

CUNY Ethics and Morality Contest
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To Our Own Choices Be True

We face problems everyday. From what to eat for lunch, to what career paths to take, choices must be made; yet how should one go about reaching these decisions? In a society where complex information from wide-ranged sources is available to us, these choices must also take into account such complexity. Prudence, thus, is to fully understand a problem in its entirety, to see ahead of actions taken and their potential consequences, and to restrain oneself from making biased choices. To be prudent is to make decisions that are sensible, even when others doubt, ridicule, or question those choices. In the western tradition, prudence is considered to be the “charioteer” of all virtues; after all, one should first make a rational judgment of the situation before exercising other virtues, such as courage, temperance, or righteousness. To me, prudence is also a critical part of growing up; becoming an adult is not merely reaching a magical age and thus gaining freedom, but an adult must make decisions and be responsible for one’s own well-being. Being prudent is necessary to ensure that one makes choices that benefit in the long term; in other words, you must be responsible for yourself.

Traditionally, college was such a place where young people learned to be virtuous adults. It was not only a place for learning and career advancement, but also for “how to be a person”, to borrow a Chinese saying that my father always drilled into my head. However, it seems as if colleges are drifting away from their responsibilities in forging responsible citizens and focusing more on practical job skills. On any campus you may find plenty of job fairs and recruitment sessions, but hardly any philosophical talks on ethics. Last year I attended a university like such, a postcard school in upstate New York that was everything one would expect: a picturesque campus, weekend parties, a utopia separate from the outside world. It was a life where most

students did not need to work to pay tuition or fees, as most of it was taken care of by parents and loans; a world where one could walk into a dining hall and expect food at all times without being concerned with cooking (a troublesome process that I learned firsthand this summer). I was not satisfied; I did not like this exclusion of reality at all. I thought, then, of transferring schools. Two paths lay before me: either transfer to some renowned private university, or come home to New York City and attend a CUNY school. My first instinct was to look into the rankings; from 'most helpful professors' to 'best dining halls', rankings seemed like an easy and stress-free way to choose schools. Initially I leaned heavily towards the top ranking schools; all the beautiful photos, stellar reputations, and fantasies of a prestigious private university took hold of me. A CUNY school, on the other hand, seemed to be a "downgrade" in reputation and ranking. Not to mention, the prospect of living at home was extremely unappealing.

Yet as I did more research, I realized that I could not rely on such superficial lists; every school was complex with its benefits and drawbacks, and no numerical ranking could sufficiently encompass this complexity. In a similar way, life's choices are just as complicated and multi-faceted; in this transferring process, I concluded that I must first understand the choices before me, the benefits and harms of each choice, and then decide to the best of my ability. More importantly, I must not ever lose sight of the very reason why I attend college: to receive an education, and to learn to "be a person". These two criteria became crucial principles to abide by in this process.

Over the next few months, after hours and days of researching different schools and drawing up lists of pros and cons, I knew that CUNY's Hunter College would be the best choice for me. Although private universities have their amenities, I thought that a public school offered just as good of an education, and perhaps even better, without incurring a lifetime of debt.

Moreover, I realized that quite a few private universities were even further disengaged with the real world; I have spoken to students of these schools, many of whom conveyed this exclusivity that bordered on snobbery. These traits were antithetical to education and moral character, which I thought should be universal; and since arriving at Hunter, my experience thus far has proved my thoughts to be true. I found Hunter and CUNY to offer an educational experience that is unique in its own way, things that traditional schools lack. Its location in New York means that the city is the campus: a metropolis of diversity, from single mothers with kids, to veterans of war, to young people like me, people of all ethnic and economic backgrounds who come together with the same goal in mind: to learn, because education is valuable. Moreover, the resources that New York City has to offer is boundless; outside the traditional classroom and a five minute walk away are world-class museums, cultural institutions, and research centers, all of which welcome inquiring minds with open arms. Opportunities are also plenty for political activism in local elections, and community outreach to diverse neighborhoods. Lastly, as a resident of New York and with the help of financial aid, Hunter is free for me. There seemed nothing better than being able to study what I love at no cost.

Of course, the transfer experience has not been perfect. In the remaining months after making the decision, I told many people of my plans. Some listened to my reasoning with understanding, but others could not understand why I was "downgrading"; even from within my own mind there was this audible voice that insisted, *come on, you can do better than that*. And like many other transfer students, I have trouble meeting new people, especially since Hunter is a commuter school where students hardly interact with each other outside the classroom. Moreover, going to school in the city means a lengthy commute by bus and train: no more roll-out-of-bed-five-minutes-before-class-and-walk-into-lecture-in-pajamas anymore. However, these

doubting thoughts are quelled whenever I remind myself of the reasons why I chose this path: the educational opportunity that has been made available to me.

In retrospect, transferring schools was probably the best decision I have made in my life. Not only has this act of prudence benefited me academically, the entire transfer process has made me realize that prudence, after all, is a manifestation of our greatest gift: the ability to think, our most valuable asset as human beings. Prudence is essential for us to act as independent thinkers, free from the superficialities and prejudices that tempt us. It allows us to become leaders, free to project our individual spirits and not blend into the mass of followers. More importantly, only out of rationality are we able to improve our moral characters: to make the best choices, to discern good from bad, and to know right from wrong. An act of free will is a truly joyful thing, and this joy has revealed to me how important the freedom of choice is. However, with this freedom comes a great responsibility. I have been motivated to cherish its sanctity, and be responsible for them. On the other hand, prudence should not only be limited to the "big" decisions of our lives, but exercised whenever we can; tiny decisions, especially, will amount to huge impacts, just as how one small snowball can roll into a big avalanche. We can remind ourselves at various moments each day that careful thinking leads to good actions, good actions beget good results, and that prudence will give us the best results, even if doubt persists. If somehow my transfer decision turns out to be the wrong one, I have learned an invaluable lesson that will prepare me for the more complex choices of times ahead. I can only hope that my education at Hunter College, in New York City will further facilitate my development, in both intellectual and moral manners. After all, college is not the only means of becoming an adult; making prudent decisions and taking responsibility for them are what characterizes mature individuals. Thus, when taking on these duties, we can say: to our own choices, be true.