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# Against Teleology in an Honors Great Books Curriculum

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## INTRODUCTION

Chronologically presented courses that span centuries often catalyze unwitting buy-in to unexamined narratives of progress. While useful for helping students make connections between the human past, present, and future, Great Books honors curricula like the one used at the University of Maine have a few inherent problems that require careful navigation. Both students and faculty tend to discard—or misinterpret—the values, cultural products, and successes of older cultures in favor of newer ones. Instead of valuing the uniqueness of a foreign place and time, we often emphasize transformation for the sake of narrative coherence in a program that needs focus to bring heterogeneous elements together. At times, such a curriculum seems to imply that previous civilizations came into being only to create modern culture as we know it, a fallacy that can have a negative impact on students' learning and the general tenor of cultural and historical sensitivity in an honors college. As an honors faculty member trained as a medievalist, I have developed strategies for avoiding a teleological approach to the Great Books curriculum, offering several exercises and resources to help teachers and students avoid the pitfalls of an unexamined teleological approach. These curricular supplements and exercises call out implicit teleological narratives at important junctures, staging interventions in our linear process of thinking, learning, and teaching.

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN GREAT BOOKS HONORS CURRICULA

The University of Maine Honors College has been using a Great Books curriculum for many years. Our curriculum focuses on the Western tradition and spans millennia. Our decisions about readings are a result of conscious choice and yearly deliberation, taking into account the charges leveled against Great Books curricula in the academic battles of the 80s and 90s (see Dooley and Altman). While we do include some subaltern voices, the bulk of our curriculum consists of famous, dead, named, white males. I am not going to tackle the problematic nature of such a course; that concern has been hashed and rehashed in the academy, and we do it every year in our faculty meeting about our Great Books curriculum. My sense of unease is not generated simply by the

representative texts we have (carefully) chosen; my deeper concern is the less explored and thus more insidious danger that such a curriculum may lead students to see the past as a series of graded steps leading to the present.

Great Books curricula are suspect for many different reasons, and we could choose instead to teach thematic units or create some other curricular structure that explores classic texts in an interdisciplinary format, but the arguments in favor of Great Books are as many and as persuasive as those against them. First, they give us a useful “long view.” During a time when departments are experiencing cutbacks and institutions are cutting survey courses in the humanities, students can still get a sense of historical continuity. Second, honors curricula replace many general education requirements in the humanities, so we may feel a moral obligation to retain a historical component in our interdisciplinary study. Great Books courses allow students to read fundamental texts in political science, ethics, philosophy, art, music, literature, and psychology, to name a few disciplines; taught well, they open up the world to students (Black). Third, and perhaps most significantly, a Great Books curriculum helps students make connections across cultures and across time. Unfortunately, students often note superficial correspondences between the present and the past only to valorize the superiority of their own lived experience in the twenty-first century. This reaction is described best by Scott Huelin: “[T]he well-meaning student, eager to overcome the estrangement of an encounter with a foreign text, can inadvertently rob the text of its alterity by too quickly making it too familiar (22). An example of this eagerness to familiarize another culture’s text is my students’ frequent response to Vitruvius’ *Ten Books on Architecture*. They register mild surprise at the methodical and nuanced way in which Vitruvius describes the careful topographical situation of successful architecture, and they then almost invariably remark that modern architecture has luckily moved beyond the need to consider the potability of the local water or the marshiness of the ground.

Such present-favoring (and often erroneous) connections are a consequence of the intense time constraints imposed by a curriculum that requires a new major reading every week; students are pressured to make sense of difficult texts very quickly. A sense of gratitude for having the privilege to live in our present is not necessarily an inappropriate reaction to elicit from students, but schools that teach Great Books as part of their honors curriculum might do well to consider whether this is the best student outcome or whether we are missing an opportunity to teach multiculturalism in a nuanced way.

As a medievalist primed by my discipline to feel troubled by the academic privileging of the present over a dimly understood and “othered” past, I value the opportunity that honors gives me to think through these problems with a thoughtful group of students affiliated with many disciplines. I can proselytize—if thoughtful discussion can be described as such—to talented students who may never become familiar with the sophistication of Medieval French poetry or the narrative brilliance and originality of the Norse sagas but who, by participating in a Great Books curriculum, are exposed to philosophically dense writings from the dawn of history to the present.

## THE ATTRACTIONS OF TELEOLOGY

We tend to teach and learn in a way that privileges teleological thinking because we are products of dominant socio-economic patterns established after the Enlightenment. Narratives of development and progress are ingrained in our national conversation. Capitalist systems require “the constant revolutionizing of production” (Marx 79); buy-in to technological innovation is catalyzed by a belief that things will get better and that the newest thing will make it so. We are biologically anthropocentric and tend to deemphasize alternative narratives such as those telling the story of the environment or of non-human life (see Davis). In an unfortunate parallel to this anthropocentrism, we can also be unintentionally Eurocentric when we privilege canonical narratives of progress over the experience and cultural products of non-Western peoples. We have a tendency to read non-Western narratives as foils to our central narrative of Western progress.

Monotheism (the most common religious system in America) is also emphatically teleological and makes us resist cyclical or non-linear narratives of time. Apocalypses, Judgment Days, and New Jerusalem-style utopias loom large in the national imagination, making it all too easy to apply this teleological framework to the workings of terrestrial history. In a striking parallel, biological evolution, when misunderstood by laypeople as a narrative of development toward an ultimate goal, offers a model for teleology.

Finally, we continue to pump out popular books that reinforce our notions of the superiority of the present to the past. A good example is the recent Pulitzer-winning book by Stephen Greenblatt entitled *The Swerve*. This book, on a history-changing moment when Poggio Bracciolini rediscovered Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, argues that the renaissance was in part a direct result of this rediscovery of an ancient text. Without it, Greenblatt suggests, we might still be mired in the superstition and lack of innovation that he argues characterized the Middle Ages. While thousands of scholars of the Premodern gritted their teeth, the book was a bestseller. The best rebuttal of the Greenblatt phenomenon, by Jim Hinch, is worth reading in its entirety for its defense of the Premodern world and includes this particularly salient quip:

Greenblatt’s caricatured Middle Ages might have passed muster with Enlightenment-era historians. Present-day scholarship, especially the findings of archeologists and specialists in church and social history, tells a vastly more complicated, interesting and indeterminate story. . . . *The Swerve’s* primary achievement is to flatter like-minded readers with a tall tale of enlightened modern values triumphing over a benighted pre-modern past.

With such formidable forces continually produced in the cultural and academic industries, the Great Books curriculum cannot help but structurally lend itself to progressive readings of history. These forces act upon teachers and students alike, programming them to think teleologically.

One great irony of students' unquestioning belief in the goodness of progress is the repeated data suggesting that students of this current generation believe that the world is less full of possibility for them than it was for their parents (Lowery; Thompson; Smith; Brooks; "Just 15%"). My own students cite factors like climate change, globalization, overpopulation, the impossibility of true newness, the increasing rate of production in conjunction with the planned obsolescence of those products, the deterioration of American cultural standards, and the general sense of "things falling apart" as evidence for their belief that they can offer the world less, and vice versa, than previous generations. That such a paradox—a sense of hopelessness coexisting with a belief in progress—can exist so prominently in our students' minds is perhaps a reflection of their struggle to take a long view. Helping students identify this paradox not only in themselves but in modern thought—a sense of decline and alienation being one of the most marked crises of the postmodern age and existing hand in hand in with a deep belief in progress—is another way to bring forth a nuanced habit of thinking about time and civilization. (See Appendix for a discussion of some of the most challenging critics of the notion of progress, including Amin, Wessells, and Adorno.)

## REASONS FOR CHANGE

A holistic approach to a Great Books curriculum does not necessarily require scrapping or rewriting the curriculum; instead, it can actively and consciously resist implicit buy-in to teleological narratives inherent in the curricular structure. Such resistance not only does more justice to the past but helps students think beyond their own time and place. If we think about the past encountered in old texts as a kind of open-minded study abroad, where we can learn to change our personal perspectives, the entire endeavor becomes more meaningful. Not every student can afford the life-changing experience of study abroad, so we can try to produce some of the revelations of a study abroad at home (Levy).

Honors students need to learn to think critically about chronology and narratives of progress, and, if honors programs can claim to be the last bastions of the liberal arts in the American academy, then we must have an open attitude towards artifacts from the past. After all, many of the classic disciplines—music, art, history, classics, grammar—must look to the past as the foundation of the present state of their field. If one of the purposes of a liberal education is to create citizens who can think critically about what they encounter—as well as act ethically toward people and situations foreign to them—then we owe it to our students now, more than ever, to teach them to use the past to think about the present and plan for the future.

Furthermore, the past is necessarily and directly relevant to students' lives in the twenty-first century. One of the most commonly aired complaints from students (and sometimes faculty) about the first year of the honors curriculum at UMaine, which spans from ancient Sumerian texts to Machiavelli, is that some of the readings do not seem relevant to modern experience. For example, at

UMaine, the most commonly debated texts are the *Presocratics Reader*, *Inanna*, and *the Odyssey*, among others. Students often say they find the texts out of date for modern problems and ways of life and that they have a hard time gleaning meaning from them that can apply to their lived experience. The Old Testament is relevant, such logic goes, because its impact on the present is clear. Obscure scientific texts by ancient philosophers seem, to the average observer, beyond irrelevant, since the science they contain has been disproven or surpassed for centuries. These texts tend to arouse either a patronizing admiration that people could be so advanced in such a dark age or active anger for having to read something so useless.

Obviously the answer to this sense of disconnect is not to search for examples of ancient texts that seem to predict cell phones. The first lesson we need to stress for all students—including STEM and professional students who have been inculcated with the desire to get an education that counts in the real world—is that we can always learn from these texts. In fact, the stranger or more irrelevant our readings may seem, the more likely they are to help us think about the rest of our experience in new or fuller ways. Just as learning about cultures different from our own classically broadens the mind, so too does learning about the past, which, as we know, is a foreign country (Hartley 1). Moreover, students of every discipline can find texts relevant to them: Gilgamesh's forays into the cedar wood of Humbaba inspires wonder about humans' innate need to destroy nature as a means of asserting mastery over it, and Anaximander's theories that all life originated in the sea inspires awe at the human capacity for logic and critical thinking.

## EXERCISES IN ESCAPING TELEOLOGIES

Honors programs and colleges that use Great Books curricula need to make explicit the embedded teleologies in their courses of study, and so I provide a toolkit for honors educators to engage in a conversation about the question of teleology. I have developed a series of questions that can be explored in small groups or as a class and that I believe can catalyze more nuanced thinking about the issue. I designed the different class discussion questions, exercises, and assignments to be explored in small sections of class time set aside throughout the semester as conscious moments of intervention in implicit teleologies. These class materials have worked in my classroom and may be useful to other honors faculty.

- Ask: Are there certain junctures in your Great Book curriculum when attention is paid to a cultural turning point? What is that turning point, and are the underlying assumptions about why it is important made transparent? In our curriculum, such turning points occur with the Presocratic philosophers, Sappho, the New Testament, Vitruvius, the Italian Renaissance, and "The Rise of Rationality," which introduces a series of readings in the Enlightenment. In these moments, lecturers outline a paradigm shift—such as from *mythos* to *logos* or from irrational to rational thought. A conversation can be started to

decide whether these turning points are legitimate and useful for understanding the period, and, if so, why. Another strategy would be to examine exactly what was left behind in favor of a new technology or philosophy and whether the innovation was truly new at all. The class may discover that certain lines of thought or activities are not new and that they have long lineages.

- Ask: Are the texts in your Great Books curriculum too culturally codified to challenge inherent teleologies? For example, are Greco-Roman texts favored over texts from cultural borderlands? Are they read for themselves or for what we know they will tell us about some understood narrative of cultural development?
- Discuss how the world may be improving, staying the same, or declining. See if the class can reach consensus.
- Add a new paracurricular focus bringing out extrahuman concerns like environmental impact. In my class, we consciously read assigned texts for what they tell us about the way people think about the environment, their lived landscape, and the animals that inhabit it, thus complicating the rhetoric of human progress at any cost.
- Brainstorm events and practices we tend to associate with the past (like plague, war, bad medicine, oppression, or ignorance) to foreground assumptions and projections. Ask if these negatives are nonexistent now, and, if not, where they are located.
- Have students identify their personal choice of the finest human innovation and then identify the detrimental aspects of that same innovation. Ask if innovations have no drawbacks and if any innovation comes without a price. This question affords a foray into discussion of mythological examples, i.e., Faustian bargains, Trees of Knowledge, or Pandora's boxes.
- Discuss whether our modern narrative of progress has been influenced by historical theories about human evolution. Explicitly acknowledging students' inherent belief in human evolution and then using scientific knowledge as well as the history of social science to debunk it is a powerful way to highlight the assumptions that most first-world moderns make about the course of history. I frame this conversation in this way:
  1. We begin by discussing teleology: "*Telos*: a Greek word denoting end, purpose, or goal. We humans are accustomed to thinking *teleologically*, or towards an end.
  2. We ask this question: Do our most famous narratives (scientific, religious, artistic, philosophical etc.) have a beginning, middle, and end? Are we capable of thinking in any other way? Are there other ways of thinking about the universe?
  3. After discussion I argue: So, in a way, we are accustomed to thinking evolutionarily. We like to frame linear narratives to make sense of things that

may not be so linear after all. In reality, most things—the solar system, the earth, politics—just change.

4. We come to a conclusion: Let us think critically about the way we frame our narratives within an evolutionary context. Think of all the dangerous/unethical ideas that people have brought forth under pseudoscientific banners. Inspired by the idea of evolution misunderstood as a process with a goal, we have promulgated dangerous ideas like social Darwinism, the notion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, phrenology, linguistic evolution, anthropological evolution, and the evolution of civilization.
  - As a class, create an  $x/y$  graph with multiple data points conveying major human experiences over time and discuss whether all the data points show positive growth. In my classes, simply agreeing on the most important human experiences and values can yield productive discussion. Graphing them is also an exercise in negotiation, communication, and persuasion.
  - Compare linguistic and anthropological arguments regarding the relative complexity of human syntactical or social systems. Both fields have been at the forefront of arguments that evolutionary models for modern human civilization are not only flawed but fundamentally inaccurate. Studies in comparative linguistics, for example, have repeatedly shown that no language is more complex than any other; if that is the case for language, we should have difficulty arguing that one culture, a complex system, is better than another.
  - Ask: Is calling the past savage and “othering” it any better than calling current non-Western cultures “savage,” and is there a double standard here?
  - Try historical roleplaying. Following an exercise developed by my colleague Eliza Buhner-Kapit, I develop historically possible personal profiles that students then play out. For Rome, students can perform the roles of matron, slave girl, centurion, bricklayer, or senator, for instance; they then interact with one another in character, discussing both their own lives and the texts of their era. This exercise gives the past a face and a name, humanizing it.
  - Discuss Hegelian versus Adornian views of history, i.e., the notion of dialectical development in opposition to a sense of accelerating chaos. Compare these classic Western interpretations of time to other cultures’ or civilizations’ notions of time. Read non-Western creation myths and discuss whether their notion of time involves endless cycles, regression, or teleology.
  - As a class, identify key words that are used often in classroom discussion; they will likely be words like “civilization,” “author,” “artist,” “music,” “culture,” and “hero.” Many of these words might be inherently Eurocentric. Other people living today may not use such terms or have a need for them in their own cultures and perspectives or understand their worth or validity; if they do use these terms, they have had to adapt them often by neglecting core elements of their own culture. Discuss the general notions of discoveries and creations: who is discovering whom and what constitutes a creation.



- Discuss the terms we use to denote historical periods and epochs: “Prehistoric,” “Ancient,” “Classical,” “Dark Ages,” “Middle Ages,” “Renaissance,” “Early Modern,” “Enlightenment,” “Industrial,” “Modern,” “Postmodern.” Each of these terms makes implicit claims about the value or relevance of the period. The terms are often framed relative to preceding or following periods, leading to questions about how the terminology influences our assumptions about and understandings of these periods.

## CONCLUSION

Adding a series of conscious interventions in the teleological assumptions inherent in any Great Books course not only improves the tone of the conversation in class; it also helps train students to be more culturally sensitive to “others” they may encounter in their lives, making them better travelers and perhaps better citizens. Performing these intersections produces other positive results. For instance, a non-teleological approach to time may yield a deepened personal philosophy with rewards that include the ability to face bleak personal moments or the prospect of aging philosophically; without a belief in golden ages and dark times, one can find moments of brightness in every phase of life, as we have learned to do with human civilization. Another result may seem like a relatively small benefit, but I think it is a great achievement: in writing, a person trained to avoid teleological thinking may be more prone to avoid erroneous overstatement—“firsts” and “mosts” disappear unless they are backed by informed conviction, not inherent and unexamined teleologies. As any reader of stacks and stacks of critical essays may attest, a break from such inaccurate hyperbole is a great boon indeed.

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## APPENDIX

### A SHORT ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following bibliography does not provide an exhaustive list of resources that challenge a teleological approach to the study of history or Great Books. I have begun an online forum where other educators and students are encouraged to share resources that could do similar work. Please feel to visit my personal blog, <<http://sarahharlanhaughey.blogspot.com>>, to join in the conversation. Below, I have shared resources that have worked in my own interactions with faculty and students. These are mostly well-known and accessible books that offer an overview of some aspect of the debate about teleology. In some honors classes, we have read and discussed excerpts from some of these books. In other cases, I have shared these books with interested students. Finally, I have used these books as means of opening up a dialogue with other faculty who might otherwise be reluctant to have a discussion about inherent teleologies in our honors curriculum.

Amin, S. *Eurocentrism*, R. Moore (trans.). New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989.

The foundational text for readings of Eurocentric attitudes not only in canonical cultural texts, political policy, and economic development, but also in daily life. Amin's model of capitalist development, which reflects a core-peripheral structure, is enlightening and sparks lively discussion.

Benjamin, W. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." in *Illuminations*. H. Zohn (trans.). H. Arendt (ed.). New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 253–64.

The original discussion of Klee's angel of history (Thesis IX), Benjamin's allusive and elusive short theses can have a profound impact on student thought, as I can testify. When I encountered Benjamin's essay as an undergraduate, my thinking about time and history radically shifted. These are very short; it is easy to read one out loud at the start of a class and have a brief framing discussion before plunging into analysis of a specific text. See also II on the privileging of the present over the past or future, VIII on constant oppression as the rule of civilization, XVIII on organic life v. human time.

Diamond, J. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997.

This was a highly influential book for many good reasons, not least because it challenged a popular audience to reexamine deeply held views about the reasons why some civilizations seem 'better' or 'more advanced' than others. See also the National Geographic special on this book.

—. *The World Until Yesterday*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

This book picks up where *Guns, Germs, and Steel* left off, with a sensitive and engaged exploration of the positive aspects of traditional societies all

over the globe, using Diamond's field experience in Papua New Guinea as a jumping-off point.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*. L. Rauch (trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988.

Hegelian history has defined the way we think about time in the western world. In the debatable triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, we find a very provocative idea about the way human culture develops. Hegelian scholars have debated exactly what Hegel meant by his dialectic, but its popular results are a sort of evolutionary model for human thought.

H.R.H. Charles, Prince of Wales, et. al. *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at our World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

This is a passionately argued defense of traditional art and ways of life as a means of becoming sustainable in the 21st century. Prince Charles has a unique holistic way of looking at world food systems, architecture, and the natural world from a comparative historical perspective. Particularly interesting chapters include: "The Golden Thread", an exploration of images of harmony in nature and in the artefacts of traditional cultures, and "The Age of Disconnection", a rereading of modernism.

Lacey, Robert and Danny Danziger. *The year 1000: What Life was like at the turn of the First Millennium*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2000.

A really interesting book about daily life in England at the turn of the last millennium. One of my favorite aspects of this quick and enjoyable read is that each chapter is organized by month, giving students a strong sense of seasonal time as a different way of organizing human experience. Another benefit is students' realization that the 'Dark Ages' weren't so terrible after all—they're just another moment in human history.

Lasch, Christopher. *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*. London: Norton, 1991.

Lasch can be a bit reactionary, taking direct aim at the dearly held tenets of the liberal left, especially the utopian belief in progress, the rights of the individual, and the notion that the world can be made fundamentally better through the right to material goods. He rejects the rhetoric of the right, as well, focusing instead on the limitations of growth and our moral responsibility to settle for 'good enough' in the form of hard work, moral values, and community. A problematic but discussion-engendering book that caters to no one's preconceptions or politics.

Menoçal, Maria Rosa. *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2003.

This book had a big impact on me as an undergraduate, because it explores medieval Spain as a culture of *convivencia*, a place where adherents of

all three of the major monotheistic religions were able to live together in relative harmony. Menoçal explodes the assumption that Spain was constantly a place of intolerance and inquisition, and makes a strong argument that 1492, the year of Columbus' discovery and the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the peninsula—and arguably the year that ushered in the modern era—was a tragic event for even more reasons than we usually acknowledge.

Ponting, Clive. *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.

Challenges the 'Lynn White thesis' that monotheistic religion imposes a nature-destroying philosophy on its adherents with disastrous results, among other things. Ponting argues that really, any human civilization will strip and exploit nature, no matter the religious foundation of their culture. A really good history of the world from an environmental perspective, this book can help shift the way we think about human 'good,' especially when that same good is fundamentally detrimental to the world. The short first chapter, "The Lessons of Easter Island," makes an excellent stand-alone introduction to an ecocentric reading of human history.

Pernoud, Regine. *Those Terrible Middle Ages: Debunking the Myths*. Ignatius Press, 2000.

A passionately argued—and very French—defense of the European Middle Ages as a time of great cultural beauty and innovation, diversity, and intellectual rigor. Particularly enlightening chapters are six, on the (extensive) rights of women in the Middle Ages, and 2, on the art and engineering accomplishments of medieval people. Don't miss Pernoud's hilarious affirmation that "Middle Ages is privileged material: one can say what one wants about it with the quasi-certitude of never being contradicted" (142).

Pinker, Stephen. *The Language Instinct*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

An approachable text on the mechanisms of language. It's great for challenging ingrained attitudes about prestige dialects and 'proper English'. For the purposes of this bibliography, see Pinker's lucid explanations of the relative complexity of the every human language. These can be read and thought about interdisciplinarily as parables of a sort. Pinker's powerful linguistic work reinforces the broader theory that no truly complex closed system can improve—it simply changes.

Said, E.W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

A powerful exploration of the mechanisms of the Western othering of other societies. Said's analysis applies equally effectively to the othering of the past.

Wessels, Tom. *The Myth of Progress: Toward a Sustainable Future*. Vermont: VUP, 2006.

One of my favorite 'big picture' books, Wessels attacks the notion of progress—a process dependent on constant economic growth—from many different angles, in particular his three laws of sustainability: the law of limits to growth; the second law of thermodynamics, which eposes the limits to energy usage; and the law of self-organization, which has caused the incredible diversity of life not only in ecosystems but in the human body and culture.

