Ambition: Intellectual, Moral, Political
Explanation

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The Witherspoon Institute is an independent research center that works to enhance public understanding of the moral foundations of free and democratic societies. Located in Princeton, New Jersey, the Institute promotes the application of fundamental principles of republican government and ordered liberty to contemporary problems through a variety of research and educational ventures.

The Institute carries out its educational mission through the scholarly work of the Simon Center on Religion and the Constitution and the Center on the University and Intellectual Life. These two centers provide opportunities to high school, undergraduate, and graduate students to examine the moral foundations of political, philosophical, and social thought and to assist leading scholars in performing rigorous scholarship, often from an interdisciplinary perspective.

This past academic year, 2016-17, the Center on the University and Intellectual Life began offering its first programming for Princeton students during the academic year, primarily undergraduates but also some graduate students. These various reading groups and short seminars are non-credit and entirely voluntary. By year’s end, we had offered eleven different reading groups, although we are here suggesting one, on Ambition, as our nominee.

Description of Courses:

(1) Ambition: Intellectual, Moral, Political

Our major offering is a seminar which includes approximately 30 different students, with a core group of roughly 20. Over twelve two-three hour sessions the group examined the meaning of ambition at a time when humans have unparalleled technological power to remake society, our environment, and human nature itself. Despite our technological ambitions, our society is profoundly uncertain when it comes to meaning, morality, and human purpose, resulting in an anxious sense that we must work to alleviate human suffering, increase human capacity, and succeed as individuals, but still do not really know why. Through the readings, we’ve presented several visions of the best way to cope with this situation, including the classical understanding of the “gentleman-statesman,” the modern vision of “enlightened and useful self-interest,” the technological vision of “controlling fortune,” and the postmodern irony of the transvaluation of all values.
As part of the ambition group, students attended the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and had dinner with a distinguished Princeton alum; another group attended the Metropolitan Opera and enjoyed dinner with a past member of the Met board, and Princeton alum. In addition to the readings, we’ve had dinner with faculty discussing some aspect of ambition, including Christy Wampole (French), Margarita Mooney (PTS), Jonathan Zimmerman (Penn), Harriet Flower (Classics), and Leora Batnitsky (Religion), with ten students at each dinner. Amy and I have also hosted students at our home, including informal times of relaxation, community-building, and dinners, sometimes with over twenty students packed around the table.

We’ve launched “lock in” research days to help students write Junior Papers and Senior Theses, including developing “scholar practitioners” from the Princeton area assist students with their writing. In April, Robert Faulkner, whose book we are reading, will join students for dinner and lead one of the seminars, as well as give a lecture for the James Madison Program.

(2) The Thought of Bernard Lonergan

As Ambition drew to an end in April, students requested another reading group to meet at the same time which focused on the thought of Bernard Lonergam (1904-1984) the Jesuit philosopher-theologian who examined the operations of the human intellect and the function of grace in perfecting and elevating those operations.

(3) Open-Mindedness and Intellectual Diversity

In the Fall of 2016, a group of students from Princeton Theological Seminary and several Witherspoon staff members met bi-weekly in Whelan Hall to discuss texts relevant to the subjects of open-mindedness and intellectual diversity. More specifically, the group reflected on whether, and under what definition(s), the intellectual habit of open-mindedness is a virtue in the classical sense, and whether intellectual diversity is of value and, if so, why. Texts included those by Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Stuart Mill.

(4) Tolerance Among the Virtues

Beginning in March 2017, the Witherspoon Institute sponsored a reading group on Professor John Bowlin’s newly published book Tolerance Among the Virtues, led by Professor Bowlin himself. The group meets weekly for four weeks and will be composed of—in addition to the core group that comprised the Fall reading group described above—additional Masters and PhD students from Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University. Sixteen graduate students are registered.

(5) Flannery O’Connor

In response to student requests, a group exploring the short stories of Flannery O’Connor is offered in the Spring of 2017. This is part of a project to expand our offerings into literature, music, and the arts beyond our core strengths in philosophy and political theory. We’ll also plan to watch the documentary on O’Connor.
(6) Alasdair MacIntyre

Again in response to student requests, a short seminar for Spring 2017 on MacIntyre’s newest book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. This group has brought in several new students not previously associated with our programming, several of whom are attending other events as well.

(7) Wendell Berry

A group of students met during the Fall and early Spring semester to read and debate a collection of Berry’s essays on the economy, body-self dualism, religion, and the meaning and nature of work.

(8) Virtuous Leadership

Responding to a request by a local teacher, this seminar is offered to Princeton area teachers, ministers, and professionals. We are working through *Virtuous Leadership* by Alexander Havard, likely followed by Rod Dreher’s *Benedict Option*.

(9) Incommensurability and the Final End

This seminar meets roughly biweekly during the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 semesters with ten students. It aims to probe a few questions about the pursuit of the good. Specifically, do humans have a single final end, a *summum bonum*, and if so, what is it? How is it related, or how would it have to be related, to the contingent but real goods enjoyed during the course of ordinary life? Does it make sense to say that some kinds or instances of goods are better than others? If not, how can moral decisions be made? To approach these questions, the seminar considers central texts on the good and the final end by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas before moving on to some recent debates which those texts have occasioned. The seminar’s goal is for participants to achieve a comprehension of these debates’ complexity and of the prospects of answering, accepting, or qualifying the extant arguments. The seminar also functions as an introduction to recent debates among natural law theorists.

(10) Aquinas and Philosophy of Language

This reading group meets weekly during the Spring 2017 semester. The focal text is John P. O’Callaghan’s 2003 book, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence*, which brings the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas into conversation with recent philosophy of language. To that end, the group also reads and discusses some recent literature from which O’Callaghan draws and to which O’Callaghan responds, such as that of Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jerry Fodor, Hilary Putnam, and John Searle.

(11) The Common Good

This reading group meets weekly during the Spring 2017 semester. The group’s primary aim is to understand the distinction between common and non-common goods and the character of the political common goods. Its point of departure is the Charles De Koninck’s famous 1943 essay
“The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists” and responses by Yves R. Simon and I. Thomas Eschmann, O.P. Time permitting, the group will also consider the bearing of this historical debate on recent discussion of the political common good and the relationship between politics and ethics generally.

**Rationale:**

While it may once have been true that students arrived merely with an inadequate formation, it is now the case that many arrive with something of an anti-formation. We are not beginning at “zero” with students; many arrive already moving in the direction of anti-culture, and the university continues to push them strongly in that direction—we need to work hard, in other words, just to get them “back” to zero. Consequently, while students continue to need access to better ideas, arguments, and books than they have previously received, their formation also needs to include more fundamental and foundational aspects of culture. In addition to ideas, our programs model what free and fair inquiry looks like while offering a collegial network of life shared together. As such, all of our programs share four background notions:

1. Ideas have consequences, and bad ideas have very bad consequences, but good ideas on their own are not fully adequate to form students well, given the cultural malformation. Giving students good books and arguments is a start, but not enough in itself.

2. Good ideas plus modelling the mode of free and fair inquiry plus the formation of a friendly community is better. This is what our various reading groups and seminars do well. This is better, but not yet enough.

3. The formation of hearts and mind, in addition to ideas, models of inquiry, and community, also requires embodied practices and habits. In *The Idea of the University*, Newman argues that the university forms knowledge while the college forms the values and morals of the young through its rhythms of prayer, meals, conversation, and life-together. Our various programs, particularly the internal programs, help the university attain its promise, but we also need to do the college-type work of life-together. When possible and appropriate, our programs can also involve students in family life, meals, culture, friendships, travel, mentorship, internships, encouragement to fulfill religious duties, and so on.

4. The formation of minds and hearts, while good for the individual student and their immediate circle of friends, is insufficient to attain the long-game of cultural change if these students are not involved in networks involving multiple sectors.

Consequently, our programs take seriously the notion that what is taught, the content, however important, is able to expand and transform students best when we attend to how it is taught, particularly when students are formed in a reductive, materialistic, anti-culture. Thus, we do (1) read and study better books and ideas, but do so through (2) Socratic seminar committed to
wonder, aporia, and the further question, (3) within a community of friendship that attempts to (4) include and incorporate a wide diversity of viewpoints, disciplines, and commitments.

Application to Ambition Seminar:

The seminar is for high achieving students of Princeton University, most of whom have been trained, just as Deresiewicz notes in Excellent Sheep, to view success in the reductive terms of accomplishment and external reward, mostly accomplished through very high facility in analysis, research, and other forms of thought highly valued by the contemporary research university, however limited and restricted. At the same time, while steered into a highly individualized and reductive account of ambition and success, students tend to simultaneously be trained to value social justice, equality, and poverty reduction, while holding quasi-eschatological hopes for technology and technocratic ability despite the fact that the moral ontology grounding those beliefs is often relativistic or merely utilitarian. That is, the moral demands for justice and a “better world” is hardly supported by a flattened ontology of fields of force, rational self-interest, and socio-biology as complete explanations of the world and the human. There’s a disjunct between the hopes and the ontology, which is why many students tend to be ironical about the entire enterprise.

Rather than simply refuting these claims polemically, we show a better way. First, by reading texts from the classical and theological traditions which suggest that such ambitions are too small rather than too large, that magnanimity calls for something more. Second, in Socratic conversation, pursuing assumptions to contradiction and dead-end, that is, like Socrates, not teaching so much as allowing students to recognize the tensions and inner-contradictions in their own positions. Such aporia, in our judgment, is one of the primary ways to expand reason, for as Socrates knew, aporia can lead to wonder. Our own universities privilege and reinforce a picture of reason which is critical, skeptical, analytical, that has a stance of “guilty until innocent” with respect to the world, trying very hard to not make a mistake and believe in error. The stance of wonder is generous, expansive, and open-handed; it delights, it assumes the super-abundance of intelligibility, and rather than seeking to avoid error (although that too) it seeks first to believe and know. Consequently, like the early Socratic dialogues, most of our sessions end with a buzzing confusion, a sense that we now do not know, that there is more to be asked—a stance which I call “the further question.” Our programs, thus, do not judge their success or failure on whether students reach this or that preferred conclusion but whether students have further questions, committed as we are that the intellect is made for truth and tends toward the truth if motivated and moved by honest inquiry. Third, we try to provide an education in norms, that is, in community, place, family, tradition, friendship, and so on. Our seminars always involve a meal, sometimes in private homes; we try to bring those who have already graduated, including those much older than students, into the conversation; young children are around, and parents, and spouses, and community members. (There’s some talk of dancing.) That is, we’re trying to enlarge the space and form of the contemporary university so that it resembles and invokes something more like a college, or even a neighborhood, a real place with thick and actual relations and commitments, for in these norms students learn more of the meaning of their true and genuine ambitions than in the theories alone. Finally, we’re acting on the assumption that
these networks will last, that students become friends, and that friends will study together for many years, far beyond the limits of graduation.

In all of this, we’re attempting to expand reason to reach the full “shape” of human(e) knowing rather than the cribbed and confined “space” of critical thinking and analysis alone, all in the attempt, in the ambition course, to have students lift their spirits and minds to a broader, bolder vision of their purpose and telos.