PHILOSOPHY IS EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS

It cannot be too often repeated that philosophy is everybody’s business. To be a human being is to be endowed with the proclivity to philosophize. To some degree we all engage in philosophical thought in the course of our daily lives. Acknowledging this is not enough. It is also necessary to understand why this is so and what philosophy’s business is. The answer, in a word, is ideas. In two words, it is Great Ideas—the ideas basic and indispensable to understanding ourselves, our society, and the world in which we live.

These ideas, as we shall see, constitute the vocabulary of everyone’s thought. Unlike the concepts of the special sciences, the words that name the Great Ideas are all words of ordinary, everyday speech. They are not technical terms. They do not belong to the private jargon of a specialized branch of knowledge. Everyone uses them in ordinary conversation. But everyone does not understand them as well as they can be understood, nor has everyone pondered sufficiently the questions raised by each of the Great Ideas. To think one’s way through to some resolution of the conflicting answers to these questions is to philosophize.

The Great Ideas Program aims to do no more than to provide some guidance in this process. I am limiting the consideration of these ideas to an elementary delineation that will try to achieve three results for you.

First, it should give you a surer grasp of the various meanings of the word you use when you talk about the Idea.

Second, the delineation of each Idea should make you more aware than you normally are of questions or issues that you cannot avoid confronting if you are willing to think a little further about the Idea—basic ones, ones that human beings have been arguing about over the centuries.

Third, in the consideration of each Idea, we are led to the consideration of other ideas. How does our understanding of truth affect our understanding of goodness and beauty? How does our understanding of what is good and bad carry us not only to an understanding of what is right and wrong, but also to an understanding of justice, and how does that affect our understanding of liberty and equality as well?

If I succeed in these aims, I will have helped you engage in the business of philosophy, which is everybody’s business not only because nobody can do much thinking, if any at all, without using the Great Ideas, but also because no special, technical competence of the kind that is required for the particular sciences and other special disciplines is required for thinking about the Great Ideas. Everybody does it, wittingly or unwittingly.

I hope I am right in believing that everyone would wish to do it just a little better.

WHAT IS AN IDEA?

In the vocabulary of daily speech, the word “idea” is generally used to name the subjective contents of our own minds—things that each of us has in his or her
own mind. This use of the word predominates in a large portion of modern psychology, concerned as it is with something called "the association of ideas" or "the stream of consciousness"--with the images we experience in dreams or in acts of imagination. It is a kind of omnibus term that covers all the contents of our minds when we have any conscious experience--our sensations and perceptions, our images and memories, and the concepts we form.

But that, obviously, is not the way the word "idea" is being used when we engage one another in the discussion of ideas. In order for a discussion between two or more persons to occur, they must be engaged in talking to one another about something that is a common object of their conjoined apprehension. They do not have a common object to discuss if each of them is speaking only of his own ideas in the subjective sense of the term.

Consider, for example, a number of individuals arguing with one another about liberty and justice, about war and peace, or about government and democracy. They probably differ in the way they subjectively think about these matters. Otherwise, they would not find themselves arguing about them. But it must also be true that they could not be arguing with one another if they did not have a common object to which they were all referring. That common object is an idea in the objective sense of the term.

These two uses of the one word "idea"--the subjective use of it to signify the contents of an individual’s conscious mind and the objective use of it to signify something that is a common object being considered and discussed by two or more individuals--may be a source of confusion to many. We might try to eliminate the source of confusion by restricting the use of the word "idea" to its subjective sense and substituting another mode of speech for "idea" in its objective sense. We might always use the phrase "object of thought" instead. Thus, freedom and justice, war and peace, government and democracy might be called objects of thought.

One other example may help to reinforce what has just been said. Let us turn from our thinking to our sense-experience of the world in which we live. We are in a room sitting at a table. On the table is a glass of wine. You are facing the light and I am sitting with my back to it. We have, therefore, different subjective impressions or perceptions of the color of the table and of the wine in the glass. But in spite of our divergent subjective perceptual experiences, we know that we are sitting at one and the same table and looking at one and the same glass of wine. We can put our hands on the table and move it. We can each take sips out of the same glass of wine. Thus we know that the table and the glass of wine are one and the same perceptual object for both of us. It is that common object that we can talk about as well as move and use.

If this is clear, then I recommend that we use the word "idea" in its objective sense as a common object of thought that two or more individuals can discuss and either agree or disagree about. To eliminate the word "idea" in its objective sense and always use instead the phrase "object of thought."
We live in two worlds: (1) the sensible world of the common perceptual objects that we move around and use in various ways and (2) the intelligible world of ideas, the common objects of thought that we cannot touch with our bodies or perceive with our senses, but that, as thinking individuals, we can discuss with one another.

THE ADJECTIVE “GREAT”

Readers of this may be puzzled and even annoyed by my repeated use of the adjective “great.” The great authors are the writers of the great books. They engage in a great conversation. What about? The great ideas. Are all these uses of the adjective related in an orderly way so that one can discern the primary use from which the other uses are derived and by which they are controlled?

I think I have an answer to that question, one that helps me to explain why there will always be controversies about which books, in the literature available to us, deserve to be called “great.” There are many different standards or criteria by which persons can judge a book to be great, and its writer a great author. Different groups of persons will, if called upon to do so, construct different lists of books that deserve the status of “great.” This is not the case when we consider ideas rather than books. Take the list of the 102 ideas exhibited here. There may be some disagreement about them, but it will be very slight, indeed; there are few of these ideas that anyone would recommend dropping and few that anyone would recommend adding.

If we take the adjective “great” as the qualifier of ideas and as the controlling criterion of our other uses of it, then many things are clarified and little controversy is engendered. The great conversation is the discussion of the great ideas during the last twenty-five centuries of Western culture.

There may be other great ideas and other great conversations about them in three or four of the cultures in the Far East—Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist. But these are not only quite separate from one another, they are also extraneous to the great conversation about the 102 great ideas in Western literature and thought. At this stage in the history of the world, a world cultural community does not exist, and a global set of great ideas cannot be compiled. The future may hold the possibility of one global great conversation, but that lies far ahead of where we are today.

Given the reality of the great conversation for us who have inherited the Western tradition, it is that discussion of the great ideas that determines how we draw the line between books and authors that deserve to be called “great” and those that do not. But, it may be asked, what tangible evidence can be given of the reality of the great conversation? 'What shows us that such a conversation really has taken place from antiquity to the present day?

These ideas were derived from an extremely close analysis of 44 works by 73 authors from Homer to the twentieth century. This analysis was performed by a staff of specialized indexers under my direction, and the works analyzed were later published as Great Books of the Western World. The editorial staff that I headed found a way of demonstrating the existence of the great conversation. They
constructed two indices—one called "The Author-to-Author Index;" the other called "The Author-to-Idea Index."

The first of these indices listed, beginning with the Greek tragic poets and with Herodotus, who came chronologically after Homer, the authors they read and referred to or commented on. As we came down the chronological series of authors, the editorial staff listed all the preceding authors that any author in the series had obviously read and talked back to.

Obviously, earlier authors could not refer explicitly to their successors, but often points that they made anticipated what would be considered and challenged later. This Author-to-Author Index shows the great conversation going on across the centuries.

The fifty-four volumes of the first edition of Great Books of the Western World in 1952 ended with the works of such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors as Herman Melville, William James, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Each of these authors was found to have read and commented on twenty-five or more of his predecessors. When six volumes of twentieth-century authors were added to the second edition of Great Books in 1990, fewer of these authors appear to have been as well read as their predecessors but for some, such as Alfred North Whitehead, Werner Heisenberg, Max Weber, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and James Joyce, their acquaintance with the works of their eminent predecessors is as clearly evident.

The Author-to-Idea Index provided another demonstration of the reality of the great conversation. The editorial staff listed, from Homer up to the twentieth-century authors, the number of great ideas that each author could be found discussing, counting the appearance of citations of their work in the topics under each idea. Thus, for example, Homer appears in 51 of the 102 great ideas, Herodotus in 71, Plato in 100, Aristotle in all 102, Plutarch in 79, Augustine in 97, Aquinas in 102, Dante in 84, Shakespeare in 79, Montaigne in 90, Francis Bacon in 97, Spinoza in 79, Gibbon in 88, Locke in 98, J. S. Mill in 82, Hegel in 97, Tolstoy in 96, Darwin in 71, Marx in 71, Freud in 91. When we come to the twentieth-century authors, their works, for the most part, are cited in fewer than half of the 102 great ideas.

In a sense, it is the Syntopicon itself—the topical index to discussions of the great ideas in the Great Books—with its almost 3,000 topics that provides the best evidence for the reality of the great conversation.

**WHY 102 GREAT IDEAS?**

The answer to this question is that the number could have been more or fewer than 102, but probably not much fewer than 92 or much more than 102. In other words, the number of 102 plus or minus 10. Why so?

Let me explain. one of the great ideas is GOVERNMENT. in outlining the topics that present the interior structure of that idea, we could have placed topics dealing with
all the major forms of GOVERNMENT, such as TYRANNY AND DESPOTISM, MONARCHY, OLIGARCHY, ARISTOCRACY, and DEMOCRACY. but that would have made the chapter on government extraordinarily long and unwieldy; so we chose instead to develop separate chapters on the different forms of government mentioned above. By doing so we increased the number of great ideas; if we had made the other choice, we would have decreased the number.

Another example is the chapter on VIRTUE AND VICE. here we could have included among the topics of that chapter the consideration of particular virtues: COURAGE, TEMPERANCE, PRUDENCE, JUSTICE, and WISDOM. that would have reduced the number of great ideas. but we decided that to do this would make the chapter on VIRTUE AND VICE too long and cumbersome; so we made the other choice.

In short, the number 102 is somewhat arbitrary, in terms of choices that we made for practical reasons. But its arbitrariness is limited. We could not have done the job with only 50 great ideas, or with 150. At no time in all the eight years of work on the production of the Syntopicon was there an outcry on the part of the editorial staff that some idea other than the 102 we had chosen was needed to accommodate a large and significant body of Western thought that could not be subsumed under the various topics of the 102 ideas that we had selected. Controversies since engaged in on the publication of the second edition of the Great Books of the Western World have, while including much criticism of the choice of authors, conspicuously avoided criticizing the choice of ideas.

I have thus answered as best I can what a great idea is, how the 102 were chosen, and why there are only 102 of them; that is, 102 plus or minus 10.