

Great Books IV

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Why is the Great Books Important?

The study of the Great Books is the study of Western Culture, a culture that has formed our culture today and which has led for centuries in art, humanities, economics, and culture. The ideas expressed in these books are profound, and apply to our society today as much as when they were written. By reading the “Great Books” we gain the insight and knowledge of our ancestors and begin to understand how we have been formed. These books are our guide through life by giving us morals, understanding, and perspective beyond ourselves.

One of the many reasons the Great Books are “Great” is because they are all connected to each other. These books incorporate the fundamental themes of Western thought: “good vs. evil”, “actual justice”, “dangers of pride”, “philosophy of government”, “true happiness”, etc. While it is said that The Great Books are “old-fashioned”, these ideas are very much foundational to our society today. But to more fully comprehend these thoughts, we have to read these books to gain the insight and wisdom that helped these philosophers overcome the issues that they debate. In an essay written by the Sisters of St. Xenia, The Great Books are even described as vital for humanity: “Our souls were formed by the western mentality and psychology, and the often painful effort of understanding ourselves can succeed only by our coming to a knowledge of the forces that have shaped us” (Xenia 1). Only by coming to a greater understanding of Western Literature can we come to a understanding of our origin and history. These fundamental themes of Western Culture help us come to a better understanding of how our society was formed, and helps us understand the problems and issues we face in our daily lives.

A big theme throughout The Great Books is the nature of happiness. One of the first philosophers to tackle this question is Aristotle, whom we read in year one, who claims that happiness and virtue are one. He states: “Happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue” (W.D. Ross translation *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle). How then should we understand this claim? Aristotle defines happiness as intrinsically linked to virtue, not physical well being, not to one’s station in life, vocation, or even to extreme suffering. This is a controversial statement. Aristotle however, is just one of the many philosophers who debate this subject throughout the centuries. This question is still being debated today, and perhaps the most distinctly modern American formulation is by Henry David Thoreau, whom we read in year four. Thoreau decided to leave his home in Concord Massachusetts, and go live in solitude at Walden Pond, to prove that happiness can be achieved without material goods. There he wrote *Walden*, a journal of his daily life at Walden Pond, explaining how he found his true happiness: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” (Thoreau 379). For Thoreau the essence of happiness is found in simplicity, since he feels that it builds morals which it turn leads us to “True Happiness”. However, today our society is still trying to find its own “true happiness” and this debate will continue for a long time. This is another reason why the Great Books are so important, since they open up the mind to these philosophical questions while leaving space for creative thinking.

Another recurring theme in The Great Books is the danger of pride and, together with this, the seduction of power which we see from Homer all the way to Dostoevsky. We especially see the vices of pride in the ancient Roman society, which is filled with rulers and politicians who wield their power to destroy their morals. Plutarch, whom we read in year two, comments on this in his account of Rome’s most powerful rulers: Romulus, Coriolanus, and Caesar. Plutarch describes how these men each have strengths and weaknesses, but especially focuses on their one common weakness: pride. Romulus, Plutarch says, killed his own brother while they were quarreling on how to build Rome’s foundations. Romulus believed that *he* was the true founder of Rome and did not want to listen to anyone else’s advice.

Coriolanus was too stubborn to listen to others and allowed his pride to overcome him. Plutarch writes: “Marcius appeared again with his whole army and bade the Romans to choose whether they would yield or fight and then made proposals he thought best for both parties” (John Dryden Translation *Coriolanus*, Plutarch). Caesar however, only cared for power: “In general, in all he did and undertook, I detected the ambition for absolute power” (John Dryden Translation *Caesar*, Plutarch). These Roman rulers are just a few of the many examples of people ruining their lives by their pride, lust for power, and the absolute indifference for those around them that flows from this. It is seen throughout history. A modern American who contributed to this idea is Herman Melville, whom we read in year four. He is the author of *Moby Dick*, a novel which is considered “The American Classic” by many. *Moby Dick* is the story of an American whaling ship in the 1800s, and tells the story of a whaling captain named Ahab, and his quest for revenge on the white whale Moby Dick. Throughout the book Melville shows the reader how Ahab only cares about his agenda and needs since, of course, it is his quest: “They were as little children before Ahab; and yet, in Ahab, there seemed not to lurk the smallest social arrogance” (Melville 131). Ahab is so obsessed with killing this whale, for his own pride, that he leads his entire crew to their deaths. Problems of pride have certainly not gone away; they are still seen in our society today just as they have been seen during the lives of these great philosophers. This once again shows that The Great Books does not discuss beliefs and ideas that are “ancient”, but rather ones that transcend time and culture, are part of our lives today, and likely will be as long as humanity endures.

The biggest “Great Theme” is the struggle between “good vs. evil”, and how each one gets their due justice. This is seen in Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Plato’s many debates, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, etc. Two authors who especially dwell on this topic are Dante Alighieri, and John Milton. In Dante’s epic *The Divine Comedy*, which we read in year three, we are led on his own personal journey of Hell with the poet Virgil as Dante’s guide. Virgil shows him the punishments of those who have sinned in their life and the “true justice” they are now receiving for their

actions. Dante is told by many souls in Hell how much they *now* want to change and how they remember their past life: “There is no greater sorrow than to be mindful of the happy times in misery” (Dante V:131-133) Dante is portraying justice and “good vs. evil” as what we think of it today; the bad get punished and are given the justice they deserve. Milton however, many years later, put out a different view on justice. In his famous epic *Paradise Lost*, which we read in year four, John Milton portrays Hell as a place its inhabitants want live. In his story, Lucifer, the greatest of the angels, is thrown out of Heaven for trying to rebel against God. Now in Hell, Lucifer still prefers his “justice” to Heaven: “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (Milton 1:263). Milton believes that those who are being punished do not view it as justice for their sins or even view themselves as evil, which is in contrast to Dante’s inmates who would gladly take back their mistakes if they could. These two books illustrate the profound ideas of The Great Books philosophers and how their ideas are never the same. The Great Themes are discussions across the millenium, with each generation bringing insight. This is yet another example of the power of The Great Books: the insights we receive are across thousands of years and each one incorporates the history and culture of its time. This way we get the full picture of how our ancestors viewed the beliefs and issues which we still deal with in society today.

Of all the Great Books, my personal favorite is Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, which we read in year four. This book is one of the more “modern” books in The Great Books sequence, but yet it is able to incorporate all the major themes of Western Culture. The book, based in late 1800s Russia, is a murder mystery involving Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, and his three sons: Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha. Yet because of Dostoevsky’s skillful maturing and developing of his characters, we get to see all the key themes of Western Literature: the pride that encaptures Fyodor and Ivan; the good vs. evil struggle within Dmitri; the virtue and actual happiness of Alyosha; and especially the limited legitimacy of earthly justice, which Dostoevsky portrays throughout the book. Dostoevsky even touches on philosophy of government when he gives us his views on how Russia is be controlled: “We shall convince them that

they will only become free when they resign their freedom to us” (Dostoevsky 258). Dostoevsky realizes that Western Themes are very much a part of Christianity and uses these themes to bring out his religious beliefs. The novel revolves around the change of Dmitri Fyodorovich Karamazov, the eldest son of Fyodor, who goes from being a drunk buffoon to accepting responsibility for his actions and through this accepting God. Dmitri is convicted of killing his father, a crime that he did not commit, but accepts the charge: “I want to suffer and to be purified by suffering” (Dostoevsky 509). This is Dostoevsky’s climax, when Dmitri embraces pain and suffering instead of avoiding it. Dostoevsky uses all the themes of Western Culture to promote a message of redemption and change believing that anyone can be forgiven if they choose to be. He combines these themes into this one message and through this he shows that all the debates over pride, sin, justice, etc. will be reconciled if we just seek forgiveness.

The Great Books are a way of re-understanding our past and learning from the great minds of Western Culture. The past is actually very similar to the present. Although some of the problems we face today could never have been imagined by our ancestors, the problems have the same roots, and when we consider the root problems rather than the particulars, there are many instances of people and cultures facing the same problems centuries and millennia earlier. The Great Books have been very beneficial to my development, since they explain why I have been given a set of morals, and how very important morals are. They also explain what is right vs. wrong in society and how to act in the company of others. But what I have gained most from these four years is the ability to understand society around me and especially, how to seek true happiness in the world around me which I would have never learned without reading The Great Books. The Great Books develop in us the ability to think and speak across many different cultures and generations, which in turn helps us understand how we came to be who we are today, how we will choose to live, and what we choose to value.

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