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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Learning to Settle for Good Enough

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Tags: ethics | Changing Scholarship | Johann Hari | Sune Lehmann | Course Prep | Good | Settle | Materials | Stolen Focus

Creating new courses just keeps getting harder. Today I finished drafting the reading list for my new course on Ethics and the Good Life for first year students. It was supposed to be easy because my research and writing is about ethics. And it was supposed to be fun because I have the luxury of teaching whatever I want in this course.

But it was awful. Partway through, I understood why Barry Schwartz argues that having too many choices makes us less happy. I found myself envying people who teach a set curriculum with an assigned reading list.

I quickly became overwhelmed by the infinite number of possibilities and then I made it worse by going online and looking for a *bigger* infinity of choices. I bounced back and forth between sample syllabi, texts, videos, and podcasts for hours. I felt guilty because I wasn't familiar with enough of it. And I got more and more tense.

My list of possible materials just kept growing. And it was taking forever. I used up the time I had set aside for this project, and more. A lot more.

Part of the challenge is that we no longer agree about what should be in a course like this. When I started teaching at Stonehill College, we had a historically-based philosophy

curriculum, and the reading list for an introductory ethics class was a given: Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and Nietzsche.

It took philosophy much longer than the other humanities, but the boundaries of our discipline are finally expanding. Most of the time, I am glad that we're bringing in new approaches and formerly excluded voices. I'm one of the people in my department who have been pushing those boundaries (starting once I understood how limiting our approach was - and once I was tenured). But I miss having clarity about what my courses should and could contain. So. Many. Choices.

Johann Hari's *Stolen Focus* got me out of the spiral. Hari points out that more and more information is pushed at us every day:

- 1986: the equivalent of 40 eighty-five-page newspapers
- 2007: 174 newspapers
- Now: unknown, but probably more.

Hari quotes Sune Lehmann who likens it to drinking from a fire hose.

That hit home. We can't do it. Seriously. I can't even skim the 1986-era 40 newspapers a day. And here I am, voluntarily seeking out additional information, turning the pressure in that fire hose up beyond today's 174+ daily newspapers.

Of course I can't do it. I just googled "ethics and the good life syllabus" and there were 30,800,000 results.

It can't be done, and it's not my fault.

The inevitability of failure reassured me.

I had no choice. I had to select course materials from a limited subset of possible materials. This gave me permission to take a different approach: **Instead of looking around, I'm limiting myself to what I'm already familiar with.**

I set a timer for two hours and turned the internet off (the Freedom app - the best invention since the mute button). I told myself firmly that I'm an authority on ethics (hey, they let me teach it to college students). And then I asked myself two questions:

- **What is the main goal of the course?** Students will reflect on their life, their values, and on the ways they might not be living in a manner that reflects those values. If things go well, the course will help them live a little better.
- **Given that goal, which of the issues that I am familiar with should the class consider?** I wrote a list:
 - How smartphones get in the way of our happiness: body image, our ability to pay attention, our relationships

- What happiness is, with a deeper dive into the role of money, friendship, and meaning
- How (some) adversity benefits us
- What we owe other people, both friends and strangers
- How we can better balance caring for ourselves with helping others
- What makes something right or wrong?
- How we might relate to people who disagree deeply with us about what matters
- Some of the ways in which we are biased

We won't do all the units - I'll give the students some choice.

Turns out, I know a lot and I already knew enough to put together a course. More research was unnecessary and unhelpful. It so often is. I wish somebody had reminded me of that while I was trying so hard to drink from the fire hose.

<https://wabash.center/2024/11/learning-to-settle-for-good-enough/>