

Philosophical Assumptions of the ACI Honor Code

Presented by Dr. Kerry Hunter to the first year class at McCall, September, 2006

Hi, I'm Kerry Hunter. I'm a member of the department of political economy, and I teach political philosophy here at Albertson College. I have been asked to talk to you today about the Honor Code, and I want to do so by starting with Plato's allegory of the cave. Though Albertson was not around during Plato's day, I still think he had something to say about honor codes that is at least as pertinent today as it was several thousand years ago when he first said it. And I want to share that with you today as a sort of *warning* and as a *challenge* as you begin your college experience at ACI.

Plato believed that the great teachers of his day really knew very little about real truth, and because of this, the society he lived in was like a group of individuals who had spent their lives living a very peculiar way in a cave. Here is how he described it:

--Behold! human beings living in an underground cave, . . . here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

And [you will see] men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall. Some of them are talking, others silent. . . .

[The people in the cave] see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave.

And of the objects which are being carried, in like manner they would only see the shadows. . . .

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them? . . .

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow? . . .

To them, . . . the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Plato goes on to suggest that the teachers in the cave are those who have developed grand theories to explain the shadows, but in reality, they too remain in the dark and do not really understand truth, but only the shadows of truth. He further suggests that the people dwelling in the cave would not even know each other as all they can see are the shadows on the wall. And he suggests that this is how the bulk of us are really living, not knowing truth about anything or anyone in the world. Finally he suggests that if someone were to come, unhook our chains and begin turning our heads toward the light, it would be a most painful experience, one we would probably fight against. However, some would find it appealing and would slowly accustom their eyes to looking at the fire and then eventually climb out of the cave and enter into the real world and comprehend real light and real objects. People who had done so, however, would not be greatly appreciated back in the cave. Their understanding would seem like nonsense to those who have developed an expertise for understanding shadows on a cave wall. Yet, Plato argued, the true teacher would have the responsibility of unshackling those in the cave and turning them toward the light.

This is just an analogy but if it is true that you are in this sort of situation, if it is true that for 13 years of education your teachers have been simply helping you to gain an expertise in explaining the shadows of truth as opposed to the real truth, how would you go about determining who to trust to turn you toward the light? How would you go about determining who to trust to help you start climbing out of the cave?

Socrates, Plato's teacher, seemed to imply that there is really only one person you can trust to help you do this, and that person is no one other than yourself. To some extent Socrates implied that each of us has truth within us, and that truth can only be discovered if we refuse to accept the standard truths we are given by others and start asking questions. Perhaps this is the great irony of the cave allegory. It implies that only you can safely force yourself to start climbing out of the cave by asking yourself hard questions and honestly answering the question: does this feel right? Does what I am hearing feel right, or does this feel like just another crock? In short, though Socrates believed that good teachers can help by playing the role of midwife, that is, good teachers can ask the right questions to help you give birth to real truth, when it comes down to it, discovering truth is something that we each have to bear individual responsibility for. And in the end, only you can decide if you really are satisfied with an expertise in shadows.

Last fall, as the school year was coming to a close, the student body voted in favor of implementing an honor code. The faculty and staff also voted in favor and the Board voted that way as well. Now Plato would tell you that it is silly to ask cave dwellers to make such decisions for themselves, but Plato's warnings aside, we are now faced with the challenge of implementing an honor code here at ACI. And as we begin doing this, I want to suggest that all of us are for the most part living like those people in Plato's cave. We have been instructed in the proper ways of thinking by people who are at

best, experts on the shadows of truths in their respective fields, that is, experts on the images of real truth, but not truth itself. We have been given rules to follow by these experts. And they have enforced these rules. We have also been led to believe that without expert enforcers, the world would be a bad place to live. We have been told to rely on the rules and the expert enforcers. And to some extent, we have been taught that if we are clever enough to avoid being caught violating a rule, then it is ok.

But to live according to an honor code is going to require something quite different. To really live by an honor code, we will all have to gain an understanding of more than just shadows and the opinions of experts. To live by an honor code will require that the rules we live by are based on reality, a reality we have each individually gained an understanding of, through our own personal struggle. In short, to live by an honor code will require that we each begin taking off those shackles and trusting our ability to turn toward the light and discovering truth for ourselves as we help each other.

As we begin doing this, I want to encourage you to accept a tremendous responsibility and to trust your instincts. Assume that until proven otherwise, everything you have learned up to this point has been only about the shadows of truths. Moreover, I encourage you to assume that every professor you are going to have at Albertson College is no different. Assume that the reason they have their PhDs is because they have proven that they are very good at participating in the cave dialogue, they are in fact the very best at this. So to the extent that you want to understand the current dialogue our society is engaged in be it in biology, chemistry, math, politics, psychology, philosophy, etc., you should definitely listen to what your professors have to say and read what they want you to read. And you should take their critique of your work seriously. They know the standards by which our society will judge your work.

However, if you are not satisfied with just the wisdom of our cave society, make your professors show you they are interested in more than just cave knowledge themselves before you accept their wisdom as anything else. I mean, look around you at the professors that are here. Do we look like we have any great wisdom? Do I look like some wise guy? I have three children. They all call me geeze. When they are feeling really respectful they might call me Dr. Geeze. They could tell you that having a PhD has not made me some great philosopher who has seen the light. And I'm guessing so could the kids of any of the faculty at ACI. PhDs don't necessarily result in wisdom of real truth.

But as I suggested, the fact that we have PhDs does suggest something. It suggests that at least we understand the shadows of the truths in the topics we teach. That is something. And as members of the ACI community, we at least understand the image of the ideal we call honesty and the concept we call integrity. We understand some concept of the ideal community and we might greatly understand the image of the value of working together as a community. In other words, we have some understanding of these concepts, even though I'm guessing it might still be very rudimentary, even though some of us have been here for 19 years and longer.

What this means is that if we are going to successfully implement an honor code at ACI, the most important thing we have got to learn is to trust each other, and to trust ourselves. We have to learn to have faith in each other as we work toward gaining a true knowledge of honesty and integrity. And individually, we each need to learn to have faith in ourselves. Not the self you have probably constructed in order to attract the neat looking person that has suddenly caught your eye. That self is also just an image and can be quite unreasonable and over the next four years you are going to see it do some awfully stupid things if you are not careful. But you do need to learn to trust the self that is deep inside you, that self that often finds itself feeling some doubts. That self inside you that understands integrity and that understands honesty. Perhaps it's the same self that headed off to kindergarten 13 years ago, the self that was excited about school and learning new things, the self that had a real sense of justice, long before it was misled into accepting some lesser concept. That self may have been squashed into a pretty tiny corner after 13 years of learning to conform at school. So be careful. Don't assume that that self is necessarily correct now as it too can be quite confused and even dangerously reactionary after 13 years of being screwed up in public schools and 18 years of being screwed up by parents who are also limited by the fact that they too dwell in caves. But you do need to learn to trust that if it is having doubts, something is probably not right. So listen for those feelings of doubt and keep asking questions.

As we each learn to have faith in ourselves we also must begin to have faith in each other. We must begin to seriously believe that we have what it takes to solve our problems. Let's look at the actual text passed by the Board of Trustees. Here is what it says:

Albertson College of Idaho is a community of integrity; therefore, we, the students, seek to promulgate a community in which integrity is valued, expected, and practiced. We are honor bound to refrain from cheating, stealing, or lying about College-related business. We are obligated to examine our own actions in light of their effect on the community, and we are responsible to address any violations of these community standards.

What does it mean to be responsible to address any violations of these community standards? Does this mean it is our job to report any violation to the professor or dean or some other judicial body? It might, but not necessarily. Note that it states that "*we are obligated to examine our own actions in light of their effect on the community.*" For me, this means I must examine my action in light of their effect on the community even as I am attempting to address any violations. There may be times when it will be best for the community for me to inform others about violations I discover. But for me, pledging to uphold the Honor Code means that I will accept personal responsibility to address any violation I see in a way that will help the community best.

I suggest that most often this will probably mean engaging in direct and meaningful dialogue with the individual violating the code as opposed to turning him or her in to some authority or expert. One of the worst things about cave dwelling and relying on experts alone is that it tends to dehumanize and separate all of us. When we look to an

expert to enforce rules for us, we shuck our personal responsibility and in doing so shed our very humanity.

A year ago a student came to me with a quandary. He had a friend who had agreed to write a paper for someone else for a certain sum of money. He felt it was wrong and wanted to talk about what he should do about it. Thankfully he did not want to tell me who the individuals were. He just wanted to discuss his responsibility in this situation. We had a great discussion and he eventually left my office resolved to carry out what he had determined was his responsibility. He determined that though he valued his friendship, true friendship needs to be based on openness and honesty and therefore the person in question needed to know just how he felt about the whole thing and then they would go from there. I don't know how it turned out, but I was personally grateful that the student who came to me was struggling with this issue and that he didn't just automatically turn the friend in. He seemed to understand that the larger issue of developing a community of integrity is more important than stopping a particular violation.

Let me give you an example of how the honor code can inform our behavior outside of the classroom. Last year a group of students were traveling back to Caldwell on a bus after having spent the evening dancing in Boise. Some had had a fair amount to drink, and one male student began loudly demanding that the bus driver stop the bus to let a few of them relieve their full bladders. Apparently the driver determined they were close enough to home that they could wait and refused to stop the bus, only to have the student start berating and denigrating her as just a stupid blue collar woman who had no right to exercise such power over them. Didn't she know that it was their tuition money that was paying her wage? At this point, another student took it upon himself to intervene and though initially things got a bit ugly, he eventually was able to suggest that a community of integrity demanded that students treat everyone including bus drivers with respect and decency. In the end, the whole bus load of students including the offender apologized to the driver for the offensive behavior and it turned into a beautiful community building event for all.

Indeed there are those who believe that we humans need governments to keep us in line because it is too inconvenient to govern ourselves. These people are often known as Democrats. They are also known as Republicans and in the name of freedom keep passing more and more law and hiring more and more experts to enforce these laws. These people buy into the idea that good fences make good neighbors. And though it is the case that where there is no integrity there might be some truth to this notion, the ideal of the honor code moves us radically in a different direction altogether. The ideal of the honor code suggests that it is silly to give up responsibility for governing yourself. That it is silly to view only each other's shadow and to build fences to keep us apart. As we really begin living an honor code, I have a hunch it will push us to form a community based on personal interactions that do not rely on impersonal and dehumanizing legal processes. Yes, there may be a rare time when we will have to rely on the dean or judicial board for added help. But if the honor code is going to really work, it will

require that each of us become committed to share full responsibility for governing ourselves.

So as we start this year, remember that this honor code thing is brand new for all of us. We are still in the process of trying to figure it out. All of us that have been at the college prior to now have already developed habits of operating without it. Some of these habits will be hard to break. Guess who is in the best position to help us? You. You guys are fresh. You have never been to Albertson College before. You will be able to see some silly things that we have grown accustomed to. So we need you as much as anyone to help us as we begin adopting this honor code and I encourage you to not let your first year status silence you as we struggle with this concept.

In short, as Socrates would suggest, all of us need to become midwives, to struggle with each other as we learn the valuable truths of being a part of a community of integrity. That phrase, “community of integrity” is a key phrase. You will discover that Albertson College is a community. This is not a place where lone individuals run around competitively seeking information to better themselves at the expense of others. If you wanted that sort of environment, you needed to go to some fancy east coast school. We are a community, with obligations and sentiments towards each other. This is something many of you will come to greatly cherish about ACI, and though you might initially feel a bit homesick for your old life, (I’m guessing in fact that some of you are already beginning to feel that) trust me, by the end of Christmas break, you will all be very anxious to get back home to the good ole ACI.

Finally, let me tell you that I am really grateful that you have joined us. I love Albertson College. It is a tremendous place to live and work. I welcome you to our community and look forward to see how it changes because you have joined us.