

Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

Session 3: Q&A

Samantha Donohue: How do you continue learning in your life?

Dr. Joshua Hren: Sure. I consider it, first and foremost, my duty to prepare for my classes. Given that I'm teaching in the Great Books Honors College, one thing that's distinctive about teaching in a great books model is that you're oftentimes teaching outside of your area of expertise. I don't think I've taught in the same three classes at all since we started the Honors College. Every single semester I'm teaching at least one, if not two entirely new classes. And what that amounts to is a lot of preparation, delving into, this semester Augustine and Aquinas, who I've never taught before. Last semester was Galileo and Descartes, who I've only taught a little bit before. That's one of the main ways by which I continue to learn. I also help homeschool our children. I'm in charge of teaching them, especially literature and history. We're reading *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson, which is an amazing novel because it's enjoyable for me and my children love it. I'm also teaching them American History.

Samantha Donohue: Fantastic. We have a little bit of a deeper question. Do you think it's true that we fictionalize our lives?

Dr. Joshua Hren: That's referring to, I think, what I mentioned in the talk, that quote from Simone Weil, the French Philosopher, about, we can't help but fictionalize ourselves. I certainly don't think that absolutely everyone does, in a categorical sense, every human being fictionalizes him or herself, but I do think we are inclined to because coming to know ourselves

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and gaining that self-knowledge about who we truly are is only something that we can really receive well if we have cultivated sufficient virtue to be able to receive it. So if we haven't cultivated the virtues, and then we come to know things about ourselves, right? We typically then don't want to hear certain things about who we really are. So we might fictionalize ourselves in the sense of either being more inclined to build ourselves up and puff our virtues up into something or our merits or our strengths up beyond the degree that we should. Or we're inclined to focus on the aspects of ourselves that are our weak points. I think if we cultivate the virtues, both intellectual and moral, we're not going to be inclined to resort to those fictions because we'll be able to bear it. Do you know what I mean? We'll be able to receive it, and it's not going to be something that will either puff us up or deflate us.

Samantha Donohue: Dr. Wysocki, do you want to comment on that same question?

Dr. Joe Wysocki: I was just thinking about our love of imitation at the beginning of Aristotle's Poetics. Thinking about fictionalizing ourselves in the sense that thinking in terms of when we act and when we act virtuously, we're doing so most often not in some abstract way that we've deduced from general principles but by imitating others. I don't know if I would say it's fictionalizing ourselves so much as we're using the imagination to sort of create a narrative that we then live, that we place ourselves in. A

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courageous person, but reading *Kidnapped*, a courageous person would do this thing, and now I want to. When this comes up later on today, or these things that will come up later on this week, these challenges I might have, I have almost a dramatic, imaginative view of how I will respond to those. Maybe that helps me to grow in virtue.

Samantha Donohue: So there's so much to learn. How do you prioritize your time in the learning process?

Dr. Joshua Hren: That's a great question.

Dr. Joe Wysocki: Necessity does that a lot for me. In some way, it takes the choice out of my hands. I have some choice in terms of the courses I will teach, and that's what necessitates what I'm going to be thinking about now. And so, beginning with the primary texts that we're going to teach and then getting to some secondary literature on that text that we don't use in class. Generally, a Great Books approach to education is that we're going to stick with the primary texts for the undergraduates, and secondary texts can help us as we prepare. And then, even choosing my courses, very often there's a certain number of courses that we have to teach, but it is, as Tocqueville would say, a sort of salutary yoke that we place on ourselves. These books are just so wonderful that being forced to read a certain book and focus one's attention can be really salutary to one's learning. Because actually, even for those of us who are inclined to this type of education, with



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the phone now and the access to all of these texts, one can become distracted.

For example, the other night, I'm teaching Tocqueville, an entire course on Tocqueville this semester, and there's a chapter where he says, "We're all Cartesians." I mentioned this in the talk. We're followers of Descartes. And the other night, I just picked up the Descartes before bed, and Dr. Hren was teasing me because it's not really usually pleasure reading, Descartes.

I just started reading some of his discourse on method because he says we have this Cartesian method and I said, "Okay, I can read a little bit of this, but I ought not to spend too much time reading this because it's going to distract me from Aristotle's Rhetoric and Tocqueville's Democracy in America, and that's what I need to be focusing on right now." So there is so much, and there can be a temptation in a Great Books program because it's all so wonderful. I want to get to read it all. But balancing that with what is best for the students. Right now, they need to focus, and I need to model that for them as best as possible.

Dr. Joshua Hren: I remember that in the talk that I gave, I was mentioning that for someone like myself or a student in the honors college, the trouble is going to be, I'm so far into Kant's discourse on reason or something like that, that I have a hard time getting out of that to read the news, right? But I actually imagine that for a lot of people, I don't need to imagine; I know for



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a lot of people, unless you're a sort of professional philosopher or an academic or a student, it's the reverse. The reverse is the real struggle that most human beings have to sort of figure out, which is, I'm inclined to actually read the news and read these middle brow analyses of policy or the events of the day. And so the difficulty, then, is I need to continue to return to, let's say Aquinas' *Treaty on Law*, or if I'm thinking of thinking about the events of the day, in terms of politics, like to reread the constitution, or maybe read it for the first time. To return to those more permanent and solid texts as a way of constantly framing and using that immense amount of criteria to interpret the rest of reality.

Samantha Donohue: That's a good way to look about it. So we have another question on Tocqueville, for you Dr. Wysocki. What other works by Tocqueville have you studied, and why is this one your favorite?

Dr. Joe Wysocki: So actually my answer is that I have not really read any other works by Tocqueville. I have read selections of his other major work. He has really two major works. That's *Democracy in America* and then, *The Old Regime and The Revolution*. It's an analysis of the French Revolution. And I am teaching it for the first time this semester, so I've begun to read it. It's not until late November that we're going to read it, but these are the sort of small ways within the Honors College where there's so much to learn. I try to organically, in small ways, add on texts around the focus that I have. I've done *Democracy in America* for many years. And I said, "Well, I think

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it's time for me to read his other work, and I'm going to teach it for the first time. And I'm very excited.

This summer, again, this is one of these ways to read a new text, but maybe tie it to something we're doing. I read Montesquieu over the summer. I taught a course on Montesquieu, and it was the first time I had read Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. And Tocqueville, at one point in the letter to his friend, Beaumont, with whom he traveled around in America, said, "Every day I spend time with three of my best friends, Rousseau, Pascal, and Montesquieu." Three other great French philosophers. And I had never read Montesquieu, so this summer, I was able to, and it's helped immensely in my understanding of Tocqueville. This is an area that I've really come to love Tocqueville and his writings. And so kind of expanding that and turning to his sources and now beginning to read his other work.

Samantha Donohue: This is back to Tocqueville. What does the lack of contemplation in a democratic society do?

Dr. Joe Wysocki: Sure. You know, Tocqueville has a chapter, obviously, on this. It's a chapter on how Americans do the sciences, and by sciences, he means I probably mentioned this in the talk, almost everything. Philosophy. It's broader than the natural sciences. Now, he says, they don't engage in the contemplation about the foundational truths of the sciences, whatever that science may be. And ultimately, they stick to the practical application of all of those things. That's what they want to know. How do we



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apply this thing? That's the American intellectual way. And in that chapter, he says, so here's the very low bad thing that happens. That's not as important. But one bad consequence is that eventually, you're going to do the practical side of things poorly. If people have not thought about, and at some level apprehended those fundamental truths behind the application, whether that's engineering, if you can't understand some of the theoretical math or some of the theoretical physics or if you are involved in political life, which can be very practical in policy, if you have not thought about the foundations of those things, you're not going to do the practical thing well over time. You're not going to be able to innovate. That's part of the American some of the good parts of being an American, some of it can be a kind of a drawback for Tocqueville as well, but innovation. To be able to even innovate without having a grasp of those fundamentals is going to be difficult.

But probably the higher problem is, is a spiritual poverty that we're going to experience. That is that for most of us, in a democratic society, contemplation is going to be through the form of some kind of prayer to life. It's not going to be Cartesian metaphysics. It's going to be a prayer life, which means that we're not being nourished by prayer. Maybe you can speak to this too?

Dr. Joshua Hren: It reminds me a little bit about what Plato says in the Phaedrus about those who are the inventors of things aren't always the

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best judges of the goodness of those things. And so, with all of the innovation and all of the invention that's happening in a democratic society, there's just this assumption that it's good. So it's not just that it is. I would just add, you said it all, but I would just add that it's not just a neutral acceptance of all of this innovation and this change and what we could call restlessness. It's a presumption or even a declaration that that's all good. Do you know what I mean? And that those inventions are definitely good. That innovation is definitely good, without, to put it frankly, without asking what goodness is. For example, what does it mean to say that something is good?

Dr. Joe Wysocki: No, that's right. We have new powers that we're discovering every single day.

We're not talking about what ends those powers are tailored to.

Dr. Joshua Hren: And typically, it seems like those questions come second or in an aftermath

Dr. Joe Wysocki: That's right.

Dr. Joshua Hren: Of the use of these new technologies. So they might be employed for five years, and then some Catholic college will open up a Bioethics center and say these crazy things are happening right with

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genes. What are we supposed to do? And then they'll get a professor to think about it and write about it.

Dr. Joe Wysocki: In terms of higher education, so many colleges are under immense pressure today, immense pressure to survive. And that means that you're constantly thinking about programs. You're constantly thinking about programs that will draw students. If the people who are running universities haven't been able to engage in that contemplation, somebody who sees the vision, and we're lucky to have that here. But even your programs you're going to say, well, this thing as a new program that teaches you how to do this, and you go ahead and you add these programs without asking the question, is this course of study really good for any human being? I think there's just a lot of programs that are added at a lot of colleges that nobody's really asked that question. It's "Well, but people are going to this. It turns out that the data shows people are attracted to that." And you go, "Is that because of our fallen nature maybe?" What is going on here?

Dr. Joshua Hren: Right. Basically, you can't just automatically take descriptive knowledge, which is, this is the way that things are and just say, that's also prescriptive. Truth, therefore, it should be that way.

Samantha Donohue: How do I get involved in the Great Books, and what is your guidance on being a lifelong learner?

Dr. Joe Wysocki: Do you want to start?

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Dr. Joshua Hren: Sure. Well, I guess I would say that in terms of the great books that are most likely going to be more accessible if you've never read a great book before, I would advise picking up something like Homer's Iliad or The Odyssey, plays by Shakespeare, reading them very carefully and even slowly over time. One of the wonderful things about a Shakespeare play, obviously, is on the one hand, written to be performed, but in terms of reading, if you don't have a lot of time, you can read an act a night, or something like that, and it's sort of broken up into these subsections naturally for you. You can just use that to your advantage if you have a very active life and not a lot of time on your hands. But I would say starting with literature or poetry instead of starting with philosophy would be one thing I would advise.

Here, in our freshmen curriculum, we actually have one of the more difficult philosophical texts in the Fall of freshman year. That is Aristotle's Organon, and students really struggle with it. It's his treatises on logic. But we also pair that with Homer's poetry, and students have expressed their relief at the experience to be able to do both at once because it's not all as difficult or as intense. I think there are fewer people in the world who have a sort of philosophical bent or a philosophical inclination. That's not saying that that's wrong or bad; it's just sort of the way that it is. What that means is that just more people will be able to appreciate literature than philosophy and really glean philosophical wisdom through reading poetical texts. That is the way that I would put it.



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Homer's asking a lot of the same questions that Aristotle does. Like, what is friendship? What does it mean to be virtuous? What does it mean to be a coward? What is the relationship between mortality and piety? Or our relationship to the Gods? But they're going to sort of address those questions and answer them in very different ways. One being more systematic and philosophical, the other being dramatic.

Dr. Joe Wysocki: And I think if you want to move into, venture into philosophy next, you might start with some of the dialogues of Plato. There are some more accessible dialogues with Plato, which are written poetically. I mean, it is a play. A philosophic play. It would be kind of boring to watch it performed, but it's a conversation. It's presented as a conversation. And there are really difficult Platonic dialogues that you would not want to start with. But I think Plato's Apology would be a good text to start with, which is the account that Plato gives of his life and defense of his philosophizing in the city as he's about to be condemned to death for philosophizing. I would begin with Plato's Apology.

Samantha Donohue: All right. I've got my reading now. Thank you. Thank you both so much for your time.

