Knowledge, Excellence, and Mox
By Darrel Colson
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I have a confession to make. I dearly love the 1999 motion picture *Varsity Blues*. Do you know the movie? If you don't, I'll fill you in on enough details so that you'll know why I love it so. On the surface it's one of those stories about hormone-driven high-school boys coming of age against a backdrop of football, beer, strip-clubs, cheerleaders in various stages of dress and undress, and untrustworthy adults who are sometimes hypocritical, sometimes cynical and manipulative, but almost always stupid. It also paints a picture of the south, particularly Texas, that all of us native to the region will insist is not true, while wishing, deep in our hearts, that it really were less true a picture than it is. The fact is, the movie has me pegged, certainly with respect to my love for high school football.

Football is king in the little Texas town where the story is set. More specifically, *high-school* football is king. It's even more important than NASCAR. All 20,000 or so of the town's residents live for the Friday night games pitting their valiant players against the gridiron gladiators from some other small town nearby. It's the kind of town in which every adult male either played on the high-school football team or wishes he had, in which every adult female either was a cheerleader or wishes she had been. As the story develops, we realize that football is not just a sport that young men enjoy for healthy fun; it has taken on demonic dimensions.

The film constantly asks us to contrast the smallness of most of what goes on in the town with the enormity of football in the town. So little of interest happens in the

town that old fellows can sit at the edge of the practice field and relive their own high-school practices, recalling the very words that coaches said to them decades before.

Football is so big that the football coach cuts a giant swathe through the town. People hesitate to offend him in even the smallest ways, as though he were filled with nitroglycerin and might explode or something, taking the town's hopes for a district championship along with him. Also as the story moves along, we learn that there is good reason to be wary of the coach: he's a selfish man who abuses the trust of the young men in his charge.

When a player performs especially heroically on a Friday night, townspeople erect a billboard bearing an image of him, a sort of icon, in front of his house. Symbolically, this is the most effective device in the film; the camera angle makes it seem as though the image of the boy, sporting his football regalia, dwarfs not only the boy's home but also his real bodily self.

The story focuses on Mox, the backup quarterback who cheerfully sits on the bench so that the starter, a passer of epic potential, can bask in glory. Mox's father, of course, desperately wants Mox to play quarterback, not to warm the bench. Predictably, of course, the starting QB goes down to injury, and, surprisingly, the backup, Mox, proves to be every bit as good a player as the starter had been. Before too long, his house is dwarfed by an icon of himself, and his father intoxicated with pride and joy.

But, alas, Mox wants none of this. He doesn't want to play, and he doesn't want the glory. He cheerfully sat on the bench because he uses that time to read serious literature while his teammates sweat to advance the ball down the field. Mox doesn't want to fit in. He dreams of leaving, of leaving his small town, and football, and Texas,

and going off to Brown University, never to return. An especially vivid scene shows him delightedly opening his notice of admission to Brown when his father bursts into the room to talk to him about the dire threat posed by a neighboring town's high-school football team. The film shocks us with the incongruity between Mox's expansive and far-reaching dream of Brown and his father's narrow, limited dream of winning a Friday night game against some 16- and 17-year-old boys.

Although *Varsity Blues* is no classic bit of literature, I like it because I think that the rudiments of its plot are both common and quintessentially American. How many films, how many stories are about young people who resist fitting into the mold that their families or societies crafted for them? Think about the Disney phenomenon of the late 80's, *The Little Mermaid*, which tells the story of a daughter who refuses to obey her father, who puts her personal desire for the prince above her filial duty? I know that this movie was released long before most of you were born, but how many of you have seen it? When we all saw that film, most of us identified with Ariel; we cheered her on, hoping that she would ultimately be able to escape her family and her society to realize her dream of becoming something totally different from what her father hoped for her.

Americans, I suggest, like such stories as these because we resist the very notion that we must conform to some other person's plan for us, even if that person happens to be a parent. Americans often insist upon the "freedom" to live out their own lives in jobs, professions, towns, churches, and clubs of their own choosing. We don't want to be characters in a narrative that someone else wrote for us.

In the early part of the 19th Century, the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville traveled for several months in America trying to understand what makes us tick. When

he returned to France, we wrote the classic work, *Democracy in America*, a book that offers an eerily perceptive study of our character. In one section, de Tocqueville marvels over the paradoxical nature of American individualism. It is not a selfish, "passionate and exaggerated love of self," he said.[1] It is, rather, a "mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends."[2] Of course, this drawing apart with family and friends tends toward instability. Let me quote again from de Tocqueville's comments on the consequences of individualism:

> Among democratic nations new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition. . . . Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it.[3]

Obviously, de Tocqueville's aristocratic background influences the way he sees us, but he makes a point, doesn't he?

Crucial to classical ethics is this understanding that people are born to a role and a purpose. Pervading Homer's *Iliad*, for example, is the assumption that each character in the poem occupies a role, and a role that was not so much chosen as accepted. Each role bears privileges as well as correlative responsibilities. In one especially telling speech, Sarpedon, one of the most sympathetic Trojan warriors, says to a friend:

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[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, rev. by Francis Bowen, corrected by Phillips Bradley, abridged by Thomas Bender (New York: The Modern Library, 1981), p. 395
[2] de Tocqueville, p. 395.
[3] de Tocqueville, p. 396.

Glaucus,

why do they hold us both in honor, first by far
with pride of place, choice meats and brimming cups,
in Lycia where all our people look on us like gods?
Why make us lords of estates along the Xanthus' banks,
rich in vineyards and plowland rolling wheat?
So that now the duty's ours—
we are the ones to head our Lycian front,
brace and fling ourselves in the blaze of war. . . .[4]

Glaucus and his friend receive great benefits from their society—the best food and the top honors; in return, they are expected to earn these benefits by leading their army into battle. And, to take this one step further, those who do more than simply fulfill their obligation to lead and to fight, those who actually do these things well, ensuring victory and success, are virtuous. You see, to be virtuous in Greek is simply the same as to be excellent. The virtuous person performs his or her duties excellently.

It is a traditional, very conservative culture that Homer depicts. People are born into a class and a role and they accept the obligations that come with those things. They learn how to act by listening to their elders and emulating role models, the heroes of the past.

Homer's characters would feel quite at home in Mox's little Texas town. They would absorb and internalize the instructions of their parents and the expectations of their fellow townspeople, and then they would do their duty as it had been laid out for

[4] Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1991), Bk. 12, lines 359-367.

them to do. They would, for example, play football with all the enthusiasm they could muster, not the reluctance that Mox shows. And those that had the appropriate virtues would play football darn well.

Often the Greeks talked of four cardinal virtues that enrich the soul and equip it to do all things well. Last week, I assigned a little homework to the First-Year students. Do you remember what I asked you to do? I asked you to study the stained glass windows in the hallway opposite the Castle Room on the second floor of the Student Center. How many of you did your homework? OK: what are the four cardinal virtues depicted in the window on the far left? Temperance or moderation, courage or bravery, justice, and wisdom.

The Greeks felt sure that possessing courage was what made Achilles so good at what he did on the battlefield; and they felt sure that possessing wisdom was what made Nestor a good—if longwinded—source of advice; but they really didn't know how Achilles became courageous or Nestor became wise. In fact, not only did they not know how Achilles and Nestor came to be virtuous, they would have been hard-pressed to define courage or wisdom, or any of the other virtues, for that matter.

When Socrates stepped onto the stage, he decided to throw a verbal hand-grenade out into the society that gave him birth and sustenance. He started asking tough questions, such as, if you can't really define courage, how do you know what it is? And if you don't know where it comes from, how do you know you've got it? He threw so much of the conventional understanding of these things into the air that his fellow citizens finally got fed up with him and put him to death.

But, as always happens in cases like these, the questions outlasted the questioner. Socrates' hand-grenade started an explosive chain reaction, a reaction that generated a whole series of philosophical descendents who thought that they could answer his questions. Socrates' young friend Plato thought hard about these questions, and concluded that the key to the answers had to lie in knowledge, but knowledge precisely understood.

In the *Republic*, Plato outlines an educational program that will ensure that able students develop the cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom. For him, the crucial choice is the curriculum, what subjects young people should study. OK, let's go back to the stained-glass windows. What does the far right window depict? Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. These are the four subjects that together are called the quadrivium, what in the Middle Ages was considered the culmination of a good education in liberal arts.

In Plato's curriculum, the student's progression is carefully planned. First, he or she studies arithmetic, numbers as pure as they can be, number in one dimension, if that makes sense. Then, the student moves to geometry, which involves number in two dimensions, numbers arrayed on a single plane; then, the student's on to solid geometry and astronomy, which involves number in all three dimensions of space—length, width, and depth; and finally, the student takes up music, or what Plato calls harmonics, something akin to what we label "music theory." This study takes the student into an examination of number in the fourth dimension, which is time.

Why these? Why are mathematical subjects the proper topics for a student? What is characteristic of mathematics that makes it the proper culminating topic for a

student pursuing liberal education? It is this: the study of mathematics, in Plato's words, "leads the soul forcibly upward and compels it to discuss the numbers themselves, never permitting anyone to propose for discussion numbers attached to visible or tangible bodies."[5] You have to remember that for ancient folk, as for Medieval folk, the heavenly spheres were made of a completely supernatural substance, aether, so to study them was to take our minds away from the ordinariness of the physical. To study music, or harmonics, was to seek to hear the harmony of these spheres, a harmony audible not to the ears but to the mind properly trained.

Numbers being completely invisible, not possessing any physical characteristics, they lead the student's mind away from the mundane and material and toward the special and the ideal. Here is where Plato connects the study of liberal arts with the cardinal virtues of our windows, for on his view, the young person whose attention can be shifted away from the material world of dirt and flesh and football and fame and toward the invisible world of numbers and ideas, the world only seen by the mind's eye, the world that is the proper home of the immortal human soul, then that young person can discern what virtue really is and incorporate it into her life.

On Plato's view, virtues are, simply and purely, knowledge: Temperance is knowledge of the appropriate and moderating distribution of responsibilities, whether inside the individual human soul or throughout the community. Courage is knowing what *really* is to be feared and what is not: for example, is death to be feared or is doing the wrong thing to be feared? Justice is the knowledge of what is the right thing to do

[5] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), Bk. 7, 525d.

and the consequent determination to do it. Wisdom is knowing about what's best for the whole, whether the whole person or the whole society.

Shifting our gaze from the dross of the world *liberates* us—aha, see the connection to *liberal* arts?—liberates us from the distracting demands of the physical, demands that will, if we allow them, completely fill up our lives: the demand to brush our teeth, and make our beds, and eat our meals, and buy our clothes, and make our car payments, and pay our cell phone bills, and play video games, and update our Face Book pages, and on and on and on. You get the picture. Focusing our attention on the liberal arts takes us out of the "ordinariness" of our day-to-day lives, demanding that we ask questions we normally wouldn't ask, that we look at issues in a way that we wouldn't normally do. That is perhaps the hardest part about liberal education: it takes us out of our comfort level for at least a time; sometimes, it makes us uneasy for more than a short time. We might have to ask really uncomfortable questions about our assumptions, about our expectations, about our goals.

There's a little piece of Plato's *Republic* in the IS 101 reader, a section called "The Allegory of the Cave." In that piece, Plato has Socrates, his mouthpiece, insist that we live in a world of shadows. The point he is making is that the world of our experience that seems so real and substantial is at best a reflection of reality, and more likely a dim shadowy perversion of reality. Remember the difference between the giant billboards depicting football players and the football players themselves? Which are more real, which the perversion of the real?

Plato challenges us to escape the shadows, to reach for the reality that lies behind the world of mere appearance, the world of truth. I'll bet all of you guys have seen that

other film from 1999, *The Matrix*. Right? Well, on Plato's view, you guys are living in a matrix. Do you remember the choice that Morpheus gives to Neo? Plato, too, offers you the red pill, but the red pill is education.

Through real education, Plato suggests, you will develop the ability to discern what is true—what is truly to be feared, what is truly to be done, what is truly best for you and for your community.

Let's get back to Mox. What should he do? Homer would warn Mox against going off to Brown. He would ask Mox to think about his father, about his fellow townspeople and their expectations for him. Homer would remind Mox of the advantages he has received from his town and the debts he ought to repay. Plato, however, might urge Mox to see through the triviality of that town and its expectations, would probably urge Mox to break out of the shadowy cave that his little town has been and to reach for something beyond—maybe even in Providence, Rhode Island, where Brown University is. I'm ambivalent about Mox; I see the points of both Homer and Plato.

Like Mox, many of you may feel caught between choices that your family expects you to make and choices that beckon to you but that might take you away from those family expectations. Last week at the parting worship, Pastor Ramona talked to you First-Years about discovering and claiming your callings. We here at Wartburg believe that studying the liberal arts will help you strip away what's superficial and then lay bare the true callings in your lives. What are you called to do and to be? I pray that all of you will throw yourselves into your studies this year, and that all of you—not just the First-

Years—will, to borrow once again from Pastor Ramona, "look back and wonder who you were and be amazed at who you've become."

My time is up now, and I've raised more questions than I've answered; but, later in the semester, when you've had a chance to live through your first few weeks in school, we'll talk more about these things. At the inauguration, we'll return to Mox, and we'll talk about some more movies, too.