Josiah Ober of Stanford University was awarded a 2023 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. In this video, Brandice Canes-Wrone of Stanford interviews Dr. Ober about how universities can educate students for democratic citizenship and why doing so is a vital part of the university's mission.

Brandice Canes-Wrone, Stanford University

It's great to be here today with my colleague, Josh Ober, also known as Josiah Ober, who's the Markos and Eleni Kounalakis Chair in Honor of Constantine Mitsotakis at Stanford University. Josh is also a professor of political science and classics and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. Most important for today, he is one of our inaugural Barry Prize winners of the AASL in 2023. We're going to give you a chance to get to know Josh a little bit better and some of his views on his field, the state of the university, and academic freedom.

Josiah Ober, Stanford University

Thank you very much, Brandice. It's wonderful to have a chance to talk with you about this. I want to express my thanks once again to the AASL for the great honor of the Barry Prize.

Canes-Wrone

That's completely our pleasure. Josh, what do you see as one or two of the most important challenges right now for maintaining high intellectual standards in your field? I realize this is a bit of a trick question for you. I'm going to let you define your field as political science or classics. I know you are courtesy in philosophy as well. There are so many places in which you're influential.

Ober

Thank you. Yes, I think of the field as really interdisciplinary with a grounding in classics within the history and culture of the ancient Greek and Roman world. The political theory and the political practice that we have from what we know about classical antiquity grows out of that. That includes philosophical works by Plato and Aristotle that incorporate both what we now think of as political philosophy and ethics, also the study of rhetoric, and really also the study of political history. This creates a conjoined field. It's not entirely new because the field of classics has always been very capacious.

If you think about the history of the American university, if we go back to the eighteenth, even the early nineteenth century, the core areas of the university were basically what we now call

classical studies and theology. Classical studies that incorporated a great deal that is now properly disciplinary became fully disciplinary in the course of the nineteenth century. I'd like to think that I'm continuing a tradition that began a long time ago, a tradition that would be familiar to people like, say, James Madison, working on political questions by looking back at a classical Greece and Rome.

Really the challenge about doing this well now is that we've become so much more professional in terms of what you really need to know and the body of work, the literatures you need to master as a political theorist, as someone interested in, as I am, democratic theory, or say Republican theory or ethical theory. It's become much more demanding to think about how you incorporate political science and analysis of institutions, analysis of political behavior. That was something that early classicists did, but they didn't do it in the kind of disciplined way that we do it now. Meanwhile, the study of classics has always demanded a really high level of mastery of ancient languages, the history of the ancient cultures that we study, some knowledge of the background art, some knowledge of archaeology. All of these have become more professionalized. So, how to do this well when there's simply so much more to know? There's so much that the work in each of these subfields is much deeper.

That's one of the great challenges. Each of us tries to take it on in somewhat different ways. It really means depending a lot on our colleagues, recognizing that I'll never know, Brandice, as much as you know about political institutions, or I'll never know as much as my colleague Ian Morris knows about archaeology, or my colleague Walter Scheidel knows about the ways in which you can think about ancient slavery. These are all fields that are important to me, but I have to depend on the knowledge that colleagues impart to me and try to synthesize it in a way that's coherent and that wouldn't embarrass my colleagues when they read my work. So that's a great a challenge. It's an exciting one. It actually makes us better because it pushes us further into the best that's being done in a whole series of really exciting fields.

The other challenge is that some classicists, certainly not all, have lost faith in the very idea that there is something of great value in studying the classical past. There's a sense that there's something wicked, perhaps, about the classical world because people who lived in the classical world embraced practices and behaviors that would be regarded as unethical these days. There were slave societies. They treated women in ways that we wouldn't, any of us, accept any longer. This has gotten to the point where some classicists think that there's simply nothing to be learned from the past, at least nothing positive. It only becomes a negative exemplar. It's another example of colonialism, imperialism, settler societies.

I worry that the field has come to embrace a lot of concerns of other areas within the humanities in ways that are potentially driving out the recognition of the real value of engaging with a society, or a set of societies, that in some ways was very different from our own. In other ways, they were struggling with questions that are quite familiar to us in ways that are potentially valuable for us to learn from. If we give that up, we give up the idea that there really are positive things to learn from the classical past, we abandon a set of case studies that are important for anybody who cares about, for example, the development of political institutions or economic development in the very long run, or the kind of ethical conundrums that emerge in a society that

is on the one hand dedicated to equality and on the other hand embraces forms of deep inequality.

Canes-Wrone

Interesting, fascinating. Two very large challenges that hopefully individuals can appreciate who are steeped in the classics like yourself and political philosophy, as well as those who are quite outside the field.

Ober

When I'm talking with students, they really resonate with this work. In many ways, this is a problem of the professoriate, not of the student body, or at least not of the students I talk with. They want what I offer them that is positive as well as the resources to critique what is negative. It really is not an issue in terms of the students, the "demand" side. My worry is that the "supply" side—the professoriate—may in the end reduce the value of what we ultimately can offer as a field.

Canes-Wrone

This is your interview, not mine, but I will tell you, I've had similar experiences. I teach the presidency, a much narrower period of history, obviously, than the scope you're dealing with. But of course, we struggle with that. We have a lot to learn from what the Founders were thinking about executive power and demagoguery. We have to think about a very different society and even in terms of what was being done in the early twentieth century. I've found students able to both recognize the flaws of the society and of the individuals who sometimes wrote things that are very valuable in other respects.

I want to move on since we could talk about this for a long time to the broader university and some of these issues related to the mission of the university. Also, more broadly, how would you describe what the mission of the university ought to be, and why is that important?

Ober

The core mission of the university is seeking truth, or the closest thing we can find to truth: the best evaluative positions that we can come to given the facts that we know, because in some cases we have to make judgments on matters for which there isn't any settled truth. Certainly, some moral questions are like that, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be aiming at seeking the truth that bears on those moral, those evaluative questions. In the first instance, we do that.

In the second instance, we have to find a way to inculcate what we know in the next generation, to pass on the best that is known and to pass it on in ways that are completely honest, that not only allow students to know more ultimately than they started out with, but to evaluate what they know in a way that is serious and critical and allows them to become in their turn seekers after the truth.

It's also the case that universities have a real requirement to prepare students, not only for the marketplace, not only for economically productive careers and lives that will create more value,

not only so that more wealth can be distributed within our society or globally, but to become citizens. That is, how to be effective and productive members of communities—local communities, state communities, national communities—that are purposeful, that are seeking some common end, and yet are composed of people who do not agree on everything. Democratic citizenship is the art of learning to work with those with whom you don't agree about everything and yet with whom you hold something in common. You are in a community, you are seeking some set of common purposes and doing so in a way that is respectful of one another and that recognizes that no one is going to get everything that they want, that each of us is going to have to compromise on some things because we have pluralistic desires or references or commitments.

Yet, if we work together effectively, if we have respectful civil discourse rather than just shouting at each other, if we can treat each other as civic friends rather than enemies, then we can make agreements that are positive sum in which we're all better off having made the agreement than having not made the agreement. We can furthermore agree that this agreement isn't the end of the game. We will be discussing these matters as we go forward, and the next generation will be doing so as well. So we can work toward a better, "more perfect union" in the words of the Constitution, recognizing that we will never have a perfect union.

The university needs to teach that each of us has ideals. We'd like to see our community, whatever that community is, be as good as it can possibly be. We probably have a conception of what that is, but we have to recognize that that conception is not identical to everyone else's conception, certainly at a national scale. Therefore, for me or my people to demand perfection right now from you and your people is really fundamentally unfair. It is a demand that is really unjust because it's asking you and your people to give up everything so me and my people can have whatever it is that we think is perfectly just, is everything that we care about.

The university needs to be teaching these kinds of skills. These are not just the skills of high school civics. It's not just understanding the basic apparatus of American government. That's very important, but it's not enough. We need to be teaching our students the basics of what we tend to think of as "collective action" problems. Why *are* these problems? Why are they hard? It's not just because people are mean, it's because collective action is actually genuinely difficult.

We need to teach people the history of how the compromises that create any democratic community, the United States premier among them, were arrived at and how they were then adjusted over time. This means recognizing that citizenship is a matter not just of ideals, but of politics. That's something that needs to be taught at the kind of level that universities and colleges are designed to teach. If we give up on teaching civics on the assumption that it's all been done at the high school level, or we don't really have time because we need to have more courses to make them economically viable and so on, we're really giving up something that the university ought to have at the center of its mission. I'm happy to see that in a number of American universities, certainly here at Stanford, in the last several years, there's been a recognition of how important this is and that American universities for a while had largely abandoned the notion that teaching citizenship is a part of their core mission. I'm optimistic that

the trend is moving in the right direction, but we've got to keep pushing on that. It's got to be done well. It's got to be done fast.

Canes-Wrone

It happened in part at Stanford and elsewhere due to efforts by you and others. It didn't just fall out of the sky.

Ober

It's been an exciting time to be pushing on this because, yes, it takes a lot of effort. It does take energy, but it *is* really catching fire. It's not a matter of banging your head against the wall. It's pushing at a door that may still be a little open, the hinges are a little creaky and rusty, but the door can be opened. It is beginning to swing open a little more easily. We'll see over the next, I hope, several years, a really growing movement across the whole ecology of American higher education to recommitting to civic education at a much more sophisticated and advanced level than it had been taught in the past.

Canes-Wrone

Speaking of things that are changing and have changed, we're by nature in academia prone to thinking about what needs work and what needs to be discovered. On a more optimistic note, what has pleasantly surprised you over the past five years in your work?

Ober

I have been pleasantly surprised at the level of student enthusiasm for the kind of things that I teach. I teach a course almost every year that goes under the name Origins of Political Thought. Now it's a bit of a cheat because it really is a survey of Greek political thought from Homer to Aristotle. But what I tell them is that it's a single coherent tradition that we can follow and it's probably the earliest coherent tradition that we can follow all the way through for 500 years. Anyway, it's been much studied and it's worth studying.

When I first came to Stanford, I offered this course and I had a decent number of students whom I taught seminar style. It's a very demanding seminar. They have to read a lot. Especially in the last five years, the number of students who wanted to take this course just burgeoned. I have more students than I can possibly treat properly in a single seminar any longer. I want to keep it as a seminar because the to and fro of discussing these topics rather than just lecturing on them is a big part of it. I might've thought that with the pushback in some parts of the classical profession as I was talking about against the value of the classical world that maybe students would avoid this or come to the class thinking the only thing here is to tear down the classics. But it's been terrific. The last two classes I had were both the largest classes, but also the best. The students were genuinely engaged, debating among themselves points based on careful reading of difficult texts. That's certainly something that I wouldn't have guessed. It's something to hope for, of course, but I wouldn't have guessed that there would be this kind of resurgence of real interest in this material.

The other thing that surprised me is the level of interest and excitement among social scientists for the kind of material that classical historians, people doing classical studies, broadly speaking, can bring forward, both to the study of economic development, but also to the study of institutional design and problems in democratic design, direct democracy versus representative democracy, and so on. Rather than this being a kind of strange little subfield that a few classicists are interested in and have always been interested in, it has really gotten quite a lot of attention among political scientists, among some economists. I'm having conversations that are genuinely exciting to me in that they really are not only a matter of me learning more about the things that the best social scientists around are studying, but I'm able to bring them material that they get excited by. Some preliminary results are that we can generate in some cases somewhat large-scale data that is emerging from archaeological fieldwork, for example.

I'm surprised at the welcome that this material, which in some ways, fairly, takes a little while to get your arms around, is getting. It's from a long time back, no technology. A lot of the conditions were very different, but social scientists have been eager to engage with, and in some cases, to take on board in advance work in basically the history of classical or premodern institutions. I hope for it, of course, but the enthusiastic reception has been really somewhat striking to me.

I'll say one more thing, just about my very own work. I wrote a book recently called *The Greeks and the Rational*. It is about the origins of Greek thinking about what we would now call "game theory," nonmathematical game theory, so it is quite different from the things that my colleagues who specialize in this are doing, and yet it's grounded in the same set of intuitions, or at least so I argued. Once again, the reception that I got from serious game theorists was amazing. They were willing to walk me through the mistakes that I made when I started getting involved with this, but they were also enthusiastic for the idea that there actually is an ancient history to the problems of how social choice operates in a complex society that doesn't have all of the mathematical apparatus that we now take for granted. I was not just presenting something that's odd and peculiar and quaint to people, but rather something that they could genuinely become enthusiastic about, excited about, want to talk about. The thought that the ways in which ancient conceptions of what it is to be rational, what it is to make a rational choice based on preferences and beliefs, and the expectation of what other agents will be doing, the thought that that was all something that is very recognizable to people who study this now in a contemporary way was really great fun. It seemed that we were all having fun working it out. The book is what it is, but the process of writing it and the discussions that have come after it have been a source of ongoing, really surprising joy to me.

Canes-Wrone

That's wonderful. It's great to feel that your research, the broader field, and the students are all moving in your direction.

Ober

Obviously, when you're looking at American higher education, when you're looking at any of these issues that we've been talking about today, there's a cup half empty everywhere, but there

is really a cup half full. In many ways, the cup is becoming increasingly full, as we realize that focusing on what's not working at universities can sometimes blind us to the fact that a lot is working and that there are a lot of faculty and a lot of students who are really in the last few years recommitting to the conception of a university that *is* aimed at the use of reason, *is* seeking truth, does have a purpose beyond getting a job on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley. That's been exciting for me. That's something important for us both to recognize and then to keep pushing as hard as we can to make sure that that trend continues.

Canes-Wrone

Josh, thanks so much again, most importantly today for these insights that you've shared, but more broadly for all of the work you've done, both in your research and teaching and also in terms of bringing civics into the curriculum at US universities and here at Stanford in particular.

Ober

Thank you so much, Brandice. It's always a joy talking with you, and I look forward to next time.