 11, 2.20.2, 2.22.4, 15. Structurally, enthymemes tend to leave out at least one premise, which is typically something we all agree on (or the orator wants to make us think we do).

Describing the enthymeme was not Aristotle's only contribution to rhetoric. He also saw that a crucial part of persuading anyone about anything is making them believe not just your words, but yourself—and credibility can be engineered. You do it by projecting a character which will resonate with your audience (which Aristotle called *ēthos*) and appealing to their emotions (which he called *pathos*).<sup>2</sup>

To construct the character that will appeal to your audience, you find out as much as possible about them: what they need, what they want, and what they're worried about or frightened of. Then you present yourself as the person they need: wise, energetic, forward-looking, or whatever is likely to appeal to them. In that character, you play on their emotions. Perhaps you rile them up by telling them that your opponent is trying to take something away from them. Perhaps you calm them down by assuring them that whatever they want is what you want. The more precisely you can play on people's emotions, the more power you have.

Along with enthymemes, *ēthos* and *pathos* are still the most powerful tools in all kinds of discourse today. And Aristotle could see as well as we can that this poses a risk to the quality of public life and relationships, and it worried him. He tried to find a way to tie rhetoric to morality and make it not just effective, but good. He did this by drawing on an argument he makes elsewhere, that the aim and highest good of human life is *eudaimonia*, happiness or human flourishing. To flourish is to live doing what we are designed to do best, and human beings are designed to exercise reason in accordance with virtue.<sup>3</sup> When we speak in accordance with reason and virtue, therefore,

we are living well and flourishing.<sup>4</sup> In theory, somebody who speaks in public could be a self-interested, manipulative charlatan who cares only about wealth and power, but such a person would not be using reason in accordance with virtue, so they would not be flourishing (or helping others flourish), and who would want to be such a person?

The problem with this argument seems to be that, in practice, quite a lot of people are happy to be such a person.

I worried about this a good deal when I was teaching my MBA students. I could teach them the elements of rhetoric in a day, and they were listening keenly. But I could not teach them to love goodness in a day. If they did not love goodness already, wasn't I just teaching them how to exploit people?

I never solved that problem, and I don't think we have solved it in education in general, or in public life. It is one of the biggest questions we face, not least when we study theology or philosophy or teach or learn in a university: can we find ways to tie discourse and persuasion to goodness and truth more effectively than Aristotle?

My last story is about the most unexpected lesson I ever learned. It happened soon after I was ordained, over twenty years ago. At the time I was teaching at Oxford and, as I started serving in a parish, it struck me that there were some useful parallels between my university teaching, and preaching and teaching in the parish. What was more, there were parallels between my pastoral responsibilities for my students and my work with my congregation.

It seemed likely to me (note the enthymeme) that my experience of university teaching, which I had already been doing for several years, would inform my teaching in the parish, but that my pastoral training for ministry might

<sup>2</sup> *Rhet.* 2.1–11 (*pathos*), 2.12–17 (*ēthos*).

<sup>3</sup> He assumes that all reasonable people know what virtue consists in: it includes the intellectual virtue of seeking goodness, practical, social virtues such as justice, courage, temperance, and friendship, and controlling the emotions which might undermine the practice of virtues.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. *Nicomachian Ethics* 1095a15–22, 1097a15–1098a20. In the (possibly earlier) *Eudemian Ethics* he offers a somewhat different account of which *NE* seems to be a development.

inform my pastoral work with students, for which I had never had any training. What happened was exactly the opposite.

As a teacher, I would often play with ideas, spinning a line to see where it went or playing devil's advocate to make students think. It was fun, and it did make them think, and I didn't necessarily worry about whether it made for the best interpretation of the material. Getting them to think was enough, as a starting-point. But you can't stand up in a pulpit and spin a line—or if you do, you are making a fool of your own faith and your congregation's. In a pulpit you can only talk as honestly and carefully as you can about what you believe to be truth. So my congregation taught me that if something is worth teaching, it is worth teaching seriously, and it changed the way I taught.

On the other hand, when you are ordained and put on any kind of clerical uniform, your congregation instantly infers that you are much wiser and more pastorally gifted than you probably are. They often entrust you with their needs, fears, and doubts, in a way not many thirty-year-olds are well equipped to deal with. And it is so tempting to allow that to happen, and pretend you are much wiser and more spiritual than you are, but that way lies self-deception and hypocrisy, and potentially serious harm to other people. I was saved from that (I think!) by my students. They knew I had no training in pastoral care for them. They certainly didn't assume I had the gifts of the Spirit. If they came to me, it was purely on the basis of my lived experience, however limited. They wanted my honest opinion, and no more. I came to realize that, essentially, that was what I had to offer my congregation too. It was not nothing—on a good day, it was not without the Spirit—but I had better not imagine it was more than it was. My students taught me a humility in pastoral encounters which I hope I have never forgotten.

Three stories; three reflections on education. When we learn, and teach and practise what we learn, we are trying to develop our human—physical, intellectual—capabilities to the utmost. But we also have to learn to hold ourselves open to the inspiration that comes from

beyond us, and is the thing that ignites what we say and do and reveals mysteries beyond our grasp.

We all want to communicate effectively—to reach out to people, and change hearts and minds. But if we do it purely for our own benefit, without caring about goodness or truth, then what we say is liable to damage, even destroy the very fabric of relationships and societies that we depend on.

And sometimes, however accomplished we are, the most important lessons come from the most unexpected places. Which brings us to the Book of Proverbs, and the passage we have just heard.<sup>5</sup>

The fascinating thing about ancient wisdom, as a genre, is that it is so rooted in and committed to the everyday: the real world we live in. At the same time, it is so idealistic. Perhaps more than any other genre, it wants to do the fullest justice both to the material and to the metaphysical domain. Wisdom walks the walls of its city. It stands in the marketplace and looks around (e.g. 1.20–21, 8.2–3). It observes people (e.g. 7.6), and donkeys, swallows, and ants (6.6, 26.2–3, 30.25). It knows the value of a barn full of grain, a neighbour who can keep a confidence, and a tradesman who doesn't lean on his scales (3.10, 11.1, 11.12, 20.10). It celebrates love and marriage and worries about sexual misconduct and gender relations (5.1–23, 6.20–7.27, 7.7–23, 18.22, 31.10–31, 30.18–23). It celebrates community and worries when people fall out and abuse the law (e.g. 3.1–12, 6.16–19, and *passim*).

At the same time, wisdom is constantly tantalized, and it tries to infiltrate its listeners, with the sense of a God whose thoughts and ways are as far above everyday life as the heavens are above the earth (cf. Isa. 55.9); the God who precedes and exceeds everything that is; who commands existence, and to whom everything belongs and is answerable (e.g. 3.19–20, 8.22–29). The God whom we can never reach out and grasp, but whom we can encounter, and who shows us that we are wonderfully made (cf.

<sup>5</sup> Prov. 8.1–11, 22–23, 30–35.

Ps. 139.14). The God by whom we know that we are known, and feel that we are loved, and to whom we can respond with awe and love—and learning. Because wisdom celebrates not least that God, through wisdom, calls humanity to learn (2.1–12, 3.1–12, 4.5–13, 4.20–23, cf. 1.22–33), about the world and about God, and, like any teacher, God is delighted when humanity wants to learn (8.34–35).

In today's reading, Wisdom says, listen to my instruction, and find in it not only knowledge and expertise, but life itself, as the favour of the Lord falls on your learning and ignites it (8.4–21, 32–35, cf. 3.18, 4.13, 4.21–22). Wait in my doorway and watch at my doors (8.34), because wisdom may come into your life from directions you never expected. When you listen, you will hear Wisdom speak both persuasively and trustworthily (8.6–9), a truth that touches those that hear it and turns their hearts and minds towards God (8.17, 35).

This is Proverbs' way of squaring the circle with which Aristotle struggled, between persuasion and goodness. The writer sees the source of persuasion and goodness as a personal God who actively creates humanity and determines its default state as good in relation to its creator.<sup>6</sup> That brings some challenges of its own (which we won't get into here),<sup>7</sup> but it offers a powerful vision of how what we learn and the way we communicate are connected with why we learn and when learning is good.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gen. 1.4 etc.. Prov. 8.22–31 is one of the earliest elaborations of the Genesis 1 creation myth (Dina Stein, *Reading Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 119–135). 'Goodness' in God's works reflects God's own goodness and God's recognition that God's goodness is reflected in God's works (Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 18).

<sup>7</sup> In particular the origin of evil. A key difference between Jewish and Greek ethics (including Aristotle's) is that a cosmology in which everything is created by a single good God finds it hard to account for the existence of evil, while traditional Greek polytheism finds it hard to defend the priority of good. Aristotle, following Plato, tried to get around this by positing that the ultimate divine is an (impersonal) good, but struggles to explain the causal connection between this good and human virtue.

To shape this vision the writer looks back to the first creation narrative in the book of Genesis. He makes Wisdom say, the first of all God's works was me. I was there—the Word—when everything else was spoken into being.<sup>8</sup> So I can tell you that before you ever spoke a word, you were spoken. You are made of words. And if you speak in the ways—some later commentators would say, in the image—of the word which spoke everything into being, then your speech will be good, as the one who created you is good and saw that you were made good. But if your speech is self-serving, manipulative, or untruthful, then you will no longer be in touch with the source of your words, and what you say can only end badly.

Proverbs cannot prove that God made humanity to live and speak well by divine inspiration, any more than Aristotle could prove that the aim of human life is *eudaimonia*. They both rely on a combination of intuition, tradition, reason, and experience to confirm their convictions. Those who share the tradition of Proverbs find that Judaism and Christianity affirm their intuition and experience, that humanity is part of a creation that is made to be good, and when our words are good, they echo and transmit something beyond us: the dynamic goodness of our Creator. But the words of Proverbs are a challenge to those who share its writers' conviction. Are we living and speaking our conviction well and persuasively in everyday life? They are also a call that frames our life here. How can we live, study, and teach here in such a way that we increasingly echo and transmit the goodness of our Creator?

So here we are at the beginning of a new academic year: ready to learn; ready to teach; ready to enjoy our surroundings and our shared life. Wisdom celebrates all those things, and also points beyond them. She says, while you are working to learn and think and communicate the best you can, be open to the inspiration that ignites your learning beyond anything we

<sup>8</sup> Including humanity, at Gen. 1.26. At v. 30 Wisdom says 'I was beside him [as] an 'iimon.' The Hebrew word has been interpreted as 'artisan' or 'master worker' (e.g. NRSV, first attested in the LXX), 'trustworthy friend', or 'ward'.

can reach out or capture for ourselves. While you are studying wisdom in the places you have chosen, don't forget that sometimes it comes from wholly unexpected places. And remember that before you ever spoke—or heard or read a word—you were spoken, and the words that are

good and do good in this world are the words that speak in the ways of Wisdom and the Word that brought all of us into being.

Last but not least, as you pursue wisdom, be as joyful as she is, as she rejoices in the presence of God, and delights in humankind!