

**At Last: My Last Lecture (Sort of)**  
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All right, first off I need to disappoint some people who despise reading the fine print on things or just plain love to speed-read only large fonts: this is not only *not* my *last* lecture, I'm not even retiring anytime soon. So sorry to those of you poised to shout "Good riddance to bad rubbish!" at the end of this soliloquy. You're going to have to be patient a while longer.

Astute audience members will note that I am reading this lecture; students familiar with my classes will further note that I typically read only other philosophers' stuff and hardly ever anything of my own. That's because, as many of you well know, I almost never take lecture notes to class—I cram an outline of what I want to say in my head and just extemporize off the cuff. And that's why so many of you so often see me laughing intermittently—I often can't believe what I've just said myself! So reading a lecture is something of unfamiliar territory for me. I'm not the best oral interpreter—so please bear with me in all my stops and restarts. But I will make one comforting compromise that reflects my true lecture style: I'll *walk* and talk, which only adds one more additional challenge to my oratorical coordination—reading while doing so.

One other thing. There are many, many people in this audience whom I love dearly as friends and colleagues. Were this my real, final last lecture, I'd be sure to verbally snatch each one of you by name out of the audience, hold you up as a treasure for all to see, and place you gently back in your seat. I actually started to do that in a previous draft of this lecture only to find that the first page consisted of nothing but a roll-call. So I dropped that idea. Trust me though—if there is anything truly redemptive about my life, it is to be found in knowing so very many of you!

My deepest thanks to Phi Theta Kappa for this generous invitation to present what I might say were this truly my last lecture. It is a great honor to be among the first faculty asked to speak in this forum, and it is my special treat to follow Dr. Kerry Trask on this soapbox. I'm still trying to get the stitches out that he put me into last year, and I'm going to try my best to at least partly repay the favor.

What would I say at the occasion of my real-life last lecture? I haven't the slightest idea, really. It probably is more a function of how that occasion would actually play out. If for example during my lecture on the deficiencies of Schopenhauer's concept of freedom, where I lay down on the floor and show how under his concept "Lazy AI" and "Cadaver AI" are paradoxically equally free, but instead of just pretending to have a heart attack to act in the role of the latter I really do have one, then—I guess that's my last lecture. I can only imagine the scene afterwards—students laughing at "Cadaver AI" as they always do and waiting for him to revive to become "Lecturing AI" once again. After a few minutes, some astute student would no doubt realize what was going on and blurt out "Hey! No quiz today!!"

Most likely though it'll be more whimper, less bang. It'll be Spring semester of 2020 or so, and in Logic on a Friday afternoon close to 2 pm. I'll be laser-writing a first-order predicate calculus proposition on the wall lightboard “ ‘for all x, y, and z, if Gx then if Fy then Wxy and it is false that if Fz then Wxz and z does not equal y, and G=girl, F=fun, W=wanting’ ” and my students will remove their earbuds attached to their 5<sup>th</sup> generation i-Learn devices that directly read written symbols into audio equivalents and say “What the hell does that mean—‘Girls just want to have fun???’” And I'll say it was a song in the 80s and why don't you ask your grandma about it and they'll roll their eyes and I'll eloquently “hurrumph” my way out of that final class to spend whatever little pension I have left over from Governor Justin Nickels' 2018 financial reorganization of UW—System, Incorporated.

Or something like that. Actually, my *real* last lecture will no doubt be to a special single someone I really, really like who doesn't particularly deserve hearing it, as it will probably be sonically lubricated with a glass of lightly-oaked chardonnay—and no doubt it will be a rambling rant about some so-called “cutting-edge” authoritarian numbskulls who believe that their inventions, policies, and ideas *have* to be better because they are, well, after all, *new*, as if the novelty of the sheer randomness of intellectual production were as automatically trustworthy as the truly inspired novelty of experienced and studious genius. I can just hear myself: “Why converse when you can email!! Why email when you can Wiki!! Why Wiki when you can Facebook!! Why Facebook when you can Skype!! Why Skype when you can Twitter!!! Ach!!!”

And to that most unfortunate special one, I pre-apologize for that, you real last-lecture victim.

Thus, you my present audience can't be that unfortunate one. You have to hear something much more artificial, forced, and premeditated. *Pobre gente!*

So I have three messages for you this evening: one from Spock, one from Socrates, and one from me. Oh hell—they're all from me. But in the spirit of the evening, as they say in the mereology literature, assume that the first two messages are from some fusion of parts called “Spocrates”.

By the way, the first message is not from the Vulcan Spock who returns Friday to the big screen in the *Star Trek* prequel. It is Dr. Benjamin Spock of *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946), the original *Dummies* book, I'd argue. It begins in its first sentence with a message of calm reassurance: “You know more than you think you do.”

I agree. Not just with respect to already knowing how to hold your breath above a particularly ripe diaper, but so many things about your life that's in your head already, and that you just need jogging to bring it to your attention to see that you know better than you think you did. Plato tagged something like this the “doctrine of reminiscence,” believing that when you're born you've got all the knowledge you'll ever have downloaded into your brain and all you need is experience to draw it out. Now of course

that's crap—though clever crap—but the fact is that there are lots of stuff we know, especially about ourselves, that we can readily draw on if we open up to what we experience about ourselves just a bit.

Knowing a guy named Bob Hieb led to many of those experiences for me. Bob and I became best friends at Northwest Nazarene College (now University) back in the early 70s. I was there to become a minister; he to become an English professor. Neither one of us made it to those goals. We met in our first philosophy class, and along the way of taking the next ten philosophy classes grew into the strongest of fraternal love as we also did of our love for philosophy. We both left NNC to pursue a career in philosophy, and while he eventually diverted into abstruse questions in computation theory, I muddled around in seminary for a year (which was sometimes embarrassing because I no longer was religious) and then on to the University of Tennessee, finally landing here in 1981. I stand here today in large measure due to the lessons Bob taught me with his fantastic intellect: it was conversing with him one day that the message of one book—*Fear and Trembling* by Soren Kierkegaard—sunk deeply into my mind and eventually placed me here instead of behind some church's pulpit. Bob was there when a book changed my life.

But this is just backdrop to the one example I have in mind to exemplify Spock's point above, and it was Bob who provided the experience that showed me what I already knew.

Bob taught me foosball, and we played often. Now Bob was a natural athlete, whereas especially then I resembled (in food metaphor) more an underbaked and doughy loaf of bread than some hearty breakfast of champions. One Friday night we were playing and he was just killing me with slam-after-slapshot. I've always been a competitive sort, and I just got madder and madder at myself for not playing better. After one particularly bad outburst where I think I shouted that I was a complete idiot at foosball, Bob stared at me and shouted back—"White—pull your head out!!"

Now at some level I knew I was being an asshole, taking a damn game far too seriously, and using it as an excuse to berate myself not just for physical inadequacies, but lots of others lurking below my thinnish skin. Some twenty-four years later I published a poem about that moment in *The Mississippi Review*:

### **Hieb's Sonnet**

(for Robert George Hieb, 1953-1992)

"Hhhwhyte," you slanged in that NoDak phenotype  
"Pull yer head owut!"--the "ass" left begging--  
the first of a good thousand mirrors, all cast  
of the same clear guttural and held in that  
barb'rish angle so, yes, I at last could see the cut.  
"Narcissus to my Goldmund"--you thought that  
so small and dark a quip. But here, a generation past,  
held fast where light cannot enter (though now

very likely reversed), it still shines on all those verbally polished planes you left me, so now, Occam stylist I've become, I can scissor for myself. Fallen from life, like hair in midlife rout, my *Narziss*: I am Goldmund within, without.

Yes, Bob's words were often mirrors, where, if I just took the moment to see myself, I'd learn something about myself that I already knew somehow deep down inside.

We all know things deep down inside ourselves that we're better off acknowledging are there. I wish you *your* Bob Hieb to find them.

"You know more than you think you do."

But then there's Socrates. Now he never said it this, except perhaps in the so many ways he taught it: "You know *less* than you think you do."

How could I give a so-called "Last Lecture" without mentioning Socrates? His life and example has informed every western philosopher ever since 399 BCE, when he drank poison instead of taking his other option—skipping town. He died rather than turn his back on his teachings. And what were they?

"You know less than you think you do."

Socrates is of course famous for the fact that the Oracle at Delphi proclaimed him the wisest man in Greece because he knew for certain at least one thing: that he knew nothing. But of course the Oracle knew *that* because Socrates didn't keep his wisdom to himself. He *demonstrated* that he knew nothing in the most publicly irritating way—by showing others that not only did *he* not know the answers to lots of important questions—he showed that people who *did* think they knew the answers really didn't know them either. And people don't like to be shown they're wrong—probably because not enough of us learn to laugh at ourselves. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Socrates was sentenced to death or exile by an Athenian tribunal for essentially being a wise-ass (now that's something the Oracle should have considered—who's the wisest ass in Greece? Socrates again!! Because he knows at least one wise-ass—himself!! *Gnothi Seautou* indeed!!). Since I'm at least Socratic in the wise-ass sense, allow me to condense his wise-ass-ity in a song from my Philosophy Songs page on the internet, dedicated to Socrates, who was traditionally called the Athenian gad-fly:

**The Gad-Fly Athenaios** sung to "The Girl from Ipanema"

Short and bald, snub-nosed and ugly,  
the Gad-fly Athenaios comes talking,  
and when he questions,

each one he questions goes "huh?"

Though he sounds much like a Sophist  
he cares for truth, he cares for justice,  
but when he questions,  
each one he questions goes "huh?"

How can I know universals?  
What is the nature of virtue?  
How could the soul be immortal?  
Is there something you think that you know?  
You might want to ask Euthyphro!

Short and bald, snub-nosed and ugly,  
the Gad-fly Athenaios comes talking,  
and though he questions,  
it's just inquiry. . .

"Huh?" "huh-huh?" "huh?" "Hah-huh-huh?" "Huh?"  
"Huh-huh-huh?" "Huh?" "Hah-huh-huh?" Huh?"  
"Huh-huh-huh-hhhhhuuuhhhh, hhaaahhh huh-huh-huh?"  
it's inquiry. . .  
inquiry. . .

(Note—my songs page (should you want to visit it) is the first to pop up in Google typing “Philosophy Songs”—but for one month it displays only one song—Vegan—for my dear friend and colleague Professor Helene Dwyer who died two weeks ago from Lou Gehrig’s disease.)

Of course, Socrates’ point that “You know less than you think you do” has a very serious side. This past decade saw instances of the most horrible kind of confidence that one knows the truth, and acts on it: 9/11, the WMDs that never were, the steely belief in the economic virtue of endless, unrestrained consumerism, and so on. As I’m quasi-famous for saying—and Socrates surely would have said it had he the referential resources—we desperately need to tune our bullshit meters. There is a Grand Canyon of difference between certainty and certitude, and remarkably few of us have BS meters tuned well enough to detect the presence of that magnificent logical chasm. After all, we *feel* we *know* that our political preferences are right. We *feel* we *know* that the behaviors of some people are inherently morally wrong. We *feel* we *know* that slighting the truth to our spouses, our supervisors, our co-workers, our employees, our colleagues, is *really* in their best interest—if they only knew what *we* knew. Oh, we *feel* we know a lot—certitude is the stock in trade of a confident gait through life. But as Socrates tried to show us—certitude is dirt cheap, purchased by the counterfeit comfort of lazy ignorance, and is most often the mark of a tiresome trudge toward the grave, with little to show for the journey except that we thought consistently throughout that we *knew* that other people not like us *are inferior*, the dross of humanity, pitied at least but probably better hated as

well-deserved. And then our descendants tag us in reconsidered memory otherwise: racists, ignorant, fascists, Nazis.

If the history of the world, and philosophy, has a voice, it has one clear message that was placed on Socrates tongue, and through his sacrifice, resounds as clearly in 2009 as in 399 BCE:

“You know less than you think you do.”

Ok, now you know the collective wisdom of “Spocrates.” Know yourself, by looking deep into yourself, both to learn how to be a better person, and also how to be rightly humble in pressing your beliefs.

Now for one more very deep, very serious message: “You are funnier than you think you are.”

That’s *my* message, Spocrates aside. But I think it’s a corollary of the messages of Spocrates. If you come to see who you really are—the good, the bad, the unsure—then you have to laugh. The only other option is to wallow in the absurdity of taking yourself *too* seriously—and being seriously ignorant of yourself as well.

Socrates certainly understood this. He didn’t pretend to know all the answers—he didn’t pretend to know *any* of the answers. He did *pretend*, however—as I’ll soon explain. Most clearly he understood that inquiry into matters of justice, knowledge, and virtue might not lead him to the truth about such things, but it could most certainly lead him *away* from things that are false. Unfortunately, Socrates’ interlocutors seldom grasped this point until it was too late and too funny—at least as represented in the Platonic dialogues. Here are all of Plato’s dialogues reduced to a single generic one:

### **The Athenian Sophist Sage or ASS**

Socrates: Hey Athenian Sophist Sage, I hear you know a lot about just-know-tue.

ASS: I know it like I know my own wife.

Socrates: I understand—many others say much the same as well (giggles to himself). But how is it that you claim to *know* just-know-tue?

ASS: That’s very easy: I know that just-know-tue is exemplified by Pterophrenos in his dealings with Osteocephalus.

Socrates: I heartily agree! But that is just an example. I want to know the *definition* and *essence* of just-know-tue.

ASS: Ah, I see. Just-know-tue then is in the *way* that Osteocephalus was dealt with by Pterophrenos.

Socrates: True, true!! But would you admit that the *way* that Pterophrenos was dealt with is the real point here, and not his example itself?

ASS: Undoubtedly.

Socrates: And would you agree that that *way* is just a summary of all such like ways that Pterophrenos and others like him were dealt with?

ASS: I would.

Socrates: But then you must agree that this summary is just a *collection* of examples of others who behave like Osteocephalus did with Pterophrenos?

ASS: I suppose it is.

Socrates: Then we still only have examples of just-know-tue, and not its definition or essence.

ASS: Oh *skata!* Well, I must go now Socrates and pick up some dinner from my friend Filo-Esophagus.

Socrates: Poor me—will I never find the definition of just-know-tue?? (Wink, wink.)

THE END

Poor Athenian Sophist Sage!! He's much funnier than he thinks he is. He's seriously lost in his *pride* of knowing just-know-tue, and does not see that while he knows his *pride*, he doesn't know his just-know-tue. A fool if ever there was one.

But you know, Socrates is much funnier than even *he* thinks he is. While he walks about Athens talking to people about just-know-tue he knows bloody well that no one he encounters knows just-know-tue, because he's thought this whole thing through pretty thoroughly, and so it turns out he's just *pretending* to try and learn about just-know-tue! He knows that he doesn't know what just-know-tue is, knows that others don't either even though they think they do, but goes around *pretending* to try and learn from them anyway! And why? To try and show them that they are wrong in their believing that they really know something and so probably piss them off in the process, and piss them off so much they bring charges against him that leads to him drinking hemlock? Now that's hilarious!

And that's why *I* am even funnier than I think I am. I actually think that there is something good and worthy about Socratic pretense and even all its potentially troublesome consequences—so much so that I have spent an entire career pretending to be Socrates. So right now what do *I* know? I know only that I am a dude who pretends to

be a dude who pretended to be a dude who knew nothing even though he *did* know something—that—is—FUNNY!! (Take that Robert Downey Jr.!)

And so I leave you tonight with my three messages:

“You know more than you think you do.” Embrace those precious occasions of correction, criticism, embarrassment, and complaint that provide those rich opportunities to see deeply inside yourself things that at some repressed level you know are already there. Know yourself for what you are, for only then can you become something better.

“You know less than you think you do.” When you feel so confident in your position, you think you know that final answer to risk it all and become your own Slumdog Millionaire, you’re sure that a belief, behavior, or stance that someone else has is wrong, wrong, wrong—remember all those flat-earthers who burned round-earthers at the stake because they were so sure, sure, sure it was the right thing to do. You just might be a flat-earther yourself.

Finally, life is here my dear friends, for the short time it is. Yes, of course there are times to be serious—many such times. And of course those times should be taken seriously. But depend on this advice that I’d like to stick in your fortune-cookie tonight: if you can’t laugh at yourself, then no one *should* take you seriously. Because you *are*, after all, funnier than you think you are.

Thank you—and goodnight.