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Presentism, a Secular Age and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Virtue Education in British Secondary Education

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<u>Presentism, *A Secular Age* and interdisciplinary approaches to virtue education in British secondary education</u>

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<u>Abstract</u>

Drawing upon François Hartog's work on regimes of historicity, I argue that what Hartog calls "presentism" often undergirds the enacted curriculum in UK secondary schools. This "omnipresent presentism" also shapes the worldview of many students, which necessarily has an impact upon any attempt to ground virtue education in philosophies such as Aristotelianism or religions such as Christianity whose foundations were laid in pre-modernity. I further argue that any attempt to construct an interdisciplinary approach to virtue education must, following Charles Taylor, take seriously the nature of the secular age in which we live and especially his argument that modern unbelief "is a condition which can't only be described in the present tense, but which also needs the perfect tense, a condition of 'having overcome' the irrationality of belief". Drawing upon the ideas of Hartog and Taylor, and focussing on the proposals for the teaching of English and History in The Jubilee Centre's *Teaching Character Through the Curriculum*, I suggest other possible approaches to the practical application of virtue education in schools.

In *From Athens to Auschwitz: the Uses of History*, Christian Meier argues that "we are experiencing more history and historical change than almost any generation before us, and yet we take virtually no interest in it." (Meier, 2005, x) For Meier, an essential problem of our age is "the absence of history", which, given the plethora of popular history books, TV documentaries, and historical fiction in contemporary culture, seems surprising. However, he is not writing about the volume of historical production but rather about the absence of "a historical orientation, a historical way of seeing things or asking questions". (Meier, 2005, x) In two recent books,

François Hartog (2013 & 2015) explores reasons for the absence of history in this sense, providing a compelling analysis of what he calls regimes of historicity, society's ways of relating to the past, present and future. For Hartog our current regime of historicity is dominated by "presentism", a characteristic feature of modernity in which "the past and the future are represented, thought of, and felt as departing from and returning to the present" (Hannoum, 2008, p.458) in contrast to previous regimes which privileged either the past over the present or the future over both. According to Hartog, the success of the heritage industry, sales of popular history books, and the presence of media-friendly historians on our TV screens cannot hide the fact that, driven by presentist concerns and assumptions, our contemporary culture is largely indifferent to the challenges of the past.[1] Sometimes experienced as "an imprisonment within the present" and sometimes as an emancipation from the burdens of the past and the future, presentism is omnipresent. (Hartog, 2015, p.113)

Since this presentist understanding is what defines our current regime of historicity, a regime shared by students, teachers, and examination boards, it cannot but infiltrate the way we teach even subjects like history, which we might assume to be relatively immune to its allure. How this presentist understanding of the past works can be seen in a Year 7 History Textbook produced by the Schools History Project, in which students are asked 'Why was the Roman army like a top football team?' before being provided with the following activity (Dawson and Wilson, 2008, pp.30-31):

Here are some tips for success in football management.

- Buy the best players from around the world.
- Get them fit! Keep them healthy!
- Pay them well.
- Stay in the best hotels.
- Banish wives and girlfriends (WAGs).
- Clever tactics – use your brain.
- Get your players (and your supporters) to the games on time!

[1] In contemporary Western society even the terms we use to make sense of the contemporary world are often divorced from history: "ce présent présentiste s'entoure de tout un cortège de notions ou de concepts, plus ou moins détemporalisés : modernité, postmoderne, mais aussi globalisation et meme crise." (Hartog, 2013, p.290)

How are these similar to what made the Roman army successful?

Though it could be argued that the approach used here is to start with students' experiences and interests in order to draw them out of the limited sphere of their contemporary experiences and perceptions, it is surely also possible, if not probable, that presentist views are reinforced by a question which links WAGs to the Romans and seeks to find similarities between the Premiership and the Roman army. This is far cry from the understanding of, and approach to, history that many previous ages would have taken for granted. As Neil Postman put it with a liberal dose of irony: "Cicero remarked that the purpose of education is to free the student from the tyranny of the present, which cannot be pleasurable for those, like the young, who are struggling hard to do the opposite – that is, accommodate themselves to the present." (Postman, 1985, p.151).

A presentist approach to history can also be seen in the Ideas and Beliefs section of the same Key Stage 3 History textbook, with students being asked to consider whether Henry VIII was "medieval or modern" and being specifically asked, "Were his ideas medieval – just like all the other kings you have studied in this book; or was he a modern man?" (Dawson and Wilson, 2008, p.204) In order to answer this baffling question, students have to assume that there is a fundamental divide between the "medieval" and the "modern". What may be less obvious to them is that the very word "medieval" instantiates a particular way of understanding the relationship between past and present. "Medieval" and "the Middle Ages" are polemical terms, as Michel Zink (2015) has recently argued, building upon what Régine Pernoud (1977) and C.S. Lewis (1990) demonstrated many years ago. For Lewis, "the very idea of the 'medieval' is a humanistic invention. (According to Lehmann it is in 1469 that the expression *media tempestas* first occurs.) And what can media imply except that a thousand years of theology, metaphysics, jurisprudence, courtesy, poetry, and architecture are to be regarded as a mere gap, or chasm, or entre-acte? Such a preposterous conception can be accepted only if you swallow the whole creed of humanism at the same time." (Lewis, 1990, p.20) According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it was not simply *media tempestas* that was a dismissive humanistic invention: the Middle Ages were similarly condemned by Early Modern writers. Camden, writing in 1605, promised that "I will onely giue you a taste of some of midle age, which was so ouercast with darke clouds, or

rather thicke fogges of ignorance” while Wotton, writing in 1624, was happy to offer “the reuiuing and repolishing of good Literature, (which the combustions and tumults of the middle Age had vnciuillized).” What began as a term of opprobrium has remained so in public and popular discourse. When David Cameron (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014) claimed that “The cruelty being meted out [in Syria and Iraq …] is literally mediaeval in character” and when John Kerry (US Department of State, 2015) argued, in response to the Paris attacks of November 2015, that “we are witnessing a kind of medieval and modern fascism at the same time, which has no regard for life, which seeks to destroy and create chaos and disorder and fear”, they were drawing upon a term which was created in order to drive a wedge between past and present.[2]

The question of whether Henry VIII’s ideas were “modern” or “medieval” is not, therefore, a neutral one. If “medieval” has connotations of ignorance, a lack of civilisation or downright barbarity, then students are being sold a particular view of the past, whatever their judgments on Henry VIII. This presentist contempt for certain aspects of the past can be found not just in 17th Century literature and in recent history textbooks but in the Oxford School Shakespeare edition of 'Julius Caesar' too where we are told that, “At the start of the sixteenth century the English had a very poor opinion of their own language: there was little serious writing in English, and hardly any literature." (Shakespeare and Gill, 2006, p.122) It is unclear whether the author is reserving her judgment for the start of the sixteenth century or whether she is suggesting that there had been “hardly any literature” up until that point in English, a suggestion that the presence of *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Piers Plowman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Canterbury Tales* would seem to render untenable.

Untenable or not, the reality in the overwhelming majority of British schools is that pre-Shakespearean (medieval) literature does not appear on the curriculum. I am obliged to teach post-1990 texts to my GCSE and A Level students but I am not obliged (or encouraged) to teach

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[2] See also: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-article-on-libya-the-pathway-to-peace--2; https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-at-the-un-general-assembly-2014; https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-european-council-and-tackling-extremism [Accessed 29th November 2015]

anything written before the 16th Century. What Michael Gove (Department for Education, 2013) referred to in a speech at Brighton College as "the enacted school curriculum" – what is actually taught as opposed to what is available for teaching – covers *Of Mice and Men*, *Animal Farm*, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* but signally fails to address the first thousand years of English literature. In his speech Michael Gove attempted to draw a battleline between Middlemarch and Breaking Dawn. It could be argued that he should have drawn it between Middlemarch and Middle Earth.

In the Jubilee Centre's *Teaching Character Through the Curriculum*, Dan Wright encourages History teachers to explore "How the past judges the present; how the present judges the past; moral blindspots, past and present" (Arthur, Harrison and Wright, p.25) in much the same way that Christian Meier claims: "How many things one can learn about antiquity […] through the issues of our own times! And how much antiquity can teach us about the questions of our day!" (Meier, 2005, p.3). However, as Meier goes on to argue, the two sides of the equation are not equally balanced: "Europeans have a sense of themselves as survivors of a history they have left far behind them; they do not see history as their origin or the foundation on which they stand. History is not something they desire to carry on (in a better way if possible). Hence they feel no gratitude to their forebears for what they achieved with so much labor; on the contrary, they are fixated on all the things they don't understand (and are not making an effort to understand), such as wars, injustice, discrimination against women, slavery, and the like." (Meier 2005, p.17).

Wright provides a long list of historical topics which are worthy of study but, if Hartog is right, that list does not really get to the root of the problem. If presentism is the defining characteristic of our current regime of historicity, then teachers need to do more than present binary alternatives when inviting students to explore "the Catholic Church as a source of medieval morality, for both good and ill" or "Virtues and Vices in Dante's Divine Comedy", let alone the loaded debate about "Medieval relations with the Non-Christian Other, e.g. Wycliffe and the Lollards, the persecution of the Jews, and Islam and the Crusades: exploring the complexity of how to handle difference through an examination of the virtues of tolerance, against the vices of intolerance and over-indulgence." (Arthur, Harrison and Wright, p.26) If the default position of our students (and, because we are all subject to the same regime of historicity, of many teachers

too) is that the present is in a better position to judge the past than vice versa then studying such binary alternatives is likely to reinforce rather than challenge presentist assumptions.

Presentism has implications not just for the teaching of history but for the development of virtue education too. If the past, to say nothing of the future, is judged from a presentist perspective, there can be little chance of students allowing themselves to be challenged by ideas that are not consonant with, or framed within the concepts of, contemporary ideologies. Specifically, it becomes difficult to see how teachers can ground virtue education in philosophies such as Aristotelianism or religions such as Christianity whose foundations were laid in pre-modernity.

Indeed, recent work on secularization theory suggests that presentism creates particular difficulties when religious beliefs are being examined. Responding to a public opinion survey in 1998 which revealed that the majority of Europeans (in fact practically 2/3 of the population in every Western European country) believed that religion is "intolerant", with a majority of the population in every Western European country (apart from Norway and Sweden) believing that "religion creates conflict", José Casanova argued that "such a widespread negative view of 'religion' cannot possibly be grounded empirically in the collective historical experience of European societies in the 20th century or in the actual personal experience of most contemporary Europeans." Instead "contemporary Europeans obviously prefer to selectively forget the more inconvenient recent memories of secular ideological conflict and retrieve instead the long forgotten memories of the religious wars of early modern Europe to make sense of the religious conflicts they see today proliferating around the world and increasingly threatening them." (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer & Vanantwerpen, 2011, pp.69-70) In Casanova's view, the viewpoint revealed by the 1998 European survey, "can be plausibly explained ... as a secular construct that has the function of positively differentiating modern secular Europeans from 'the religious other,' either from premodern religious Europeans or from contemporary non-European religious people, particularly from Muslims" (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer & Vanantwerpen, 2011, p.69), an idea which Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor develops in great detail in *A Secular Age*, where he argues that modern unbelief "is a condition which can't only be described in the present tense, but which also needs the perfect tense: a condition of 'having overcome' the irrationality of belief." (Taylor, 2007, p.269) Secularization theory is hugely contested but the

particular danger here is that students' presentist assumptions are likely to predispose them to look favourably upon certain secularization theories, especially those which draw upon a sense of historical rupture, with inevitable consequences when addressing issues of belief and associated notions of virtue.[3]

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor warns that "we have to be aware of the ways in which an 'unthought' of secularization, as well as various modes of religious belief, can bedevil the debate. There is, indeed, a powerful such unthought operative: an outlook which holds that religion must decline either (a) because it is false, and science shows this to be so; or (b) because it is increasingly irrelevant now that we can cure ringworm by drenches; or (c) because religion is based on authority, and modern societies give an increasingly important place to individual autonomy; or some combination of the above." (Taylor, 2007, p.428) This "unthought" of secularization can be seen in another Key Stage 3 History textbook (Harrison & Harrison, 1988), where a question about the medieval Church is framed in these terms:

> Many people today do not think much about Heaven and Hell. In the Middle Ages people would have thought about them and about God much more. As a group, see if you can think why this was so.
>
> Did you think any of these?
> 1 People then couldn't explain many things we take for granted. So they said "It is God's will."
> 2 Many people had miserable lives. They comforted themselves by saying that there must be something better after death.
> 3 People lived much shorter lives, and many died as babies or young children. Death was always near, and the idea of the love of God gave them hope.
> 4 The Church was much more powerful then. Everyone went to church and heard stories of Heaven and Hell.

[3] See Benedict XVI (2010): "Today's culture is in fact permeated by a tension which at times takes the form of a conflict between the present and tradition. The dynamic movement of society gives absolute value to the present, isolating it from the cultural legacy of the past, without attempting to trace a path for the future."

5 And of course, as people thought a lot about Heaven and Hell, there is little doubt which they would choose!

Implicit in this passage is a particular form of secularisation theory, a theory that says that belief in God (and in Heaven and Hell) is unnecessary as soon as people stop having "miserable lives", as soon as modern science explains the world more fully, as soon as life expectancy increases and the Church loses power. Virtually the only options not offered to students are that people found theistic beliefs credible or that God, Heaven and Hell are realities about which it might have made sense to think.

The authors of *Teaching Character Through the Curriculum* argue that, "Character education is not about promoting the moral ideals of a particular moral system. Rather, it aims to promote a core set of universally acknowledged cosmopolitan virtues." (Arthur, Harrison and Wright, p.6) However, even if these cosmopolitan virtues are now universally acknowledged (which is highly debatable), they are certainly not shared across the ages. In our current regime of historicity, we are fundamentally divorced from the past and, hence, from past understandings of virtue, even if we retain occasional visiting rights. So, if, as Taylor and Casanova argue, our secular age is grounded upon a perception of rupture, a sense that past beliefs have to be jettisoned to allow the balloon of the present to fly off into the blue skies of the future, and if presentism presents a considerable obstacle for anyone wishing to ground virtue education in philosophies or religions which have their roots in pre-modernity, what can we do in the classroom?

Taylor's work in particular suggests that a certain amount of historical revisionism is required. Although secularization theory is hugely contested, little of this debate filters through to the secondary classroom. In this context it should also be possible to bring presentist assumptions and prejudices out into the open. The challenge of the past to the present is a suitable topic for introductory history lessons at any key stage.

An alternative approach is suggested by Michel Zink in *Bienvenue au Môyen Age* where he suggests that, although the Middle Ages have had a terrible press, that perception changes when we consider the Middle Ages "avec les yeux de la poésie. Châteaux et forêts, princesses,

chevaliers, monstres, merveilles et aventures nourissent aujourd'hui encore notre imaginaire, celui des enfants avec Walt Disney, celui des adolescents et de leurs jeux de rôle, comme ils ont nourri celui de Tolkien et do son Hobbit, de C.S. Lewis et du monde de Narnia. Les mots de troubadour ou d'amour courtois font encore rêver. Ni Roland à Roncevaux ni Tristan et Iseut ne sont oubliés. Le Graal n'a rien perdu de son mystère." (Zink, 2015, p.13) There are what Charles Taylor calls cross-pressures in our current regime of historicity - neither presentism nor the unthought of secularization is a monolith – and premodern literature can be the means by which presentist assumptions and the unthought of secularization are challenged. Medieval literature presents readers with stories, characters and symbols which are still deeply attractive but within a context that is disturbingly unlike our secular age. In reading the stories, admiring the characters and responding to the symbols, we may be jolted out of contemporary assumptions, which is a necessary precondition for any meaningful virtue education.

The function of literature in virtue education, in other words, is not to provide moral exemplars but to shake us out of complacency. In his suggestions for *Teaching Character Through the Curriculum*, Jonnie Noakes suggests that, "All of the virtues are the theme of literature and each can fittingly be made the subject of English writing or reading exercises. For example, a discussion of Othello will focus on issues of trust, honesty, respect, compassion, and leadership; it will consider the damaging effects of a lack of empathy in human relations". (Arthur, Harrison and Wright, p.18) However, literature will always resist readings from a single perspective. Though it is undoubtedly true that *Othello* could be read as a study of the damaging effects of a lack of empathy in human relations, the questions raised by the play could also be explored quite differently. Racial issues, for instance, are foregrounded in troubling ways, with the extent to which Shakespeare was challenging or colluding in the racial stereotypes of his day, for example, being very much an open question (Smith 2005, 28-48). We cannot use Shakespeare's plays as simple guides to, or warnings about, virtuous behaviour but we can use Early Modern, and especially pre-modern, literature as a bridge to pre-modern understandings of the world.

Though History and Literature lessons can provide some sort of defence against presentism, ideological challenges to this omnipresent orthodoxy can come from any discipline. A recent Theos report, for instance, convincingly argued that Modern Foreign Languages also have their

part to play. (Cooling, 2010, pp.40-48) In other words, and returning to the theme of this conference, an interdisciplinary approach is vital if we are to break down some of the barriers that presentism and modern unbelief can present to virtue education. If Hartog is right in his analysis of our current regime of historicity, the teaching of History alone can never be enough on its own to effect any deep-rooted change, if only because it cannot provide an independent criterion of judgment by which history itself can be judged.

To finish, I want to mention a possible solution to this classic historicist problem, a way out suggested by Hartog when he identifies "two major forms of presentism": the secular form which sees the present as "a footbridge to tomorrow" and the Christian form which sees the present as "a springboard to eternity". (Hartog, 2015, pp.109-110) "In regards relations to time," he writes, "Christianity's specific contribution was the decisive event of the Incarnation – the birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God made man – which broke time in two." (Hartog, 2015, p.60) If presentism is a problem for anyone engaged in virtue education then the solution is not to be found in History, English, Modern Foreign Languages or universally acknowledged cosmopolitan virtues, I suggest, but rather in "the Christian order of time [which] retained a certain malleability, which allowed present, past, and future to be articulated against a backdrop of eternity. It was not a single regime of historicity, nor can it be reduced to one". (Hartog, 2015, pp. 62-63) It is this order of time, which stands outside history even as it enters into it, that provides us with the means by which to challenge the omnipresent presentism of our age. Once we have taken on this challenge, we can then engage in the vital task of educating for virtue, a task which our forebears have already largely mapped out for us.

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