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Convocation Address  
Spring 2013

This ceremony has been wonderful, as convocation always is. It has been a celebration of all of you and your individual achievements; of the McMaster family in which, as of today, you have succeeded to a different kind of membership; and of our society, which accords to universities a privileged status and generous support—in return for which we provide not only brilliant and energetic leaders for tomorrow, but also the new ideas and discoveries that will shape our future. Convocation is a communal event because it celebrates our community, its values and its aspirations.

This is a time to contemplate where you fit in—not only within the McMaster community, although our alumni representative has certainly given you some good ideas about that—but more broadly in our society and in our world. Three years ago, at *my* first McMaster convocation, I tried to describe where I saw myself fitting in and spoke about the idea of “education as integrity,” about my belief that “education is diminished in value and effect when it falls out of touch with the full gestalt of human concerns.” In keeping with that belief, the question I would ask you to consider today is this: where will your university education eventually find its value, and where would you hope to see its greatest effect? How will your life as the proud holder of a McMaster degree intersect with and address the large questions facing our species and our planet?

Ronald Dworkin, the eminent legal philosopher from whom I quoted on this platform three years ago, identifies the issue in this way: “Living must be more than finding oneself pulled by unexamined habit through worn grooves of expectation and reward.”<sup>1</sup> “No respectable or even intelligible theory of value,” he writes, “supposes that making and spending money has any value or importance in itself and almost everything people buy with that money lacks any importance as well.”<sup>2</sup> Dworkin prompts us to be always mindful of the *value* of what we do, and to understand value in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Value is something that resides in relationship—in between people, between people and things, between people and ideas—and it is to be measured, if at all, in effect.

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<sup>1</sup> *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 420.

<sup>2</sup> 422.

Dworkin expresses this notion very beautifully, if rather bleakly, this way: “the only value we can find in living in the foothills of death, as we do, is adverbial value.”<sup>3</sup> *How we live* is a question of value; *that we live and die* is merely a matter of fact.

Ronald Dworkin died at the age of 81 in February of this year. In his last major work, published in 2011, he sought to provide an overview of his thinking, one which brought together “my work in law and my work in political philosophy and moral philosophy and the theory of interpretation and the kitchen sink.”<sup>4</sup> *Justice for Hedgehogs* is what he chose to call that book.

The title, as Dworkin tells us, is actually derived from a line by the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, popularized in the Twentieth Century by Isaiah Berlin. The line goes as follows: “The Fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”<sup>5</sup> Thus are contrasted two ways of viewing the world: the first regards phenomena as serial, separate and individual, while the second sees them as not merely connected but integrated, not a series but a singularity. For Dworkin, “Value is one big thing.”

I won’t try to unpack this assertion in all its complexity, except to refer you back to my observation that value is something which resides in relationships, that has no existence outside of relationships. At one level this simply means that the realm of ethics and morals is community, the network of relationships through which we have an opportunity to do more than merely live. It also means that moral and ethical values are of necessity interconnected and interdependent.

A life does not realize its potential value through compartmentalization. To be ruthless and uncompromising in the office yet loving and solicitous in the family: what kind of a life is this, and what can we say about its value? If value resides in the adverbs which describe our actions and the adjectives which describe us, how does the equation that links “ruthless” and “loving” work out? Does it resolve as zero? Only the hedgehog knows.

The point about the hedgehog’s view that is worth remembering is this: the value of a life is the sum of its qualitative interactions with the world: immediate and remote, direct and indirect, private and public, professional and recreational. Integrity, as we commonly understand the word, resides in the consistency with which we apply ourselves in all of these realms; we have integrity when we act not according to values that change with circumstance, but as if our value as persons is “one big thing.”

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<sup>3</sup> 13.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *New York Times* Obituary by Adam Liptak, February 14, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> 1.

Notwithstanding Dworkin's very critical comments about the value of money and of what can be bought with it, the world of finance does provide an analogy useful for thinking about the project of being a worthwhile human being. In the same way that your accountant won't allow you in the final analysis to separate your assets from your liabilities—won't let you ignore the latter and concentrate on the former, just because to do so makes you feel wealthier—the hedgehog insists that in accounting for the value of your being on earth, everything is counted in. This is how Dworkin expresses the bottom line: “if we want to live well, [the focus must be on what] we must do for, and not do to, other people.”<sup>6</sup>

In anticipation for today's convocation ceremony many of you I am certain will have invested in some new clothes: a new shirt, tie, dress or shoes perhaps. I'm not a shopping theorist or expert—merely, like most people, an occasionally enthusiastic amateur—but I know that into your deliberations at the rack will sooner or later have come thoughts about the value of the garment you were thinking of buying. A primary consideration for most people would be the asking price which, as you move from considerations of affordability and then to use, turns into an assessment of the garment's *value*. Typically, the context within which we find and attribute value to a shirt or a dress is very narrow: it may earn you cachet in your fashionable circle, it may “say” something about you that you want said, or it may simply delight your eye. *Pulchrum est id quod visum placet*, as St. Thomas says: beauty is that which, being seen, pleases.

Value is neither essential nor tautological, however. Things have different value for different people in different circumstances, and in the kind of commercial moment I have just been describing the hapless garment becomes simply a nexus for various intersecting value propositions: yours, the store's, the manufacturer's, the advertiser's. It is in the interest of all of those people, especially the retailer, to keep the context within which you assess the value of their commodity simple and narrow, to compartmentalize the buyer with the product so that only value of the most personal kind can be attributed or discovered. Going back to Archilochus's contrast between the hedgehog and the fox, I would say that commerce functions by making foxes of us all: it encourages us to encounter the world serially and without reference to the “one big thing.”

After the April 24th collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh, killing more than 1100 workers, can shopping for clothes ever again be the kind of fox-like, somewhat self-involved activity I have been describing? No doubt for some people it can and will. There will be those, I suppose, whose capacity for compartmentalization is so advanced that exploitation and human suffering expended in the production of a garment does not factor in their assessment of its value to them.

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<sup>6</sup> 1.

I thought of this recently in the men's section of the Hudson's Bay Company where for the first time I noticed—because recent events had prompted me to look—that by far the majority of shirts available were made in Bangladesh, where as we all recently learned, a worker's life is sometimes cheap to her employer, and where the minimum monthly salary for a garment worker is 3,000 takas (\$38), or approximately half of what my Canadian retailer is asking me to pay for one of the thousands of shirts shipped from that factory.

My purpose today is not to debate the merits and demerits of commerce, or to venture into the realm of business ethics—where I know as a professor of literature I would be foolish to tread. Instead, I have seized upon the Bangladesh garment workers' tragedy—and our daily involvement with it through the clothes we buy and wear—as an illustration of why it is impossible to live a good life without taking the hedgehog's view, without understanding that value—as we ascribe it to our lives, to others and to objects—is “one big thing.” Or rather, we must at all times *behave* as if it is “one big thing.” The inhumane treatment of workers in Bangladesh must be reckoned by me as I assess the value of a garment I am being invited to purchase: if I do not do that, my own value as a human being is diminished.

“Only connect!”: That is, if I might borrow from a character in E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End*, the whole of my “sermon.” “Live in fragments no longer,” Forster's character Margaret Schlegel asserts, and the isolation upon which excess and injustice depends will give way to unity and community. In Dworkin's analogy, it is the hedgehog who sees the world in its interconnectedness, and who understands his own value in being of the whole, and acting for the good of the whole.

This convocation ceremony provides an opportunity to ask you to take your McMaster degrees and go out into the world in the same spirit—if not confident in your ability to transform the world, at least determined to live in it with integrity and dignity.

Farewell, hedgehogs.