

George Bragues Podcast Transcript

INTRO: There's a lot going on at the University of Guelph-Humber. In this podcast, we'll uncover some of the stories you might have missed. I'm Nick Patch, and this is Voices of UofGH.

Nick: Well thank you for joining us. I am here with the Assistant Vice-Provost and Program Head of Business, Dr. George Bragues. Thank you for joining our podcast.

Dr. Bragues: Great to be here.

Nick: We're here to talk about the Agora Fellowship and the Agora Fellows, and I imagine there are some listeners out there who must be wondering what the Agora Fellowship is. So I was hoping to start that you could take us through the program a little bit.

Dr. Bragues: Sure, sure. We're now going into our third year. This began back in 2015. And it was based on – I was at a workshop on ways to engage students outside the classroom and a professor at McGill (University) mentioned that he did this reading group and it was a not-for-credit situation. Students would come in once a week for a semester. And they would be expected to have read the assigned readings and to speak about them. And then the incentive for the students is that they would get recognition, they would get a stipend, he also arranged academic guests, academics from outside McGill University if they happened to be around, to come in and join the group discussion. He mentioned that it was student-led, that his role was just to monitor the conversation, get it going when it was slow, make sure no one was dominating the conversation. I thought that was a really good idea. Although we have small classes here compared to most universities, we don't have a lot of seminars where people just get a chance to discuss ideas, and we don't have a lot of chances for students to discuss amongst themselves. So I thought let's bring this to Guelph-Humber. I got some funding, John Walsh, the Vice-Provost of the university, decided to also provide some funding for the initiative. We did it for the first time in 2015 where we read Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. We didn't read all of *Wealth of Nations*, that would have taken us four or five semesters to get through, but we read excerpts from *Wealth of Nations*, we read all of *On Liberty*, and the topic was freedom. We had eight students in that first iteration and it was a success story. They loved it. We ended up going to Washington, D.C., for a student conference on the theme of liberty and we ended up touring Washington. We did it again this past year, in 2016, we did it with the theme of happiness, and we also read Adam Smith, this time a different work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which doesn't get as much attention as *The Wealth of Nations*. And we also read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. It's basically a reading group but it's a reading group tied to an opportunity for students to distinguish themselves on their CVs, on their resumes, and they also get to go on a trip that is related to the readings. So we get together about eight times in the fall semester, two hours a session, and I have assigned readings, and each week we discuss those readings and I try as much as possible, and it usually works out, to have the students talk amongst themselves.

Nick: I know you get students from all programs here at Guelph-Humber applying, does it surprise you the depth of perspectives from students of different programs?

Dr. Bragues: Oh yeah. I definitely strive to ensure there's a diversity of students who become Agora Fellows. As many programs as possible. We certainly do notice the different perspectives, especially I notice the Justice Studies students, whenever we talk about a topic that pertains to the law or to guilt, they do bring a lot of insight into that. I know one of the discussions we had that was quite, probably one of the more lively discussions we had this past session was whether or not it is better to be praise-worthy and not praised – in other words to be a good person but not have a reputation that equals it – or it's better to be not that good a person but still thought of as a great person. The justice studies students brought the case of the unjustly accused. They said, we've met some unjustly accused people as part of the justice studies program, and I can tell you it's not easy to be someone who's praiseworthy and good but thought to be the opposite. Certainly they bring a perspective there. I know in the past with the topic of freedom, liberty is often contrasted with equality. So students from the Family & Community Social Services program were always wanting to bring in the topic of equality and saying that there's other issues here in addition to liberty and that liberty taken too far can get in the way of equality. So those are some of the ways the varying perspectives students bring in can help the discussion.

Nick: this year's topic I understand is God and Politics.

Dr. Bragues: Yes, yes, I'm going out on a limb here with this one.

Nick: It's a pretty rich topic for discussion, especially right now. I'm curious how you arrived at it.

Dr. Bragues: I'm part of a reading group myself. It's just a group of professors from the GTA who I know. We've been getting together for a number of years on the topic of religion and politics. The discussions have been very animated to say the least. We've never had a problem in finding something to read that is germane to it. We've never had a problem either in connecting it to something that's going on in the news. So I thought why not bring that same discussion, which I've so much enjoyed over the years with my friends, why not have the students have the chance to get the same experience? Plus I'm always looking for topics that are sure to engender student interest, that will ensure that people have something to say, and God and Politics has been a topic that has been part of our zeitgeist for well over a decade now. So I thought, I'm sure students have been paying attention to it. I'm sure they have something to say about it. And I'm sure the books that I'll be bringing to the table with the agora fellowship will illuminate and enrich their understanding of the topic. The books have already been chosen. The main one's going to be John Locke's A Letter Concerning Toleration. So he's going to set up our current understanding here in the western democracies of how religion and politics are supposed to be related. In a western democracy, especially since the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the prevailing view is there should be a separation between church and state, the state should be neutral, and that people should be free to on their own exercise their religion, pursue their own religious vocation, so long as the public good, the secular public good is not affected,

then all is well. So Locke will set up our sort of current understanding, the philosophical underpinnings of how we operate in a Western democracy. The other reading is Dante. He's known for the Divine Comedy, but the Divine Comedy is way too long to read. It's three different books: there's Hell and Paradise and there's also Purgatory. I always find Hell being the most interesting of the three. And I think a lot of Dante's readers agree. I'm going to bring in a book of his called on monarchy. That book gives us an understanding of how things looked before Western democracy emerged on the scene. And installed our current understanding of how politics and religion should be related to each other. It will also give students an understanding of the division of worldly matters, which are supposed to be the purview of the state, in our current understanding, and spiritual matters, which are supposed to be the purview of the church or the synagogue or any other religious organization. We'll be reading that. And I'll also be bringing in James Fitzjames Stephen, not very well known, I think he should be better known, he wrote a book in the late 19th century against John Stuart Mill's On Liberty, it's called Equality, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. He contests that the assumption that underlies our current approach to religion and politics, that we can easily divide up things that are spiritual from things that are earthly, that belong to the state. Because if the division can be neatly done like that, then there really should be no tension between religion and politics. That's religion, the state is out of it. That's not religion, therefore the state should have a role in there. A lot of the conflicts, a lot of the debates that you have concerning religion and politics really revolve around what falls under the spiritual realm and what falls under the earthly realm. Quite often, the two intermingle and that's where the conflict arises. Stephens' reading is going to be an eye opener for some students to see how that can be challenged, the neat division between church and state is not so neat after all. Or maybe it doesn't look neat. I'll leave it up to students to figure out the quality of Stephens' argument.

Nick: You mentioned within your own network of friends and colleagues, that debates can get if not heated, at least robust. I'm sure it's the same with the students. Are you expecting some robust debates?

Dr. Bragues: I think so. I suspect all of them will believe that the state's role should be largely neutral with respect to religion. But I do believe there will be some issues where they will be debating well maybe the state's getting too much in the way of people with religious beliefs here, I could see issues where students take the view that there's too much religion on this issue and we should take more of a secular world view. So what I suspect is that in theory, in the general view, they're all going to be good Lockeans, believers in the separation of church and state or of the spiritual and the earthly realms. But then when it gets down to specific issues, then that's where the debates will be. Suddenly they'll have to reflect upon their general prior commitments, whether or not those can be held consistently down the line on each and every issue.

Nick: I've been chatting with some of the Agora Fellows from the past year, I know part of the joy of Agora Fellowship is that you can take these complex readings and make them more accessible to people who don't have a philosophical background. How do you approach that and make sure everyone's participating?

Dr. Bragues: That's probably the hardest thing. I'll never forget the first time I held an Agora Fellowship meeting. I thought, is anyone going to say anything except for me? Because I can talk. I'm a professor, I can go on for hours on a topic but I was very concerned, am I going to be able to get something going here that can acquire a momentum of its own? We want to be the one who starts it and then we can sit back and watch the fireworks go. That first time I did the Agora Fellowship in 2015, I learned a lot of lessons. One of them is I really need to be prepared. Even though I'm not going to do a lot of talking, I need to be prepared with a list of topics and a way to approach those topics that is going to get the students discussing in a civil way. That's another challenge too. So what I'll do is I'll reread the readings for that particular week a few days before I go in, and I actually write down questions, I've found that the approach of asking questions of the students is more likely to elicit a response than me making a statement or something. I try to be Socratic. These are meant to be Socratic seminars. Socrates was the founder of Western moral and political philosophy and his approach was to go around asking questions of people. A lot of people couldn't answer him and so people didn't like him and he ended up being executed by Athens but it's a very good approach. So in the days before I go in for a meeting, I'll come up with a list of questions. And then I'll look at those questions again and is there anything in particular in the students' lives, especially where they are right now as young people, that they can relate to? Their relationship with their professors, their relationship with their fellow students, their relationship with their parents, I find that by starting at that very concrete personally relevant level we can then ascend to a more theoretical understanding of the issues.

Nick: I know we don't yet know where the Agora Fellow will be travelling next year, but I've heard when they travel with you they see a lot and they should wear comfortable shoes. Is that true?

Dr. Bragues: Yes, yes, yes. Any time you travel with me, my wife can certainly tell you about this, she goes on and on about the foot sores and the blood and all that. So yeah, you travel with me on a study tour, this also happens on the study abroad tours that we do, yeah, I mean, my view on these things is when you go to a place like New York, which is where the Agora Fellows were most recently, or Washington, we have a short period of time. We don't know when we're going to be back again and so let's use the time efficiently. So where I use some of my business program background, everything's got to be efficient, let's use the inputs to get the maximum output. Our main input is time so let's use that to get the maximum output, which is to see the most things. And that takes a lot of planning. I can tell you that. Because it's really a matter of how can you set up the roots so that everything you want to see can be seen in sequence, you don't have to go back and forth all the time. New York lent itself to that because it's a rectangular island. You can go down and back up.

Nick: I'm looking forward to seeing where you go next year.

Dr. Bragues: Yeah, the way I decide it is I try to gauge where the conversation has tended to go, if there are any themes the students have really focused in on, and see if there's a city or

conference that really ties into that. With god and the state, that could be challenging, but I'm sure we'll come up with a nice location for the students to go to.

Nick: Thanks very much for joining us.

Dr. Bragues: You're welcome. Great to be here.