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Disciplinary Responses to Theology Brief Preview

NEIGHBOR-LOVE IN CAREER ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

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In my years as a professor of philosophy, I often had students come to my office with questions about the course they were taking from me. They didn't understand something I said in my last lecture, they expressed disappointment over the grade I had given them on their essay and asked for advice about how to do better in the future, etc. But rather often, those who were juniors or seniors, and whom I had come to know quite well, asked for advice about the future career they should aim at. They mentioned the options they were considering. Could I give them advice as to which to choose? Or should they perhaps aim for something quite different from any of those?

I don't recall ever consciously thinking of my advice in terms of an exercise of neighbor-love. But in retrospect, that's what it was. Knowing the student as I did, what career did I think would most likely promote his or her well-being?

Early in my career my advice, I'm sure, amounted to a mishmash. But eventually I learned, from various encounters, to condense my advice into three salient questions.

First, do you think you will be good at the option(s) you are considering? I well remember the student who was doing mediocre work in philosophy but told me that she was determined to pursue a career in philosophy. As gently as I could, I told her that there are other worthwhile professions than professor of philosophy. "Not for me, there aren't," she emphatically replied. I asked her to expand on her answer. What came out was her conflicted relationship to her father. We talked at length about this, on that day and subsequent days. Eventually she decided that philosophy was, indeed, not for her.

Second, do you anticipate you will love doing what you are considering? Students would tell me that they loved philosophy, loved English literature, whatever, but were nonetheless seriously considering going into law, medicine, or business. What did I think? They looked unhappy. I asked them why they were considering going into law, medicine, or business when it was philosophy or English literature that they loved. Their answer was always the same: their parents were forcing this on them. That's where the money is. So together we probed their relationship to their parents. Yes, their parents might be unhappy for a time if they did not go into a career that yielded them lots of money. But was pleasing their parents worth being unhappy for a lifetime?

Third, is it worthwhile doing what you are proposing doing? On occasion, students would tell me that they were considering doing something that they would clearly be good at, and that they would love, but that seemed, to me, at least, to serve no worthwhile purpose. So I invited them to consider whether this career would contribute to the well-being of their fellow human beings.

Neighbor-love for my students: look for work that you are good at, that you love, and that is worthwhile.

Not all students took my advice. Some felt driven to a career in which they would be doing what they weren't very good at; some felt driven to a career in which they would be doing what they disliked; some plunged ahead into a career that served no social good. Others tried but were unsuccessful in finding a career that satisfied my three criteria. But it has given me great satisfaction, over the years, to learn from many former students that they found work that they were good at, that they loved, and that was worthwhile.

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