

ALL-AMERICAN SOCRATES

The Intellectual Legacy and Teachings of Dr. Michael J. Sugrue

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Born in Queens on February 1, 1957, Dr. Michael J. Sugrue passed away on January 16, 2024, just a couple weeks shy of his 67th birthday. The eldest of four children, his father owned pubs and restaurants in New York. His mother managed the family home on Long Island. Like most Irish Catholic baby boomers, he attended parochial schools. But, unlike most, he would go on to college, and, so to speak, never stop going.

As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, his teachers included the famous conservative philosopher, Allan Bloom; but he majored in History, and, while at one point working as a security guard at Madison Square Garden, went on to earn a Ph.D. in History from Columbia University.

Submitted in 1992, his doctoral dissertation was entitled, *South Carolina College: The Education of an Antebellum Elite*.

Why would a promising young scholar—one who, as time would soon tell, was wired to become a world-class expositor of world-historic ideas and, in the best sense of the term, a big thinker—choose to do a dissertation about some pre-Civil War southern college? I'm not sure, but it might have had something to do with the college's most consequential antebellum president, Dr. Thomas Cooper.

The Anti-Cooper

Born in England in 1759, Cooper died in 1839. He was a well-noted natural scientist, philosopher, and jurist. In a 1926 book,² a young Dumas Malone, who would later rank among Thomas Jefferson's most important biographers, documented that Jefferson and many other Founding Fathers were big Cooper fans. Malone characterized Cooper as

...a passionate advocate of political and intellectual freedom against tyranny in any guise, and an enthusiastic promulgator of what he believed to be the truth.

Indeed. In 1787, Cooper authored *Letters on the Slave Trade*. Drawing on a dazzling command of western ideas and thinkers, slavery, argued Cooper, was irredeemably immoral.

¹ This paper is adapted but derived in its entirety from a lecture that was originally scheduled to be delivered on October 10, 2024 at Ave Maria University (AMU) in Florida, but was cancelled due to Hurricane Milton, rescheduled, and delivered at AMU on February 3, 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/live/Izy6CqgWYdE>. A great debt is owed to Penn Associate Director, Dr. Stephanie Scott, for transcribing and preliminarily editing thousands of pages of Dr. Michael J. Sugrue's teachings. I am grateful to her, and to Penn Executive Director Daniel Cheely, Penn Professor John Peter DiIulio, and Penn College of Liberal and Professional Studies Assistant Rosalee DiIulio, for their respective edits and comments on an earlier draft of the address. I am also grateful to Dr. Michael J. Sugrue's brother, Chris Sugrue, and to AMU's Professor Michael Breidenbach and Professor Janice Breidenbach, for their respective comments, insights, and kindnesses. All errors are mine alone.

² Dumas Malone, *The Public Life of Thoms Cooper 1783-1839* (Ams Pr Inc, 1926), reprinted with additions in 1961 by University of South Carolina Press.

But then, in the quarter-century before his death, Cooper, who moved from England to America in 1794, whistled a very different tune; namely, *Dixie*.

Even as he secured prestigious professorships at the University of Pennsylvania and other schools, Cooper started spinning pro-slavery arguments. In 1819, he went all in, moving to South Carolina, publicly repudiating his anti-slavery past, and, as if to prove his sincerity, purchasing several enslaved families.

Installed as president of South Carolina College in 1820, Cooper became schoolmaster to the sons of uber-elite plantation society gentry from all across the South. He set his students hearts afire and minds ablaze with ideas, arguments, and rationalizations crafted to legitimate secession and justify slavery. His alumni included antebellum governors of Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi, plus nearly a fifth of the signers of the original Confederate constitution.

Sugrue laid bare how, in educating students who would go on to preserve, protect, and defend slavery and foment and celebrate secession, Cooper had enlisted, and, when necessary, twisted, ideas from many a major western thinker. For example, the “*inimitable Cooper*,” as Sugrue called him, invoked Jeremy Bentham’s legal positivism and utilitarian “*nonsense on stilts*” view of human rights when defending laws that denied Black people, whether slave or free, the right to marry.

Being an intellectual Renaissance man, and being a preternaturally gifted and influential educator, as Cooper was, and as Sugrue in 1992 was on the way to becoming, is great. But it’s plainly no guarantee that you will walk yourself and others safely past whisperers in the garden or light a lifelong path to learning and leading for human well-being.

I’m no psycho-biographer, but it wouldn’t surprise me if Sugrue saw in Cooper a sort of ghost of Christmas future, a long, crooked outstretched finger pointing to the possibility that, at some point, for some reason, one might undergo a corrupting metamorphosis, one that begins with you as a true academic guide to what is true, good, and beautiful; that begins with you as an unflappable intellectual foe and implacable moral critic of what is false, evil, and ugly (like slavery and other forms of human brutality and inhumanity); but that ends with you as a pedagogically perverse Pied Piper who marches students and others over moral cliffs.

Regardless, whether self-consciously or not, Sugrue, I submit, was the *anti-Cooper*. For, as I will detail momentarily, the Sugrue who emerges from the video and audio records of his teachings, and from the testimonies of those who experienced him as an on-campus professor, was the last educator on earth who would want to witness his students succumbing, cult-like, to groupthink (even if the thought the group was thinking—or chanting—was his very own), or watch them marching through personal and civic life in close-formation lockstep the way that only the collectively and callously close-minded ever willingly do.

In this crucial respect, Sugrue's pedagogy was at its core fundamentally and foundationally *Socratic*. As Dr. Andrew Beer of Christendom College has recently observed, a

...willingness to be refuted is of...foundational importance for Socrates. For the opposite of a style of conversation that upholds the value of being refuted is one that avoids being refuted at all costs...(and) that transforms honest and open inquiry for the sake of mutually beneficial moral truth into a contest for power and domination... For Socrates...a positive delight or eagerness to be refuted...in matters of moral truth, is a liberation from...the greatest evil for a human being.³

School of Rock

Sugrue was the *anti-Cooper*; but he also was, more gloriously, the *all-American Socrates*.

The “all-American” part of that appellation is easy to justify. Sugrue was born in America; he lived in America; he died in America; and, in each of several respects, his was an all-American academic persona.

For instance, throughout his adult life, Sugrue voiced quintessentially American antipathies toward aristocracies or virtual aristocracies of wealth, education, or birth. And he exhibited prototypically American, small-d democratic reflexes opposing the centralization and concentration of power, whether in governmental, religious, corporate, or other institutions. For instance, in an August 26, 2021 podcast, Sugrue waxed:

Every large institution, every powerful institution, that is not answerable and transparent to someone or something else becomes corrupt...My point is that every elite tends towards corruption...There are people of vast wealth and financial influence that have a grossly disproportionate influence over the economy. You want to give it all to one person? ... So my point is, right now, I would take the U.S. Constitution, I'm sticking with it.

Likewise, Sugrue came as close as he could to making the fruits of his intellectual labors available to all. At least in my experience, many or most intellectual elites have nothing to say—and care to say nothing—to average people. This might be less true for American academic elites than it is for European academic elites, but it is true for both.

It was not, however, true for Sugrue. In the video lectures that I will be discussing shortly, it's obvious that he's not lecturing for a mass everyman audience; but it's equally obvious that he's not speaking, gesticulating, and performing for would-be philosophers only.

³ Dr. Andrew Beer, “Socrates on the Blessing of Being Refuted,” *Instaurare*, Summer 2023, p. 44.

Rather, what comes across is a public teacher who wants “We the People” to consider what we are missing as people, as human beings, as sentient souls, if we’re not leading an examined life. Indeed, his target audience seems to be people for whom his lecture might well be the first and last word they ever hear (or see) on the subject.

What you meet is an exceptionally learned fellow American who wants to help you learn how to swim in the history of important, history-making, and history-altering ideas, like those from the three thinkers whom he tells us did the most to frame his own thinking and pedagogy; namely, Plato, Shakespeare, and Nietzsche.

What’s absent is any hint that this is a haughty, *Herr Doktor* scholar. What’s present is an all-American scholar, erudite, not effete, who would never prostitute his grey matter by publishing article after article in professional “refereed” academic journals that matter mostly to tiny circles of hyper-specialized professional academics and their citation cartels.

And what’s equally present is a man who liked or loved many of the things that most Americans of his generation liked or loved, most notably, perhaps, rock music.

By contrast, his aforementioned University of Chicago philosophy teacher, Alan Bloom, concluded his 1987 surprise bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*,⁴ with a blanket condemnation of rock music for promoting

...rebellion against parental authority...sex, hate, and a smarmy hypocritical version of brotherly love.

Reflecting on rock music videos, Bloom added:

A glance at the videos that project images on the wall of Plato’s cave since MTV took it over suffices to prove this.

I would beg to differ. Well before Elvis unloosed his pelvis, and long before Sir Mix-a-lot’s “Baby Got Back” got briefly banned by MTV, human beings—not least the ancient Greek pagan-philosophers of whom Bloom was so very fond—found their way to every conceivable form of sexual depravity and debauchery, all without a single rock sound track blaring in the background or a single rock music video projecting X-rated shadows on the cave. Besides, some rock music is more nearly a virtual Judeo-Christian book of songs, a paean to true love, truth-seeking, do-gooding, truth-telling, self-sacrifice, and spiritual self-awareness.

In any case, legend has it that at one point Sugrue’s affinity for rock got him crosswise with Professor Bloom. Too bad, because Sugrue might have taught Bloom a thing or two, not only about rock music, but about how not to miss a beat when it comes to real Socratic philosophizing—that is, when it comes to opening minds, young and old, by engaging them at eye-level, not hectoring them from above or belittling them from afar.

⁴ Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), 25th anniversary edition.

To be sure, there's much that is strictly demanding and strongly opinionated, and little that is *kumbaya*-like, in Sugrue's intellectual legacy and teaching.

Indeed, on rare occasions, he could be provoked into down-dressing an interlocutor, scathingly yet hilariously. My favorite example is what he wrote on October 15, 2021 in reply to a podcast viewer who demanded that he place a "trigger warning" on his lectures. In reply, he offered one. It read in part:

This lecture is unabashedly replete with xenophobic, stupid, stigmatizing, marginalizing, stress creating, upsetting, perverse, immoral, disgusting, mistaken, unacceptable, reactionary, offensive, degrading, traumatizing, revolutionary, inauthentic, hegemonic, dehumanizing, tone deaf, alienating, dog-whistling verbal violence, inappropriately delivered by an unfashionably candid speaker who is considerably less impressed with you than you are with yourself. While the depth of his indifference to you and your exquisite sensitivities makes the Grand Canyon seem a mere shot glass, all can be forgiven except for your fraudulent self-esteem, which demands an amount of make believe the speaker finds onerous, bogus and boring...(T)hese lectures are probably not for you, as much due to your college rendering you unteachable as lack of native wit. This is not a problem for the speaker because he has elected to refrain from desiring your approval until he finds out what it's worth and what it's good for and why he should bother obtaining it. Thank you for sharing.

Still, Sugrue was never simply dismissive and never gave short shrift to ideas and opinions contrary to his own, not if they were the least bit well-reasoned; and he almost always seemed ready and willing to at least begin a dialogue about them.

Cultivating the steadfastly Socratic part of his all-American academic persona took some real work on Sugrue's part. As he stressed in an August 28, 2021 podcast, one has to "learn to become Socrates":

It's very important that you take...criticisms and questions from people you disagree with, and you don't have to troll them on that account. Steel sharpens steel. If you really want to be a thinker, then you have to be willing to engage in the dialectic...You don't learn anything from the arguments you win or think you win. What you learn...from is the arguments you lose.

Between Unpublished and Unfinished

Of course, if Socrates were alive today, he couldn't get tenure in philosophy at most American universities because he was "unpublished." All-American Socratic Sugrue was unpublished, too, though, at the time of his passing, he was working on a book—a big one.

On February 24, 2022, he posted an outline of the book on his Substack site under the heading, "First 10 pages of an unfinished history of the world." Those ten pages were single-spaced, like 8-font type, outlining 10 chapters, encompassing a grand total of 58

sub-sections, plus more than 100 *sub-sub-sections*, and featuring the most dazzling and dizzying parade of topics one could imagine—from “Origins of Art/Religion/Philosophy—Hegel’s Spirit”; to “Archaic Physics to Ancient Physics,” with entries on Greece, China, India, Rome, and Islam; to “Modern Physics: Dynamic yet Predictable, 1300-1900”; to “Prostitution of Science to Politics;” to “Futurism to Fascism: Sorel & Heidegger;” and, finally, to “My Last Lecture: ‘What’s Going On?’ ” and “The Great Task: Reconciling Love and Reason.”

Three decades before penning that outline, Sugrue almost certainly could have published *South Carolina College: The Education of an Antebellum Elite*, and paved a straight path to a tenured professorship and all the other conventional trappings of academic success American-style.

But maybe because he viewed those trappings as traps—I don’t know—the dissertation was never published. In fact, next to nothing that Sugrue thought or taught in the 30-plus years stretching from his dissertation to his death was ever published.

So, the bookends—or, more to the point, the *non-bookends*—of Professor Michael Joesph Sugrue’s academic career, are, at the one end, his excellent *unpublished* dissertation, and, at the other end, his epic *unfinished* history of the world.

And yet, in between the *unpublished* and the *unfinished*, Professor Sugrue gave us the *unparalleled* and the *unsurpassed*. In between his unpublished dissertation and his unfinished history, he gave us untold treasures.

For starters, in 1992 and 1995, he gave us, all told, 35 video lectures produced by the Teaching Company as part of its “Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition” series.

In 1993, he gave us 12 video lectures, also produced by the Teaching Company, as part of its “Great Authors of the Western Literary Tradition” series.

In 1996, he gave us 16 Teaching Company-produced audio lectures on “Plato, Socrates, and the Dialogues.”

In 1997, he gave us another 16 video lectures via the Teaching Company, all of them part of its “The Bible and Western Culture” series.

In 2020 and 2021, he gave us 18 “Classics Revisited” webinars produced via Bibliotheca.

In 2022, he gave us 25 self-produced “Idea Store” audio podcasts.

In 2022 and 2023, he gave us 10 self-produced “Mike and Darren Unplugged” video podcasts.

And, in addition to all of that, in various other in-between years, he gave us at least 29 video Classes on YouTube; 32 Humanities Seminars from informal classroom recordings; and 57 blog posts, some of them excerpts from his unpublished dissertation and his unfinished history.

Now, what if one were to transcribe all of the above, from the, all told, 79 video lectures of the 1990's, to the webinars, podcasts, and recordings, both video and audio, from 2020 through 2023—*how many single-spaced, 12-font pages might that be?*

The tentative answer, subject to revision, including revisions that may be occasioned by finding more of this or that, is at least 3,750 pages. And without adding more of this or that, adding just the unfinished book, which in draft is supposed to run to several hundred pages, the total crests past 4,000 pages—the rough equivalent of like sixteen 250-page books.

This we know because my brilliant Penn colleague, Dr. Stephanie Scott, who, in addition to being an expert on Irish literature, is a stupendous editor, and serves as the indispensable associate director for each of two Penn degree-granting programs, one undergraduate and the other graduate, has compiled, transcribed, and read them all. I'll have more to say about those 4,000 or so pages, and about Dr. Scott, in due course.

For now, however, let me be quick to remind us that, in addition to podcasts, webinars, recordings, and video lectures—including his some 250,000 subscribers, his 15 million or so views, and his fan favorite Marcus Aurelius lecture's nearly 2 million views—what Sugrue thought and taught also reached thousands of people the old-fashioned way, up close and personal, most notably through the courses he offered during his time on the faculty at Ave Maria University, and, before coming to AMU, through his earlier academic and teaching appointments, including one as a Lecturer at Princeton University.

He taught many different courses. At Princeton, for example, among his courses were:

- “Approaches to the Renaissance and Enlightenment”
- “The Bible in the Western Tradition”
- “Approaches to the Modern World” and
- “The Just Society”

But there was one course that, albeit in different forms, he taught for 30 years. It's the one that got rostered at AMU as a two-year sequence of Humanities courses. The course description began as follows:

This course examines selected landmarks in Western culture, combining politics, ethics, literature, philosophy, history, science, psychology, art and religion from antiquity to the present.

The “Overview” section of the syllabus declared:

The purpose of this class is to help fish realize that they are wet. Like it or not, we are westerners...Understanding the genesis of the categories that structure the world around us offers the only genuine possibility of freedom from the tyranny of unexamined ideas and the futility of unexamined lives.

The course would start with ancient River Valley Civilizations, turn to Athens and Jerusalem, and go on from there

...through modernity to the contemporary impasse of globalized Western culture.

Then cometh this friendly but firm forewarning:

*You will be busy...There is no elevator to the upper floors of cultural competence, you have to climb the stairs...We will read at least one text per class, sometimes more...These books will speak to you if you will listen. You will feel new grooves cut into your brain. If you apply yourself diligently, these books can change your life...(Y)ou'll get no sympathy from me. Every student is responsible for getting the reading done before every class. I can **explain** these books for you but I cannot **understand** them for you.*

So, no sweat or fret, right? Just 75 or so heavy reading assignments, starting with

- the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Synoptic Gospels, and more; then on to Greece, with Gilgamesh, Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, and other works including Plato's *Symposium* (Bernardete translation, please), Plato's *Republic* (Bloom translation, please), plus more Plato, and also Aristotle's *Ethics* and his *Politics* (what, no Aristotle's physics or rhetoric?); and then
- Rome and Christianity: Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, and others on the way to Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* (and don't dare try watching the video lecture without reading the book, not unless your stoicism is a shield against the righteous wrath of a real teacher); and, oh yeah, *The Koran*, Dante, Aquinas. Chaucer, Machiavelli, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and more, including Thomas More; then next, the
- Modern West, with Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal, plus—to note just the M's and K's—Moliere, John Start Mill (what, no James Mill?), Marx, Kant (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*—why not?), and Kierkegaard; and, finally
- Christmas Reading (that is literally what it said on the syllabus— “Christmas Reading”), assigning Dostoyevsky, Mann, and Tolstoy, to be followed (after your relaxing holiday break, of course) by Nietzsche, Freud, Joyce, Weber, Huxley, A. J. Ayer, Mann, Wittgenstein, Piaget, Habermas, and others, including Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* read in juxtaposition to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (memo to Rawls from Alex: better hide the women and the children and bullet-proof that veil of ignorance...).

Sounds breathtaking; but the truly breathtaking thing was that Sugrue not only knew it all—I mean, really knew it all, or deserving of 30 posthumous Oscars if he didn't—but knew it all, had thought deeply about it all, and—per the unfinished history of the world book outline I referenced earlier—knew still more, including modern theoretical physics, cosmic to human evolution, multiple and competing creation narratives, Big Bang with or without Big Banger, and so on.

It's quite a span from Thomas Cooper to Immanuel Kant, from John Coltrane (yes, Coltrane, the jazz genius who Sugrue brought into his kaleidoscopic intellectual canon) to Quarks (yes, he knew and puzzled about quantum theory, too) to certain core Catholic teachings that, whether expressly referenced as such or not, were—or so it seems to me—always somewhere in his teaching mix, always there at the end of his every intellectual trail, most especially teachings about human dignity, human community, the common good, and *Fides et Ratio* (faith and reason).

And Sugrue not only knew it all and repeatedly and incessantly puzzled through it all, but he could draw on it all, instantly and effortlessly, insightfully, eloquently and entertainingly—pedagogically!—on his feet, alert in his chair, in real time, whenever he needed in order to motivate or explicate something for a student or any other willing interlocutor.

That is what comes across, *that* is what's most emphatically and dramatically appreciated, in testimonies by his former students, and in the kudos heaped upon him by his video lecture, webinar, and podcast fans.

And Sugrue's ceaseless intellectual striving was never confined “only” to Western culture. For instance, in the Question & Answer session he did in the aforementioned August 28, 2021 podcast, he tells us:

Well, I've gone through a lot of phases in the development of the way I think. And you know, I think anybody who spends a lifetime as a professor is likely to do that...I would say now...I'm a kind of hybrid Christian Platonist. I spent a lifetime looking at the history of philosophy in the West and then trying to add to that as much as I could with a knowledge of the belief systems of the great world civilizations. So I would include China, Persia, India, but also the Mesoamerican indigenous civilizations. Their mythology turns out to be quite interesting.

Sugrue's passing on January 16, 2024 occasioned a number of articles in prominent outlets. For example, in “Professor of Inspiration,” published in the Manhattan Institute's magazine, *City Journal*, its associate editor, John Hirschauer, zeroed in on the “Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition” episodes. Each episode, observed Hirschauer,

...showcased Sugrue's charisma, encyclopedic knowledge...and generational talent as an orator. In each episode, Sugrue paced back and forth without notes in hand, engrossed in the motivations, idiosyncrasies, and enduring relevance of the lecture's subject. He studiously restrained his own beliefs, seeking to present the most compelling case for each thinker's ideas.

Sugrue was also memorialized in tributes by students whom he had taught the old-fashioned way.

For instance, in “Eat, Pray, Western Civ—The Teaching Life of Michael Sugrue,” published in *National Review* magazine on February 3, 2024, John Byron Kuhner, a Substack writer who, back in 1995, took Sugrue’s Princeton course on “The Bible in Western Culture,” praised him as “a supremely gifted educator,” adding that

During Sugrue’s career, academics considered him...beneath their notice. Now he seems like someone all those who love the humanities need to learn from...Those of us who were his students...cannot forget the great joy in life we had with him... (For) 90 minutes at a time, two times a week, we were with him and there was nowhere else we wanted to be.

And there were other published notices, including a belated one on May 25, 2024 in *The New York Times* by Trip Gabriel, one of the paper’s national correspondents. The headline read, “Michael Sugrue, 66, Dies; His Talks on Philosophy Were a YouTube Hit.” Its subheading read:

After an academic career spent in near obscurity, he became an internet phenomenon during the pandemic by uploading talks he had given three decades earlier.

In the *Times* article’s penultimate paragraph, Gabriel observed:

The circa-1992 academic in large square glasses had metamorphosed, in the recent lectures, into a bearish man with untamed white chin whiskers. But the low-tech look of the original videos persisted into the Zoom era, and he lost none of his passion for explicating ideas, or his indifference to publishing.

Meditations on Meditations

There are at least two distinct ways to assess the notices of Sugrue’s passing in *City Journal*, *National Review*, *The New York Times*, and other outlets.

One way is to say, “Wow, that’s quite nice, and that’s quite a lot, especially given his relative obscurity prior to the COVID pandemic and his podcasts.”

The other way, however, is to say, “Well, that is quite nice, but it’s not enough, and not good enough. It’s not enough or good enough because the notices were too few; too prone to blur the distinction between a lifelong intellectual heavyweight, on the one side, and some mere flash in the pandemic podcast pan, on the other; too much about mere nostalgia for his teaching; and too bereft of reflections regarding how his teaching might survive and thrive even without him here in mortal coil to charm and challenge us anew.”

I had the latter reaction. That said, I’m still not sure I understand why I had that reaction, or why it was as passionate as it was and remains.

I don’t think it was—or at least I hope it wasn’t—because, at age 66, the death of another ethnic Catholic baby boomer academic at age 66, one who also had chronic health challenges, gripped me.

Nor was it because I knew Dr. Sugrue at all well personally, because I didn't. Back in the 1990's, he launched his video lecture series, and I was a fan. I was then on the faculty at Princeton, so I got to interact with him a tad, and I had one memorable experience involving him.

It was 1996. I had been on the Princeton faculty for a decade, run the MPA program and a research center, and was best known to undergraduates as the introduction to American Politics professor. In the middle of the spring semester, a few students came up to me after my lecture on a not-so-scintillating topic, namely, the inner workings of the federal government bureaucracy. They seemed keyed-up. I thought it was about my midterm exam; but they wanted to talk to me about Dr. Sugrue.

His Princeton contract was up, they said, and Princeton might not renew him. He was then teaching several courses, each attested to by the students as terrific and transformational. They were forming a group, called "Students for Sugrue," to plead to the central administration for his renewal. They solicited me with a funny bit of false-bottomed flattery: "*Prof. D,*" said one student, "*Dr. Sugrue is like how **you** would be if you had really interesting stuff to teach.*"

Anyhow, their efforts, plus some *sotto voce* back-channeling by me and my pal, Professor Robert "Robby" George, who a few years later founded Princeton's James Madison Program on American Ideals and Institutions, did the trick, and he taught at Princeton into the early 2000's.

I left Princeton myself in 1999, but I stayed connected to it thereafter in my capacity as a member of the Madison Program's advisory board. The program's godsend of a first Associate Director was the magnificent Dr. Seana McGuire Sugrue, who is now, of course, the Ambassador Michael Novak Professor of Politics here at AMU. I saw both Seana and Michael again, albeit briefly, when, in the 2000's, I visited AMU's interim Naples campus and served briefly as a member of its Board of Regents.

Last but not least, I got reacquainted with Dr. Sugrue's teaching via his pandemic era podcasts and heightened web presence. Regrettably, however, I never did what I was inclined to do like a half-dozen times during that period; namely, drop him a line or email saying hi, praying for his health and well-being, and praising this or that podcast.

Shame on me.

Or make that double shame on me in relation to his meditations on Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.

Marcus Aurelius was the last of Rome's so-called "five good emperors." In 1992, in his video lecture on *Mediations*, Sugrue described Marcus Aurelius as "*the most interesting of the Stoics*" and the rarest "*absolute ruler*" in history, one whose unfettered power made him melancholy from fear that he might abuse it, put it to immoral purposes, and fail on any given day to be a virtuous—as in a just, wise, temperate, and courageous—philosopher-king.

Bridge from that 1992 lecture, which was delivered in a lively but linear style, and which, in single-space, 8-font-type runs to a dozen pages, to the October 8, 2020, “Classics Revisited” webinar on Marcus Aurelius in which a more mature Sugrue, teaching, enchanting, and fielding questions in a kind of rhetorical jazz style, characterizes Stoicism as

...a kind of philosophy of resignation...You can't control the world, right? We're not God, but we can control ourselves and we can control our conduct. Life has its ups and downs...but we can completely control the way we respond to these things...The Stoic philosopher holds that if any person can achieve moral goodness, then...every person is capable of doing (so)...

Marcus Aurelius, Sugrue riffs, was

...as close as the world has ever come to a Platonic philosopher-king. He works diligently. He tries to develop and maintain virtues. He is deeply committed to doing the right thing every day...he's, in a way, the loneliest man in the world....he seems like sort of a Calvinist without Christianity. A bit of a Puritan in Babylon. How such a man emerges, I don't know; it's one of those flukes of history, one of those freaks of nature...It is a surprising thing to see in human nature.

Indeed it is—and, unfortunately, it would be a welcome but shocking thing to see more than occasional flashes of Marcus Aurelius among America's contemporary national political leaders in either party and at either end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

In any case, hearing Sugrue on Marcus Aurelius influenced how I thought about our American political leaders. Specifically, his meditations on Marcus Aurelius made me wonder whether I had been, for lack of a better way of putting it, all too ready to give our presidents and other political leaders something akin to a carte blanche moral pass when it came to how they practiced the “ABC's” of American politics—forging alliances, striking bargains, and making compromises.

For instance, I had far too little appreciation for little-acclaimed presidents, like Chester Arthur, who, whatever else they were or did, indisputably had their brief but shining, principled, and uncompromising Marcus Aurelius moments (which President Arthur, a lifelong hardball Republican patronage politician, did in 1883 when he championed the creation of the federal civil service system).⁵

Tutored by certain experiences in national politics plus Sugrue's meditations on the *Mediations*, I became less willing to pardon presidents, presidential advisers, legislators, and campaign operatives who were, if you will, too quick to reach for

⁵ To wit: John J. DiIulio, Jr., “Chester Alan Arthur,” in James Taranto et al., eds., *Presidential Leadership: Rating the Best and the Worst in the White House* (Free Press, 2004), chapter 21; and “Why Judging George W. Bush Is Never as Easy as It Seems,” in Robert Maranto et al., ed., *Judging Bush* (Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 294-310.

Machiavelli—too prone to rationalize and justify lies, calumnies, and immoral actions in the name of acquiring or sustaining the power necessary to “getting things done.”

It's not *The Brothers Karamazov*, but, in the comedy movie, “The Blues Brothers,” the title characters, played by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, justify their not entirely legal or ethical antics to save a Catholic orphanage by dead-panning the words, “We’re on a mission from God.”

As I learned first-hand first as a teenager and college kid involved in Philly politics, and then, in spades, during my various times inside or alongside the halls of national political power, it's never easier to justify deviltries as mere deceits, or to pretend big lies are noble lies, or to rationalize malign thoughts or deeds as bridges to benign outcomes, than when you're telling yourself that you're absolutely on the side of the angels while simultaneously ignoring signpost after signpost that you are actually on the road to perdition.

The Books of Isaiah and Michael

Speaking of perdition, in the aforementioned October 8, 2020 podcast, a viewer asked Sugrue, “*Did Marcus Aurelius believe in God?*” Sugrue answered:

You know, I can't tell. There's a deeply religious element to the way he thinks about the world...Marcus Aurelius is a great standard for a man who refuses to make moral compromises when it would be tempting to do so. So, I'd be inclined to say that he represents as good as it gets while just using our reason. My guess is that we may need something more than reason for life to be satisfactory. And what that might be, I'm not sure.

Although Sugrue never said for sure what that “something more” might be, he often seemed to nominate “religion” as *an* answer, if not as the sole and sufficient answer, and to privilege the Catholic religion or Catholicism—or maybe it might be better characterized as Catholic-flavored Platonist Christianity—as his own best answer.

For instance, in the aforementioned October 28, 2021 podcast, the one in which he reflected on his fascination with foreign, non-western belief systems and cultures, he confided:

So I've looked around (for) various examples of...human belief systems... (The) best...at the end of it is this: what we need is some braiding together of love and rationality. And that's why I hear what Socrates has to say...The Western tradition of rationality, which realizes itself in natural science, is an extraordinary contribution to human life. But it has nothing in it that is comparable to the Parable of the Good Samaritan...Not only is there nothing similar to it in the Greco-Roman tradition of philosophical rationality, there is much that is inconsistent with it... (The) tradition of Athens has...given us no reason to embrace universal human compassion...I want to keep the mythos along with the logos. I want to have both Athens and Jerusalem. Kierkegaard

will eventually come around and say, take a stand, put up or shut up. And when I have to, I'll take the Christian side of the wishbone. I'm going to pull on that side. And the reason why is that I can imagine Christianity sprouting some rationality; I can't imagine rationality sprouting love.

So, what, if anything, more can and should be done to preserve, platform, and promote the intellectual legacy and teaching of this Irish Catholic hybrid Christian Platonist all-American Socrates with History pedigrees, thousands of adoring former students, and millions of digital disciples?

My answer, in a word, is “lots.”

There is a case to be made that Sugrue is, at a minimum, one of the most important *American* historians of ideas of the last many generations.

As I see it, the sprawling and enthralling intellectual legacy and teaching of Dr. Michael J. Sugrue is centered on the possibility that faith *can* be reconciled with reason; that love, understood as a passionate regard for the true and permanent well-being of others—the love of 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4 to 8; the love that is patient, kind, not jealous, nor boastful, nor proud, rude, self-seeking or easily angered; the love that takes no pleasure in evil; the love that “rejoices in the truth”—*can* be married to rationality.

That’s an intriguing possibility, one that all sorts of people—people of all faiths and people of no faith—might find it fruitful to explore, embrace, or eschew through the teaching of Dr. Sugrue.

Ditto the ideas of each of the dozens of great minds and authors that Sugrue mined and defined in the amazing videos and all the other recordings and materials that he left behind.

But it’s my unhappy guess that unless these videos and recordings and other materials are duly collected, curated, and published as *books*—as a set of creatively conceived and well-edited volumes, carefully indexed and cross-indexed by names, by topics, by subjects; each volume with its introductory essay or essays; and each or all suitable for assigning in whole or in part in college seminars and lecture courses alike—then Sugrue’s intellectual legacy and teaching will never receive the scholarly attention that it deserves; never reach as many future hearts and minds as it should; and maybe even fade away within a generation or two, not gone (digital is eerily immortal), but fossilized, frozen in time, and forgotten.

It’s my view that what should happen with Sugrue’s intellectual legacy and teaching is akin to what happened with that of the greatest historian of ideas of the 20th century; namely, Oxford University’s Sir Isaiah Berlin.

Berlin was born to Russian Jewish parents in 1909 in what today is Latvia, and he died in 1997. His entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* aptly describes him as an

...historian of ideas...and essayist...renowned for his conversational brilliance, his defense of liberalism and pluralism, his opposition to political extremism and intellectual fanaticism...His essay Two Concepts of Liberty (1958) contributed to a revival of interest in political theory in the English-speaking world.

Berlin used his writings mainly as tutorial teaching notes or as fodder to spark a conversation with a few of his favorite colleagues at Oxford or other places. For most of his life, he published next to nothing of his work. He had a principled objection to publishing writings that were not written to be published as such; and he was deeply reluctant to edit, smooth out, fill in, or otherwise revise his essays in ways that would render them more readable and publishable.

As he approached his 70th birthday, Berlin was perfectly content to leave it there. Thank God, however, that one Henry Hardy was not. As an honorary fellow at Oxford's Wolfson College, which Berlin had founded, Hardy had a front-row seat to Berlin's genius. While he was a graduate student of Berlin's in the mid 1970's, Hardy came to perish the thought that Berlin's thought might perish by remaining largely unpublished forever.

As recounted in Hardy's 2019 book, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*,⁶ he had to coax, cajole, and battle the great Oxford Don, who, to the very end, mixing humility with insouciance, did not quite see what all the fuss was about or grasp why Hardy's mission—namely, finding, collecting, and curating Berlin's essays, editing them, organizing them thematically and topically, and publishing them as *books*, as edited volumes—was worth either Hardy's time or his own.

By 2015, after decades on the job, Hardy had edited or co-edited 18 books, 17 of them composed of essays by Sir Isaiah Berlin and commentaries thereupon, and the last a volume containing letters Berlin had written between 1975 and 1997.

With my aforementioned Penn colleague, Dr. Stephanie Scott, whose eyes have danced across pretty much the entire transcribed Sugrue corpus, and who reports finding herself engaged and enlivened by Sugrue's teaching even when she begs to differ with his assumptions, analyses, arguments, and occasional advocacies, I believe that the 4,000 or so pages that I referenced earlier, the unpublished dissertation, the unfinished big book, and whatever else might be found and duly included, merits a Henry Hardy-like publication push.

Wouldn't it be great if one day, nearby the Great Books themselves, the books of first-rank commentary on those books included Dr. Michael's on the shelf nearby Sir Isaiah's?

⁶ Henry Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure* (Tauris Parke, 2019).

As a self-teaser, I re-read Machiavelli's *The Prince* and then read, compared, and contrasted what Berlin, in his famous 1958 essay, "The Originality of Machiavelli,"⁷ and Sugrue, in various video lectures and podcasts, each had to say about *The Prince*, about Machiavelli, and about "Machiavellianism."

Suffice it to say that Berlin's Machiavelli says "choose": it's the way of the Caesars or the way of Christ and His disciples: you must choose, not as fools choose, but understanding the "effectual truth" that, in the city of man, nice guys, including guys who act nice when they don't have the stomach to be "all bad," don't normally just finish last; nice guys finish *crucified*. That fate awaits not just Christian martyrs but any once full-bore, bad-as-need-be prince who lapses into a desire to be more loved than feared—they end deluded, dethroned, and dead, like the murdered Julius Caesar.

And suffice it to say that Sugrue's Machiavelli is a close cousin to Berlin's. After explicitly referencing Donald Trump's bestseller, *The Art of the Deal*, he profiles Machiavellianism as "*the art of the double-cross*." With illuminating references to Shakespeare, Freud, Plato, Heidegger, and numerous other thinkers, Sugrue lays bare how Machiavelli

...is completely opposed to all metaphysical interpretations of the world. Machiavelli does not believe in heaven and hell...in God...in the realm of the forms. All Machiavelli believes in is here and now...Once we abolish the metaphysical realm, there is no law or ultimate standard by which to judge our actions and by which to judge good and evil...(Machiavelli) enjoins us to create, to go back to the earlier, pre-Socratic, pre-Christian virtues. We hear the drums of a primitive heroism in this book.

I did hear those "drums," but I heard them only after Sugrue heard them first and beckoned me to listen closely and tune in.

And I dare say that Sugrue's thinking on Machiavelli was more accessible than Berlin's without seeming any less authoritative.

In any case, wouldn't it be a crying shame if, decades hence, Sugrue's Machiavelli, his Shakespeare, his Plato, his Nietzsche, and all his other commentaries and teachings—right down to his take on fellow American Cormac McCarthy's 1992 novel, *Blood Meridian*—were accessible only by watching what by then would be 50- 60- or 70-plus-year-old video lectures, or dredging up quarter-century-plus-old podcasts, or the like?

I think it would be worse than a crying shame. In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville warned that "democratic ages" cultivate intellectual cultures in which "*the darting speed of a quick, superficial mind is at a premium, while slow, deep thought is excessively undervalued*."

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," as printed in Henry Hardy, ed., *Against the Current* (Viking Press, 1980), pp. 25-79.

Against this current runs the all-American Socrates and all the many and varied treasures of his intellectual legacy and teaching, treasures that can and should become ever more widely recognized and shared in the decades, even centuries, to come.

May Almighty God welcome Dr. Sugrue and bless all who loved and learned from him.

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The first person in his family to graduate from college, Dr. DiIulio was a full-time commuting student at Penn when he earned both a bachelor's degree (economics and political science) and a master's degree (political science) in four years. Three years after receiving his PhD in political science from Harvard University, he received tenure at Princeton University. He led Princeton's domestic policy MPA program and founded its Center of Domestic and Comparative Policy Studies. He was the C. Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and founded and directed research centers at Brookings and several other leading think tanks. He has been a contributing editor or written regularly for several dozen journals, magazines, and newspapers.

Dr. DiIulio has won several major academic awards, including, early in his academic career the David N. Kershaw Award of the Association of Public Policy and Management (APPAM), which is given every three years to a scholar under the age of 40 who has "made distinguished contributions to the field of public policy analysis and management." He has served on the boards of many national and local nonprofit organizations including universities. He has developed national programs to expand educational opportunities for low-income children, mentor the children of prisoners, and support public-private partnerships that benefit low-income communities. He has advised presidents and presidential candidates in both political parties.

Dr. DiIulio served as first Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the G.W. Bush administration and assisted the Obama administration in reconstituting and expanding that office. He was among the first inductees of The National Mentoring Partnership's "Legends of Mentoring" initiative recognizing "vital leaders who have made tremendous contributions to the mentoring movement."

Dr. DiIulio is the author, co-author, or editor of more than a dozen books, including a leading textbook, *American Government*, 18th edition (Cengage, 2024); *Bring Back the Bureaucrats* (Templeton, 2014); and *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future* (University of California Press, 2007). In 2016, he launched a decade-long research and curricular initiative on eldercare in China. In 2024, in conjunction with Penn's Common Ground for Common Good initiative, he initiated "Spirited Debate," a multi-faceted project dedicated to exploring how religious leaders and institutions might help to de-polarize American politics. He is a Roman Catholic in the Jesuit tradition.

