



Ethics, Public Policy, and Technological Change

Rob Reich
Mehran Sahami
Head TA: Roberta Fischli

Housekeeping

- Friday sections will discuss privacy and a case study on facial recognition
- Policy memos due Thursday, March 12, 11:59pm
- Final Reflection due Tuesday, March 17, 11:59pm
- Tech Ethics and Policy Fellowship applications due March 11

Tech Ethics & Policy *Summer Fellowships*

Apply by March 11, 2026



Agenda: Our Final Class

1. Ursula le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas"
2. Final Reflections
 - Mehran
 - Rob
3. Questions and Comments From You

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Expert Guests



Ryan Beiermeister



Artemis Seaford



Zoë Hitzig

LE GUIN

THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

A STORY



The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018)

“

*We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable.
But then, so did the divine right of kings.*

***Any human power can be resisted and changed by
human beings.***

*Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our
art, the art of words.”*

URSULA K. LE GUIN — National Book Awards Speech, 2014

sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

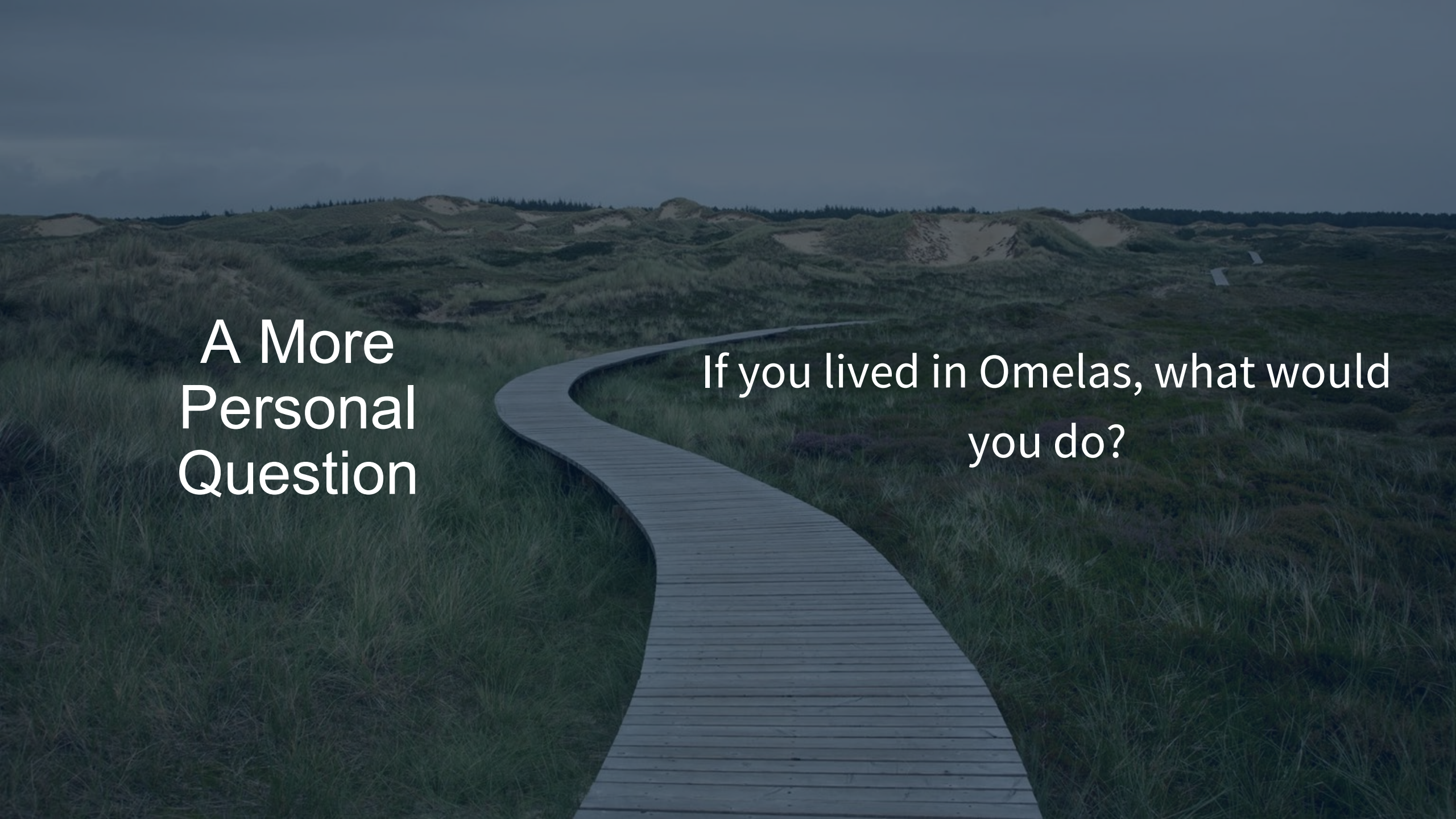
At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

A wooden boardwalk made of grey planks winds through a field of tall, green grass. The boardwalk starts in the foreground and curves towards the right, disappearing into the distance. The background shows rolling hills under a dark, overcast sky. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Questions for you

Are the people who walk away from Omelas heroes? (Why – because their conscience won't allow them to remain in the city)

Or cowards? (Why – because by leaving the city they leave the child in misery.)

A wooden boardwalk made of light-colored planks winds through a vast, grassy dune landscape. The path curves from the foreground towards the middle ground, disappearing into the distance. The dunes are covered in tall, green grasses, and the sky is a deep, dark blue, suggesting dusk or dawn. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

A More
Personal
Question

If you lived in Omelas, what would
you do?

Complicity



CHECK THE LABEL
ON THE
SHIRT/JACKET
YOU'RE WEARING.
WHERE WAS IT
MADE?



WHEN IS THE LAST
TIME YOU
PURCHASED
GASOLINE?



DO YOU HAVE
MONEY
DEPOSITED IN A
BANK?



WHERE DOES
STANFORD INVEST
THE MONEY IN ITS
ENDOWMENT?

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Why This Class?

- In the last few decades, computing has arguably changed humanity on a global level more than anything else
 - It impacts who has **freedom**
 - Access to platforms for free speech (and reach)
 - Ability to communicate privately
 - Control of personal information
 - Freedom to transact
 - Incarceration (physical freedom): bail decisions
-

Why This Class?

- In the last few decades, computing has arguably changed humanity on a global level more than anything else
 - It impacts our **social relationships**
 - Communication (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Zoom)
 - Community formation (in social networks)
 - Information sharing and discovery
 - Harassment and cyberbullying
-

Why This Class?

- In the last few decades, computing has arguably changed humanity on a global level more than anything else
 - It impacts our **personal well-being**
 - Mental health
 - Physical health
 - Device dependence
 - Internet addiction
 - AI companionship
-

Why This Class?

- In the last few decades, computing has arguably changed humanity on a global level more than anything else
 - It impacts our view of **our own abilities**
 - Bias in systems that evaluate and judge us
 - Relationship to AI and autonomous systems
 - The future of meaningful labor and employment
-

Why This Class?

- In the last few decades, computing has arguably changed humanity on a global level more than anything else
 - And it impacts many who had no opportunity for a role in its creation
 - Inequity in who builds technology
 - Inequity in who chooses what technology is built
 - Inequity in who technology is built for
 - Inequity in distributional impacts of technology
-

But There's Hope

- In the last few decades, computing has arguably changed humanity on a global level more than anything else

It has also tremendously empowered you.

With that comes tremendous responsibility.

Take both seriously.

But, What Can I Do?

- You can't solve a problem if you don't know it exists



- And a little less arrogance wouldn't be a bad thing...
-

The View from Social Science

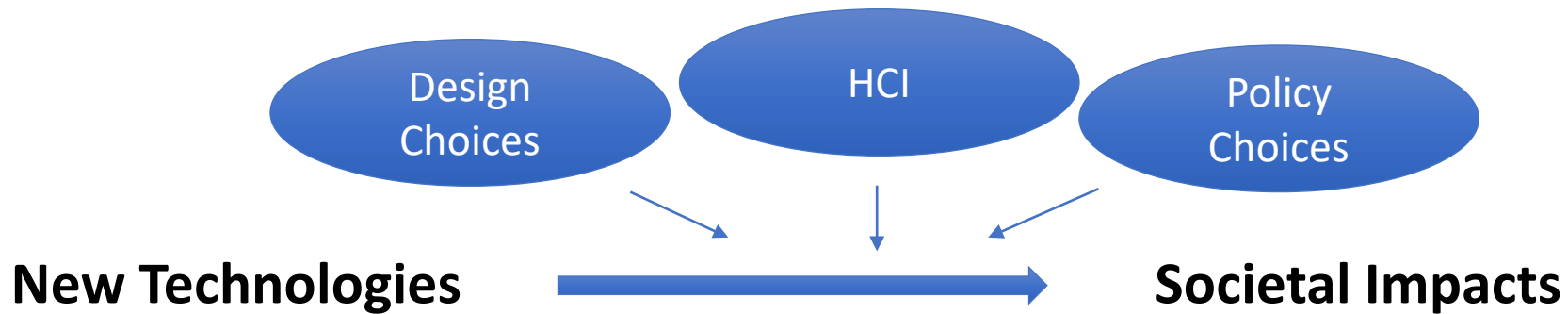
1. The consequences of technology are not unknowable
 2. Governance isn't a bad word
 3. Navigating this moment requires multiple perspectives
 4. There isn't one right answer
 5. You are not only a user, you are a citizen
-

Measuring Consequences



Many have argued that we cannot know the impacts of new technologies in advance, so the best strategy is to just innovate and see what happens.

Consequences are Conditional



We can *anticipate* potential impacts

We can *measure* those impacts empirically

We can *influence* how new technologies affect society

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Letters to a Young Technologist

Letters to a Young Technologist

1. [What is Technology?](#)
2. [Value Beyond Instrumentalization](#)
3. [It's Time to Govern](#)
4. [Study the Past, Create the Future](#)
5. [To be a Technologist is to be Human](#)

[About](#) →

About the Essays

Letters to a Young Technologist is a collection of essays addressed to young technologists, written by a group of young technologists.

This project began as a hope for reflection, and a desire for collaboration. We wanted to reflect on our roles and lives as young technologists, and to kindle broader conversations about these topics.

We were driven by the realization that technologists hold an increasingly important position in society, with the capability to change billions of peoples' life experiences through the tools they build. But the set of ideologies or life-philosophies currently on offer to most people pursuing a career in technology are surprisingly shallow, as is many technologists' understanding of their field's history.



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What is Technology?

As young technologists, our work involves acts of immense power, and society both admires and fears these acts. This is a recent phenomenon. In ancient times, those who made technology were devalued as laborers: they were lowly potters and bronze-smiths, not space billionaires. Plato believed in the inferiority of practical craftsmen compared to philosophers, since they deal with the corrupt material world rather than the pure plane of Being and Ideas.¹ But for the last century technology has been eating the world. The newfound status and significance of modern technology requires us all to set aside space for probing the weighty questions that our work elicits, questions about its meaning and influence.

Notice that we're not defining technology as a solution to a problem, but rather a path to an end. Though many technologists see their work as "problem-solving", problems are in the eye of the beholder; one first has to *make decisions* about what constitutes a problem before *making decisions* to solve it in a particular way. That decision-making process is prior to and more fundamental than the problem-solving process.



Doomed to Choose

Ethical curiosity seeks action.

We actually have no other choice but to act.
(Passivity, deciding not to care, and not to choose, is itself an ethical choice.)

Maya Lin (architect, pictured left):

“I seek to create spaces for people in which to think, but not what to think.”

But, What Can I Do?

People systematically **overestimate** the change that is possible in one year.

And systematically **underestimate** the change that is possible in ten years.

Ten Years Ago in 2016

- Donald Trump elected
- Brexit: UK votes to leave the European Union
- Russia accused of hacking the US presidential election
- North Korea conducts two nuclear weapons tests
- Stanford's Katie Ledecky wins 4 golds at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio
- Pokemon Go Goes Viral
- Hamilton storms Broadway

2016 Highlights in Technology

- AlphaGo defeats world Go champion Lee Sedol 4–1
 - First time AI beats a top human at Go
- Oculus Rift and HTC Vive launch consumer VR
- Pokémon GO becomes a global phenomenon
- Apple AirPods released
- Apple vs. FBI encryption battle over iPhone access
- Microsoft acquires LinkedIn for \$26 billion
- Self-driving cars hit public roads (Uber, Tesla, Waymo)
 - First fatal Tesla Autopilot crash recorded
- HuggingFace, Scale AI
- OpenAI founded December 2015

Technology Highlights: Dec 2025 – Mar 2026

- OpenAI launches o3 and o3-mini reasoning models
 - Top scores on coding and math benchmarks
- Google releases Gemini 2.0 Flash and Deep Research
- Anthropic MCP becomes the standard for AI agents
 - Adopted by OpenAI, Microsoft, and Google
- NVIDIA reports record \$68B quarterly revenue (Feb 2026)
 - AI chip demand drives 73% year-on-year growth
- Moltbook
- Anthropic showdown with DoW

Lesson?

You should think about the influence you could have over a decade.
Not in the coming year or two.



Six Concluding Ideas

Seek out discomfort. Get off track.

We do not live in a fundamentally just society or world.

Will you use your opportunity at Stanford to attain or cement privilege, power, and status?



ISLANDS OF PROTESTS. 45 ARRESTS. 18 YEARS IN CONFINEMENT.

LEADERSHIP
WILL CALL FOR
THE TROUBLE.

JOHN LEWIS: GOOD TROUBLE

A FILM BY DAVID MOTTEN

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Six Concluding Ideas

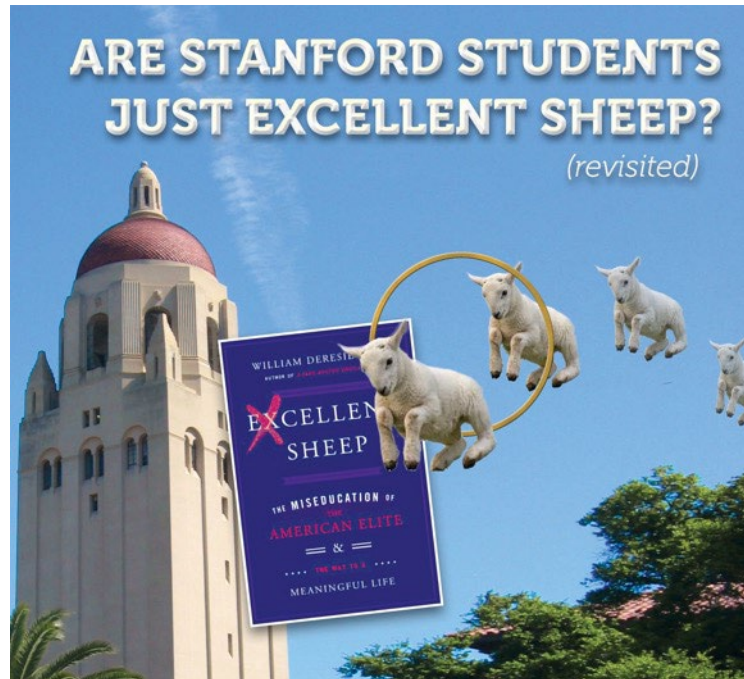
As Stanford undergrads: will you get into good trouble, or get along by going along?

“Most students are gentle cowards who think that their gentleness offsets their cowardice.”

– William Sloane Coffin, Yale Dean of Religious life

3

Six Concluding Ideas

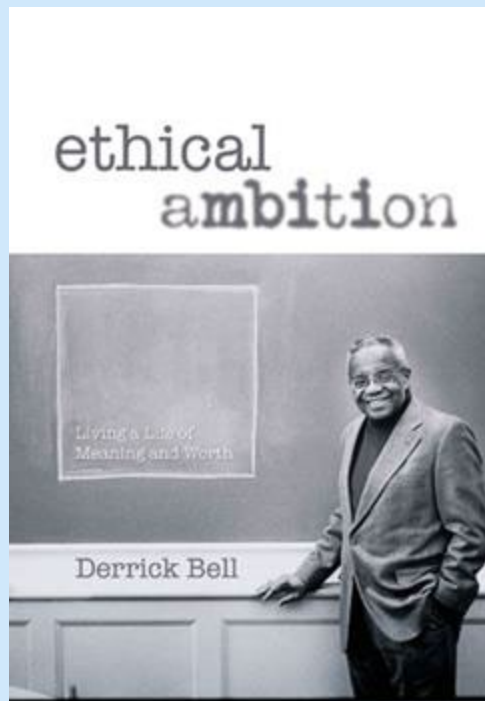


The unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates

But also, the unlived life is not worth examining.

Do not make academics the only thing you do here. There's more to life than being an excellent sheep.

Six Concluding Ideas



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Have ethical ambition

Strive for moral decency, not moral sainthood.

Moral perfection and moral purity are overrated.

Six Concluding Ideas

Embrace ambiguity

The most interesting questions in life don't have singular answers; they have better and worse answers.

We put certain questions to ourselves not so we can answer them but so that we can spend a lifetime wrestling with them.

Paraphrase of poet Ranier Marie Rilke



Six Concluding Ideas

A motto for living?

Skepticism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

Paraphrase of Antonio Gramsci.





Finally, Huge
Thanks To...

- Roberta Fischli
- Dominic Zappia
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- Thay Graciano
- Samanta Bennett
- Aditesh Kumar
- Mary Fetter